Children’s perspectives of play and their research participation

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at

Charles Sturt University

by

Carmen Huser

B.A. (Early Childhood Education)

M.A.Ed. (Early Childhood Education and Care)

Charles Sturt University

July, 2017
# Table of contents

Table of contents .......................................................................................................................... 3  
List of Tables ................................................................................................................................. 8  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................. 9  
Certificate of Authorship ............................................................................................................. 11  
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................................... 13  
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ 15  
Glossary and list of abbreviations ................................................................................................. 17  

1 Chapter One: Introduction ......................................................................................................... 19  
1.1 Personal researcher standpoint ............................................................................................. 20  
1.2 Context ...................................................................................................................................... 25  
1.3 Problem to be addressed ......................................................................................................... 28  
1.4 Structure of the thesis .............................................................................................................. 30  

2 Chapter Two: Literature Review ............................................................................................... 33  
2.1 Play and early childhood education and care (ECEC) ......................................................... 34  
2.1.1 Early historical approaches to play ..................................................................................... 35  
2.1.2 Modern, developmental approaches to play ....................................................................... 38  
2.1.3 Contemporary sociocultural approaches to play, learning and development ....................... 41  
2.2 Definitions of play .................................................................................................................... 56  
2.2.1 Pretend play ....................................................................................................................... 59  
2.2.2 Play as a vehicle for learning .............................................................................................. 67  
2.2.3 Play as pedagogy ................................................................................................................ 70  
2.3 The state of research of play from children’s perspectives .................................................... 76  
2.3.1 Context ............................................................................................................................... 78  
2.3.2 Control and agency in play ................................................................................................. 79  
2.3.3 Educator roles ..................................................................................................................... 81  
2.3.4 The role of peers ................................................................................................................. 83  
2.4 Researching children’s perspectives of play ........................................................................... 86  
2.4.1 Why involve children in play research? ............................................................................. 87
2.4.2 Children’s right to express their views freely ...................... 92
2.4.3 Children’s agency ........................................................................ 96
2.4.4 From ‘child-friendly’ methods to methodologies for sound research ........................................................................ 98
2.4.5 Children’s choices of participation in research ...................... 104
2.5 Summary, gaps and research questions ........................................ 112

3 Chapter Three: Methodology .......................................................... 115

3.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 115
3.2 Theoretical framework ................................................................. 115
  3.2.1 Sociocultural approaches to play ............................................... 115
  3.2.2 Childhood Studies ...................................................................... 117
3.3 Ethical considerations ..................................................................... 120
  3.3.1 Beneficence and risks ............................................................... 123
  3.3.2 Privacy and confidentiality ....................................................... 126
  3.3.3 Informed consent and assent .................................................... 129
  3.3.4 Payment and compensation .................................................... 134
  3.3.5 Ethical symmetry ...................................................................... 135
  3.3.6 The research relationships ....................................................... 138
3.4 Research design .............................................................................. 141
  3.4.1 Social-constructivist study ....................................................... 142
  3.4.2 Constructivist grounded theory ............................................... 144
  3.4.3 Participants .............................................................................. 147
  3.4.4 Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness ................................ 150
3.5 Data generation ............................................................................... 152
  3.5.1 Group discussions with video stimuli ................................... 153
3.6 Data analysis .................................................................................. 160
  3.6.1 Data set ................................................................................. 161
  3.6.2 Rules for transcribing data material ...................................... 162
  3.6.3 Constructivist grounded theory data analysis ...................... 163
3.7 Summary ......................................................................................... 169

4 Chapter Four: Children’s Perspectives of Play .............................. 171

4.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 171
4.2 The diversity of the ways children indicated play ...................... 172
  4.2.1 Play indicators linked to the word ‘play’ ................................ 173
4.2.2 Rule-governed actions indicate play ........................................... 175
4.2.3 Pretending indicates play ................................................................. 177
4.3 Different play influences: The home, the ECEC context, and contemporary popular culture ............................................. 180
4.3.1 Differences in girls’ and boys’ play themes .................. 183
4.4 Diversity in children’s motivation to play ................................. 185
4.5 Emotional differences in play ............................................................... 186
4.6 Pretending is a shared play process ............................................... 189
4.6.1 Enacting a role ............................................................................... 190
4.6.2 Giving objects new meaning .......................................................... 198
4.6.3 Imagining non-existing things to exist ........................................ 205
4.7 Exclusion and inclusion of peers ..................................................... 208
4.8 Learning in play ............................................................................... 213
4.9 Who rules the play? ......................................................................... 221
4.9.1 Children own their play through self-invented rules ........ 222
4.9.2 Educators’ facilitation, management, control and regulation of children’s play ...................................................... 223
4.10 Summary ......................................................................................... 233

5 Chapter Five: Children’s Perspectives of Participation ........... 235

5.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 235
5.2 Children’s strategies for consenting and dissenting .................. 235
5.2.1 Consenting .................................................................................. 237
5.2.2 Dissenting .................................................................................. 242
5.3 Children’s awareness and reflection of their participation rights 248
5.3.1 Reflecting the ‘watching for giving consent to share’ rule .. 248
5.3.2 Requesting to watch specific videos and to discuss particular contents .......................................................... 251
5.4 Participation processes ................................................................. 254
5.4.1 Spotting ...................................................................................... 255
5.4.2 Peer interviewing ........................................................................ 259
5.4.3 Performing as participation ......................................................... 263
5.4.4 Being in role ............................................................................... 265
5.4.5 Observing and documenting ....................................................... 267
5.4.6 Exercising peer power ................................................................. 269
5.5 Summary ....................................................................................... 271
6 Chapter Six: Discussion ......................................................... 273

6.1 Research question 1: What do children identify as play? .......... 273
   6.1.1 Play or not play? How the physical context and the nature of play influences children’s perspectives ......................................................... 275
   6.1.2 Children’s perspectives of play are content-, and condition-related .............................................................. 277
   6.1.3 Play content-related perspectives ........................................ 277
   6.1.4 The conditions of play ..................................................... 284
   6.1.5 Summary: Towards defining play from children’s perspectives ........................................................................ 290

6.2 Research sub-question 2: How do children describe play? ...... 292
   6.2.1 Signalling play with words .................................................. 292
   6.2.2 The message ‘this is pretend’ .............................................. 293
   6.2.3 Describing play actions ...................................................... 294
   6.2.4 Demonstrating play .......................................................... 295
   6.2.5 Summary: Children’s play descriptions through words and bodily performances ........................................ 296

6.3 Research sub-question 3: What understandings do children derive from their play? .......................................................... 297
   6.3.1 Agency ............................................................................ 297
   6.3.2 Belonging ......................................................................... 299
   6.3.3 Summary: Agency and belonging ....................................... 301

6.4 Research sub-question 4: What connections do children make between play and learning? .................................................. 302
   6.4.1 How children define learning ............................................ 303
   6.4.2 Children’s perspectives of learning in play ......................... 303
   6.4.3 Educator role .................................................................... 305
   6.4.4 Learning in collaboration with peers ................................. 306
   6.4.5 Learning in play? .............................................................. 307
   6.4.6 Gatekeeping: Children’s decision to disregard (or bypass) learning in play ...................................................... 308
   6.4.7 Summary: Learning in play ................................................. 309

6.5 Research sub-question 5: What characterises ethical spaces for researching with children? ........................................... 309
   6.5.1 Agency ............................................................................ 310
   6.5.2 Privacy .............................................................................. 317
6.5.3 Relationships ................................................................. 319
6.5.4 Ethical spaces framework ............................................. 323
6.5.5 Implementing agency, privacy and relationships in ethical spaces ......................................................... 327
6.5.6 Summary: Informing ethical spaces from children’s perspectives of participation .................................. 330

6.6 Overall research question: What are children’s perspectives of play experienced in early childhood education and care? .................. 332

7 Chapter Seven: Conclusion .................................................... 339

7.1 Study contributions and implications .................................. 339
7.2 Future research possibilities ............................................. 347
7.3 Trustworthiness, limitations and challenges .......................... 348
7.4 Personal reflections ........................................................... 350

8 References ............................................................................. 355

9 Appendices ........................................................................... 375

9.1 Appendix A: Ethics approval ............................................... 375
9.2 Appendix B: Principal Information letter ......................... 377
9.3 Appendix C: Principal consent form ................................. 380
9.4 Appendix D: Educator (Kindergarten classroom) Information letter ......................................................... 382
9.5 Appendix E: Educator (Kindergarten classroom) consent form ................................................................. 383
9.6 Appendix F: Parents (Kindergarten classroom) Information letter .............................................................. 384
9.7 Appendix G: Parents (Kindergarten classroom) consent form ................................................................. 386
9.8 Appendix H: Child participant assent booklet .................... 388
9.9 Appendix I: Coding framework .......................................... 391
List of Tables

Table 1 Guiding research questions ......................................................... 114
Table 2: Consent watching ...................................................................... 157
Table 3: 'Mixed' group conversations ....................................................... 159
Table 4: Additional group conversations .................................................. 159
Table 5: Transcription rules .................................................................... 162
Table 6: Initial coding example 'Ninja' ..................................................... 164
Table 7: Children indicate play using the word 'play'................................. 174
Table 8: Home and ECEC context as influence of play ............................. 182
Table 9: Contemporary popular culture influences play ............................ 184
Table 10: Diversity in children's motivation to play .................................. 185
Table 11: Children talk about playing or being a character ...................... 191
Table 12: Children's consent and dissent strategies .................................. 237
Table 13: Children's participation processes ............................................ 255
List of Figures

Figure 1: Child assent booklet..........................................................131
Figure 2: A boy signing his booklet..............................................132
Figure 3: Group conversation (indoors) ......................................155
Figure 4: Group conversation (outdoor) ......................................155
Figure 5: Boys’ self-invented Transformer play............................202
Figure 6: Bumble Bee turned into a car ......................................204
Figure 7: Bumble Bee transformer...............................................204
Figure 8: Writing one’s name (assent).........................................239
Figure 9: Drawing oneself (assent)...............................................240
Figure 10: Negotiable assent.........................................................240
Figure 11: Being unsure - assent.................................................241
Figure 12: Choosing a pseudonym...............................................242
Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services, Charles Sturt University or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of thesis, subject to confidentiality provisions as approved by the University.

Name: Carmen Huser

Signature: 

Date: 27 July 2017
Acknowledgments

First of all, to the children who participated, I wish to thank you for sharing your great knowledge with me, and for allowing me to enter your play worlds. I am immensely grateful for what I learned as a young researcher from my participants. I would like to acknowledge the time you dedicated to my research, and of course, for the fun, many laughs, and the experiences we shared. I would like to extend my gratitude to the children’s families for their permission and trust in me. To the director and all staff at the ECEC centre, I would like to acknowledge their curiosity in my study that opened the doors for my data generation. I am very grateful for their cooperation in providing time and space for my research activities. For the many hours, I could spend with the children at the centre I wish to thank the educators from the kindergarten classroom; and there were many hours, that I became “part of the furniture”.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Professor Sue Dockett and Professor Bob Perry: for your dedication to supervise me; your support and unshakable belief in me; for your immense knowledge and research experience you shared with me, and your friendship. My PhD journey started with Bob’s invitation to a cup of tea during a conference, followed by their encouragement to apply for a scholarship at CSU, which brought me all the way to the other side of the world; a journey I will never regret. I feel extremely privileged for the opportunity to work with Sue and Bob whose work in ethical participatory research with children has been such inspiration for this thesis.

To my friends and fellow doctoral students in Albury and back home, thank you for being such true friends and of support during exciting and challenging times. Special thanks go to my friend Luisa, for your lessons in the usage of NVivo and for reminding me that there is light at the end of the tunnel; to my friends Tristan and Jessamy, for your constructive feedback and the many hugs. I wish to thank all the staff at the School of Education in Albury, to share the thrill with me.
To my parents and my sister, who encouraged me from afar for the whole time, but especially in the final run. You have unconditionally believed in me and given me the strengths I needed to finalise this endeavour – and to reach the top of the mountain.

I would like to acknowledge Renate Alf’s illustrations, and would like to thank her for giving permission to use them to create the ‘child assent booklet’ for this research project reported in this thesis.
Abstract

An important ambition to this study was theorising play from the perspectives of the players themselves – the children. This study explored the perspectives of a group of children on their play experienced in an Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting, and the ways in which these children chose to share their views and understandings.

In Australia, play-based learning has been placed at the centre of children’s learning in the ECEC practice, looking back on a long tradition of play being recognized to benefit children’s learning and development. There are times, however, where children’s play interests compete with agendas of educators. Previous research and debates have focused primarily on the adult point of view, whilst generally omitting children’s perspectives.

There is growing recognition of the importance of children’s understandings of their lived experiences of childhood. Children’s perspectives should have an important role to inform play pedagogies and how play is conceptualised in ECEC.

Underpinned by sociocultural theory, this study considers play as a leading activity in children’s constructions of understandings and as a cultural practice where children interact with their social environment. The study is also situated in Childhood Studies, recognizing children as social agents and competent actors. Children and childhoods have been considered worthy of study in their own right. However, despite efforts to create conditions for children’s participation in research, little is known about how children choose to participate.

With the theoretical anchorage in mind, the methodology draws upon social constructivist grounded theory. The interpretivist approach seeks to understand the meanings that children hold about the specific phenomenon of play. The exploration of children’s perspectives of play employed a qualitative design and utilised constructivist grounded theory as a framework for data generation and data analysis. Data were generated through group conversations with video stimuli. These incorporated video-recordings of children in their play (‘play-videos’) and the showing of these
play-videos to the children. The play-video functioned to stimulate a small group of children to converse about their play experiences. The group conversations were also video-recorded to capture children’s verbal and nonverbal expressive forms.

The interpretation of the results of this study demonstrated a prominence of pretend play although children did not separate between different types of play; the diversity of children’s perspectives; children’s emphasis on control and agency in play; the community of co-players; and the importance of peers in learning and play activities. The ways in which children participated produced knowledge about their strategies of consenting and dissenting. Playing was one of the participation processes children initiated on their own, and play itself was utilised to demonstrate their perspectives of play.

Findings of this study contribute to ongoing considerations of ethical research involving children, and to stimulate the idea that research is situated in a physical, creative, and social-emotional space. The study also poses further reflections about children’s rights to participation and privacy. The children demonstrated verbally and through bodily expressions that their right to participation was not a right they had to act on, and that they could decide how to share their experiences and perspectives.

This thesis highlights the importance of taking children’s perspectives as the point of departure for continuous reflections of play-based pedagogies and ethical research practices, and concludes with implications for play provision in ECEC as a co-constructed endeavour between children and educators.
### Glossary and list of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DEEWR</strong></td>
<td>Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ECEC</strong></td>
<td>Early childhood education and care. This term refers to the overall system of education and care for young children. It includes the planning and provision through policies, regulations and curricular frameworks and their practical implementation in institutions. The emphasis is on both, education and care, as highlighted in <em>the Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care</em> report (OECD, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ECEC setting</strong></td>
<td>This term functions as an umbrella for the wide range of services attended by children prior to school such as “kindergarten” in Victoria and “preschool” in New South Wales (NSW), long day care, and similar services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educators</strong></td>
<td>The term ‘educators’ is used in the National curriculum framework document for early childhood education in Australia <em>Belonging, being &amp; becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia</em>, and refers to “early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings” (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 5). Where discussions present children’s own expressions, the term ‘teacher/s’ is used, as this is how the children referred to the adults working at the childcare centre where the study took place.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Kindergarten was the term which educators at the research site referred to the classroom for 4-5 years old children where the study proceeded.

Table activities are part of the daily routines in the kindergarten classroom at the research site where educators offer a range of activities at tables. These activities are educator-initiated and -instructed. Children are asked to rotate between those table activities. The three educators in this classroom position themselves at one of the tables to give guidance to the children. However, at some tables, children engage in the activity without guidance, after the activity has been introduced to them. This routine was commonly referred to as ‘table activities’ by educators and children and differed from activities children engaged in during their self-initiated play which could occur at the same tables.
Chapter One: Introduction

“We feel happy about it and the problem why we want to play is to have fun.”

(Chloe, child participant, transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

The opening quote originates from Chloe who was one of the children participating in the study reported in this thesis. Her statement serves as an excellent introduction to this research for two reasons. Firstly, the purpose of this thesis is to put the spotlight on children’s perspectives of play, rather than reinforce dominant adult conceptions of play. Secondly, Chloe raises several issues of interest in the study of play. The player’s perspective is of importance, as she gives meaning to play; for example, play can provoke emotions (“we feel happy”). Further, the players have motives for play; hence play raises questions about why someone plays. In Chloe’s case, she mentions fun as a motivating drive for play. Play also seems to have a social component; Chloe refers to a group of players (“we want to play”). However, there is something about play – something problematic. Play researchers have faced and expressed, similarly to Chloe, that there is a problem, an ‘ambiguity’ (Sutton-Smith, 1997), or ‘trouble with play’ (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). While the phenomenon of play has been discussed and researched through several disciplines and theoretical approaches, even just within the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), the concept of ‘play’ has troubled researchers.

Within the field of ECEC, there have been calls for the re-conceptualisation of play and an examination of the ways in which play is supported and valued (Rogers, 2011). Most of these attempts emanate from an adult perspective. However, more recently, the children’s own understandings of play have received recognition for contributing to the ways play is situated in ECEC. The number of play research studies from the perspective of the players themselves, the young children, is still small. This thesis contributes to the understanding of children’s perspectives on their experiences of play.
The first part of this chapter provides information about my personal standpoint as a researcher. By outlining where I come from, I discuss implications for the research study, such as what previous studies inspired and provoked me to research play from children’s perspectives. Following this, the chapter situates the study within its context of ECEC, and explains the purpose and significance of the doctoral study. The introduction needs to be understood for what it is; an introduction that covers a range of issues without addressing any of those in detail. The introductory chapter sets the scene for the following chapters where issues are discussed comprehensively. The issues that are flagged in this first chapter have influenced and guided my thinking and the ways I have approached the topic of my thesis.

1.1 Personal researcher standpoint

Before starting my doctoral candidature, my previous professional and personal experiences led me to the research interests that this study has aimed to explore. I began my professional development as an educator in Germany, my country of origin. This was followed by accomplishing a Bachelor degree, during which time I also gained practical experiences in a childcare centre in New Zealand, and later a Masters degree in Early Childhood Education and Care. The European Master in Early Childhood Education and Care (EMEC) degree was unique in its provision at that time; it was funded through the European Socrates-Erasmus scheme and allowed students from Germany, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Scotland and Sweden to study in a joint degree program with a focus on strengthening a European heritage ECEC perspective, cross-cultural learning opportunities and reflecting from insider and outsider perspectives about how ECEC is conceptualised in each partner country. Following my masters study, I worked as a research assistant at the Niedersächsisches Insitut für frühkindliche Bildung und Entwicklung (Lower Saxony Institute for Early Childhood Education and Development). Each step had an impact for where I stand today.

Working in ECEC, I observed and became engaged in children’s play. Children’s imagination and fantasy, as well as the high levels of
communication and social skills that they exercised, fascinated me. The recurring play themes showed complex constructs of the world that the children had developed within their peer culture. The themes were influenced by children’s personal experiences at home, but also by stories they must have listened to or saw on television. From my observations and talking to the children, it occurred to me that children recreated those stories and experiences with their own special meanings.

The children’s construction of play themes, and their friendship-building and maintenance of play in ECEC reminded me of my own childhood. Although I could play on my own for hours, my strongest memories are connected to playing with my friends. We played out stories that we cultivated; one re-occurring play story had developed from a television show. When I came across Corsaro’s (2003) work ‘We’re friends, right?’ during my masters study, not only could I identify myself with the children he had observed, but his discussions of his ethnographic studies inspired me to research children’s play. In addition, his ambition to “bring the voices of children to the adult debates about childhood” (Corsaro, 2003, p. ix) and his recognition of children’s active creation of their own peer culture, as well as their contribution to society through their own interpretations of what they experience, was thought-provoking and resonated with me. I could not agree more that children’s own culture was worthy of study.

Recognizing the children’s enjoyment in play as well as the educational benefits for children’s learning in play, led me to reflect on the practices of some of my former colleagues when I worked in ECEC services in Germany. On numerous occasions, they disrupted any play that they identified as too ‘loud’, ‘noisy’ or too ‘wild’, limiting children’s play experiences instead of engaging with and enhancing them. It seemed as if they attached more importance to adult-led activities, for example a craft activity at a table with the educator, than to children’s self-initiated play. In defence of my colleagues, educators’ responsibilities have grown to meet standards of pedagogical quality, while simultaneously working with parents’ expectations and dealing with conditions of full classrooms with high noise levels that contribute to health risks for educators. Despite seeing
the challenging conditions, I felt I wanted to support the children and protect their play worlds. One reason to support the children’s play originated from remembering how important playing was for me as a child. The second reason grew from feeling that my colleagues did not acknowledge children’s play, overlooking the richness and creativity by focusing on the ‘disturbingly loud’ nature of it. These memories came back to me when I thought about what influenced my research interest.

At the same time as reading Corsaro’s work, my attention was drawn to recent work about children’s rights. As stated in the United Nations’ (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have – among other rights – the right to play and the right to express their opinions on matters of their life. Respecting children as holders of rights and experts on their lives is fundamental to the standpoint I take as a researcher. Another inspiring work while I was a Masters student was the use of the Mosaic approach for listening to children’s voices (Clark & Moss, 2001). This finally led to my study ‘Children’s voices on play’ (Huser, 2010) which can be seen as the doorstep for me to enter the research ‘space’ of scholars sharing the emphasis of researching with instead of on children (Christensen & James, 2008b). After gaining professional research experiences in Germany, which focused on the evaluation of educational programs to foster children’s development, I was passionate about returning to my field of interest, that is researching children’s perspectives. By creating spaces for research with children, I have aimed to explore children’s lived play experiences in ECEC.

My experience of growing up and working in ECEC in Germany has influenced me and the way I reflected on the meaning of play in children’s education in Germany. It seems as if play has been taken-for-granted as the ‘natural’ way children learn. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) concluded that many assumptions have shaped play-based education, as manifested in many ECEC curriculum documents. In Germany, each of the sixteen federal states developed and implemented their own curriculum document for ECEC in the last two decades. As an example, in Baden-Wuerttemberg, where I started my career as an educator and experienced the early implementation into practice, the curriculum document for education in
ECEC states that children perceive learning and playing as the same. Play is referred to as the children’s way to understand and explore the world (Ministerium für Kultus Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg, 2011). However, this notion of play as the child’s way of learning seems to be just one taken-for-granted assumption within adult perspectives of play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). The understanding that the child engages with the world through play, and constructs their own knowledge in play can be interpreted so that the pedagogical work of an educator should interfere as little as possible in children’s free play – something I experienced in my professional development as an educator, and is supported in an observational study in Germany (König, 2009). Against the background that play is highly valued in German ECEC, “the interaction processes observed between the pre-school teachers and children during free-play time in these German pre-schools was poorly influenced by play” (König, 2009, p. 62). More recently, a comparative study where trainee educators from Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, and Wales were interviewed about their perspectives on their role in children’s play revealed that the German trainees were most reluctant to interfere in children’s play (van Der Aalsvoort, Prakke, Howard, König, & Parkkinen, 2015).

Even prior to the implementation of the curricular documents, play had a long tradition in the pedagogical practice of German ECEC. However, a discussion of the role of play has been neglected in most of the curricular documents. This might be related to an identified shift from play to more academic oriented learning in ECEC (König, 2008). This is the context where I received my own education, and where I worked as an educator. I am aware of my personal experiences and assumptions, and they have promoted me to reflect, critique and question, but also challenged me throughout the conduct of my doctoral study.

Similar to Germany, play has been a traditional feature of ECEC in Australia. Despite this long tradition, its role in play-based learning has received new attention with the implementation of the national curriculum document, Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) in 2009 (DEEWR, 2009; Sumsion, Grieshaber, McArdle, & Shield, 2014). The EYLF is the first national
curriculum framework for children in ECEC in Australia and outlines a play-based pedagogical approach to learning. While the framing document for ECEC in Australia emphasizes children’s right to play, and sees children as competent players and learners, play-based learning remains an adult concept. This context provided an interesting research opportunity which, combined with support from my supervisors, encouraged me to undertake research in Australia.

Researching in ECEC in Australia as a German, I reflected on several aspects: me as a non-native English speaker, me as a person not growing up in Australia, me as a former educator in the German ECEC system, and me as a researcher in a different cultural context. With English being my second language, I wrote this thesis in a mix of translating from German and producing English directly. Sometimes, I had to look for the ‘correct’ words, or ended up describing what I wanted to say. In any case, I am aware that I may express ideas in different ways from a native English speaker. Conversations with my supervisors confirmed that my way of expressing could lead to misunderstandings and need for clarification. But that was only one of the challenges in being a second language user. Interacting with young children with whom I did not share my first language has created challenges; and yes, there were moments I did not understand every word they used in conversations. However, the children might have also enjoyed the conversation with an adult whose language skills were not perfect, providing the children the experience of being more skilled than the adult. Here, I have shared an experience with Corsaro whose ‘poor’ Italian skills were received with enjoyment by the children participating in his studies. Not growing up in the same country as the participating children could also be challenging, I assumed, in a lack of knowledge about Australian children’s culture.

In relation to my professional biography, it has been especially important for me to consider the taken-for-granted assumptions about play that I bring with me from my experience as a child and a German ECEC educator, and to examine how these have influenced my reflections on the study topic. I am influenced by Western educational and societal thinking, acknowledging views about play as a universal feature of childhood, a right
of each child, inseparable from learning, and beneficial to child development. However, my professional and personal experiences such as working in ECEC in New Zealand, participating in a European collaborative Masters course, and studying alongside educators from different European countries, have had an impact on me. Reflection on ECEC with other professionals from a range of, albeit Western contexts, gave me many opportunities to become aware of my influences.

With this personal and professional biography in mind, I aimed to take into account the context where my study is situated. In addition, interest in children’s lived experiences draws me to adopt a sociocultural perspective (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) as my theoretical framework. Adopting sociocultural perspectives in my research helps me to foreground children’s perspectives on play in their own local contexts. Robbins (2003) identified one of the strengths of a sociocultural approach as gaining deeper insight into the connectedness of being part of a sociocultural context and children’s understandings. As well, such an approach recognizes that my understandings are culturally constructed and calls for reflection. I aspire to shed light on children’s perspectives on play, as they are often overlooked.

1.2 Context

In this section, I provide background information that places this study into its overall context. The issues I raise here are addressed in more detail in the literature review chapter. Play has received a lot of attention in ECEC since the pioneering work of Fröbel and others (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Historically, play has been linked with childhood and children’s development and growth (Saracho & Spodek, 1995), at least in Western societies. Traditional theories of play have provided differing explanations of play, its occurrence in childhood, and its role in children’s learning and development. More recently, play has been stated as a fundamental right of the child in Article 31 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989).

Despite its universality, scholars have been challenged to find a consistent definition of play, partly due to its ambiguous and complex nature. One consequence of attempts to define play has been the
development of narrow descriptions of play, and the comparison of play with non-play (Pellegrini, 2009), as well as the placing of play in opposition to work (Rogers, 2010; Wong & Logan, 2016). Definitions have incorporated a range of categories of play (Pellegrini, 2009), characteristics of play (Garvey, 1977; Huizinga, 1955), play behaviours, types of play (Bretherton, 1984; Piaget, 1962; Rubin, Watson, & Jambor, 1978), and contexts of play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Huizinga, 1955; Wood, 2009). Vygotskian and Post-Vygotskian definitions of play see the imaginary situation as the essential element of play, while simultaneously stressing the importance of play as a cultural practice which interacts with the social environment, in a specific location, and at a particular time (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ridgway, Quiñones, & Li, 2015; Vygotsky, 2004). Nevertheless, there are still questions about its definition. Approaching play through a range of criteria has been criticized for not delivering a sufficient explanation of play (van Oers, 2013). It seems that adults show a tendency to measure or categorize phenomena (Kalliala, 2002) which might be why the question ‘Is it play?’ (van Oers, 2013) has driven research towards a definition. This study deals carefully with definitions of play, including concerns about what children define as play (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

This thesis looks closely into three defining elements of play: pretend play; play as a vehicle for learning; and play as pedagogy. Pretend play has been researched extensively, focusing its emergence and development, and its role in children’s development (Fein, 1981; Garvey, 1977; Lillard et al., 2013; Smilansky, 1968). For the exploratory focus of my study, I was less interested in the developmental benefits of pretend play and was drawn towards its meaning for the children, who have identified this kind of play as an essential activity during the time they spend at ECEC settings (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Rogers & Evans, 2006). Play defined as a vehicle for learning has contributed to its instrumentalization in ECEC (Rogers, 2013); and pedagogies of play have been generated to address strategies for educators to promote children’s play and learning (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). Educators have also been challenged by the
implementation of play pedagogies and an adult agenda on play which is concerned with quality and effectiveness (Wood, 2010).

Diverse pedagogies of play have been generated in different contexts and over different times. Major influences have been Piaget’s constructivist view where play was connected with individual child’s active acquisition of the world and construction of knowledge (Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, 2009), and Vygotsky’s work which perceived children’s play as the leading activity of child development (Elkonin, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as a collaborative activity embedded in the social, cultural and historical context, where learning is situated in the interaction of a more competent and experienced peer or adult with the child. His emphasis on the sociocultural context and the community of learners where adult scaffolding is an important contributor to children’s play has been further conceptualised by others (Anning et al., 2009; Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Rogoff, 1990). These differing theoretical views have impacted on the ways play pedagogy has been implemented in practice, and what role the adult has in children’s play and learning.

The adult’s role in children’s learning is often more connected to teaching through adult-directed activities than to play (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b). In Australia, play-based learning and intentional teaching have been placed at the centre of children’s learning in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). It is the educator’s role to combine these two approaches that have often been perceived as binary opposites (Thomas, Warren, & de Vries, 2011). Despite challenges that educators might have with combining play-based pedagogy and intentional teaching, the combination promises to balance child-directed and educator-directed activities. However, debates around play pedagogies evoke questions such as: ‘Does all play offer learning experiences to children?’ (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011) and ‘Does learning through play help to meet the essential content of the curriculum?’ (Colliver, 2012). Play as a pedagogical tool seems to create competition between children’s play interests and educators’ educational agendas. This “pedagogization of play” (Rogers, 2013, p. 160) has increased challenges for the position of play in ECEC.
1.3 Problem to be addressed

Play research and the debates about play in ECEC are dominated by adult perspectives. Educators’ perspectives of play tend to emphasize play as pedagogy, particularly as a means for fulfilling curricular goals and teaching towards externally set standards (Broadhead & Burt, 2012; Rogers, 2013). In this light, play is justified through the provision of ‘purposeful play’ - an adult-structured form of play - and considered beneficial for children’s development (Wood, 2010). Educators may judge children’s play as “good play or bad play” (Rogers, 2010, p. 154) against concepts of educational play, resulting in children’s play being under adult supervision and curriculum regulation. Results are that educators try to manage play (Wood, 2012), with the possible consequences of restriction of play time and space, interruption of particular play themes, and challenges by the children. International researchers have raised concerns about the consequences of such restriction and regulation of children’s play (European Early Childhood Research Association (EECERA) Special Interest Group (SIG) “Rethinking Play”, 2017), and condemn “insensitive or unnecessary adult interventions” (Wragg, 2013, p. 286). Generally, adult concepts of play omit children’s perspectives (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). However, the key to understanding children’s lives is to include their perspectives on those lives (Christensen & James, 2008a; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011; Mayall, 2008).

This doctoral study aimed to explore children’s perspectives of play, in order to enrich the understandings of play in ECEC from their point of view. Part of the rationale for this emanates from expected differences between the perspectives of children and adults. Harcourt (2011) argued “that it is highly possible that the way children experience childhood, and how adults perceive it to be experienced, may result in a disjunction between the actual and the observed” (p. 332). The question “How do children perceive their lived play experiences in ECEC?” guided the investigation. Understanding the importance of play experiences for children in ECEC can provide a basis for knowing “when and why they choose to engage in play, and in what ways they subsequently benefit” (Howard, 2010, p. 146).
Against the background of growing recognition of children’s perspectives in ECEC research, this thesis supports the critique from Rogers and Evans (2006) and Einarsdóttir (2014) which highlights the prevalence of research around children’s play that reflects an adult point of view, and the identified lack of understanding of children’s play from the perspective of the children themselves. The study reported in this thesis builds on their suggestions to explore not only children’s perspectives of play, but also the ways in which children participate to share their views. My study is designed to extend existing research on children’s perspectives on play (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000; McInnes, Howard, Crowley, & Miles, 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Theobald et al., 2015). It builds on my previous experiences researching play which I undertook in 2009 in a German kindergarten (Huser, 2010).

Within the growing research field of Childhood Studies, children and childhoods have been considered worthy of study in their own right, with the consequence that the focus has shifted from research on to research with children (Christensen & James, 2008b; Corsaro, 1997; Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011). The epistemological perspective of Childhood Studies understands childhood as a social construction with its own place and structures in society (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002). Childhood is regarded as a permanent element of the social structure in relation to adulthood, but with changing children inhabiting and experiencing it over time (Mayall, 2002). While this perspective recognises the hierarchies and social positioning of children as sub-ordinate to adults, with adults often in powerful roles and in control of children’s freedom (James, 2009), children are not viewed as passive or powerless. On the contrary, Childhood Studies highlights the perspective of the agentic child, who acts and contributes to social and cultural reproduction (Corsaro, 1997; James, 2009). Childhood Studies also positions children as competent, with children considered to be experts on their lives (James & Prout, 1997). Thus, the child is competent to share his or her view, generates knowledge and acts a reliable informant in research (Alderson, 2008). In Childhood Studies, the child’s perspective receives status independent of the adult ideological perspective (Qvortrup, 2009). Nurtured by the children’s rights movement, Childhood Studies also
recognizes children’s rights to express their opinions and participate in decision-making concerning their lives (United Nations, 1989).

The view of the child as rights holder, competent participant and active agent who is worthy of study in their own right is the central perspective of Childhood Studies. This epistemological perspective informs the goal of the study to respect and understand children’s perspectives, applying a social constructivist methodology and utilising participatory methods. Despite efforts to create conditions for children’s participation in research (Lansdown, 2005); consider the specific ethical challenges that come with research involving children (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013); and design methodologies that provide opportunities for children’s active participation, little is known about how children choose to participate (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2012; Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, and Waterson, 2009; Birbeck & Drummond, 2015; Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016). Hence, while the main research question asks what children’s perspectives of play are, one of the sub-research questions turns its attention towards children’s participation in research, and the characterstics needed to create ethical spaces for researching with children.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis comprises seven chapters. Chapter One introduces the study by describing the premise underlying the study – that even with long traditions of play and the valuing of play in children’s learning and development, play has been theorized from adult perspectives, which tend to have ignored the understandings children bring to play. Within the ECEC context, the conceptualisation of play has been shaped by dominant developmental Western theories. Play-based approaches to learning mirror such conceptualisations. Chapter Two provides deeper insight into the influences of existing play theories, as well as how the more recent concepts of childhood and children have led to research of children’s perspectives of play, and which gaps can still be found in the extant literature. Chapter Two concludes with a statement of the research questions guiding the study.
Chapter Three begins with the outline of the theoretical background of the study. With sociocultural theories and Childhood Studies at the core of the study, discussion of ethical considerations and methodological decisions is undertaken. Methods for data generation and data analysis are described in this chapter.

Chapters Four and Five present the results in detail, foregrounding the participating children and their perspectives. The children’s verbal and nonverbal contributions made this study possible. With my deep respect for the children, I have aimed to make them visible throughout the results chapters, but also in Chapter Six, where the results are discussed in light of previous research.

Chapter Seven finalises this thesis, concluding the study’s contributions to the research field, implications, future research possibilities, and noting the limitations and challenges. Just as the thesis commenced with my personal standpoint, it concludes with some personal reflections.
2 Chapter Two: Literature Review

Much has been written about play and children’s perspectives of their everyday experiences. This chapter reviews relevant literature across these areas. The literature review starts with an initial, broad focus on the two separate areas of play in ECEC and researching children’s perspectives, before considering research that combines both areas. My prior knowledge of existing research and influencing authors – some of whom have been mentioned in the introduction of this thesis – led the literature search in its first steps. To select sources for the literature review, I used multiple electronic databases and relevant keywords, including a range of synonyms and variants of terms for the search. Key scholars were identified in the continuing steps, as well as which methodologies and theories they applied. Future research areas – as identified by other authors – helped to map out gaps in the literature. This chapter developed further throughout the writing up of the thesis, as the relevance of particular areas shifted with the emerging understandings based on my research results. However, with ‘play’ as a well-researched phenomenon, and ‘children’s perspectives’ as a fast-growing research focus for the last few decades, both required the coverage of key literature respectively.

While play has been identified as an integral human experience, the multiple theorizations of play mirror its diversity and complexity (Bergen, 2014). In reviewing the play literature, this chapter acknowledges a range of play theories and explores play and its role and place within the context of ECEC. The review begins with a brief historical revisit to the field of play in ECEC and highlights two important major influences from the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, before the chapter puts the spotlight on Post-Vygotskian sociocultural approaches to play. These have the potential to challenge traditional understandings of play by exploring children’s cultural participation and contributions, their shared creation of peer cultures, and innovations of new forms of play through their contemporary experiences.

Different theorizations of play have contributed to a range of understandings of play, but have not concluded in a satisfactory definition of play. However, defining play seems to narrow and limit how play is
constituted. For example, defining play has often led to thinking about what play is – or is not – or, has focused on a hierarchy of types of play, where pretend play received highest attention. Other foci within theorisations of play have included play as a learning tool and play as pedagogy. Play within ECEC has mainly served educative purposes, when play is seen as a vehicle for learning, or contrastingly as reward, when seen as oppositional to work. These are all adult perspectives of play.

While the role and place of play in ECEC continues to draw research attention, relatively limited focus has been directed towards theorising play from the perspectives of the players themselves – the children. The review of research relating to children’s participation in research also suggests that there is much to be learned about children’s participation choices and the actions that support these. Research gaps across these two areas – children’s perspectives of play and their participation in research – provide the starting point for the study reported in this thesis.

2.1 Play and early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Acknowledging the long tradition of play within the education of young children, this first part of the literature review explores the introduction of play in institutionalised ECEC, and how different historical theories have shaped the place of play within ECEC. As many of the theories have advocated contradictory views about play, it is probably not surprising that play is regarded as an ambiguous and complex phenomenon (Wong & Logan, 2016). A number of approaches to play have influenced ECEC in Australia (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Grieshaber, 2016; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), and in other countries, for example the UK (Wood & Attfield, 2005), Hong Kong and mainland China (Grieshaber, 2016). The way play is situated in some countries in ECEC policy and curriculum documents goes back to historically grown notions of play, for example that play is ‘natural’ to children as emphasised in the European Nordic countries, such as Iceland (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Views of play as the child’s way of learning and beneficial for child development also go back to early theorizations of play in European countries, but have influenced ECEC
in Non-European countries through colonization, such as South Africa (Marfo & Bierstecker, 2011).

This review provides an overview of theories of play, with emphasis on prominent influential works of Piaget and Vygotsky, before outlining more contemporary sociocultural approaches that draw on Vygotsky’s theory. Piaget (1962, 1976) and Vygotsky (1978, 2004) conceptualised play within their theorizations of human cognitive development, emphasising constructivist and sociocultural approaches to child development and learning respectively. Such different understandings have shaped pedagogical concepts for ECEC, including Germany (Grochla, 2008) and Australia (Anning et al., 2009; Grieshaber, 2016), which consequently has implications for play as pedagogy and the role of the educator in children’s play and learning processes. Throughout the review, dominant play debates and assumptions are critically considered critically. In the second part, this chapter explores research focused on children’s own perspectives of play, considering that the first section of the chapter revealed theorizations of play from adult perspectives.

2.1.1 Early historical approaches to play

In the discussion of play and its role in the education of young children, the value of play for human growth was mentioned by Plato. Its value for children’s development and learning became more concrete during the time of Renaissance and Enlightenment, in the work of philosophers and pedagogues such as Rousseau and Comenius (Bergen, 2014). Rousseau’s influence produced the idea of play being a natural phenomenon, and contributed to romantic and universal views about play. This has also been reflected in more recent approaches to play – for example, Parten’s theories of play stages in children’s social development can be tied to universal notions of play (Wong & Logan, 2016). Contemporary approaches to play question the universality and the romantic framing of play that tend to overlook other aspects of children’s play, for example ‘dark sides’ where children exercise power among their peers (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

A number of theories of play emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. These are known as Classical play theories and define play as a means to
regulate energy or as an emergence by instinct (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Mellou, 1994; Saracho & Spodeck, 1995). These early theories were often contradictory. For example, different Classical theories postulated that play releases surplus energy and produces needed energy (Saracho & Spodeck, 1995). Other Classical theories positioned play as a means for children to become integrated into the world of adults (Mellou, 1994; Saracho & Spodek, 1995): they reduced play to a child’s preparatory ‘playground’ for adult life where children exercised adult roles they would need in the future; or for outliving an instinctive, primitive stage of human evolution with the aim of fitting into adult society.

Despite critiques that these theories lacked solid research foundations, derived from simple philosophical standpoints, and exhibited limitations in answering questions about the purpose of play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Saracho & Spodek, 1995), the theories influenced later approaches to play. Some of the underlying assumptions laid the foundations for current understandings that are reflected in a range of ECEC practices. For example, educators might argue that if children are noisy and do not sit still during activities, they may benefit from some outdoor play time to get rid of the (surplus) energy (Dockett & Fleer, 1999). Play as a relaxation tool is another common aspect still in educators’ minds. It is seen when educators reward children for an accomplished task with a free play period (Rogers, 2010; Wing, 1995). The early theorizations, such as play as a means to relax, have positioned play as the opposite of work (Wong & Logan, 2016).

Other play theorists, including John Dewey and Maria Montessori separated play from work, or defined play as the child’s work respectively (Ridgway et al., 2015). John Dewey developed an educational concept with play as a key aspect of learning. Dewey’s interpretation of play as a child’s tool to make meaning of his world has influenced ECEC considerably (Saracho & Spodeck, 1995). His ideas nurtured play in education, adding particular importance to dramatic, pretend, or social play. Emerging from these early theorizations have been assumptions about play that can be encountered in current ECEC programs, strengthening the view that play is the opposite of work. Play and work have continued to be elements to
inform ECEC for child development and children’s learning, but have been linked with different settings: informal learning settings make use of play activities, whereas work has been related to formal settings where the focus is on skill acquisition and content learning (Hedges, 2014).

While the notion of ‘play versus work’ has resulted in the notion of play as reward, it also had an impact on play provision, where play time is scheduled around ‘serious’ work tasks that educators direct (Rogers, 2010). Children are then often called away from their play to do these more serious tasks, suggesting that they have more importance than play (Rogers & Evans, 2006). These segmented elaborations of play ignore the complexity of the phenomenon, but also are solely based on adult perspectives and are inconsiderate of the players’ own understandings (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

The German pedagogue Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel receives special attention in contributing to later formulations of play as curriculum. Fröbel is referred to as the first to create an early years curriculum with a special emphasis on play, even though ideas about play were in evidence in the work of Comenius and Pestalozzi before him (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Fröbel and Pestalozzi have both been perceived as the pioneers in the education of young children, particularly through their ascription of an educational role to play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Their work was largely responsible for establishing the assumption that children learn through play. For example, Fröbel’s instructions for using his invented Gifts introduced concepts of early numeracy and science education (Liebschner, 1992), with play being the “medium for education” (Saracho & Spodek, 1995, p. 132). Despite the respect for Fröbel’s educational contributions, his work has been criticised for oversimplifying and romanticising play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Still, his conceptual assumptions of play can be found in contemporary discussions of play, including the role of play in children’s development and learning; the universality of play; and the educator’s role in children’s play.

Other assumptions that originate from these early theorizations and that can still be seen to influence ECEC, include the views that play is natural to the child; play does not follow an external but rather an inner
drive, therefore occurs for its own sake rather than for the sake of reward; and play can be a serious, rather than a frivolous, activity (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

2.1.2 Modern, developmental approaches to play

Modern play theories developed after 1920 expanded the focus of explanations for play beyond questions of existence, towards questions about the functions of play in children’s development (Mellou, 1994; Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Play has been strongly connected with child growth and development (Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). One of the most well-known developmental theorists is Piaget. His theorization of play is strongly connected to his theorization of cognitive development. In the early years of life, Piaget’s (1977) genetic epistemology outlined the development of cognitive processes through sensorimotor to operational stages. Piaget attributed the development of children’s cognitive skills to the processes of assimilation and accommodation, two complementary processes of adaption. Assimilation occurs when information gained from an experience can be integrated into existing mental structures, whereas accommodation is required if mental structures need to undergo change in order to adapt to the new gained information. Play, according to Piaget (1976), developed in three successive stages and prepared the child for adulthood. The three stages were evident in the three types of play, namely practice play, pretend play, and games with rules.

According to Piaget, in play, the child, engages in the process of assimilation which results in the creation of a play-world that is in line with the child’s mental structures. Pretend play “is primarily assimilation of reality to the ego and intensification of this same pleasure through fictitious control of the whole natural and social world” (Piaget, 1962, p. 146). On the one hand, the child re-creates experiences, and it could be argued that play acts as an arena to achieve mastery in enacting an activity repeatedly (Göncü, Tuermner, Jain, & Johnson, 1999). On the other hand, it also could be argued that the child does not learn anything if using an assimilated ‘world’. Piaget (1962) described how:

play is distinguishable by a modification, varying in degree, of the conditions of equilibrium between reality and the ego. We
can therefore say that if adapted activity and thought constitute an equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation, play begins as soon as there is predominance of assimilation. (p. 150)

According to Piaget’s theory, play could only change after a new cognitive skill had been developed. This explains the stages of play which rely on levels of cognitive development.

Around the same time as Piaget, Vygotsky theorised human cognitive development, and the role of play in children’s development. His contributions only became accessible in Western countries in the late 1970s (Wong & Logan, 2016). He recognized that children recreate past experiences in their play with acknowledgement of the children’s creative reproduction of their social and cultural experiences. In contrast to Piaget’s assimilative idea, Vygotsky (2004) argued:

A child’s play very often is just an echo of what he [sic] saw and heard adults do; nevertheless, these elements of his [sic] previous experience are never merely reproduced in play in exactly the way they occurred in reality. A child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what he [sic] has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he [sic] has acquired. He [sic] combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his [sic] own needs and desires. (pp. 11-12)

Vygotsky assigned a highly creative ability to the child in play, as she combines elements of the experienced in an innovative way. Vygotsky’s contribution to developmental psychology proposed play not as following cognitive development, as Piaget had argued; rather he regarded play as the leading activity that promoted children’s mental development (Edwards, 2011; Kravtsova, 2006; Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

The concept of play as the leading activity is defined “as a bridge that supports a child’s transition from one psychological function to another across the developmental lifespan” (Edwards, 2011, p. 196). Play as the leading activity offers the child opportunities to master new psychological functions (Kravtsova, 2006), but also develops from them. Imagination is such a psychological function. It relates to reality and prompts the child to learn the cultural meanings of things and actions (Edwards, 2011). Imagination uses what exists in reality, for example what the child has
experienced in the past (Vygotsky, 2004). From the past experience, the child can draw on a real object (such as a box), and create a new meaning (such as a concept of an experienced, real object (car)), imaging the box to be a car. Play has also been explained by Vygotsky (1978) as the child’s activity to find solutions for unrealizable desires. If a child’s need cannot be satisfied, the child uses imagination to fulfil the desire in a play experience, in a play world. According to Vygotsky, by satisfying their needs in play, the child develops. Imagination and reality are interconnected in children’s interaction with the social and cultural environment: “imagination allows children to connect with reality so that the cultural meanings and objects residing in reality can be reworked” (Edwards, 2011), for example the child creatively re-interprets and reproduces reality (Corsaro, 1997).

Although Vygotsky’s theoretical approaches to play focus on children’s development, they contrast with Piagetian ideas, which have dominated ECEC in Western societies and conformed with trends of high individualism. Piaget’s constructivist approach to development contributed immensely to what is known about child development today. On a positive note, Piaget’s view of the child highlighted processes of actively constructing her knowledge. On a critical note, the individualistic view ignored the context in which development occurs:

In Piaget’s theory the focus is on the individual child’s mastery of the world on her [sic] own terms. Constructivism offers an active but very lonely view of children. Even when others (parents, peers, and teachers) are taken into account, the focus remains on the effects of various interpersonal experiences on individual development. (Corsaro, 1997, p. 17)

Vygotsky provided a contrasting view: the child learns the practices of the community in which they live. For example, the child acquires the use of the local communication tools, such as language. While the child actively engages with the local practices, the processes of acquisition are contextual and embedded in the social interaction between the child and the community (Vygotsky, 1978). This is probably the most essential distinction between Vygotsky’s work and that of Piaget: knowledge is not described as individually constructed and development does not occur in individual exploration; rather social interactions with more experienced others drive development. Interactions with others can include adults or more skilled
peers. In play, children can act beyond their competences by operating in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) through others’ guidance (Vygotsky, 1978).

Piagetian developmental constructivist theories have promoted the role of play, and the active role of the child in their own development, but also have focused on the developmental consequences of play, and play as a means of intervention for children who diverge from developmental norms (Göncü et al., 1999). Through this research field, the notion that play is always beneficial for development has been strengthened, as has the view that play is an educational tool. Contemporarily, the developmental focus on play has been criticised for narrowing the view of play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), particularly for ignoring the inherent value of play. As an alternative, Vygotsky’s theoretical perspective has been advanced by followers of his sociocultural approach, which is discussed in the next section.

2.1.3 Contemporary sociocultural approaches to play, learning and development

The historical discussion of play has not only been fruitful in acknowledging the theories for their understanding of play within their own time of construction, but they have doubtless shaped what is known about contemporary children’s play and its connection with child development. However, Fleer (2010) identified that these theories have to be reviewed for their limited application to today’s ECEC: “it has been possible to demonstrate that the old theories of child development cannot achieve this new political imperative, and therefore the old theories guiding pedagogical practice are no longer relevant for early childhood education in current times” (Fleer, 2010, p. 216).

As an institution, ECEC reflects societal changes, which are connected to globalization processes. These processes are not limited to economic aspects of life, but characterize the cultural contexts of life as well. The modern values such as certainty, linearity and universalism; and the existence of absolute truth have been challenged (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). The modern, developmental perspectives of play have been
shown to omit the sociocultural context, while global societies face high complexity, diversity and uncertainty (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005). However, in a world that is socially constructed and comprised of cultural contexts, play approached in a way that reflects the sociocultural context, respects multiple perspectives, and can identify power mechanisms that shape dominant views of play. Chowdhury and Rivalland (2012) argue for sociocultural research in the investigation of play within ECEC, as this lens can shed light not only on how play is conceptualised in ECEC, but also how it is valued as a learning tool within the social and cultural traditional context that has shaped educators’, parents’ and children’s beliefs.

Vygotsky’s (1978; 2004) contributions to the sociocultural theorization of play can count as ‘old theories’ (Fleer, 2010); after all, he described them almost hundred years ago. However, his approach to play which links to his theory of human cognitive development, has offered a theoretical basis to consider societal changes in regards to play: the social, cultural and historical context of the communities within which children develop, learn and play define children’s active acquisition of knowledge through the cultural tools these communities offer (Edwards, 2003). Vygotsky’s ideas were furthered by his colleagues and followers, such as Leontiev and Elkonin, and have informed contemporary ECEC (Bodrova & Leong, 2015), which have come to known as sociocultural, socio-historical or cultural-historical theories (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Broadhead & Burt, 2012; Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2012; Colliver & Fleer, 2016; Edwards, 2003; Fleer, 2010; Ridgway et al., 2015; Rogoff, 1990). Recent ECEC research that reflects Vygotskian understandings has also developed social-constructivist lenses (Anning et al., 2009) or extended theories, such as (Cultural-historical) Activity Theory (CHAT) (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; van Oers, 2013). The recognition of the interrelation between social processes, cultural participation and development were also the foundation for Corsaro’s (1997) interpretive approach in regards to childhood socialization and which explored children’s collective processes to produce their own local peer cultures, where they share meaning and co-construct knowledge in play and routines. Within all these theoretical perspectives, social interactions are the key component to processes of children’s play, learning
and development (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), which, in the following, I refer to under the umbrella term ‘sociocultural’.

In this section, I revisit the field of Post-Vygotskian approaches to play, and Corsaro’s approach of ‘interpretive reproduction’, before turning attention to ‘contemporary play’ that embraces new forms of play arising from children’s direct participation with contemporary popular culture, technologies and related branded toys and events which are part of contemporary children’s everyday experiences (Edwards, 2014). A sociocultural perspective, as highlighted in the following discussion, provides the theoretical basis for seeking to understand children’s play, learning and development within contemporary contexts through their cultural participation in social processes at a particular point in time.

2.1.3.1 Post-Vygotskian approaches

Sociocultural perspectives have gained prominence as a critical response to dominant Western theories in ECEC, such as the influences of Piagetian constructivist ideas (Anning et al., 2009; Grochla, 2008; Robbins, 2003) that focused on the individual child and processes of biological maturation, but largely ignored contexts of development (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Fleer, 2012). Eurocentric conceptions which have been fed dominantly from constructivism created a universalist view of the child and of play. The focus on the individual child has been contrasted with views that children actively recreate understandings from past experiences to reproduce their social and cultural experiences in social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978, 2004) while they create and share meaning in interaction with their social environment, with adults and other children (Corsaro, 1997; Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Lindqvist, 2001). Placing emphasis on maturation has contributed to views of the child as universal, which when linked to play in childhood, constructed the idea that play is universal as well. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) have identified “taken-for-granted understandings of play in ECEC [such as] that play is natural, normal, innocent, fun, solely about development and learning, beneficial to all children, and a universal right for children” (p. 1) which ignore cultural contexts and reduce play to the vehicle for promoting the development of some children.
Since Fröbel’s ideas of the benefits of play for child development, an equation of playing and developing has become an image of universal and unquestionable truth (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). In addition, play is identified as a universal right as it is documented in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). However, this positioning does not always acknowledge beliefs and life circumstances that differ from Western ones (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), which this thesis acknowledges as much as it advocates children’s rights. In a society where child labour is the key to a family’s survival, play may not be valued in the same way as in Western contexts (Gaskins, 2014; Moyles, 2006). Play is almost treated as a “sacred right of childhood” (Cannella & Viruru, 2000, p. 124) and the way for each child to learn. However, sociocultural and cross-cultural studies provided evidence that play is valued differently in social and cultural contexts (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2012; Göncü, Jain, & Tuermer, 2007; Göncü et al., 1999; Rogoff, 2003), and that play and its role in children’s lives in general, and for their learning and development in particular, can differ immensely in meaning (Gaskins, 2014).

Rogoff (1990, 2003) advanced Vygotsky’s theory and emphasised that “culture is not an entity that influences individuals. Instead, people contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 51, italics as in original). To Vygotsky’s intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, a third level, the contextual processes for development, was added where participation in the local community is considered (Rogoff, 1990). When play is approached from a sociocultural theoretical stance, play cannot be separated from the social contexts in which it occurs. Children’s cognitive developmental processes are also understood in this way, highlighting the three levels where development occurs simultaneously, according to Rogoff: on the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the community/ institutional level (Edwards, 2003). Rogoff’s (2003) studies provided insight that the cultural contexts in which children participate are important, as practices differ from culture to culture, such as childrearing in U.S. American, Mayan, or Indian communities, but also throughout history, for example from writing on walls, to the availability of papyrus or paper, and contemporary word
processing tools. Social interactions are always situated within children’s local contexts which are inseparable from their communities’ culture and history. Cultural studies from non-Western contexts have been important to question assumptions that all children are the same. Critical reflection of dominant Eurocentric/Western conceptions (Colliver, 2012) through providing multiple understandings of children, child development and play are important as the Eurocentric concepts surrounding play “privilege certain ways of understanding children against a developmental continuum” (Wood, 2010, p. 12).

Depending on children’s cultural contexts, experiences vary in relation to their social roles within their communities, the expectations that are placed on them within these, and how much their activities are supervised by adults (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). Parental beliefs about the value of play are linked to these aspects and differ across cultural contexts. For example, parents in the U.S., as well as parents in China, saw an educational value in play to drive learning and development, whereas parents of the Kpelle community in Liberia perceived play as purely an activity children engage in, and the Yucatec Mayan people in Mexico showed least value of play for children’s development (Gaskins, 2014). There, children contributed to the family’s household. For the Yucatec children, play was not the leading activity of development, as they engaged in a range of activities with adults where they had opportunities to learn and further develop skills (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). The dominant view that play is the one formula to facilitate learning in ECEC is a Western construct (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2012) where children spend less and less time with adults and in shared work tasks with adults. Universally expressed definitions of play are problematic, as they overlook the immense variations of the contexts where play occurs (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Cultural contextual differences shape, and have impact on, how children spend their time with others, and how play is constituted in their lives.

Conceptualisations of play that derived mainly from studies with children from Western middle-class backgrounds have dominated the field, but when dealt with as the norm have given inadequate explanations for the play of children (Rogoff, 2003) not only from non-Western families, but
also those from low socioeconomic status communities (Göncü et al., 2007). Children who did not display the same kinds of play, or the same level of performance in specific play characteristics as pre-defined by developmental researchers were labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ and in need for intervention (Smilansky, 1968). Göncü et al. (2007) claimed such judgements lack “cultural validity” (p. 157), and that it was necessary to take cultural and economic contexts of families into account. In their study on the relation between poverty and children’s play, they observed and video-recorded children’s play in three different cultural communities (African American city community, European American semirural community, and a Turkish peasant community) with similar low socioeconomic contexts, and interviewed the children’s parents and educators about their beliefs and values of play. The rich descriptions of play gave insight about where, what and whom children played, while the adult interviews provided context how the value of play was perceived (Göncü et al., 2007).

Poverty, violence, and traffic were identified as dimensions which impacted on play, for example in relation to parents’ engagement in or supervision of play (Göncü et al., 2007). Poverty was a factor in terms of parental play involvement: some parents had time to engage in children’s play; the workload of others did not allow such engagement. High occurrences of violence in the neighbourhood and highly frequent traffic impacted on whether or not children could play outside and without adult supervision. Depending on the location, children’s play occurred at home and at the ECEC setting the children attended. The Turkish children involved in the study had no access to a school, hence their play occurred at home and on the village streets and surroundings; there was hardly any traffic in the village which allowed play without supervision. Societal, contextual conditions had an impact on the ways play occurred, and this was not only related to location, as in the Turkish’s village example, but also temporally related. Finnish parents in another study reported that childhood has changed over time (Kalliala, 2002), highlighting also how the increase in traffic since their own childhood had resulted in decreased levels of street play, and more adult-supervised play for their children.
The cultural comparison of the low socioeconomic communities in Göncü et al.’s (2007) study revealed a range of adult beliefs about the value of play. All parents and educators valued play in children’s lives. However, Turkish parents and relatives saw play as something that children did within their peer groups, and did not understand the researchers’ interest. Even though they noted play “prepares for life” (Göncü et al., 2007, p. 169) through imitation of adult activities, Turkish adults did not share their American counterparts’ views who emphasised developmental benefits of play, and play as a learning tool. Chowdhury and Rivalland’s (2012) sociocultural study in Bangladesh also explored how parents and educators valued play, and found that play’s value is strongly shaped by cultural values and by specific groups of people. In this study, educators and parents had different understandings of play: while the parents who came from low socioeconomic status communities placed emphasis on academic achievements and education as the chance for their children to a better future, the educators who had received training to implement play as a tool for teaching and learning inferred that play had actual value for children’s learning. The parents could not draw on experiences of play in their own education, as within the Bangladesh context, play had only recently become of interest in ECEC policy. Hence, play is conceptualised and communicated, sometimes quite differently, within educational and home contexts (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2012; Göncü et al., 2007; Göncü et al., 1999).

Within ECEC practice, adult beliefs play an important part: it is through educators’ practical implementations of theoretical understandings that play provision is influenced and shaped. Play-based programs and curricula shape ECEC practice in many countries (Grieshaber, 2016; Marfo & Bierstecker, 2011; Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Sumson et al., 2014; Wood, 2010); but the role of the educator in play is often a challenge. Depending on the theory, the educator plays a different role in play. As the literature review has discussed, the understanding and positioning of play in ECEC has been shaped by different historically grown theories of play. Strongest influences have been constructivist developmental theories. More recently sociocultural theories have gained prominence in Australia and
internationally to inform educational programs (Anning et al., 2009; Grieshaber, 2016; Grochla, 2008) which changes the adult role in play provision.

From a constructivist, developmental point of view, the educators’ main role has been to facilitate play (Fleer, Anning, & Cullen, 2009), while sociocultural theory takes the educator’s active role in children’s play into account (Lindqvist, 2001; van Oers, 2013). However, many educators face challenges in working out their role, particularly the ways and to what extent they engage in and stimulate children’s play (Fleer, 2015; Fleer et al., 2009; König, 2009; McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011; van Der Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Wood, 2010), especially if their training was based mainly on constructivist informants.

This is seen in one observational study in Germany, which showed that educators rarely made use of approaches based on co-constructing knowledge together with the children, but rather left them playing freely without providing their active guidance (König, 2009). German educator students also demonstrated a reluctance to intervene in children’s play (van Der Aalsvoort et al., 2015). In an Icelandic study, the educator role often seemed limited to a passive observer role (Einarsdóttir, 1998). One question arising from these studies considers whether these results reflect a long-standing tradition of free play which relates more to constructivist than sociocultural theories to play. In an Australian qualitative study, video observations of educators’ positioning in children’s play revealed that educators take on different roles in children’s play, but predominantly supervise and provide resources (Fleer, 2015). On those occasions where educators did interact they often followed an “educative agenda” (Fleer, 2015, p. 1808) which led to misinterpretations of children’s play themes while the educator purposed the play for curricular themes, such as science topics, or they acted as a coordinator, but never as a play partner. In an action research project during the implementation of the Wales Foundation curriculum (Wood, 2010), educators initiated reflective research cycles and felt they had to rethink their developmental assumptions about the children and universal ideas of play in relation to learning. The 3-5-year old children in their setting came from different cultural backgrounds, and not all
children had access to the curriculum through the mainly free play provision in place. The educators gained awareness that more inclusive play provision was needed to meet the children’s diverse understandings of play, and that adults’ active engagement and guidance could support those children who were challenged. The studies presented here highlighted that educators struggled with engaging in children’s play either based on likely constructivist theories or driven by curricular goals.

A sociocultural approach, such as CHAT, in contrast to constructivism, does not question adults’ active participation in children’s play (van Oers, 2013). Rather, it assumes that educators can take on various roles in children’s play (Jones & Reynolds, 2011), as they engage in a range of cultural activities. This approach questions the “binary conceptualisation of the role of adults” (Fleer, 2015, p. 1802) – involved or not involved in children’s play – noting instead some of the many roles educators may play: facilitator, coordinator or supervisor, as well as actively positioning inside children’s play, such as taking on a character role (Fleer, 2015). A sociocultural theoretical approach, for example CHAT, understands play as a mode of activity, with any cultural activity grounded in interpersonal interactions that are the source for development (van Oers, 2013).

Even though sociocultural theory has informed the EYLF that informs Australian ECEC practice (and before the introduction of the national document, state curricula had such foundations), the implementation of a curriculum does not mean that all educators have fully understood the theoretical basis for their praxis. For example, educators might have not had opportunities to grasp the understanding of sociocultural theory and its consequences for play provision in their educational practice, or they may have misinterpreted sociocultural theory with multiculturalism (Edwards, 2006). One consequence may well be educators’ challenges with their active engagement in children’s play.

Besides the educators’ challenges of finding their role in children’s play, they also overlook “children’s agendas” (Wood, 2010, p. 20) focusing their educative agendas (Fleer, 2015). What causalities and consequences are related to this are detailed in further on in section 2.2.3 in this chapter where I confront the issues surrounding play defined as pedagogy. Briefly, a
continuous push for quality and effectiveness have driven play-based programs and resulted in adult judgements about appropriate and inappropriate play (Wood, 2010). Particularly in the UK, but also in other contexts such as Australia, educators are driven to provide a play-based curriculum where children meet curricular outcomes, grow and develop in ways that can be observed and documented (Colliver, 2012; Keating et al., 2000; Wragg, 2013). This adult agenda does not leave much space for play that might seem purposeless rather than purposeful, from an educational point of view (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). It also misses opportunities to take into account what drives children to play (Howard, 2010). A sociocultural perspective provides a theoretical basis to explore children’s play agendas. Coming back to Rogoff’s (2003) contributions, I delve into the subject of children’s shared processes in cultural activities and continue with Corsaro’s (1997) interpretive reproduction to explore collective processes that children use to create a peer culture within play.

2.1.3.2 Interpretive reproduction

This chapter, so far, has confronted the issues surrounding dominant theories of play that have taken a developmental, constructivist view with a focus on the individual child. Corsaro was also critical towards such theories where development was understood as a linear process – with children progressing from the immature child to the competent adult – and the individualism approach that ignores collective social processes (Corsaro, 1993, 1997). He acknowledged the constructivist view of the active child but has stressed the importance of the social context of child development and socialisation. The difference with constructivism lies in the view that socialisation is not seen as individual, but always as a shared process. From his longitudinal ethnographic studies in Italian and U.S. American ECEC settings, Corsaro (1997) introduced the “notion of interpretive reproduction” (p. 18, bold in original) which rejects the future-oriented individualistic view of socialisation. Instead the emphasis is on two aspects: the ‘interpretive’ nature of the ‘reproductive’ act (Corsaro, 2012). This view highlights children’s creative appropriation of information they experience in society while, at the same time, emphasising children’s creation of their own peer cultures and their contribution to adult cultures and society in
general through their participation in both peer and adult cultures (Corsaro, 1997).

Peer cultures commence to develop immensely once children are amongst their peers for an extended time, for example while attending ECEC services. Children create peer cultures through collective actions (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009). The definition of peer culture is “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 197). A strong characteristic of children’s peer culture is consistent effort to gain control and share that control with their peers (Corsaro, 2003), particularly through routines (Corsaro, 1993). Children’s efforts to gain some form of control exists in response to their encounters of structural and social constrains – however such efforts also offer possibilities for social participation at the ECEC context (Löfdahl, 2010). When rules are experienced as unfair, children may share a sense of injustice (Corsaro, 1993), and respond with shared resistance which Corsaro (1997) identifies as their ‘secondary adjustments to adult rules’. For example, he observed children smuggling in little objects to the ECEC setting, even after they had been told not to bring toys from home to the classroom, as this often ended in children fighting over the special toys and arguments about sharing. The children were careful about showing and sharing these objects with peers, aiming for them to remain unnoticed by their educators (who often knew about the secretive actions). But, possibly because the children then shared their toys and therefore acted as the educators had intended, or because the children showed such creativity to hide their objects, the educators refrained from stopping the children in their routine (Corsaro, 1993). Other play routines included ‘approach-avoidance play’ (Corsaro, 2012) where a threatening agent was approached and then avoided by running away from. In the Italian research site, children formalized such play, for example ‘La Strega’, which was based on a tale of a feared character, and re-invented and produced new versions of it by applying new rules and structures, while still aiming to experience control.

Within a sociocultural interpretation of development, children are actively constructing knowledge through their participation in cultural
activities; they utilize and appropriate the tools available; they observe and participate in order to learn the appropriation of tools and practices; and invent further and transform participation through their contributions (Rogoff, 2003). All this is always understood within shared efforts of a group within a particular cultural and historical context. Children are viewed as active learners and drivers of their own development (Rogoff, 1990). Play, then, becomes a social practice of a community where meaning is shared, co-constructed, reproduced and interpreted (Corsaro, 1997). The playing individuals stand in direct relation to their actions, but also to the interactions within this group of individuals. The community of players form play and systemize it within their play culture (Wood, 2009). With this in mind, development is driven by the participation in social activities (Robbins, 2003).

2.1.3.3 Children’s contemporary play

When play is understood as embedded in its sociocultural context, Edwards (2014) draws attention to the contemporary influences on children’s play that reflect the changes children experience in their ‘reality’ (Edwards, 2014). She believes that the sociocultural perspective offers perfect grounds to add “the concept of ‘contemporary’ play” (Edwards, 2014, p. 220). This concept “is characterised by the possibilities enabled by the convergence between the various products, digital media and digital technologies that children potentially experience on a continuum of digital to non-digital experiences” (Edwards, 2014, p. 225). In contrast to views that television and other media, as well as the consumption of digital technologies, lead to a decrease in the amount and quality of children’s play (Nicholson, Kurnik, Jevgjovikj, & Ufoegbune, 2015), the concept of contemporary play as proposed by Edwards (2014) offers opportunities to reconceptualise children’s play by taking their contemporary experiences into account. These experiences include their engagement with contemporary popular culture through television, digital media and technologies.

With the growing market of merchandized products, superhero toys have also taken over. Such toys have pre-scripted roles and themes, and it is debatable whether they enable opportunities for children to communicate
and negotiate with each other when playing with them, or whether they limit children’s play narratives (Parsons & Howe, 2013). Observations of children playing with these toys in comparison with generic toys, however, did not attest such limitations. Even though a pair of boys playing with the superhero toys negotiated less on story plots or roles, they demonstrated that the shared knowledge and common interest in superheroes created rich play between the boys (Parsons & Howe, 2013). Concerns that play quality decreases seemed to be connected to developmental views of play, rather than what children’s experiences through play participation is about.

Cultural experiences from children’s everyday lives inform and are interpreted by children in play (Corsaro, 1997; Vygotsky, 2004), but these experiences are not limited to interpretations of adult life, as Vygotsky (1978) among others constituted. For a group of children in Mexico, a dance performance play based on a telenovela was demonstration of their cultural participation (Ridgway et al., 2015). Watching telenovelas is part of their everyday cultural practices in Mexico. The telenovela served as a template that the children used to create a dance in an imagined situation. In addition to interpretations of everyday life experiences and linked to observations of adult life, contemporary experiences open new opportunities deriving from participation in and interaction with digital technologies, consuming television and other media-related events (Edwards, 2014).

Data from previous studies on children’s play lore, such as the collected work from Opie and Opie in the 1950s, or Dorothy Howard’s study on children’s school playground activities in Australia among others, have enabled researchers to draw comparisons with contemporary childhoods and children’s play (Darian-Smith, 2012; Kalliala, 2002; Marsh, 2014), placing play into its sociocultural and historical context. Continuities were apparent. For example, that children interpret stories in their play which they know from fiction, is not new. Kalliala (2002) investigated the reflection of time and culture in children’s play in a study in Finland. She compared data from the 1990s collected through observing and talking to six-year-old children in Finnish ECEC settings as well as at their homes, with additional information from their parents and educators, and data from the 1950s from former research and documentary sources. While children’s
play in the 90s reflected one of today’s childhood’s strongest influences, the media, children in the 50s also integrated fictional stories. While in the 90s, they transformed, for example, the ‘Lion King’ film’s story and reality dating television shows into new play plots, children in the 50s reconstructed fairy tales and adventure novels. And the superheros of today’s play themes used to be the characters in legends and other tales (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

In another study about continuities and discontinuities in media consumption, literacy and play, Marsh (2014) identified continuities between the 1950s and 2010s in the ways children engaged in multiple playful ways with new released movies that both became highly popular. For example, they played characters and story lines from the movies, or created language play based on them. A change was observed with the introduction of digital possibilities, where children have different opportunities to engage with the movies offline and online. The ‘Childhood, Tradition and Change’ study surveyed Australian children’s play culture on primary school playgrounds with collected data from 2007-2011 (Darian-Smith, 2012). Many traditional games, such as ball games, chasing and running games, and language games have endured, but games such as Hopscotch, Elastics and Marbles decreased in popularity, while digital play was added as a new category of play on school playground. Traditional play changed in themes, such as that references to popular culture and media increased in language games and in what the researchers categorized as ‘imaginary play’. While traditionally children have made meaning of their realities in play, these studies demonstrate that new technologies and media in contemporary contexts enabled new play practices including online, digital play, even though traditional games continued to be popular among children.

While contemporary influences have been identified, traditional play does not disappear, as shown in the continuities studies mentioned above. However, new digital or online play occurs, as well as converged play “in which technologies, digital media and popular culture are understood as cross-referential” (Edwards, 2015, p. 3), to a point that it is almost impossible to distinguish between digital and analogue play where children
make use of dolls or soft toys plus an app on a phone or computer in their play. What the current consumer market offers to children has expanded immensely and contributed to these converged play opportunities, and to play on a digital to non-digital continuum, as Edwards (2014) has explored. On the basis of one popular television character (Peppa Pig™), Edwards provides an overview of the possibilities on this continuum, with soft toys, figurines, puzzles and clothing on the non-digital end, and online games, web-forums, apps and YouTube clips on the digital end. The opportunities on the continuum do not require a linear progression, meaning that a child does not have to watch an episode of the television program first, before being able to engage with an online game or to do a puzzle. Edwards (2014) continues to underscore the importance of the non-linear possibilities: children do not need to follow stages of acquired knowledge or skills as developmental theories of play postulated. Instead, children directly participate “in the digital-consumerist context focussed on a series of personally realised opportunities experienced across the continuum through the convergence between digital media, digital technologies and a range of products” (Edwards, 2014, p. 230), where even wearing a merchandized T-shirt displaying the character can count as play. Such examples provide a rich view on children’s contemporary play where the consumption of television and other (digital) media and popular culture have created new possibilities of cultural participation.

Contrary to the arguments that media and technologies cause a decrease in children’s play quality and quantity (Nicholson et al., 2015), children continue to demonstrate creativity and innovation in play (Marsh, 2014), create new forms of playing on a digital to non-digital continuum and converged play (Edwards, 2015), and show their direct cultural participation through play (Edwards, 2014; Ridgway et al., 2015). By integrating and reinterpreting stories from television and other media, children make meaning of their everyday life activities and transform their play culture through contemporary influences, including branded and merchandized products and technologies that are part of the popular culture (Edwards, 2014). Embracing contemporary notions of children’s play can overcome traditional concepts of play that may limit children’s experiences in play and
view them as deficient. Rather than a decrease of amount of play or quality of play, new forms of play emerge that only children who experience contemporary childhoods might understand.

2.2 Definitions of play

Different theorisations of play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Saracho & Spodek, 1995) produced a range of definitions. These focused on the play behaviours of children and the functional elements of play (Pellegrini, 2009), various play types (Piaget, 1962; Rubin et al., 1978) and contexts of play (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Huizinga, 1955; Wood, 2009). However, despite the many studies, there is no agreed definition of play (Broadhead, Wood, & Howard, 2010). In addition, there have been many attempts to define play using categories, criteria or continua (Garvey, 1977; McInnes et al., 2013). However, one definition might exclude some important aspects. The following discussion revisits some major attempts to define play acknowledging their historical theoretical origin as well as contemporary applications and implications. Three defining elements are presented in more detail, as they stand out for the later discussion within the thesis: pretend play; play as a vehicle for learning; and play as pedagogy. First, I give an overview of some characteristics and approaches to defining play that have been prominent in the literature.

One approach to defining play has been to eliminate what it is not. For example, play as an observable behaviour was compared with non-play and distinguished from other behaviour, such as exploration (Pellegrini, 2009) or work. Historically, play was defined in opposition to work which draws back to the existential idea of play for relaxation (Wong & Logan, 2016). Other educational theorists, such as Montessori, also have argued that play is the child’s work (Ridgway et al., 2015) Hence, the ‘play-work separation’ did not disappear and has manifested itself in ECEC through practices, where educators deploy play, for example, as a reward after children have accomplished work tasks (Rogers, 2010). Certain characterizations of play have reinforced the distinction from work. When play has been described, it is associated with pleasure, voluntariness, engagement, and freedom of choice, with no need for an extrinsic goal or a
product (Garvey, 1977; Huizinga, 1955). It is more about the process than a product-outcome (Sylva, Bruner, & Genova, 1976). These characteristics are certainly true for many play occasions and players’ experiences. While most of them can be associated with work as well, the product-orientation might have contributed particularly to see play as oppositional to work.

Another attempt to define play suggested not thinking of play as an act or observable behaviour, but rather, regarding play as manifested in an attitude or a mental approach towards a practice: “The construct of playfulness is argued to be an attitude of mind, which indicates the approach taken to an activity” (McInnes et al., 2013, p. 270). Is then play everything that is approached playfully? The definition of play as a mental approach or attitude does not mean ‘anything goes’. If play is understood as an attitude the child has towards a particular activity, it is necessary to explore children’s different understandings of play more carefully. Play may not mean the same to each child: what one child identifies as play, might not be right for another child. Children are a highly diverse group (Beazley et al., 2009). The concept of playfulness as an attitude is interesting in regards to overcoming the play-work divide. When an activity has particular qualities for the child, according to van Oers (2013), there is no need to distinguish between play and work. Even though the activity may be goal-directed and adult-initiated, and educators might regard the activity as work, the children can experience play qualities (van Oers, 2013). Play according to van Oers (2013) is an activity that is accomplished by highly involved actors, who follow some rules (either implicitly or explicitly), and who have some freedom with regard to the interpretation of the rules, and to the choice of other constituents of an activity (like tools, goals, etc.). (p. 191)

The assumption that play is driven intrinsically can be traced back to the early theorizations of play where play is defined as an instinct or need of children (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Play as an instinct carries the notion that it is biological and evolves in every human being. This view becomes problematic when linked to a universal norm which sets expectations for how play is to be performed, disregarding cultural-contextual variations of play. This chapter has already argued that Eurocentric and Western views of
play discriminate against those children who grow up in contexts where play is valued differently (Colliver, 2012; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Developmental and maturational perspectives of play have been critiqued for ignoring the social origins of play (Fleer, 2012). In her descriptions of play, Fleer (2012) changes the focus so that the motive for play lies in the participation with the social world, and experiences from participating become representations in play. Seeing play as driven by inner instincts reinforces the idea that every child plays, and that, because play will evolve in the same way for all children, play should be left with the child. The association of play with freedom of choice is closely related here. ‘Free play’ practices have been common in ECEC. However, a focus on free play assumes that all children will have access to this kind of play (Wood, 2010) before they are confronted with free play at ECEC. Further, the term ‘free play’ is another unclarified phenomenon.

What is meant by free play, and how much freedom is in free play? It may well be that there is relatively little freedom of choice about play in ECEC (Wood, 2010). For example, players set limits in order to be able to play together, and agreements and compromises have to be made (van Oers, 2013). Secondly, some children are excluded from play and are not free to enter play if the other players impede and exercise powers of exclusion (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Löfdahl, 2010). There is also exercise of power external to the players. Play has become highly supervised, often for the safety of children (Göncü et al., 2007; Kalliala, 2002). In ECEC, play provision is highly regulated by adults with a focus on educational outcomes of play (EECERA SIG "Rethinking Play", 2017; Wood, 2010). Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) found conflicting meanings for the term ‘free play’ that partly mirror the restraints and regulation exercised by adults, ranging from play that was ‘free-of-adult-control’, to a ‘free-choice time’ within an adult-set time-frame.

‘The ambiguity of play’ (Sutton-Smith, 1997) has not been overcome. Could a clear, certain definition be a solution to understanding the role of play in children’s lives in ECEC? While such a definition may be useful, defining play could also limit children’s experiences to a definition that may recognise the complexity of play (Wood, 2013), but from an adult
point of view. Such a definition might include only specific types of play or play that satisfies specific adult-initiated roles. Play may be reduced to a learning vehicle (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), or regulated for educational purposes through a ‘pedagogization of play’ (Rogers, 2013; Wood, 2010).

2.2.1 Pretend play

One approach to the challenge of defining play has been to disassociate from a general definition, and instead move towards narrow categorizations of play. One example is the focus on children’s pretend play (Fein, 1981). The ECEC context offers space for pretend play, as children attend settings that allow for informal, child-initiated activities with peers. Thus, pretend play might be increasingly observable during the early years, as children have expanded opportunities to engage in such play. The extensive research on pretend play among peers has focused on its emergence and development, and its role in children’s development (Fein, 1981; Garvey, 1977; Lillard et al., 2013; Smilansky, 1968).

The study reported in this thesis acknowledges the contribution from studies investigating how pretend play develops over the childhood years, and the ways in which children’s developmental benefits through pretend play engagement. However, in this study I aim to tread carefully with definitions of play, whether play is defined in more general terms or in narrow terms. For example, through focusing on one type of play, such as pretend play, this thesis agrees that “[i]n aiming to define and categorize play, we may be in danger of overlooking the fact that children have their own definitions of play” (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 7). For the exploratory focus of my study, pretend play nonetheless attracts my attention and interest, as children themselves have identified this kind of play as an essential activity during the time they spend at ECEC settings (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Rogers & Evans, 2006).

Much of the research attention to pretend play has derived from the work of Piaget, who claimed that pretend play has its peak emergence in ECEC years (Bretherton, 1984). Piaget (1962) described three consecutive subtypes or categories of play which comprise practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules. Other researchers also strictly separated play types,
while still others considered that pretense was a requirement to define an activity as play. For example, Grusec and Lytton are representative of those who investigated play types separately (Ridgway et al., 2015), while Vygotsky excluded any types of activities that did not involve pretense from his definition of play, such as construction, physical activity, and games (Bodrova & Leong, 2015).

There are different terms found in the literature that refer to pretend play. Often, terms such as “imaginative play, make-believe play, fantasy play, dramatic play”, (Fein, 1981, p. 1096), have been used interchangeably. However, these terms can also reveal subtle differences (Fein, 1981; Moyles, 2012). ‘Socio-dramatic play’ can be understood as the extension of role or pretend play where several children enact different roles, including people and animals (Moyles, 2012). Corsaro (2003) has made a distinction between ‘socio-dramatic role-play’ and ‘fantasy play’: while in role-play children “collaboratively produce pretend activities that are related to experiences from their real lives (for example, family and occupational roles and routine activities)” (p. 111), their fantasy play relates to “fictional narratives” (p. 112), or the manipulation of objects and toys, rather than enactment of a role. However, Fein (1981) stated the source for the stories children enact in play is not critical, and Corsaro’s (1997) emphasis lies in the acknowledgement that children do not just imitate or internalize their ‘real life’ experiences from the adult world. Instead they creatively appropriate information, interpret and reproduce this information and link it to what the children are concerned with. Despite the different existing terms, the central aspect for this kind of type of play is the act of imagining or pretending (Vygotsky, 1978). Post-Vygotskian researchers have emphasised the imaginary situation as the essential element of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ridgway et al., 2015).

A major body of research on pretend play concentrated on its development as children mastered the skills of symbolic representation. From his observations of his own children, Piaget (1962) concluded that there were three types of play that developed consecutively with the child’s cognitive development: practice play; pretend play; and games with rules. In his understanding of pretend play, pretending also advanced gradually with
representations of events taking different forms, and the child dissociates from the concrete represented event. Bretherton (1984) linked to Piaget’s ideas that role, actions, and objects are subject of representation where the child learns to separate “the symbol from what it symbolizes” (p. 4). The importance of symbolization has been also stressed by Vygotsky (1976) who argued that symbolization enables the child to give an object a new meaning, for example a stick becomes the pivot to represent riding a horse. In addition, another requirement for this symbolic act is that the child is also able to distinguish between what is real and what is not real, as the child acts ‘as if’ the stick is a horse (Garvey, 1976). The distinction between real and not real marks an activity as pretend play. Paley (1988) observed children using this clear distinction to invite peers to play: “pretend it’s real” (p. 58). Post-Vygotskian explorations of children’s symbolic acts have contributed to understandings of how play advances and is mastered with children’s developing cognitive competencies of mental representations. Following Elkonin’s work, Bodrova and Leong (2015) highlighted that children master symbolic representations in play, first by replacing real objects which they give new meaning until they are able to pretend without having a physical object and act symbolically using verbal cues and gestures.

Vygotsky required three components so that an activity could be defined as play: play always consists of a situation to be imagined; roles to be acted out; and rules that manage those roles, and with their attendance maintain the imagined situation (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). In the imagined situation, the child draws from past experiences to use and interpret them to create new events in play (Vygotsky, 1978). However, according to Gaskins (2014), the roles which children act out in play have their origin in “realistic”, but also “unrealistic roles and events” (p. 36). Both have their fascination. Experimenting with fantasized, unrealistic roles promotes the child for self-expression, as there is no realistic template on which to draw. Rather, the child can explore and be creative when taking on an unrealistic role. The realistic roles, on the other hand, offer the child opportunities to reflect on roles the child knows from real life situations to expand understanding of the real world (Gaskins, 2014). Such explorations of roles
and “pretend identities” (Rogers, 2010, p. 161) create opportunities for the children to test different acts and behaviours and find out which arrangements are suitable for different situations (Hughes, 2010). Winther-Lindquist (2013) provided examples that highlighted how fantastic roles especially promoted role exploration, due to an ongoing role development throughout the children’s play. In her ethnographic study about children’s pretend play and their social identities, data were gathered through handwritten field notes of observations and additional tape-recorded interviews held with children “on the spot” (p. 35). Data were gathered in two Danish ECEC settings over the period of a year. The five-year old boys in one observed play episode established and negotiated their roles on the go. Negotiations were important to the children, for example, if they did not like their social position in the play group. Roles also marked their social identities, and each role could include more or less power, and could have a different hierarchical status. The unrealistic roles promoted experimentation with roles that included “feared, mean and morally dismissed and curious roles” (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013, p. 39). Children’s playing with such roles that create power hierarchies among the players or the enactment of ‘mean’ acts towards other players, sits uncomfortably with a romanticised view that play is always about joy, fun and innocence (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), and may result in educators being quick to ban this kind of pretend play.

Pretending with others affords opportunities to build shared understandings. Developing shared understandings is linked to the concept of intersubjectivity, where a shared focus is the start of a dynamic process of continuous negotiation of the knowledge about this focus and how to communicate about it (Göncü, 1993). Metacommunicative skills are required, for example, to negotiate as children agree on a shared play theme and explore this further. Sawyer (1997) showed the complexity of children’s metacommunication in play. The use of metacommunication enables children to lay out parameters for play, and share a common understanding which can motivate continued playing. Bateson’s investigations of play frames offered insight into children’s communicative and metacommunicative skills during their play, noting the importance of ensuring all players’ understanding of the pretend actions involved (Dockett
& Fleer, 1999; Evaldsson, 2009): the message ‘this is play’ can be stated explicitly or through specific expressions. For example, in reference to role assignment, the child acting as a doctor might say: ‘Let me check if your arm is broken’. The child’s statement here does not include an explicit reference that ‘this is play’ or ‘pretend’ respectively. Rather, the child speaks within the character or “within the pretend frame” (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009, p. 14). An explicit reference includes, according to Sawyer (1997) the actual element of pretending. The players know that they are speaking and listening within the play, rather than in the real world through a range of messages, including explicitly ‘Let’s play’ or ‘Let’s pretend’.

“The message ‘This is play’ is usually unnecessary in the preschool because children are in a context in which play is the expected activity” (Sawyer, 1997, p. 35). However, children sometimes take shared knowledge for granted (Göncü, 1993), which can mean that messages that do not outline the play explicitly are missed by co-players. Other times, children speak within the pretend frame to exclude children from play (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009). Evaldsson and Tellgren (2009) observed in their ethnographic study in Sweden, how a five-year-old girl excluded another girl by telling her she was dead. With the death of the character, the girl was no longer a necessary play partner. This shows how complex metacommunicative skills in children’s pretend play can be.

This part of the review has explored pretend play and acknowledged the often complex metacommunicative management of play, including the strategies children use to gain play entry and organize social interactions. While these acknowledgements identify the potential benefits of play and children’s development of skills in play, they do so from the perspectives of adults. They do not, however, provide any insight about what children experience, and what their perspectives are on the experiences of pretending and playing together.

2.2.1.1 Girls’ and boys’ pretend play themes

The following discussion addresses possible gender differences in children’s pretend play preferences in relation to play themes. Some studies reported here suggest a tendency for girls and boys to show some gender-stereotyped pretend play, even when the play theme has the same basis. For
example, children’s play themes are often based on television, other media and fictional characters, such as superheroes; both boys and girls engage in the enactment of those themes, although not always in similar ways. A detailed discussion of gender issues in children’s play is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, in seeking to understand children’s perspectives of their own play, it is important to explore what is known about the play themes of boys and girls.

Research has suggested a segregation of boys’ and girls’ play themes, interests and preferences where boys demonstrated a stronger attraction towards good and evil themes, superhero, war and weapon play than girls (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Holland, 2003; Lever, 1976; Pellegrini, 1987), and girls’ play themes circled around play scripts with caring and nurturing roles (Kalliala, 2002), like playing with dolls (Lever, 1976). However, in a longitudinal study in the UK, where the educators observed, documented and planned carefully for children’s play and reflected their observations with the researcher, they did not find that “‘boys do this’ and ‘girls do this’” (Broadhead & Burt, 2012, p. 148). Rogers and Evans (2006) reported that boys and girls in their study enjoyed the same theme, ‘the castle’, but narratives that grew from the castle theme differed: while the boys focused on fighting and knights who killed dragons and other people, the girls’ interpretation of the castle was about princesses and mums and dads who lived there.

In one group, the 'castle' was the most popular choice. Equal numbers of boys or girls chose the 'castle', however, the way in which this was represented in their drawings was strikingly different. For the boys, the castle was about fighting, battles and chopping people's heads off; strong, aggressive, gory tales ('I liked dressing up as a knight, I tried to kill a dragon and soldiers were killing it and I'm watching them battle.' (Sam, aged 5) For the girls, however, the story was about 'mums and dads' or princesses living in the castle. (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 49)

Hence, these close observations of children’s play themes supported that boys and girls are attracted by different, quite gender-stereotyped themes in their play. Fabes, Martin, and Hanish (2003) noted that boys’ and girls’ play becomes more segregated during the early years, with increasing gender-stereotyped play.
Superhero play and play with ‘bad guys’ themes are presented in the literature as dominantly boys’ play themes (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Holland, 2003; Levin, 2010), explained by reference to television programs and movies that are catered more for boys than girls (Levin, 2010). An action research project in a London ECEC setting put the spotlight on boys’ preferences for superhero play which had many references to popular culture themes, such as Power Rangers™ (Holland, 2003). However, superheros are not just the interest of boys. Other studies have shown a different picture, emphasising that girls also engage in these themes (Marsh, 2000; Paley, 1988; Wood & Attfield, 2005). In these cases, what differs is not so much the theme as the ways in which the theme is enacted. Marsh (2000) undertook a study in an English school classroom with 6-7-year-old children to research what role popular culture can play in literacy education. For this, a ‘Batman and Batwoman cave’ was set up in the classroom, where children could engage in writing activities and pretend play over a period of ten days. The researcher collected field notes, video-recorded children’s activities in the cave and undertook semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents. While the study looked at popular culture as a means to promote literacy practices, it also provoked thinking about how girls are intrigued by superhero narratives, as long as females were linked to positive images within the superhero world. Even though both boys and girls engaged in pretend play within the superhero theme during the project, the themes slightly differed. Boys were mainly fascinated by chasing and arresting villains, while the girls’ interest lay on helping the victims and contributing to a good relationship with their male co-players. Even when the girls captured a villain they would take care of the villain’s wellbeing while imprisoned, which was of no interest to the boys. Marsh’s (2000) study suggests that girls can be engaged in just as much superhero play as boys. However, the narratives underlying the children’s play still seem to follow gender segregated lines: boys play adventures, and girls prefer caring roles, and even though the girls enjoy exploring a powerful role, as within this study, even Batwomen were still nice and nurturing. In contrast to the girls rejecting play that was too dominated with villains in Marsh’s (2000) study, Paley (1988) documented a girl’s invention of a Bad Cinderella, and girls’ engagement in ‘bad guys’ play scenarios. However, similar to Marsh’s
observations, bad guy themes received new rules, once girls entered the play, such as that there are no bad guys allowed if there is a baby involved in the play (Paley, 1988).

The studies mentioned describe a tendency for boys and girls to be attracted to different – often stereotypical – roles, even within the same play theme. Countering this, Evans (1998) suggested that children have personal toy preferences which were not necessarily determined by their gender, suggesting that personal choice also be responsible for play themes. Similarly, children in a Finish study reported that their play interests were a personal choice, and that they could play the ‘other’ gender’s play if they wanted (Kalliala, 2002). Corsaro’s (1997, 2003, 2012) ethnographic studies in U.S. and Italian ECEC settings revealed routines and play that are unique to children’s peer culture. In one of those routines, approach-avoidance play, Corsaro observed mixed-gender play, particularly around a routine where a threatening agent was approached, and avoided, with the result that children experienced excitement, as they coped with fear and managed being in control and exercising power (Corsaro, 2012).

Children interpret and reproduce everyday experiences in their play (Corsaro, 1997). Influences on their play include what the children experience in their social encounters with adults and peers, or what they see on television or other fiction and media. Levin (2010) suggested that television programs are directed at the different gender groups, which could explain why different themes appear in boys’ and girls’ play. However, an extensive survey about children’s use of popular culture, media and new technologies in England concluded that girls’ and boys’ preferences in television programs and film choice reflected both similarities and differences (Marsh et al., 2005). Thus, boys and girls can be exposed to similar messages on television programs, but also to different ones, and deal with these messages in their play. The fact that Batwoman had a positive image (Marsh, 2000) might have been the important message for the girls which made them choose to engage with the theme. The boys and girls in the Finnish study engaged often in gender-stereotyped play, as well as in television-influenced play themes (Kalliala, 2002), and the girls made meaning of the current dating television shows in a romantic story play.
While girls’ and boys’ play have shown differences, children have also engaged in same play themes and play activities. Themes that originate from television and other media increase in popularity as children get older, which might be due to the availability and the various technologies and merchandized toys and branded products that provide children with a range of opportunities to engage with these themes (Edwards, 2014). While the children make meaning of the engagement with media-related themes, superhero play and other pretend play themes, girls and boys do this in similar, but also in different ways. Studies such as Kalliala’s (2002) argue that to find out about what and why girls and boys choose to play, it is important to ask the players.

2.2.2 Play as a vehicle for learning

Play has been argued to be an appropriate context for children’s learning in the early years (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008), which is mirrored in ECEC policy documents and curricular frameworks. For example in the German framework documents for ECEC in Lower Saxony (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 2011) and in Baden-Württemberg (Ministerium für Kultus Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg, 2011), play is understood as children’s preferred way of learning, and in the Australian EYLF, play has been identified as the “context for learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). Indeed, play and learning have been discussed as inseparable dimensions of children’s experience (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006), a view which is supported by the amount of research that provides evidence that children learn in and through play, and the developmental benefits of play for the child (Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014; Sylva et al., 1976; Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, & Lander, 2009). While Piaget (1976), for example, distinguished between play and “strictly intelligent activity” (p. 171), contemporary researchers have argued that play and learning stimulate each other (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006), and have demonstrated children’s high levels of motivation in play situations (Moyles, 2006; Sylva et al., 1976). Play therefore could be seen as a vehicle for learning, as learning is more likely to happen if the child shows motivation towards the activity (Spitzer, 2002).
However, can it be argued that every play activity offers learning possibilities? Is it that “the world of play becomes a source of learning” (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006, p. 53)?

Controversial views can be found in the literature with contrasting views among those who agree about the developmental benefits of play and the concept ‘learning through play’ (Hedges, 2014; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009), and those who challenge the discourse of play as “solely about development and learning” (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 1). For Vygotsky (1978), pretend play offered the perfect learning environment: providing a context where symbolic representation, thought and language develop, hence cognitive skills, such as literacy, could be learned. When learning is focused on the mastery of practical skills, Piaget’s identified subtype of practice play supported such learning (Bergen, 2014). Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) consider that both play and learning dimensions appear in the other, while suggestions also include that only play episodes with certain elements fulfilled, such as “complexity”; “imitative role play”; “make-believe”; “persistence”; “interaction”; and “verbal communication” have the potential for learning (Dockett, 1998, p. 107). Hence, differing views exist of the role of play for learning.

To understand the relationship between play and learning, learning itself needs further conceptualization. Different concepts of learning exist, including: ‘learning as acquisition’ (Colliver & Fleer, 2016), ‘learning as knowledge construction’, or learning as ‘increased discernment’ (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014). If learning and play are seen against the background of a sociocultural theory, learning can also be defined as the ability to participate in meaning-making and the shared practices of a group (Colliver & Fleer, 2016). Learning takes place in social and cultural interactions where “knowledgeable peers and adults in multifaceted roles, may help children to experience, explore and construct new understandings, knowledge and skills in a dialectic rather than linear process” (Hedges, 2010, p. 28). Children learn in interactions with others and from each other in their cultural participation, with play being one among other possibilities (Edwards, 2006; Hedges, 2010). Learning can proceed in different ways in social interaction, and can vary culturally: knowledge can be shared.
verbally, and children can learn through observing others or through participating in social activities (Hedges, 2014), not just in play.

Regardless of the learning context, whether play or another activity, more knowledgeable and experienced others are key to foster exploration and construction of new skills (Hedges, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Drawing on Vygotsky’s theorization of ZPD, the child is capable of mastering a skill “under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) which she would not be able to do yet independently. Rogoff (1990) acknowledged the importance of experts guiding a novice in her concept of ‘guided participation’; and the analysis of case studies of ECEC settings in the ‘Effective Provision of Pre-School Education’ (EPPE) study generated the concept of ‘sustained shared thinking’ (SST) (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a). SST has been defined as “an effective pedagogic interaction, where two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a, pp. 78-79). In the EPPE study, such interactions were mostly observed in interactions between an adult and a child; but they can be initiated by adults or children.

The notion of play as a learning vehicle has opened a debate around whether or not all play offers learning experiences to children (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010); and, if not, what types of pedagogically framed play promote children’s learning (Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie, & Hunt, 2010). Furthermore, the adult role in children’s learning has more often been linked to learning processes where the adult directs the activity, for example through teaching, than to play (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b). Across the research literature, there is dominant interest in how pedagogies of play and educators’ active roles provide learning opportunities for children:

Much of this debate around teacher-directed and child-initiated learning seems to focus on whether and how adults can lead playful activity as a tool for promoting learning rather than having the potential to create opportunities for playful learning as arising from children’s interests and experiences. (Broadhead & Burt, 2012, p. 21)
While the role of educators and the pedagogical practice are crucial to play provision, defining play as a vehicle for learning has instrumentalized play as a tool, with one consequence being that there is rarely consideration of what connections children make between play and learning. Play as a vehicle for learning is an adult construct that might miss children’s motives for play and their experiences in play. It might also be that children may develop self-understanding as learners through conversations about their learning and play with their educators (Broadhead, 2006; DEEWR, 2009; Theobald et al., 2015). Recent studies suggest that children take the educator’s role into account when making links between play and learning (Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Theobald et al., 2015). I return to these studies when presenting the state of research of play from children’s perspectives later in this chapter.

2.2.3 Play as pedagogy

Research investigating the role of play in children’s learning and development has shown the long tradition of play as an important factor in ECEC pedagogy (Dockett, 2011). Historically grown assumptions that children learn and develop in and through play which draw back to Comenius, Fröbel, and later Dewey, have been reinforced through research evidence (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014; Sylva et al., 1976; Vygotsky, 1976; Whitebread et al., 2009). Play has been argued to be “an important pedagogical tool” (Fleer, 2010, p.120). Pedagogies of play have been generated to address strategies for educators to promote children’s play; make use of play to enhance children’s developing skills; or make curricular goals and knowledge content accessible to children through play. The contemporary Australian ECEC context emphasizes play-based learning. While the EYLF refers to the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and suggests that children have the right to play, it focuses strongly on play as a pedagogical practice for “planning and implementing learning through play” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). The pedagogical emphasis on play reflects an adult ideological viewpoint. In addition, learning and development are foregrounded as standard under the National Quality Framework and inform curriculum decisions for implementing a high quality educational program (Australian Children’s
Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018). This is not surprising, considering that both documents address educators to promote learning and developmental outcomes. While the EYLF reflects children as competent, it does not explicitly acknowledge children’s views of play.

The following discussion explores what is meant by play as pedagogy; the implementation of play pedagogies and educators’ related challenges; play under threat of adult agenda concerned with quality and effectiveness, as well as supervised and curriculum-regulated play.

First, what is meant by pedagogical practice? Generally, pedagogy has been defined as:

[a] set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community). (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, and Bell, 2002, p. 28)

Hence, pedagogy is geared to promote learning processes with educational outcomes. When the terminology of pedagogy is connected to play, then play is used as a technique to provide an environment where learning takes place in adult-children interactions, or an environment that considers:

the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play. (Wood, 2009, p. 27)

Regarding “play as pedagogy” (Wood, 2013, p. 99) assigns an active role to the educator, who uses a planned play situation with a purpose to enhance the child’s learning. Such play pedagogy is based on contemporary influences that have turned the focus towards a collaborative view of play and the community of learners where adult scaffolding is an important contributor to children’s play (Anning et al., 2009; Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Rogoff, 1990). The decisions that the educator makes are informed by the curriculum to provide a complex learning environment. Wood (2013) refers
to these decisions as the pedagogical framing, and the pedagogical strategies rely on the educator’s observations and assessments of the children’s play.

With the introduction and implementation of the EYLF in Australia, pedagogical practice is aimed at promoting children’s learning in ECEC through play-based learning and intentional teaching (DEEWR, 2009). It is the educator’s role to combine these two elements that have often been perceived as binary. Thomas et al. (2011) expound this perception that play and teaching are separate units by examining historical assumptions, including views of play as natural for the child, and thus a natural context for learning, while teaching is highly structured by the adult. Piaget’s constructivist views have contributed to such assumptions, and exerted strong influences on pedagogies of play in the European context, but also in Australia. Other influences from Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the U.S., developmental psychology, and more recently, from approaches exercised in the Italian municipality of Reggio Emilia, have shaped play provision and pedagogical practice in Australia (Anning et al., 2009).

Despite the contemporary acceptance of the active role of the educator, and concepts such as ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), ‘guided participation’ (Rogoff, 1990), and SST (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b) to promote children’s learning through play, traditional notions of play have continued to shape ECEC, connecting play with individual development and mainly free from adult intervention, emphasising ‘free play’ and ‘open-ended play’. A survey of empirical studies on how play has been understood and approached by educators in Australia during the implementation period of the EYLF revealed educators’ tendencies towards the ‘non-intervention-approach’ (Sumson et al., 2014). The practice of intervening the least facilitates play mainly through the provision of play resources and a rather passive role of the educator. As much as theoretical approaches inform practice, it is the educator’s implementation of these that shape pedagogies of play (Edwards, 2006).

For the implementation of play pedagogies, educators face many challenges, including:

- adults’ understanding of the complexity of play (Wood, 2010);
• differentiating and connecting notions of play, learning, freedom and choice (Dockett, 2011; Wu & Rao, 2011);
• justifying play-based approaches (Dockett, 2011; Wood, 2010);
• confronting developmental discourses that place the adult in a privileged role with control and power over the child (Cannella & Viruru, 2000; Wood, 2010);
• integrating play-based learning and intentional teaching into their practice as complementary, rather than binary concepts (Thomas et al., 2011); and
• balancing their own understandings and beliefs about play with the expectations of curriculum documents (Marfo & Bierstecker, 2011).

Debates around play pedagogies may increase uncertainties for educators, as they grapple with questions such as: Does all play offer learning experiences to children (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011)? and Does learning through play help to meet the essential content of the curriculum (Colliver, 2012)? Recent research does suggest that the application of different types of pedagogical play cannot only teach children content but provide opportunities for the children to explore the content in their own ways (Edwards, Moore, & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2012). Across this study, a ‘pedagogical play-framework’ was developed and implemented by participating educators where they used ‘open-ended play’, ‘modelled play’, and ‘purposefully-framed play’. Educators’ efforts to support play were underpinned by two principles: that all play-types have equal pedagogical value; and that they can be applied in multiple combinations (Edwards, 2016). Approaches such the pedagogical play-framework have the potential to successfully combine playful learning and intentional teaching by balancing child-directed and educator-directed activities.

Despite this, play in ECEC seems to be situated in a competing field between what children are interested in playing, and, when used as a pedagogical tool, how play serves the purpose that children achieve specific curricular goals “that are external to the play of the child” (Rogers, 2013, p. 171). Play has been transformed into various models of ‘educational play’ in ECEC practice that is planned and goal-oriented, privileging an adult agenda concerned with quality and effectiveness, and the educational
purposes, such as achieving educational outcomes of the curriculum (Wood, 2010). In the light of a quality agenda, Rogers (2010) suggests that adult concepts of educational play judge children’s play as “good play or bad play” (p. 154) which leads to “supervised” (p. 155) play and play regulated by curriculum. There are many examples, where educators make decisions about children’s play for various reasons. The adult can exercise power in deciding which play materials are available to children; how much play time is available; which activities are accepted in the ECEC setting; and when some play is stopped or interrupted. Some play, such as physical play, rough-and-tumble play or play-fighting are interrupted by educators more for the safety of the children (Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Tannock, 2014), with the intent that children do not harm each other (Wragg, 2013). War, weapon and superhero play have been banned in many settings (Holland, 2003). Reasons for banning particular play were that the educators judged the play as:

- “too dirty and messy, ... too loud, ... too uncontrolled and risky, ... described as ‘naughty’” (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 61);
- “lively, noisy and physical” (Holland, 2003, p. 27);
- “undesirable behaviour” (Wragg, 2013, p. 285);
- too “boisterous” (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 50); or
- “‘aggressive’ and ‘anti-social’” (Wood, 2012, p. 5).

It is tempting to wonder if another reason for the interruption of children’s play is that it does not fit in the quality/ effectiveness agenda (Wood, 2010) and does not seem to meet educational expectations, prompting some researchers to ask whether or not play is at risk of being instrumentalized for educational outcomes (Broadhead & Burt, 2012).

Consequences of focusing on the restriction and regulation of children’s play in the light of promoting the educational outcomes of ECEC have been raised by international researchers (EECERA SIG "Rethinking Play", 2017). For example, Wragg (2013) criticises adult domination of play, particularly the “insensitive or unnecessary adult interventions” (p. 286). Markström and Hallén (2009) argue that the control of early childhood education environments often stands in contrast to the idea that
ECEC is about nurturing children’s development, and reinforces power regimes where adults control and regulate how children spend their time at ECEC settings. Even in situations where educators think to balance curriculum across children’s play interests and pedagogical practice, they may unintentionally exercise power and miss what could have been the main play purpose for the child. In one project, where Australian educators reflected on a new concept to integrate children’s interests in digital technologies and popular culture into their play-based learning provision (Edwards, 2015), one educator’s reflection made me wonder how much the educator had considered the original play interest of a boy – which was about playing Spiderman™ – in her further planning that had changed the focus on spiders. While the spiders might have caught the children’s attention and engaged them in activities, the educator had nonetheless intervened, and it is questionable if she really “buil[t] on his interest in Spiderman™” (Edwards, 2015, p. 13), a play interest in which educators have shown uneasiness.

In times of “regimes of standardized testing, deliverable outcomes and the prioritizing of the more traditional literacy, numeracy and science teaching” (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 22), play-based learning approaches are at risk of disappearing. While children may benefit from re-conceptualizations of play where play pedagogies inform ECEC practice and promote children’s content learning, ‘educational play’ or ‘purposeful play’ are adult constructs. This “pedagogization of play” (Rogers, 2013, p. 160) has increased challenges for the position of play in ECEC. However, Wood (2013) advocates for play as a pedagogical tool but also for just being children’s play:

play cannot be justified only as a pedagogical means for delivering performance goals on the curriculum areas of learning. Play is incredibly varied and complex and must be valued for what it means to children. Outside of the pedagogical gaze, play is done for the sake of play; children play to become better at play; mastery of play involves learning, but what is learned must be of direct use to the players. Whether play is of any use or interest to adults is beyond the concern of players. (p. 68)

Colliver (2012) suggests that maybe the ‘wrong’ stakeholders such as scientists and policy makers are privileged, instead of the primary players
such as practitioners, parents and the child. Are “the stakeholders traditionally most vocal in ECEC policy the most appropriate decision makers” (Colliver, 2012, p. 15)? Reflecting the debate around the stakeholders, it is important to uncover silenced voices and underrepresented perspectives that are very important in the discussion of play and its place in ECEC.

Today, the current childhood research arena has opened new possibilities to include children’s perspectives. To generate ideas about what pedagogies support playful learning, or what playful learning is, children’s perspectives on play should be explored more deeply (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). This chapter turns its attention now towards the current state of research of play from children’s perspectives, and then continues to discuss the underlying philosophical standpoints of researching children’s perspectives of play.

2.3 The state of research of play from children’s perspectives

The elusiveness of the phenomenon that is play is also visible when children have contributed to the knowledge of play. In a recent Australian study, children had differing views about which activities were identified as play (Theobald et al., 2015). For example, two girls’ opinions differed when defining the same ‘Ballroom’ activity as playing or working. Similarly, a group of boys first described their sandpit activity as hard work, but then one boy considered it playing. The work-play distinction was also identified in children’s responses throughout studies undertaken in the last three decades in different countries (Dockett & Meckley, 2007; Howard, 2002; Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995). The play-work dichotomy has defined play in ECEC and resisted time – not only for adults, but also for children (Rogers, 2010).

For children in a Canadian study, almost anything could be play (Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence, 2013), but in a UK study (Howard, 2002), children distinguished between play activities and other activities. In this latter study, children were asked to categorize activities through photographic stimuli (Activity Apperception Story Procedure), for example into play or work. While the procedure gave some insight into what
behaviours, environments and social conditions children associated with play (Howard, 2002), it did not give many choices to the children to explore their knowledge of play much further than within the narrow categorizations within a play-work dichotomy. However, in Glenn et al.’s (2013) study, the children were engaged in a multi-method approach to data generation that included verbal and nonverbal, creative group activities.

In a Swedish study, 5-6 year old children were first observed in play and structured learning activities, and later asked to tell the researcher about their activities. One child included the preparation of props for an activity in the definition of play, whereas other children found that setting up a game was not considered playing (Kärrby, 1989). A recent study from Iceland involving children aged 3-5 years old highlighted the view from children that “play needed preparation, but the preparation was not play” (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017, p. 7). In this study, children were prompted to talk about their play after they had watched a video-recorded activity of themselves in the ECEC setting. Did the children have different definitions about play in these studies; or did the different ways of exploring their definitions influence the results?

The children in the Canadian study offered perspectives of play that contrasted with Vygotsky’s (1978) understanding that play always involves an imaginative situation. For these children, play was not limited to “imaginative play activities” (Glenn et al., 2013, p. 192), whereas for the children in the Swedish study (Kärrby, 1989), the emphasis of play lay on opportunities for pretending. One UK study utilised a range of methods, including participant observation and activities, to engage in conversations with children. Within these conversations, children made distinctions about what was real and what was pretend. For these children, pretence marked the activity as play (Rogers & Evans, 2006). According to just this small range of studies, children hold multiple perspectives of play, where playing can be separated from work activities, or can be both at the same time; playing can include preparation time for an activity, or not; and play does not have to be distinguished by characteristics such as the possibility for imagination. The various methods for data generation may have influenced whether or not children explored freely the multiple meanings of play.
Despite the range of ways for the exploring children’s perspectives of play, some commonalities in relation to the context of play, the opportunities for control in play, and educators’ and peers’ roles, have emerged. These are discussed in the following sections.

2.3.1 Context

The physical context of an activity can determine whether or not children perceive it as play. Such links to the physical context arose within a play versus work distinction, as children labelled their activities as play or work, depending on factors in the environment (Howard, 2002; Keating et al., 2000; McInnes et al., 2013; Wing, 1995). The children in Keating et al.’s (2000) study, aged 3-6 years old, assigned the work label to any activity that included sitting at a table, writing or reading. However, doing paintings at a table was named as play by some children. A similar tendency was demonstrated when 4-6 year old children identified activities using the Activity Apperception Story Procedure: a table activity was likely to be identified as work, whereas activities on the floor were likely perceived as play (Howard, 2002). Wing’s (1995) findings showed children’s ability to put play and work on a continuum. Although they had distinct identification factors for play and work, the children perceived some experiences as ‘in-between’ work and play. Thus, the physical context influenced children’s perceptions of their activities, but the extent to which it defined an activity as work or play varied.

Children have also connected social factors to the play context. Across several studies, play was often linked to activities without educators present (Howard, 2002; Howard, Jenvey, & Hill, 2006; King, 1979; McInnes et al., 2013). In Wing’s (1995) study, the children considered activities that were led by educators to be work rather than play. In addition, when educators expected a specific outcome from the activity, children ascribed a work, rather a play, label to it. The social context has been a factor in determining whether a situation was perceived as play or work not just through the presence or absence of an adult, but also of peers (Howard, 2002; King, 1979; McInnes et al., 2013). In the Activity Apperception Story Procedure, photographs that showed several children in a situation were more likely to be identified as play by the children who sorted the
photographs. McInnes et al. (2013) concluded from their study that the key to children perceiving an activity as play lay in the nature of the educator-child interactions. Interactions could differ in the degree of children’s opportunities for control and choice – and this largely depended on the educators. Children’s dependency on adults is a core element of childhood and its social status (Mayall, 2002). Children’s awareness of this dependency can be found when they report on their experiences where they feel lack of choice and control.

2.3.2 Control and agency in play

Studies seeking children’s perspectives of play have reported that children often did not mention the word ‘play’ or assign their activities to a specific type of play (Howe, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2015; Theobald et al., 2015). The context of the conversations with these children, however, made it clear that children referred to play. The descriptions of their activities identified what they regarded as important in play: being active, (Nicholson et al., 2015; Theobald et al., 2015); owning the play (Kärrby, 1989; Nicholson et al., 2015; Theobald et al., 2015); and having a feeling of control and choice (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011; Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Robson, 1993; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995). Three to four-year-old children in an Australian study focused on “their active participation in “doing” something” as an element of play (Theobald et al., 2015, p. 345). In Nicholson et al.’s (2015) study, the verbs that children used to describe play focused on being agentic and the ways in which agency could be used to influence the play situation. The importance of children’s sense of ownership has been highlighted in several studies (Theobald et al., 2015; Wing, 1995). Of particular note was Paley’s (1988, p. 30) description of children who titled themselves “the boss”, and claimed responsibility for creating the play idea and therefore ‘owning’ the play. When children link their play participation to having an influence on decisions about play, this could be to claim ownership of their play (Theobald et al., 2015).

Play seems to be associated with being in control, having freedom and self-direction for the children, while they link work with compulsory
tasks set by adults: children expressed their feelings about play with ‘can’, and about work with ‘have to’ (Wing, 1995). Just the presence of an educator signalled to some children that an activity was a work task. So, play is dependent on self-choice: activities that are assigned by an educator are not self-chosen, and less likely to count as play for children (King, 1979; McInnes et al., 2013). King (1979) noted that the more control exercised by the child, the more likely the child perceived the activity as play. For children in McInnes et al. (2013) study, the voluntary nature of an activity and the amount of choice they had contributed to the labelling of an activity as play. Similar associations were found in Howe’s (2016) study where the children highlighted self-initiated, self-directed, and self-regulated activities as play. This is in keeping with the earlier report of Wing (1995), who concluded that the voluntary nature of activities was indicative of play. The children in Rogers and Evans’ (2006) study identified only those activities as play when choice and control was present. The extent of choice and control was similar across several studies, and included the choice of play partners, as well as making decisions about the play content and rules of play (King, 1979; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995).

The ECEC context, where educators structure daily routines and many activities are collective, however, challenges children’s wish for control and being able to make decisions (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Rogers & Evans, 2006). Markström and Halldén (2009) identified individual children’s acts of agency, as they negotiated rules and social activities in their ECEC setting. Both individual agency and collective agency have been identified as children navigate ECEC settings and generate opportunities to direct play. Across studies, children have made efforts to share control with their peers (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009) and, within their peer groups, to respond to challenges collaboratively. Corsaro (1997) identified such collaborative acts when children felt restricted through rules that the educators had set up. For example, Corsaro noted that children liked to bring toys from home to their ECEC setting. Educators were concerned with the conflicts that resulted and, as a consequence, established a rule that prohibited the bringing of
children’s own toys from home. Children ignored this rule and continued to take toys secretly to the classroom. The smuggling-in of toys, and collaboration with peers to keep it secret from their educators, became a routine of the children where they acted as agents: they had taken control back of a situation (Corsaro, 1993).

2.3.3 Educator roles

Several studies have explored children’s perspectives of educators’ roles in play. Children in a Swedish (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009) and an Icelandic study (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015b) reported enjoying educator involvement in play, and saw the educator’s role as assisting and supporting the children. Children in studies undertaken in the UK, the US, and Australia have reflected on the roles of educators in play (Howard et al., 2006; McInnes et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995). Educator absence was an indicator of play for children in the UK and Australia when they labelled activities with the Activity Apperception Story procedure (Howard, 2002; Howard et al., 2006). The corollary to this was that the presence of educators could lead to children identifying an activity as learning or work (McInnes et al., 2013). Work, rather than play, also included situations where educators were in close proximity, or offered assistance and supervision (Wing, 1995). Hence, if the educators assigned those children to do a drawing activity, drawing became work. In contrast, when the children themselves engaged in drawing activities, drawing was regarded as play. However, the children did not explicitly point out that educator involvement disqualified play, but they emphasized that work-related activities were governed by their educators.

In the context of learning, children have indicated that educators provide guidance (Pyle & Alaca, 2016), though the educator as a guide in learning is not always situated in a play context. In a comparative study conducted in Europe including Denmark, Estonia, Germany and Sweden, children reflected on how they learned, identifying three main strategies: learning alone; learning through the help of others; and learning through practicing (Sandberg et al., 2017). These others included educators, but also other children. The children in this same study identified learning as the
development and mastery of practical, as well as academic skills, and the gaining of new knowledge (Sandberg et al., 2017). In an Australian study, three-to-four-year-old children noted that they learned through their educators’ involvement in play and other activities, and connected learning with academic skills, such as literacy and numeracy (Theobald et al., 2015): two girls, for example, discussed that they learned the alphabet and numbers through engaging in art and craft activities. Findings from a Canadian study explained that children’s perspectives of play and learning are shaped by their experiences in a specific context such as the ECEC classroom (Pyle & Alaca, 2016). For example, the children in this study who hardly ever experienced their educators engaged in their play, rarely made connections between play and learning. Hence, the presence of the educator was considered a determining feature for the play-work distinction. Several studies examined children’s understanding of play and learning: results showed that some children made a distinction between these two categories (Howard, 2002), whereas other children associated play with learning (Dockett & Meckley, 2007; Kärrby, 1989; Keating et al., 2000; Rogers & Evans, 2006). These differences may be explained through considering the role of educators within children’s play.

Intentionally or not, educators regulate, interrupt and restrict play (Rogers & Evans, 2006; Sandberg, 2002). Interrupting play has been linked with war, weapon and superhero play (Holland, 2003), and play that educators perceive as too “boisterous” (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 50). Children’s responses to the interruptions vary. For example, in one study, children tried to convince the educators that their self-constructed ‘weapons’ were in fact something else (Holland, 2003). This strategy reflects what Corsaro (2003) identified as ‘secondary adjustments’ or ‘playing the game’, as the children in Rogers and Evans’s (2006) study called it. The strategies utilise a playful manner to renegotiate rules that the educators have introduced. Children participating in an ethnographic study in the UK reported that educators interrupted their play to assign them to formal tasks (Rogers & Evans, 2006). This produced feelings of frustration in the children. Furthermore, the children’s conclusion was that the educators give
less importance to child-initiated play activities than to educator-initiated activities.

Research has identified a number of different roles for educators in children’s play. These include the roles of ‘stage manager’, ‘mediator’, ‘player’, ‘scribe’, ‘assessor and communicator’, or ‘planner’ (Jones & Reynolds, 2011), as well as a passive observer role (Einarsdóttir, 2005). In some studies, children have noted that educators were rarely, if at all, co-players – a conclusion they linked to educators using the time allocated for play to manage other tasks in the classroom (Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995). As the review of play theories revealed, the roles educators adopt within play is linked to understandings of the role and place of play within children’s development and learning. For example, developmental theories, such as Piagetian ideas of the child constructing knowledge individually and independently, have dominated ECEC, which could challenge educators to see themselves in an active role in children’s play (Dockett, 2011).

2.3.4 The role of peers

Children’s perspectives of their own play experiences are related to play as the space for friendship, sharing meanings and enjoyment (Corsaro, 2003; Huser, 2010; King, 1979; Nicholson et al., 2015; Rogers & Evans, 2006). Interacting together can be the source of enjoyment and an impetus for social play (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011; Howe, 2016; Löfdahl, 2005). Children can also be motivated to play to make friends (Avgitidou, 1997), or to maintain friendships (Corsaro, 2003; Dunphy & Farrell, 2011) through play. While primary school children in a Canadian study concluded that children would play with any peers ( Glenn et al., 2013), in my previous study in a German Kindergarten, all of the participating children referred to the presence of their friends as the most important factor in making play enjoyable (Huser, 2010). The latter also resonates with Avgitidou’s (1997) findings, who concluded that friendships could encourage further play once friends had co-created ideas and themes for social play. Similarly, the children in Rogers and Evans’s (2006) study valued play for the opportunity to be with friends. Apart from being with friends, shared interests encouraged children to play with peers – for example a common interest and
shared knowledge of superheros provided a base for social play (Parsons & Howe, 2013). When social play was enjoyed, children were motivated to play together again, and often a conversation about their past play ended in further peer play (Paley, 1988).

These first insights into children’s perspectives of play draw a positive and inclusive picture of play. Indeed, children’s play has a very inclusive side (Löfdahl, 2010), where children invite each other to play (Paley, 1988), and where children help each other as they engage in play (Wood, 2013, 2014). From a young age, children create communities in play and demonstrate that play has value for building feelings of belonging within a social group (Löfdahl, 2010; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015).

The importance of a sense of belonging was highlighted in a recent Icelandic study (Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015), which aimed to understand how young children experience and communicate values within their play communities in ECEC settings. In two ECEC setting groups, one with children aged one-to-two years old, the other with 2-3 years old children, video observations of child-child interactions during play sessions over a period of 5 months made up the data. Particular attention was paid to children’s communication, including verbal, bodily and emotional expressions. Apart from communicated values that addressed individual rights to play and the ‘well-being of others’, the young children’s communication of values was directed towards ‘belonging to the community’. In this study, belonging was demonstrated as children made efforts to be together and share meaning in play, through actions such as accepting the co-player’s play idea, or communicating with their bodies, looking at each other and laughing together. The experience of belonging creates an understanding for the child to belong to a group, and through this, provides opportunities for children to draw on interactions within the group to build their own sense of identity (DEEWR, 2009).

However, not all experiences of play are positive. Despite children describing play as an activity where they have fun (Glenn et al., 2013; Wing, 1995), experience pleasure (Howard, 2002; Rogers & Evans, 2006), and enjoy being with peers (Glenn et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006),
some children experience play quite differently, linking it with negative feelings and exclusion (Einarsdóttir, 2014; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Löfdahl, 2010; Skånfors, Löfdahl, & Hägglund, 2009). The ECEC context encourages children to play together, however, exclusion is a common process and an established strategy in peer cultures among children in ECEC (Skånfors et al., 2009).

There are two opposing rules often communicated to children in ECEC: that ‘everyone can join’; and that children have the right to play on their own (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009). ‘Anyone can join’ suggests that play is inclusive, yet children seem to determine themselves whether or not they follow or ignore this within the educator-regulated play environment (Löfdahl, 2010). Educators may allow the stretching of this rule as, if anyone could join, play that has already started could be interrupted by new players which can have a drastic impact on the direction of the play. Children try to avoid such changes and protect their ongoing play, which Corsaro (2003) identified as the protection of the ‘interactive space’.

In a Swedish ethnographic study with 4-5 year old girls, researchers investigated communication in relation to social exclusion in play and its resistance, and how this was enacted collectively (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009). The two opposing rules noted above were used by girls in the study with varying effect. For example, one girl tried to enter play based on the ‘anyone can join’ rule, while the two girls already playing together made use of the other rule to exclude her. The study demonstrated different collaborative strategies used by the girls to exclude. In collective actions the girls positioned themselves as powerful characters in their play, for example adopting the roles of police, who make decisions. Another strategy was to argue against the third girl’s inclusion disguised as being protective: to enter the play would be too dangerous for the girl. Last, they also used age as a contributing factor for exclusion. This reinforced the argument that the play was too dangerous for the third girl to enter, as she was younger than the other two. In this situation, the girls’ collaboration supported their exclusive actions (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009).
Children in another study indicated that they excluded younger children and favoured same aged peers as play partners (Löfdahl, 2005). Here, the researcher identified that age can be one of many personal characteristics that can lead to children’s exclusion; other factors included gender and social positioning. In contrast, in an investigation of children’s social and moral reasoning, Wainman et al. (2012) noted that children find it important to include peers of different genders or ethnicities for fairness and moral reasons. However, these same children also showed personal choice when including peers. It may be that children’s efforts to exclude others from their play reflect a desire to have their own play spaces. Strategies to achieve this were identified as ‘making oneself inaccessible’, or hiding in spaces (Skånfors et al., 2009).

Play can be a social space where children enjoy being with friends and maintaining friendships. Mostly, being with peers was experienced as pleasurable. In play, children also share interests and meanings. However, complex processes impact play: exclusion and inclusion have been part of children’s peer culture. Adult regulations of play, such as rules that anyone can join may be in contradiction of children’s wishes to protect their play. There is still the need for more insight into such processes and the meanings they have for the players.

2.4 Researching children’s perspectives of play

This chapter so far has provided an overview of the literature on play in ECEC, its theoretical approaches and the practical consequences for play pedagogies from adult conceptualisations. It has reviewed the current state of research of play from children’s perspectives. This part of the literature review draws attention towards the philosophical argumentation underpinning researching play from the players’, that is, from the children’s perspectives. It begins with an argument supporting children’s involvement in research in general before considering play specifically. The chapter then delves into the area of research with children and the underlying philosophical standpoints of Childhood Studies. Issues surrounding research involving young children aiming to elicit their perspectives are confronted in the conclusion to this chapter.
2.4.1 Why involve children in play research?

In recent decades, a growing body of literature has emphasised the inclusion of children’s perspectives in research on childhood matters. This emphasis has been driven by a rethinking of research paradigms in studying children and childhood, with the result that these areas are now considered worthy of study in their own right (Christensen & James, 2008b; Corsaro, 1997; Harcourt et al., 2011; James & Prout, 1997; Prout & James, 1990).

Within this growing research field of Childhood Studies, children are acknowledged to experience childhood in their own way. Following from this, efforts to understand their experiences require children’s participation (Einarsdóttir, 2007, 2014). This thinking is based on the view that children are active contributors to their social worlds (Corsaro, 1997); that childhood is a social construction (James & James, 2004); and that children are holders of rights and citizenship (United Nations, 1989). In particular, with children’s right to express their viewpoints and have a say in decisions concerning their lives, Childhood Studies has promoted the inclusion of children as research participants.

Researchers in the field of Childhood Studies have critiqued the dominance of adult viewpoints that generated knowledge of childhood and children (Qvortrup, 2009). Traditionally, childhood and children have been theorized through socialisation and developmental psychology lenses (Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009), producing views of the ‘natural’ child and childhood as a ‘universal’ phenomenon (James & Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1996). For example, developmental psychology research focused on childhood as preparation for adulthood (Mayall, 2002), positioning children as ‘becomings’, rather than ‘beings’ (Qvortrup, 1994). Defining children in comparison with adults emphasised notions of immaturity and incompetence (Jenks, 1996). Adopting a universal construct of childhood brought with it the expectation that children will grow and develop in predictable ways at predictable times, often progressing through universal set of stages. The developing field of Childhood Studies has challenged both of these positions, promoting theoretical and conceptual shifts that acknowledge childhood as a social construction with its own place and structures in society (Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002).
Rather than seeing childhood as a natural process, it is constructed through interactions of people within their societies where certain political and cultural expectations are shared:

Childhood is to be understood as a social construct, it makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society but which are incorporated within the social structure and thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct. Childhood then always relates to a particular cultural setting. (Jenks, 1996, p. 7)

The reconceptualization of childhood as a social phenomenon implies that childhood has to be understood contextually, and thus varies in relation to its cultural embeddedness in a specific time and location (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002). Consequently, there are childhoods, rather than a universal childhood (Jenks, 1996).

Childhood Studies attends to not only how childhood is understood, but also how the position of the child is theorized and acted upon in practice. Within ECEC practice, for example, the educators’ conceptual and philosophical images of the child impact on their pedagogical practice, on the ways they interact with children and make curricular decisions (Einarsdóttir, 2014). Similarly, the researchers’ beliefs and ideological stances influence the research they conduct, as well as the methods used.

Across a range of research, children have been positioned as objects, subjects, or more recently, as social actors/active participants (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). The objectification of children has been common where children were seen as dependent, vulnerable, and incompetent, placing the adult as the child expert who acts in the protection and welfare of the child (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The objectified child in research is closely linked with the views of the natural, universal child, and where children’s development follows “‘normal’ milestones” (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008, p. 18). The image of the developing, incompetent child influenced research insofar that researchers doubted children’s abilities to comprehend the undertakings of research on them (Christensen & Prout, 2002).
The recognition of children’s rights promoted through the UNCRC has strongly contributed to the shift to research with children. In particular, Articles 12 and 13 (United Nations, 1989) address children’s right to be heard in matters concerning their lives emphasising that children’s participation in decision-making has to be enabled and enacted. These articles provide justification for involving children, and argue that children can be reliable in informing about their own experiences (Alderson, 2008), providing that children’s use of multiple diverse means to express themselves, as acknowledged in Article 13, are respected. Because children hold these rights, it is indisputable that research should respect children’s own perspectives, understandings, points of views and interests, and consider the most suitable ways to design rights-based research approaches where children can express these (Beazley et al., 2009; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015; Lansdown, 2010; Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011).

Several studies have argued that it is not only possible to elicit young children’s perspectives, but that it is also critical to do so when seeking to understand children’s everyday experiences (Harcourt, 2011; Mayall, 2002). Children’s everyday experiences, for example their social encounters with adults and other children, inform how childhood is constructed; their own views on these experiences support a construction of childhood from those who inhabit it (Mayall, 2002). From this, childhood which has been described as a time of “apprenticeship” and “preparation” towards adulthood (Mayall, 2002, p. 20) is now considered a generational category in the present, and children are regarded as a social group in their own right. With the recognition and promotion of children who have “rights as a ‘unique social group’” (Harcourt, 2011, p. 333), a range of themes that relate to children have been researched internationally. These include children’s lived experiences at home and in ECEC (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Langsted, 1994; Mayall, 2002); quality in ECEC (Clark & Moss, 2001; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2012); and children’s experiences of the transition to school (Perry & Dockett, 2011).

Investigating children’s overall experiences in ECEC also addressed the area of play. Several of the studies that have been undertaken did not
start with a focus on play. Rather, play was one of the themes raised by children, suggesting that it is an important element of their lives and experiences within ECEC (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Mayall (2002) whose initial interest was with how young people in the UK constitute childhood, found that her 9-year-old participants emphasised play in their free time as a specific component of their childhoods. They linked play with “a time out of adult control” (Mayall, 2002, p. 133). However, the participating children were also aware that their play at school was highly controlled by adults. In an Icelandic study (Einarsdóttir, 2005), 5-6 year old children gave insights into what they liked and disliked in ECEC, with play being an activity they liked. They also liked that they could decide what to play, even though play was regulated in relation to, for example, how many children could play in a specific area, or in relation to toy availability. These children emphasised the importance of play with peers that was “undisturbed by adults” (Einarsdóttir, 2005, p. 478). Results from these studies indicate that children experience autonomy as decision-makers in play, as well as the control of play exercised by adults. In addition, both studies demonstrated that play is an important feature of childhood for these children, which puts the spotlight on finding out more about children’s own perspectives of play.

Much of the play research and debate about play in ECEC has been discussed by adults, with little reference to children’s perceptions (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011; Rogers & Evans, 2006). However, scholars have pointed to the necessity of investigating children’s perceptions of play, on the basis that children might experience play in different ways than adults have theorized: “It is highly possible that the way children experience childhood, and how adults perceive it to be experienced, may result in a disjunction between the actual and the observed” (Harcourt, 2011, p. 332). For example, King (1979) whose study was undertaken in an U.S. ECEC classroom, reasoned that it was necessary to explore children’s views, due to possible differences between adults’ and children’s perspectives:

Because adult perspectives on reality do not always accord with those of children, defining play in kindergarten from the children’s point of view would add a new dimension to our
understanding of the role of play in the life of the child and in the classroom setting. (King, 1979, p. 82)

The findings of this pioneering study confirmed the lack of consensus between adult and child beliefs about play. In particular, many of the academic activities that the educators thought were play, were not considered as play by the children. In addition, the characteristics of activities, such as fun and creativity, that educators believed made the activities play, were not congruent with children’s focus on voluntariness as the main characteristic of play (King, 1979).

Not only if an activity is experienced as play, but what children experience in play, can be invisible to the adult onlooker. What adults surmise from observing children’s play can vary considerably, or even miss essential aspects which the children had in mind in their play. Through her study of Finnish children’s play, Kalliala (2002) observed some children’s play on a slide. However, it was through conversation that the playing girls explained that the slide represented a waterfall. Research on play that has not included children’s own accounts and has studied play mainly through observations rely on adult perspectives. The critique has been that observational studies lack deep understanding of the players’ experiences (Howard et al., 2006). For example, observations that are time-sampled can only offer a fragment of a play episode and therefore fail to understand the complete play scene (Löfdahl, 2005). While observations enable the researcher to see what the children do not articulate but demonstrate in their actions, relying solely on observations might only tell part of the story the child experiences, reflecting the view that “[c]hildren are the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences” (Alderson, 2008, p. 287). To address this, many studies that aimed to elicit children’s perspectives of play have used mixed methods, for example ethnographic participant observations and formal or informal conversations with children, some of those in combination with another stimulus or activity (Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence, 2013; Löfdahl, 2010; Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Theobald et al., 2015).

In addition, an argument for including children’s perspectives of play is that dominant adult views of play in children’s education have reduced play to serve developmental purposes that have the potential to
override children’s own meanings they give to play; what motivates children to play; and what interests they pursue in play (Wood, 2010). Dominant adult views include constructivist theories of play, that play develops in stages, and that every child undergoes these stages (Piaget, 1962). Such a universal view of play – and of the child, as aforementioned – ignores that children’s play experiences are culturally and socially diverse (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011; Wood & Attfield, 2005). The first part of this chapter has delved into the area of the major influences on play within ECEC. Even though universal views of children’s development and play have been critiqued for excluding some children and challenging their access to ECEC curricula (Colliver, 2012; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), these views can still be found and shape practice (Wood, 2010). Despite the shift from research ‘on’ to research ‘with’ children, the amount of research on play from children’s perspectives has been limited (Colliver, 2012; Einarsson, 2014).

In general, research with children is still underrepresented compared with research on children, as an international meta-analysis of ECEC journal articles that have been published between 2009 and 2012 revealed (Mayne & Howitt, 2015). Only a third of all reviewed papers were considered as research with children, and the authors concluded that that this research practice continues to be a marginalized field. Play has become highly regulated by adults (EECERA SIG “Rethinking Play”, 2017), which underscores the importance of further exploration of play from the players’ point of view, which can then inform play provision from the players’ perspectives.

2.4.2 Children’s right to express their views freely

Research of children’s perspectives has been motivated and informed by recent understandings of children’s rights, including those which explicitly refer to children’s right to express their views freely – particularly Article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). It is important to note that the right of freedom of expression means that expression is not limited to verbal means. Realising children’s participation rights should acknowledge children’s diverse representations of their experiences and views (Dockett & Perry, 2015; Lansdown, 2010). Rinaldi
(2005) introduced the concept of a ‘pedagogy of listening’ to recognize and respect the richness of children’s diverse expressive forms, the ‘hundred languages’ of the child, which may include body language, facial expressions, and play (Lansdown, 2010).

With the aim to cater for children’s expressive diversity, Clark and Moss (2001) designed the Mosaic approach, which included consultations with children, parents and educators. Clark (2011) described the multi-method Mosaic approach as a “set of methods to gather and reflect on the views and experiences of young children (under five years old) in early childhood provision” (p. 323). The range of methods used in the Mosaic approach acknowledges children’s diverse verbal and nonverbal ways of expression. For example, opportunities were provided for children to engage with the project through photo-tours and drawings. The advantage for the children is that they can choose from several participatory tools. For the researcher, the approach affords the advantage of increasing the interpretative quality of the data by drawing on the range of data generated through diverse methods.

However, the time-consuming process of data interpretation and the complexity of such a multi-method approach should not be underestimated (Clark & Moss, 2001). Other researchers, for example, Einarsdóttir (2005), Harcourt and Mazzoni (2012), Howe (2016), (Kalkman & Clark, 2017), and Waller (2006, 2014) have adapted and applied the Mosaic approach. For example, Howe’s (2016) study in the UK used multiple means to explore what values primary school Year 1 children gave to play. The study revealed that children emphasised spending time with friends in play, self-directing their activities and following their own interests. Additionally, they saw play as fun and rewarding. The researcher provided multiple opportunities for the children to take her on a tour through the school while taking photographs, and to produce drawings about specific questions, such what the children liked or disliked. Both photographs and drawings prompted conversations between the researcher and each child about the value of play at school.

The combination of conversations and a creative, nonverbal activity, such as drawing, have been successful for eliciting children’s perspectives
across a range of studies enriching the data generation, and at the same time providing a familiar setting for children (Einarsdóttir, 2005). When multiple methods have been used, such as the combination of photographs or drawings, children’s narratives about these were an integral part of the analysis process. Children’s verbal explanation of each contribute to the unit of analysis (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2011), combining children’s “oral and visual narratives” (MacDonald, 2009, p. 40). In my earlier study (Huser, 2010), I utilised a Mosaic approach, where the children had multiple options to participate and share their opinions about play in a German Kindergarten. I experienced that not all children wished to use drawings to express their ideas; and I questioned the photo-tour method for its meaningfulness for data generation. The digital camera was very popular, and those children who took the opportunity took many photographs. However, when I invited the children to talk about their photographs, some remained silent. I could not identify whether they preferred not to tell me what meaning about play the photograph kept, or if the child had just enjoyed experimenting with the camera. Some children narrated their photographs, and through this emphasised the importance of friends, toys and other play material, and specific places to play. Without hearing the children’s stories, it would have been difficult, if not impossible to capture the children’s meanings just by analysing the visible content of the photographs. Assumptions could easily be made that may differ from the ‘real’ idea behind why a child had taken the photograph. However, this demonstrates that the multiple approaches can rely immensely on children’s verbal accounts, despite the intention of providing for the freedom of expression.

Some researchers have attended closely to children’s nonverbal communication to gain insight into their perspectives of play. Body and facial expressions, as well as play actions, have been shown to be part of children’s communicative repertoires (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Paley, 1988; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). In an Icelandic study of the play communities of 1-3 year olds, children communicated and engaged in meaning-making through their bodily expressions (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson,
Whilst children have demonstrated their competence to communicate their ideas, experiences and understandings in conversations (Brooker, 2008), Nentwig-Gesemann (2002) and Theobald et al. (2015) showed awareness for the challenges experienced by some young children in their use of verbal communication. For example, a boy in Theobald et al.’s (2015) study struggled to find the words to describe his activity. Children in a German study provided insight into their collective play practices through demonstrating a game of Pokémon-cards, after children had also said that they would not know what to say when prompted with a question (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002, 2010). Instead of following the game’s instructions, children had their own ways of playing which they had not explained in the verbal communication; rather the concrete act of playing the game demonstrated the children’s practices, which then provided opportunities to discuss these practices. Apart from play being an activity children enjoy, Paley (1988, p. vii) identified children’s fantasy play as their “intuitive language”: “That which Frederick has been unable to explain in conversation unfolds comfortably in play” (Paley, 1988, p. 29).

Considering nonverbal expression is important when research aims to include children who are preverbal (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2012), have difficulties in expressing themselves verbally (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002), or who choose not to comment in verbal form, despite their agreement to participate (Bitou & Waller, 2011). Nentwig-Gesemann (2002) considered the advantage of video-recording conversations with children as the video-camera captured not only what children contributed verbally, but recorded children’s practices of playing with Pokémon-cards. The children in her study had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge around the play practices in action. In an Icelandic study with toddlers (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015), children’s interactions were video-recorded, and the bodily expressions were recognized as a communicative form of lived experiences. This study was underpinned by Merlau-Ponty’s (2003) theory of ‘life-world’ and the concept of the ‘lived body’.

According to the ‘lived body’ concept, “the body is our anchorage in a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 167): the human being is intertwined
with the world, so that the body is the medium of expression. The body becomes central to the act of meaning-making in interaction with the environment and with others. This allows the adult researcher to gain insight into children’s intentions through considering their bodily communication. However, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015a, p. 722) concluded that the researcher is challenged in interpreting children’s bodily expressions, noting that “[t]he experience and interpretation of others and others’ perception of us is always ambiguous”. Reflecting on the studies using different possibilities for children to express themselves in diverse ways, it seems to be important to offer multiple opportunities, and for the researcher to be sensitive towards the children’s preferences. For example, not every child likes to draw; but the bodily expressions can give the researcher additional insight to what the child narrates. The main aspect is to be aware of children’s diverse expressions and to recognize their right to express these through verbal, nonverbal and creative means.

2.4.3 Children’s agency

Recognition of childhood as a social construction, and children’s roles in actively contributing to constructing their own childhoods, has foregrounded the importance of children’s agency. Agency can be considered as the decision-making acts of an individual (DEEWR, 2009). However, agency is more than just an individual’s act; rather it is embedded in the social context of an agent. Acting as an agent, in Mayall’s (2002) definition, includes negotiating and contributing to change through social interactions: children negotiate, take part in their social worlds with other children and adults, and make decisions as expressions of their agency.

Corsaro’s (1997) concept of interpretive reproduction emphasises how children create their own peer cultures, participate and contribute to their peer cultures. This concept also recognises children’s contributions to adult cultures and society collectively, which is also expressed in the term “collective agency” as used by James (2009, p. 42). In this sense, children demonstrate their wish to control and participate in social life through collective acts: “Children are not sole agents; rather, they construct and use their agency in interdependence with others in their peer cultures” (Löfdahl, 2010, p. 124). In particular, across several studies, when children
encountered constrains and regulation articulated by adults, they did not let these go unchallenged; rather they re-interpreted and resisted these (Corsaro, 1993, 1997; Löfdahl, 2010; Wood, 2014), and developed strategies of negotiation (Markström & Halldén, 2009). Apart from adult resistance, children also exercised agency to manage social interactions with peers in play and through play (Corsaro, 2003; Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Skånfors et al., 2009; Wood, 2014).

Children have found ways to respond to the social context, structures and expectations of participating in collective activities, while also following their individual interests. Ethnographic and interpretive observational studies demonstrated children’s exercise of agency during play and social encounters (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Wood, 2014). The researchers in a Swedish study (Markström & Halldén, 2009) used participant observations and concluded that children’s acts of resistance were mainly directed towards regulated space and time for their activities. Strategies identified included silence, avoidance, negotiation, collaboration and partial acceptance. For example, when a boy got called by an educator to join a collective activity, he ignored the call and kept playing and talking to himself with the result that he was left alone. He succeeded in managing his own time and space by staying silent in the interaction with the educator. In another example from this same study, children combined two strategies – negotiation and collaboration – to rescue a peer after an educator’s accusation of having done something wrong: in this instance, peers protected each other and used their knowledge about social order and collective norms for their negotiations. Similarly, in another study, a group of boys worked collectively to circumvent the rule of banned superhero play and weapon games (Holland, 2003): they told the educators that their constructions were not guns, but represented drills. Children in both studies rescued their peers and themselves through negotiations, so they could not be taken to task by their educators for breaking rules.

Exercising agency has also been reported to occur in children’s play, in relation to the inclusion and exclusion of children who wish to enter play, and in relation to play content, such as the pretend identities children explored (Löfdahl, 2010; Wood, 2014). Children in one Swedish
ethnographic study (Löfdahl, 2010) contributed to the knowledge shared among peers. They exercised and explored with power they had within the existing social orders, which resulted for example in the exclusion of peers. In a qualitative study in the UK, Wood (2014) identified children’s acts of agency through pretending in their free choice play. The enactment of particular characters offered opportunities for exploring power and agency where they could chase monsters, play dead and come back to life. Through such play acts, children have control; they can use “imaginary power” (Wood, 2014, p. 14) to change the direction of play as they wish. In summary, play can provide a context where children can exercise agency.

Acknowledging children’s agency can be an important step in promoting ethical research and generating sound data – however such recognition in and of itself, is not sufficient to achieve these outcomes, nor does it produce better data (Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010; Palaiologou, 2014). Children can cultivate their agency (Dockett, Einarisdóttir, & Perry, 2011; Waller, 2006), for example, when they have opportunities to negotiate and re-negotiate their participation. The aspect of ‘collective agency’ may be useful for considering how data can be generated, such as making use of peer groups where children create and share knowledge.

2.4.4 From ‘child-friendly’ methods to methodologies for sound research

The growing amount of research involving children has stimulated discussion about how their participation is best achieved. The following discussion considers which methods are best suited for research with children. In research practice, two strands of argument around this topic can be observed: the adaptation of methods used in research with adults; and the development of specific methods for children’s research participation (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Following the second strand, there has been a rapid expansion in the development of ‘child-friendly’ methods. At the same time, discussions of methodological concerns around such methods have become more prominent (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Dockett et al., 2011; Palaiologou, 2014). For example, there are concerns that the
popularity of the methods gets lost in its pure application (Bessell, 2009), and that such methods oversimplify complex ethical and methodological decisions (Palaiologou, 2014). I first follow up the topic of ‘child-friendly’ methods and explore whether or not it is indeed about methods that match with children, or if it is more about matching with participants more generally. Is research with children different from research with adults, and do same or different methods apply? Or is the focus on methods the ‘wrong’ starting point? This leads into making a point for the importance of establishing sound research through methodology where theoretical perspectives and ethics build the basis, while the choice of methods play a subordinate role.

One point of view on the appropriateness of methods is that children and adults have different expertise and competencies. The consequence is then to say that children’s perspectives can be best elicited and their active participation promoted when methods match children’s expertise and competencies by using ‘child-friendly’ methods. To say that research with children deserves their own methods can be delicate. The decision for child-friendly methods at best reflects a respect for children’s rights to participation. In reference to the UNCRC, children have not only the right to participation, but that their preferences and competencies to express themselves are considered when selecting methods to elicit their perspectives: “children-friendly methods are required to facilitate children’s freedom of expression” (Beazley et al., 2009, p. 372). Drawing, painting and playing have become prominent in participatory research with children, based on the idea that these activities are familiar to children and allow them diverse means to express themselves freely. One challenge of the child-friendly approach arises then, when adult researchers judge children’s participation and hence, select participative methods based on criteria such as age, developmental cognitive and social stages and maturity models (Christensen & Prout, 2002). At worst, ‘child-friendly’ methods deny children any competent status.

The denial of children’s competencies can be an issue whether or not methods that derive from research with adults are adapted for their use in research with children, or child-friendly methods are developed. In a study
on children’s, parents’ and educators’ definitions of play in the U.S., questionnaires were used for data collection. While the parents and educators filled out the questionnaires by themselves, children aged 2 to 6 years were interviewed by ECEC university students who read out the questions due to children’s lack of literacy skills (Rothlein & Brett, 1987). Adapting the questionnaire method to children’s competencies enabled children to take part, although the suitability of the method is questionable. The questionnaire situation was a quite formal interview setting which may have provoked feelings that the child was expected to give correct answers (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Children experience adult control and authority in institutions such as ECEC settings (Mayall, 2002), which could increase this feeling. Other feelings of obligation towards the researcher (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Holland et al., 2010) or to ‘please’ the adult (Moyles, 2006) have been reported. In her study in U.S. with kindergarten children, King (1979) used a combination of observations and interviews or conversations. While combinations of methods have the potential to incorporate children’s range of verbal and nonverbal expressions (Clark & Moss, 2001; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015), their effectiveness largely depends on the reasons why certain methods and combination of methods were chosen. In King’s (1979) study, I am drawn to the conclusion that the observations had the function to check on children’s reliability, rather to provide the opportunity to gain insight verbally and nonverbally: “As each activity was named, it was determined whether the child accurately remembered the event described” (King, 1979, p. 83). The need to seek such verification suggests that children’s responses were not considered sufficient to count as reliable data.

A suite of child-friendly methods has been developed based on the theoretical standpoints that children are competent to contribute actively to research (Christensen & James, 2008a), that children’s lived experiences and realities are worth of study (Corsaro, 1997; Harcourt et al., 2011), and that children are best qualified to this study (Alderson, 2008). But with this in mind, it can be argued – in opposition to the argument that children need and deserve their specifically designed methods because they have different competencies than adults – that the recognition of the competent child
implies that there is no need for special methods (Qvortrup, 1994). The discussion of child-friendly methods also foregrounds children’s marginalization in terms of their social status and lack of power in adult-led environments (Punch, 2002). A child-friendly technique is not enough to overcome socially established power hierarchies. Rather, genuine research applies appropriate methods in relation to any person participating in research (Clark, 2011; Punch, 2002). Can the issue be solved with changing ‘child-friendly’ into “person-friendly” methods (Punch, 2002, p. 337)?

In some studies, children have contributed to the question about their preferred methods of engagement. When 5-15-year old children were asked in a Scottish study (the ‘parliament study’) (Hill, 2006), what they thought about how best to gain access to their own and their peers’ perspectives, and what they preferred in consultation processes or in research participation, the children did not identify one best way. Rather, it was important to them that there were equal opportunities to avoid feelings of being left out, and that choosing from a set of methods to engage could promote more equality. The children’s standpoints mirror researchers’ efforts: “Young children do not always have the tools and the language to express themselves as clearly as researchers might wish. However, adopting a multi-method, child-friendly approach enabled children to articulate their views more fully” (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 53). However, some of the older children in Hill’s (2006) study provided different reasons than the lack of tools or language for applying multiple methods. In their opinion, children have different temperaments, personalities and skills. For example, a shy child would not feel comfortable in sharing views in a group setting, while for another child, the group setting could be perceived as supportive when realizing peers share views on issues, or when being with a friend. Some of the children who researched with Dockett et al. (2011) in a range of studies in Australia and Iceland disliked the ‘child-friendly’ activities, but showed a preference towards “adult-friendly” (p. 73) methods. The researchers concluded that adult researchers need to be careful with surmises about ‘typical child activities’.

A recent study in the UK argued that children, while engaging in their activities, demonstrate behaviours that correspond with adult research
behaviours, such as exploring, finding solutions, conceptualising, and basing their decisions on evidence (Murray, 2017). From the reported studies, a consensus is that children wish to be involved in good research and be researched properly, with equal opportunities for everyone (Hill, 2006), and with the same respect as given to adults (Dockett et al., 2011).

Drawing on familiar activities does not have to be completely rejected. Children’s experiences can inform how participatory methods might be used. In a study in Northern Ireland, 4-5-year-old children acted as co-researchers and shared their ideas on involvement in decisions about research questions, methods and data analysis. They made use of their experiences in ECEC settings, where a ‘talking object’ organized their turn taking during circle time. The children suggested implementing this practice in peer interviewing (Lundy et al., 2011). Even though some children reject familiar activities as research methods (Dockett et al., 2011), other children will support the idea of drawing back on familiarity (Lundy et al., 2011).

Taking children’s experiences as the point of departure for selecting methods has been stressed by several researchers (Beazley et al., 2009; Lansdown, 2005; Mason & Urquhart, 2001) as a means of recognising children’s different expertise and competencies. Children are different, reflecting different life experiences based on the cultures and environments into and in which the children grow up (Lansdown, 2005). Children’s actual experiences give better reference points for making decisions about potential research methods than, for example, age. I argue that categorizing methods as child-friendly implies that these methods suit for all children which stereotypes children and draws in reminders of the image of the universal child derived from constructivist, developmental perspectives. This raises the potential for children to be treated as a homogenous group – which they are not (Beazley et al., 2009; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Children do not develop and mature in the same linear way; therefore, children’s research participation has to be understood within their cultural contexts and from their experiences (Lansdown, 2005; Mason & Urquhart, 2001). Hill (2006) provided different methods for the participating children who were diverse in their age, competencies and ethnic backgrounds.

Lansdown (2005) describes children’s ‘evolving capacities’ and their
relatedness to children’s life circumstances. Consequently, children as holders of rights in research have different capacities for each right, and may need guidance and support on various levels according to the experiences they have within their cultural contexts. Under the concept of evolving capacities, researchers can aim to create the environment that gives children the best possibility to exercise their rights to participation. Levels of participation include the potential for children to be involved in decision-making (Lansdown, 2005).

Several researchers (Dockett et al., 2011; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Palaiologou, 2014) argue that researching children’s perspectives should not be reduced to the selection of ‘child-friendly’ methods that encourage children’s participation. The discussion has moved on to reflect that this focus on such ‘best matched’ or ‘child-friendly’ methods gets lost in their pure application in studies (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Children do not need specialised methods; all research participants – no matter whether children or adults – must experience research practice where methods are appropriate and are ethically and thoughtfully chosen, or in accordance with Christensen and Prout (2002), “symmetrical considerations” (p. 489) must be in place. This can be achieved when methodology and ethics build a union (Palaiologou, 2014). It is less about which techniques for data generation are selected than how children are considered, although these two things are intertwined. Research that builds on children’s agency and their competencies, recognizing their rights, provides spaces where children can share their perspectives. They still face power hierarchies due to their marginalized social status which requires the researcher to act in a way that protects children and their rights (Christensen & Prout, 2002), as well as from harm (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015).

Children’s agency means that children contribute to their social and cultural worlds, and when this is the basis for research, it leads to decisions based on considerations about the methods most suitable for the purpose of the study (Christensen & Prout, 2002). It is then the researcher’s responsibility to reflect the adaptability, practicability and the challenges of each technique (Dockett et al., 2011).
Christensen and Prout (2002) have argued that the children’s participation in research raises dilemmas that often are not addressed in codes of ethics. In one example, the question was how to deal with situations where children tolerate the researcher’s presence and the video-recording of their ‘secretive’ activities without knowing that their recordings would be shown to their educators, while in contrast, the educators would not allow video-recordings of their practice to be shown to anyone (Christensen & Prout, 2002). This is where a “collectively available set of ethical values” (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 492) and the principle of ethical symmetry receives importance, so that the researcher is not just reacting situationally, but can make use of a strategy: “the rights, feelings and interests of children should be given as much consideration as those of adults” (p. 493). This can mean in practical terms, that children even though they have not reached the age for giving legal consent (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2013; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005), are asked if they wish to participate and are informed fully about their rights to participation: that they can make decisions and exercise choice; that as agents they renegotiate their participation (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015); and that children’s experiences and “local cultural practices of communication” (Christensen, 2004, p. 170) find consideration.

Research involving children may bring particular ethical conflicts and dilemmas for the researcher. But instead of thinking of special ‘child-friendly’ methods, the principle of ethical symmetry offers a strategy on which to base ethical considerations. How children are understood within the research is the starting point to the study’s methodology, which then in union with ethics, lays the foundation for designing the research. Then, methods which are best suited to answer the research questions can be developed.

2.4.5 Children’s choices of participation in research

The previous discussion has highlighted the philosophical standpoints that underpin Childhood Studies, including the recognition of children as competent actors (James & Prout, 1997), as social agents (Corsaro, 1997; Mayall, 2002), and as holder of rights (United Nations, 1989). I want to turn the focus now towards children having the right to
participation. Despite efforts to enable children’s participation and create ethical research practice, little is known about the ways children choose to participate (Dockett et al., 2012). Furthermore, research reports marginally ethical dilemma and challenges (Beazley et al., 2009; Birbeck & Drummond, 2015), and children’s decisions to dissent (Graham et al., 2016).

There have been efforts to create conditions for children’s participation in research, through acknowledging their evolving capacities (Johnson, Hart, & Colwell, 2014; Lansdown, 2005), and providing a strategic principle in response to existing asymmetrical power relations between adults and children for ethical sound research with children (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Codes of ethics usually do not specify ethical research practice where children are considered as active participants. However, more recently researchers have reflected on the specific ethical challenges that come with research involving children (Graham et al., 2013; Harcourt et al., 2011), and discussed dimensions and key areas, underscoring the importance of the relationships between adult researcher and child participant (Graham et al., 2016; Palaiologou, 2014). As the previous discussion highlighted, reflections included the utilisation of child-friendly methods, and the continuous necessity to focus on methodologies and ethics as a union to provide opportunities for children’s active participation. Research that is deeply grounded in the belief of children’s agency and competencies aims to provide spaces for children to show their expertise (Dockett et al., 2011).

Following the suggestions made in the previous discussion, just and respectful engagement with children draws the attention towards children’s agreement to participate voluntarily in research (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). One of the ethical challenges researchers reported was children’s informed consent (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009). Although in many countries parental consent is the only legal requirement for children’s participation (Dockett & Perry, 2010), researchers have emphasised to seek children’s “active agreement” in addition (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998, p. 339, italics as in original), and introduced informed assent procedures for participatory research with children (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009). As a point of reference,
children were shown or explained examples of parental consent forms, and children contributed to think about their own ways of giving assent (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Ford, Sankey, & Crisp, 2007; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Huser, 2010). In my previous study in Germany, children reflected that they shared the same right as their parents to show their agreement to participation:

When I introduced myself to the target children in a special occasion, I confronted them with the letters I had given to their parents, explaining that I had asked all their parents for permission to do a study with them. One child immediately said: “I did not receive a letter from you!” Some others agreed. So, we decided that the children would receive a letter, which they could sign like their parents did. One boy mentioned that he could not write his name yet, so new ideas came from the children, such as drawing pictures of themselves, taking a photograph or all three together. (Huser, 2010, p. 44)

Other studies researching children’s views of play mentioned briefly seeking children’s oral assent (Glenn et al., 2013; Howe, 2016; McInnes et al., 2013; Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Theobald et al., 2015). For example, Theobald et al. (2015) involved the children’s parents who read out information to their children, and educators in the classroom provided opportunities for children to ask questions for giving informed assent. Educators in this study undertook the data generation, and therefore functioned in dual roles – as educators and researchers. Both, parents and educators, were familiar to the children which may have assured children to trust the information.

While oral assent, or even more formal procedures to seek children’s assent, as for example the creation of a child assent form which they can ‘sign’ in their preferred ways, at the start of a research project is important, researchers have recognized the ‘provisional’ nature of children’s assent (Dockett et al., 2013; Gallagher, 2015). While researchers’ decisions to take their time to become a familiar figure for the children, and giving children time to gain trust are done with good reasons (Corsaro, 2003; Mayall, 2008), the time period between researchers’ first contact with the children and the finalised research project can be hard for children to estimate. Children might agree one time, but this is no indicator for being involved for the whole time (Dockett & Perry, 2010). Continuous procedures of reassuring
children still wish to participate were developed in response (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Children have the right to withdraw, and to be able to re-negotiate their participation. For example, in an Australian study with 3-5-years old children about their childhood experiences (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011), they created a ritual for giving assent for each interaction with the researchers (activities of data collection or analysis): each child had a piece of paper signed with their name, and wrote ‘OK’ on it at the beginning of a new activity/ interaction. Glenn et al. (2013) reminded throughout study that children could withdraw.

The literature reviewed in this chapter has revealed that children represent their views through a range of expressive means, including nonverbal, bodily expressions. Such body signals or other nonverbal communication become highly important in the light of provisional and ongoing assent for children’s participation:

The children were told who Pat was and what she was doing and that if they did not want Pat to do the filming they could ask her to stop. It was a delicate balance between giving children their rights to stop the filming and having them abandon their play in order to dance or sing for the camera, but gradually normal patterns of play developed and could be openly filmed. On one occasion, Pat was filming two girls who had gone to the coat area to get something from their pockets. It became apparent that there was clearly something ‘secret’ about their interaction and, although they did not ask for filming to stop, they looked with some dismay at the camera and at Pat and tried to hide their objects (lipsticks). It seemed important to respect their privacy and to withdraw quickly from the area, taking account of their indirect rather than direct request to stop filming. At any time in filming, if a child looked anxiously at the camera, the filming process moved away. (Broadhead & Burt, 2012, p. 14)

As Broadhead and Burt (2012) demonstrated, the researchers had to reflect carefully about children’s agreement of being filmed. Clearly, not telling the researcher to turn off the camera does not mean that the children had agreed. In an ethnographic study in Sweden, children had their own strategies to negotiate their participation and interactions in collective activities with ‘silence and avoidance’ as one indicator for non-willingness to participate (Markström & Halldén, 2009). Silence can be one way to show disagreement, hence, children’s nonverbal communication may tell more.
Children have used body signals to show their relationship to the researcher and whether or not they wished to engage with them, for example through hiding from the researcher as a sign of withdrawal, or to seek close proximity for assent (Axelrod, 2016; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). “Recognising the importance of the body alerts researchers to the actions of children as they signal their preferences about participation” (Dockett et al., 2012, p. 248). However, clarity in the signals is not guaranteed: children might say one thing, but their behaviours sent an opposing message which could imply that the child is unsure about their participation (Dockett et al., 2012).

Little is known yet how children choose to participate (Dockett et al., 2012). Reviewing the literature, examples from ethnographic field notes presented moments where children initiated participatory moments with the researcher, however, it is not clear if the researchers had described the situations to reflect them as children’s choices of participation. For example, Corsaro (2003) and Axelrod (2016) both used notebooks in which they wrote their observations of children’s actions, and the children showed interest in the researchers’ notebooks. In a U.S. based Headstart classroom, 4-years old bilingual children were observed during their play with a focus on their language practices (Axelrod, 2016). One girl was so fascinated that she asked her father to get her own notebook. The other children’s interest then increased as well to a point where they all sat in the classroom scribbling in notebooks or pieces of paper pretending to be researchers. In another occasion, they asked the researcher to read out what the notes in the book said. “They would laugh and comment and point to each other, saying, “That’s you”” (Axelrod, 2016, p. 107). Was this the children’s creation of participatory interactions? And how is it with reactions that may signal children being uncomfortable? In the UK study about children’s input into consultation and research participation (Hill, 2006), the researcher concluded that children may demonstrate negotiation by using jokes as response to questions.

There is rarely input from children to reflect research ethics (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015), and children’s dissent has been neglected immensely even though it has the potential to illuminate important processes (Graham
et al., 2016). Dissent is often treated briefly with one mention that a child, for example whose parents had given consent, withdrew (Howe, 2016), but also is openly discussed that children may participate for various reasons, but others than the researcher hoped for. For example, they might participate to get free food but withdrawing that their data can be used (Holland et al., 2010), or to engage in alternative activities than what their classroom offers (Gallagher, 2015). Hill’s (2006) study that aimed to listen to children’s views on consultation processes provided insight and gave ideas as mentioned in the above discussion on child-friendly methods. Some of the older participants saw their participation as “a right and one that they need not exercise if they had better things to do” (Hill, 2006, p. 78).

Challenges and dilemmas that have been reported covered asymmetrical power relations, for example when children’s confidentiality seemed to be of less importance than to the participating adults’ (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The researchers had been confronted with this issue when the head master of the research site asked to view the children’s video-recordings of their activities, even though the children had let the researchers witness ‘secretive’ things. Power relations find consideration with familiar figures, even though in general this may increase children’s feeling of trust and willingness to share their views with this person (Mayall, 2008). In contrast, Dunphy and Farrell (2011) reflected on the second author’s position as an educator in the classroom and her dual role as researcher to be problematic. Had the children felt “that they had to adjust their response in any way” (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011, p. 135) due to their educator asking them about their play? The review of the literature revealed that children responded with resistance to educators’ regulation of children’s play (Rogers, 2010) which they even tried to ban some time (Holland, 2003). Mayall (2008) considered that even being in the physical space of the classroom where children experience restrictions could hinder them to talk freely about classroom experiences. Corsaro’s (1997, 2003) strategy to spend much time with the children and to wait for children’s invitation what he considered a ‘reactive method’ to enter their spaces was successful.

Even just following children into their private play spaces raises ethical challenges of intrusion (Palaiologou, 2014; Waller, 2006). Waller
(2006) had used multiple methods to find out about 3-4-years old children’s outdoor experiences in the UK. They took him on tours to their “happy places and special places” (Waller, 2006, p. 83) while taking photographs. When was he an invited visitor, when did he become an intruder? An already established relationship between researcher and children contributed to the success of the visits to the spaces. A question of space invasion was also asked in the following example:

For example, from the self-observation diaries of the three projects it became evident that in cases of unstructured observations in the form of snapshots with children when they were participating in activities the researcher felt it was worth recording, the children themselves at instance felt that their own spaces were invaded. (Palaiologou, 2014, p. 697)

Private spaces can also raise ethical dilemmas for the researcher when children want to help her to follow up questions in ways that may affect other participating peers’ privacy (Beazley et al., 2009). In some situations, it may be an advantage for the researcher that “[c]hildren can get responses from their peers in a way that is not possible for adults” (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2013, p. 4). And in many cases, children feel comfortable chatting in small groups and sharing their experiences with friends (Dockett & Perry, 2005), because they can relate to their peers’ experiences (Alderson, 2008). Informal group conversations between peers have also shown to be supportive, as they “could follow on each other’s leads” (Mayall, 2008, p. 112), especially when the children were in control over the direction and content of the conversation. However, researchers were confronted with another dilemma when peers silenced or interrupted other participants in a group conversation (Holland et al., 2010).

Confidentiality can cause dilemmas when children reject ethical conventions about maintaining confidentiality. For example, in some studies, children have rejected the use of pseudonyms (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2013), demonstrating to be gatekeepers of their own data (Danby & Farrell, 2005; Dockett et al., 2011; Holland et al., 2010): “They wanted the people who read or heard about the research to know their names” (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009, p. 163). Beazley et al. (2009) call for
more research to report on dilemmas and challenges, as it is not all “feel-good participation in research” (p. 376).

Reporting and reflecting openly about dilemmas and ethical challenges is important. So too is learning about how children wish to participate and the choices they would like to make. Multi-method approaches, such as the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), offer children a range of activities to choose from. But what about children’s own ideas and strategies of choice? Palaiologou (2014) has argued for “the creation of ethical spaces for participatory research with children” (p. 698). What could characterize such ethical spaces?

When space is taken literally, it may be important to consider how the physical space restricts or enables participation, for example, whether or not children have the physical freedom to walk away from a situation with the researcher (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2009). Familiar physical spaces, such as the children’s play spaces, have been the place where children engaged in conversations with researchers and talked about their play at the same time (Keating et al., 2000; Robson, 1993).

In addition, spaces where children feel safe to express their opinions and experiences (Lundy et al., 2011) are certainly desirable. Leaving conversations agendas with the children has been fruitful to elicit what was important for the children to talk about (Mayall, 2008). Developing their own forms of representing their experiences, one boy created a diary with photographs shot in his room that portrayed his week being grounded (Holland et al., 2010). The eight 10-20-years old children and young people in this study had the freedom of working on individual projects to explore identity (Holland et al., 2010).

When children experience their participation as meaningful (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015), this can contribute to creating engaging conditions. To talk about an experience that has meaning to the children and they can relate to is a good starting point. While the use of vignettes (Rogers & Evans, 2006) and photographs have stimulated conversations about definitions of play (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al., 2013; Pyle & Alaca, 2016), video-recordings of children’s own experiences created conditions.
for personal and meaningful reflections. Videos can act “as a catalyst for children to reflect” (James, Bearne, & Alexander, 2004, p. 117), and enable them to revisit their own comments and actions (Dockett & Perry, 2005), and their play experiences (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Theobald, 2012; Theobald et al., 2015). In these studies about children’s perspectives of play, only children who had been recorded watched their video-recordings. However, peers can stimulate each other’s thoughts (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2013; Mayall, 2008) and co-create and share meaning together (Corsaro, 1997). It follows that it could be fruitful to seek children’s permission to let other children watch their recordings with and link their responses to previous statements offered by their peers. This provokes to think of ethical spaces having a social dimension.

Being in a group of peers allows children also to use communication practices that are used among their peer group which includes the specific use of language, and the way meanings and actions are conceptualised. Recognising these practices of communication may be one way for the researcher to access children’s activities and to build dialogue through showing respect and interest in children’s practices (Christensen, 2004). “[W]e need to consider what we can learn about children’s participation from children’s perspectives of their own experiences” (Waller, 2006, p. 80).

2.5 Summary, gaps and research questions

This chapter has reviewed different theories of play that have developed historically and influenced the ways in which play is conceptualised and situated within ECEC. By examining theoretical approaches to play, the review illuminates relationships between play, development and learning. Vygotsky’s (1978) contribution to a sociocultural understanding of play where social interactions are essential for children’s learning can be found in the play-based approaches for Australian ECEC services, highlighting the active role of educators (DEERW, 2009). Research with the purpose of gaining insight into children’s perspectives of play has highlighted the importance of context and control that children apply to their definitions of play activities, as well as which roles they
assigned to peers and educators for their play and learning in ECEC contexts. Less attention has been paid in which ways children choose to share their perspectives of play.

This chapter has also reported the ways childhood and children have been reconceptualised through the field of Childhood Studies, and outlined research that takes children’s perspectives as rationale of study. Reasons for the involvement of children in research and the underlying philosophical standpoints – seeing children as holders of rights and social agents – were outlined. Despite continuous discussion and reflection on the methodological and ethical considerations to enable children’s participation, little is known about children’s choices and preferred forms of participation.

With the recent education reform and consequent mandatory implementation of the EYLF as the first national framework for ECEC settings in Australia, challenges have been identified for educators: they are required to balance child-initiated play, play-based learning, and intentional teaching (Grieshaber, 2016), while focus lies on quality assessment and educational outcomes under the National Quality Framework’s requirements (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2013). Consequently, research turns attention towards educators’ complex tasks of combining play-based learning and intentional teaching (Sumsion et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2011), and their role in play (Edwards et al., 2010; McInnes et al., 2013; van Der Aalsvoort et al., 2015). While the importance and further exploration of the educator role in play is recognized, a key to understanding how children can benefit most from play-based approaches in ECEC is to include their own perspectives of play. Within the extant research literature on play in the ECEC context, there are few contributions to theorizations of play from the children’s perspectives themselves despite their acknowledgment as important stakeholders of play (Colliver, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2014) and growing research with children (Christensen & James, 2008b; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). The study reported in this thesis has been designed to contribute to this under-researched area, with the aim to “dig deeper into the nature of play, what counts as play for children” (Einarsdóttir, 2014, p. 326).
Simultaneously, the study addresses a lack of attention to how children choose to participate in such research (Dockett et al., 2012). Despite the literature of researching children’s perspectives and its ethical considerations, there is a gap in understanding how children provide consent (or dissent) and act on their rights to participate. Hence, the study’s aim is to explore children’s perspectives of play experienced in ECEC, and addresses that there is still more knowledge required to understand what makes play play for children, what is important for them in play, and how the children are confident and comfortable to share their views of play, so this knowledge can be used to inform methodologies and ethics in research with children. The research questions guiding the exploration are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1: Guiding research questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding research question</th>
<th>What are children’s perspectives on play experienced in ECEC?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research sub-questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do children identify as play?</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>How do children describe play?</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What understandings do children derive from their play?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What connections do children make between play and learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>What characterises ethical spaces for researching with children?</td>
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3 Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses the methodology applied to the study of children’s perspectives of play. First the theoretical perspectives that underpinned the study are presented. Secondly, the chapter considers the ethical dimensions of this study. Following this, the chapter addresses ethical considerations that applied to this study. I outline the methodological framework which is informed by an interpretive paradigm and a social constructivist lens. Within a qualitative research strategy, the use of constructivist grounded theory to inform the data generation and analysis is described. Unlike its linear presentation, methodological decisions were being made throughout the planning and field phase of the study in an emergent, cyclical process. The chapter concludes with a detailed presentation of the methods for data generation and analysis.

3.2 Theoretical framework

Two key theoretical approaches contributed to the framework for the study: socio-cultural approaches to play and Childhood Studies. The theoretical understandings that derive from both have determined the focus of my study and have implications for methodological and ethical decisions. From sociocultural perspectives, I look at play as a leading activity in children’s constructions of understandings through interactions with others. Childhood Studies provides the basic principles for me to view children as social agents who are competent to express their views.

3.2.1 Sociocultural approaches to play

This study approaches play from a sociocultural theoretical standpoint where social interactions are central to processes of children’s play, learning and development (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Social interactions are understood to be placed within the children’s local context which is shaped by their host communities’ culture, time and place. Vygotsky’s (1978, 2004) theorization of play recognized children’s active, creative reproduction of their social and cultural experiences through their re-creation of past experiences in play. As the literature review has reported,
besides his contributions to understandings of the role of play in children’s development through the ZPD, where play is the leading activity, Vygotsky has underlined the importance of others – adults and more experienced peers – for children’s acquisition of cultural practices and knowledge that is shared in their social and cultural worlds (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on his ideas, Rogoff’s (1990) elaboration of sociocultural theory informed this study highlighting:

- social interactions as the key to children’s acquisition of and their contribution to their social and cultural worlds;
- a strong view of children “as active participants in their own development” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 16); and
- learning as an active, participatory process in cultural activities of the society.

In addition, building on Corsaro’s (1997) ‘interpretive reproduction’, sociocultural approaches to play recognize that children create their own peer and play culture. The people with whom children interact, and the contexts in which children’s experiences are located, both shape children’s experiences. So, children’s play experiences and their perspectives of play are not just influenced from outside, from contextual factors, such as parents, and social and cultural beliefs and values, but, simultaneously, are reinterpreted and shaped actively by the children themselves. Together with peers, the children create and share meanings in play. In addition, children generate meaning together with adults.

When play is understood through a sociocultural lens, play is the leading activity where children demonstrate their cultural interpretation of experiences (Edwards, 2014). Hence, the children’s perspectives of play are diverse and complex, reflecting their experiences (Dockett & Fleer, 1999) around play at home (Göncü et al., 1999), but also how play is conceptualised and communicated (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2012) at their ECEC setting. Exploring play through a sociocultural lens emphasizes the importance of contextualising children’s play (Wood, 2009), and moves beyond studies of play that reflect age and developmental foci, to encompass “the diversity, complexity and richness of children’s lives”
This study acknowledges that a sociocultural approach to play includes the recognition of contemporary changes of culture and society which emerge in children’s play: new forms of play evolve and merge with traditional forms to generate what Edwards (2014) described under the concept of contemporary play.

The sociocultural lens also allows me to understand that meaning is shared, rather than constructed individually, which would make it “meaningless to study the child apart from other people” (Bitou & Waller, 2011, p. 53). This perspective also allows me to locate myself in the study and to reflect on the ways that the children involve me in their construction of meaning.

3.2.2 Childhood Studies

The study was also anchored in principles derived from the field of Childhood Studies. As introduced earlier in Chapter One, the key epistemological understandings of Childhood Studies include the recognition of children’s agency, competences and rights, and childhood as a social construction (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002). While the principles of Childhood Studies can produce challenges (Hammersley, 2017), they have offered foundations for researching children’s perspectives of their own lives (Christensen & James, 2008b; Corsaro, 1997; Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011).

The principle of the social constructivist approach to study childhood and children has allowed for reconsidering how childhood is understood (Norozi & Moen, 2016). Who is considered to be a child and what constitutes childhood can differ in relation to the societal, cultural and historical context. The shifting views that emerged from this approach and that have challenged a universal and biological concept of childhood have been reviewed in Chapter Two. To reconstruct the concept of childhood, however, is also reliant on the inclusion of children’s own perspectives of childhood (Prout & James, 1990).

Seeing children as competent and capable actors and social agents in their lives was the starting point of this research study about children’s ways of constructing and conceptualising aspects of their lives (James & James,
That these ways may not only be different from adult constructions and conceptualisations, but also different from those of other children, reinforced a rejection of a universal view of childhood (Dahlberg et al., 1999), in favour of the view that:

even within one society, whilst being subject to its rules, different children may experience rather different kinds of childhoods and as we shall see, it is precisely through the messy process of living out their lives as children that children themselves may contribute to the process of childhood change. (James & James, 2004, p. 47)

The recognition of children’s rights, particularly the right for children to express their views on matters that involve them and to be supported in doing this (United Nations, 1989, Articles 12, 13), is closely linked to the shift to researching with children (Christensen & Prout, 2002) and the acknowledgement of the importance of children’s perspectives. The shift includes reflecting how children are involved in research and how children’s perspectives can not only be accessed, but also valued and respected.

Children’s entitlement to be involved in decisions affecting their lives (United Nations, 1989) includes their right “to be listened to and heard” (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015, p. 16, italics as in original). Children can contribute their perspectives to research (Alderson, 2008; Dockett et al., 2011) and be engaged in research that affects them. However, the crucial point of children’s engagement in research is that they have opportunities where they can express their opinions, and that adult researchers take these opinions seriously by actively listening and taking the children’s opinion into account. This requires that the adult researcher views the child as competent and capable in presenting her ideas.

There are two important consequences for the study that arise from the application of Childhood Studies. Firstly, I took children’s perspectives into account, and treated them seriously. The study aimed to go beyond listening to children’s views and just being “receptive to hearing their voices” (Smith, 2011, p. 15). Taking into account what children have to say required three distinct activities – listening, hearing and acting (Roberts, 2008). This meant not only attending to what the child participants said, but
also considering their expressions and actions, and acting in response to these. Taking children’s perspectives into account in this study was understood as a responsive act which included documenting what children shared during data generation. The aim was that the children saw that their participation was of importance. Key elements of genuine participation (Lansdown, 2005) in this study included: that I consulted and informed children about their opportunities and rights to participation in the research; and even though I initiated the research activities, I aimed to share decisions with the children and collaborate with them in such ways that there was room where the children could initiate and direct aspects within their research participation. Methodological decisions including data generation methods were carefully selected to promote these elements of participatory research, for example that children could make decisions if they accepted my invitations for interactions; or that the children chose what we discussed together, and how they expressed their ideas. The later presentation of the data generation process gives detail about the ways I chose to meet genuine participation opportunities for the children.

Secondly, children’s agency (Corsaro, 1997; Mayall, 2002) was recognised throughout the study. This key claim goes hand in hand with the sociocultural theoretical frame for play, such as Corsaro’s (1997) conceptual thinking around children’s interpretive reproduction. This concept draws attention to the agentic acts of children as a collective, their creative meaning-making and contribution to society and culture. This recognition has shaped the research agenda and research practice.

Across a range of research, there has been an attempt to move towards forms of collaborative research with children going well beyond them being “‘counted in’ in adult-led research approaches” (Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 492). This was reflected in my study, where the children were invited to demonstrate their evolving capacities for involvement in decision-making processes. Lansdown’s (2005, p. 4) four levels of involvement

1.) to be informed.
2.) to express an informed view.
3.) to have that view taken into account.
4.) to be the main or joint decision-maker
were utilised to consider children’s involvement. In this study, children were actively involved in data generation and could renegotiate their participation, even though I made the main research decisions.

My strong belief in, and commitment to, seeing children as competent, social agents drove the methodological decision-making for this study. After reviewing the literature on researching children’s perspectives, the methodology aimed to address children’s access to participation regardless of their communication skills, but respecting their capacities and preferences for expressive means. This included providing opportunities for the involvement of those children who may had challenges with verbal expression (Lansdown, 2005), and who chose to express their views through the use of their bodies (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). To prevent silencing the children in this research (Cannella, 2000), I considered their diverse ways of expression throughout the data generation. Some children showed strengths in using words, while others highlighted their verbal expressions using gestures, and others entered a performance expression similar to when they acted out a role in their play. As I outline later in this chapter, considerations of nonverbal contributions from the children had consequences for the data generation in quite pragmatic ways. For example, I recorded conversations with the children not only with an audio-recorder, but video-recorded them, so I was able to take all expressions, and not just verbal accounts into account for analysis.

Against the background of the theoretical frameworks of the study, agency is foregrounded in the ways in which children act individually and collectively. This was based on Corsaro’s positioning of children as social agents, who through acting as a collective, can contribute to societal change (Corsaro, 1997; James, 2009; Mayall, 2002). In the current doctoral thesis, I made methodological decisions respecting children not only as agents, but also reflecting their agentic strengths as a group.

3.3 Ethical considerations

With the growing amount of research that involves children, questions have been raised about how the ethical dimensions of such research need to be addressed. Unethical research in the past has highlighted
the need to protect children from harm and exploitation (Coady, 2008). In recent years, and with the advent of the field of Childhood Studies, the position of the child in research has shifted from being objects to subjects to participants (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Following these changes, ethical considerations around children’s participation in research have been discussed in new ways, since older developmental and vulnerable discourses, which used age-based discourses to challenge the perceived competence of children, have been challenged (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

In response to more contemporary views of children as competent social agents (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002) and holders of rights, in particular of participation rights (United Nations, 1989), the field of Childhood Studies has offered transformed research designs, methodologies and methods. However, ongoing ethical challenges accompany the new possibilities of researching with child participants (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Participatory, rights-based approaches to research with children respond to the need to extend conventional research methods and practices (Beazley et al., 2009; Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). The following discussion addresses these approaches, together with their applications to this study.

An important foundation question to be asked before conducting ethical research involving children addresses whether or not the research is important, and whether information could be gained without children’s involvement. This is not to say that researching children’s perspectives should be avoided. From a rights and agency perspective, children’s lives are, first of all, worthy of study. Alderson (2008) approaches the issue of children’s involvement by asking: “who is better qualified to research some aspects of their lives than children themselves” (p. 278). Additionally, children can be encouraged to exercise their rights to contribute to matters concerning their lives. But if the same information can be gained without children’s involvement, it might be appropriate not to involve them, weighing up children’s rights to participation and protection (Beazley et al., 2009).
To study a life aspect like children’s play experiences in ECEC settings, I believe that children are the best qualified (Alderson, 2008). It has been suggested that the 'wrong' stakeholders have dominated research about play discourses favouring the perspectives of apparent 'play experts’ including psychologists and policy makers, rather than those directly engaged in children’s play: children, parents and educators (Colliver, 2012). Asking children about their play experiences seemed ethically justified: they are the primary users and therefore experts about play. Children are important stakeholders and should not be excluded from play research or only represented by someone else. In other words, in a study seeking perspectives of play, it would seem inappropriate to exclude the players themselves. I perceived it as my responsibility to conduct the research in ways that showed respect, accepted the children’s capacities, and encouraged their participation (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). Involving children directly goes a long way towards preventing children’s exploitation in research (Alderson, 2008), provided that ethical research practices are in place. Ethical research practice has been approached through identified ethical principles, in relation to best outcomes, or within a framework of rights-based research (Alderson, 2015).

The purpose of the study, the costs and funding of research, review and revision of research aims and methods, information given, consent, dissemination, and impact on children have been listed in ethical considerations of research with children (Roberts, 2008). These ethical considerations can be understood as universally accepted principles for any research involving human beings (Alderson, 2015; Graham et al., 2016; National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2007; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Most recently, guiding frameworks have been developed specifically for childhood research in international collaborations striving for best ethical practice: for example the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) ethical code for early childhood researchers that centralises principles around an “ethic of respect” (Bertram, Formosinho, Gray, Pascal, & Whalley, 2016, p. iv), and the framework of ‘Three Rs’ (reflexivity, rights and relationships) that
underpins the work of an international initiative, Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (Graham et al., 2016).

Ethical standards that were applied to this study conformed to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (NHMRC, 2007), and were approved by the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee (CSU HREC) (see Appendix A). The approval was understood as a starting point for the ethics of the study, with acknowledgement of the continuous need for ethical decision-making throughout the research process (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Graham et al. (2013) provided ethical research guidance that was applied to the present study through consideration of the key areas: harm and benefits; informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; and payment and compensation. The study reflected these key areas using the ‘Three Rs’ framework: researcher reflexivity, children’s rights, and relationships. These have been presented as pillars of ethical practice, but can also be understood as interwoven into such practice. How these key areas and the framing reflections have been applied to my doctoral study are presented below. My ethical discussion concludes with a consideration of research with children utilising the principle of ‘ethical symmetry’.

3.3.1 Beneficence and risks

As the study aimed to enrich the research field from children’s perspectives, children’s potential benefits from their participation in the study, and any risks of being harmed by such participation had to be assessed first. Alderson (2008) highlights a tendency of adult researchers to approach children’s possible harm or exploitation through participation in research with a protective attitude that often results in limiting children’s participation possibilities. However, children have the right to be involved in decision-making in matters concerning their lives (United Nations, 1989). A protective attitude or an assumed developmentally based inability to participate “can lead to the exclusion of young children from research” (Graham et al., 2016, p. 83). Children must be offered spaces to demonstrate and develop their agency (Dockett et al., 2011; Waller, 2006). From a rights-based research perspective, the recognition of the children as active participants drove the study. Elucidating beneficence and risk of harms
included considering the benefits for participating children and for children in the future, as well as any risks of distress or exclusion.

The exact benefits could not be foreseen and described fully prior to the commencement of the study. Unexpected aspects and uncertainties were present daily throughout the field phase due to the exploratory nature of the research (Gallagher, 2015). The necessity of children’s participation was weighed up by considering rights to protection and eventual benefits for the participants: “to make participation in research, at whatever level, an experience, which is at best positive, and at worst, does no harm, to young people” (Roberts, 2008, p. 273). The study considered the questions: Does the research topic engage children? Does it have meaning in their lives? and Does it have a connection to their experiences? To ensure children’s participation was highly respected, their ideas about what paths could be ‘walked’ were treated seriously. Responding to children’s ideas in situ was seen as beneficial for the children. Children can be the driving force to change how aspects of their childhood are perceived (James & James, 2004), providing that their perceptions are collected and presented appropriately.

In this study, the participating children had opportunities to share their perspectives of play. These opportunities were seen as possible interesting ‘paths’ of engagement with their educators, with their peers, and even with their parents. Children decided what they wanted to share with their peers during research activities. They also had control over what to share with educators.

Research studies do not always directly benefit the children involved. It is more likely that children in the future benefit from research outcomes (Alderson, 2015), for example when outcomes are reported and lead to implementation in practice, or when recommendations grow out of the findings (Alderson, 2015; Dockett & Perry, 2015). Play-based learning provision has become compulsory in ECEC settings in Australia. Acknowledging and responding to children’s perspectives of their play can inform practice so that children will benefit most from the play practices provided.
Demonstrating their agency in enjoyable activities could be perceived as a beneficial opportunity for some children. Mostly, children in this study seemed to enjoy their participation and showed enthusiasm for engaging with me. The participating children experienced interactions where their perspectives were treated as meaningful and with respect. However, children’s reactions to participation can differ (Alderson, 2015), and – as was evidenced at some points in this study – included boredom, and even distress in one case. In addition, the research setting brought challenges for children’s voluntary participation. While children were invited to participate, their participation was influenced by what else was occurring in the child care centre at the time. In some instances, participation meant missing out on play opportunities. This was noted as an issue particularly in spring, when outdoor play was more available than in the previous cold months, and where children showed increased interest in playing outside, rather than joining a conversation with me and their peers. As I wanted to respond to children’s wishes, I experimented with moving my activities to the outdoor areas.

There is no way that possible risk of distress and discomfort as a result of participation can be avoided altogether. However, my responsibility included minimising that risk through appropriate preventive action as well as reaction in case of these occurring (Dockett & Perry, 2015). Potential risks were identified prior to entering the field, and had to be reviewed for each interaction with the participants. For example, distress can be caused by feeling left out. Some children wanted to participate but, for different reasons, were not included in the sample. The number of participants was limited for managing the interactions. Practicalities also resulted in the exclusion of children who attended the research site on days that did not overlap with the times of my visits.

Some children only expressed the wish to be video-recorded, but showed disinterest in conversations with me. As respectful and meaningful relationships characterise good research (Dockett & Perry, 2015), I offered those children the opportunity to have videos taken of them, with it remaining the children’s choice to step into conversations for data generation or not. The risk of feeling excluded can also be caused when
parents reject permission but the child wishes to participate (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Feelings of being excluded need careful consideration to ensure children’s wellbeing. But this is not to say that researching children’s perspectives should be avoided. Rather, children should be supported in their active participation. In one case, a boy showed growing interest in participation as his friends engaged in conversations with me. Before I started my research activities, the boy’s parents had dissented for him to participate. However, I felt it was my responsibility to step into dialogue with the parents, telling them my observations which addressed their son’s attempt for interactions with me, and we found common ground that enabled the boy to participate, after we clarified what concerns the parents had. For them, their son’s wish to participate outweighed their concerns around the safety of stored video-data. As this example showed, consent often is linked with concerns of privacy and confidentiality, which are addressed next.

3.3.2 Privacy and confidentiality

Privacy and confidentiality are mostly named together, and are often treated quickly confirming that information of participants is stored anonymously and safely. The elaboration of both issues, however, touches sensitive aspects, including the balance of the right to privacy and the right to protection (Dockett & Perry, 2015), the different adult researchers and child participants’ views of being reported anonymously (Dockett et al., 2011), and the need for awareness for spaces of privacy and the potential invasion of these during field work. The NHMRC (2007) defines privacy as the “domain within which individuals and groups are entitled to be free from the scrutiny of others” (p. 101); and confidentiality as the “obligation of people not to use private information – whether private because of its content or the context of its communication – for any purpose other than that for which it was given to them” (p. 99). The procedures for confidential reporting have to be clarified with participants prior to their participation.

Standard procedures include that participants are not recognisable from research reporting. Anonymity in reports can be guaranteed using pseudonyms, safe storage of identifiable data, and destruction of data after completion of the study (Alderson, 2015). Video data from the present study
were stored in a secure place where only I had access, and digital files were secured with password access. In transcripts, de-identification was used to ensure confidentiality. This process was discussed with the children, and they were offered opportunities to choose their own research pseudonym. However, some research has reported that children have expressed their rejection of using de-identified data as they were proud of their work and therefore wanted to use their real names (Coady, 2008; Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2011; Dockett et al., 2013). Some children in the present study also showed this tendency when they were given the opportunity to choose pseudonyms, or fantasy names, as I called them, when children needed further explanation. Most children showed irritation and did not pick names different from their own. The concept of fantasy names seemed to confuse the children. Play, where children simulate a role, perhaps including that they can be called a name different from their real name, was an anchor I used to explain to the children the meaning of ‘fantasy names’. One child, then, chose a name from her favourite movie, and a few other children considered names of television characters. Possibly due to the lack of experiences with confidentiality, it is also hard for children to foresee how pseudonyms are in place for their own protection. Children have shown confusion about use of pseudonyms in the past (Dockett & Perry, 2015). I felt tension between respecting children’s decisions for not picking a pseudonym and the ethical commitment I had made. As my study was approved under the confidential conditions, where necessary, I chose pseudonyms for the children in this thesis. For confidentiality, I also selected a pseudonym for the research site.

Confidentiality becomes a very sensitive matter when children tell aspects of their lives that raise concerns for their safety, such as possible abuse. Einarsdóttir (2007) and Dockett et al. (2013) elaborate the limitations of confidentiality in the presence of a higher need for protection. Participants needed to be aware of this limitation. In conversation, but also in a formal procedure of gaining children’s consent, I addressed this issue: “You can tell me anything you like about what you know about play at preschool, but if you tell me something that makes me worried about your
safety I will tell someone who can help you”. Children responded that their parents or educators could help.

In this study, video-records and photographs of children were taken. At times, I was challenged with technical issues during the data generation and moved to replace videos with photographs. However, it soon became clear that the videos were a more engaging stimulus for the participating children.

Pseudonyms cannot hide a participant’s real identity when visual data are generated (Robson, 2011). In this study, parents could optionally give consent that their children’s visual representations might be used for presenting findings of this study to conference audiences or in reporting findings elsewhere. In our digital age, it was important for most parents that photographs and videos of their children would not end up on the internet. But even in publishing research outcomes, use of visual data should be reflected for their potential to “reinforce ideas in the text” (Alderson, 2015, p. 638), and not for pure decoration purposes. Again, children were asked about this matter, too, but the children could not refer to similar past experiences for making a decision, which left the issue undetermined. What children were able to make informed decisions about was whether or not they agreed to share their videos and photographs with their peers in the group conversations. Children were shown their visual data first, and only with their consent was the video or photograph shown to other children.

Being filmed or photographed was approached with care. Not only the later sharing with others considers rights of privacy, but the actual process can be perceived as an invasion of private space. Waller (2006) has asked if children’s participation can already be an intrusion of privacy. In following children in their play experiences, private spaces can be in danger of such invasion. Do all aspects of children’s lives end up being researched? Perhaps, children’s play is already too much under adult supervision? Værum Sørensen (2013) questions how much privacy is considered during the time children spend in educational institutions in general. Privacy was challenged in this study at times, when children discussed matters, such as breaking rules, when their educators were in ear-shot (Cocks, 2006). My sensitivity was important to detect signs of children experiencing an
invasion of their privacy, for example if they hid when they saw me with a video-camera approaching their play, and balancing privacy and protection, in case children wished to talk about experiences that might have contravened the classroom rules.

3.3.3 Informed consent and assent

Informed consent is linked to voluntary participation, recognition of participants’ competences and being informed about the research in detail (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). When researching with children, clarification is needed about whose informed consent must be gained, and what forms of gaining consent are appropriate. Consent for this study was gained from the various stakeholders who had been involved directly and indirectly (see Appendix B - H). Gallagher (2015) emphasizes the need to respect the multiple actors. Applied to this study, the participating children were “lead actors”, whereas their parents or other legal guardians, the director and staff members at the research site, as well other children, who potentially could interact with the research, and their parents were perceived as “supporting actors” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 735). Even though I identified the children as the lead actors, parental permission was sought formally with signed consent forms (see Appendix F & G), in accordance with ethical standards (Dockett & Perry, 2010) and legislative requirements for human research in Australia (NHMRC, 2007). However, voluntary participation relies on being informed about the choices offered to the participants (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015), and gaining permission from the children acknowledges their agency (Smith, 2011). Thomas and O’ Kane (1998) accentuated children’s agreement to participation which I adopted for the doctoral study: children’s “active agreement” overweighed parental “passive agreement” (p. 339, italics as in original). Hence, even when parents agreed, their children only participated at their own request. In the case of the boy whose parents first hesitated to consent, I sought dialogue with the parents, when the boy expressed his wish to participation, because his agreement had highest weight for me.

Consent has been legally restricted to a certain age or level of maturity in different countries, including Australia (NHMRC, 2007). The term ‘assent’ has been used to cover cases where the participants have not
reached the age to give legal consent or are otherwise unable to give such consent (Dockett et al., 2013; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Ethical practice should acknowledge that all participants, regardless of their age, have the right to make decisions about their participation.

While recognising the legal requirement for adult consent as a precursor to children's engagement in research, we argue the importance of the concept of assent, as an additional process whereby children can exercise choice about their own research participation. We contend that young children are capable of providing assent, or dissent, in ways that clearly reflect exercise of agency in their own choices about participation. (Dockett & Perry, 2010, p. 3)

Regardless of the term in use, informed consent/assent has its starting point at informing the potential participants about the topic, the nature and purpose of the study, as well as what participation would entail, including data generation procedures and rights to privacy (Gallagher, 2015). The procedure of gaining children’s informed assent underscores that voluntary participation depends on being informed (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015) and actively agreeing (Thomas & O' Kane, 1998). It is important that consent and assent are written or orally given in a language suitable to the audience (Coady, 2008). If the researcher’s language is too complicated, participants – all multiple actors included – are not well informed. But if the language used for children’s assent is too simple, this is inconsistent with the view of the competent child (Alderson, 2008). Children can only make their informed choices if they understand the research and the procedures involved (Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Experiences from an earlier project informed my decisions to ask children formally for their agreement. Children have shown that they find it important to receive a written assent form and give their permission by signing this form, just like their parents (Huser, 2010). Gallagher’s (2015) suggestion of media familiar to the children and to the context of the research, as well as Dockett et al.’s (2013) reflections to support the process of informed assent, have been employed in this study. A booklet was designed which included the necessary information in text and images (as displayed in Figure 1, see Appendix H for complete pages of the ‘child assent booklet’). I read out the text to the children on several days in group-
time during my visits to the kindergarten class. Images illustrated the text in a way that was familiar to children from looking at picture books. Some images were taken from cartoons that represent typical situations in ECEC settings with permission from the cartoonist (R. Alf, personal communication, April 10, 2015). One exemplar of the booklet stayed in the book corner in the classroom, so children could go back and look at it. Other exemplars were handed out to children to read in a one-on-one situation between them and me. These exemplars were signed by those children who gave consent, and stayed in each child’s possession, while I took a photo of these exemplars as a copy. Children signed with their names or drew a picture, as Figure 2 shows. They could indicate how they felt about participation by circling a happy looking or a sad looking face. This procedure has been successfully implemented in research with children (Dockett et al., 2013).

![Figure 1: Child assent booklet](image-url)
But how does the researcher ever know that the participants have understood and have been fully informed? It is more likely that children might only be partly informed at the beginning of their involvement. Also, the exploratory nature of this study brings up the challenge that not all consequences could be foreseen (Gallagher, 2015). I perceived the booklet as a good starting point for engaging in conversation with the children as they could ask further questions around possible participation (Gallagher, 2015). Procedures of assent have been discussed to be more like an “ongoing process” (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015, p. 46). Applied to this study, I explained the procedures to the children on several occasions as the study proceeded. I introduced my study to the children in the beginning, and told them that I was interested in play, and therefore wished to watch them, to video-record them, and to watch the play-videos with them and other children. However, to implement ongoing assent procedures, I reminded the children about the procedures. For example, assent to recording a group conversation was sought at the beginning of each group conversation. Children could experiment with the audio-recorder’s microphone and listen back to their recorded voices. Through such hands-on explanations, children’s understandings of what was involved in their participation made sense to them.

Children need ‘provisional’ assent possibilities that acknowledge and leave room for renegotiation (Dockett et al., 2013; Flewitt, 2005; Gallagher, 2015). Children might assent in one situation, but dissent in the next. Informed consent should always reflect the right to dissent at any point of the research. In order to acknowledge the right to non-participation, even
just having the physical freedom to walk away from a situation with the researcher should be an option for the child (Dockett et al., 2009). Young children might also just be interested in participation for other reasons than the researcher hopes for:

From a child’s point of view, the most significant implication of taking part in research may be having a new person to interact with, being given ‘fun’ or ‘boring’ activities to do, or getting time out from what they would otherwise be doing. It may be of no interest or import to them to know what questions the researcher is trying to answer, or what is going to happen to results. The fact is that for different children, research will inevitably be experienced in different ways, and in ways that might not fit with the researcher’s perspective, aims or aspirations. (Gallagher, 2015, p. 723)

Flexibility and opportunities for re-negotiation need to be reflected in the procedures for gaining children’s assent. Harwood (2010) argues that consent procedures should be underpinned by formal procedures, such as through signing consent forms or given verbally, and taking children’s behaviour into account. I had experienced in my earlier study that such a combination of a formally signed consent and continuous informal checking if children still were willing to participate is possible (Huser, 2010).

Researcher sensitivity for children’s expressions of dissent involves interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues on a daily basis, as not all children will express their consent verbally or through writing ‘ok’ (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011). Does the child get bored, does he show disinterest or emotional stress, or tiredness (Cullen, Hedges, & Bone, 2009)? In my earlier study, the children showed their withdrawal from being video-recorded by closing the curtains to the role play area, by freezing in their movements, turning away their faces and interrupting the flow of their play. “Children must be provided with multiple means of indicating their willingness to participate in any aspect of the research process” (Harwood, 2010, p. 8), such as their body language. Children’s body language and nonverbal signals can be irritating for others, and there is the chance that opposing messages are sent which might demonstrate that the children are unsure of their participation (Dockett et al., 2012). It lies with the researcher to interpret ambiguous signals from the children (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). As Gallagher (2015) states, negotiating informed consent can be
messy and complex process. Negotiation and context-sensitivity are therefore crucial in procedures of consent.

Despite the acknowledgement of the legal status of ‘consent’ in Australia, stating that young children have limited capacities to give consent due to their levels of maturity, and hence parental consent is required (NHMRC, 2007), I will continue to use the term ‘consent’ instead of ‘assent’ to highlight children’s capability and right to make choices for their participation. However, I understand ‘consent’ in the same sense as researchers have introduced and established the term ‘assent’, including ‘provisional’ assent and possibilities for ongoing renegotiation (Dockett et al., 2013; Flewitt, 2005; Gallagher, 2015). I started the research study on those understandings and used the term ‘assent’ on children’s booklet. With the continuous reflections of children’s agentic participation choices in this study and the ongoing engagement with the literature, I favour the terminology used for research with adults, and apply ‘consent’ to research with children. During the field phase and later in data analysis, children’s diverse ways of showing their consent and dissent became a focus. I aimed to understand their verbal and nonverbal expressions to research ethically with the children, and in addition to generate rich insight of children’s consent and dissent forms as contributions to the research field.

3.3.4 Payment and compensation

Payment and compensation have not received much attention in researching with children, especially when studies have been conducted in ECEC settings (Graham et al., 2016). Four types of possible payment have been encountered especially in medical research with children: reimbursement, compensation, appreciation and incentive (Wendler, Rackoff, Emanuel, & Grady, 2002). Reimbursing direct costs was not an issue in the present study as there were no additional costs to families of participants to travel to research activities (Alderson, 2015). Children engaged in the study during their time at the ECEC setting and I respected their wishes to follow their own interests, such as playing, looking at books, or engaging with their educators. No compensation was applicable. This would, for example, be different when researching with the children added to the financial burdens of their families. Rewards were not promised to
children, as the form of incentives could pressure children to participate in ways that could be unethical (Graham et al., 2016). However, I reflected on whether the children might have felt motivated to participate in the hope of getting something out of it, such as receiving my attention.

I was responsive to children’s requests, such as being a play partner to them. Such catering for children’s requests was elaborated as a form of appreciation. Appreciation is perceived as an age/culturally appropriate gift that can be provided to participants at the end of the study. Respecting children’s requests for spending time together could be perceived as appreciation. I considered this as a fundamental expression of the ethics of respect and relationship maintenance which are a necessity to do good research. In terms of appreciation, I thanked the children for their participation with an afternoon tea, thank-you-cards and photographs of each child. The photographs were included as the participating children had voiced their wish to take some of the photos home. Photographs only displayed the specific child, to continue the respect given to privacy and confidentiality throughout the study.

3.3.5 Ethical symmetry

Research should always follow ethical principles. However, the considerations which need to be addressed when researching with children might differ in detail from those used for adult participation in research. Research with young children brings specific ethical challenges. I paid attention to the risk of oversimplification (Palaiologou, 2014), for example not to assume that research with children is ethical by simply picking an activity that children are familiar with from their daily experiences in ECEC, such as drawing, or that should be appropriate for their age, as a research methods. Ethical research with children must move beyond just choosing child-friendly, developmentally appropriate methods. Research with children considered adopting methods that researchers saw as assisting children “to articulate their views more fully” (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 53). However, continuous reflections have shifted from ‘child-friendly’ to ‘participant-friendly’ methods (Clark, 2011). With respect to the view of children as agents (Mayall, 2002), but also in recognition of children’s experiences (Lansdown, 2005; Punch, 2002), I aimed to choose methods
best suited for the research and my participants. In addition, ethics need to be embedded holistically into the research process and into the theoretical framework (Dockett et al., 2011). Under the principle of ‘ethical symmetry’ (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Dockett et al., 2011), this study reflected and applied ethical principles to the research that suited the participants involved, as well as the theoretical framework.

Ethical symmetry provides the space where the research can be designed in the most appropriate way for participants, regardless of their age, and for the research aims and quality. Any methodological decision was based on the suitability of the decision to the participants; acknowledging children’s evolving capacities of participation (Lansdown, 2005), and responding to the concrete research context (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). The principle of ethical symmetry underpinned all ethical considerations, such as gaining informed consent, assurances of confidentiality, recruitment of the participants, continuing interactions with the children, and the relationships between the adult researcher and the child participants.

I reflected on whether putting children into a research situation was necessary. Children do not only have the right to participation, but also a right to protection (Beazley et al., 2009). It is not for nothing that frameworks for conducting research with children question whether the participating child’s well-being could be at risk. However, I considered children’s participation as essential to approach the research questions while ensuring that the children could experience their participation as meaningful (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015; Dockett & Perry, 2015). The present study was based on children’s play experiences in ECEC contexts and their knowledge about them. Thus, the study adheres to a key characteristic for practice underpinned by the ethical symmetry principle: “the practices employed in the research have to be in line with children’s experiences, interests, values and everyday routines” (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 482).

Even though my ambitions were to research with the participating children in equal partnership where I showed respect and recognition for their expertise and competences and rights, I was aware that ethical practice
is challenging. Responsibility for these partnerships with children lies with the researcher as power asymmetries between adults and children, as well as between children exist (Christensen & Prout, 2002), even with highest ambitions. As a first step, I recognized the possible power imbalance and respectfully engaged with the children. Further, in line with recommendations under the ethical symmetry principle, I adopted strategies (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015) to foreground children as competent participants and holder of rights:

- additional to parental consent, children had their own opportunities to give consent;
- once they had given consent, I acknowledged that children re-negotiate their participation, and therefore saw assent procedures as ongoing;
- I provided options for how children could contribute to data generation through video-records that captured children’s verbal and nonverbal expressions, as well as being sensitive to their ideas of participation; and
- I was attentive to children’s actions.

Grounding research in ethical practice (Dockett & Perry, 2015) was a key characteristic for this study. The last research sub-question mirrors this ‘grounded-ness’. The study Children’s perspectives of play and their research participation did not only aim to explore play from children’s points of view, but to canvass the characteristics of ethical spaces for researching children’s perspectives. Within the exploration of children’s perspectives of play, the ethical spaces for the children to participate were created as a prerequisite in the planning of the study, while at the same time, they were further explored and developed through children’s participation. Despite growing numbers of studies involving children’s participation, dilemmas and ethical challenges are not often reported, although they must have been experienced (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). Thus, this study proposed to explore ethical practice in situations where children’s participation can be delicate for the researcher. Agreeing with Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015), I looked at children’s ways of participating from a ‘strengths’-approach: I considered children’s participative acts, even if they
were challenging for me, as the children’s expressions of their right to participation, including their right to ‘non-participation’ (dissent). A particular focus was how the children showed their consent and how they chose to participate.

3.3.6 The research relationships

Throughout this study, I aimed to weave key ethical considerations into relationships, pursuit of children’s rights, and researcher reflexivity. Relationships were important. Children’s reports are likely to be accurate and complete if they trust the researcher. The researcher cannot be a stranger. However, the researcher’s presence can alter the situation. Unobtrusive methods aim to limit this influence. Researchers have offered different ways of stepping into interactions with the participant children. The range varied from limiting interaction to a minimum in order to ensure unaltered behaviour of the children (Sawyer, 1997) to researchers introducing themselves as an assistant in the classroom (Mayall, 2008). Harwood (2010) changed between different roles, from being ‘least-adult’, similar to Corsaro (2003), while I engaged as co-player during the period of familiarization in my earlier study (Huser, 2010). The overall aim of interacting with the children was to “gain greater access to the children’s perceptions” (Harwood, 2010, p. 8), but it is also clear that adults are visible to children (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015) who question the role of the researcher in the field. Christensen (2004) suggests that children’s question “Who are you?” means “Who are we to each other?” (p. 166). The response to the question has implications to the relationship between the participants and the researcher.

Historically, children have been in less powerful positions than adults in society, and continue to be:

People who inhabit childhood differ from adults in that childhood is understood as a period when people require protection, since they know less, have less maturity and less strength, compared to older people; protection implies provision; and it implies unequal power relationships. (Mayall, 2002)

Even with the recognition of children as holders of rights and social agents, adult-child power imbalances and inequalities are matters of course.
(Alderson, 2008). The inequalities and biased power relations need to be carefully considered. Children are aware of differences between adults and themselves, not only through body size, but the social status of adults in children’s lives who are traditionally in more powerful positions (Corsaro, 2003). At ECEC settings, adults regulate what children can do at what time of the day. In research with children, the adult researcher has also higher control over children’s activities. Applying a child-rights approach to research and respecting the child as agent is a start that needs further consideration in relation to the power relationships between child participants and adult researcher. However, Holland et al. (2010) address power as a dynamic concept where power can shift between all actors in the research. They acknowledge that the adult researcher has more freedom and control over the research process, but that children are not completely powerless. Truly reflexive practice respects children’s rights and children’s participation (Dockett & Perry, 2015). Methodological and ethical decisions I made to reduce power imbalances were, for example, to respect children’s wish to be left alone, and to be sensitive towards their signs of dissent; to have conversations with groups of children where they were in the majority; to stay mostly passive in such conversations; not to interrupt when children directed the conversation; and not to intervene when children participated in their own chosen ways.

In terms of children’s rights to protection, the main challenge occurs when the researcher must react to a situation to protect children from harm; maybe in an observed conflict where children start to harm each other. Although children are used to adults who protect them, the researcher also cannot step into the role of an educator. The researcher is not part of the staff. This remained a dilemma for me.

Relationships beyond those among children and the researcher also have potential impact on the study. The relationships between the researcher and gatekeepers, such as educators and parents are crucial in terms of consent. The recruitment of child participants can be difficult if the research topic is connected to children’s experiences in ECEC. Hence, getting access to children in ECEC settings depends on the willingness of those who work in these settings. There might also be a risk of biased findings, if selective
consent of gatekeepers is given in such a way that excludes some children and strengthens unequal opportunities when only particular children are invited to participate by educators (Smith, 2011), or parents reject permission. I sought informed consent from the centre’s director, as well as from the educators, first. And once director and pedagogical staff agreed, there can be issues: Will the educators feel observed in a way that will judge their pedagogical skills? In this study, the educators might have thought the topic of the research project was to ascertain whether they ‘correctly’ delivered a play-based approach within the curriculum. I addressed such issues in conversations with the educators prior to the start of my visits and ongoing to clarify directly expectations. Compared to the practice in my earlier study, where educators recommended children for participation, I based my decisions about who participated on children’s verbal and nonverbal expressions of interest in taking part.

All those relationships – with the children, the staff, and the children’s parents – were an ongoing matter throughout the research project. A familiarization phase considered that it takes time to build relationships and trust between all involved, with emphasis on the children and me as the researcher. However, I also saw my ethical responsibility to think that the relationships would come to an end with the research project. The data generation finished in early December 2015, just before the summer holiday break, with most of my child participants finishing their time at the childcare centre (research setting) as they engaged with their transition to school. It was a time to say goodbye in general, which suited well to celebrate the end of the project with the children, their families and the staff. The children were involved in making decisions about how to celebrate the project farewell, and in the preparations once decisions had been made. In the last two weeks prior to the farewell, we selected photos, and the children stuck them on posters and told me what I should write on the posters, accompanying the photos. Some children drew pictures, reflecting their play ideas. During an afternoon tea, the children presented posters and drawings in an exhibition to all the children in the group, to parents and their educators. While I offered to talk to parents and educators if they wished to know more about the study’s preliminary findings, the children were the
main actors and explained and talked about their posters with their parents. Even though this event was meant to be the official farewell, I returned the next day to follow the educators’ invitation to join the Christmas concert. Many of the children had also asked me if I was coming to the concert and were happy to see me. The communication with the childcare centre continued after the field phase finished, and discussions surrounded ideas of providing staff with professional development opportunities about the issue of play from children’s perspectives.

3.4 Research design

This section details the methodological considerations for the study. These include the paradigm, the research design, the sampling methods and the methods for data generation and analysis. Methodology and ethical practice need to be addressed as a union (Palaiologou, 2014), and need to go beyond the rather isolated choosing of child-friendly methods (Dockett et al., 2011) that are popular in research with children. However, research that focuses solely on such methods might mask genuine participatory research with children (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Palaiologou, 2014). Instead, children’s participation needs to be reflected upon (Mason & Urquhart, 2001), as the research questions and aims of the research are addressed (Dockett et al., 2011). In research following the principles within the field of Childhood Studies, participatory methods have not been chosen for the sake of participation, but as a genuine reflection of children’s rights and agency as a theoretical frame (Holland et al., 2010). Such theoretical positioning of children in research requires the development of new methodological understandings and re-formation of research practices (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Participatory, rights-based research has assigned active roles to children (Dockett & Perry, 2015), which includes that the children are able to engage in the research planning, conduct and dissemination, to make decisions and negotiate the research process and how their perspectives are being shared. Hence, I saw it as my responsibility to ensure that the children were provided with opportunities to influence and contribute to processes and outcomes, as well as to the knowledge co-constructed in the research.
This qualitative study was informed by an interpretive paradigm to firstly comprehend the children’s meanings of play; and secondly to re-construct and present their meanings. Interpretivism aims for grasping the “true voice of the participants” (Hughes, 2008, p. 36), as they make sense and share meaning in a socially constructed world. The interpreted knowledge is true in a sense of authenticity within the local context of the participants (Hughes, 2008). This paradigm aligns with my theoretical standpoint where knowledge is constructed and shared in cultural practices in social interaction. I believe that the children construct socially understandings and share these with others – peers and adults, continuously re-creating meaning (Corsaro, 1997; Hughes, 2008). These meanings the children give to play are the focus of the interpretive study.

A qualitative strategy of inquiry led the design of the study, supporting the exploration of children’s perspectives of play, as well as the production of detailed descriptions of the meanings and understandings the children hold of play (Hughes, 2008). This research approach encouraged interpretation of the phenomenon of study (play) in its natural setting with the participants, and the building of understanding of the experiences of those involved in the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Within the qualitative design, research participants’ opinions received attention through the use of a methodology and methods that “privilege participants’ voices in data collection and analysis” (Given, 2016, p. 13). It also encouraged exploration of the phenomenon of play in depth from the perspectives of the small group of participating children, over an extended period of time. In the light of the theoretical anchorage in sociocultural studies and Childhood Studies, I chose to draw upon the methodology of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory is described in this chapter in detail, as are the methods for generating and analysing data that were applied within this research design.

3.4.1 Social-constructivist study

Interpretivist research studies the meanings that an individual or a group of people hold about a specific phenomenon in their everyday life, how they make sense of their social world and how this sense-making develops over time (O’Donoghue, 2006). The theoretical position as
described in this chapter (3.2.1 and 3.2.2) aligned well with a social constructivist lens. Social constructivism has been defined as “a theoretical perspective that assumes that people create social reality(ies) through individual and collective actions” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 189). I understand social phenomena as constructed entities that result from humans make meaning of their shared experiences. Therefore, I rejected an absolute truth or reality, rather acknowledging that reality as what is real for those who experience it and the notion of “social knowledge” (Lincoln, Lynham, Guba, 2011, p. 119) arising from collective meaning-making.

The social constructivist view acknowledges the active role of the researcher, interacting with the research participants, in the exploration and construction of meaning (Kim, 2014; Schwandt, 1994). This sat well with my beliefs about constructing knowledge in collaboration with the children who participated in this study. I recognized knowledge as socially constructed in interaction, shared meanings as co-created in continuous negotiation (Hughes, 2008), and the children as co-constructors of the generated knowledge from this study which is central to Childhood Studies.

Social constructivism considered that knowledge is also embedded in values and beliefs within a specific context:

Social construction is a social process, and in no way existent apart from our own involvement in the world – the world is always our world, understood or constructed by ourselves, not in isolation but as part of a community of human agents, and through our active interaction and participation with other people in that community. For these reasons, knowledge and its construction is always context-specific and value-laden ...

(Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 23)

I approached the generation of knowledge as a “social activity” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 38). This process entailed sharing understandings and meanings rather than the searching for one universal truth (Lincoln et al., 2011). Situated in a Vygotskian tradition, meaning was an entity shared by individuals that derived from sociocultural contexts (Dockett & Perry, 1996; Rogoff, 1990). Meaning, then, was understood as “taken-as-shared” (Dockett & Perry, 1996, p. 8), a view that respects that it is not certain that each participant shared the same meanings and understandings of a play experience, although the child took part in this same experience. The
participating children in this study were assumed to share meaning in their peer groups, but also to hold individual understandings of the play phenomenon. However, these understandings derived from cultural activity in social interaction. The social constructivist lens suited well with the theoretical underpinnings of this study where children’s collective contributions to society, culture and knowledge construction through interpretive reproduction are acknowledged (Corsaro, 1997).

3.4.2 Constructivist grounded theory

The study aimed to explore children’s shared and individual understandings of play by co-constructing knowledge in interaction with the child participants. There can be challenges when including children and the researcher in the co-construction of meaning within qualitative educational research. However, two foundational presumptions guided my approach to this challenge. Firstly, the study recognised children’s agency as a starting point in order to emphasize the co-construction of meanings and understandings, acknowledging the participating children as competent agents. This meant that the children contributed actively and negotiated their participation and what they shared with me throughout the conduct of study.

Secondly, the study addressed the challenge of including children as co-constructors of knowledge by putting high emphasis on building trustful relationships with the child participants (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). From this, I understood the interactions between the children and myself as the spaces for generating data. It meant also that I had to be reflexive in my interpretations of data, and at the same time, ensure that each relationship was a partnership where knowledge could be co-constructed. Within an extended time period, I aimed to build trustful relationships with the children, to provide an atmosphere where the children felt confident to share their views. I also wanted to learn in which ways children communicated understandings and meanings. Trusting relationships were seen as an important prerequisite to gaining access to participants’ views in conversations and, therefore, to gaining “solid data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 19). Constructivist grounded theory was chosen as a research design because it allowed data to be generated in an emergent manner, through interaction between the researcher and the child participants (Charmaz, 2011).
The research design took the research questions as the starting point to explore the phenomenon of play in early childhood education and encouraged the consideration of data in an emergent way, not prefixed by expectations and hypotheses (Edwards, 2008). The research was designed to provide possibilities to illuminate diverse understandings, to see emerging concepts, and to construct theories. Grounded theory methods are used to analyse data, but are more than just techniques for data analysis. They offer systematic but flexible guidelines that frame a simultaneous process of data generation and data analysis (Charmaz, 2006), using principles and practices such as coding, memo-writing, sampling for theory development instead of representativeness, and comparative methods. The aim is to “construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2).

Using the framing of constructivist grounded theory provided steps throughout the research process, but focused particularly on the steps of data generation and analysis. The steps were not used in a linear process. A cyclical process, instead, was used to generate data, analyse initial data, inform further data generation, and construct theories. Traditional grounded theory approaches suggest that the literature review not be considered until the data have been subjected to independent analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is further claimed that, if this is not done, an independent analysis is not possible and the analysis is likely to be deductive. However, in this study, existing literature was used to shape a research proposal and support the research question. Charmaz (2011) recognizes the importance of knowledge of the field of the study prior to entering the field. However, themes emerged from the data that had not been reviewed in the literature before data generation and analysis, but became important to follow up during the completion of data analysis. As Charmaz (2006) acknowledged, the familiarity with the research topic prior to start of the research provided ‘points of departure’ to develop ideas in relation to what to look for in the data, and what questions to ask participants. There was one point of departure which could be understood as deductive analysis in this study. The fifth research question arose from the literature review, with reference to adult researcher’s space invasion in research with children (Palaiologou,
which is addressed later in this chapter. However, it was important to balance the points of departure with the emerging concepts.

The grounded theory driven process began with the research problem. The research questions were the opening point that led to a first round of data generation and initial coding. Data generation included memo-writing where trends are written down to create concrete ideas that explain best and interpret the data. Through this continuous process, categories developed that guided data further analysis. In the several rounds of data generation, focused coding began. Conceptual categories took shape. Further data generation was driven by theoretical sampling in order to gain data that was specifically of interest in regards to the arising conceptual categories. The new data were submitted to both initial coding and focused coding. New data also refined the theoretical concepts that were formed through developed categories. Earlier data were re-examined continuously to contribute to the theoretical concepts. The re-examination and comparison of earlier data with newer data, as well as of categories, underline the simultaneous process of data generation and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

This study aimed to develop new theories through a “purposeful systematic generation from the data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 28). The generation of new theories was based on evidence from the data, and the utilisation of a constant comparative method. Comparing data with data, categories with categories, and categories with data in a continuous process supported the generation of strong concepts (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) noted that the “generation of theory through comparative analysis both subsumes and assumes verifications and accurate descriptions, but only to the extent that the latter are in the service of generation” (p. 28, italics as in original). I looked at how children understood play, and what their perspectives of the phenomenon were as being influenced by the children’s circumstances and their sociocultural, contemporary context. The children’s play perspectives that emerged from the data were therefore not understood as end-products, but as continuously developing theories, or as Glaser and Strauss (1967)
suggested a “theory as process” (p. 32). Data generation and analysis is addressed in section 3.5 and 3.6 in this chapter.

3.4.3 Participants

Qualitative research aims for rich, detailed insight into specific phenomena. To ensure the richness in a feasible frame, the use of smaller sample sizes is well-established (Denscombe, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, my interest in children’s experiences of play was explored through the detailed consideration of the perspectives of a small group of children. Sampling was a two-step process. The first step was to select a research site. The decision to opt for only one research site was built on my belief in the importance of establishing strong relationships with participants – both staff and children. The childcare centre where the study took place was selected by convenience: the centre’s staff and I had first contact through professional liaison, and the centre’s director showed interest in the research topic. The centre claimed to offer a play-based pedagogy which provided a context for exploring children’s perspectives of play. In a meeting with the director, I explained the study’s topic and the implications of participating in the study. At the meeting, the director chose the kindergarten classroom (4-5 year-old children) to provide the context for the research. That the director initiated a meeting to receive more information about the research study was perceived as a positive start to the research. The positive responses of the director and the kindergarten classroom leader who attended the second information meeting laid a basis for a growing trusting relationship that would be necessary for undertaking the intensive field work in the study.

As in many qualitative research studies, the sample was not pre-specified but, rather, evolved during my time in the field (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used the widely accepted approach of purposive sampling to build the group of children to be involved in the study (NHMRC, 2007). Many characteristics for the research participants have been considered in building the sample, including familiarity and expertise with the studied experience, voluntary participation, ability to share their understandings, and time for participation (Morse, 2007).
I intended to undertake the study with a small group of approximately six to eight focus children in their prior-to-school year. However, during the period of data generation, many of the other children in the classroom interacted in different ways with me. My initial observations helped to identify children who engaged in a range of play activities and who felt comfortable in their interactions with me. These observations informed the decisions I made about which children to involve in focus group discussions.

By the end of the fieldwork phase, 17 children had been involved in conversations around their reflections of play experiences. An additional nine children had been invited by their participating peers to sit with them during a conversation the participating children had with me. On the play-videos, further children appeared in the background, but showed no interest in participating in conversations. The play-videos were used as stimuli for conversations, but were not analysed for the generation of data. Hence, while the data reflect the involvement of several children, the major participants in this study were the 17 children – 8 boys and 9 girls – who participated regularly in reflections on their play in group conversations. The nine peers – 5 boys and 4 girls – who joined them in discussions also contributed data, but on a less regular basis. All participating children were aged 4 years old at the beginning of the fieldwork phase; some of the children turned five during the study.

Although voluntariness and interest of the children were the main factors in selecting the focus children, four sampling parameters, as suggested by Miles and Hubermann (1994) influenced the choice of participants: (1) settings, (2) actors, (3) events and (4) processes. These parameters were reflected in the sample:

(1) The setting included indoor and outdoor play areas of the kindergarten children.
(2) The actors were those children who were engaged in play.
(3) The play events included different play contexts and play themes.
(4) The play processes ranged from finding play partners, setting up play with equipment, and assignment of roles in the actual play.
In following the constructivist grounded theory approach to data generation, the group of participants expanded from the original intention. While the group was small to start with, the processes of data analysis involved interactions not only with that small group, but also with other children who participated in their play, thus expanding the sample. Saturation for sampling was part of the approach to data generation and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

A legal requirement was to choose children as participants whose parents gave permission for them to be involved. Before the field phase, all parents in the centre were informed of the potential study through the centre’s newsletter. Families of the kindergarten children also received letters with information and consent forms prior to the start of the study. During the first weeks in the field, I provided opportunities for parents to ask further questions and offered clarification. The main strategy for this was to be at the childcare centre on three afternoons as the parents were picking up their children. At these informal meetings, I explained the purpose and nature of the study. Once parents had given consent, their children were invited to participate in the study. The children also made active decisions about their participation. Children showed interest by coming closer to me, asking me questions, and interacting with me and my equipment. One child showed growing interest whose parents did not give consent to start with, however, when their child engaged further, I sought dialogue and could negotiate with the parents. The main concern was about what would happen to the video data, but once I ensured the security and purpose of video data, the parents gave consent. I was aware that the parents could have decided differently.

I had informed all children from the classroom about my research using a child assent booklet I had designed for this study. It explained in simple sentences, supported by drawings, what the study was about and what participation included (see Appendix H). Those children who wished to participate showed their informed assent in a formal procedure through ‘signing’ a child assent booklet. Besides the formal procedure, the children were asked about their willingness to be involved throughout the field phase.
3.4.4 Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness

Validity and reliability have been traditional concepts in quantitative research, largely derived from research that relies on testing and measuring (Wolcott, 1994). Nonetheless, qualitative research also involves making judgments about the authenticity of data and the interpretations of these.

As a qualitative researcher, instead of assessing data and analysis in terms of truth, I am more likely to ask what is meant with truth in a world that is interpreted in many individual and collective ways, rejecting one universal truth. However, to ask if research is valid and reliable is also to ask if research makes sense. Validity, then, in this study involves making judgments about the themes that emerged from the data, asking specifically if they are plausible, sturdy and can be confirmed (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) provide points that are useful to consider in making judgments about the reliability and validity of qualitative research. For example, they advocate for clear descriptions of the study’s components and detailed descriptions of the findings in relation to the categories and emerging concepts, as well as consistency with prior theories. The grounded theory methodology chosen for this study emphasises the interpretive nature of reality, contending that the ‘groundedness’ in the data contributes to research rigor (Thornberg, Perhamus, & Charmaz, 2015):

Constructivist grounded theory is always an interpretation, one among many possibilities of understanding reality. However, because the interpretation is completely grounded in the data and entirely constructed by the researchers through rigorous and emergent processes of coding, category-building, memo-writing, and sorting, the grounded theory interpretation rests solidly on empirical evidence. (Thornberg et al., 2015, p. 419)

Throughout the study, validity and reliability were enhanced by ensuring data integrity, transparency of research processes, and balancing data interpretation in a reflective process (Dockett & Perry, 2015). Integrity was an important part during data analysis, and following the grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006) ensured that codes are checked back with the whole set of data, not just where they occur first. The process of making constant comparisons was an integral part of data analysis in this
study. Consistency of results is also an indicator for reliability, while validity is best achieved in qualitative studies if methods were suitable to answer the posed research questions (Fraukel, 2015).

Qualitative researchers have argued that validity is ensured through “field-sensitive evidence” in terms of “being able to offer as valid a representation of the field of study” (Edwards, 2008, p. 124) as possible. Alderson (2008, p. 278) claims that children are the best “qualified” to share their views in research about their own lives. While this may be the case, it was my responsibility to be sensitive and flexible to make ‘sense’ of the data and analysis. The researcher’s reflexivity has been identified as an important requirement in qualitative research (Edwards, 2008). Reflexivity was important in terms of considering my researcher impact on participants’ reports, particularly in terms of the tendency for researchers to synthesise these reports further and regress towards their own beliefs. Therefore, I continuously went back to the children’s direct statements and nonverbal contributions.

Langsted (1994) proclaims the reliability of children’s statements: “it is possible that the independent observations of children we use as a criterion of reliability may be less reliable than the children’s own statements” (p. 34). The design of the methodology and the methods chosen aimed to ensure that the children could comfortably and competently make their statements: “Good information on childhood must start from children’s experiences” (Mayall, 2008, p. 110). However, validity and reliability increase where children feel comfortable and participate freely (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Comfort has been linked to a friendly atmosphere, meaningful research topics, and rapport with the researcher (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). During this study, time was allocated to build relationships between the participating children and I, seeking to establish such a sense of comfort for all involved.

The National statement on ethical conduct in human research (NHMRC, 2007) states that quality and credibility are more important in qualitative research than validity and reliability. Qualitative researchers have therefore emphasised other concepts such as trustworthiness, which can be established through the use of a range of strategies (Hatch &
Coleman-King, 2015). As Hatch and Coleman-King (2015) emphasize “early childhood qualitative researchers should avoid the trap of justifying their work in terms of meeting criteria determined by positivist research assumptions. Instead, they should apply constructs such as trustworthiness to establish the legitimacy of their work.” (p. 471). Hatch and Coleman-King (2015) refer to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) ideas, where one of the elements of trustworthiness is based on ensuring credibility “by showing that multiple representations of reality have been provided and that the reconstructions of the researcher are credible to the participants who supplied the original data” (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015, p. 470). In this study, I aimed for credibility through the extended time period of data generation, and the relationships built with the participating children (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### 3.5 Data generation

When choosing methods for data generation, Palaiologou (2014) has warned that if the method serves only to gain children’s participation, but does not serve the overall research purpose, it is likely to be inappropriate: “How you collect data affects which phenomena you will see, how, where, and when you will view them, and what sense you will make of them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 15). In other words, methods should “reflect the nature of the research” (Palaiologou, 2014, p. 692).

The main question is then how children can be given the opportunity to become constructive participants and competent informants on issues concerning their everyday life experiences…. We need more knowledge on how to seek knowledge from children’s point of view in a respectful and serious way. (Eide & Winger, 2005, p. 74)

The research questions for this study guided the choice of methods. The data generation was introduced to the children after a familiarisation phase where children, the educators, and I got to know each other. During this time, I observed the routines, activities in the kindergarten classroom, and children’s play. I also functioned as a play partner for the children when they invited me. These interactions laid the basis for trusting relationships that were crucial for the data generation.
From the beginning, I took field notes that documented informal conversations with the children and my observations. The notes were useful in the data generation and later stages of data analysis. For example, the notes helped to contextualise children’s play: who was playing with whom; what and where the children played; what activities happened throughout the day, and so on. These notes were useful to also keep track once data were generated, as well as to inform the initial coding of data and ‘memos’ that were used “to explore and record as much analytic detail” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 166) as possible for categorization of the data. However, the method for data generation involved children participating directly in group conversations. Combining grounded theory with interviewing techniques provided an in-depth approach to data generation that helped gain insight into the participants’ perspectives and how they interpreted their own experiences (Charmaz, 2006).

3.5.1 Group discussions with video stimuli

The theoretical framework informed the methods used through acknowledging that knowledge was developed in collaboration and through sharing meaning (Bitou & Waller, 2011; Corsaro, 1997; Löfdahl, 2005). Group discussions, video-recordings and video-stimulated reflections can provide opportunities for investigating children’s perspectives about play (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Theobald, 2012). In this study, data were generated through group conversations with video stimuli. These incorporated video-recordings of children in their play (‘play-videos’) and the showing of these play-videos to the children. The play-video functioned to stimulate a small group of children to converse about their play experiences. The group conversations were also video-recorded, with an audio-recorder as an additional back up for voice quality.

Recording children’s play on video was a key aspect of this study. To facilitate this, I spent some time observing and interacting with the children prior to introducing the video camera. Following this, I introduced the video camera and recorded children’s play. The children were invited to observe what I was doing and to view the videos. These initial videos were regarded as familiarisation opportunities, and not considered as data. Once the children seemed comfortable with both my presence and that of the
video camera, I recorded episodes of children’s play that were to be the focus of our group conversations. In each instance, the children involved in the video-recorded episodes were invited to participate in group conversations with me and their co-players. Mostly, the players agreed to this and were eager to discuss what has been recorded. However, there were several occasions where children declined the invitation to join in the conversations. Their decisions were always respected.

Group conversations have been identified as a convenient data collection method for researching young children’s individual and collective perspectives of experiences from their everyday life (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002, 2010). The small group conversations gave the children an appropriate setting to discuss the research matter in an atmosphere where they feel comfortable – they will generally be among friends – but also provide the stage for sharing and extending their ideas (Corsaro, 1997; Dunphy & Farrell, 2011; Eide & Winger, 2005). The group conversation setting had the advantage of accessing individual opinions that arise spontaneously in discussion with others. Social reality and meaning are both created in interactions and within children’s peer cultures. The group conversation method offered spaces for children:

- to co-construct meaning explicitly with their peers; and
- to be in the majority, so they are strengthened through the presence of their peers and to balance generational dominance of the adult researcher (Heinzel, Kränzl-Nagl, & Mierendorff, 2012).

A group size of between five and eight children has been recommended to facilitate group, rather than parallel, discussions, as well as to stay feasible for the moderating researcher (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). However, the group size in this study was affected by contextual factors: for example, children who had played together and could discuss a shared experience. In my previous study (Huser, 2010), being with a friend had proven to be a good strategy to stimulate talk about video-recorded play experiences. In the present study, sometimes a group of five children worked well; at other times, intensive discussions arose in groups of two to
three children. Group size, length of time and frequency of group
discussions varied and were placed flexibly in relation to the contextual
factors. Group conversations were held in the kindergarten classroom while
educators led table activities in another area of the room, or while one staff
member set up the rooms for routines (see Figure 3). However, with the
changing seasons, the conversations also took place in the outdoors when
the children spent their free play time in the backyard of the setting (see
Figure 4). Places were chosen where children felt comfortable and familiar,
as well as where at least one kindergarten staff member could see the group.

My intention was to use group conversations with narrative-
generating opening questions (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002). Characteristics of
these conversations are freedom, self-initiation, flow, and participant
control. To start a conversation, I invited the participants, to describe their
play experiences and to reflect on play from their point of view. I saw my
role as passive, yet encouraging (Charmaz, 2006). After my initial invitation
to watch and comment on the video prompt, my main roles were to listen
and to encourage the children to discuss the play. However, when conversations lost flow, I moved into a more active role. I asked more closed questions to clarify children’s statements or to focus on particular themes that had been raised and where I was seeking more detail and explanation. I then made decisions either to stimulate the conversations with more follow-up questions or new questions, or not to intervene. In the first case, the conversations became more similar to a group interview where I played a leading role. Hence, I guided the structure and content of the conversation. In the second scenario, I interpreted children’s different behaviours as indicators that they wished not to share their reflections and ideas with me or the other children.

Group conversations generated narratives from the participants. However, some children seemed eager to show what was relevant for them, rather than to discuss this verbally. To facilitate non-verbal as well as verbal expression, I invited children to respond in performance: to show play, as well as or even instead of, talking about play (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2010). Group conversations were not only audio-recorded but video-recorded. The audio-recording ensured a higher quality for the voices of the children and this was useful when transcribing each session. The video-records, however, had the advantage of documenting children’s non-verbal engagement. They allowed what children expressed through performance to be captured.

A group conversation ‘lives’ from its flow. I encouraged the children but did aim to avoid leading the discussion (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). I functioned mainly in a role of an active listener and intervened as little as possible. However, I offered a stimulus to the group to initiate an almost naturally occurring conversation (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002). Instead of just an opening question, the play-video provided stimulus. Videos can act “as a catalyst for children to reflect” (James et al., 2004, p. 117). Video-records enable children to revisit and reflect their own comments and actions (Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Theobald, 2012):

Researchers could go back and share with children their original comments and plans, enabling children to revisit and elaborate on their initial comments. The importance of the video recordings was to ensure that the context ... was recorded. (Dockett & Perry, 2005, p. 517)
A collective experience, such as playing together, is a good starting point for a conversation. Practically, I invited the children to share their expert knowledge and invited them to talk about a past shared play experience. Sometimes, the experience dated back more than a week (however, never longer than two weeks); other times, the children asked to watch their recorded play immediately.

During the field phase of the study, 117 play-videos were recorded. These ranged from 1 minute to around 25 minutes long. I chose videos to show to the children, first of all based on the visual and audio quality, so children could easily hear and watch their recorded play. Secondly, I tried to show a range of play recorded in different locations and children engaging in a range of themes, material and play partners. From this selection, the children watched their recorded play, and were invited to make a decision about whether or not they wanted to share the videos with other children.

Originally, these first showings of the videos to the children functioned purely as a way to gain children’s consent to share the videos with others (‘consent watching’). To make sure children’s views were clear and recorded, I video-recorded these initial showings of the videos. For most of the first thirteen occasions where I replayed the videos, the children watched their play-video without commenting – despite a few laughs and finally saying yes or no to my request to use these videos in conversations. Three of those ‘consent watching’ settings were transcribed, as children started making a few comments about their play (see Table 2). Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide information about all the conversations between the children and I that were video-recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. The tables show the file number, the date of the recording, which children participated in the conversation, and the amount of time of the recorded conversation in minutes and seconds.

Table 2: Consent watching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>File number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Time mins:secs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M2U00172</td>
<td>28/07/2015</td>
<td>Sophia, Jessica</td>
<td>05:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00213</td>
<td>18/08/2015</td>
<td>Ethan, Jarvis</td>
<td>00:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00217</td>
<td>20/08/2015</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>01:20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Originally, I wanted to take the play-videos children had consented to share and show these to their co-players and/or peers. Seven such group conversations, ranging in time from 5 minutes to 21 minutes, took place (see Table 3). In this original setting idea (‘mixed’ group conversation), a mixed group of children watched a set of play-videos; children watched not only video displaying themselves, but videos of their peers. However, those conversations where I showed only those children their own play-videos in order to seek their consent to share, turned into group conversations. In the end, 19 of these ‘additional’ group conversations (see Table 4) where only children from a play-video participated proceeded, ranging from 1 minute to 18 minutes. Further, a group of boys wished to re-watch one of their play-videos, and this conversation was recorded (file number DS500059), and a group of girls requested to watch the video-record of their conversation (file number M2U00288). Two boys reflected on their child assent booklets, and they gave me permission to audio-record the evolving conversation (file number DS500061). All of these conversations, including the original ‘mixed’ and the additional conversations, were completely transcribed.

In summary, the data set consists of: 3 consent watching videos (Table 2); 7 ‘mixed’ group conversations (Table 3); and 22 additional conversations (Table 4), which equals approximately 360 minutes recorded conversation time. The findings of this study are based on these 32 video-recorded and transcribed conversations. The transcriptions of the data set encompassed 211 pages in total. The play-videos acted solely as stimuli for the conversations, but were not part of the analysed data as the aim of this study was to explore the children’s perspectives of their play, rather my perspectives based on observations of their play.
### Table 3: 'Mixed' group conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>File number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Time mins:secs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M2U00209</td>
<td>11/08/2015</td>
<td>Ethan, Elsa, Sophia, Sienna, Chloe, Hudson</td>
<td>25:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00212</td>
<td>18/08/2015</td>
<td>Ethan, Sophia, Chloe, Hudson</td>
<td>11:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00249,</td>
<td>22/09/2015</td>
<td>Ethan, Sophia, Chloe, Molly, Sienna, Zoe, later</td>
<td>21:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500042</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jarvis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00250,</td>
<td>24/09/2015</td>
<td>Jackson, John, Josie, Hudson</td>
<td>16:38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500043</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00252,</td>
<td>29/09/2015</td>
<td>Rose, Jessica, Olinda, Sophia, Chloe</td>
<td>6:03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500045</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00254,</td>
<td>29/09/2015</td>
<td>Hudson, John, Jason, Chris, Jackson, Louis</td>
<td>20:02 (16:34 audio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500046</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00298;</td>
<td>19/11/2015</td>
<td>Leo, Sophia, Ethan, Scarlett</td>
<td>12:07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500064</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4: Additional group conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>File number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Time mins:secs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M2U00216</td>
<td>20/08/2015</td>
<td>Jackson, Braxton, Nathan, Hudson, Kyle</td>
<td>06:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00218</td>
<td>20/08/2015</td>
<td>Chloe, Olinda, Hannah, Dana</td>
<td>18:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00246</td>
<td>17/09/2015</td>
<td>John, Braxton, Nathan, Hudson</td>
<td>04:41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00247</td>
<td>17/09/2015</td>
<td>Chloe, Olinda, Sophia, Rashmi, Molly, Scarlett, Rose (Dana watches)</td>
<td>17:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00248</td>
<td>17/09/2015</td>
<td>Elsa, Indie, Hannah</td>
<td>11:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM_9967</td>
<td>24/09/2015</td>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>04:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00251/</td>
<td>29/09/2015</td>
<td>Sophia, Jessica</td>
<td>10:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500044</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00279,</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>Ethan, Leo</td>
<td>21:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio DS500047</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>File number</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Time mins:secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00280, audio DS500048</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>John, Louis, Rose, Sienna, Elle</td>
<td>08:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00281, audio DS500049</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>07:27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00282, audio DS500050</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>Jessica, Sophia, Olinda</td>
<td>10:43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00283, audio DS500051</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>09:38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00284, audio DS500052</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>Sophia, Chloe, Jessica, Elsa</td>
<td>11:29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00285, audio DS500053</td>
<td>27/10/2015</td>
<td>Sophia, Chloe, Jessica, Elsa</td>
<td>12:31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00286, audio DS500055</td>
<td>05/11/2015</td>
<td>Sophia, Scarlett</td>
<td>18:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00287, audio DS500056</td>
<td>05/11/2015</td>
<td>Hudson, Jackson, Braxton</td>
<td>09:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00288, audio DS500058</td>
<td>05/11/2015</td>
<td>Leo, Sienna, Chloe, Ethan, later only Leo &amp; Ethan, later with Bill</td>
<td>19:10 but the chat actually finished after 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00290, audio DS500060</td>
<td>05/11/2015</td>
<td>Elsa, Indie, Hannah</td>
<td>04:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DS500059 (only audio)</td>
<td>05/11/2015</td>
<td>Hudson, John, Jackson, Nathan, Braxton</td>
<td>07:56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00288, audio DS500057</td>
<td>05/11/2015</td>
<td>Scarlett, Molly, Chloe, Sophia</td>
<td>06:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DS500061</td>
<td>12/11/2015</td>
<td>Louis, Ethan</td>
<td>14:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2U00296, audio DS500062</td>
<td>12/11/2015</td>
<td>Ethan, Leo</td>
<td>04:40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.6 Data analysis

Constructivist grounded theory led data generation and analysis in this study. At the beginning of the data generation phase, I looked for starting points for analysis that would also inform further data generation.
Codes and categories for analysis were constructed from the data (Charmaz, 2006). In the following section, I outline the data set, rules for transcribing data material, the data analysis process following Charmaz’s model for constructivist grounded theory, and the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis.

3.6.1 Data set

The approach to data analysis was inductive and emergent. The transcripts of the recorded group conversations entailed data from the verbal accounts but also included descriptions of nonverbal performances from the children. This reflected my positioning of children rights holders, as outlined in Article 12 of the convention:

Implementation of Article 12 requires recognition of and respect for nonverbal forms of communication such as play, body language, facial expression, or drawing and painting, through which very young children make choices, express preferences and demonstrate understanding of their environment. (Lansdown, 2010, p. 12)

Field notes functioned as background information (Edwards, 2008); as did conversations I had with the children throughout the data generation phase. These often occurred spontaneously in daily interactions. However, the field notes were only used to support what children had shared in the group conversations; they did not stand alone for interpretation. It was crucial to explore children’s perspectives and not my perspectives of children’s play.

In this study, children’s own expressions of their perspectives were foregrounded; they were the most important source for data. Researcher interpretive efforts are inevitable in qualitative data generation and analysis. Thornberg et al. (2015) reflected that adult researchers are challenged in collecting data from children, and hence continuously need to reflect on any impact of the adult frame they bring to the interpretation. One way to approach this challenge is to see all data as meaningful: “even in situations in which we feel that we do not seem to get ‘meaningful data’” (Thornberg et al., 2015, p. 413). Hence, I took the complete recorded conversations as data and transcribed the whole group conversations, including what children did and said. In the data analysis process, I had those ‘aha’ effects that
3.6.2 Rules for transcribing data material

I transcribed all video-recorded group conversations. The video- and audio-records enabled me to go back to the conversations, listen to what had been said, and view again what had happened. However, as visual and audio records can identify participants, I decided to work with transcripts in order to protect the identity of the participants, while at the same time providing original ‘records’ of interactions. The transcriptions followed guidelines that have been adapted from conventions used in basic conversational analysis (Selting et al., 2009). However, the transcripts also documented verbal and nonverbal accounts that were of interest for this study.

The conversations were transcribed verbatim, and only changed minimally using grammatical and spelling conventions to make the transcripts clearer. However, the punctuation did not completely reflect grammar conventions, but rather reflected how children produced their verbal accounts. Conversational analysis guidelines were used in an adapted version to ensure appropriate representation of what was said and what happened in the conversations (Selting et al., 2009). Actions included descriptions about who was talking to whom, what the participant showed using gestures, or what participants contributed to the conversation through actions and performances. Table 5 shows the adopted transcription rules.

Table 5: Transcription rules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is transcribed</th>
<th>How it is transcribed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational descriptions</td>
<td>((                    ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate response of a conversation partner</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elongation of vocal</td>
<td>:: for example sa::w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of laughing</td>
<td>((laughs))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitch of voice drops</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitch of voice rises</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitch of voice rises mediate</td>
<td>,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintelligible passage of record</td>
<td>( (       )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of transcript</td>
<td>(… )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6.3 Constructivist grounded theory data analysis

The analytic journey of this study followed the suggested two-phase grounded theory technique which comprises an initial coding phase and a subsequent focused coding phase. In grounded theory, coding is highly important as it “shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45). The qualitative coding processes define the data by separating, sorting, and labelling. To start with, data were separated into segments and received labels. This process did not only take verbal expressions into account – it also included the participants’ actions during conversations. Therefore, verbal and non-verbal accounts were considered as data. In the initial coding phase, I chose line-by-line coding to segment the data. Each line was coded with labels which provided a summary of the segment but also gave an initial idea of a category for “analytic interpretations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). The line-by-line initial coding encouraged me to see everything as data and to stay open to any recurring topics (Charmaz, 2006). Data were read closely to build familiarity. Codes were chosen to stay very close to the data, even as close as using direct participants’ quotes, coding “in vivo” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). During initial coding, I explored each segment for actions, to deploy emerging categories. Actions as codes discouraged starting conceptualisation too quickly, before an analytical framework was developed. The use of gerunds, as suggested by Charmaz (2006) was helpful in creating action-grounded codes.

The initial codes were treated as provisional. During the process of coding, codes could be revised to fit with the data. As well, initial codes set areas for further exploration during the later data generation. The initial codes became more defined throughout the coding process and transformed into analytic, or more theoretical, categories on a more abstract level. As the coding process progressed, data were segmented and looked at on an incident-to-incident level, instead of line-by-line. I targeted data again to compare new emerging codes with data that I had already coded. Single words, lines, or passages could construct a code. Coding longer segments allowed interactions between the group conversation participants, such as completing each other’s stories, to be taken into account. Throughout grounded theory coding, constant comparative methods supported analytical
comparisons to find similarities and differences. Statements or sequences were compared within one group conversation, and in different group conversations. Sequential comparisons brought insight to “events at different times and places” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54). Ethan’s exploration of the theme ‘ninja’ which had dominated his play from the beginning of the first research visits and through his engagement in the group conversations provides an example of initial coding of a transcribed conversation (Table 6).

**Table 6: Initial coding example 'Ninja'**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial codes</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying ninja moves</td>
<td>Ethan: That’s the ninja moves. ((Chloe laughs))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitating ninja actions from video</td>
<td>(( Ethan gets up and imitates the moves he shows in the video))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroying the bad guys</td>
<td>Ethan: I was destroying the bad guys ((looking to Chloe who looks at him)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing the ninja job</td>
<td>Ethan: And that’s me doing the ninja job. ((points to another spot on the screen, then turns towards me)) Can you see: the real ninja moves I was about to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotting himself in the video</td>
<td>(...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking me for agreement, doing the real ninja moves</td>
<td>Ethan: We were uhm, we were. We were actually playing. Different ninja, not fighting ((he starts rocking on his chair)), not punching, not destroying anything. Just being nice ninjas and not destroying anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing different ninjas [different to what?], not fighting, not punching, not destroying, being nice ninjas, not destroying</td>
<td><em>(Transcript M212, 18/08/2015)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using this example, statements within the same group conversation were compared. Ethan constantly brought up a ninja theme. On a line-by-line initial coding, similar statements are made: Ethan identified his actions in the video as ninja moves and imitated them. He distinguished between doing the ninja job and doing the real ninja moves. Later, he reported about playing ninjas. In later group conversations, the ninjas theme seemed to have disappeared. Looking back at the earlier conversations, Ethan combined the ninja theme with a ‘good versus bad’ theme when using a
more incident-to-incident coding. In the first incident, he did not only identify the ninja moves. Ethan played a ninja who destroyed the bad guys. But later, in contrast, Ethan highlighted that he and his peers were playing different ninjas. First, it seemed unclear why and to what these ninjas were different. From following his further explanation, that they played nice ninjas, Ethan distinguished them from ninjas who destroy. These ninjas do not fight, punch and destroy things, but instead are nice ninjas. In later conversations, his play descriptions are also linked to the themes such as nice and not punching or hurting anyone.

The ninja theme reoccurred in other conversations with other participants, but with less interest than Ethan had shown in the presented example. However, different children displayed enthusiasm about characters from several television programs or movies. As data were constantly compared in an ongoing process, play that was influenced by contemporary children’s television programs was followed up for data analysis. The other theme that caught my attention was based on Ethan’s comments on being a nice ninja who are not punching and let me to compare it with other data. For example, Ethan and Leo reported on two games they had invented. Their demonstration of the rules for these games indicated a link to Ethan’s different, nice ninja play: no pushing and no hurting anyone were the rules, as the following two examples ‘Don’t push other people while you’re jumping’ and ‘Don’t punch my head when I’m on my motorbike’ demonstrate.

**Example: ‘Don’t push other people while you’re jumping’**

*I:*  Can you tell me a bit more about the belly flop? Are there rules doing the belly flop?
*Ethan:* We weren’t allowed to uhm push.
*I:*  Yeah, not to push whom?
*Ethan:* To push the people without jumping.
*I:*  Don’t push other people while you’re jumping?
*Ethan:* Yeah, if someone’s in the way then you’ll hurt them when you jump. My shoes are actually really strong. They’re tough, they crack heads open in the thigh.

(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)
Example: ‘Don’t punch my head when I’m on the motorbike’

I: Ok boys while you keep watching the video I would like to ask you a little bit more. So what is important for you when you’re playing?

Ethan: It means don’t hurt any. Don’t crush into someone when you’re on your pooping motorbike.

Leo: Running into poopy motorbike.

((They laugh))

Ethan: O::r?

(...)

I: What would interrupt your play?

Ethan: Chris was interrupting me. That donkey bastard.

Leo: And also no punching and hurting. When I’m on the motorbike. Don’t punch my head when I’m on the motorbike.

(Transcript M296, 12/11/2015)

In another group discussion with different children, Hudson reported a self-invented game that he and his peer had played. The rule of this game was “whenever there is people we can’t jump over there.” (Transcript M287, 05/11/2015). The rules of Hudson and Ethan’s games might have had a similar original thought: to protect other children from harm. Maybe the rule was that no one would jump on another child? In Hudson’s case, he also named the source of the rule. The educator had told them. In reference to another game, Hudson was talking about in that conversation, he said: “And then we don’t have rules in the other one.” The question arose as to whether specific rules controlled children’s play, and whether these rules had been established by the educators. As a result of reviewing this data, I was promoted to ask if Ethan and Leo’s rules were framed by themselves or by the educators. And was Ethan emphasising that he played different, nice ninjas, because the educators had banned playing ninjas after the players had punched each other, and even had hurt someone? I used memos for grasping such emerging themes, such as ninjas, ‘no hurting’ rules, self-invented rules, rules by educators, for further analysis.

The initial coding phase was followed by focused coding to explore the most prominent categories. A more theoretical approach to data was developed during focused coding, and codes that seemed strong codes were
selected for conceptual exploration. Codes from the initial open coding were grouped together in this phase. Clustering codes, I based the strength of a code on how often it re-occurred, and how substantial the code was in making sense out of the whole data set. Focused coding often required me to go back and forth in the data to investigate whether codes were analytically strong. The reflections on children’s television-influenced play and rules of games are good examples of the non-linear process that was required for the investigation of which codes would be used to categorize all data, and emphasised that “coding is an emergent process” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 59) where one code can call attention to another. For example, the initial code ‘playing different ninjas’ from Ethan’s story contributed to create the category ‘enacting a role’ in comparison with other coded data where other children explored similar stories. The focused coding links the analytical interpretations with the data, producing and refining abstract concepts or categories. A coding framework (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011) was developed and applied to lift codes to conceptual categories (see Appendix I). While the framework helped to identify clear names and properties that describe the categories, it also formed the basis for the emerging themes and theoretical concepts.

Axial coding is also suggested to illuminate categories and their properties and their relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding requires a frame for analysis that could potentially limit and restrict the construction of codes. Therefore, Charmaz (2006) provides an alternative process for highlighting links between categories. A less explicit analytical construction is built on developing subcategories of the categories and reflecting the links between them (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, I developed subcategories to make sense of categories. For example, analysis indicated that play is influenced by rules, and sub-categories further explored the educators’ roles in facilitating or restricting play through these rules (see Appendix I). Overall, the coding within this constructivist grounded theory framework brought insight into the theoretical meaning of the data.

In Chapter Four and Five, findings present the themes that emerged from data analysis. The phenomenon of play was conceptualised from
children’s perspectives with the aim of creating new theoretical understandings. Chapter Four outlines the diversity of the ways children indicated play; different influences on play; children’s motivation to play; and a range of play processes (pretending; exclusion and inclusion; learning in play); as well as children and educators as rulers of play. Chapter Five deals with the themes that emerged from the data that were relevant for exploring children’s choices and research participation. Again, the coding guided the analysis and presentation of the resulting themes, covering children’s strategies of consent and dissent; their awareness and reflections of participation rights, and participation processes.

Chapter Six can be understood as the presentation of the final analysis. Here, the results of Chapter Four and Five are synthesized and relate back to the research questions and existing literature. The knowledge from the literature review had special importance for answering research question five. My departure point, but also structural tool to interpret the data was Palaiologou’s (2014) ‘notion of ethical spaces’. I identified three spaces: the physical, the social-emotional, and the creative space. Further, the children had initiated processes of consenting and dissenting in this study which I interpreted into three concepts – agency, privacy and relationships. While this analytical lens had a deductive nature, analysis was still in line with constructivist grounded theory methods, as interpretation was based on both data and on pre-existing knowledge (Charmaz & Bryant, 2007).

3.6.4 Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used to assist in the organisation and conduct of the data analysis. The NVivo 10 software of QSR International Pty Ltd. (2012) was used, once initial coding was undertaken. Line-by-line initial coding was completed manually using the transcripts of the group conversations. Coding each line produced a large number of codes that were treated provisionally. Entering focused coding, where larger units of data were coded, and when codes became refined and more stable, data analysis was managed with the CAQDAS. The software simplified the searching for and sorting of codes and the management of categorization. NVivo enabled me to list categories,
to have an overview of, and to link sources and references to, each category. With the direct linkage to sources and references, all referred data could be viewed for re-reading, re-analysing and refining of codes. Utilizing the software had the advantage of being easily able to re-name a category, as the changed name was directly applied to all examples of data under this category. Easy management of data through the software helped me to focus on analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

3.7 Summary

This chapter has outlined the theoretical anchorage of this interpretive study in sociocultural approaches to play and Childhood Studies, acknowledging children’s competencies, their expertise, rights and agency. This theoretical anchor lead to choosing a social-constructivist lens to the qualitative study where knowledge is understood as co-constructed in social interactions within a particular time and location. The ambition of knowledge co-construction with young children afforded me to put emphasis on the research relationship between the participating children and myself, and the principle of ethical symmetry guided the ethical considerations I made for the conduct of this study, and thinking of the methodology and the ethics as a union.

In this chapter I presented the constructivist grounded theory research design and its implications for data generation and data analysis. I discussed validity and reliability within the scope of this study. To generate data with the 17 participating 4-year-old children, I video-recorded them during their classroom activities, and used selected records (play-videos) to stimulate group conversations with the children about their play experiences, which were also audio- and video-recorded to capture what children verbally and non-verbally shared during the conversations. For the analysis, I described in detail how the data set came together, the transcription, analytical and computer-assisted management process of the data. The generated rich data of this study is presented in the following two chapters.
Chapter Four: Children’s Perspectives of Play

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents interpretations of the data based on the participating children shared about their perspectives of play. The themes that I address in this chapter emerged from the data through an active coding process, which has been detailed in Chapter Three. What children perceived as play and what understandings they held about play varied. While there were similarities among the children’s perceptions of play, there were also differences. Thus, children’s perspectives of play cannot be presented as a unified whole that holds for all children. Rather, their ideas and understandings were diverse, offering a range of insights and perspectives, based on their different interests, experiences and thinking. The children shared their ideas and understandings, which produced conversations around multiple perspectives of play and processes that occurred in their play.

The first section of this chapter presents the diverse ways children discussed their play experiences: the children’s play indicators were linked to the use of the word ‘play’ in their elaborations which provided departure points for me about what indicated play for the children. Apart from using the word ‘play’, the children indicated play through describing their rule-governed actions, and their pretending indicated play. Following this section, the chapter illuminates further why I interpreted children’s perspectives of play as diverse. The children reported on different play influences, such as the ECEC context, their home environments, and contemporary popular culture; a range of motivational factors that led to play; and diverse emotional play experiences. In addition, the children’s discussions showed that they merged different forms of play, such as pretend and construction play, and mixed traditional games, such as a game with a ‘first wins’ rule, with contemporary forms of play, for example playing with digital technology. In sum, the first four sections with their sub-sections explore the diversity within children’s shared perspectives of play. This is followed by four sections with their sub-sections on play processes.
Further, the children discussed a range of processes that occurred within their play. Play processes included ‘pretending’; ‘inventing and following games and rules’; ‘preparing play props’; ‘excluding or including peers’; and ‘learning in play’. Some processes were illuminated by all children, while other processes were discussed only by some participants. The extent of these processes also varied. The process of preparing play props, as well as inventing and following games and rules were linked to pretending, which was the most prominent play process. Pretending was elaborated by all children, and can be separated into three pretend forms: enacting a role; giving objects new meaning; and imagining non-existing things to exist. One play episode could include all three forms. In presenting the three forms, I explore pretending as a shared process that contributes to the creation of communities of co-players.

Following the extensive elaboration of pretending, two further processes are presented: the exclusion and inclusion of peers; and learning in play. Discussion of learning in play provoked different reactions in the children; some thought they did not learn anything in play, whereas others identified what they learned in play, and some children remained silent about this aspect. Data included children’s verbal and nonverbal contributions to this topic; their actions highlighted the role of peers in children’s learning.

The chapter finishes with the question: Who rules children’s play? The data had provoked me to ask this question, as children illuminated that they invented rules and created regulations through the content of their play, but that they also felt regulated by educators’ rules around play space, time for play, and tolerated play behaviour. This section highlights contrasting roles the children attributed to their educators, as well as how children emphasized inventing and following their own rules, and how they felt about and reacted to educator regulations.

4.2 The diversity of the ways children indicated play

The children who participated in this study demonstrated a range of ideas and understandings about their play, and presented these in different ways. When the children commented on their play-videos, they spoke about
their play in three ways. These three ways helped me to understand what indicated play for the children. Firstly, children signalled very clearly that what they were discussing was play, as they used the term ‘play’ in their reports. I took these statements where children used ‘play’ in their sentences to look for indicators of play. These indicators are presented in the first sub-section, and include for example ‘playing a game’, and ‘playing a role within a theme’. Secondly, children focused on talking about their actions: they were not necessarily explicit in their use of the term play, rather they reported about actions that were governed by rules. Rule-governed actions were linked to the play process ‘inventing and following rules’ which I understood occurred in playing a game. Thirdly, children discussed ‘pretending’ which I interpreted as a play process. Again, the children did not always mention the word ‘play’. However, they elaborated pretending when they reflected playing a role within a theme.

For the children in this study, play can be indicated differently: playing a role within a theme, playing with peers, playing with material, playing a game, and playing in a location were all signalled through using the term ‘play’. In addition, I identified play processes – where the term play was not used explicitly, but where the children presented pretending and rule-governed actions when they invented or followed rules as indicators for play.

4.2.1 Play indicators linked to the word ‘play’

This sub-section presents results derived from children’s accounts where they used the word ‘play’. When children used the word during our group conversations, this offered me first insights into which activities the children identified as play. In the group conversations, I provided the children’s recorded activities (play-videos) as stimuli to invite them to tell me about their play. To start a conversation, I posed very open questions, such as “Would you like to tell me what you were doing?” I tried to avoid using the word ‘play’ first, and only after the children had mentioned that they were playing I referred to their activities as play. From these prompts, the children identified a range of their activities as play, and they applied various indicators for identifying play, notably:
• playing out a role within a theme;
• the involvement of play partners;
• the usage of play material;
• playing a game; and
• particular locations that were specified as play spaces.

Table 7: Children indicate play using the word 'play'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play indicator</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Numbers of children utilising indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing out a role within a theme</td>
<td>we were playing sisters and mum (Sienna)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play partners</td>
<td>I was playing with John in this (Jackson)</td>
<td>Playing with a peer:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We were playing: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play material</td>
<td>Playing with the play dough (Elsa)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing a game</td>
<td>Snakes and ladders (Sophia)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play spaces</td>
<td>Home corner play (Chloe).</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of comments that reflect these indicators are reported in Table 7. In these examples, children acknowledged play and utilised the word ‘play’ in their descriptions. Fourteen of the 17 children participating in the group conversations linked play with playing a role within a theme. Three children explicitly mentioned playing with a peer, naming a play partner. A further eight children indicated involvement with others, but did not name a partner. ‘We were playing’ indicated that others were involved. Two children reported playing with a range of specific material or toys. Playing a game was mentioned by four children. While only one of them referred to a board game, all four discussed self-invented games. Five children acknowledged the location (play spaces) of their play. Three children never utilised the word ‘play’, but participated also the least or remained silent for most of their time during the conversations. Those examples, where children used the word ‘play’ were a departure point for me to gain insight into which activities children identified as play, and what from the children’s perspectives, frames play.
There were times when children did not use the word play, but did refer to the same or similar experiences as in those incidents when they mentioned ‘play’ (see Table 7). From these comments, I interpreted further indicators for play which are presented in the next two sections.

4.2.2 Rule-governed actions indicate play

Apart from the word utilisation, the children signalled play in other ways: they described play actions that included the act of making, as well as physical actions. When the children talked about these actions, they often mentioned a set of rules that governed the actions, or they provided insight into the rules through their concrete actions during the conversations. In the following example, Hudson described his and his play partner’s actions first. Then he stopped and labelled their activity:

Hudson: And then we put that thing back up there. ((pointing to screen)) And then we knock it down. ((straightening his arm)) Off the ramp. And then the two cars go. ((gliding one hand along his other arm until both hands touch each other)) One knocks it over, the first wins. That was the game we were playing.
(Transcript M287, 05/11/2015)

As Hudson’s example shows, elaboration of just one play experience can be quite complex. Hudson moved from describing actions, to explaining underlying rules, to labelling the activity. Not every time, Hudson labelled his activities as play. Other times, he focused solely on describing his play actions. In another example, Ethan and Hudson discussed what Hudson was playing with Nathan. Hudson used descriptions and referred to play processes without adding a label, but he described his actions of “making a ramp now” (Transcript M212, 18/08/2015). Ethan showed interest in the activity and made alternative suggestions to Hudson. Hudson then provided more details about why he did what he did. However, he never used the word play. In the example above, however, he used the indicator ‘playing a game’, and presented a play process which I interpreted as ‘inventing and following rules’. The same process matched with Hudson’s descriptions of his activity, as he explained these to Ethan.
Playing a game with rules was also discussed by Ethan and Leo. They started by explaining a skid game that included a series of movements which they demonstrated simultaneously with their verbal descriptions. The series started with running and ended with skidding on a blue mat. In further conversation, the boys came up with more rules that were part of their “double skid game” as Leo named it (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015). It seemed that the rules had been applied tacitly in their play, but had only been formed into agreed rules during the conversation. This situation with Ethan and Leo added to the understanding of the play process ‘inventing and following rules’: rules are used to frame play; they are applied after being discussed or in unspoken agreement; or the children co-construct rules while interacting.

The unspoken nature of inventing a game and following its rules was also evident during a conversation with Sophia, Scarlett and Rose who began to engage with my equipment. The research activity of watching their video-recorded play turned into an opportunity for playing a self-invented ‘computer game’. The game included tapping the finger on the touch-pad of the laptop with the aim to pause the play-video that we were watching. At some point, Sophia and Rose, both held one of their fingers above the touchpad, while one of the girls counted. I did not realise immediately, that the girls had just non-verbally agreed on a game:

*Scarlett: And we know this but Sophia won before.*
*I: Sophia had won before?*
*Scarlett: But I won next.*

((All three girls touch the touch pad to move the cursor and press the play button.))
*I: Oh, you mean pressing the button?*  
(Transcript M247, 17/09/2015)

The girls competed to see who managed to pause the video first. At some point, Rose complained that she had only two turns whereas Sophia had already had several turns. Clearly, the girls had silently agreed on some rules for the game: whoever tapped first and managed to pause or play the video was the winner; and players had to take turns equally. Inventing and following rules, spontaneously or planned, had been demonstrated by the children several times in this study. In this conversation, the girls did not
explain any rules. Rather, their actions provided insight into the use of rules in their games. At the same time, the girls had demonstrated a mixing of traditional play with innovative play, using known rules such as ‘first wins’, and applied these to a self-designed game which arose from the new context: playing with the laptop.

Games and rules are not always invented by the children. Apart from playing games with self-invented rules, children also played known games, for example board games, and followed a set of externally predefined rules. Only one of the participating children described playing board games with set rules. Sophia provided her knowledge of the rules of the game Snakes and ladders in detail. She knew them “because the teachers told us before we play” (Transcript M247, 17/09/2015). As this shows, there are differences in play processes around games: rules are created or applied, they are used independently under children’s own terms, or depend on someone else, and they can be followed, ignored, or manipulated. While most of the children’s elaborations dealt with self-invented games, Sophia had added that they played games with set rules, and that the educator had provided assistance in explaining those rules. The strategies children used in response to educator-emphasised rules in the children’s self-initiated play are presented in the final section of this chapter: Who rules the play?

4.2.3 Pretending indicates play

The third way the children illuminated their ideas about what was part of their play was to talk about pretending, and also to pretend directly during a conversation. Pretending was the most discussed play process: all of the participating children related to pretending when they viewed their play experiences. Pretending was presented by the children as a process of imagination that influenced the play. Imagination enabled the players to move beyond the actual situation of being a child in an ECEC setting with particular space and material at hand. Instead, they pretended to be realistic characters, such as a mother (Olinda in Transcript M282, 27/10/2015), or unrealistic ones, for example a ninja (Ethan in Transcript M212, 18/08/2015). They pretended to travel in a pirate ship (Hudson in Transcript M246, 17/09/2015), or to have cupcakes for a party (Elsa in Transcript M209, 11/08/2015). One influence on pretend play was contemporary
popular culture, with the children pretending to be, for example, characters from television programs (Braxton in Transcript M216, 20/08/2015), or using provided play material to represent merchandized products (Hudson in Transcript M254, 29/09/2015). However, the presence of pretence and the ways this was used and articulated by the children varied.

Different aspects of play were part of the process of pretending: children pretended to be a character when enacting a role; pretence was enacted by offering new meanings to objects; children used pretence to generate things and actions that did not really exist; and children used words such as “pretend, not real” to identify and label the pretend aspects of their play. For example, Chloe’s elaboration included naming the pretence, acting as someone else (a baby), and imagining non-existing people (mum and dad):

Chloe: I took my shoes and jumper off because I was pretending to be the baby in the corner, and to be naughty and cheeky, so I did that and then I needed to run away.
I: So you tried to be, what did you say naughty and cheeky in that game?
Chloe: Yeah, and I needed to run away ((smiles at me)) ((giggles)).
I: Aha. Run away from who?
Chloe: From my mum and dad.
I: Who was your mum and dad?
Chloe: Oh, it’s not real, it’s pretend.
(Transcript SAM_9967, 24/09/2015)

The way children talked about the pretend aspects of their play in the conversations with me varied. Some participants literally slipped into the roles and performed during conversations about pretending:

Jackson: And John. And you were Mr. Tod. Weren’t you?
John: Like this uahh.
Hudson: And you also ((changing his voice)) I want you for dinner.
(Transcript DS500059, 05/11/2015)

The boys had watched a play-video where John had pretended to be Mr. Tod. John’s review of his play resulted in another ‘Mr. Tod’ performance,
making scary sounds. Although Hudson had not played this role during their joined play, he also performed as Mr. Tod during the conversation. His performance included a change of the pitch of his voice, lowering it while saying a sentence that gave information about the content of the role. It seemed the children were closely connected to their pretend world. They instantly slipped into the roles while they were reminded of their play by watching the video-sequence. In this way, the children gave information about their pretend content, and showed me the performance of pretending. Pretending, for example, was performed by changing the voice and making sounds accordingly to the played role.

While the children elucidated forms of pretending, they also demonstrated their awareness of the pretend world.

_Elsa: And we were cutting our bellies to get the baby out. ((giggles))_  
_I: You cut the baby out?_  
_Elsa: Hmm._  
_I: Where was the baby?_  
_Jessica: In Sophia’s –_  
_Elsa: belly._  
_Chloe: Sometimes –_  
_I: Inside of Sophia._  
_Chloe: Sometimes you can just pretend to have a baby._  
_(Transcript M284, 27/10/2015)_

Chloe pointed out explicitly that they had just pretended. The act of explaining to me that it was just pretend indicates that Chloe was aware that I was not in the play frame, and needed assistance. Chloe stepped out of the pretend world by explicating the pretend aspects of their play. The words “just pretend” were a clear sign of her awareness of what was real, and what was pretend, and that a person outside of the play would have difficulties to understand the pretend aspects of the play. Other children had also clarified to me that they were pretending. Jessica commented that she had not used “an actual needle” (Transcript M285, 27/10/2015) while playing doctors; and Jackson highlighted that he was “pretending to steal some money from you guys” (Transcript M216, 20/08/2015). I also pretended in a conversation, and responded as if I thought that John as Mr. Tod really wanted to eat the other boys, and asked if that was the case. Hudson assured
me, that it was “not real. Yes, just pretend.” (Transcript M216, 20/08/2015). Pretending is discussed in more detail later in this chapter to provide deeper insight into the process of children’s play that was most prominent in their conversations.

Diversity was not only apparent in the ways children talked about their play and in their indicators of play, but children’s perspectives of play showed that there are:

- different play influences, namely the home, the ECEC context, and contemporary popular culture;
- differences in girls’ and boys’ play themes;
- diversity in children’s motivation to play; and
- emotional differences in play.

The following sections elaborate each of the listed aspects above.

4.3 Different play influences: The home, the ECEC context, and contemporary popular culture

Children’s perspectives of play were influenced by the various contexts – including the social contexts – in which they were playing. Influences derived from the home context, the ECEC context, and contemporary popular culture. However, only three children mentioned their homes, while most of the children made links to the context of the kindergarten classroom (see Table 8), and references to contemporary popular culture were made by the majority of children (see Table 9). For the home and ECEC contexts, children drew on particular aspects, such as the children and adults who interacted with them, and the rules that governed these interactions. Table 8 provides a summary of these influences, noting references to siblings, classroom peers, parents and educators, and indicating the past experiences that stimulated these play themes.

In both contexts, home and ECEC setting, other children stimulated children’s play. As shown in Table 8, only one child referred to his sibling, while four children mentioned their classroom peers. Hudson explained that his brother contributed to his play ideas (Transcript M287, 05/11/2015),
while, in another example, four children identified their kindergarten peers as the ‘initiators’ behind particular play activities:

I: Did you invent this game?
Ethan ((nods and smiles)): We made it up.
I: You made it up.
Leo: Yeah. Ah Ethan made it up.
I: Ethan made it up? But you shared it with Leo.
Ethan: Yeah. So me and Leo are the bosses.
I: Ah ok.
Ethan: Of the game.
(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)

Apart from other children, adults in the children’s lives, within the home and the ECEC contexts, were highlighted as contributing to their play. Sophia and Elsa mentioned their fathers (Transcript M209, 11/08/2015), while eight children talked about the educators having an impact on play.

Past experiences sometimes created the play context (see Table 8). Children remembered what they experienced and used that to create their play theme. For example, playing doctors was stimulated through the visit of the ambulance to the ECEC setting (Transcript M252, 29/09/2015), while a past family excursion to the circus provoked play content for Sophia:

Chloe: Sophia, why did you wanna make a story?
Sophia: Because there was a house and there was a tent. And then we saw each other at the circus and then we tried to make a circus. ‘cause like that, and then -
Chloe: That was a long time ago.
Sophia: Yeah.
(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

Sophia, Sienna and Chloe referred to past family excursions and contributed that family holidays had been a source for their ideas (Transcript M209, 11/08/2015). External prompts, like a past event, stimulated the children’s play. First, the event was experienced. Then, the memory of it created enough stimulus to form a play content. In other words, the children took an external event and then internalised it through play.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home context</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>ECEC context</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“‘cause I invent with my brother” (Hudson)</td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“it was Olinda’s idea” (Chloe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“My dad does Peppa pig moves” (Sophia)</td>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“Because the teachers told us” (Sophia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past events</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“From my holidays” (Sienna)</td>
<td>Past events</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“We saw that in the ambulance” (Olinda)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes that framed the play content varied, and originated from children’s life contexts, including the contemporary popular culture (see Table 9, section 4.3.1). Children’s play themes had realistic sources, such as playing family or enacting professions –including hairdressers, doctors, vets, and police. In contrast, other themes required the imagination of fantastic characters like ghosts, or originated from the contemporary popular culture. Participants mentioned characters from television programs, movies and merchandized play products that they used in their play, such as Ben 10™, OCTONAUTSTM, ninja turtles (from the TMNT movies, often just referred to as ‘ninjas’), Peppa Pig™, and Transformers™. The knowledge of those characters shaped the play content insofar that children pretended to be those characters, imagined having the characters’ equipment, and transferred the characters’ special powers from the media to the playing child. The latter was imagined by a child wearing a T-shirt that displayed the character Elsa from the Disney® movie ‘Frozen’:

_Elsa: Yes. Uhhm, when me and Elle were dancing, and Rashmi just stopped us. A ghost. And when we turned around, we iced her._
_I: You iced her. How did you do that, Elsa? _Elsa: ‘cause I had a shirt with Elsa on it._  
_(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)_
In this study, the boys reported more about play contents that were inspired by contemporary popular culture, than the girls did.

4.3.1 Differences in girls’ and boys’ play themes

In this group of children, contemporary popular culture seemed to have more impact on the boys’ play than the girls’. A few girls commented on such play, but these were quite brief mentions. Sophia, Sienna and Elsa talked about “Peppa Pig moves” in one of the first group conversations (Transcript M209, 11/08/2015), and Elsa’s play theme was based on the movie ‘Frozen’. She also imitated a popular singer while pretending a wooden pipe was her microphone (field notes, 03/09/2015). This adds singing performances and the influence of music videos to her play. Apart from these occurrences, it was mainly the boys who performed play themes derived from television programs and movies (see Table 9), which then resulted in a dominance of popular culture themed conversations. Their narrations included pretending to be characters such as Leonardo, the ninja turtle, and Barnacles, who is the boss of the Octonauts (John in transcript M246, 17/09/2015). Overall, Table 9 shows that girls mentioned pop-cultural influenced play six times, while 22 comments from boys were about play themes based on pop-culture.

Maybe the girls had not watched the programs that influenced boys’ play. Having watched them possibly had an impact whether a child engaged in the play theme. Without the knowledge of a particular television program, a child might not be able to follow a play plot easily, and what playing this theme entailed. However, the children re-interpreted themes that had a television original, and so those children who had never watched the program could probably still engage in the play. A child who does not know Transformers™ might have still been able to join when some boys used the Mobilo® construction material from the classroom to replace the actual merchandized Transformers™ product. But, potentially, it would have been hard for the child to follow the other children’s instructions because of special vocabulary required:

_Hudson: Mine can turn into a special ski-boat and that’s a different Optimus. ((changing his transformer into a different form)) (Transcript M254, 29/09/2015)_
Similarly, a child who has no knowledge of a hairdresser’s job might not understand a play partner acting as a hairdresser, but can observe their peers and copy actions to follow and engage in the play. In general, the girls discussed more play themes that were linked to the home context and professions, while the boys explored many themes originating from television and merchandized products. Knowing the television program might have sparked interest and encouraged playing it, while not knowing it might leave a child disinterested.

The numbers in the Table 9 record how many children mentioned those play themes; they do not represent the number of children who actually engaged in them. However, the table provides an overview of the differences in terms of the mentions of contemporary popular culture in boys’ play themes compared with those of the girls’ in this classroom, highlighting that more boys mentioned play themes that have been influenced by television and other media compared to the girls. The boys mentioned a range of such influenced themes (n=7), while the girls only mentioned three different media influenced play themes.

Table 9: Contemporary popular culture influences play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls’ play themes</th>
<th>Number of girls</th>
<th>Boys’ play themes</th>
<th>Number of boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Realistic life contexts (family, professions…) influenced play themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Police</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (mums, sisters, baby)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Family (mums, sisters, baby)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdressers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular culture (television, movies etc.) influenced play themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peppa Pig</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Peter Rabbit and Mr. Tod</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Superheroes (Spiderman, Batman)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music video</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Power Rangers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transformers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ben Ten</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Octonauts</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ninja Turtles</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4 Diversity in children’s motivation to play

A further contributor to children’s diverse perspectives of play derives from their motivation for play. The participating children identified diverse motivators:

- play is fun;
- the play theme and what it involves motivates;
- pretending to be a particular character is the motivation;
- to find out how things work;
- joining in with friends and other peers; and
- for the sake of play.

During the conversations, children were sometimes motivated to go back to playing what they had just watched in their play-videos. So, the reminder of play could be identified as well as play motivation. Table 10 lists the range of motivation factors, how many children mentioned each of them, and gives an example how children presented their play motivation. In summary, there were many factors that motivated children’s play.

Table 10: Diversity in children’s motivation to play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“the problem why we wanna play is to have fun” (Chloe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play theme</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“we like playing doctors” (Jessica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretending to be a character</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“I like to be Leonardo” (Hudson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and peers</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I like doing this because I like Scarlett” (Sophia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see how things work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Because we wanted to see how everything worked” (Rose)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just for the sake of play</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“I just wanted to” (Jessica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminder of play</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Ah I wanna do that again.” (John)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5 Emotional differences in play

Diversity in children’s play was also evident in children’s emotional experiences in play. Children can have a different view on their play, depending on which emotions are experienced. Two children responded that they felt “happy” or “good” when they played. During some conversations, the participating children started to play, and showed their enjoyment in play, for example through laughing was expressed by other children to highlight the relationships between the players.

((Sophia giggles holding her hand in front of her mouth))

((Rose smiles at Sophia.))
Rose: <laughing>: We did it at the same time.
(Transcript M247, 17/09/2015)

Rose and Sophia had touched the computer touchpad at the same time causing the video to be paused. For both girls, this was a moment of enjoyment. Rose’s expressions – verbally and non-verbally – presented her enjoyment of the shared action. Her comment highlighted that they had done it together and Rose looked smilingly to Sophia. Being the same or doing the same contributed to some of the children to feel happy in play. It seemed that sharing knowledge or synchronising their activities strengthened the relationship between the girls in this moment, as well as to experience positive emotions during play.

But not every play experience was positive. Emotions experienced in play and other activities children engage in can include sadness, anger, disappointment or boredom. And these feelings can arise for various reasons for different children; not sharing toys, being interrupted by peers or adults, exclusion and inclusion in play can all evoke a variety of emotions. Sadness resulted for Elsa for two different reasons. One time, she felt sad when a play prop was taken away from her by a peer:

I: Ok, what would you like to tell us about this moment?
Elsa: Uhm, Chris was trying to uhm ( ).
I: Oh, take that away from you [her pretend microphone]. How did you feel?
Elsa: Sad.
(Transcript M248, 17/09/2015)
Similar to Elsa’s experience where Chris took away her pretend microphone, Louis encountered a negative play experience where Bill did not want to share the toy cars with him. While he was telling about this experience, Louis crossed his arms as if he was still angry with Bill (Transcript M280, 27/10/2015).

Returning to the feelings that she experienced, Elsa expressed the same emotions in two distinct situations that she or other children might have perceived as play. Another time, sadness developed when Elsa disliked her activity:

I: Hmm. And is there something you don’t enjoy?
Elsa: Hmm? Doing making stuff.
I: You enjoy making stuff?
Elsa: No.
I: No, you don’t. What kind of stuff is that?
Elsa: I don’t enjoy making uhm stuff, craft.
I: Like crafting?
Elsa: Yeah. And like cooking stuff.
I: Hmm. Sometimes I see you at the craft table or like doing paintings or colourings and collageing. Is that something - how do you feel when you do that?
Elsa: Sad.
(Transcript M283, 27/10/2015)

The second incident could leave the impression that Elsa does not enjoy any sort of craft activity. However, before this conversation, she told me that she liked playing with the playdough and with the loom bands. Playing with the loom bands in particular could be categorized as craft, and it is based on ‘making stuff’. Rainbow Loom® advertises their product that is made of rubber and plastic bands to make bracelets and charms by weaving the bands following different design patterns. Elsa differentiated between the play activities she engaged in, as well as how she experienced them. Depending on the activity, craft could be an activity she enjoyed, as in the case of playing with loom bands, or one that made her feel sad. It remains unclear whether or not Elsa even perceived crafting activities she did not enjoy as play.

Two children can also experience one situation in opposite ways. Louis showed happiness when he watched and commented on a play-video
where he was recorded with John. With excitement, he announced that he was playing with John. He felt included and happy about that. However, from John’s position, this situation had a quite different interpretation. John was reserved and quiet while watching the scene. This behaviour was not typical for him. John contributed to other situations where he watched a play-video of himself. Instead of laughing and showing excitement, the corner of his mouth did not rise once. And slowly, he commented that Louis “just joined me”. John also showed no interest in discussing this play episode and declined the invitation to narrate:

*I: John, would you like to tell me a little bit about your play? ((John makes a sound)) Pardon?  
Louis: I had –  
I: It’s John’s turn, Louis.  
John: Louis can. ((very silent, pointing to Louis))  
(Transcript M280, 27/10/2015).

This example highlights that a situation can be experienced emotionally in different ways by different children. While Louis enjoyed his apparent inclusion, John experienced Louis’s joining in rather negatively.

The emotional attribution to an experience is strongly linked to the person’s position in the experience, including the ‘power’ aspects of this position. When Chloe asked Elsa why she wanted Rashmi to be the ghost, Elsa responded: “because she’s five and I’m five” (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015), creating an inclusive criterion of ‘age’ that could exclude others. This example indicates that inclusion and exclusion can happen at the same time – for different children. Exclusion also has two sides: the act of excluding a peer, and the state of being excluded by a peer.

Ethan and Leo’s reactions to watching a play-video illustrated another emotional attribute that impacts children, depending on their position in the play. The two boys laughed as they saw Jarvis breaking his pretend motorbike in the background of the video. They labelled the moment when Jarvis fell off his motorbike as “the funny part” (Transcript M296, 12/11/2015). They enjoyed it so much, that they requested to watch it again. Was this malicious joy? They laughed about a peer’s misfortune. Molly who was standing close by, observing Ethan and
Leo in their conversation, was invited by Ethan to watch. He was sure she would find it funny as well. Molly responded: “What's so funny?” The joy was not shared by her. Children’s perspectives of play can therefore vary in relation to their position in each experienced play, their involvement in the play, and the emotion attributed to a particular play situation.

4.6 Pretending is a shared play process

I identified a range of processes that occurred in children’s play from their elaborations: pretending; including and excluding peers; inventing and following games and rules; preparing play props; and learning in play. All child participants described various forms of pretending, reflecting three main forms of pretending:

1) enacting a role;
2) giving objects new meaning; and
3) imagining non-existing things to exit.

Four children engaged in all three pretend forms, while nine related to two forms, and only two children to one of them. Enacting a role was mentioned by fourteen children; twelve referred to purely imagined objects or events; and eight children named objects with a symbolic meaning. Some of the children’s discussions explored pretending in detail which showed that pretending could be linked with another process, for example preparing play props, or with inventing and following games and rules. Their discussions also indicated that the children used the three forms of pretending in flexible and dynamic ways. The children also engaged in pretend acts during the conversations which gave insight into how pretending contributed to children’s play. For example, when children acted as a character during the conversation, I could observe how the character ‘came to life’ through the child changing the voice or moving in accordance with the pretend character. For all three forms of pretending, the children often shared knowledge and created a community of co-players based on the shared pretence. Each pretend form is elaborated in more detail in the following discussion.
4.6.1 Enacting a role

The most common form of pretending incorporated the enactment of characters. Playing different characters was performed by the children throughout the field phase of the study which I could observe during my visits to the classroom. I was able to watch the children pretending to be characters such as ninjas, doctors, or ghosts. The enactment of a pretend role became obvious through the children’s actions or through their conversations when they were speaking in their character’s frame. It seemed as if children had a shared knowledge of how to act in the different roles. Children who entered the play identified the content of play and the included roles by observing the players’ actions, and by listening to what they said.

In their narrations, children referred to playing a role when they introduced the theme of their play, and continued to offer more insight into the aspect of enacting the role. However, it sometimes seemed as the children assumed a shared knowledge about the themes and characters involved, as they did not explain them and how to join the play. Rather, the children went straight into the elaboration of the process that accompanied playing a role. This process afforded opportunities for the children to imagine to be those characters. Often, they pretended to be those characters that they had played again in the group conversation. There were two ways of introducing the process of enacting a role: on the one hand to ‘play’ a character and, on the other hand, to ‘be’ the character. Table 11 shows some examples of how children talked about the character enactment in these two different ways. Two children who described the same play scenario used different expressions. For example, when John and Hudson both talked about “playing Octonauts” (Transcript M246, 17/09/2015), John referred to pretending that he “was playing” one of the Octonaut characters, while Hudson said he “was” one of them. To play or to be an Octonaut was used interchangeably by the boys. Sometimes, the same child used the first expression earlier in a conversation, and then the second later on (see Table 11).
Once it was established who played which character, this play process encompassed the knowledge of which actions were needed to fulfil the pretending of being the character. For example, as they watched a play-video, Sophia and Jessica presented the theme of their play. Then Sophia clarified which role she had played and which role Jessica had enacted, before finalising how Jessica’s role had led the actions of their play:

\[
I: \text{Would you like to tell me what you were doing?}
\]
\[
\text{Sophia and Jessica: We playing doctors. (looking at each other)}
\]
\[
\text{Sophia: And I was the baby, and she was the mum nurse.}
\]
\[
\text{And I was sick. And she had to check my whole body.}
\]
\[
I: \text{So she was checking your whole body. Cause she was the nurse. Jessica was the nurse.}
\]
\[
\text{Sophia: And also the mum.}
\]
\[
(\text{Transcript M251, 29/09/2015})
\]

Thus, the girls’ scenario of playing doctors included two roles; the sick person, and a nurse. The nurse’s job was to examine the sick person’s body. Sophia was very specific that Jessica played a mum nurse, not just a nurse. And in this scenario, the sick person was a baby, which might have supported the importance of having a mum there and not just a nurse. The doctor play theme kept re-occurring over a long period of time. When the girls talked about playing doctors and pretending, the topic of role casting stayed consistent. In a similar play theme, Olinda and Jessica both reported play about “getting sick” (Transcript M252, 29/09/2015), indicating who was pretending to be sick (Transcript M284, 27/10/2015).
Despite the consistency, special scenarios expanded the playing doctors theme. Elsa and Chloe elaborated when they “pretended to have a baby” (Transcript M284, 27/10/2015), and Elsa had pretended to administer the list of sick people.

Elsa: We were getting the phone numbers. And names.  
I: Oh you were getting the phone numbers and names.  
And what did you do with the phone numbers and the names?  
Elsa: We said who was – who was sick.  
I: Oh who was sick-  
Elsa: Well whose kid was sick and were there.  
I: Who did wanna know this?  
Elsa: One of my friends who was playing in the doctor area.  
(Transcript M283, 27/10/2015)

Pretending to be a character can be broadened the more the players develop their role acting; either through knowing what the role entails, or through creating and imagining new role content. Children’s pretending is linked to the expansion of children’s play content. In Elsa’s example, the knowledge of different staff roles in a hospital or doctor’s practice facilitated Elsa’s inclusion into the play, even though that play was happening in the doctor area, while Elsa played with a keyboard at one of the tables nearby. The play was enriched by a new introduced action: going to see Elsa, receiving information about sick people, and writing down the names of the sick people. As it progressed, playing doctors incorporated variations of enactments of characters.

Pretending also expanded with deeper role development. When Chloe pretended to be a “naughty and cheeky” baby (transcript SAM_9967, 24/09/2015), instead of a nice and well-behaved baby, she created a specific scenario where she could explore mischievous behaviour. The play content would have not been the same if she had decided on a different enactment of her role. When Chloe discussed her enactment of the naughty and cheeky baby (Transcript SAM_9967, 24/09/2015), not only was she showing an understanding of the act of pretending but she also clarified how pretending was to be translated into play. First, she named the role she was about to play: “I was pretending to be the baby”. Next, she highlighted her decisions
about what characteristics this role should include: naughty and cheeky. What she said next is important: “so I did that”. Playing this role, pretending to be a naughty and cheeky baby was realised by doing; by using actions that were coherent with the role; the play was made possible, and the role taking was developed further. This step of pretending afforded Chloe an idea about how the baby’s characteristics would be enacted, translated into actions. Running away from the parents was Chloe’s identified action of a naughty baby. She took on the imagined role.

Often, the boys’ pretend play themes originated from the contemporary pop culture. They used the stories from television programs or other media to structure their play. For example, the stories of Peter Rabbit and Mr. Tod, firstly published in Beatrix Potter’s children’s books (Potter, 1902; Potter & Dohm, 1918), and more recently adapted in an animated television show and aired on Australia’s ABC, informed play using the characters and the storyline: John was acting as Mr. Tod who, in the book and television program tries to catch Peter Rabbit in order to cook and eat him. The original idea was adapted by the boys to create a chasing game:

_Hudson:_ _John was Mr. Tod, and we were running away from him._

_Braxton ((walking towards me, jumping from one foot on the other and like catching something with his hands)): ‘cause we were Peter Rabbit._

_I: So, why did you run away from him?_  

_Hudson: Because he was trying to eat us._

_I: He tried to eat you?_  

((Hudson nodding and smiling))

_Braxton ((climbing on the table to sit there)): He was Mr. Tod._

(Transcript M216, 20/08/2015)

The boys’ explanations described the pretend as if it was a fact, such as Kyle’s later comment that John (as Mr. Tod) “cooked us in a pie”. Kyle, Hudson and Braxton displayed their knowledge of the Peter Rabbit story. Braxton seemed to take the knowledge about the relationship between Peter Rabbit and Mr. Tod for granted. To him, it was obvious why they had to run away from John who pretended to be Mr. Tod; because that is what Peter Rabbit did. In response to my wondering question, he simply repeated his
first comment that John was Mr. Tod, as if that explained everything. The way Braxton reacted to my questions about the boys’ explanations gave the impression that he took the Peter Rabbit story as common knowledge. For this group of boys, this might have been the case. All the boys had enjoyed the game, and some of them actively reported about it. Was it the shared knowledge about Peter Rabbit that made the game possible?

Pretending afforded the players opportunities to construct shared understandings of what was going on. The group of boys around Hudson and John often shared knowledge about the content of their play, as it originated from television programs. However, it is possible that they then shared this with their peers in order to create a play theme together. These boys seemed to be experts in their play contents that involved knowing the names of the characters, and their relationships: “Barnacles is the boss” as John explained (Transcript M246, 17/09/2015). This expert knowledge contributed to their play, and also to the conversations about the play. Conversations with Hudson, John and their co-players around the play themes Mr. Tod, Octonauts and others were lively. The boys participated very actively – often being physically active – and seemed to be very excited to share their knowledge.

*Hudson:* You know, John went down the hole, because I went down into my gup.
*I:* Where did you go?
*Hudson:* Into the pirate ship. ((rocking, holding hands on his knees, smiling, looking down))
*I:* The pirate ship.
*Braxton:* Me too::. ((jumping up, throwing his fists in the air)) hupphuppy.

((Hudson wants to say something too, but in this moment, John shouts something))

((Hudson stands up.))

*Hudson:* And I was a Kwazii and I was on the pirate ship gup. ((moving his shoulders up and down and then sits back again)) [gup must be a submarine ship from the Octonauts show on television, and Kwazii is one of the characters]

((Braxton and Nathan chat together.))
*John* ((stands up and throws his hands in the air))
<<sings>>: Say the Octonauts.
((Braxton hops up too, they sing something and hop and throw their hands up, both turning to Hudson.))
Hudson ((lifts one arm)) <<in a different voice>>: From the racer ((singing a song)).
((John lands his hand on the table and makes a beep sound, falls down.))
((Braxton laughs.))
Hudson ((jumps up, smiling)): Table alert. ((falls back on seat))
I: Table Alert? So, I heard Turbo, Octonauts.
John: And Mr. Tod!
((Braxton jumps around and let his hand land on the table several times))
I: Can you correct me? And Mr. Tod was there as well?
Hudson: Yes, yes.
(Transcript M246, 17/09/2015)

In this conversation, Braxton’s body was in movement, jumping, raising arms, while all the boys completed the elaboration of their play experiences. Hudson and John even synchronised their talk when listing all the Octonauts’ names, finding a common rhythm of speech. It even seemed as if they knew in which order their peer would list the names.

The shared knowledge of the television program ‘The Octonauts’ created a community of co-players with expert knowledge using special terms and names, as the boys had also demonstrated when talking about the transformer play. John’s singing would be meaningless for someone outside of this community, but all the present boys understood the meaning of the song. It became a cue to direct the discussion, turning the focus to the Octonauts theme. The shared knowledge allowed Braxton and Hudson to join in singing. John’s action of clapping his hand on the table while producing a beeping sound was another cue for action. Hudson identified it as typical action from the program and demonstrated that he had understood the cue with his “Table alert” comment.

The knowledge of the OCTONAUTS™ show had contributed to the formation of a community of co-players. However, for these boys, there were no boundaries, no strict rules about separate play themes. Although the Mr. Tod and OCTONAUTS™ stories originated from different shows and involved different characters and adventures, the boys mixed them, merging all the characters they liked. John and Hudson agreed that Mr. Tod could be part of their Octonauts play theme. The mixing of themes could potentially
contribute to the varied enactments of the characters. John’s Mr. Tod performance might have been influenced from other shows or media, and the fact that characters from those different sources could emerge in one play story allowed new interpretations for the different characters.

While, in the book and on television, Peter Rabbit is the main character, for the boys, this play was all about Mr. Tod. John’s and Hudson’s reactions to the recorded play indicated their emphasis on the Mr. Tod character: John came back several times requesting to watch the ‘Mr. Tod video’ again (Transcript M248, 17/09/2015), and when the group of boys asked another time and re-watched the video, Hudson invited John: “wanna go play Mr. Tod?” (Transcript DS500059, 05/11/2015). Sometimes the players stayed very close to the original storyline from the television program. Other times, their own re-interpretations were cultivated. John’s performances of Mr. Tod showed that he created his own Mr. Tod character instead of simply copying it: John walked robot-like when enacting Mr. Tod, while the television character is an elegantly dressed, swaggering fox. In addition, John’s and Braxton’s interpretation of Mr. Tod sounded like a monster, unlike to the television fox. The boys had copied but also transformed the original for their play.

Mr. Tod became a theme, not just one of the roles to enact. Certainly, it was a special role in the boys’ invented chasing game: Mr. Tod was the chaser, while every other player was Peter Rabbit. Any chasing game needs a chaser. However, the chasing was one leading action in the game, while rescuing was another. The children who were in the Peter Rabbit role could also “save” each other once captured.

_Hudson: And then you caught me didn’t you?_
_John: Yes._
_Hudson: And then the other guys came to save me didn’t I?_
_Braxton: I did too._
(Transcript DS500059, 05/11/2016)

After Hudson had been caught by John, the other boys came to his rescue. The rescue theme can be found in Beatrix Potter’s (1918) book ‘The tale of Mr. Tod’, and has re-emerged in the ABC show as well where Peter Rabbit and his friends saved each other from being captured (ABCiView, 2015,
Similar rules of chasing, catching and rescuing can also be found in traditional chasing games. The group of boys had invented their own game, potentially applying traditional rules, and combining them with their shared interest in the stories of Peter Rabbit and Mr. Tod.

Similarly, John reported a chasing and rescuing theme in a TMNT based play. He was playing ninja turtles, and he and his friends Wade and Bill had to run and rescue themselves on the monkey bars in order to “get rid of the baby shredders” and to prevent being turned into a “poisoned shredder baby” (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015). Again, the original served as an idea to invent a game. Both, the ninja turtle and the Mr. Tod game were movement games that included running away from someone who pretended to be a character, or from something the players had imagined to be chasing them. As these examples show, play processes, such as pretending and inventing and following rules were often intertwined.

Pretending was also linked to preparing play props, such as when enacting a character included dressing up, for example wearing a police hat or a ninja mask. Dressing up as a superhero and other characters from media sources was popular, and sometimes this was portrayed in the children’s play at the centre. In addition, children mentioned during conversations that they liked to dress up. Hudson liked to be Leonardo from the ninja turtles (Transcript M287, 05/11/2015), and Ethan enjoyed playing ninjas and brought his ninja-mask from home (Transcript M214, 18/08/2015). He also discussed with Leo that they wanted to dress up as Spiderman and Batman (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015).

Dress-ups might be like play props that support pretending. However, the actual presence of dress-ups was not necessary, and in the children’s play that was informed by contemporary popular culture, a new dress-up form was observed as an influential play prop. Superheroes and other characters could inform play if the player was wearing a merchandized product, for example clothing that portrayed the character. Elsa pretended to have the powers from the character ‘Elsa’ from the Disney®’s movie ‘Frozen’ who was depicted on her T-shirt. In the children’s play, Elsa pretended to freeze her play partner, just like the movie character (Transcript M249, 24/09/2015). As well as dress-ups, other play props were
used in connection with the second pretend form: giving objects new meaning.

### 4.6.2 Giving objects new meaning

Pretending was not only a process of enacting a role, but was also about giving objects new meaning. Sometimes, children’s play was promoted through the provision of play equipment. This equipment was quite concrete. In the following days after an ambulance’s visit to the setting, the educators had provided plastic needles and bandages, so the children could take their experience from the visit into their play. A month later, the girls were still playing doctors, but with different equipment which they had organised by themselves – possibly because the educators had removed the original material (Field notes, 20/10/2015): face washers that are normally used in the setting for cleaning children’s faces after eating, or for cooling if someone got hurt, were always available to children to grab from a container. The face washers replaced the bandages, and pencils and colours were used as needles. The playing children pretended that the washers and pencils could act as something else.

During the conversations, the children often introduced the objects, naming the object directly with the new given meaning. What the object represented in their play was important. The children imagined scoops of sand to be cake, construction material to be handcuffs or transformers, or a table to be a tunnel. In one incident, Sophia and Jessica watched their first play-video that I had taken of them. Sophia described their actions and material used as it can be observed as an outsider, an observer of their play: she named the objects for what they were in reality, for example a table. In contrast, Jessica considered their pretend play world:

*Sophia: Shuffling under the table. ((short glance at me))
Jessica: Under the tunnel! ((looking at Sophia))
(Transcript M172, 28/07/2015)*

Jessica highlighted the pretend meaning of the table: she had imagined that the table was a tunnel in play. When Elsa commented on this play-video in the following group conversation, Sophia reacted to Elsa’s ‘real object’ comment:
“Elsa: Look, you go under the table.
Sophia: That’s a tunnel.

(Transcript M209, 11/08/2015)"

Elsa’s comment showed that she, as an observer and non-participant of this play sequence, referred to the observable, while Sophia, as the player with insider knowledge raised it to the pretend level explaining to Elsa what the table had represented in their play. The playing girls, Sophia and Jessica, had easily re-interpreted a table to function as a tunnel. Hence, pretending is a process that happens for the players. Elsa’s and Sophia’s discussion about the table representing a tunnel is one example where Sophia displayed her insider knowledge as a player, whereas Elsa could not know directly the underlying symbolism that the table served as she has not been a player in that activity. Elsa had to rely on what she could see with her eyes while Sophia had actively created a pretend world in her mind that she had shared with her co-player Jessica. Although she had been aware that it was a simple table, she remembered what the table’s function had been during the play. In the first form of pretending – enacting a role – the insider and outsider perspective was also apparent: Hudson and John had shared ‘Mr. Tod’ which looked like any running game to an observing outsider who was not aware of the pretend roles and actions. Pretending included to share knowledge of what was pretended.

Giving objects a different meaning can sometimes be as simple as in the tunnel example. The table’s shape and size invited the girls to shuffle underneath it, as if it was a tunnel. Other times, objects were first created to represent what the children needed for their play. When material was used for representing something else that required some preparation, the pretending started during another process: ‘preparing the play props’. For example, a construction material, referred to by the children as “the chains”, was used to create handcuffs and belts. These props were important for Ethan and Leo for enacting their roles:

*I: How did you come up with the idea of making handcuffs?*
*Ethan: Uhm. We just know ‘cause we wanted to be police.*
*I: Oh you were playing police –*
Ethan: And this is police acting. ((stands up and shows his belt)) So, so handcuffs, and the handcuffs. And keys. And that’s me wearing the handcuffs.
Leo: And there’s me making the handcuffs. And there’s me making the handcuffs. Once more making handcuffs.
(Transcript M289, 05/11/2015)

Leo concentrated on the act of making the handcuffs, a preparation act for their police play. He did not explain that they had built with the chains. While he was preparing the play props, Leo already re-interpreted them and pretended that the chains were handcuffs – as he explained.

In another example, Sophia was pretending to have a broken arm. She pulled her arm into her long-sleeved shirt until the arm was completely invisible.

Jessica: And she had a broken arm.
I: A broken arm!
Sophia: And that’s why I had to do pfft. ((pulls her arm inside her long-sleeved shirt))
(Transcript M251, 29/09/2015)

The idea of pretending to have a broken arm led to the act of making her arm ‘disappear’ by hiding it inside her clothes. However, the moment where she pulled her arm inside the shirt was a preparation for playing. The preparing of her play prop (arm inside the shirt) supported her enactment of being a sick person with a broken arm. So, pretending can give children ideas for the preparation of play props, be a prerequisite of playing, and at the same time, preparing play props can further widen the process of pretending. There is clearly a link between preparing play props and pretending. Play props provide a stage for playing. An object from the real world is used to act as the imagined object. Preparing the play props seems almost an act to be closer to their pretended, imagined world.

In one of the boys’ play activities, the links between giving objects new meaning, preparing the play props and playing with them were so strong, that I felt it was impossible to separate the processes. In this example, the group of boys reported playing Transformers, based on the merchandized toys, which seemed to be a merging of pretend and construction play. I had observed some of the boys engaging with the
original products that had been provided at the setting. However, the play did not last very long and was quite simple and not very social. The players tried out the different transformations that the Transformers™ products allowed, sometimes showing each other their transformed shape. Then, they left the table and the products. In contrast, Hudson, John and a few more of the same boys group spent a whole morning in the outdoor area with their pretend/construction transformer play (field notes, 29/09/2015), with repetitions on the following days. For this play, the boys made use of the Mobilo® and built different shapes that allowed transformations. These self-constructed transformers represented the merchandized products. This alone already required the players to pretend that the Mobilo® constructions were the Transformers, or that their constructions had similar properties. The building of these new Transformers recalled similar processes such as Ethan’s and Leo’s making of the handcuffs: preparing the play props and pretending were intertwined; allowing a flow between construction play and pretend play.

The preparation of the self-constructed transformers included several actions and interactions of the players in a more complex way compared with activities with the original merchandized Transformers™ toys. Playing with the self-constructed transformers included actions such as building the transformers, showing how to build them, and transforming them into known transformers from the media, or into self-invented forms.

I: Would you like to tell me a bit more what you know about playing with the transformers?
Jason: I just built one. ((holding it up))
I: Yes, you just built one. Hudson showed you how to build it.
John: We like to turn transformers into a different transformer.
(Transcript M254, 29/09/2015)

The prompted responses revealed that the importance of the play can be different for the players. It can be about the building of the transformers, as for Jason, whereas John highlighted the transforming process in this kind of play. The boys often talked about their different self-constructed transformers, and explained to each other what transformations their constructs could perform, as well as showed and taught each other how to
build them. However, the play was more than just building and transforming. At the same time, these actions involved pretending. They pretended that the constructions were Transformers™, or birds and other animals or vehicles from the real world. It needed the players’ imagination to pretend that a Mobilo® construct was the Optimus Transformer™ and a bird respectively. Once a player had built his transformer, he tried out the different transformations, or played with the transformer. One game that the boys came up with was to throw their transformers as far or as high as possible or into a basket that was used as a goal (*field notes, 29/09/2015*). Playing with the transformers started with the originals but offered many possibilities for the players to create new play ideas.

![Figure 5: Boys’ self-invented Transformer play](image)

The self-invented transformers play included several processes, as shown in *Figure 5*: the boys combined building transformers (preparing play props); inventing and playing a game with the transformers; showing others how to build a transformer; and transforming transformers into self-invented transformations or into known transformers which was signalled
using special terms from the merchandized toy and the linked media source. Playing with transformers became a complex activity that included pretending and inventing and following rules. Instead of being limited to the original Transformers™ possible transformations and pre-designed features, the boys’ self-constructed transformers could change in ways which expanded the play possibilities.

*John:* And my transformer can turn into a boat and a rocket ship.

*Hudson:* =Bumble Bee.

*I:* Ok, one after the other. We will first listen to Hudson, then to John, then to Jason, and then to Louis.

*Hudson:* And Bumble Bee can turn into a car, but not Optimus.

(Transcript M254, 29/09/2015)

The closer the players stayed to the original merchandise, the more they restricted and regulated the play. Hudson explained which original transformer could turn into which shape, but what was impossible following those regulations. The example shows also how Transformers™ expert knowledge was integrated into the language that Hudson used. *Bumble Bee* is in fact not the insect, but a name of one of the transformers. Expert knowledge was needed to understand this.

However, other transformations were possible that did not rely on the knowledge of the media or merchandise. Vehicles and animals were used as templates instead of the merchandized products. The original product allowed the boys to think of different ideas for transformations, but the construction play also opened new possibilities. John thought of shapes from the real world, such as boats, that allowed him to play without Transformers™ expert knowledge. He rather created his own knowledge base. Although some players referred to the original materials, the pretend/construction transformers play provided space for imagining whatever the players wanted. When the boys created their own ideas, there were no pre-set rules, unless they established them. Rather, the material allowed specific mechanisms that could be changed to explore different possibilities of transformations, and the constructors decided on the rules of transformation. The boys used different construction pieces and invented a
variety of shapes; and one shape could transform into another one as Figure 6 and Figure 7 show: Hudson had turned Bumble Bee into a car.

During the self-invented pretend/ construction play activity with transformers, the boys showed each other how to construct or transform their transformers. Similar to other play experiences where the players connected with each other, they created a play community – even if it may have been temporary. For example, Jason highlighted that he and Hudson had constructed the same transformer, using the same shapes in the same combination. His focus lay on their relationship within the community which he demonstrated verbally through comments ("we’re both the same"), and physically through approximating his transformer to Hudson’s transformer. Jason’s comments resembled to Rose’s when she played an invented game with Sophia: she also highlighted her relationship to her 204
play-partner through doing or being the same. While in her case, Rose was happy that she and Sophia had succeeded to touch the play-button at the same time, Jason emphasized that his and Hudson’s transformers looked the same. In this example, the play had also formed a community with collective meaning: the players shared the pretend world where the constructions were transformers.

This section reported on the ways the children re-interpreted toys, material and equipment, and gave these objects new meaning in their pretend play. As the next section shows, children went beyond such re-interpretations of objects, as they imagined and fantasized about non-existing or non-present things.

4.6.3 Imagining non-existing things to exist

As the third form of pretending, the children pretended to have things available that did not exist, or that they had no access to in that moment, and to perform actions without having play props. This form of pretending requires to imagine the non-existent or to imagine that something is present while it is not. The ‘stage’ for play therefore does not always require props. Imagined crocodiles can swim under the climbing frame, as Scarlett and Sophia presented (Transcript M286, 05/11/2015), and Sienna and Zara “heard a monster” (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015). These children showed that pretend play often does not need any special concrete provision. However, the children in the study not only imagined ‘from scratch’, but were inspired by their contexts. Like playing a role, imagined things can have their source from the real world, can be fantasized, or originate from a television program or other media.

I: John, can I ask you a little bit more about the ninja turtle play?
John: We went to the slide to the cubby house - To the monkey bars.
I: What was with the monkey bars?
John: Monkey bars, and elsewhere and there and there.
I: Yeah. What happened on the monkey bars?
John: Uhmm, we, we were trying to get rid of the baby shredders.
I: Hmmm?
John: We were tr- We were the baby shredders.
I: You wanted to get rid of the baby shredders? Who are the baby shredders?
John: Uhmmm, the white bits, the white bits.
I: The white bings? And what can the white bings do?
John: If you touch them you will turn into a poisoned shredder baby.
(Transcript M250, 24/09/2015)

John elaborated that they climbed the monkey bars to escape the baby shredders. I did not know what John meant, so he explained what baby shredders were. John and his co-players pretended that they had been chased by characters from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle movie. For doing so, the boys had to imagine the baby shredders were on the grass in the backyard. John and the other players had been running away from non-existent, but imagined predators.

How much all three forms of pretending can occur all at the same time, or flow into each other, was visible in a conversation with Scarlett and Sophia. During the conversation, they touched several aspects: play actions; actions linked to pretending to be an acrobat; imagining crocodiles to run away from; and enacting a crocodile. The two girls had described in detail their play on a climbing frame in the backyard at the centre. The frame included a slide and a pole, and the two of them had been demonstrating a routine of climbing up and sliding down together with two other girls. For Sophia and Scarlett, the main interest during the conversation had been to talk about the routine, which they called “doing tricks”.

Scarlett, at some stage, referred to the actions of climbing up and sliding down as doing an “acrobat thing”, indicating that at some point in the play she had pretended to be an acrobat. However, when the conversation was about to finish, she and Sophia added a new pretend idea to their play.

Sophia: So we were playing on the slide and we were gonna crush into each other and then we decided not and then we were going on the firemen pole. And one was gonna stand on the other -
Scarlett: And we were gonna go once at the time. And we also gonna do tricks.
I: What sort of tricks? Scarlett?
Scarlett: Like climbing up the pole. And try to climb up the slide. And by standing and falling on your bottom on the slide. That’s what I did once.

(...) Sophia: Yeah and we were. So, on the other side. Like there is a climbing thing.

Scarlett: Yeah.

Sophia: And then we climb up. And there is a hole. And then we run across the beach ’cause there’s crocodiles. And we walk across the uhm things. And then we run on there because there are the crocodiles. We went on the slide ’cause I’m a crocodile.

Scarlett: And I’m a crocodile too.

(Transcript M286, 05/11/2015)

The girls’ descriptions of their play changed direction during the conversation. This variation indicates the dynamic, rather than static, dimension of play. Phases of strong emphasis on actions and movements can transition into phases of high attention towards pretending. And within the pretend phases, narrations change and evolve. From describing their actions, Sophia and Scarlett introduced a pretend play theme in the end. This conversation might mirror what the children experienced in play. It is also possible that the pretend play idea ‘crocodiles’ had only occurred to them in the conversation. The activity had started with the idea of climbing up the monkey bars and sliding down on the slide or the pole. The girls experimented with the movements, for example two children were sliding next to each other, or one girl slid quickly after the other, and they bumped into each other. During the exploration of different movements, they invented the idea of playing tricks and doing things that acrobats do. At some point, the play turned into a game of running across the bridge of the climbing frame.

Maybe the idea to pretend that there were crocodiles under this bridge had been developed while playing. Or maybe this idea occurred to Sophia when she was talking about the play. This example shows how ideas around pretending quickly change from imagining to run away from crocodiles, to imagining to be the crocodile. Hence, imagining non-present crocodiles to be present turned into enacting as a crocodile. Playing and pretending are not static; rather, they develop and change. During this one
play experience, the themes and pretend aspects of play started with one narration that led into another. Sometimes pretending in play was planned, as Chloe presented her decisions on being the naughty baby. Other times pretending was spontaneous, such as the introduction of the crocodiles occurred after a routine of doing tricks. New ideas can emerge when the players allow them.

4.7 Exclusion and inclusion of peers

Exclusion and inclusion are processes that occur within play, and were identified by the participating children in their play. The experiences were diverse, depending on whether children were the ones excluding peers from their play, if they felt excluded or included by peers, or if they wanted others to be included. Many of the participants started to talk about their play with a statement about who they had played with, or commented that “we played” indicating with “we” that an including process had been linked to their play. Jackson, for example, stated that “I was playing with Elle. She wanted me to play with her. That was a few days later [He was comparing this play experience with another play experience that had happened earlier in that week]. And I wanted.” (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015). It was like a simple equation: Elle wanted to play with Jackson + Jackson wanted to play with Elle = they played together. However, at second glance, it is not that simple. What if Jackson had not wanted to respond positively to Elle’s request of inclusion? A child can be the ‘includer’ in one play experience, and the ‘included’ in another one. And the same goes for exclusion. Both processes are highly complex.

Playing with a peer was identified as a motivation for playing. Jackson and Sophia both explained that they would accept a peer’s invitation for playing together. So, when the peer wanted to play with them that is what they did. The invitation and its acceptance are both acts of inclusion. For Sophia, the inclusion process was also grounded in the relationship with the other peer and the feelings she held for that peer.

Sophia: And I like doing this because I like Scarlett and she always asks me if she is not playing with me if she can play with me and I always say yes. ((wiggles her body))
I: So, why do you say yes when Scarlett asks you?
Sophia: Because I like her and I like playing with her.
(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

Sophia’s enthusiasm for playing is connected to playing with Scarlett. And her approach for accepting a play partner and enjoying social play was connected to the positive emotional relationship to Scarlett. Other participants used play as a validation for their friendship. For example, Hudson addressed his play partner Kyle while watching a play-video of them: “And Kyle, that day I was being your friend, wasn’t I?” (Transcript M216, 20/08/2015). Also, outsiders identified play partners as friends. Jessi had walked by a conversation with some participants who looked at photographs displaying John, Bill and Wade playing. She looked over John’s shoulder to see the photograph he was holding in his hands, and commented: “That’s you and your friend.” John’s simple response showed agreement: “Bill and Wade.” (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015).

Children’s reasons for including peers were related to the peer’s individual characteristics. A criterion such as age or gender sometimes seemed to be applied as a basis for inviting or allowing the peer to join in or play a role. For example, Elsa’s age-related criterion had given Rashmi the opportunity to take on the ghost role of the game (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). There were mostly girls playing with girls, and boys playing with other boys. Only a few children were seen playing in gender-mixed groups throughout the field study. However, the children did not explicitly mention that they preferred to play in gender-based groups. Applying a criterion to include someone could also serve to exclude anyone else who did not meet the criterion.

I: Are there rules to the game?
Leo: It’s the double skid game. Skid games.
I: Skid games.
Ethan: So and this was the rule - no girls.
I: No girls. Other rules?
Ethan: No girls and no other boys can ever play.
Leo: No other boys.
I: Just you two.
((Both nod.))
(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)
In Ethan’s and Leo’s case, they first stated to exclude girls, but then added that also no other boys were allowed (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015), excluding anyone else from their play.

The complexity of the processes of exclusion and inclusion become most apparent when the children experienced the opposite process in the same situation. While Louis excitedly reported that he was playing with John, John had not shared the inclusive idea.

I: John, would you like to tell us a bit more, what you were playing when Louis joined you?
John <<very slowly>>: Louis just joined me.
Louis: John, I was playing with you ((tipping John on his shoulder)) in the cubby house right here.
(Transcript M280, 27/10/2015).

The same experience was mentioned by Sophia and Jessica. John and the girls declared that Louis had “just joined” them (Transcript M284, 27/10/2015). Particularly, Sophia’s statement sounded reproachful. The accusation addressed Louis’s form of play entry. He had neglected to ask if he could play with the girls, or with John. Excluding was one response if a child did not use the ‘correct’ play entry strategy. In these two examples, just joining was not considered to be the right way by Sophia, Jessica and John. There are possible explanations for Louis’s exclusion, such as age (he was four, not five as Elsa), gender, or that the players did not want another peer to join a play that was already underway. It could even be possible that the combination of these elements led to the other children’s exclusive behaviour. All that can be drawn from observing and listening to the children is that Louis experienced social play, while his perceived co-players had not actively included him into their play.

Different motivations for play impacted on the process of inclusion. For Sophia, friendship was a primary motivation for playing with others. However, Jessica referred to inclusion and friendships in a different way:

I: So you told me you like playing doctors ’cause you like lying down. You like joining in with friends.
Jessica: I don’t like anybody joining in.
I: Ah. But joining in with your friends?
Jessica: Maybe.
(Transcript M284, 27/10/2015)
Jessica’s proclamation that she did not like anybody joining in apparently did not apply to Sophia. Jessica was often seen with Sophia on the one day of the week she attended the setting, and she always let Sophia join in her play. For Sophia, friendship was one possible inclusion factor. Sophia had discussed earlier in that conversation that she liked friends to join in. However, she would also let Louis join in if he had asked, which could emphasize the importance of the ‘correct’ play entry strategy:

Jessica: Even Louis. But Louis, Louis wasn’t. We didn’t want him to play.
Others: No.
I: You didn’t want Louis to play with you?
Sophia: And he just joined in. He didn’t ask us.
I: Ok, and if Louis had asked you if he can join what would you have done?
Jessica: We would have said no.
Elsa: I would say no.
Sophia: I would say yes.
(Transcript M284, 27/10/2015)

This example shows how differently exclusion and inclusion can proceed. Jessica and Elsa would have not accepted Louis’s play entry in any case, while Sophia would have changed her mind, letting Louis enter their play. She was the one who had brought up the reason for rejection, in fact: “He didn’t ask.” So, with fulfilling this criterion, exclusion could have been changed into inclusion, at least for Sophia.

As the ‘joining in versus asking for play entry’ example demonstrated, there can be a range of procedures in place for both exclusion and inclusion. A verbal expression of interest to be included can be perceived as the correct form of play entry for some children. This strategy may disguise subtle and individual criteria, and might be highly dependent on who expressed interest to whom, and when, as well how it was ‘read’ by the recipients. However, children often did not verbally execute the excluding processes. Exclusion was often subtly executed through actions, such as not sharing play material or toys. For example, Bill had been playing with toy cars, while Louis had also played with them first. When he tried to play with Bill, Louis was excluded. Bill did not want to share the cars with him (Transcript M280, 27/10/2015). Was it Bill’s non-interest in
playing with Louis? Was it Louis’s way of expressed interest in a joint play with the cars? Did Bill simply reject to share the toys? Each situation can be different, and exclusion and inclusion depend on the contextual factors and the players involved, as well as the subtle messages and actions to enter play. Bill rejected Louis as a play partner without saying it. Rather, he excluded him using nonverbal actions through not sharing the toy cars.

Exclusion might not always be the purposeful intention, rather the by-product of other children focusing on their social play. In a conversation with Scarlett, Sophia and Rose, Sophia described inventing a game with my laptop on which they had watched their play-videos (Transcript M247, 17/09/2015). The girls were trying to move the arrow onto the pause and play button on the screen to stop the video. The player who managed to press the button first won. At the beginning, all three girls had played together. At some point, however, Sophia focused to show Scarlett how to move the arrow on the screen. They had been so engaged in their activity that Rose started to get bored. So, the outcome for her was to feel excluded by the actions of the other two girls.

Friendships might be one of the strongest bases for exclusion. Ethan and Leo were friends. They often played together without other children. When they explained their rules for the skidding game they had invented together, the rules mainly addressed exclusionary criteria: no girls, as well as, no other boys were allowed to join (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015). Even though Ethan’s first rule was to exclude girls, which indicated a gender criterion, his second rule excluded other boys. Thus, the rules established a space that only allowed Ethan and Leo to be part of the play. They called themselves the bosses of the game. This gave them every power to protect the exclusive space they had created for their skidding game. While I watched them playing the skidding game, I had not observed the boys saying the later explained rules aloud to other children. They did not say to girls that they were not allowed to play. But there had been no girls asking to join in. Ethan and Leo had chosen a corner with some blue mats on the ground to play and skid. They might have picked a corner that seemed to them private enough to hinder the attraction of other children. Maybe their game did not attract others. Maybe the boys appeared to others as such a
strong exclusive entity that others did not even try to enter their play. There can be various reasons and procedures that contributed to the exclusive game of the boys. The boys had their play under control. Protecting their private play space from others might be very important to children. In this way, Ethan and Leo demonstrated that they held the right to play with whoever they wanted – even if that meant to exclude others.

The processes of inclusion and of exclusion that were highlighted by the children were complex. The conversations highlighted that children experience social play differently, sharing instances where one child felt included, while the others engaged in the same activity had a different interpretation. ‘Just joining in’ was not accepted by all children, and did not necessarily lead into inclusion. Exclusion of peers could entail the protection of play between two children who wished to stay exclusive.

4.8 Learning in play

The comments of children in this study referred to a number of processes that they connected to their play. In most instances, discussion of these processes was initiated by the children. However, when learning as a process in play was discussed, it was in response to my inquiry. Once prompted, children’s comments referred to the presence – or absence – of learning in play, and the role of educators. That children did not mention the topic of learning in their spontaneous discussions around their play raised questions about their perceived connections between play and learning. During the conversations, the children demonstrated acts that suggested that peers played a role in learning: children scaffolded each other and acted as role models or educators. For example, while playing, one child showed a peer how to construct a transformer.

My prompting question during the viewing of the play-videos was “What do you learn in play?” It produced different reactions from the children. Some of the children’s responses were “Nothing” (Sophia in transcript M282, 27/10/2015), or “No idea” (Hudson in transcript M287, 05/11/2015), suggesting that these children did not make a connection between play and learning, or had not yet considered learning in play. Other possibilities are that the children chose not to discuss this subject, or might
Some children reflected on their learning opportunities straight away when I asked them. Olinda and Elsa both indicated that writing down people’s names can be learned in a play activity. “We learn to write some names” and “learn to write words”, Elsa mentioned (Transcript M283, 27/10/2015). She was commenting on her play-video where she used an old keyboard and pretending to type the names of sick people for another peer who played in the doctor area. This was a concrete play experience that Elsa could refer to, while Olinda linked literacy learning with play without a particular memory or prompt:

I: What do you learn in play? Or what do you learn at the activities?
Sophia: Nothing.
Olinda: Sometimes we learn how to do stuff. Like.
   ((voice now gets softer)) We don’t know. Sometimes we write people.
I: You do what?
Olinda: Write people. ((giggles))
I: Write people? Like writing down?
   ((Olinda giggles, nods.))
I: You write names down of people?
   ((Olinda nods.))
(Transcript M282, 27/10/2015)

First, Olinda’s response was vague, as if she was not sure of what she wanted to say. The use of language such as sometimes, stuff and we don’t know indicated that it was not a familiar area for Olinda to talk about, or that she originally decided not to talk about it. Even her voice became softer, which might have been a sign for being unsure. She showed more confidence in her response once I replied.

The continuing conversation opened deeper insight into the children’s ideas about learning, and Olinda’s comments prompted her conversational partner Sophia to consider alternative learning experiences. The girls’ exploration of learning in play progressed, and a disagreement between Sophia and Olinda finally generated indications about
understanding learning. Sophia thought that they learned how to ride a bike in the backyard, but Olinda disagreed.

I: What do you learn in the activities?
Sophia: Riding bikes. ((giggly))
I: I didn’t see you riding bikes in the video. But do you learn how to ride bikes at Ladybug?
Olinda: No we do not.
Sophia: Yes we do.
Olinda: We don’t.
Sophia: Down at the back.
I: Down at the back?
Olinda: Yeah, but we don’t learn. We already know, how to do it.
Sophia: No, we actually do learn.
Olinda: No we don’t.
Sophia: Yeah we do.
I: Maybe you Olinda, you’ve already learnt. And Sophia is talking about other children that are still learning how to ride a bike?
Olinda: Well I got no cycling wheels on my bike anymore.
Jessica: Me either. I don’t.
Sophia: I do not have training wheels on my bike and I cannot ride it without training wheels.

(Transcript M282, 27/10/2015)

For Olinda, learning was linked to new skills; to things that the child did not know how to do. She used the concrete example of riding a bike to explain that learning has an initial phase that requires support; in this case, in the form of special cycling wheels. Once the learning phase was completed, those wheels were not needed anymore, because Olinda then knew how to cycle. In contrast, Sophia showed that not having training wheels did not necessarily mean that the learning phase was accomplished, and that, for her, further training was needed.

Another aspect of this conversation is that Sophia had picked an activity for her exploration of learning, which typically was acted out by children during free play time in the backyard. Children rode bikes, actually tricycles and scooters, when they played without receiving instructions from the educators. She linked learning to a child-initiated activity. Sophia had understood that play could be the context for learning, even though I had
kept the learning context open. Earlier comments from another participant had first added insight into the reasons why children choose to play but also presented a link between play and learning; Rose decided to play doctors “because we wanted to see how everything worked” (Transcript M252, 29/09/2015). Finding out about things and figuring out their functions indicates an exploratory component in Rose’s play. So, for some children, a learning aspect was present in their self-initiated play.

A contrasting opinion to Sophia’s was introduced by Jessica on the same day when she met in a different mixed group of participants. She had been quiet about the topic before, but this time, she presented her understanding of learning:

I: So you told me what you do in play. But I’d be also interested what you learn in play.
Elsa: We –
Jessica: We learn when we play how to? ((pauses as if she thinks about her response))
Chloe: The way how to play?
Jessica: No, no, no. I’m still talking. When we - when we - when the teachers tell us to do that the thing that’s how we learn? ((poses her statement like a question as if she is unsure))
I: So you learn when the teachers tell you what to do?
Jessica: Yeah.
(Transcript M284, 27/10/2015)

The beginning of Jessica’s statement connected learning with playing. Then, the pitch of her voice rose as if she was unsure and had to think about her response. Chloe tried to add to Jessica’s discussion that they learn how to play, but Jessica rejected Chloe’s idea. On the one hand, she seemed determined about the answer she was about to give, not accepting any interruption or advice. Her final statement, on the other hand, was communicated in the same uncertain voice. “What do you learn in play?” certainly is not an easy question to answer – and was not a common topic raised by the children at the research site. However, Jessica’s statement when the teachers tell us to do that the thing that’s how we learn brought in a different perspective: that the children learn when the educators tell them what to do. Educators rarely had been observed engaging in children’s play.

216
Rather, they interacted with children in educator-led activities, such as group time, table activities, and meal times. Perhaps Jessica was connecting learning with educator-led activities, rather than with self-initiated play.

The participating children indicated that educators influenced their play. My questions about learning processes in play provoked questions about the educators’ roles in these processes. Elsa’s example about her literacy learning experience had been possible as the children had an understanding of different staff working in the doctors’ field. As well, the provided play equipment facilitated play involving letters displayed on the keyboard. The old keyboards and computer screens set up as an office desk encouraged Elsa to play with letters and to pretend she was writing names. Providing play equipment was not the only way of influencing children’s play and their learning experiences in play.

Some reactions to the “What do you learn in play?” prompt suggested a quite different role for educators. Ethan and Leo approached it through stating rules:

*I: So Ethan, Leo, so maybe before we finish our chat, we talked a lot about your games. Do you, do you, what do you learn when you play a game?*

*Ethan: That means - no fighting.*

*I: No fighting.*

*Leo: No fighting in the skid game.*

*(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)*

Where is the cradle for this thought? Why did Ethan come up with a rule, with this particular rule, when he was invited to discuss the learning in playing the self-invented games? It might have been on his mind when I asked about learning. It might have been connected to the topic of the overall discussion where Ethan and Leo had described the invention of the game and its rules earlier. However, a week later, the topic was prompted again, and Ethan gave a similar response: “That you don’t actually hurt anyone.” *(Transcript M289, 05/11/2015)*

Fighting in play and not hurting other children had been an ongoing issue for the educators at the research site throughout the fieldwork phase. Ethan, in particular, had been advised several times that fighting or
punching was not allowed. Educators interrupted Ethan’s and others’ play that included such behaviour. Was Ethan’s outcome from these experiences that he learned to follow the educators’ rules in play? Despite being admonished to stop such behaviour, Ethan kept playing, for example pretending to be a ninja, in ways that were related to fighting. In the conversation, he may have wanted to show that he knew about the adult rules. He had learned the rules of how to play at the centre. Knowing them did not mean acting on them, though. Ethan might have learned to adapt the educators’ rules for his play. His implementation of the rules just differed from the educators’ original idea.

Children’s elaborations about learning in play were short, and even when I broached the subject again, the children did not follow it up. In two different situations, they even started what seemed to me talking nonsense. Ethan and Leo reported that no pooing was another rule in their skidding game. It is possible that the boys’ silly talk was meaningful to them, and making up these rules had been a fun game in itself or part of the overall skidding game. Another possibility is, that introducing taboo topics, the two boys might have tried to provoke me, or to divert attention. They managed to change the direction of the discussion most certainly, while I was distracted from my question, trying to find a way to respond to the boys’ no pooing and no weeing rules.

_Ethan: And no weeing on people._
_(Leo laughs even more._)
_I: So these are other rules I guess. And what do you learn in your games?_
_Leo: Wee-o._
_Ethan: Wee-o, bee-o._
_Leo: And no weeing and no –_
_I: Now you’re just being funny again, hey?_
_Leo: And no weeing, and kick side balls._ _((laughs))_
_(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)_

In the conversation, a week later, it was Leo who ignored my attempt to step into the matter again, and distracted Ethan by asking him to play the skidding game instead. Changing the direction of our conversation was a demonstration of exercising power. The boys were not the only children to
reject further discussion of learning. Sophia and Olinda decided they were finished with the matter.

*I: What else, what can you learn in play?  
Sophia: Nothing very else. Thank you. ((giggles))  
I: What?  
Olinda: Nothing very else.  
I: Nothing very else?  
Sophia: Nothing else. Very else. ((Olinda laughs.))  
(Transcript M282, 27/10/2015)

Did the children feel uncomfortable with this topic? Was it because learning in play was not familiar or relevant to them?

The children’s way of participating in the conversations suggested that peers contributed to children’s learning in play – even if the children did not name this as learning. The boys’ version of the transformer play, using material to construct their own transformers instead of playing with the merchandized product, allowed the creation of a transformer community. Within this community, the boys explained and presented their constructions and transformations to each other. During such presentations, one boy constructed or transformed the material in front of another boy while often verbalizing his steps of action. This verbalisation sometimes included the use of shared knowledge and a special language. The watching boy could understand the presentation with or without the expert knowledge, as the boy who showed and explained his transformer undertook all the constructions at the same time. His audience could watch, observe and potentially copy and implement the presented construction in their own repertoire.

*Hudson: Jason, Jason I’ll show you how you can transform it into Optimus ((touches Jason’s transformer, then back to his transformer)) I’ll show you, Jason, look. See that, Jason? Into that special kind of ski-boat. Change it into that.  
((Jason moves his transformer towards Hudson’s.))  
Jason: Look we’re both the same. Look, it’s both the same.  
(Transcript M254, 29/09/2015)
Hudson, in this example, stepped into the role of the instructor, and Jason was the learner. The instructor drew Jason’s attention towards the object, the transformer, (‘See that’), as well as towards the necessary construction actions (‘Change it into that’). Basically, Hudson was Jason’s educator scaffolding his peer’s experience of transforming in a play experience. In contrast, I had watched Hudson constructing with LEGO® during table activity time. An educator had given him a printed template to follow instruction for constructing a vehicle out of LEGO®. Hudson struggled with this activity: he looked at the instruction plan, then stopped building, placing his head in his hands (field notes, 27/08/2015). Hudson did not receive help from a peer or an educator who could have showed him how to construct the vehicle. The plan had not been helpful for Hudson to follow instructions.

The scaffolding that Hudson had demonstrated during the transformer play was also performed by Sophia who assisted Scarlett to master the touch pad in order to pause and play the video.

Sophia: You can do it. Do you know how? Now, tap!
((holds her finger in the air and moves it quickly downwards)). No, down a bit. ((drawing a circle in the air, pointing to screen))
(Transcript M247, 17/09/2015)

Sophia used gestures to model to Scarlett what she had to do to move the cursor, and then to tap the touch pad exactly when the cursor was positioned on the play button at the screen. Like Hudson, Sophia provided verbal cues while she modelled the actions (“Now, tap!”). Scarlett accomplished the task with Sophia’s help. These examples draw attention towards the role of learning from peers in play.

Despite their few comments, the children shared some insights into the aspect of learning in their play. The children’s perspectives varied in relation to their understanding of what they learnt in play, or if they learnt at all in play. Olinda and Sophia in particular highlighted their concept of learning. But there seemed to be some level of unfamiliarity with this topic – or perhaps a desire to focus on play rather than learning. However, Olinda and Elsa identified literacy experiences in their play which provoked the idea that certain play equipment provided by the educators led to those
possibilities. Also, Ethan and Hudson explored the connection between educator-introduced rules to their own play ideas. In several instances, children provided scaffolding, clearly supporting the learning of their peers.

4.9 Who rules the play?

Through conversation, the children showed that they thought about their play and its practice. They entered play with their peers; invented games and rules; developed play themes; and enacted roles. As they did so, the children imagined pretend play worlds; collaborated in groups; and created rules to protect their play space, leading to the inclusion or exclusion of peers. Often these actions occurred simultaneously as players mastered the range of actions, or were still exploring different processes on individual and social levels. Through their actions, children owned and ruled their play.

However, play was also structured by the ECEC setting in which it occurred, particularly by the rules of the setting. The children did not only talk about their self-governed play, but also about play situations that had been subject to educators’ restrictions and regulations. Play provision – including space, time, equipment and rules about behaviour – was managed by the classroom educators. The children reacted in diverse ways to those rules. In several group conversations, they addressed the topic of rules. However, there were different ways to addressing rules: in a statement of facts; in form of a complaint; or in an act of transgression. Analysing children’s accounts on rules, a question arose for me: who rules the children’s play?

There were rules around play at the ECEC setting, which the children told me about, or which I observed being stressed by the educators, for example:

- when and how long to play: play had to stop when the educators signalled pack-up time;
- where to play: children could use those areas in the classroom (or specific areas in the outdoor) that the educators had given access to, such as the carpet area;
• how to play: children who ran or were noisy were asked to stop running or to be more quiet;
• how to use toys: prams were for dolls, not for children to sit in;
• what to pretend: children were not allowed to pretend that blocks were guns, or pretend to be a ninja.

Independent of these existing rules, children organised their play by inventing their own rules. The following sections first present the ways in which children owned their play through self-invented rules (section 4.9.1), and continues with the educators’ impact on children’s play through facilitation, management, control and regulation (section 4.9.2).

4.9.1 Children own their play through self-invented rules

The children’s rules were either planned or applied spontaneously while the play was in progress. It seemed that many of the rules were unplanned and not verbalized, rather they were enacted impulsively or developed in response to the play context. The spontaneity of children’s rule invention was evident, for example, during a conversation where Scarlett, Sophia and Rose started playing with the laptop functions to run the play-videos. Throughout the conversation, the girls had not openly discussed that they had started a game, neither had they openly discussed how the game was regulated. They just played the game. Scarlett did not introduce me to their game; instead she mentioned that Sophia won first, and she had won next (Transcript M247, 17/09/2015). While the girls knew what was going on, I first had trouble understanding that the girls were talking about a rule of their self-invented computer game: ‘who first taps, wins’. They had a shared attention and purpose that were not apparent to me. A further cue for me that the girls had established a game was, when Sophia announced: “let’s play with each other, Scarlett.” Again, the girls did not verbalize any rule or goal of the game, however, Scarlett and Sophia performed in a competitive manner, trying to press the button first, and Scarlett even tried to hinder Sophia by holding her wrist. Other examples also showed that the children invented games where they applied rules. The ‘first wins’ rule which the girls had applied to their computer game also structured a game...
Hudson and Jason had invented: the player who knocks down a ramp first with his car, wins (Transcript M287, 05/11/2015).

Apart from inventing games and rules, the children created play worlds with imagined objects and people, as well as pretend roles. The children seemed to regulate their play with their planned and unspoken, often spontaneous, rules. Often, only the players of one play theme knew what was going on, as when Elsa pretended to ice Rashmi (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015), or when John and his friends ran away from the baby shredders (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015). They knew the rules because they were ‘in frame’, sharing the content and rules of their play. Knowing the rules gave the playing children control. This could lead to other children’s inclusion or exclusion, as when Elsa assigned Rashmi the ghost role because she was ‘five just like Elsa’ (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). The child who ‘owned’ the rule also held the power over what was going on in the play.

4.9.2 Educators’ facilitation, management, control and regulation of children’s play

Besides children’s own regulation of play, educators facilitated, managed and controlled play. Sophia mentioned that they knew how to play a game because the educators had explained the rules to them. While the educators’ facilitation was received positively, as it enabled children to play, children focused on educators’ rules, and how these controlled and restricted play.

I: Would you like to tell me a bit more about the table activities you do here at Ladybug Centre?
Olinda: Uhm we play on the carpet. And sometimes the teachers say: don’t play on the carpet.
(Transcript M282, 27/10/2015)

What Olinda described was the restrictions around play space. Educators decided where children played. The girl was not complaining, rather stating that the children were sometimes allowed to play on the carpet, and other times, they were not. The classroom was divided into a carpeted and a non-carpeted area. The carpeted area included one spot that was assigned for group time where the educators gathered all children for reading a book or
talking with the children about the daily activities. Different play areas were found in the carpeted area; for example, the home corner play area, tables with writing material, a lightbox table for exploring shapes and figures, and a construction corner with changing material. The non-carpeted area always had a set-up of tables that were either used for meal times or for table activities, which included craft material or puzzles. During the fieldwork phase of data generation, I noticed that there were different rules about the carpeted area, especially around table activity time. At table activity time, educators assigned children to different tables, where the educators led a range of activities. Children then moved from table to table, and some children started playing on the carpet area when they had finished their activities or had wandered off from the table activities. The educators might have not always noticed the wandering children immediately. The educators seemed at ease with children transitioning to the carpet area for most of the times – maybe because they could concentrate on supporting the children who were still engaged in the table activities, while the children who played on the carpet were occupied. Other times, as Olinda mentioned, the educators did not allow the carpet play. She did not complain, possibly because the educators generally did not interrupt children moving to the carpet. Play space on the carpet, however, was under the control of the educators.

Educators’ governance over play space was also evident in the outdoor area. The area that was accessible directly from the classrooms of the kindergartners and the ‘juniors’ (as the neighbouring classroom children were called at the setting) was made up of a large shaded area with a sandpit and swings and a slide in the centre. It was surrounded by a concrete area where children could run, ride tricycles or play at tables. A fence separated the concreted area from a grassy area where some trees provided shade. The grassy area was also fenced and separated from the younger children’s – toddlers and babies – outdoor area. Dependent on children-staff ratio and on time of the day, children could play anywhere or just in the shaded area that was more manageable and well-structured for educators’ surveillance. The children did not comment on the regulated outdoor play space. However, when Sophia and Scarlett were asked about differences of indoor and
outdoor play, they focused on the “babies’ side is on the next side” which then led them to highlight the rules about the fence:

Sophia. And we can open it [the gate of the fence that separates the concrete and sandpit area from grassy backyard].
Scarlett: No. The teachers have to open it, you mean, Sophia.
Sophia: No I can actually reach it.
Scarlett: I can too.
I: You can reach it. But are you allowed to open it?
Scarlett: No. We need to ask the teacher.
Sophia: I was one day.
Scarlett: I did one day too. But we got in trouble didn’t we?
(Transcript M286, 05/11/2015)

The girls pointed out different aspects: firstly, the educators had control over the fence gate. Secondly, although the children were capable of using the gate themselves, they had to ask for permission. And lastly, the children could get into trouble for opening the gate without seeking permission. The educators had the power to open the gate, to give permission to children to use it, and to impose a sanction for unauthorised opening of the gate. But again, Scarlett simply went along with this rule uncomplainingly.

The regulation of space for playing was one issue that children raised during conversations, while another concerned time for playing. Free play, where children followed their own interests, was timetabled around other daily routines. The day’s structure included educator-organised group times before each morning and afternoon tea as well as the lunch breaks: educator-led table activities; and free play time, both before and after lunch. Free play was either set outside or inside. After each play time, children were asked to pack up before moving to another daily routine. Pack up time was signalled inside with a tambourine that was shaken by an educator. Ethan and Chloe discussed the restricted play time, the signalling of pack up time, and packing up.

Ethan: We were trying to make belts but it’s too late. The teacher did that. ((He lifts one hand and shakes it))
Leo: The teacher don’t want that.
Ethan described a situation where he and Leo were constructing belts out of the ‘chain’ material. The creation of the belts had been a preparation for their play. Once ready to start using the props for their play, it was time to pack up. In his sentence lies a complaint of not having enough time either to finish preparing for play or to enact that play. Ethan and Leo’s play involved several steps, and needed time for making the belts, to get prepared for play, and finally for playing. Ethan highlighted the lack of play time again later in the same conversation: “So we were playing police, but we were about to take this whole thing on the carpet but by that time they did the shaker.” For these children, the time slot for free play was too short. It allowed Ethan and his friends to develop a play idea and prepare play props. They were all set to take their constructions to a play space to start their actual play when the educators gave the sign for the end of play time.

Time for play was managed by the educators. Time was limited, and often, the children seemed to be caught unaware by the pack up time signal and the connected end of play time. Regulations around play time were beyond the players’ control. Pack up time was not only an interruption of an ongoing play in progress; it also meant the children had to pack away the prepared and built play props disabling continuation or episodic play. If the props were made of construction material, they would need to be taken apart and put back in the boxes, as was the case for Ethan and his belt. Episodic play that continued over a longer period of time, even days, was challenged by the pack up regulations. Continuation of such play was hindered. Pack up time might have even been experienced as a moment of destruction of the well-prepared play props. Chloe had brought up her perspective about pack up time in a different conversation: “When we pack up it’s not much fun. ‘cause we are packing up the whole room and we do not anything about it and then packing up is not fun.” (Transcript M284, 27/10/2015). Compared
with her elaboration of play which is fun in her opinion (*Transcript M249, 22/09/2015*), it seemed pack up time was the opposite of play: it is not fun. Clearly, packing up marked the end of playing, the fun times. In her comment, Chloe spoke of the “whole room”, the complete play space, and she described that they “do not [do] anything about it”. Her comment might highlight children’s complete lack of control of the situation.

The time when children’s play equipment had to be put away in boxes was not the only moment when children’s play material seemed to ‘disappear’. Educators changed material, equipment and complete play spaces in the classroom almost on a weekly or fortnightly basis without consulting the children. Children sometimes seemed to be irritated when they reflected on a play-video that the play equipment in an area had changed since the video was taken. For example, the blue mats that Ethan and Leo had used for their skidding game had been moved to another place (*Transcript M279, 27/10/2015*). They wanted to show me where the play had happened in the classroom, but could not find the material in that space anymore. Louis, however, did not show irritation but just acknowledged the changes: “John, I was playing with you ((tipping John on his shoulder)) in the cubby house right here. ((pointing to cubby house)) Now it’s moved right over there.” (*Transcript M280, 27/10/2015*). Play that was dependent on the provision of play equipment was hard to repeat if the equipment had been moved away. In this sense, children’s play is not only time and space regulated, but also shaped by the equipment on offer.

Rules existed about how certain equipment was to be used, as well as what play themes and play behaviour were tolerated. Children’s play was influenced by those rules. Educators facilitated play through providing play material and equipment. However, they only permitted the use of the provided items in a certain way. When the educators supplied the home play corner with new doll prams, a new rule was introduced. The doll prams were to use with dolls, and not for children. A group of girls watched a play-video of home corner play, where Rashmi had been filmed sitting in one of the prams. The discussion moved to the topic of the doll’s pram. Sophia and Molly mentioned that it was not allowed to sit in them, while Rashmi explained that she had not known this rule (*Transcript M247, 17/09/2015*).
A few days later, the elaboration of this rule continued. Rashmi was not present during the conversation, but the other girls brought it up:

I: Well I think Sophia wanted to comment on it. What was not ok?
Sophia: You are not allowed to sit in the pram.
I: Ah, and Rashmi did sit in the pram.
Chloe: She didn’t know.
I: She didn’t know. Why did you know about that then that you are not allowed to sit in the pram?
Sophia: Because the teachers told us. Didn’t they, Chloe?
(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

Sophia persevered with the topic of what was not allowed, and noted that the rule actually came from the educators. In the first conversation, the girls had been talking about the rule as if it was a universal rule without a concrete source. In the second conversation, Sophia explained that the educators had told them not to sit in the pram. Sophia had shown interest in the educators’ role in their play before: when she explained that the educators had told them the rules of the ‘Snakes and ladders’ game; a situation where the educators had facilitated play. Chloe focused on a different aspect: her reaction that Rashmi had not known the rule sounded like a justification for Rashmi’s behaviour. Did Chloe defend Rashmi? In this case, Chloe could have been motivated for different reasons: she might have thought that Rashmi could get into trouble, and her defence protected Rashmi. Or Chloe wanted to point out that even though rules had been established, not all children necessarily knew them.

Rashmi was not the only child who was unaware of this particular rule. Olinda also did not know, and she was not sure why that was so. Chloe had a solution for Rashmi’s lack of knowledge when Sophia investigated more about the incident: “Because the day we spoke about that I don’t think she [Rashmi] knew about it.” (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). In other words, Rashmi had not been present when the educators introduced the new doll prams and the rule about not sitting in them. Many children did not attend the setting on a daily basis, or did not attend a complete day at the setting. If rules were not discussed with all children, some children were not
able to know the rules and act on them. Also, rules were not co-created with children. Educators mainly introduced rules undiscussed.

Another rule related to limited play in the backyard where there was less shade. The reason for the limitation related to being sun smart, which is an important aspect of living in Australia. Another reason for keeping the children in one area in the outdoor setting was to guarantee supervision. A larger space required more staff members to oversee the whole area and secure children’s safety. However, the reasons behind those regulations were neither discussed nor explained to the children. Safety reasons also restricted play themes and behaviour. Louis explained that “we don’t use guns at Ladybug” (Transcript DS500061, 12/11/2015). Clearly, the gun reference did not mean real guns, but children’s self-built guns from construction material or sticks representing weapons. With the popularity of themes such as ninja turtles and superheros, educators found children pretending to have guns in their play, and they disapproved. Educators’ objections also related to play where children were highly physically active and the safety of some children could have been at risk.

I: Hudson, did you have rules when you played this game?
Hudson: Hmm. No. The jumping ((his hands draw a curve into the air)) game had rules.
((Braxton makes snoring sounds))
I: The jumping game had rules?
Hudson: Whenever there was people. Ahm.
((Braxton gets louder))
I: Hey. Braxton. When you snore this is all on the recorder. So the recorder can only hear you snoring. But we can’t hear our chat anymore. What was that? The jumping game that had rules. So why does one play have rules? And the other doesn’t? Braxton?
Hudson: Because. Because ahm. Because <educator3> told us whenever there is people we can’t jump over there. And then whenever. And then we don’t have rules in the other one.
I: So the rules came from <educator3>?
((Hudson nods.))
(Transcript M287, 05/11/2015)
In this example, I had initially asked Hudson to explain the rules of a game he and Braxton had played. They had built a ramp for a car racing game. His attention shifted from describing the original game to another game. The keyword ‘rules’ may have triggered a memory of the jumping game: one of the educators told them to take care of other children when jumping. Jumping was banned when other children could have been at risk. These rules were likely established to protect children from harm and to make sure children’s play was safe and no one got hurt. The way Hudson continued his descriptions indicated that he perceived the educators’ rules as the only existing rules. There were not any rules in the other game in his opinion. However, Hudson’s car-racing game included explanations, such as “the first wins”. So, perhaps this did not count as a rule – or was not seen as a prohibition, rather as the natural outcome of the game. Although the jumping game rule had been in place for children’s own safety, it also limited children’s play behaviour. Hudson’s perspective of rules in play points towards the importance of the person-in-charge – who had established the rule.

Sometimes, the children did not mention whether anyone had told them to follow some particular rule. While Hudson highlighted the educators as the rulers of play, Ethan had announced that he and Leo were the “bosses” and “creators” of their games. When elucidating the games he played with Leo, Ethan did not bring up the source of the rules to his ‘belly flop’ game. The rules sounded quite similar to Hudson’s educator-introduced ones: the children were not allowed to push other children: “Yeah, if someone’s in the way then you’ll hurt them when you jump.” (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015). Both boys, Ethan and Leo, considered it to be important not to hurt or punch anyone. For Leo, it was clear that the rules were also for his own protection: “Don’t punch my head when I’m on my motorbike” (Transcript M289, 05/11/2015). Whether the two applied those rules because they made sense of them, and had internalized them, or because they knew, like Scarlett, that you can get into trouble when ignoring the educators’ rules, Ethan and Leo had taken ownership of the rules.

The discussion of the ‘not punching and hurting’ rules showed that children were aware of their existence. Children knew that fighting, even
though it was pretend fighting, was not tolerated at the ECEC setting. However, the application of the rules into children’s play was ignored from time to time. Play that had been banned by the educators still occurred: Braxton and Hudson commented on a play-video that showed them and their play partners playing “fighting swords” (Transcript M216, 20/08/2015), and Ethan was air-punching (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). Ethan especially played themes that were interrupted by the educators as they included ‘ninja fighting’ actions and the use of pretend weapons. He displayed different coping strategies to the ‘no guns’ and ‘not hurting’ rules. A few times, the researcher had observed him and other boys building weapons from construction material. Once, when an educator addressed them, they changed the way they held the ‘weapons’ and presented them to the educator as ‘sledgehammers’. Sometimes, the strategy worked and they continued their play. Other times, the educator told them to take the constructions apart, as she clearly had identified them as weapons and showed no tolerance for their use in play.

Children showed their own interpretations of rule implementation into their play. Ethan seemed to be immersed in the topic of good and bad guys and of fighting like a ninja. In most conversations, Ethan stood up and showed ninja moves or produced sounds that reminded me of laser swords in movies. The review of one of his play episodes revealed what could be another coping strategy for following the educators’ rules and at the same time not giving up on his ninja play:

Ethan: We were ummm, we were, we were actually playing ((Sophia and Chloe rocking with their chairs, looking to Ethan)) different ninja, not fighting ((he starts rocking too)). Not punching, not destroying anything, just being nice ninjas and not destroying anything. (Transcript M212, 18/08/2015)

In his explanation, Ethan was not playing anything ‘bad’ because he was in fact “destroying the bad guys” (Transcript M212, 18/08/2015). Fighting the bad guy would make him the good guy, a nice ninja. They were different. These ninjas did not destroy, but were just nice. With this strategy, Ethan implemented the ‘not hurting anyone’ rule into his favourite ninja play, most likely using a different approach than the educators had in mind. At
other times, the ‘rule-breaking’ was less caused by consciously ignoring the rules, but by the lack of knowledge of them. As Rashmi’s doll pram scenario had illuminated, children were not always aware when they broke a rule.

Children tried out new, self-invented games; and there might have been an unexplored area where educators framed rules in response to children’s spontaneous play ideas. These rules had not been introduced and discussed with the children. Throughout the field phase, situations like these occurred. However, the children did not elaborate on them. Breaking rules and its consequences were in fact a topic some children decided to remain silent about:

**I:** Oh what happened here?
**Ethan:** Uhm. ((his corners of the mouth go downwards))
**I:** Ah let’s watch it again. ((The video has finished, I restart the short video))
**Leo:** And we skidded, then the teacher watched us, then we go to the tables and tables, ((giggles)) stables. ((giggles))
**Ethan:** To the tables –
(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)

My second attempt of finding out how Ethan and Leo assessed the situation ended with Leo repeating that they just went to the tables. From observing this moment, I concluded that the educator interrupted their skidding game and sent them to the tables. The educator had controlled the boys’ play and decided that the skidding game had to be banned. Instead, the two boys were assigned to the hammering activity. Ethan’s and Leo’s choice to remain silent on the educator’s control shows that the children were gatekeepers. Children’s participation and assertion of their rights to discuss or not discuss matters will be presented in Chapter Five.

In contrast to their silence, Louis reported an experience where he felt negatively about the educators’ regulation of the play space.

**Louis:** I tell my mum that play outside and <educator3> being so rude at me. ((stemming his hands into his hips. He looks towards the camera but it could also be he looks towards the educator who is in the room))
**I: Why was she rude at you?**

*Louis: ‘cause her let me not go in the sandpit ‘cause I was cutting the block.*

*(Transcript M280, 27/10/2015)*

The ban from the sandpit sounded like a consequence from some disapproved play behaviour. The educator might have decided that the “cutting the block” was not okay, and therefore Louis was not allowed to go playing in the sandpit anymore. Hence, control over the space where children played was handled on an individual child basis. From Louis’s perspective, the educator’s behaviour was viewed as “rude”.

Children in this study explored their control of their play. They created rules and exercised power within their play. However, the ECEC setting and the adults within it, influence play by determining:

- what spaces can be used for play;
- at what times and for how long children can play;
- what material is offered and allowed in particular ways; and
- which play behaviours are tolerated.

They all contribute to the regulation of children’s play and might be beyond the players’ own control. From the children’s perspectives, educators both facilitated and limited their play. Sometimes educators’ rules were implemented by following the rule, or by adapting the rule under the children’s own conditions. Other rules were ignored, and children coped with the consequences. There was a range of play behaviours that the educators aimed to ban. However, some of the children developed strategies to avoid such bans. Although educators controlled play in many ways, the children also owned it, or, at least, perceived that they owned it.

### 4.10 Summary

As the examples in this chapter show, children’s interpretation of their play activities differed. Indeed, the question arises as to whether children identify the same activities as play. If children have different perceptions of activities as play or not play, these could be relevant in programming for a play-based curriculum in an ECEC setting. The numerical presentation of children’s ideas about play, as provided in the
Tables 7-10, highlight the diversity of their perspectives. There is not one definition of play that is applied by every child. Rather, each child holds a range of understandings of play in varied contexts. A group of children might share one understanding, but not others.

As a consequence of this diversity, a range of processes emerged from the children’s conversations about their play: pretending, excluding and including peers. I sought to provoke discussions about learning in play. Again children’s responses differed, with some children rejecting the view that they learnt anything in play, whereas others identified what they learned. Some children remained silent about this topic. The way some children contributed to the conversation through actions highlighted that peer learning occurred in their play.

Children’s play in ECEC is highly regulated, however, the source of the regulations originated from the children themselves, or from the educators which provoked the question: Who rules the play? Despite restrictions through educator-regulated play time, spaces and tolerated behaviours, children also experienced control and ownership of their play. Overall, the data for this study revealed that children’s perspectives of play are not fixed. Rather they are flexible, changing, and context-driven. The diversity of children’s perspectives of play need acknowledgement if ECEC programs are to promote play provision for all children.
5 Chapter Five: Children’s Perspectives of Participation

5.1 Introduction

In this study, the participating children explored their perspectives of play while they also experimented with being a research participant. This chapter opens by presenting a range of strategies the children used in this study to consent and dissent respectively. These acts demonstrated their awareness of having the rights to consent and dissent. Consenting and dissenting was enacted for particular times, activities and content. Once they gave consent, participation varied as the children engaged with me.

Further, this chapter addresses how the children considered and exercised their participation rights, with a range of actions providing evidence of their consciousness of their rights and their reflections upon them. For example, they asked questions and sought information about the procedures involved in the study; and they became specific in their requests. During the group conversations between the children and me, a range of participation processes emerged that the children had initiated. Participation processes included; ‘spotting’; ‘peer interviewing’; ‘performing as participation’; ‘being in role’; ‘observing and documenting’; and ‘exercising peer power’. Apart from acting and reflecting on their participation rights and creating participation processes, the children expressed different emotions in interaction with me as the researcher and with their peer participants which are illuminated throughout the presented results in this chapter.

5.2 Children’s strategies for consenting and dissenting

Voluntary participation was one of the ethical principles underlying this study. During the phase of familiarization, I discussed with the children that it was their choice to participate or not. We discussed together what the children could do if they wished to be left alone while they were playing or decided not to engage with me in a conversation. One girl said: “If we don’t want it, we say stop. We tell you.” (Field notes, 04/06/2015). She had made
the point that participation was based on a personal choice, and included an active agreement or disagreement. Saying ‘stop’ could be used anytime, hence participation was within the limits of a situational agreement. With the aid of the child assent booklet, we elaborated the different activities that I was about to use during the study, such as filming children during play, showing the play-videos to, and discussing them with, the children, while also filming our conversations. The data generation phase started with the recording of children’s play. On the first day, many children requested to be filmed: they requested it verbally, invited me into their play corners, or posed in front of the camera. As I walked through the classroom holding the camera in my hand, I also asked children if I was allowed to film their play. Sophia and Jessica responded with a quick nod before they continued playing, while Indie answered: “Yes, you are allowed.” (Field notes, 09/06/2015).

In the following days, I was also confronted with a child’s dissent. I had filmed Ethan, Jarvis and Leo in a chasing game. Jarvis called: “You can’t catch me!” but was caught by Leo. At this moment, Jarvis turned towards me and looked at my camera. He moved behind a pillar and glanced at me. It seemed to me that Jarvis was hiding from me. When he peeked at me from behind the pillar, his facial expression also did not appear to testify delight. My interpretation of this situation was that my or the camera’s presence had caused him to stop playing. I took his behaviour as a way to express his dissent, switched off the camera, and told Jarvis. He then went back to the chasing game. Throughout the study, the children made decisions about their participation for each interaction with me. Their strategies to communicate their consent or dissent varied from verbal (like Indie) to nonverbal (like Sophia, Jessica and Jarvis). This section of the chapter presents the different strategies children used to convey their consent or dissent throughout the study. Table 12 provides an overview of the range of strategies and the number of children who put those strategies to use.
Table 12: Children’s consent and dissent strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consent or dissent strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consenting</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal consent</td>
<td>Ethan: “You can share all of the videos”</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal (nodding) consent</td>
<td>I: “Hudson, do you want to tell us a bit more?” Hudson nods.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional consent</td>
<td>Ethan: “I wanna share this video with you today.”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating as consent</td>
<td>Elsa: “Can we have another chat?”</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dissenting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal dissent</td>
<td>Sophia: “Done with our chat.”</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal (shaking head) dissent</td>
<td>I: “Is that ok that Olinda and Mary are here?” Elsa shakes her head.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing something else, such as playing</td>
<td>Scarlett runs towards Sophia and they start a chasing game.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring researcher question</td>
<td>I: “Are there different kinds of play you play inside –?” Sophia: “What are these buttons for?”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving the conversation</td>
<td>Sienna: “Can I go outside? Come Zara, let’s go outside.” Sienna and Zara leave.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not elaborating an issue</td>
<td>I: “What happened here in the end?” Ethan: “Stink”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signalling the end of conversation with other comments</td>
<td>Chloe: “Let’s close the computer now.”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.1 Consent

During conversations, children consented to being filmed, to sharing their videos with other children, and to telling me and their peers about their play experiences. Consent was given through the children’s or my initiative, and through verbal and nonverbal agreement. Children’s own invitations for participation were mainly linked to watching more play-videos and to being filmed again while playing. Most often, children asked for more videos to watch: 18 out of 34 references were made on this subject, while nine times,
children requested to be filmed in play. Sophia, for example, asked me to “play it again so you can watch us.” (Transcript M251, 29/09/2015). Chloe suggested that “we do that in the sandpit, and then we can take it, and then we can straight watch it.” (Transcript M218, 20/08/2015). Sophia ensured I had switched on the video-camera during our first conversation (Transcript M172, 28/07/2015). Other times, the children expressed their consent to “have another chat” (Elsa, in Transcript M209, 11/08/2015), to share a video with others (Ethan, in Transcript M296, 12/11/2015; and Sophia, in Transcript M282, 27/10/2015), or to contribute to the conversation: “Excuse me, can I please, can I tell everybody about my photo now?” (Sophia, in Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). In this last instance, Sophia took the initiative and requested that it was her turn to share with everyone what she had to tell about her photograph. On a few occasions, I took photographs instead of video-records to overcome challenges that were related to technical support and spontaneity needed in response to the educators’ time changes of daily routines.

On my invitation to share their play-videos and play-photos respectively, with others and to tell the group about their play experiences, children practiced the same strategies as they had used to show consent to being filmed: they nodded or responded with “yes” to my offer.

I: Would you like to share some of your videos with other children?
Ethan ((stands up, very straight)): You can share all of the videos. Thank you.
I: What about Leo?
((Leo nods and smiles.))
(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)

As Ethan’s and Leo’s example displays, the children were quite different in their expressive styles. Children’s expressions changed, as did their opinions about giving consent, and whether they gave consent on a particular day, or at a particular time.

Consenting was personal and situational: one day, Ethan told me that I could share all videos; another day, he clarified his contributions to a specific content and time: “I wanna share this video with you today.” (Transcript M296, 12/11/2015). Ethan had understood that he could set the
conditions to his consent, and his comment gave a clear indication that he could control the limits of his consent: consenting once did not mean giving me unrestricted, universal access. Ethan’s consent was provisional for that day and for that particular video. Other children set different conditions: Elsa wished to tell her peers first about her play, before she handed over a photograph that captured her play, and Sienna agreed to look at her photograph but to remain silent about it (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). The provisional nature of consenting also became clear during conversations I had with the children while we looked at and discussed the child assent booklet, which was available to each child who was interested in participating. When I reflected with Louis about his potential participation, he did not tie himself down to a definitive ‘yes’ or ‘no’:

I: So Louis. Is that ok that I talk to you? And watch you play?
Louis: Yes sometimes. And make me happy to watch me on the movie.
I: So you like watching the movies that I took of you?
Louis: Sometimes I like it.
(Transcript DS5000061, 12/11/2015)

The children’s signatures (writing their names or pretending to write their names as shown in Figure 8, and drawing themselves onto a page as shown in Figure 9) expressed their agreement in participating, but at the same time, gave them the right to withdraw at any time.

Figure 8: Writing one’s name (assent)
Ethan and Louis thought about how they felt about participation and wondered if they wanted to circle both emoticons, the ‘thumbs up’ (or the “happy face” as the children called it) and the ‘thumbs down’ (or the “angry face”). Louis ended up not indicating either emoticons to demonstrate that he was continuously negotiating his participation (Figure 10). Both boys also considered the ‘unsure’ emoticon, highlighting that their participation was subject to constant change and could be re-negotiated. Sienna, while she negotiated her assent booklet, decided to circle the ‘unsure’ emoticon (Figure 11).

Figure 9: Drawing oneself (assent)

Figure 10: Negotiable assent
The children were also able to choose pseudonyms for use in reporting the study, as a means to promote confidentiality. Even though I had conversations with the children about why it was important to protect their privacy, most children chose their own name, which could be due to the children’s unfamiliarity of the use of pseudonyms or their lack of experience with issues related to confidentiality and privacy. Another explanation is that these children wished to keep their own names and not to pretend to be someone else. However, Elsa picked her pseudonym straightaway, based on her interest in the character ‘Elsa’ from the ‘Frozen’ movie (Figure 12). Towards the end of the data generation phase, Ethan and Louis discussed possible pseudonyms linked to characters from contemporary popular culture, with Ethan replying to my offer of using another name than his: “I wanna have ((pausing)) Guess what name I wanna change my name to. Nanana, Batman.” (Transcript DS500061, 12/11/2015), while Louis mentioned names from the Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers. These were characters which the boys enjoyed integrating into their play themes. In the end, they did not pick any pseudonym.
Nevertheless, they had thought about the possibility of changing names for
the assent booklet, and focused on characters they liked.

5.2.2 Dissenting

Despite the children’s enjoyment and motivation to participate, they
were selective towards their consenting, as expressed in their conditional
agreements, as well as in their various ways of dissenting. As Jarvis’s
example showed, dissent was sometimes given nonverbally, when he hid
behind the pillar. However, the children’s strategies to show their dissent
were more complex than just verbal or nonverbal expressions. What seems
like a simple question “Can we finish now?” was embedded in a multipart
argumentation from Chloe.

Chloe: When should we close the computer?
I: After we finished.
Chloe: Can we finish now?
[A while later]
Chloe: Let’s close the computer now. ((smiling, and
jumping up))
(Transcript M212, 18/08/2015)

Her first question might have been to ensure that it would be her turn to
close the laptop as Chloe remembered that one child had been allowed to do
this in the previous conversation she had joined. It could have also been her
suggestion to finish our chat. Her last sentence was stated with the
knowledge that closing the laptop would result in, or be the result of, ending
the conversation. She signalled her intention to finish the conversation.
Children saying “no” or shaking their heads were clear signals of dissent in response to my invitations to participate. One time, Ethan made it very clear that he wished to withdraw from talking about a video that the group had just watched. He stood up and said: “I don’t want to talk about it [video] because tomorrow is my birthday.” (Transcript M298, 19/11/2015). The second half of his sentence might have had nothing to do with his withdrawal, but has potentially functioned as a reinforcement of his argument. It certainly underlined Ethan’s disapproval of discussing this video. However, for Ethan, the fact that it was his birthday the next day might have been the reason for his withdrawal. Ethan’s feedback occurred in the last month after a five-month long period of continuous invitations to discuss his play experiences, and maybe signalled some sort of emotional saturation for Ethan. It had been the strongest complaint I heard throughout the whole time from any of the children. Nevertheless, children made choices about their participation and expressed them in various ways with, in this instance, Ethan choosing to express verbally his reluctance to talk about a video. For him, the exploration of his perspectives of play was finalised. It might have also been a sign that Ethan felt that he could tell me loud and clear that he was not in the mood to tell me anything. Even though I felt Ethan had quickly built a relationship with me and trusted me to respect his choices, this last recorded conversation with him showed a different confidence in expressing his dissent, compared with one of the very first ones.

I: So, Ethan and Jarvis, my question would be, if I am allowed to show this video to other children here at Ladybug’s.
((Ethan smiles and shakes slightly his head.))
((Jarvis watches Ethan and then says “no, no, no, no”, smiling.))
((Ethan and Jarvis look at each other.))
Ethan: No, no way.
Jarvis: No, no, no, no.
Ethan: No way.
I: That’s ok if you don’t want that I show them to other children, that’s ok.
Jarvis: No way, pomsay. ((laughs))
(Transcript M214, 18/08/2015)
Ethan and Jarvis might have been testing my reactions to their dissent. However, I took their “no” seriously.

Besides the more obvious strategies, like saying out loud that they wished to stop participating, the children signalled their dissent in other ways: not elaborating an issue; ignoring my follow-up questions, sometimes by engaging in something else; and leaving the conversation with or without prior request to do so.

Leaving the conversation was the most often used strategy to signal dissent. Jessica was the only participant who never left or asked to leave a conversation. All of the other children walked out of a conversation at least once; and half of those children requested or notified me of their wish to leave prior to stepping away. Sometimes, some children tried to ask for permission to leave, even though I had told them that they had the right to stop any time. Because I was sometimes occupied in a side-conversation with another child, they did not wait for my reaction and left, acting on their right to leave. Sienna brought her wish to leave to my notice while she was already skipping away (Transcript M209, 11/08/2015). It seemed the children had understood their right to dissent through leaving the conversation any time they wished. However, they must have felt that they should give me notice. Children’s childhood experiences include that adults have control over their activities to some degree (Mayall, 2002), and from the incidents I witnessed during my field phase, the participating children were used to getting their educators’ permission if they wanted to leave a group activity. Power relationships exist within the ECEC context, which could have influenced them to ask for my permission. However, it was not uncommon to tell me their wish to leave, and not waiting for my reaction. For example, Elsa said: “I wanna go outside now. I go outside.” Then, she left (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). She first expressed her wish, then she stated it as a fact, and then matched her action to the words. Some children encouraged their friends to go and play with them, using strategies such as pulling at their arms.

Elsa: I’m going outside.
I: Thank you Elsa, for staying a little bit with us. Thank you.
Sienna: Can I go outside? Come Zara, let’s go outside.  
((Sienna and Zara leave.))  
Ethan: Can I go outside as well?  
(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

Elsa expressed the wish to go, which perhaps indicated to Sienna that she could leave anytime, too. She took her friend Zara with her. Ethan then decided he wanted to follow them. The strategy ‘leaving a conversation’ then could almost be seen to have a ‘domino effect’.

Another variation for leaving the conversation was children’s wish to play, or at least in some cases, this is what they said as a reason for leaving. Perhaps they gauged this as an acceptable reason for leaving, given my interest in their play. Several children, when requesting to leave, asked: “Can I go and play now?” (for example, Hudson in Transcript M216, 20/08/2015). Sometimes, the children wanted to go back and play the same game or content that they had seen themselves playing in the play-video. For example, Hudson and John left to play Mr. Tod again, and Ethan and Leo continued their skidding game, which they had just explained to me. Sometimes though, the children did not express their wish to go and play; rather they started playing while staying nearby the conversation, opting out without completely leaving the group. Some eventually returned and continued participating. For example, Scarlett and Sophia had started a chasing game, and even though they stayed around our group, they had left the conversation and played slightly away from our circle. When they returned, they invented a game that aimed to press the video play-button first (Transcript M247, 17/09/2015).

Another reason for leaving could have been that on this occasion, we had met for the group discussion inside the classroom, while their classroom peers, who were not participating in the study, were outside playing. It was early spring, and playing outside had been limited in the last couple of months. Such situations arose from the context of the research setting, and while the children participated voluntarily in the study, such moments might have challenged them to make decisions about their participation. In one conversation, all but one participants used the words “I wanna go outside” when dissenting. They might have copied each other; or they all might have
felt that they would miss out on outdoor play time if they continued to participate.

The children did not always dissent from a whole conversation, but made decisions when to dissent from elaborating a particular topic. In these instances, they ignored my question, did not react to it, or changed the subject. For most of these reactions, the children had been confronted with a play-video that displayed challenging moments. One boy had been rejected by his typical play partners and consequently played by himself. Two other boys had been admonished by their educator. She interrupted their physically active game and sent them to a table activity instead. One of the girls seemed to have an argument with her friend while they had been recorded. I wondered if the play-video had reminded them of an upsetting experience. While John decided to react with silence, Leo limited the amount of information to what he wanted to share: “And we skidded, then the teacher watched us, then we go to the tables and dabbles, stables.” and started giggling (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015). He did not mention that the educator stopped their play and sent them to a hammering activity at a table. He and Ethan also engaged in distraction, testing my reactions to their use of words such as “wee”, and ignored my questions in other moments. They were effective in distracting the conversation in trying out the different ways of distraction. Sophia and Jessica corrected me when I inquired about a moment where it had seemed the girls had an argument in their play-video (Transcript M247, 17/09/2015). But when Sophia brought up a conversation about Rashmi’s breaking of a rule, Chloe tried to bypass it:

Sophia: And that was not ok. Because Rashmi is not -
((Chloe tries to say something.))
I: What was not ok?
Chloe: I pushed it. A question now, a question now, please.
(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

Across these examples, the children’s responses signalled that they had no intention of discussing their experiences. They all had acted on their right to privacy.
However, not all situations where children expressed dissent involved challenging experiences. Sometimes, they decided “that’s all we have to say”, like Sophia, for example (Transcript M286, 05/11/2015), and that there was just nothing to add. This did not apply to all participants of that conversation group.

Sophia: Done with our chat. ((smiles))
I: Done with our chat, ok. Then -
Scarlett: No, not done with our chat.
Sophia: Yes, we are.
(Transcript M247, 17/09/2015)

Scarlett did not express dissent at the same time as Sophia, and wished to continue the conversation, whereas Sophia decided to leave in that moment. Dissenting was a personal choice. This was evident in such situations as Scarlett’s, when one child left a conversation, while others stayed and engaged intensely.

The right to dissent included that the children decided what to share, and how they presented their thoughts. Sophia pointed to an experience where she had hurt herself in play. Her way of sharing this experience was a demonstration of the fall that had happened, accompanied with the sound “Ow!”

I: Oh, you did hurt yourself. Does this sometimes happen in play that you hurt yourself?
((Sophia lets herself fall on her hands and says “Ow!” again))
(Transcript M212, 18/08/2015)

When I tried to follow up, Sophia repeated her action. However, she decided that she had shared everything in the way she had wanted and did not add anything more. It challenged me to identify when children had definitely decided to cease their participation, when it was appropriate to follow up on issues, and when the children chose not to share more details with me.

In sum, the children demonstrated that they were holders of rights, and that it was their choice when to consent to, or dissent from, participation. They had developed and implemented a range of strategies to express their approval or disapproval to being a participant.
5.3 Children’s awareness and reflection of their participation rights

As the examples above show, consent and dissent to participate were enacted by the children, which demonstrated that the children were aware of their participation rights. In addition, the children reflected further on their rights, by exploring the procedures involved in the study. I had explained the planned research activities (watching children play; video-recording children’s play; watching play-videos in a group of the recorded children; watching play-videos of different children during a group conversation) to the children on several occasions during the period of familiarization. The child assent booklet had been discussed during group time or in interactions with individual children who had shown interest in participating. However, it was during the actual research activities, that the children considered their participation and their rights of participation. Their strategies included seeking information about research procedures and expressing requests directed to me. For example, the children sometimes specifically requested which play-videos to watch or what content to talk about.

5.3.1 Reflecting the ‘watching for giving consent to share’ rule

One of the procedures that I had established to ensure that the children had opportunities to make decisions about which play-videos would be shared during group conversations involved following steps: 1) showing a play-video to those children who had been recorded in that specific video; and 2) asking for their consent or dissent to share their play-video with other participating children.

After several play-videos had been shared with and approved by those children who had been recorded, these videos were shown during conversations with a mixed group of children. During one of these second group conversations, a discussion arose when Ethan realised that he had already seen a particular video.

Ethan: I already saw that one.
Chloe: No, you didn’t.
I: But not in the big group, Ethan. Was with different children. Remember?
Ethan: I know.
Chloe: Haven’t seen it, have I?
Ethan: I’m telling you, we already saw it in this room. ((pointing to the floor))
I: That’s true, Ethan.
Chloe: There are other children who need to see it, Ethan.
Sophia: Yeah we try to find Ro. Rose needs to be in this one. ((pointing to screen)) Rose does. I can see Rose here.
(Transcript M2U00212, 18/08/2015)

Ethan sounded almost annoyed when he recognized the video as he elongated the ‘a’ when he said “saw”. His focus lay on the fact that he had already seen it. Possibly, he wondered why he was shown the same video again, as it had been one of the play-videos capturing Ethan’s play. Chloe first disagreed with him, probably because the video was novel to her; then she wondered. I agreed with Ethan, explaining that they had watched the video with a different group of children – those who had been playing together with Ethan. Ethan then emphasised that it was a repetition, this time changing from “I” to “we”, pointing to the fact that there were other children, and not just him who had seen it. He also highlighted that they had even watched the same video in the exact same room. At this point, Chloe and Sophia reflected the procedure of watching play-videos: Chloe pointed out that a video can be shared with other children, and Sophia showed her understanding that children who are in the video are allowed to watch the video. In the following months of data generation, the children showed their growing awareness of giving consent through watching a video first before sharing with others. Sophia, in particular, demonstrated her understanding of participation rights. One time, she spotted Chloe in a play-video and asked me to “pause this [video] and I go and get Chloe” (Transcript M288, 05/11/2015).

Sophia’s continuous and deep reflection of the participant’s right to watch those videos that have been taken of herself, and other children, was highlighted in another situation:

Sophia: Louis is in here.
I: He is. He played with you that day.
Sophia: Why can’t he be in here?
I: Shall we get Louis to watch it too?
Sophia recognised that Louis was in the video, and questioned why he did not join her and Jessica in watching the video. When I asked the girls to get Louis, Jessica disapproved, while Sophia approved. This situation showed even more how strongly Sophia agreed with the right for those who appeared in the video to be part of the group discussing it. Even though she mostly excluded Louis from her activities, the right to watch and give consent to share a video of oneself had higher priority for her than being exclusive in this situation.

In contrast to the example above, the children also reflected that they had the right to be exclusive when it came to sharing their videos. When a child had not been recorded, the recorded child could send the other away, exercising his own right. For example, Ethan sent Louis away in one situation: “This is not your video. Louis. Is it alright if you go away?” (Transcript M289, 05/11/2015). Ethan’s comment included an explanation of why he had a right to send Louis away, and was followed with a polite request to Louis to leave. Ethan had acted on his right to watch his video first before deciding to share or not to share it with others. As the research activities often happened in the classroom or in the outdoor area while other children played in the same areas, the challenge was to give the participating children the space to act on their rights to watch their video-recorded play privately.

When Ethan explained to Louis why he wanted him to go away, he mentioned something that was important to him: “This is not your [Louis’s] video.” Louis was not eligible to watch the video without Ethan’s approval, as Louis could not claim ownership of the video. Throughout the fieldwork phase, some children claimed ownership of the videos and photographs taken of them. They had asked me about their play-videos. For example, the participants called out the names of children who were visible on the screen, and claimed them as the owners of the video.

_Ethan: This is Bill’s video._
_Leo: Yeah that’s Bill’s video._
Claiming ownership of play-videos was not common. On very few occasions, children sent peers away. However, when I changed from video-records to photographs, in order to try a stimulus that needed less technical support during a group conversation, several children claimed ownership and did not want to share or show their photographs.

Jarvis and Sophia both tried to get a glance at the photographs which Chloe held in her hands, but Chloe did not show them. Chloe had understood that it was her right to reject sharing her photographs. John’s and Jackson’s ownership of photographs went so far that they requested to take them home (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015). However, all participating children selected almost all of the taken photographs to present on posters to their parents and educators at the farewell exhibition. Reaction to the audience for sharing play-videos and photographs was a conscious act that could underlie change; the children were specific about what they wanted to share with whom and when.

5.3.2 Requesting to watch specific videos and to discuss particular contents

The participating children had rights in relation to their involvement in the study. The children showed that they had understood their right to watch their play recordings first before deciding if and with whom they shared them. This project was anchored in the principles of the United Nation’s (1989) CRC, recognizing children’s rights to express their opinions, make choices about their participation, to consent and to dissent from their participation. This also included the right to have an influence on
their participation in research activities. With growing awareness of their participation rights, they requested to watch specific play-videos. The children remembered being video-recorded during their play, and so they reminded me and asked for that specific recording, as Ethan did in this situation: “Now can we watch the one where I jump off the table?” (Transcript M212, 18/08/2015). Ethan recalled, in detail, his actions while he had been recorded. This allowed him to explain very clearly to me which video he wanted to see. When children requested their specific play-videos, they became agents of their own participation. Their demands helped them to test whether I acknowledged and took their claims seriously. Some children also took charge of selecting a specific sequence in one video to talk about. This decision process was supported as the children had figured out how to pause or re-play a video. Sophia introduced this process, offering to pause the video for Scarlett when her friend wanted to comment on a particular sequence (Transcript M286, 05/11/2015). Sometimes, though, it was all about having fun and enjoyment: John asked on different occasions to re-watch the video that showed when he and his friends had played Mr. Tod. His request was taken positively by his friends who had been playing with him. They started talking excitedly about the day they had played Mr. Tod when John reminded me to switch on the particular video, but hardly commented when they finally re-watched it. Instead, Hudson invited John to go and play Mr. Tod again (Transcript DS500059, 05/11/2015).

The participating children showed also growing awareness of their rights when they requested not only to watch their play-videos, but the recordings of the group conversations. Some of the girls, especially, wished to listen back to their recorded conversations.

Scarlett: After afternoon tea, after that, can we watch the video that we are talking about?
I: Which one?
Scarlett: That one ((pointing to the camera)), that where, where we do talking about this.
I: Oh, ((pointing to camera)) exactly the video that we are taking at the moment?
Scarlett: Yeah.
I: You wanna watch the one where we can hear our chat?
Scarlett: Yeah.
Sophia: Do you mean this one? ((pointing on the screen, still re-running the same short play-video we had focused during our chat))
Scarlett: No. ((pointing to camera, almost overstretching her arm)). The chat one.
Sophia: Chit-chat. ((moving her arms in front of her))
I: Well. ((laugh)) I can connect the camera to my computer and then we can have a listen to our chat after, or this afternoon. If you would like.
Scarlett: I like after.
(Transcript M247, 17/09/2015)

Scarlett understood that she had the right to listen to all records involving her. After she had drawn attention to the recording of this conversation, other children replicated the request. Sophia participated in eight more recorded conversations, and in four of them she requested to “have a hear” (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015) or even to “watch the video thing” (Transcript M251, 29/09/2015). In two of the eight conversations, her friend Jessica raised the request: “Can we listen to the words?” (Transcript M285, 27/10/2015).

With greater awareness of the research procedures, the girls paid more attention to them. They started to seek more information about the audio- and video-recordings and the technical aspects around them. Questions were about which day I had taken a video; if I had switched on the audio-recorder; or how the audio-recorder was working.

Sophia: Did you switch this one yet? ((looks at audio-recorder, then at researcher))
I: Yes I did.
Olinda: How come we don’t hear it?
Sophia: Because.
I: Because it’s taking your voices and we cannot hear while we’re recording them.
Olinda: Oh that’s weird.
(Transcript M282, 27/10/2015)

While Sophia was interested to know if their conversation was recorded, Olinda wondered how the process of recording could happen although she was not able to “hear” it happening. Apart from Sophia, other children did not ask about the video-recording. However, some participants walked
behind the camera and looked at the display and the video-recorded scene. This kind of recording might have been more obvious to them, as the children were able to watch the video-recording through the display, while the audio-recording could not be heard at the same time as the voices were being recorded. One time, the girls listened back to their audio-records, while the video-camera was still capturing the moment, and Sophia commented on the content that she could hear on the voice-record: “Why don’t we say anything about play and the activities?” (Transcript M282, 27/10/2015). She had reflected on the overall content of the conversation, and was surprised when she did not hear the exact words.

In several conversations, the children asked questions about the recording. Ethan wondered like Olinda, why he was not able to hear what the audio-recorder was recording. When I explained that it was only possible to listen back after the voices had been recorded, Ethan answered: “So, now I know what it is doing. It’s doing that.” (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). And Jessica commented: “And then you know what I’m saying by the way.” (Transcript M282, 27/10/2015). For her, in this moment, it must have become clear what the recordings’ purpose was in order to help me remember what Jessica had contributed to the conversation. She questioned later though, “How can this even hear us?” and this led to some experimenting with the audio-recorder. For example, Jessica got very close to the microphone and spoke with a louder voice. The participants demonstrated that they not only had the right to see their recorded play, and to discuss particular video-sequences, but that they also had the right to get more insight into procedures and to be well informed about their participation.

5.4 Participation processes

There were five participation processes I identified from children’s choices of how to participate: spotting, peer interviewing, performance, observing and documenting and exercising peer power. Each of these is discussed below. As the Table 13 shows, spotting occurred the most, whereas the children opted the least for ‘observing and documenting’, while
peer power was exercised in fewer conversations, compared with the other processes.

Table 13: Children's participation processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation processes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Number of conversations</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spotting</td>
<td>Hudson: “That’s Jason, and that’s me, playing.” (pointing on screen)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer interviewing</td>
<td>Elsa: “What were you making, Hudson?”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Louis: “We put the legs on ((stands up)), we put the arms on ((stretches his arms)), and the heads on ((puts his hands on the head)), and the legs on ((gliding his hands down his legs)), and it can cut like this.”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing and documenting</td>
<td>Chloe: “Oh, let’s write them down.” ((jumps up and walks to the bookstand at the wall))</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising peer power</td>
<td>Olinda: “Shhh ((pressing her hand on Chloe’s upper body)) I can hear it. ((pressing her hand now on Chloe’s throat when Chloe attempted to say more)) Be quiet.”</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4.1 Spotting

‘Spotting’ is a process that the participants engaged in while watching video-recorded play scenes or photographs. It was often exercised at the beginning of watching a video-recorded play and had the highest occurrence of the processes (n =183). Spotting was exercised by different children in 18 different conversations (Table 13). The high frequency might be linked with the notion that once one child started to spot oneself or a peer, other children joined in the spotting activity. In comparison, fewer instances of children exercising peer power were noted (7 conversations). However, when considering actual occurrences, the processes of observing and documenting were the least evident, with 17 occurrences in total. When children were first shown the recorded play-videos as a prelude to
consenting or dissenting to the use of their records in a group conversation with other participants, the children did not comment much on what was happening in the video. Instead, they often pointed to the screen, and mentioned their own or their peers’ names. Initially, I did not ascribe much importance to the children’s behaviour. It seemed like a natural behaviour to focus on seeing yourself or your friend on a photograph or in a video. It was when a group of boys started a lively discussion, that my attention was more drawn towards their ‘spotting’ behaviour.

What was supposed to be ‘watching for consent’ turned into a group conversation. The spotting was their starting point: Hudson shouted: “There is John”, and Jackson said: “There is Louis”, both pointing to the video-screen (Transcript M216, 20/08/2015), before the group of boys entered a more detailed discussion about their play.

_Hudson: Chris and Louis are right there. ((pointing on screen))_
_Braxton: And he is, he is -
_Hudson: =fighting sword.
_Braxton: Yeah, he is fighting swords with me. ((pause, stands up and points to screen)).
_Hudson: with Chris.
_Braxton: I can see you, and John and Kyle. ((points to screen, sits down again))
_Kyle: That’s me.
_Braxton: Where is me?
_Hudson: There are you, Braxton.
_Jackson: There is me. ((pointing to screen)).
_(Transcript M216, 20/08/2015)_

The boys saw themselves in the video. It was an exciting moment for them, and worth talking about. Once the boys had started to chat about who had been recorded, they also talked about what they were doing, for example, pretending to fighting with swords, and then continued spotting more peers. When I went back and forth through all transcripts to look what had happened in other ‘spotting’ moments, a comment from Chloe gave me the key for labelling the process: “Let me see if we can spot me.” (Transcript M212, 18/08/2015). She invited all conversational participants to join her spotting activity, while most of the time, one participant just started to look for him or herself or for others, and then more participants joined in.
The ‘spotting’ process occurred in eighteen of the 32 recorded and transcribed conversations. Comparing this with the other processes, spotting was used most by the children, while peer interviewing and performing as participation was identified in thirteen of the 32 conversations, observing and documenting in nine, and exercising peer power in seven.

So, what exactly happened during this popular activity? It was directed towards spotting oneself or spotting peers, and was verbally expressed with sentences, such as “There is me” or “That’s you”. A comment from Rose led me towards the process that was often happening prior to the children’s spotting verbalizations. In Rose’s case, she verbalised what was happening in her mind: “Where was I? Nowhere? There.” (Transcript M280, 27/10/2015). She had searched for herself in the video. First, her search was unsuccessful, and she was “nowhere” in that video. Some children directed the question towards me if they could not spot themselves: “Where is me?”, or “Where am I?”, or “Am I in the video?” Rose then did spot herself: “There”. Thus, spotting was initiated by a search leading to either a successful or unsuccessful result. As in Rose’s case, she had found herself, and she excitedly acknowledged that. Often, the successful spotting was accompanied with a gesture, and the child pointing to the video screen.

Braxton: John! ((pointing with both hands with pointy fingers towards screen))
(Transcript M216, 20/08/2015)

The finger pointing was used by different children either while sitting on the chair, or in combination with walking towards, and sometimes touching the screen. After Leo first could not spot himself, he and Ethan finally found Leo’s video counterpart, and Ethan stroked the screen, as if he was stroking Leo’s video-self (Transcript M279, 27/10/2015).

What did the spotting activity mean to the participants? Spotting was differentiated into two main areas. One focused on spotting oneself after a successful search. The moment was acknowledged with a verbal expression that meant: ‘I see me’. The spotting of a peer followed the same structure. ‘I see you’ included a relational aspect: ‘I create a relationship to my peer by telling him or her that I see them. It is not about me, but about the people
around me. I acknowledge their presence.’ Peers would also help each other spotting themselves. Accordingly, when Braxton, in the first example in this subsection, asked where he was, Hudson responded and helped Braxton find himself in the video. When children used both spotting themselves and others, they created moments of shared experience. ‘You and me’ become a group. For example, Sienna first commented on a photograph: “That’s Zara and me.” Then, she turned to Zara and excitedly told her: “Yay, it’s us, Zara. Us.” (Transcript M250, 24/09/2015).

Sometimes, the departure from spotting ‘you’ and ‘me’ led not only to ‘us’, but also to ‘what we did together’.

Sophia: That’s Shae, and that’s me. (pointing on the picture). That’s us playing with the light box over there and we were matching shades and we were making a story with the light box. With the pictures. (turning to Chloe)
(Transcript M249, 22/09/2015)

Sophia’s, like Sienna’s, spotting of her friend and herself was the departure for an elaboration of their social play and the narration of their play content. The creation of this social activity that led to successful spotting was experienced positively, and the children smiled, laughed, and sounded excited. Spotting created a space where the children consented to share their memories. It enabled them to make sense of their play memories and to give meaning to their participation in discussing their play experiences.

While the participating children enjoyed spotting themselves or their peers, an unsuccessful search for oneself was experienced negatively by some children. If children had consented to share their video, other children were invited to watch it. The result of this procedure was that children watched play-movies that did not always feature them. For example, Olinda and Jessica could not spot themselves in one video-sequence and expressed their disappointment (Transcript M282, 27/10/2015). Hannah might also have felt disappointed and left out, when she could not spot herself and commented that “Carmen didn’t take a video of me.” (Transcript M218, 20/08/2015). It was mainly the girls who asked me if they were in the videos we were about to see, while only two boys, Hudson and Braxton asked me
once, when they could not spot themselves right away. An unsuccessful search might have led to the children’s conclusion that participating in watching a play-video that was not about them, was not relevant. In contrast, a successful spotting, no matter of oneself or a peer, had several positive outcomes: it was enjoyed; it was verbalized excitedly in front of the group; it led to a social activity and encouraged engagement in conversation about the shared play experience. Spotting provoked conversations.

5.4.2 Peer interviewing

Peer interviewing was the second most frequent participation process. The children in this study engaged in conversations with each other. When a group of children who had played together watched their recorded play, their conversations had a ‘flow’ which encouraged collaborative telling and completion of the story around their play experience. However, in a mixed group of players and observers where the children watched their peers’ recorded play, discussions were also provoked. Children wanted to know what their peers had been doing. Linked to children’s curiosity about each other’s play, the children started interviewing their peers. Showing interest in their peer’s play, they commented on their peers’ play-videos and gave suggestions for further play ideas.

Ethan: You know, Hudson. Make a ramp with those box ‘cause the box won’t let it. You just crash into it ((making a movement with his left hand)) and then destroy the ramp.
[A short while later, Hudson picks up on Ethan’s proposal.]
Hudson: Ethan, this is what we’ll do. ((holding both hands up, as if one hand is the tricycle and the other hand is the ramp that is in front of the other, Ethan watches Hudson’s hands)), we just smash them, and we gonna right up. ((Hudson’s ‘tricycle ’-hand rising up)). And that stops our tyres ((looking at Ethan)), before going into, before going into the monkey before going into that climbing things.
Ethan: Are you meaning the bars?
Hudson: Those black bars. It’s ((pointing to the screen)), see that’s what we use it for. For doing that.
(Transcript M212, 18/08/2015)
Hudson must have not quite agreed with Ethan and felt some clarification was needed. Therefore, he explained to Ethan exactly what he and Nathan had intended with building their ramp: to prevent from crashing into the monkey bars during their tricycle race. For Ethan, the aim of the game was about destroying the ramp, while for Hudson, the ramp had a protective function. Peer proposals provoked the children to explain what their play content and their actions were about.

Peer interviewing could include comments and suggestions, as well as explanations and, as in any formal interview, asking questions and responding. However, the children did not have formally assigned roles, and interviewer and interviewee roles were fluid and interchangeable. In the first group conversation that I initiated at the start of the data generation process, a group of children watched play-videos of each other and the children began interviewing their peers. Elsa asked Sophia if she was pretending, and, she wanted to know what Hudson was making (Transcript M209, 11/08/2015). It was also in this first group conversation where the children created their first rule for structuring the conversation. Ethan got very active and showed his ninja moves to everyone, and I asked him if he could maybe show us his ninja moves after we had watched the play-video. Chloe expressed interest in showing some moves, too. Then, Sophia made a suggestion:

*Sophia: How about, how about ((waving her right hand)), if anybody has a move that they can do it after ((pointing on the group time carpet)), in the middle. ((points to the carpet, looks towards me))
(I nod and smile in Sophia’s direction.))
Chloe: I have a move. ((jumping up and raising her hand “school-like”))
Sienna: I have moves. ((raising both hands))
Sophia: I have moves. ((raising one hand “school-like”))
Ethan: I have moves too, and I will show them first.
Chloe: And I will show next.
(Transcript M209, 11/08/2015)

Sophia’s invitation received positive responses from everyone. Chloe was the first to react. She stated that she had a move, a comment that was
repeated by Sienna, Sophia herself, and Ethan. Everyone had accepted Sophia’s invitation. She had created and verbalized a rule: anyone who wanted to show their moves would do so in the middle of the carpet, after the play-video had finished. Ethan picked up the idea and added the next rule, setting up an order: “I will show first”. Chloe again reacted first and put herself next in line. The children had come up with their first verbalized rules for the interaction.

In the following week, motivated by observing the flow in children’s peer interviewing, I had encouraged a group of girls to ask questions about their peers’ video. Olinda posed a question to Chloe about her motives: “Why did you wanna play that?” Chloe’s answer gave insight into the context of her play: “Because we did not have been in this room.” In this moment, Chloe was thinking about the play space. Hannah copied Olinda and asked the same question, and Chloe’s answer revealed details of the play content: “So, animals get sick or get hurt. That’s why we’re there.” Chloe explained why she had played vet. The same question posed by two different children had illuminated two different aspects of Chloe’s motivation to play. So, peer interviewing revealed the children’s interest in their peers’ play, and could provide insight into a range of aspects.

Then, Chloe assumed responsibility for the conversation, and created a rule for structuring the peer interviewing, because “Dana needs some questions”.

Chloe: Dana, if Hannah ((pointing to Hannah)) puts her hand up, you answer her. ((pointing to Dana, walks back to her seat, mumbling)) I answer this. ((Hannah raises her hand, looks to Dana, smiling,)) ((Dana shows no reaction,)) ((Hannah puts her hand on her head,)) ((Chloe walks towards the laptop,)) I: Look, Dana, Hannah has a question. ((Chloe turns around to the girls, steps back towards her seat but keeps standing,)) Hannah: Dana! ((raises hand again when she has heard that I saw her attempt,)) ((Dana does not react,)) I: Yes, Hannah, what would you like to say? ((Chloe sits down, scribbling in a book,))
Hannah: Why did you play that game? ((looking at me))
Chloe: We already had that question. ((not looking up, slightly shaking her head))

(Transcript M218, 20/08/2015)

Chloe’s structuring created a formal interview situation with assigned interviewer and interviewee roles. The structure also included who would be interviewing which peer. Hannah followed Chloe’s rule, while Dana did not pick up the structure and did not react to Hannah’s request. I encouraged Hannah to pose her question. She repeated the question which she had asked Chloe before, and received disapproval from Chloe. Apparently, posing the same question twice by the same interviewer was not the correct interviewing style in Chloe’s opinion.

The children’s peer interviewing rules were enhanced, and at some point, peer interviewing involved the operating of the video-player. Sophia introduced the rule that “when we talk we pause it [video]” (Transcript M286, 05/11/2015) to Scarlett who agreed. She did not agree that Sophia was the video-operator. Sophia might have only created this rule as she enjoyed pressing the play-button. Pausing and re-playing the video had been of interest to several children. However, Scarlett transferred the rule to the following group conversation and explained it to Chloe and Molly: “You have to pause the button when you talk.” (Transcript M288, 05/11/2015). And the rule became established when Ethan had also asked to pause the video, and Chloe’s assumption was: “Now you gonna talk about it, Ethan.” (Transcript M289, 05/11/2015). Peer interviewing was a participation process chosen, and continuously enhanced, by the children.

An advantage of peer interviewing for me as the researcher became obvious, when one of the girls picked up an issue that had been ignored when I had asked the children. Chloe had just told about playing with Rashmi, and that Rashmi had been sitting in one of the doll prams. Sophia commented that “that was not ok” (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015), and I inquired further what Sophia meant. But Chloe tried to ignore my query pushing for another question. However, Sophia picked up the topic again and with persistence, she received an answer from Chloe. This example highlighted the power of peer interviewing in comparison with an interview.
situation between a child participant and an adult researcher. While Chloe had ignored my question, she was responsive towards Sophia.

Throughout the data generation, the children became more confident in peer interviewing. During our conversations, some boys had started playing with the video-camera, so I walked towards them to make sure I was still able to video-record the ongoing conversation. It was then that Scarlett picked up the audio-recorder holding it towards Sophia.

*Sophia: Scarlett?*  
*Scarlett: Yeah?*  
*Sophia: What was the funniest part that you did in the video?*  
*Scarlett: I don’t know.*  
*Sophia: The funniest part that I did in the video was that I –*  
*(Transcript M289, 19/11/2015)*

I walked back to the girls. Sophia stopped talking, and Scarlett looked at me, moving the audio recorder towards the table. I took the recorder and put it back on the table, not knowing that I had just interrupted the girls’ interview. This little sequence indicated that the girls had understood the function of the audio-recorder (Scarlett holding it like a microphone in front of Sophia); they had also applied formal interviewing roles (posing a question to the interviewee); they had chosen a topic (being interested in their funniest actions); and they had made a choice about how to participate. Their decision had been to interview their peer while I was not present, and to stop peer interviewing when I returned.

5.4.3 Performing as participation

The process of performing entailed a range of self-chosen strategies to participate. Mostly, the children decided to perform spontaneously and maybe even unconsciously. However, some performances were chosen more purposefully to explain play actions to me, and possibly to the other children. Explanatory performances included using gestures or the whole body to demonstrate a play action, or repeat parts of the play. Participating turned into playing, which revealed children’s perspectives of play, as well as how children wished to participate.
Using gestures was almost one child’s speciality. Hudson had a particular style of explaining things.

_Hudson: It’s because, me, Nathan, we kept racing, and we taking turns, and then we keep, that’s kept stopping our wheels, and we kept going around that ((showing a curve with one hand)) little block, and then ((hand moving against the other hand and stops)) once we hit each other in the first round when we ran around that._

_(Transcript M212, 18/08/2015)_

Hudson repeatedly used his hands to show what he was talking about. One time, Chloe and Hannah simulated playing hairdressers, and Ethan used a gesture to replace the educator’s action, maybe because Ethan had forgotten the word for the tambourine which the educators shook to signal pack up time.

Gesturing was performed in a broader sense by Louis who demonstrated with his whole body how he had built his transformer.

_Louis: We put the legs on ((stands up)), we put the arms on ((stretches his arms)), and the heads on ((puts his hands on the head)), and the legs on ((gliding his hands down his legs))._  
_(Transcript M254, 29/09/2015)_

His body movements were synchronized to his verbal descriptions.

Performance was a great opportunity for children to participate. In Louis’s case, his verbal explanations did not change immensely during one conversation, and were rather repetitive. However, he showed the diversity of performing which enabled him to give insight into the construction/pretend transformer game. One time, his explanations were accompanied by using his own body to demonstrate the transforming; the next time, he used his mobile construction for demonstrations:

_Louis: I’ll show you. You put the arms up ((changes the Mobilo)), you put the legs up ((changes the Mobilo)), and then it can transform into a bird. ((changes the Mobilo, then holding his figure up in front of his eyes))_  
_(Transcript M254, 29/09/2015)_
Louis had not only described the transformation steps that it took to create a bird, he had also used building for an audience as participation strategy. In doing so, he started playing with his transformer again. Ethan and Leo chose a similar way to explain the rules and actions of their skidding game.

_Ethan: Skidding. This was the skid one._
_I: Skid one?_  
_Ethan: Yeah I’ll show you._  
_Leo: Watch this Ethan. Ethan._  
_Ethan: I take my shoes off, ok?_  
((The boys both stand up. They run a few steps and let them fall sideways to the floor, while the leg in direction of movement slides, skids forwards.))  
_Leo: This is how you do the skids. I’ll show you. You do the skid. We just run –_  
_Ethan: We run._  
_Leo: We run. ((running))_  
_Ethan: So you do this. You do this._  
_I: Can I take the video to record this?_  
_Ethan: Yeah so you can see. ((pause)) double super skid._  
((leaning forward with one fist pointing towards the direction of movement, then he runs and skids))  
((They laugh.))  
_Leo: Like this, like this. You do this. ((runs, lets himself fall and rolls on the floor))_  
(Transcript M279, 27/10/2015)

It seemed that it was easier to describe the skidding while they were playing the game: doing instead of describing was the solution to participation. While the boys intentionally played the game to demonstrate the actions, rules, and structure of the game for me, children could also draw their attention to their play actions through imitation of the actions observed in the play-video.

### 5.4.4 Being in role

When the children started imitating their own or their peers’ play actions from the video, the children automatically started playing. Being in role was the most common performance used for participation. A spotting moment was the departure for a group of boys to look more closely at what the spotted peer was doing, and this created a social activity between the participating children.
Hudson: Jackson, this is what you do. ((turns towards him and clap his hand on his face, copying Jackson’s action from the play-movie))
Braxton: I am in there too.
Jackson: I needed the cookies.
Braxton: You’re eating the cookies.
((Kyle imitates the clapping-mouth.))
Jackson ((tone of his voice gets higher and giggly)): Yeah, cookie from John.
Braxton ((giggly voice)): I ate my cookies outside.
(Transcript M216, 20/08/2015)

Hudson imitated Jackson’s behaviour (clapping his hand on his mouth pretending to eat cookies) at which Jackson responded with going back into the character he had played in the video-scene. It was Hudson’s initiation, however, Jackson and Braxton then created a shared activity and started playing together. Clearly, the successful spotting had been a pleasurable moment that motivated the children to re-live the play together.

The children were strongly involved in being in role as a form of participation. It was also evidence of the children’s strong emotional engagement that they experienced in play and while watching a play that they had enjoyed. For example, some of the boys performed pretend acts of being a monster, ninja or superhero. Braxton, Louis and Ethan enacted roles instead of explaining their play. These moments gave me better insight into children’s perspectives of play; that play implied for example acting as if being a monster. I could observe Braxton stepping into the role, saying sentences that verbalized the character he had chosen, as well as adopting behaviour Braxton believed to suit his role:

Braxton: Wuahh. I am the monster. ((again moving “like the monster”)) Wuahhhh. ((sits down)) Wuahwuah (does crawling-movement of his arms))
(Transcript M216, 20/08/2016)

Pretending during conversations highlighted the children’s ability to switch character quickly, including changing their voice or the way they moved.

Being in role as participation opened up questions such as whether or not talking about play was basically impossible or meaningless to the
children without playing at the same time, or if such actions reflected that we had created a space where the children felt confident to engage with me.

By playing, the children could demonstrate their play expertise, while at the same time, playing made the participation potentially more enjoyable. Performing as a ninja might have given Ethan the power to request watching a particular video that he remembered had been taken of him: “Remember I was uah” was followed by some ninja moves and air kicks (Transcript M209, 11/08/2015). And Louis sounded quite scary and powerful, when he made fighting sounds and performed: “I show Power Rangers. It’s time for megacharge.” (Transcript DS500061, 12/11/2015). He was challenged with the question about whether he wanted to choose a fantasy name as pseudonym when we looked at his assent booklet. Being a Power Ranger might have made him feel less challenged.

5.4.5 Observing and documenting

From the beginning of the data generation phase, children from the research setting formed an interested audience which they watched those children who participated in one of the research activities. When I showed the first two children their play-video, John came closer to our group. When I looked up I saw him standing behind the camera which I had placed on a tripod. He asked me what we were doing. Then, he called a friend to “Watch this!” (Transcript M172, 28/07/2015). John showed interest in the camera, but also in observing others while being recorded in a conversation throughout the data generation phase. He came back to watch the camera when he was not part of the conversation, and experimented and changed the height of the camera (Transcript M248, 17/09/2015). It was his way of being a part of the process. For me, it indicated that he was interested in being a participant and I invited him to be video-recorded himself. John accepted. Chloe was less interested in operating the camera, but more in directing the children in how to perform for the camera:

Chloe: I wanna watch the camera. ((she runs to the video-camera and looks on the display)) Ethan look at me. I wanna take a video.
[A while later, she continues]
Chloe: Hey guys when you’re making a video make sure you’re not looking at the camera.  
(Transcript M289, 05/11/2015)

Chloe enjoyed stepping away from being a conversation participant. Instead, she slipped into the role of the director who documented the conversation. Scarlett first acted as a narrator in the background: “Talking to Louis. So Louis’s talking now.” After a while, she also started directing and encouraging actions, like Chloe: “And I take a video of you. Be silly.” (Transcript M298, 19/11/2015). Observing and documenting others was itself a form of participation.

It was also Chloe, together with Olinda and Hannah, who claimed to create written documentation of a conversation of which she had been part. Hannah had obtained a scribble book from a nearby table. She opened the pages and looked down at them while she asked Olinda how she had come up with the idea for her play. Chloe and Olinda imitated Hannah and grabbed some more scribble books and pens. Throughout the whole conversation, the girls looked up and down from their books, busy scribbling and chatting at the same time. I might have encouraged the link between their scribbles and interviewing, as I asked if they had written everything down we had said. However, three weeks later, Chloe initiated the writing activity.

I: Do you maybe want to tell me more about what you were doing?  
Chloe: Oh, let’s write them down. ((jumps up and walks to the bookstand at the wall to get a scribble book))  
(Transcript M247, 17/09/2015)

I wondered if Chloe pretended to write down our conversation, playing the role of a documenter. Independently of the props, such as the scribble books or the video-camera, the children participated while being inside the conversation, as well as outside of the conversation through observation and (pretend) documentation. Pretending to be the camera-person was a similar participatory process to being in role. Any performance gave access to the research activity in the child’s own chosen way.
5.4.6 Exercising peer power

The observation of participants in a research activity was sometimes accepted by those being observed. Other times, the participants did not like to have audience, and asked those observing children to “move away” (for example Sophia, in Transcript M288, 05/11/2015). It was John whom Sophia was sending away: a boy who also belonged to the regular group of research participants. Scarlett had not reacted to John approaching the research activity. But she disapproved of the appearance of a boy from the junior classroom. “You’re not allowed to watch. It’s not your video” she said to the boy. Scarlett had acted on her right to privacy which included first to give consent before sharing one of her play-videos. This right gave her the power to send this boy away. What happened was that children used their power to exclude others.

Olinda: Is there another one? With Sophia and Sessi [Jessi for Jessica]?
I: Yeah there is another one of Sophia and Jessica. You won’t be in that video.
Jessica: And it depends if we want her to be in it, isn’t it?
Sophia: Yeah.
((Sophia and Jessica lean over the recorder, their hats almost touching each other))
Jessica: And we don’t want her to be in it.
Sophia: Yeah we don’t want to be in it. Ok?
Jessica: Yea::h.
(Transcript M282, 27/10/2015)

The three girls had finished watching a video of their social play. Olinda wanted to know if there were more videos about Sophia and Jessica. Maybe she also wanted to know if there were more of herself. I responded, and possibly laid a foundation for Sophia and Jessica to feel powerful, as I highlighted that I had a video including her friends but not Olinda. Jessica used a powerful word: Olinda continued participation was dependent on her friends’ decision. The right to consent or dissent to share a video was used to exercise peer power in this moment.

The moment that excluded Olinda was complex in comparison with a situation where Chloe did not want to share her photographs with either
Sophia or Jarvis. She claimed ownership of her photos, as “they are mine” and “there is nothing about you” (Transcript M249, 22/09/2015). Sophia persisted, but Chloe repeated that the photos were hers, and Sophia could not claim the right to see them, as she was not in them. Olinda’s exclusion took several steps. First, there was only a threat to be excluded through the proclamation of dependency. Second, Sophia and Jessica moved closer to each other. While they leaned over the recorder, they built a unity. The hats which the girls were wearing almost created a protective shield that excluded Olinda spatially. Then, Jessica made a decision which declared Olinda’s exclusion verbally. Sophia mirrored Jessica’s statement, adding a reassuring “Ok?” which was approved by her friend. When dissent was constituted by two children, their right reinforced their power to exclude others. Exercising peer power was possibly connected to the status of the children’s friendship. When Sophia was invited to watch one of her recorded play-videos, Sophia decided to share it with Jessica: “You can still watch.” (Transcript M282, 27/10/2015).

Children’s exercise of power within peer interactions also emerged in situations where they watched a shared play-video. Peer power was exercised verbally and nonverbally at the same time on most occasions. However, the level of physically exercising power varied. While Hudson held back Nathan quickly with one hand, so Nathan would not be in Hudson’s way while watching a video, Olinda persistently got annoyed with the children who walked towards the screen to have a closer look, or to point and touch the screen after a successful spotting. The physicality increased; first Olinda grabbed Chloe’s arm, then she moved her back to the chair, pressing one hand on Chloe’s upper body. When Chloe wanted to comment, Olinda covered Chloe’s mouth. In an initial strategy to escape Olinda’s intervention, Chloe agreed with what Olinda tried to prevent Chloe from doing, demanding “everyone stop touching the screen and go sit down!” (Transcript M218, 20/08/2015). Then, in order to gain power back, Chloe responded with a chasing game which was entered into by Hannah. Chloe pretended to sit down, but then quickly walked back to the screen, Hannah following her. They both touched the screen, much to the dismay of Olinda, before they went back to their seats. Trying to keep Chloe on her
seat, Olinda built a barrier with her arm but she had overlooked Hannah who took the initiative next and ran to the screen. Olinda, still making a barrier for Chloe, was not able to stop Hannah. While Olinda looked towards Hannah, Chloe escaped and ran laughingly towards the screen. Olinda expressed her dislike with an annoying sounding “no”, and Hannah and Chloe returned to their seats. They had won the game. Olinda repeatedly showed annoyance when children walked to the screen to spot and touch their video-selves. However, she did not hold Chloe back again.

5.5 Summary

The children who participated in this study decided when and in what ways they wanted to take part. They engaged with me during the participation opportunities on offer and ‘played’ with the possibilities of participation. Playing with their participation possibilities demonstrated children’s awareness of their rights to consent and dissent regarding participation. Across the study, it became evident that each child had preferred strategies for exercising these rights in ways that suited them.
6 Chapter Six: Discussion

This chapter directly addresses all of the research questions for this study by exploring the analysed data in relation to the relevant literature. First, the five contributing research sub-questions are answered. Then these considerations are merged to answer the overall question of the study: What are children’s perspectives of play experienced in ECEC? Researching children’s perspectives of play has not only been a matter of observing what children identify as play, but has also involved considering what understandings they derive from play, and what links they make between play and learning. How they described play, and how they participated throughout the study have added to the reflection on what characterises ethical spaces for researching with children about their play. The discussion of the research questions addresses play from the children’s points of view, and participation processes to make research with children possible, enjoyable and insightful.

6.1 Research question 1: What do children identify as play?

Research utilises many different definitions of play (Garvey, 1977; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Huizinga, 1955; Pellegrini, 2009; Rubin et al., 1978; Wood, 2009). These have been drawn from different theorisations of play (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Within early childhood education, research attention has focused on ‘play as pedagogy’ and ‘purposeful play’ (Broadhead & Burt, 2012; Rogers, 2013; Wood, 2010). These theorisations of play were introduced in the literature review chapter of this thesis and have been used to help analyse the results of this study. However, both ‘play as pedagogy’ and ‘purposeful play’ are adult constructs and, despite knowledge that children’s and adults’ perceptions of experiences can be different (Glenn et al., 2013; Harcourt, 2011), children have only rarely contributed to theorisations of play. Recently, efforts have been made to include the perspectives of the players, the children themselves (Einarsdóttir, 2014). This is important as there is a need to foreground these underrepresented stakeholders’ views (Colliver, 2012).
How do children view play? From the seventeen children who participated in the group conversations, two children suggested that play can include playing with toys and other equipment: *That’s us playing with the light box.* (Sophia). Four children mentioned playing a game: *That was the game we were playing.* (Hudson). Five of the participating children mentioned play spaces: *We were playing on the slide.* (Sophia). The physical context of an activity can influence whether it is perceived as play (McInnes, Howard, Crowley, & Miles, 2013). Ten participating children mentioned playing with others. So, for some children, peers as co-players cultivated play (Corsaro, 1997, 2003). Jackson reported that *I was playing Ben Ten with John and Hudson.* His comment provided two different aspects of play, a play partner on the one hand, and playing a role on the other. The children often started the conversations with comments about the roles they played: *We were playing doctors.* Fourteen children commented that they played roles that were often included within an overarching theme, for example the Octonauts™, a television program. Notably, all children explored the process of pretending in their play which conforms with previous studies where children highlighted this type of play (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Rogers & Evans, 2006). The extant literature on pretend play is extensive (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Bretherton, 1984; Fein, 1981; Garvey, 1977; Lillard et al., 2013; Piaget, 1962; Ridgway et al., 2015; Smilansky, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978), suggesting its importance in the childhood years.

The 17 participating children provided insight into what their play entailed. While some of these aspects only applied to a small number of the participants’ perspectives of play, the majority focused on the last two aspects: the children enthusiastically described their play roles and pretending. In answering this research question, I have posed the following questions: Are playing a role and pretending the essential features of play from the children’s perspectives? And what contexts contribute to children for defining an activity as play? These questions are addressed in the discussion of research question 1.
6.1.1 Play or not play? How the physical context and the nature of play influences children’s perspectives

Most of the participating children expressed clear ideas about play. Not all children, however, shared the same understandings. For example, they had differing views of activities that were setup at tables. A group of girls identified engaging in activities at a table as play. However, another girl, Chloe called it *collage*. Chloe did not openly disagree with the other girls, but she persisted to name the activity ‘collage’ rather than play as the others did. Indeed, she did not use the word ‘play’ once for this activity. Chloe also made a distinction between home corner play and other activities, such as those occurring during ‘table activities’.

These examples show the relation between the physical context of an activity and children’s distinctions, labelling activities as play or as work (Howard, 2002; Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995). Constraints in space, such as the activity requiring sitting at a table, or the type of activity, can be cues for children to categorize an activity rather as work, than play (Howard, 2002; Keating, et al., 2000). Contrastingly, carpet and other unrestricted spaces often resulted in an activity being perceived as play, which correlates with findings from my study. Olinda reported that their educators allowed them to play on the carpet sometimes. Other spaces identified for playing included the home corner, the slide, the outside area, and spaces to which the children had given a specific meaning for their play. Elsa, for example, named a location the *doctor area*. The physical context contributed to what children identified as play.

Not all children perceived the same links between play and the physical context. The collage activity which Sophia and Olinda, but not Chloe, labelled as play had taken place during the table activities. Table activities marked a specific routine of the day in this classroom. The educators offered and guided a range of activities at tables, and they asked children to rotate between those table activities. From my visits to the centre, I noticed that the educators sent children to the carpet area where the children could freely choose what to do after they had completed their assigned table activity tasks. When I asked Olinda to tell me more about the
table activities, her response was that we play on the carpet, but also that they were not always allowed to play there. It seemed she placed table activities as the opposite to play. However, it was also Olinda who identified the collage table activity as play. So, what made it play for Olinda?

The children in my study experienced two types of activities at tables: those that occurred in their self-initiated and self-controlled play time; and those that the educators set up and guided during table activities. Even though the collage activity was introduced by an educator, the children had been left with choice and some control. This might have influenced Olinda and Sophia to call it play. Olinda and Elsa reported another activity which children in Keating’s et al. (2000) study separated from play: writing at tables. For Olinda and Elsa, the activity of writing was perceived as play. The amount of self-initiation, and therefore voluntariness, and the amount of choice for both, stimulated Elsa (writing names) and Chloe (making a collage) to define their activities as play. These results support previous studies which indicated that the nature of play, such as voluntariness and the amount of choice, contributed to children’s identification of an activity as play (McInnes et al., 2013).

The children in my study labelled different activities as play. In previous research, children distinguished between play, work, and learning (Howard, 2002), or placed an activity on a continuum of play and work (Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995). The children in my study never mentioned work. Therefore they also made no distinction between play and work activities. These findings contrast with the theoretical separation of play from work or views of play as the child’s work (Ridgway et al., 2015). However, as the other studies cited have suggested, play is not limited to an ‘either or’ concept. There can be differing views and disagreements among children in relation to which activities are identified as play (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al., 2013; Theobald et al., 2015).

While the physical context had some influence on what children saw as play, the level of control and self-initiation in relation to the activity were perceived as more important. Children’s comments referred to where and
when play was enabled, who or what controlled play, and the role of the educator.

6.1.2 Children’s perspectives of play are content-, and condition-related

The features that the participating children in this study applied to play can be categorised into either the content of play or the conditions of play. Content related features raised by children in this study included playing a theme and playing a role. Themes originated from real events, television programs or films and fantasized stories that were re-lived or re-interpreted. There were some gender differences in the themes and roles displayed. It was clear from the children’s discussions that play proceeded through acts of pretending – another content-related feature.

Play takes place under specific conditions. Play conditions for the participating children were the motivation to play, the presence of co-players (playing with others, being part of a play community), as well as the provision of play time, space and equipment (playing with toys, playing in a special play corner). The possibility for self-initiation and self-control were also important conditions for play. Some of these conditions were linked by the children to the presence of the educator (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995).

6.1.3 Play content-related perspectives

6.1.3.1 Play involves playing a role within a theme

The evidence from the children in this study is that play involves playing a role (Kärrby, 1989). The roles occurred within an overarching theme, such as nurse and sick person were enacted in a doctors theme, and particular role names, such as Mr. Tod, were part of a theme that had its origins in a television program, for example Peter Rabbit. From the seventeen children who participated in the group conversations, fourteen mentioned their play themes and roles. Some of the children spent a lot of their conversations describing the role casting: which child played which role, and what was involved in acting in a specific role. For example, Sophia explained: And I was the baby, and she was the mum nurse. And I was sick.
And she had to check my whole body. While other studies focused on role play (Rogers & Evans, 2006), I aimed to approach play in a broad sense without focusing on one type of play. It was the children who, in their conversations, emphasized playing roles.

Vygotsky defined play as always consisting of a situation to be imagined, roles to be acted out, and rules that are associated with those roles which have to be attended to in order to maintain the imagined situation (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). The children recreated events they had experienced or were realistic in the imagined situation (Vygotsky, 1978). Sophia and her friends’ enactment of real people – the sick person and the nurse – allowed them to explore their understandings of what a visit to the doctor entailed (Gaskins, 2014). In contrast, Ethan enacted different ways of being a ninja in his play that allowed experimentation with unrealistic roles (Gaskins, 2014). Hughes (2010) emphasizes the beneficial component of such opportunities where children enact a range of roles and test what acts and behaviours are suitable in different arrangements. In my study, Ethan was not always a different ninja who is not fighting. He also played destroying the bad guys, and Chloe explored being a naughty and cheeky baby, providing exploration of vicious characters (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). Chloe’s translation of the role into play, choosing specific behaviours to suit her specific characteristics, utilised the skills and knowledge to perform the role and make decisions about how to enact it. Her role was closely linked to her sociocultural context, and her performance displayed how Chloe had reworked the role: she tried to run away from her parents. She had ideas about how to behave like a baby who is naughty and cheeky, and she decided what rules accorded with her role (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013).

The children emphasised playing roles within a theme and they incorporated this kind of role play in other types of play, such as their construction play. For the children in this study, play was not separated into particular types (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ridgway et al., 2015) but rather as blends of the different types.
6.1.3.2 Play themes and content differ between boys and girls

The boys and girls in this study mentioned different play themes they enjoyed playing. Both used “unrealistic” or “realistic” (Gaskins, 2014, p. 36) themes, such as ghosts and other fantasized characters, and professions from the real world. However, the girls mainly reported drawing on realistic themes, such as playing doctors or hairdressers, and family, while the boys mainly referred to characters from television programs and movies, such as Ninja Turtles, Peter Rabbit and Mr. Tod, and the Octonauts. That is not to say that girls never mentioned playing fantasy themes or themes originating from such media, and that boys never discussed realistic play themes. For example, Ethan described playing police, and Elsa explained how she iced another girl in their play, in reference to the Disney® movie ‘Frozen’. Hudson and Elsa reported separate play experiences, both including a ghost theme. Previous research suggests that boys and girls are attracted by different play themes, with boys showing more interest in good and evil themes, superhero, war and weapon play (Holland, 2003; Pellegrini, 1987), and girls engaging mainly in play scripts with caring and nurturing roles (Kalliala, 2002). Boys’ and girls’ play themes can be linked to different interests (Roger & Evans, 2006). For example, when the children reported social play, their stories had different foci Ethan and Sophia watched the video-record of the play where they had come together on the slide. Ethan discussed first that they were playing ninjas, while Sophia, then, focused on the different movements used to slide, and the order of children sliding down. When boys and girls played together, sometimes, they applied different rules and play scripts. Reinforcing Paley’s (1988) observations, the boys in my study were particularly fascinated with themes of good and bad guys. Ethan explored playing ninjas, John was escaping from baby shredders, and at other times played Mr. Tod who wanted to eat the other boys who acted as Peter Rabbit. When they met on the slide, Sophia disregarded Ethan’s ninja story, but she did not disagree. Her focus was just different.

Even though boys and girls predominantly performed and talked about different play themes, one must question whether the differences are related to gender (Fabes et al., 2003; Rogers & Evans, 2006). However, play
themes are not always gender-bound (Evans, 1998). The boys’ play of Mr. Tod had a chasing, escaping and rescuing structure that recalls the approach-avoidance games that girls and boys displayed in Corsaro’s (2012) ethnographic studies in Italy and the U.S. Bad guys and superhero characters also attract some girls, not only boys (Marsh, 2000; Paley, 1988). In my study, groups of boys shared in playing themes mainly based on television programs and movies, while the girls shared a preference for enacting roles from the real world, such as family members and professions with a caring attitude. When boys and girls both enacted professional roles they played and spoke about different professions, and when they enacted themes that originated from television programs or films, different ones were chosen. In other studies, girls and boys have shown both differences and similarities in their preferences in television programs and film choice (Marsh et al., 2005). It is not clear, why the boys and girls in my study displayed different preferences in play themes but the play themes seemed to be linked to individual interests and experiences within their sociocultural contexts (Edwards, 2014; Evans, 1998).

6.1.3.3 Play involves the re-living and re-interpreting of real events and stories from the media-influenced popular culture

In some of their play, the children in my study re-lived and re-interpreted events (Vygotsky, 2004). For example, Sophia connected her play with past experiences: And then we saw each other at the circus and then we tried to make a circus. Children other than Sophia reported that a family holiday was the origin of some play, and the popular doctor-theme of a group of girls started after an ambulance had visited the centre. The visit of the ambulance sparked playing ‘doctors’ among the children, with some of the girls expanding their play with scripts about caesarean sections: And we were cutting our bellies to get the baby out (Elsa). The reproduction affords children opportunities for creative engagement, as they combine elements of the experienced with new, imagined ones (Vygotsky, 2004).

Not only real events are re-lived and re-interpreted in play. The boys in my study especially informed their play with ideas from contemporary, popular media culture. However, stories and characters from television
programs and films were more than just copied and lived out in the children’s play. Discussions between Braxton, Hudson and John accentuated that firstly, the stimulus for some play could be events that originated from media, such as television, and secondly, that the children re-interpreted the play in their own way. The swaggering fox as presented in the Peter Rabbit television program’s episode ‘The tale of Mr. Tod’s trap’ (ABCiView, 2015, August 28) was transformed into a robot-like moving Mr. Tod. When the three boys re-lived their play during the discussions, the role of Mr. Tod received a monster-like re-interpretation and this was also part of their other play theme based on the Octonauts™ television program.

As this example demonstrates, the children in my study re-interpreted the messages they accessed from television and other sources (Kalliala, 2002). In re-interpreting the stories, the children created their own meaning, using their imagination (Edwards, 2011). These findings question warnings of decreased amounts and quality of children’s play as a result of television and other media consumption (Nicholson et al., 2015). Indeed, Marsh (2014) highlights the continuity of children’s creativity and innovation in play in contemporary times of high media consumption.

Play based on the act of re-interpreting films and television programs is not necessarily what Vygotsky (2004) meant when he suggested that children re-interpret experiences and enact those in play. However, Edwards (2014) adds to the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective of play, incorporating “the concept of ‘contemporary’ play” (p. 220). This concept acknowledges the contemporary influences on children’s play content and the “changing nature of the ‘reality’ they [the children] experience” (Edwards, 2014, p. 223). So, while some of the children’s themes in my study addressed and re-enacted reality-delivered scripts, other themes were highly associated with contemporary popular culture, including enactments of characters from media, such as Mr. Tod and Peter Rabbit. The children’s reproduction of events in an innovative way is highlighted in the notion of ‘interpretive reproduction’ (Corsaro, 1997, 2012). The concept of contemporary play recognizes not only that children actively participate, but also that they make meaning of the experiences contemporary life contexts deliver (Edwards, 2014).
Contemporary play acknowledges new possibilities through the presence of media-related stories and products, as well as digital technologies in children’s life contexts (Edwards, 2014). The children in my study showed in their play and discussions that they easily conflated types of play – for example, merging media-influenced role play (Mr. Tod) with a traditional chasing and rescuing game. This could have been influenced directly through the storyline of the television program, when Peter Rabbit’s friend is captured in a trap by Mr. Tod (ABCiView, 2015, August 28). However, it may have been that the Peter Rabbit episode was only the starting point, and the play gradually was mixed with the children’s knowledge of traditional chasing games (Corsaro, 2012).

The availability of varied branded products linked to popular children’s television and film characters have resulted in new forms of play being observed (Edwards, 2014) and finding their place in children’s re-interpretations and creation of play culture. In my study, a group of children and I looked at a photo of Elsa pointing her arm towards Rashmi. I thought it was some kind of traditional chasing game. But Elsa described how she ‘iced’ Rashmi, and explained why she was able to do so: she wore a T-shirt displaying ‘Elsa’ from the Disney® movie ‘Frozen’. Wearing the T-shirt was part of the play experience; the displayed character’s powers were transferred onto Elsa. Such a re-interpretation also can be seen in the merging of construction play and playing Transformers – which looked like traditional construction play but included imitation of the branded toys. It is clear that some children’s play has its origins in contemporary popular culture.

Discussions about their play with the children in my study, and reference to existing literature, suggests that children re-interpret events and stories from their sociocultural contexts, including influences from the contemporary popular culture (Darian-Smith, 2012; Edwards, 2014). Play experiences that originated from media, such as television, created the liveliest discussions among a group of boys in my study. These discussions often included the participating children re-playing their play, as if they re-lived the play experience. For example, Braxton became a new version of Mr. Tod. Further exploration is needed to investigate how children not only
re-interpret what they experience in reality, including contemporary notions of reality in their play (Corsaro, 2012; Edwards, 2014), but also how they re-live and re-interpret their play.

6.1.3.4 Play involves pretending

In this study, the most common play process identified in the children’s discussions of play experiences was pretending. This finding accords with previous theorisations of play (Garvey, 1976; Vygotsky, 2004) and previous research on children’s understandings of play (Kärrby, 1989). Pretending includes: enacting a role; giving objects new meaning; and imagining non-existing things to exist. For the children in my study, enacting a role was the most prominent form. Thirteen children reported that they played a role or character (When I play ninja turtle), or that they were a character (I like to be Leonardo). Sometimes, the enactment was demonstrated directly in the discussion, for example, by changing their voice to pretend to be Mr. Tod: I want you for dinner. Twelve children talked about imagining non-existing things to exist, including Sienna who said she heard a monster. Seven children discussed giving objects new meaning: That’s a tunnel. Some children mentioned one or two forms, and four children elaborated the use of all three forms.

For some children, play is not limited to “imaginative play activities” (Glenn et al., 2013, p. 192): rather almost any activity could be play. Play can include any activity where high involvement of the players, the existence of rules, and freedom of action towards these rules are given (van Oers, 2013). Pretending also involved some level of rules. For example, Chloe described what characteristics were necessary for pretending to be a naughty baby: to do what a naughty baby does, such as to run away. In contrast, Vygotsky’s view of play seems limiting. The three defined elements which Vygotsky found necessary to call an activity play excluded any activities without such characteristics (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). The children in my study emphasized pretending as a play process. When they distinguished between play and other activities, pretending was a strong factor. Activities that looked to be solely construction or a running game from an onlooker perspective, and therefore with a Vygotskian lens disqualified as play, often held an imaginative, qualifying factor. For
example, Hudson and his friends were not only constructing with Mobilo®; they also pretended their constructions were Transformers. They did not just run around, but ran away from their chaser who pretended to be Mr. Tod.

The children created distance from the concrete everyday context in their pretend play and used different forms of representation (Piaget, 1962). Symbolization was used to give objects new meaning (Bretherton, 1984; Vygotsky, 1976), for example the girls used colours to pretend they were needles. This act requires the child to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘not real’ (Garvey, 1976). Jessica, for example, made a distinction between her pretend needle and an actual needle.

Children’s play, as in many other aspects of their lives, is informed by their experiences (Corsaro, 1997; Mason & Urquhart, 2001) and their participation in social and cultural contexts (Edwards, 2014; Rogoff, 2003). Children might show personal preferences in toy choices (Evans, 1998); so why not personal choice in picking a form of pretence? In this study, Ethan highlighted that having his self-constructed accessories were part of enacting the role of police. He might have enjoyed combining constructing and playing police. Perhaps pretence is sometimes determined by convenience? Elsa emphasized the use of face washers as bandages when playing doctors. Face washers were always available at the centre, though normally for cleaning the face rather than for playing. Other children often imagined non-existing things to happen, because you can just pretend to have a baby, or altered their behaviour to enhance the pretend play, such as when Hudson changed his voice for his enactment of Mr. Tod. Sawyer (1997) compared pretend play with improvisational theatre acting. My study adds that play occurs on a stage where certain props are available and players make use of what is present. If they do not have a prop available, they imagine it.

6.1.4 The conditions of play

6.1.4.1 Play is motivated

The children’s reports of their play suggested that play underlies a range of conditions, such as social and physical conditions: who and what is available for play can have an impact if and how play occurs. One
conditional aspect of play mentioned by the children related to their motivation to play. Children participating in the study discussed a variety of motivations for play:

- play is fun: *We feel happy about it and the problem why we want to play is to have fun* (Chloe);
- the theme or content of play is interesting to the child: *We like playing doctors* (Jessica);
- the child likes to join with friends: *And I like doing this because I like Scarlett* (Sophia);
- play provides insight: *we wanted to see how everything works* (Rose); and
- children play for the sake of play: *I just wanted to* (Jessica).

These descriptions, especially the last statement from Jessica, align with definitions that associated play with intrinsic motivation rather than the need of extrinsic goals or a product (Garvey, 1977). The assumption that play follows an inner drive, and does not require external rewarding goes back to early theorisations of play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). However, children in recent studies also have identified similar motivational factors, such as fun (Glenn et al., 2013; Wing, 1995), or the content of play, such as pretending to be a character as well as being with friends (Rogers & Evans, 2006).

Sophia’s motive for play presents an example for what drove many of the children in this study, as in previous studies, to play. The sociocultural lens, which this study takes, acknowledges children as social beings. In play, they participate with their social world, while at the same time, developing motivation to play through this participation (Fleer, 2012).

Having a friend was important to enable play and make play enjoyable (Huser, 2010). The child can be motivated to join social play to make friends, but it can also be the other way round: that being with friends or someone the child likes is the reason to join play (Avgitidou, 1997). Sophia’s elaboration of this aspect shows the circular argumentation: *Because I like her and I like playing with her*. The positive feelings for her friend encouraged Sophia to enter play with Scarlett, but it was also that playing with Scarlett was what Sophia enjoyed. This ‘circle of motivation’
(Howard, 2002; Rogers & Evans, 2006) stands in contrast to notions of a “dark side of play” (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 18), including exclusion, and other negative experiences. Co-players can contribute to play as a motivating, pleasurable activity, but can also cause ‘dark’ play experiences for those who may be excluded, which some children in this study experienced.

6.1.4.2 The roles of peers

Peers were assigned different roles in children’s reports of their play. Firstly, peers were co-players because children like playing with friends. Children often describe play as when they spend time together with friends (Howe, 2016). Play is often seen as the place for forming and maintaining friendships (Avgitidou, 1997; Corsaro, 2003). Social play can also be about creating an imagined situation in the process of pretending (Garvey, 1976), and making meaning together with peers (Huser, 2010). When the boys played Mr. Tod together, they all shared the idea that John as Mr. Tod was the child from whom to run away. Garvey (1976) notes that any “episode of social play entails the exercise of shared imagination and shared development of a theme” (pp. 578-579). Through shared imagination, the children acted in terms of their chosen roles, and these acts made sense to the co-players.

Based on shared imagination (Garvey, 1976), peers can be the source for play ideas. Sophia explains that her friend Jessica introduced the idea with the broken arm, which was the start of their social play: ‘cause Jessica came up with it first, and then I thought about it. Sophia’s comment portrays the acceptance of a peer’s idea and the beginning of a co-created play theme. Once a play theme was established, some children played it over and over again. The co-created play ideas and themes constituted friendship and encouraged further social play (Avgitidou, 1997).

The children in my study created shared meaning in play. Co-construction of shared meaning is displayed through negotiation or expansion of peers’ ideas (Göncü, 1993). When the children explained their play-videos, they often complemented each other’s explanations. For example, in collaboration, Hudson and John told about their Mr. Tod play;
Elsa and Molly extended on each other’s ideas about playing ghosts; and Sophia and Jessica explained playing doctors together for me. Each of the co-players in those dyads had an understanding of the social play theme, and demonstrated that this knowledge was shared. Also, prior knowledge to a play theme provided opportunities to share meaning, such as when the knowledge was based on common interests in superhero play (Parsons & Howe, 2013). Signals originating from the Octonauts™ program, such as Table alert, were understood by the co-players and gave some direction to the play.

In and through their interactions, children not only construct and share knowledge, but also create their own peer and play culture (Corsaro, 1997; Wood, 2009) that involves the creation of and participation in activities and routines (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). As such, there can be certain rules of participation in play that are regulated by the children, and can contrast with the adult rules in the early childhood setting. For example, ‘anyone can join’ is such an adult-set rule which children sometimes ignore (Löfdahl, 2010). Sophia, Jessica and Elsa discussed that they did not think anyone could join their play. They did not want Louis to join, and did not include him into their play in spite of his efforts to join. This contrasts with children’s perspectives of play in another study where findings suggested that children “would play with almost anyone” (Glenn et al., 2013, p. 194, italics as in original). Even though most children find that peers are important to make play enjoyable (Einarsdóttir, 2008; Glenn et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006), some children face negative experiences with peers, for example through exclusion (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Löfdahl, 2010). However, excluding peers is an established strategy to include some – but not all – peers, maintain friendships, and protect play (Corsaro, 2003; Skånfors et al., 2009).

6.1.4.3 Play is about actions that portray self-initiation and self-control

The children in this study linked play with concrete actions. Their reports included, for example, to make smooth sand (Jackson and Sienna); to make a ramp and to drive the car (Hudson); and to climb (Scarlett and Sophia). These words demonstrate that the children defined play through their active part in it and their own agency (Kärrby, 1989; Nicholson et al., 2009).
Children’s focus lay on interactions with other peers, on play that they had initiated, and whether they controlled the direction and rules. Self-initiation and self-control characterized the actions (Howe, 2016), and the children’s reports suggest that they identified an activity as play when these two characteristics were integral. The children sometimes explained that a peer or they themselves initiated play, for example by inviting a friend to play together. At other times, the children demonstrated that play was initiated without a verbal invitation, but by engaging in an activity.

An activity that is self-directed and self-regulated gives the actor a feeling of control and choice, which are also the most prominent indicators for children in definitions of play (Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; Robson, 1993; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995). In my study, the children addressed choice of play partners, play themes, play spaces and toys, as well as choice of play acts. Children want to choose what, where, with whom, and how to play (Einarsdóttir, 2014). The ‘how’ of play was often controlled by rules. Play was self-regulated by those rules, and this was closely connected to choice (Rogers & Evans, 2006). These findings conform with the key aspects that van Oers (2013) sees as crucial for a definition of play, that children are highly involved, follow some rules, but also have freedom to organise the activity.

6.1.4.4 The role of educators

The children in this study discussed the role of their educators in relation to their perspectives of play. How children define a situation is often linked with its social context. Children take the presence of an educator into account when identifying an activity as play (Howard, 2002; King, 1979; McInnes et al., 2013), and value control and choice in their play (Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; Wing, 1995). This is not to say that all control has to be with the child for the child to perceive the activity as play. However, if the activity is assigned by an educator, the higher the child’s level of control, the more the activity is seen as play by the child (King, 1979). Some children in my study labelled activities as play that had been set up by their educators, such as a collage activity during table activity time. Most of the play activities discussed by the children, however, were
child-initiated ones. So, the discussion was less about whether an activity where an educator was involved was play or not. Rather, the children focused on what role the educator played.

An educator can have several roles in play (Fleer, 2015; Jones & Reynolds, 2011). The children in my study saw their educators in the roles of facilitator, manager or controller of play. The role of the facilitator was discussed the least. Sophia said she knew how to play a specific board game because the teachers told us before we play. This kind of play needed instructions, and the educator gave information to the children about the rules of the board game. Receiving information or assistance from the educator can be a reason why children involve educators in their play (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015b; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). Some children also liked educators as co-players but this was not mentioned by the children in my study. This could be because children in this centre did not have many opportunities for this to happen.

In the children’s views, educators regulate four areas of play:

- what spaces can be used for play;
- at what times and for how long children can play;
- what material is offered and allowed in particular ways; and
- which play behaviours are tolerated.

Markström and Halldén (2009) have discussed the control of ECEC environments that often stands in contrast to the notion of nurturing environments for children’s development. In relation to space, educators in the study centre decided where children played, either indoors or outdoors, and which areas in either space could be used. However, the children could then choose which play corner they wanted to visit when playing inside, or whether they wanted to play on the monkey bars, the slide or the pirate ship outside. The regulation of space was mentioned by a few children. Sophia and Scarlett said that they had to ask the educator if they wanted to use the gate in the outdoor area. Olinda mentioned a restriction of play space inside. The second regulation concerned time. Ethan complained about limited play time that restricted him in fully developing his play.
Educators also managed the availability and usage of material. The children noticed when the play equipment they had used had been removed. A group of girls also talked about their educators telling them how to use the doll prams in the home corner. Children also discussed educators’ behaviour management, including the prescription that playing with guns was not allowed – nor was fighting and other activities where children could get hurt. War, weapon and superhero play have been banned in many settings (Holland, 2003), and often play that is labelled as too “boisterous” (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 50) gets interrupted, something that happened to Ethan and Leo, although they decided to remain silent about this incident.

In the group conversations, the children showed a range of reactions towards such regulation of their play: some just stated it as a matter of fact; others complained; and some children presented their acts of transgression. In other studies, critique has been directed towards too much control (Sandberg, 2002) and interruptions of play (Rogers & Evans, 2006). Interruptions of play and limited time can cause a decrease of quality in play, as children then lack time to develop their play idea. Children need time for role casting and creating shared understandings about the roles.

Children may react with frustration when they are assigned to a task by an educator (Rogers & Evans, 2006). In my study, Louis expressed his negative emotions about an educator’s decision to ban him from the sandpit. Other forms of responding to educator control can include the renegotiation and adjustment of the educator-set rules and resistance (Corsaro, 1997; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Sandberg, 2002). Ethan, for example, changed the way he talked about his ninja play to respond to the ‘no fighting’ rule, and ‘became a nice ninja’. Children sometimes reflected the role of educators in their play (Einarsdóttir, 2014). However, in my study, the children focused more on the regulating and interfering roles than the facilitating role of their educators.

6.1.5 Summary: Towards defining play from children’s perspectives

The children’s exploration of their play highlighted some features that contribute to insights into what understandings they held about their play. The findings of this study indicate that playing a role and pretending
are the most prominent features of play. Consistent with Vygotskian and Post-Vygotskian definitions of play, that play requires the act of pretending and an imaginary situation (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ridgway et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1978), the children focused on imagined situations and acting out roles, which were based on the reproduction and re-interpretation of past experiences within their sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978, 2004). The sociocultural contexts reflect contemporary influences and changes, and these impacted on what the children incorporated in their play (Edwards, 2014). Children’s play contents are a mix of “realistic” and “unrealistic roles and events” (Gaskins, 2014, p. 36), including characters and stories originating from popular culture, such as television programs and merchandized toys. This last influence was more noticeable in the boys’ elaborations than those from the girls. Despite the different re-interpretations, boys and girls in this study both presented pretending as a shared and co-constructed process (Garvey, 1976; Göncü, 1993). Further, pretending was not only linked to role play. Rather, the children merged different types of play, such as pretend play and construction or physical play. This merging of play types questions earlier formulations around the separation of play types (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ridgway et al., 2015).

Apart from content-related features of play, this study illuminated the conditions children applied to play. The data begged the question “What conditions contribute to children’s identification of an activity as play?” Motivation was one condition, and children identified a range of motivational factors. In line with the sociocultural theoretical frame of this study, the findings emphasize the importance of the social context of play, where the child’s engagement with the social world provides the motive for play (Fleer, 2012). In relation to peers, the children talked about inclusion and exclusion processes, and elaborated rules that led to exclusion.

The physical context of an activity could also influence some children in the study to perceive the activity as play. This is consistent with previous research (Howard, 2002; Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995). The social context also played an important role; McInnes et al. (2013) pointed out that depending on the adults’ interactions, children may not perceive activities with an adult present as play. This study suggests that children
focus more on what role educators take in their play, rather than just whether an educator is present or involved. The most vital indicators defining play for the children in this study, as in other studies, were freedom of choice and self-control (Howe, 2016; Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; McInnes et al., 2013; Robson, 1993; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995). Educator control challenged children’s freedom of choice and the quality of their play, and they reacted in various ways, which are similar to the re-negotiations, ‘second adjustment’ or ‘playing the game’ of children in other studies (Corsaro, 1997; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Sandberg, 2002). The early childhood education environment is highly controlled (Markström & Halldén, 2009), and it is essential that adults working in this environment respond to children’s needs in relation of play time, space and interactions (EECERA SIG "Rethinking Play", 2017).

Overall, this study contributes to play research by including children’s perspectives. The children in this study demonstrated their understandings of play, as well as the contents and conditions that were prominent in activities the children identified as play. Children’s perspectives of play were diverse, and this challenges the idea of constructing one definition of play that could stand for all children. The key elements of van Oers’s (2013) definition might still be the most coherent with this study’s findings: children are highly involved players who make choices and control the rules and interpretation of rules in their play.

6.2 Research sub-question 2: How do children describe play?

The children in this study chose to describe play through two main actions: verbal descriptions and nonverbal, performative acts. Describing play verbally entailed the children either signalling play with words, communicating the pretence of play, or describing actions. The performative method of description shifted the focus away from what the children said, to what they did. They demonstrated play through body movements, gestures, and playing.

6.2.1 Signalling play with words

Only three of the seventeen children who participated in the group discussions never mentioned play. Those three children stayed the most
silent of the group and contributed the least during the overall data generation. The other 14 children who participated in the study signalled play through using the terms ‘play’ and ‘playing’ directly in the group conversations. The terms were often linked to the introduction of the play theme, such as that they were playing doctors, and play characters, such as I was playing Barnacles. The explicit expression that an activity is play occurs as well when children invite their peers to play (Sawyer, 1997). The actual play context where one child introduced or invited a play theme was mirrored in the group conversations. As well, when children mentioned play partners, play material or the play space, the term ‘play’ was used directly. Finally, the term ‘play’ was used when discussing games, such as the game we were playing.

The children also spoke about their play without mentioning the word ‘play’. Perhaps children do not see the necessity of mentioning the word, because they might think it is obvious and something they could expect their peers they played with in the classroom to understand (Sawyer, 1997).

6.2.2 The message ‘this is pretend’

Children’s play includes pretending, and the playing children have strategies to communicate what is pretend and play. The children in this study showed that similar strategies were also used when they discussed their play retrospectively in the group conversations. In play, children make a distinction between what is real, and what is pretend; and with this distinction mark an activity as play (Garvey, 1976; Rogers & Evans, 2006). Children in this study used metacommunication while discussing their pretend play to send the message ‘this is play’ (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Evaldsson, 2009).

The children in my doctoral study used a range of strategies to talk about their pretend play. Often, the children introduced me to their play objects or play actions by naming the pretend meaning. For example, the girls who had played doctors talked about the needles (actually, pencils), and Ethan and Leo emphasised making the handcuffs. They used the words that expressed the symbolic meanings of the play props (Bodrova & Leong,
At other times they called their peer not by their name but by the name of the character the peer was playing. The players shared understanding about these pretend aspects in their play which afforded intersubjectivity of the players (Göncü, 1993) and metacommunicative skills after they had agreed on a shared play understanding (Sawyer, 1997).

The children also spoke openly about what was pretended, for example: *That’s Ethan pretending to get handcuffs on.* When “the fact that they are pretending” (Sawyer, 1997, p. 119) is included in a child’s statement, the child makes an explicit reference to the play. Chloe gave deep insight into her perspective of her acting as a pretend baby by explaining that she *was pretending to be the baby in the corner,* and highlighting that her mum and dad, to whom she referred, were *not real, it’s pretend.* Chloe “act[ed] out a symbolic representation” (Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p. 379) and signalled to the other players that she was pretending.

In situations where children had conversations not only with co-players who shared the meaning of pretend play, but also with other children, or with me, explicit messages about their pretence were necessary to give explanations and offer insight to their play experiences. Children sometimes take shared knowledge for granted (Göncü, 1993). When Braxton and Hudson elaborated the Mr. Tod play, they used their shared knowledge to describe what happened in the Mr. Tod play-video. For them, it was clear that they had to run away, *’cause we were Peter Rabbit.* The listener had to know that Mr. Tod chased and *was trying to eat* Peter Rabbit.

### 6.2.3 Describing play actions

Children often talk about their play without mentioning play or labelling their activities verbally (Howe, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2015; Theobald et al., 2015). Rather, their descriptions concentrate on their actions: what the children were making or doing. The participating children in Theobald et al.’s (2015) study described their actions with rich detail “but did not give a name to these types of activities” (p. 353). This is comparable with the children’s presentation of their perspectives in my study. The children talked about actions that portrayed self-initiation and self-control using “verbs” that “reflected an active and agentic orientation” (Nicholson
et al., 2015, p. 1597). However, children often started their discussion with a sentence declaring that they had played. At other times, the children introduced an activity using ‘active verbs’, and later confirmed the activity as play. For example, Hudson finished an elaboration of actions with the comment: And that was the game we were playing. Some children did not need the label ‘play’ and, on many occasions, the children just described their actions.

Leo always focused on his actions, such as making the handcuffs. The only time, he ever mentioned the word ‘play’, was when he said to Ethan: Let’s play that game again. For some children, play might not be something to talk about, but just to do (Theobald et al., 2015). On many occasions, children did not use words at all, but instead demonstrated what they wanted to share about play.

6.2.4 Demonstrating play

Children in my study showed what they did and how they played, and their actions were considered a form of expression. It is not necessary to reduce children’s expressions to the spoken word. Performance became a form of expression and a demonstration of play; gesture or use of the entire body were ways in which this was achieved. In an Icelandic study of toddlers’ perspectives of their play, bodily communication was the main type of expression used, following Merleau-Ponty’s (2003) concept of the ‘lived body’ (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). Children’s experiences are manifested in their bodily expressions (Merleau-Ponty, 2003), and the children in my study demonstrated this.

Merleau-Ponty (2003) declared the body as the place for expression: “My body is the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression (Ausdruck)” (p. 273). Such a conceptualisation is most appropriate in considering children’s ways of describing play through bodily performances in my study. In one of the liveliest conversations during the study, Braxton reflected on the play-video about Mr. Tod, and enacted the character of Mr. Tod in his own way. However, the children’s expressions were not merely body performances intertwined with their verbal
communication; when the children talked about play they re-played, re-enacted, and started playing again.

The children’s ways of producing knowledge can be through playing. Play is not only children’s activity but also as their “intuitive language with which the children express their imagery and logic, their pleasure and curiosity, their ominous feelings and fears” (Paley, 1988, p. vii). It allows them to explore beyond the child’s limited verbal explanation. Several times, the children in my study used play to demonstrate play.

For some children it was easier to show how to play, than to verbally explain how to play (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002). By applying the concept of the lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 2003) to the analysis of the children’s demonstrations of play, children’s ways of being and making meaning of the world is linked with the creating and sharing of meaning in their play experiences. For example, after Louis explored how to show his transforming through his body movements, he took his transformer and showed, to everyone in the group, the possible transformation using Mobilo®. Ethan and Leo stopped their verbal communication about the rules of their skid game, and instead combined telling and showing. While they played the game, the boys explained how they played it.

6.2.5 Summary: Children’s play descriptions through words and bodily performances

Previous studies have reflected on how children talk about their play (Howe, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2015; Theobald et al., 2015). This study accords with the earlier finding that children often describe their play without any direct reference to the word ‘play’. They talked about what they were doing or making; and the verbs used highlighted children’s active participation and their emphasis on self-control. In contrast, some children used the word ‘play’ for introducing their play theme in the group conversations, just as they did to propose a play theme to potential co-players (Sawyer, 1997).

In this study, the children often explained that they were only pretending, by giving explicit messages about their pretence (Sawyer, 1997). At other times, they employed other ways of framing play and
messaging that ‘this is play’ (Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009). These ways of communicating and metacommunicating about their play demonstrated children’s shared intersubjective focus (Göncü, 1993), even outside of the actual act of playing.

As well as signalling play with words, messaging ‘this is pretend’, and describing play actions, the children used bodily expressions in conversations about play: they showed how to play a game, or how to construct and transform a transformer. Merleau-Ponty’s (2003) ‘lived body’ can be a beneficial concept to help understand children’s play experiences and what meanings they create in and through play. In my study, some of the children re-played their play while watching their play-video, which suggests that playing is an important act of creating and sharing meaning.

6.3 Research sub-question 3: What understandings do children derive from their play?

What the children in this study expressed was indicative of the understandings they derived from their play which encompass two concepts: ‘agency’ and ‘belonging’. This section firstly illuminates the children’s reflections about their exercise of agency and, secondly, how belonging was experienced in their management of relationships, through both inclusive and exclusive acts. Other ethnographic observational studies have discussed children’s exercise of agency during play and social interactions (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Wood, 2014), and the management of relationships in children’s play (Corsaro, 2003; Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Skånfors et al., 2009). The children in this study contributed to insights around their agency and feelings of belonging through their own accounts.

6.3.1 Agency

The concept of agency includes the ability to “make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45). This study understood children’s agency in relation to their minority status (Mayall, 2002). As in many domains of their lives, children experience themselves in a lower social status and in unequal power relations; and in the ECEC context, adults highly regulate how children spend their time. But children also negotiate, create rules, for
example of ‘being with others’ (Löfdahl, 2010) and contribute to their peer
culture and adult culture (Corsaro, 1997), as outlined in the ECEC settings.
In my study, the children were decision-makers in their play. Children’s
reports suggested that they made conscious decisions about what to play,
and with whom to play. They showed confidence in choosing their play
themes, because they just wanted to (Jessica), and had clear ideas about how
to organise their play. Play has been identified as the place to promote such
agentic acts (Wood, 2014) because children apparently are in control.
Research with children suggests that children link their play participation to
having an influence on decisions about play (Theobald et al., 2015).
Children in my study reflected on their agency in terms of ownership of play
content, and in relation to play regulations, such as time, space, and
behaviours desired by their educators.

Agency was exercised in play experiences when the children created
and controlled their play. During a conversation, Ethan declared that he and
Leo are the bosses of the game. Ethan identified that this made him the
creator. He and his friend had thought of the skid game and its underlying
rules. The creative process of developing a play idea and implementing it
into their play practice made the boys the owners of this game. In other
studies, children have identified themselves as “the boss because it was my
idea” (Paley, 1988, p. 30), and have claimed ownership of their play
(Theobald et al., 2015; Wing, 1995). The boy in Paley’s (1988)
documentations, as well as Ethan in this study, picked the term ‘boss’ to
represent their identity from the play. Play is a space where children explore
their social identities, and one role children take on can be the position of a
play director who organizes, regulates or controls the play (Winther-
Lindqvist, 2013). Such a powerful social positioning is linked to the concept
of an individual’s agency that arises from the collaboration with others
(Löfdahl, 2010). Besides the creator role, the children in this study
experienced control and agency in their pretend play. As Wood (2014) has
identified, “pretence is a form of agency” (p. 14), and enacting particular
characters gave the children opportunities to exercise power and agency.
Chloe’s enactment of the naughty baby, and Ethan’s ninja performance to
destroy bad guys, are two examples where the children presented how the
“exploration of pretend identities” (Rogers, 2010, p. 161) offered them an opportunity to exercise their agency. Thus, the child in control of the play experiences agentic power.

Children’s accounts suggested that they shared an understanding of agency that was sometimes challenged within the ECEC setting. Certain circumstances rather discouraged agentic feelings and indicated children’s lack of control. The children linked such experiences to their educators’ restrictions and regulations of play. These included limited space for play; lack of play time; and how play material had to be used or was available; and what play was allowed. Even though certain actions were not allowed, some children still engaged in these. Other children decided to stay silent about the educators’ reactions after the children had played in a way the brought educators’ disapproval. It has been shown in other studies that having control and choice over play time, play space and play actions are important for children (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Rogers & Evans, 2006).

Children dislike it when educators interfere, or interrupt, their play (Rogers & Evans, 2006). For example, Ethan complained that the pack up signal interrupted his play. However, in other studies, children have shown their agency by creating strategies to deal with educator regulations in the classroom (Corsaro, 1997; Roger & Evans, 2006). The boys in my study showed techniques such as modifying their ninja play, changing the meaning of objects to disguise their weapon games (Holland, 2003). In the face of educator rules and regulations for children’s play, the children reflected on power, control and the lack of both, as well as how to act as agents of their play, ignoring or manipulating educator rules under their own terms.

6.3.2 Belonging

‘Belonging’ is the second understanding that children in this study derived from play. In other studies, children have identified play as a space where they develop and maintain friendships, where they share meaning, and enjoy social interactions (Howe, 2016; Huser, 2010; Löfdahl, 2005; Nicholson et al., 2015). In this study, the children highlighted the
importance of playing with peers. Play is not just about being with friends and other peers (Glenn et al., 2013); it is the place where the children create their own peer culture through ‘interpretive reproduction’ of their social environment (Corsaro, 1997). The creation of such peer culture is based on collective actions (Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009), and goes beyond an individual child’s experience of playing with friends. The children gave insight into their jointly created community of co-players, and demonstrated how they experimented with inclusive and exclusive acts.

Communities of co-players became apparent from the perspective of group of boys in this study. In both the Mr. Tod, and the transformers play activities, communities formed when collaborative acts produced social processes where knowledge and understandings were constructed. The meanings and knowledge produced in play were shared in the players’ community during the group conversations.

Such communities of co-players can produce a feeling of belonging (Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). Inclusive acts manage the formation and sustaining of the communities. Inclusion of others can be based on several factors, such as age (Löfdahl, 2010), gender or ethnicity, but also fairness, moral concerns and personal choice (Wainman et al., 2012). Inclusion and acts of helping are common among children (Wood, 2014). Through such inclusive acts, belonging is socially constructed and shared (Löfdahl, 2010).

Not all children experience social belonging and inclusion. Some experience exclusion (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Taking away play material and not sharing toys were strategies to exclude others in this study. The children in my study who had experienced such exclusion reported the negative emotional impact on them. Exclusion produced feelings of upset and sadness. Exclusion criteria for the participating children in my study were not very clear. Ethan and Leo formulated a rule for their game that no girls were allowed. However, they also wished no other boys to participate. Corsaro (2003) believes that children aim to protect their interactive space and play, and the entry of another player could dramatically change the direction of the play. Children also try to find their own play spaces, or hide in spaces, ‘making oneself inaccessible’ (Skånfors et al., 2009). Rules that
exclude others suggest diverse and complex strategies for the protection of children’s play and their spaces for play.

Inclusion and exclusion are complex processes, linked with social regulations and personal and collective choices. ‘Anyone can join’ is a rule that is often set by adults in the early childhood education setting, and often children find their own ways to ignore it (Löfdahl, 2010). Age, gender and diversity, social positioning, and power are linked to exclusion (Löfdahl, 2010). Furthermore, inclusion and exclusion are intertwined in dynamic social processes, as the communities of co-players are dynamic. Sometimes, children play towards a common goal, other times they become competitive. Sometimes, children form a union to protect their interactive space (Corsaro, 2003) and, sometimes, roles can be renegotiated and this can lead to the exclusion of others.

6.3.3 Summary: Agency and belonging

Agency and belonging were identified in this study as two understandings children derive from their play. The children exercised agency in play by claiming ownership (Theobald et al., 2015; Wing, 1995) through the creation of themes and rules that organised their play. Another way to experience agency was through pretending. Here, the children were able to exercise power and explore different identities in their pretend roles (Rogers, 2010; Wood, 2014). Both, pretending and self-regulating within their play gave children control. At other times, they felt their agency was challenged by educator rules that restricted children’s choices and feelings of control in play. However, the children challenged adult control through a variety of strategies. The study contributes to previous research that has indicated children’s responses to educator control (Corsaro, 1997, 2003; Rogers & Evans, 2006).

Belonging encompassed children’s creation of communities of co-players with their own peer culture. These communities produced collective processes to construct and share knowledge (Corsaro, 2003; Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Löfdahl, 2010; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). However, inclusion and exclusion were processes that impacted on children’s feelings of belonging. These processes are diverse and complex (Corsaro, 1997;
In my study, there is evidence that the children produced social processes to share knowledge and scaffold each other’s play, thereby reinforcing their community of co-players.

6.4 Research sub-question 4: What connections do children make between play and learning?

The EYLF identifies play as the “context for learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9), acknowledging the amount of research evidence showing that children learn in and through play, and that play has developmental benefits for the child (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014; Sylva et al., 1976; Whitebread et al., 2009). Research-based recommendations for educators’ pedagogical practice include the consideration that “there are play dimensions in learning and learning dimensions in play” (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008, p. 637). However, it has been asked if all play offers learning experiences to children, or if a pedagogical frame is needed so that children learn in play (Edwards et al., 2010). But the connections children make between play and learning has been investigated rarely. Do children experience and perceive play as a learning context?

The children in this study only mentioned ‘learning’ when I inquired about it. This ‘non-mentioning’ of learning in their natural discussions provokes different possible interpretations. There are many possible explanations for this. Four are noted here – although there are also other possibilities. Firstly, the children may not have identified play as a context for their learning; secondly, they may have been unfamiliar with the concepts of play and learning as inseparable dimensions (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006) and not yet have had opportunities to consider learning in play; thirdly, the children may have decided to ignore this topic altogether as it was not important to them; or, fourthly, they may have just wished to remain silent.

The discussion of this research question first addresses children’s definitions of learning, before their links between play and learning are presented. Finally, the way the children reacted to my enquiries about play and learning are discussed.
6.4.1 How children define learning

I stimulated the children to discuss the concepts of play and learning and their potential links which moved the children in the study to define learning. Sophia and Olinda started an argument about whether the children learned to ride bikes at the centre. For these two girls, the ‘what’ of learning was how to ride bikes, the mastery of a practical skill (Sandberg et al., 2017). As the discussion continued, Olinda presented her conceptualisation of learning as a defined process with an end point, where learning ends once the skill has been mastered: But we don’t learn. We already know how to do it. Olinda’s conceptualisation can be understood as ‘learning as acquisition’ (Colliver & Fleer, 2016). The outcome of her learning was a change in action (Sandberg et al., 2017). She also marked the end of the learning process; by the time when the skill has been acquired, at least not without appropriate support.

The girls’ discussion about learning to ride a bicycle highlighted that, for some children, learning happens individually, through practice. The children’s perspectives of their learning are consistent with those in Sandberg et al.’s (2017) study: they learned on their own, and through practice. However, some of the children in the study described learning with the help of others (adults or peers) (Sandberg et al., 2017). One girl in my study highlighted adult guidance for learning. Peer support was not verbalised. However, the children’s nonverbal representations of their understandings indicated the importance of more experienced peers for their learning, for example, how to transform transformers, and indicated that they learned through engaging with each other. In these instances, learning can be seen as the ability to participate in meaning-making and shared practices of a group (Colliver & Fleer, 2016).

6.4.2 Children’s perspectives of learning in play

When the children in this study were asked “What do you learn in play?” some suggested that they did not connect learning and play at all. Other children did not respond at all to the question, which made me wonder if these children had no idea about how to respond, or if they decided to stay silent. The literature presents differing views of the role of
play for learning, and how play can be situated in early childhood education curriculum to promote learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014). While some agree on developmental benefits of play and the concept of ‘learning through play’ (Hedges, 2014; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009), Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) challenged the developmental approach to play and the discourse of play as “solely about development and learning” (p. 1). Do all children benefit from play? Do all children see play as their preferred way of learning? Many children in my study did not discuss any links between their learning and their play.

Research has shown that many children have an understanding of play and learning and often make distinctions between them (Howard, 2002), while other studies show that children associate play with learning (Dockett & Meckley, 2007; Kärrby, 1989; Keating et al., 2000; Rogers & Evans, 2006). When the children in this study made a connection between their play and learning, they suggested that they: learn how to do stuff; learn how to write names; learn how to ride bikes; learn no fighting; and see how everything works. So, learning in play, for these children, covered five different areas:

1) Learning a practical skill;
2) Learning an academic skill;
3) Mastering a skill;
4) Knowing about socially appropriate behaviours and values;
5) Exploring to gain insight.

‘What’ the children learned in play was at the centre of their elaborations, such as mastering a skill through practice (Bergen, 2014), or learning cognitive skills, such as literacy (Theobald et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Socially acceptable behaviours referred often to rules that adults, such as the educators had told the children. No fighting seems to have the same reference. Learning to see how everything works provided a motivation to play. The results are consistent with other recent studies (Sandberg et al., 2017; Theobald et al., 2015).
6.4.3 Educator role

As discussed in research sub-question 1, and in keeping with other research results, self-direction and free choice were important for children’s play definitions (Glenn et al., 2013). In such self-directed play with a doctor-themed pretend play, Elsa saw a learning opportunity for writing, as she was pretending to list the names of sick people. Her educators had possibly intended such literacy learning opportunities when they provided the type-writer, setting the stage (Jones & Reynolds, 2011) for literacy engagement. However, Elsa’s report refers to a freely chosen and self-invented pretend play linked to her learning. Sophia’s example of learning how to ride a bike also highlights learning in a self-directed, free play activity.

In contrast to learning in child-initiated and self-directed play, Jessica introduced the idea that learning occurred in activities that involved the educator telling her what to do. This is consistent with findings from Theobald et al.’s (2015) study. For some children, the presence of an educator, however, is inconsistent with an activity perceived as play (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al., 2013). Is it possible that Jessica meant that she mainly learned in educator-instructed activities, excluding play as the space for learning?

Children’s perceptions are influenced by messages that are sent through educators’ actions in the classroom. One such message could be sent, when children see that their educators never engage in children’s play. Then, children make less connection between play and learning, and distinguish between them (Pyle & Alaca, 2016). In my study, the educators were actively engaged with children in their guided activities, including group time, table activities, and meal times, while they remained in a passive supervising position during children’s play. An educator’s role in play is often limited to a passive observer role (Einarsdóttir, 1998). Only on rare occasions did the children participating in my study refer to the role of educators as co-players. This is reflected in a comment from Sophia in which she pointed out that her educators told them how to play a game. Here, educator guidance promoted children’s play, and possibly helped the
children to learn the rules of the game (Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Sandberg et al., 2017).

The educator’s role in children’s play and learning received attention when Ethan and Leo explored what they learned while engaged in physical play. The focus turned towards rules, such as no fighting and that you don’t actually hurt anyone. Physical play challenges educators who focus on safety aspects of play (Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Tannock, 2014). Considering children’s distinction between play and learning in relation to educator presence (McInnes et al., 2013), Ethan might have understood that his play was interrupted by the educator to introduce the learning outcome ‘no fighting’. By stating ‘no fighting’ in the group conversation, Ethan showed that he had learned that fighting was not allowed. He also provided insight into the strategies he has learned to use to continue playing themes the educators had banned (Holland, 2003; Rogers & Evans, 2006). As Ethan’s story shows, the educator role was linked to learning appropriate social play behaviours or following adult-set rules.

6.4.4 Learning in collaboration with peers

Peers are important contributors to children’s play. Children supported each other, for example, to learn a skill that was necessary for the play. Play is an ideal activity for peer learning, as communities of learners can be formed (Rogoff, 1990). In this study, the children provided insight into collaborative learning and learning from experienced others (adults and peers) in play (Vygotsky, 1978) during the group conversations. However, they did not use verbal accounts. Rather, they showed how such learning proceeded. For example, Hudson demonstrated how he had scaffolded Jason’s building of transformers, with his actions emphasising how children learn through observation of others and through collaborative participation in social activities (Hedges, 2014).

In another example, Sophia assisted Scarlett by using gestures and verbal cues so that Scarlett learned to move the cursor onto the play-button on the laptop screen in order to pause the video. The girls had created a game where ‘who first paused the video, wins’. Peer learning played a role in the success of the game, and the children had created a scaffolding
process to meet their needs. Peers, as much as adults, can take on the role of the more knowledgeable and experienced other to foster exploration and construction of new skills (Hedges, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Knowledge – for example, how to build a transformer – can be generated in collaboration. Both Hudson’s and Sophia’s examples provide evidence that “children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others’ learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). Hudson and Sophia took on roles to tutor their peers. Learning was embedded in the play, and proceeded through play participation.

6.4.5 Learning in play?

Children in my study were not sure what they had learned in their play. Even those children who responded to my question concerning the link between play and learning seemed uncertain as to how to answer. While Hudson responded straightforwardly with No idea, Olinda was less sure. She could not name what she learned in play but she saw the opportunity of learning how to do stuff. While children may be generally competent to communicate their ideas, experiences and understandings (Brooker, 2008), finding the words to describe their thoughts or make meaning of their experiences can sometimes be difficult (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002; Theobald et al., 2015).

Children’s uncertainty in relation to connections between learning and play might be a result of lack of opportunities to connect the two. As Lansdown (2005) and Mason and Urquhart (2001) highlighted, children’s capacities are always evolving and linked to experiences. The children’s hesitant responses might have not been related to the topic of learning and play, but perhaps because of lack of participation in reflections of such topics. It is beneficial for children to be involved in discussions around their learning with their educators to develop self-understanding as learners (Broadhead, 2006; DEEWR, 2009; Theobald et al., 2015). The children in this study were not observed in conversations around their learning (in and through play) with their educators during the times I visited the classroom. In group time, educators occasionally asked the children with which activities they had been engaged and children’s responses were then transferred into a diary which was placed so that parents could see it at pick
up time. Thus, the lack of experience in discussing their learning in play may have contributed to the situation where children did not initiate the topic by themselves, and responses to my question were limited or vague. In the last part of this section, another explanation of these limited reports is explored.

6.4.6 Gatekeeping: Children’s decision to disregard (or bypass) learning in play

Just because the children in this study did not talk about learning in their play before I brought it up, did not mean that they did not make any connections between play and learning. One possible explanation is that the children might not have found it important to highlight learning when reporting about their play experiences. Another possible explanation is that they may have decided to focus on other aspects of their play.

Some children chose to bypass the topic of play and learning altogether. I approached the participating children as holder of rights and agents of their lives, and I interpreted all their reactions to my inquiry about their learning as their strategies of participation and forms of responding within their rights. Children’s strategies included sending a signal that the conversation was over, by ignoring my question or using what I named ‘nonsense talk’. Olinda, who had explored my question about what she learnt in play earlier in a conversation decided that she was finished with this matter. Her response to my further inquiry was: Nothing. Nothing very else. Thank you. ‘Nothing very else’ was a clear signal that further prompting was discouraged. Olinda had made a decision to finalise my investigation of this topic. A sensitive and respectful researcher stance applies to the right to privacy (Værum Sørensen, 2013), and any further following up would have ignored Olinda’s right. Two other participating children signalled the end of the discussion as well. Ethan and Leo’s response to my prompt on learning was camouflaged in their talking nonsense. Their reports turned attention towards the no pooing and no weeing on people rule in their skid game. Children demonstrated that they can challenge and respond creatively to adult expectations (Corsaro, 1993). Safeguarding their own peer culture from adults has produced strategies
(Rogers & Evans, 2006), which could explain Ethan and Leo’s strategy to bypass the exploration of their learning in play. At the same time, Ethan and Leo played with language and turned a serious moment (responding to questions) into a playful action (nonsense talk). Such playful actions strengthened them as active agents and gatekeepers who together formed a strong union resisting my interrogations. The boys had decided what and how they would share their perspectives with me.

6.4.7 Summary: Learning in play

Children and adults might not share the same perspectives of play and learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Theobald et al., 2015). Adults can observe a situation, and miss the meaning the child attached to the experience, just as children can miss the intended learning opportunities adults aim to provide within a play situation. Exploring children’s own perspectives of play and learning can avoid such misinterpretations.

The participating children’s ‘learning in play’ concepts encompassed their awareness of ‘what’ they learnt in play and how they learnt. Educator support helps children to learn, for example, the rules of a game. However, children can learn from people other than educators. Children’s actions during the discussions offered insight into peer support where children learned from each other. That some children did not comment on connections between play and learning or said that they did not learn anything while playing, suggested that children might feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable talking about their learning. Some children might have decided to remain silent about what links they made between play and learning. Within the children’s overall participation, children were gatekeepers of their understandings and knowledge.

6.5 Research sub-question 5: What characterises ethical spaces for researching with children?

While ethical spaces for researching with children have been discussed in the literature, there is only a relatively small amount of this literature which deals with input from children (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). Palaiologou (2014) suggests “creating ethical spaces for children” (p.
692) as a way of responding to the high demands of ethical practice. The characterisation of ethical spaces for researching with children was an aim of this study. The study – to explore children’s perspectives of play – also provided stimulus to investigate children’s own formulations of the characteristics of ethical spaces for research. Children’s ways of participation were the point of departure for this investigation – including situations which can be demanding to researchers such as where participants dissent, are not interested in participating, or challenge the researcher in other ways.

Children participated in this study through verbal contributions and bodily expressions. Findings presented earlier show that children are competent in acting on their rights and being informed research participants. The data informing these findings have been re-analysed in two different ways. Firstly, I focused on what the children’s expressions tell me about how they experienced their participation in my study, resulting in three major concepts: agency; privacy; and relationships. Secondly, I used Palaiologou’s term ‘spaces’ as another layer of analysis to consider children’s ways of participation in relation to characteristics that can give a structure for researching with children. I propose three ethical spaces for researching with children: the physical; the social-emotional; and the creative space. I then complete this section by considering how the three concepts are anchored in the three spaces framework.

### 6.5.1 Agency

The recognition of young children’s agency (Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1990) was an important starting point for this study, which was seen as an ongoing commitment to offer opportunities to the participating children to display and cultivate their agency (Dockett et al., 2011; Waller, 2006). The methodology chapter has outlined how such recognition of agency influenced the research design and choice of methods, and how agency was respected within the key ethical domains of the study. Children show their agency through making choices, assenting, and dissenting (Dockett & Perry, 2010). Children’s agency was not only a foundational methodological perspective, but the findings of the study suggest that children demonstrated agency in their research participation.
6.5.1.1 Conditional consent: re-negotiation and ongoing consent

procedures

One way children showed that they were agents controlling their participation was through their informed consent practices. Children were asked for their permission in relation to all aspects of their research participation to meet with the theoretical, philosophical and methodological understandings and requirements, as I addressed in chapter three. The study identified a gap in the literature considering how children give consent, choose to participate, or indicate dissent (Dockett et al., 2012). The study of processes of dissent has been neglected even though it has the potential to illuminate important processes: “Debates around notions of dissent gesture to a more critical engagement around connections between ethics and method that can otherwise remain muted” (Graham et al., 2016, p. 84). In this study, the children exercised their agency through a range of acts that addressed their decision-making related to providing consent or indicating dissent.

In this study, opportunities were afforded to the children to give their informed consent. The children responded to my invitations to participate in various ways. Verbally or nonverbally, they demonstrated their consent or dissent. The children nodded, smiled or answered with yes to my invitations for being filmed, for sharing play-videos in a group conversation or for talking about their play with other peers. Consent was given under conditions that the children imposed. For example, one conditional statement included a specific time frame when I was allowed to share a video of Ethan with his peers: today. Ethan set a time limit. In other examples, Elsa wished to talk first about a photograph before she showed it around the group, while Sienna consented to look at her photograph without sharing her thoughts about it. The children utilised the ongoing and re-negotiability of the consent, as they did not make decisions about their participation just once. Rather, they made decisions about participating before each data generation activity. For example in Ethan’s case, he had expressed that I can share all of the videos a month before his time limited condition. Later in the study, he had renegotiated his consent. Also, other children made individual choices about which material they were willing to
share. For the children, consent was not static, but continuously in flux, as ‘provisional’ and ‘process’ oriented assent practices have acknowledged (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012; Flewitt, 2005). Children’s conditional consent demonstrated their agency to select when to participate and what to share with whom.

6.5.1.2 Dissent: The right to non-participation

Dissent was expressed verbally, sometimes quite vehemently: And that’s all we have to say; now we can stop; and I don’t want to talk about this video. Just as with giving consent, dissenting was expressed through verbal or nonverbal behaviours. In order to show their dissent, some children shook heads, and one hid behind a pillar to express disagreement about being filmed. The nonverbal, body signals give important information about children’s decisions (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). On some occasions, the children opted in and out of group conversations. Instead of joining the conversation, they walked around, played or had side conversations with another peer. I wondered if talking about play created the wish for the children to play again. Such a conversation can certainly be a motivation to play: “Hey, y’wanna play that again?” (Paley, 1988, p. 27). Another explanation is that the children played because they had actually made use of their right to dissent. Gallagher (2015) suggests that children might take part in research because they can join enjoyable activities, “or getting time out from what they would otherwise be doing” (p. 723), possibly a less attractive activity. But what if the interaction with the researcher becomes the boring thing to do? Young people in another study, who had been asked to comment on research participation and consultation, saw them as “a right and one that they need not exercise if they had better things to do” (Hill, 2006, p. 78). Playing might be an attractive, alternative activity, and a way to dissent for a moment. At other times, the children clearly dissented by leaving the conversation. Then, they did not return. Leaving the conversation was the most used strategy to show dissent, and clearly needed no words for explanation.

Dissent did not always involve a complete conversation. In some instances, the children ignored my questions; sometimes by changing the subject, or they did not react at all. Similarly, in an ethnographic study in
Sweden, children’s strategies in relation to their participation and interactions in collective activities have been explored, and one strategy indicating non-willingness to participate was identified as ‘silence and avoidance’ (Markström & Halldén, 2009). Being silent and ignoring were the children’s resistance strategies directed towards adult attempts to assign the children to tasks in which they had no interest. The children successfully took control over their participation. In other instances, Einarsdóttir (2007) discusses how children might feel obliged to participate. Then, they might dissent in a ‘middle way’: staying in the conversation but not sharing particular content. In this study, such reactions followed mostly when the play-videos had displayed challenging moments to the children. For example, Chloe tried to privilege a different question instead of discussing why Rashmi had sat in a pram. Ethan and Leo remained silent about a situation where an educator had interrupted their skidding game and sent them to tables. The two boys challenged one of my posed questions about what they thought they might learn in play through the use of nonsense talk. Perhaps these were all mechanisms to dissent? Could the boys’ provocative, ‘silly talk’ be understood as a game or playful way to ignore my question?

Older children have used jokes in interactions with researchers (Hill, 2006). Children may choose play as a form of resistance to adult power in research participation, similar as they resist adult regulations in play (Rogers, 2010). Children’s silence or other ways to ignore the researcher questions can be interpreted as them being gatekeepers of their data (Alderson, 2005).

For both consenting and dissenting, there were no uniform rules children followed. The verbal and nonverbal signals were different for each child, and different for each situation. In some cases, clarity in the signals was not even guaranteed: children might say one thing, but their behaviours sent an opposing message (Dockett et al., 2012). Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015a) believe that the researcher can never be completely sure whether the researcher’s interpretation aligned with what children intended, which can create ambiguity. Louis’s reactions when we talked about his participation and looked at his assent booklet prompted ambiguous feelings about his participation. In addition, he and Ethan provoked a discussion about uncertainty towards their participation.
The choice of being unsure needs consideration (Dockett et al., 2012). Children might wish to take part at the time they are asked, but this does not indicate anything about their involvement for the whole time (Dockett & Perry, 2010). The boys’ elaboration highlights how important it was to reflect continuously on, and be attentive towards, children’s signals about consent or dissent, beyond a formal method such as filling out the child assent booklet:

the method of obtaining consent relies both on the more formal procedural aspects (signed consent and verbal assent processes) as well as children’s behavioural indicators, and great flexibility is required in an orientation toward child assent that embraces a form of an ongoing consenting process. (Harwood, 2010, p. 8)

6.5.1.3 Child-initiated participation processes

Research that aims to involve children as co-researchers has made efforts to include children in decisions about research questions, methods and data analysis (Lundy et al., 2011). The participating children in my study became increasingly active in decision-making which informed the data generation phase and provoked some changes. For example, the children initiated interactions that contributed to data generation, such as requesting to watch another play-video or being filmed again. Watching a play-video twice brought up further detail about this particular video-recorded play episode. Another child-initiated procedure was to listen back to the recorded group conversations. Such re-listening promoted children to reflect on the conversations. When children initiate interactions with the researcher, consenting to participate is then in the hands of the children. They have already decided and therefore prepared the content or frame of the interaction. As agents of their own participation, the children acted on their right to active agreement and personal choice (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998).

Another way children demonstrated their agency was through creating their own forms of participation. Participation processes included for example, peer interviewing, performing, such as being in role and showing play processes to an audience, and documenting. Up to this point, agency has been considered from an individual point of view, with one child
being an agent over consent and dissent and decision-making (DEEWR, 2009). “Collective agency” (James, 2009, p. 42) was also apparent in the participation processes seen in my study. James (2009) draws on Mayall’s (2002) emphasis on the social context of an agent. The agent is able to create and contribute through their acting with other people. It might have taken only one child to introduce a form of participation, but it was the group who accepted it and made it a common process. Within these processes, the children co-created meaning and knowledge (Corsaro, 1997). Making their own choices about how to participate might have also contributed to making participation enjoyable.

One form of participation children initiated was identified as ‘peer interviewing’. In other studies, children have demonstrated their capabilities and ideas about interviewing their peers. The participating children in Lundy et al.’s (2011) study decided on a circle time approach with a ‘talking object’ to organize their turn taking in the group interview following the adult researchers’ questions about data collection methods. The children in my study developed conversational structures and interviewed their peers rather spontaneously. The children showed interest in their peers’ play and interrogated them about it. For example, Ethan discussed alternative ramp constructions after watching Hudson’s play-video. As a result, he gave his peer the opportunity to provide further explanation about his play. When children interviewed each other, interviewer and interviewee roles were fluid and interchangeable. However, the children created rules for structuring conversations which formalized the children’s discussion; interview rules included general rules, such as turn taking, selecting interview roles, and more specifically, that questions should not be repeated, or that the video was to be paused while someone was talking. The children governed the conversations through these regulations which they had constructed themselves within their peer groups, and which promoted children making their own choices about content and structural aspects of the group conversation (Mayall, 2008).

Other forms of children’s self-chosen participation combined verbal and nonverbal expression. This included play acts, such as being in role and performing for an audience. Lundy et al. (2011) and Lansdown (2010) have
argued for a rights-based approach to research involving children, emphasizing that the right to be heard must consider research activities that respond to children’s diverse expressive forms. Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC highlight respect for children’s views and their freedom of expression, when sharing their views (United Nations, 1989). Choosing to video-record the group conversations, I was able to document children’s spontaneous reactions. Often, rather than reporting about their play-video, the children acted out a role, demonstrated a game they had played, or showed how to construct a transformer. These acts were sometimes complementary to children’s verbal accounts. At other times, they replaced them. Louis underlined his explanation of building his transformer using his whole body. When the ‘lived body’ concept (Merleau-Ponty, 2003) is applied to the interpretation of these acts, children’s performances are taken seriously where the children’s bodies are seen as the medium expressing meaning (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). The actual act of playing a game in front of the video-camera gave additional insight to what the children had verbalized (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2002). At the same time, when children chose their own ways to present their knowledge, they made use of different expressive means (Christensen, 2004; Clark & Moss, 2001), and were agents of their participation. The children were in control of the conversation.

In this study, the children also positioned themselves as powerful research participants through their play. Children can experiment with powerful roles in their pretend play (Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Marsh, 2000). Pretending to be an imagined character is a form of agency, where control lies with the children (Wood, 2014). A few children chose the names of powerful characters they adopted in their play as their research pseudonyms. ‘Playing a role’ as a form of participation promoted the children’s agency.

‘Documenting’ was another form of participation created by the children which allowed children to make decisions about the level of their involvement. When John first made approaches to interact with my research, he walked to the camera which was placed on a tripod and looked through its display. This action allowed John to decide to stay distant from me, while at the same time engaging with the research process. He observed
the other children who participated in a group conversation with me. Throughout the data generation phase, John and other children participated in several documenter roles: the role of a camera-person, a commentator in the background, or an active animator who engaged with those children being recorded. Chloe also initiated documentation in a different form, by offering *let’s write them down*, a participation process which found acceptance from her peers. I kept a notebook during the field phase, where I made notes, such as which children I had recorded during play, which play-videos I wanted to and had shown to particular children, and so on. The notebook was obvious to the children, and could have possibly encouraged Chloe to document our conversations in her scribble book. Corsaro (2003) and Axelrod (2016) reported that children in their studies showed interest in the researchers’ notebooks that had been used for their ethnographic field notes. After a while, several children sat and scribbled in the classroom pretending to be a researcher (Axelrod, 2016). The children in my study made their own choices about the level of engagement and participation strategies, and some of these strategies included various forms of documentation.

This section has highlighted children’s informed consent practices and how these demonstrated the children’s exercise of agency. Practices included children’s acting on their right to participation, providing consent and/or dissent, and developing their own created and chosen ways to participate.

### 6.5.2 Privacy

Privacy and confidentiality are important aspects of ethical research practice that encompass the careful balancing of the right to privacy and the right to protection (Dockett & Perry, 2015). Children’s right to privacy is a fundamental component of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). It is important to ask how children’s privacy is respected during research studies (Clark & Moss, 2001). The children in this study acted on their right to privacy in a number of ways. Firstly, pseudonyms were of little interest to them. This might have been linked to a lack of experience around confidentiality and privacy (Dockett & Perry, 2015). However, other studies have shown that children reflected and then rejected the use of de-identified
data and wished to use their real names (Coady, 2008; Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2011; Dockett et al., 2013). Children in this study demonstrated that privacy mattered to them. For example, when they made choices about with whom they shared their play-videos, they enacted their right to privacy.

Remaining silent about topics was discussed earlier in relation to children’s dissent. Nonverbal reactions to protect privacy included being silly, playing with my equipment, ignoring my questions, changing the subject, or leaving the conversation for a short time or completely. Dissent gave the children control over what was shared and thus, facilitated children’s actions as gatekeepers of their data (Danby & Farrell, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012).

It is the child’s right to stay silent, even when researchers place emphasis on listening to children’s voices (Clark & Moss, 2001). Markström and Halldén (2009) identified that children try to rescue their peers so that teachers cannot take them to task for breaking the rules. Beazley et al. (2009) address issues around a lack of awareness of possible consequences when matters are discussed in a group by children whose ambitions are not to expose others’ privacy but just to be the researcher’s helper. Sophia seemed to understand privacy issues and stopped an interview she had initiated with Scarlett when I returned to the girls. Sophia might have evaluated my physical presence and adjusted her form of participation, becoming silent according to her feeling of privacy. Axelrod (2016) described a similar situation where a boy made decisions about the distance between himself and the researcher.

Often, children’s privacy is not specifically considered by adults while children are in educational institutions (Værum Sørensen, 2013). In the current study, the research context did not make it easy to protect privacy during data generation. The children’s educators remained close by during conversations between the children and me. This was important for other protective reasons, but counterproductive if the children wished to discuss matters that might receive disapproval from their educators, such as overstepping rules (Cocks, 2006). Also, other children could approach and join the group of participants as most conversations had to happen during
other daily routines. Sometimes, the children protected their privacy, sending observing children away, while at other times, they invited their friends to watch the play-video with them. For some of the children, the procedure around watching the play-videos (or looking at photographs) was taken very seriously: they established rules about what can be shared with other children, and emphasised that the recorded children have the right to see their recorded play-videos.

Throughout the data generation, children continued to act on their right to privacy. This was encouraged through the renegotiable, flexible consent procedures. Remaining silent about topics in front of me, choosing not to share videos, and being selective about conversational content demonstrated the children’s expression of their right to privacy. Even though these children were gatekeepers of their data in many ways, it is still the researcher’s responsibility to “choose ways of working in which children do not feel compelled to share their ideas” (MacNaughton & Smith, 2005, p. 115). Privacy and careful consent procedures go hand in hand (Cocks, 2006).

6.5.3 Relationships

The ‘Three Rs’ framework that was developed to encourage ethical research involving children (Graham et al., 2016) emphasises relationships, reflexivity and rights. The methodological decisions for this study stressed the importance of relationships that are contingent on trust and respect (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). A familiar adult whom the children trust is important to them (Brooker, 2008), especially as trustful interactions between the researcher and the children allow the co-construction of knowledge and the generation of data. In this study, the children themselves explored relationships and highlighted their importance within relational participation. The children’s exploration of relationships covered the relationship between them and myself, the adult researcher and those among their peers.

6.5.3.1 The children – researcher relationship

From the start of the study, the children were active in the process of building a relationship with me. They approached me using both nonverbal
and verbal means. Jackson, especially, looked for close body contact. He leaned on me and stayed by my side when I was recording other children at play. In contrast, Jarvis hid behind a pillar and glanced at me from a distance. Such behaviours towards the researcher have been described elsewhere (Axelrod, 2016; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). Verbal approaches, on the other hand, centred on children’s further investigations into my role. They asked questions, such as whose mother I was, or if I was learning to teach children. Children consider the range of adults who interact with them at ECEC settings on a regular basis. Similar experiences have been described in other studies (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). Christensen (2004) suggests that children’s question “Who are you?” also asks “Who are we to each other?” (p. 166). Children’s exploration of the adult researcher role can include other strategies such as inviting the researcher to be a play partner (Huser, 2010; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). For example, Jessica and Sophia expressed their wish to play with me. During a conversation, they discussed how they experienced their participation, and what I could do better, such as being their play partner.

Even after the children and I had established a relationship, the importance of trust remained a continuous issue (Dockett et al., 2012). Even though the children made use of their right to withdraw from conversations autonomously, they sometimes asked for permission to leave. Feelings of obligations towards the adult researcher have been identified by other researchers (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Besides feelings of obligation, children felt left out, and confronted me with it: Carmen didn’t take a video of me. Even though I had gained some level of trust during the phase of familiarity, it remained my task to be responsive to children’s ways of foregrounding the issue. Cocks (2006) emphasises the importance of continuity and time for maintaining trustful relationships between researcher and participants. The children addressed relational issues continuously, for example, with their consent and dissent, as well as through their forms of participation.

6.5.3.2 Peer relationships

Children’s peer relations were central throughout their various forms of participation – documenting, peer interviewing, and performing (being in role, showing to an audience). The children chose participatory acts to
interact with each other. The children experimented with different ways of expression, making use of their “local cultural practices of communication” (Christensen, 2004, p. 170), forming meaningful relationships in the peer group. Data about the children’s perceptions of play were generated through peer interactions. For example, Chloe tried to ignore my questions about the rules around the home corner’s prams but she did not disregard Sophia who kept investigating the matter, supporting the conclusion that “[c]hildren can get responses from their peers in a way that is not possible for adults” (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2013, p. 4). Children often feel comfortable chatting to friends in small groups (Dockett & Perry, 2005), they know their experiences better than anyone, and can relate to their peers’ experiences (Alderson, 2008).

Another participation process, ‘spotting’, was in one way an individual act where the children checked if they were present in a play-video, looking for personal relevance. At the same time, spotting became a shared participation process to create meaning together. Spotting may have occurred through a child’s invitation (see if we can spot me) but, at other times, it seemed just to happen. Spotting created a space for the children to acknowledge each other, to consent to share their experiences, and to create a meaningful participatory process. For example, the activity created a shared moment, when Sophia spotted herself and Scarlett and then continued to move her attention to their social play: That’s us playing with the light box. A similar moment of spotting and creating a shared meaningful moment was described in Axelrod’s (2016) ethnographic study, when the researcher read the field notes to the children: “They would laugh and comment and point to each other, saying, “That’s you’” (p. 107). In my study, instead of reading field notes, I provided the children’s play-videos, and these gave the children ‘spotting’ opportunities. Children are social actors (Christensen & Prout, 2002), and spotting provides an example of how relationships were created between the participants, while the adult researcher – me – had a passive role. Knowledge and meaning was co-created in the peer culture where they shared control over the conversation (Corsaro, 1997). Children’s nonverbal, expressive forms contributed to the generation of knowledge in relation to children’s participation in this
research. When the children shared their play experience, the conversations went beyond verbal communication and included performance, providing further insight into their perceptions of play, but also acknowledging the children’s diverse representations of experiences (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2015; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Lansdown, 2010).

6.5.3.3 Peer power

The children’s peer culture also included the use of power among the peers and this brought challenges and dilemmas for my ethical practice. Literature on ethics addresses the issue of power mainly in relation to adult-child power imbalances (Alderson, 2008). However, children are not always in powerless positions (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2013). Holland et al. (2010) “conceptualize ‘power’ as dynamic and relational, shifting away from the dichotomous view of power where the researcher always already embodies ‘power’ and the research participant always already embodies ‘powerlessness’” (p. 363). While the authors acknowledge that children can feel obliged to participate due to existing power imbalances, they also uncovered power imbalances within their group of participants, whereby participants silenced each other, interrupted their peers’ talk, or dominated the space. In my study, children exercised power among peers, physically and verbally. Two of the girls in my study responded to the physical power exercised by Olinda in a playful manner: Chloe began a running and escaping game into which Hannah joined. When Olinda became physically aggressive, I felt challenged about if and when to intervene and protect my participants from harm (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015). Intervening might suggest that I as researcher did not trust the children, or did not respect their decisions. The position of the children as agents and holder of rights in this study was important to the relationship between the children and me; it helped to create an atmosphere where the children felt they could talk freely (Smith, 2011). However, the children’s positioning had to be balanced with my responsibility to protecting them from harm. The trusting relationship has been stressed by other researchers (Clark & Moss, 2001; Corsaro, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2010). To show the children my trust, I decided to refrain from intervention. The educators rarely intervened and mainly stepped in when they saw the children leaving the conversation during its conduct;
when the children experimented with my technical equipment; or when they observed the children were not listening to me. It seemed the educators’ main concern was the children’s behaviour in relation to me than towards their peers.

Many moments of peer power were related to children’s rights to privacy. During the conversations, children excluded others to protect their data. It was their right to make decisions about with whom they shared their videos. In some moments, however, I was not sure if the children misused this right so that they could experience being in a powerful position. In all cases, I decided to trust the children to respect each other’s rights to participation.

6.5.4 Ethical spaces framework

In trying to implement a child-rights approach in research, Lundy et al. (2011) have emphasised the importance of spaces where children feel safe to express their views. Such safe spaces should also challenge dominant adult understandings and agendas, and provide children with spaces for presenting their perspectives (Waller, 2006). The notion that ethical spaces might alleviate the impact of a researcher’s invasion of children’s spaces (Palaiologou, 2014) was used as a further lens for considering this study’s findings. Children in this study acted as agents when they made their own decisions and created meaning with their peers, sometimes including me. After I had analysed the data following Charmaz’s (2006) steps for grounded theory, I looked at the children’s participation within the background of previous research. The child-initiated processes, their ways of consenting and dissenting, their acts of sharing, and exercising power could be sorted within the three concepts – agency, privacy and relationships. Further, I identified three spaces: the physical, the social-emotional, and the creative space, and these have some resonance with the impacts of the physical and social environment (Dockett et al., 2009). The three concepts fit within the ethical ‘spaces’ for considering all forms of children’s participation.
6.5.4.1 Physical space: location and time

The physical space includes the context of a situation, such as time and location (Palaiologou, 2014). As one example, children make choices about their proximity to the researcher. In my study, Jarvis hid from me, and Sophia stopped interviewing Scarlett once I entered their space. The physical space has relevance to all three concepts of privacy, agency and relationships. On the one hand, there is the issue of space invasion. For example, private play spaces of children can be in danger of being intruded upon during research dealing with their perspectives of play (Waller, 2006). On the other hand, offering children spaces for engagement that are novel or different for them can influence children’s choices about participation (Dockett et al., 2012). Connections to children’s daily spaces provide a familiar location for the children (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Keating et al. (2000) highlighted children’s ease in talking about their feelings about play when they remained in their play spaces. The children in my study sometimes walked back to the tables where they had played when they talked about particular play. The children also searched for the play equipment that they had used. The location or the material found in this location played a role in children’s discussions. Interviews with children had also been successful when undertaken in the exact situation, when and where an activity occurred (Langsted, 1994).

The physical space also includes time. Children used a time frame as a condition for consenting. Consent had to be understood within time and space for each situation where the children and I interacted. That is why an ongoing, process-oriented consent procedure was important. The children made individual decisions to participate for each interaction with me, or for each piece of content to be shared. Time is needed for the child to understand the consequences of her participation, but also to become familiar with the researcher, and to inform their decision to participate by checking their friends’ decisions (Dockett et al., 2012). Participation is renegotiated over time (Dockett et al., 2013; Flewitt, 2005; Gallagher, 2015).

Even though I had made decisions about how, when and where to generate data for the study, the children made their own choices about their
engagement. In some conversations, they walked around, started playing together or had side conversations with their peers. They then returned to the conversation with me when they felt like it. Such freedom of opting in and out by walking away or starting a chasing game requires physical locations that are “easily accessible spaces, where children can engage for a little or long time” (Dockett et al., 2009, p. 294). When such physical freedom is provided, the children can act on their rights of participation including the right to withdraw (Hill, 2006).

6.5.4.2 Creative space: representation

The children’s diverse forms of participation were considered as a creative form of representing their views and understandings about play, as well as their assent and dissent practices. I interpreted children’s play during conversations as forms of displaying their knowledge about play, or as a form of dissent when children acted on their right to withdraw from participation. The children’s bodies occupied a central role in many of their strategies for withdrawing, or sharing their understandings. Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015a) emphasized the importance of the body in children’s creation of meaning, but also in their engagement with the researcher. Body language and facial expressions can give clues about what children wish to engage in (Graue & Walsh, 1998) and in which ways they wish to participate (Dockett et al., 2012). Signals of dissent differed among the children. In the same vein, when they consented, children chose how to participate. The creative space pays respect to these diverse expressions, children’s agency and their capabilities in making choices about their participation (Lansdown, 2005). It also acknowledges their right to freedom of expression (United Nations, 1989).

Nentwig-Gesemann (2002) stressed how much children’s actual acts of playing a game in front of the video-camera provided greater insight about that play than asking children to tell about their experiences. This is not to say that children’s verbal contributions are not important. Rather that the examples in this study show how the children made use of both verbal and nonverbal expressions to represent their ideas and understandings. A creative representation of their thoughts through play was often accepted by the peer group, and performed together. For example, by demonstrating
their skid game, Ethan and Leo illuminated the rules of the game, and how rules were made up while playing the game together. Children who had observed them, joined in. The participation was self-chosen, and within the child’s capabilities. Hence, I concluded that their choices were testimony of children’s agency.

6.5.4.3 Social-emotional space: communicating and acting rights

The relationships the children develop, maintain and engage in during their research participation convey emotional and social meaning to children (Waller, 2006). First, there is the relationship between the child and the researcher. Time is needed to build a trusting relationship. When seeking consent, familiarity and trust form the basis of this relationship; and both rely on the efforts of the two, the child and the researcher (Dockett & Perry, 2010). It is not unusual for the child to try to figure out the researcher’s roles in the beginning, and what impact these roles have for the child (Christensen, 2004). Continuing trustful relationships are important, because they make voluntary participation possible. However, the children’s potential feelings of obligation towards the researcher need to remain on the researcher’s agenda, as adult-child power imbalances and inequalities continue.

The social space includes peer relationships. Even among peers, power imbalances are possible and these can lead to some children being silenced or excluded. In this study, the children’s main reason for excluding others was linked to their right to privacy. The children indicated which content they wished to share in different ways, including exercising physical or verbal power against peers. Power is dynamic and relational (Holland et al., 2010). On some occasions, the peer group offered a social space, where children felt comfortable to discuss issues. It was the children’s right to remain silent about topics, and to act as gatekeepers for their data (Danby & Farrell, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012). With the support of their peers (Brooker, 2008), some children even touched on challenging topics, such as children overstepping rules. Children acted not only as agents for themselves, but also a form of “collective agency” (James, 2009, p. 42) was apparent in children’s established forms of participation, such as when a process was introduced by one child, and accepted by the whole group. In
this social space, the children co-created meaning and knowledge (Corsaro, 1997), using practices of communication that they had established with peers (Christensen, 2004).

6.5.5 **Implementing agency, privacy and relationships in ethical spaces**

How can the concepts of agency, privacy, and relationships in the three spaces identified inform ethical research involving children? The three concepts and the three spaces can be looked at separately to analyse and frame ethical research practice with children. As well, applying each space as a reflexive lens provides a particular focus to explore how each concept is promoted. While it is possible, theoretically, to separate the three spaces, in practice they overlap. However, in using each as a lens for reflection, ethical research practice can be informed in detail. The following reflective questions are departure points that emerged from the findings of this study and the associated literature to contribute to ongoing considerations of ethical research involving children. The ‘Ethical Spaces Framework’ stimulates the idea that research is situated in a physical, a creative, and a social-emotional space.

Even though the researcher might have best intentions, the research setting and context can be counterproductive in relation to ethical practice. Considering location and time, a physical space lens provokes the researcher to ask if (and how) the setting promotes children’s agency. While the epistemological principles that underpin Childhood Studies acknowledge children as active agents, a critical continuous reflection on how the concept of agency is situated and enabled is useful and necessary. Reflection on the physical space can be prompted by asking:

- What possibilities do the children have to give consent within a time-frame they set for themselves?
- How can assent procedures ensure that children can consent for each interaction with the researcher?
- Can the children decide at which time they can share information?
- Are the places familiar to the children?
• How can children physically self-regulate proximity and distance to the researcher?
• How can the children dissent physically?

Applying the physical space to the next concept provokes questions about if (or how) the space provides children with opportunities to be private.

• Does the space allow children to opt in and out, for example, can they wander off; is there space for play available; can they leave the room by themselves?
• Can the children decide what to share through the physical context?
• Are there hiding spaces, where children can go to be out of sight of the researcher?
• Does the space provide opportunities for children to address topics they wish to withhold from others, such as peers, educators, etc.?

Lastly, questions can be asked about how the physical space contributes to understanding relationships within the principles of research ethics and their practice:

• Is time allocated for familiarization between the children and the researcher?
• Does the location enable children to go back to places they talk about, for example can the children show where they played?

The second space looks at children’s research participation from a creative angle. The focus is on the opportunities children have, but also the choices they make, to express their agency.

• How can children express their agency?
• Do we recognize and respect children’s ways of positioning themselves as powerful partners in the generation of knowledge, for example through their enactment of powerful play characters?
• What affords children’s own decision-making about how to participate?

The promotion of privacy within a creative space asks how children express their right to privacy. For example:

• Are nonverbal expressions recognized?
• Do children use communication modes unfamiliar to the researcher, and how can these be respected and encouraged?

The social-emotional space draws attention towards the different relationships occurring in research studies. It includes showing respect for children’s creative expressions of agency and privacy. These are important in the interactions between the researcher and the children and among participating peers.

• What efforts are made to become familiar with children’s modes of communication, and expressive forms?
• How can the relationship between the children and the researcher be promoted including children’s participation processes?
• How can children’s peer culture be supported within the research process?

Consideration of the third space prompts reflection on agency, privacy and relationships from a social-emotional point of view. This draws attention to the social interactions of research. In relation to agency, power relations are at the centre of reflection.

• How is children’s positioning in the research ensured so they can act on and further develop their agency?
• What power imbalances are in place, and how can they be addressed, and challenged?
• How are peer relations promoted to respect children’s collective agency?

Reflection on the social-emotional space prompts considerations about privacy and how this is enacted in social interactions, and turns
attention to the ways in which emotional responses arising from private aspects are handled.

- How can the discussion of delicate matters, such as overstepping rules, be encouraged?
- How can children’s wish to remain silent be respected?
- How can privacy among peers be supported?
- How can exclusion of some children be avoided without invading privacy?

Finally, the third space is used as a lens to explore the relationships between participating children and the adult researchers, and among children.

- Is time allocated to build trustful relationships where children feel secure and respected?
- What efforts are in place to develop, continue and maintain reciprocal trust?
- How can feelings of obligation be uncovered and challenged?
- How can peers support each other?

This set of reflective questions is not exhaustive, nor ultimate. Complementary to existing ethical frameworks and guidelines (Bertram, Formosinho, Gray, Pascal, & Whalley, 2016; Graham et al., 2013), they contribute to ongoing discussions about ethical research involving children, providing the frame of three spaces.

6.5.6 Summary: Informing ethical spaces from children’s perspectives of participation

The findings of this study have shown how the children chose to participate in my research, and what can be learned from these participation strategies in relation to ethical research with children. The children gave consent under their own conditions, such as limited to a specific time-frame, or to particular information or material that could be shared with others. The children’s consent was subject to change. This is the children’s right, and the researcher’s responsibility is to encourage consent procedures that offer
flexibility and possibilities for provisional decision-making (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012; Dockett et al., 2013; Flewitt, 2005; Gallagher, 2015). Consent and dissent were expressed verbally and nonverbally, including the use of bodily expressions (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Pálmdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a). Merleau-Ponty’s (2003) concept of the ‘lived body’ is useful for the interpretation of these expressions. Children signalled their dissent through a range of strategies, including ignoring my questions, changing the subject or leaving the conversation. Participation is a right that also includes rejection (Hill, 2006), which the children might show by staying silent or avoiding participation (Markström & Halldén, 2009). Participation might also include uncertainty and ambiguity (Pálmdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a) which can influence consent procedures (Dockett et al., 2012). Children can be gatekeepers of their own rights (Alderson, 2005).

Apart from children’s consent and dissent, their participation proceeded in many ways through verbal and nonverbal communication: peer interviewing, performing, such as being in role and showing play processes to an audience, documenting, and spotting. Children’s choices of means of expression are at the heart of rights-based research with children (Lansdown, 2010; Lundy et al., 2011). Play – as a strategy itself – was one means of expression which enabled the children to engage powerfully in research (Marsh, 2000; Paley, 1988; Wood, 2014). The peer group acted as a collective (James, 2009) and the strengths of the peer culture were evident in several instances (Corsaro, 1997). However, the presence of peers produced challenges to children’s rights, and also in terms of power.

Overall, the children addressed three concepts that have been considered as part of research ethics. Agency, privacy, and relationships arose from children’s participation and were linked to their actions. The recognition of children’s agency has driven research with children (Prout & James, 1990). Children’s rights, such as the right to privacy, are considered important in ethical research guidance, and relationships is one of three key areas to frame ethical research involving children (Graham et al., 2016). Several researchers have addressed the importance of safe spaces where children can express themselves in their own ways (Lundy et al., 2011;
Waller, 2006), and where they are protected from adult invasion of their privacy (Palaiologou, 2014). This study proposed a framework of three ethical spaces – physical, creative, social-emotional – to inform ethical practice. Ethical spaces can be defined as the dimensions that encompass how children experience their research participation, and where children live out these participatory experiences.

6.6 Overall research question: What are children’s perspectives of play experienced in early childhood education and care?

In the light of most recent concerns towards restricted and highly adult-regulated play as the price for apparently excellent education (EECERA SIG "Rethinking Play", 2017), including children’s understandings of their play experiences in ECEC settings is more important than ever. While re-conceptualisations of play can inform pedagogical practice for the children’s benefit (Rogers, 2011), instrumentalising play to meet only curricular goals (Broadhead & Burt, 2012) might not be the answer to increase educational quality. There is a growing recognition that the key to understanding children’s lives is to include their perspectives on those lives (Christensen & James, 2008b; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011). The current study aimed to respond to children’s contributions to theorisations of play by deepening insight into their own understandings of play (Colliver, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2014).

Children’s play in this study has been interpreted within the contexts where children experienced play. While children’s rights and their competence to play are acknowledged in Australian ECEC (DEEWR, 2009), less is said about their agency in relation to play. This is not to say that children’s agency is disregarded. Rather, the EYLF positions children as agents and right holders, with a focus on their identity as learners. Developing a sense of agency is stated as part of one learning outcome in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). However, the pedagogical focus of this document can suggest that children’s play within the ECEC is to be supported primarily as a learning strategy. The children in this study had a range of relevant ideas about play. Their perspectives of play can inform play-based pedagogies and planning for play in ECEC. Such practice would acknowledge that children have the right to participate in decisions and are
competent contributors to society and culture, including the educational and institutional practices in which they are involved.

A summary of my results from investigating children’s perspectives of play in one setting are synthesized in the following eight key points.

1.) **Pretending was the most prominent feature of the participating children’s play.**

From the perspectives of the children who participated in this study play had features related to content and conditions. The most prominent content-related features the children identified in their play were playing a role within a theme, and pretending. These fit well with adult theorizations of play (Gaskins, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). The strict separation of play types (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ridgway et al., 2015; Rubin et al., 1978) was less supported by the actions and discussions of the children. Rather, they merged role play, construction play and physical play types. However, the imagination and pretence and opportunities to re-live and re-interpret real events and past experiences (Vygotsky, 1978, 2004) played a central role in children’s accounts of their play. The sociocultural context strongly shaped the content of children’s play. Children’s lives and realities are changing with contemporary influences, and these influences are represented in children’s play (Edwards, 2014), for example in the portrayal of television programs in role play, or the re-interpretation of Mobilo® constructions as Transformers. Independent of this influence, past events or media-consumed stories were not just imitated but the children created their own stories on the basis of their experiences, highlighting their capabilities in constructing their own peer culture (Corsaro, 1997). Pretending was linked to children’s experiences in their social and cultural contexts, and dominated their play culture, not only in role play, but in many merged play types.

2.) **Participating children’s perspectives of play were diverse.**

Researching children’s perspectives involves the risk of concealing children’s diversity of ideas, and presenting the children’s understandings as representative for all children (Waller, 2006). There is no universal child, and play is not the same for each child (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). As other research with children has suggested (Theobald et al., 2015), not all
the children in my study shared the same understandings, and differing views and disagreements appeared. This study showed diversity in children’s play content: for example, boys’ themes originated more from the contemporary popular culture, than the girls’ themes. As well, the study showed diversity in the conditions children mentioned: what motivated them to play, and what roles peers and educators played. Findings are supported by earlier studies indicating that children emphasize control and choice in play (Howe, 2016; Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; Robson, 1993; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995), and the context and nature of play are linked to what children identify as play (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006).

3.) Adult-regulation of play contrasted with participating children’s wish to have control.

The critique of the increasing regulation of play in ECEC (EECERA SIG "Rethinking Play", 2017) needs to be considered against the backdrop of what the children in this study reported about the role of educators in their play. The children suggested that play was regulated by educators in terms of play space, play time, play material and tolerated play behaviour. This regulation stands in contrast to children’s definition of play as self-initiated and self-controlled activity. Interrupted play and lack of time to develop play ideas do not seem to increase quality play for the children. Other research identified that educator control over play was experienced negatively (Rogers & Evans, 2006; Sandberg, 2002), but that children also experienced educators as facilitative and supportive (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015b; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). Children also developed strategies to challenge educators’ regulation of play (Corsaro, 1997; Rogers & Evans, 2006). There are examples of each of these in the current study.

4.) Play afforded agentic experiences for participating children.

For the children in the current study, play offered a space where they could exercise their agency, realised through creating themes and rules that organised their play. Being the creator of play promoted ownership, self-regulation and control. Agency was a shared understanding, but the children
felt their agency challenged when confronted with educator rules and consequent play restrictions. Despite such challenges, the children developed strategies to deal with regulations and to regain control. Such strategies made them agents again, as they reacted, negotiated and changed play conditions by themselves. These findings reinforce previous studies which have identified various children’s responses to educator regulation (Corsaro, 1997; Holland, 2003; Rogers & Evans, 2006). Another opportunity to experience agency in play was through pretending (Wood, 2014): the children in my study exercised power through the enactment of a range of characters. For the children, agency was a concept that they derived from play.

5.) **Communities of co-players constituted participating children’s feeling of belonging.**

The way children presented their perspectives of play indicated that they created communities of co-players through collaborative acts and social processes to construct knowledge and to share understandings and meaning. The study’s findings reiterate those of previous research (Corsaro, 2003; Howe, 2016; Huser, 2010; Löfdahl, 2005, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2015). The communities of co-players were formed and sustained though inclusive acts, and promoted children’s feelings of belonging. However, children’s play communities were also sustained through exclusion of other peers, and these impacted on children’s feelings of belonging. Communities of co-players support complex, dynamic social processes including exclusion of others to protect play and belonging.

6.) **Participating children reported little about learning in play, but emphasised that they regarded play as a social activity.**

The relationship between play and learning has not been simple to explain, either for curricular purposes (OECD, 2004), or from educators’ point of view (Dockett, 2011; Wu & Rao, 2011). Adult driven discourses have made complex the positioning of play and play-based learning in educational practice (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). Hence, a lack of clarity about what connections children make between play and learning might be surprising. In this study, not all children discussed learning in play,
or the contribution of play to learning. Confirming previous research (Dockett & Meckley, 2007; Howard, 2002; Kärby, 1989; Keating et al., 2000; Rogers & Evans, 2006), children sometimes distinguished between play and learning, while at other times, they associated one with the other. Their focus lay on ‘what’ they learn: learning practical or academic skills; mastering a skill; knowing and acting towards social behaviour rules; and exploring to gain insight or knowledge. This list complements other recent research (Sandberg et al., 2017). However, for the children involved in this study, learning was not always a sole activity. Rather, it occurred in collaboration with others. The more knowledgeable others within Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory were peers, or educators, although educators were rarely mentioned. Despite peer learning not being verbalized by the children, their actions provided evidence that children provided scaffolding for peers and participated in play communities that included learning. Nevertheless, the findings showed that the participating children were unfamiliar with discussing learning in play.

7.) Participating children were social agents and gatekeepers of their perspectives of play.

This study contributes to the small amount of research that has addressed how children consent, choose to participate, and dissent in research (Dockett et al., 2012). The right to participation includes the right to non-participation. Children in this study acted on this aspect of their right: children were agents of their participation, dissenting or withdrawing from participation when they wished to do so. They were also gatekeepers of their participation and the data they wished to share (Alderson, 2005). This role was enacted by the children remaining silent or avoiding my research questions in other ways just as was shown by Markström and Halldén (2009). The way the group of participating children created and established participation processes has indicated the children’s “collective agency” (James, 2009, p. 42).

Besides sharing their perspectives of play verbally, the children shared their understandings in nonverbal ways. Instead of talking about their play experiences, some children chose to play during our conversations, with this play itself constituting demonstrations of their perspectives of play.
Although the children mainly enjoyed participating and were comfortable with sharing their thoughts within the research group conversation, they also exercised choices and refrained from sharing.

8.) Participating children shared their perspectives of play considering rights to privacy.

The research context of group conversations provided possibilities for the children to make use of their peer culture and underlying communication cultures (Christensen, 2004), but brought up questions about how children experienced their participation, and how ethical spaces for researching with children should be characterized. For example, privacy was challenged when children wished to help the researcher by pursuing questions, which sometimes reflected a limited awareness of how this could affect their peers’ privacy (Beazley et al., 2009). Discussing delicate issues around their play, children demonstrated that their right to privacy was important, despite their apparent lack of experience considering issues of confidentiality and privacy (Dockett & Perry, 2015). The children were challenged to understand the use of pseudonyms, for example. Acts reflecting awareness of privacy were identified when children made choices about with whom to share their play-videos, and what content to discuss. The peer group was a social space for research where discussions raised topics that were unpleasant for some children, but at the same time, where they enjoyed re-living their play experiences and creating and sharing meanings about play. Hence, research participation was a relational matter that impacted ethical considerations, such as the right to privacy. The interpretation of children’s participation in this study highlighted that agency, privacy and relationships are concepts to reflect within ethical spaces, and these address the physical, the creative and the social-emotional spaces in which research practices involving children can occur.

This chapter has considered particular aspects of children’s ideas and understandings of play and discussed in detail what the children in this study identified as play; how they described play; what understandings they derived from play; and what connections they made between play and learning. The discussion illuminated each aspect with the aim of providing insights into children’s understandings of their play. In addition, the study
aimed to create ethical research spaces based on how the children experienced their research participation. For the purpose of responding to the overall question of the study “What are children’s perspectives of play experienced in ECEC?”, issues related to the first four research sub-questions were synthesised to generate an overview of how children reflected their participation in this study, and how researching with children can be characterised. The discussion chapter concluded with eight key points highlighting the insights gained from this study.
7 Chapter Seven: Conclusion

My doctoral study aimed to explore children’s perspectives of play. The focus was, firstly, on how children experience their play in the ECEC context, and what understandings and meanings they hold about their play. Secondly, I wanted to learn what characterizes ethical spaces for researching with children from the ways the children participated in the study. In this chapter, I briefly summarize what contributions and implications this study makes to the existing theorizations of play, children’s perspectives of play, Childhood Studies, and ECEC practice. I also address possibilities for future research, limitations of the study and my personal reflections on the research journey.

7.1 Study contributions and implications

The study has described what the participating children identified as play, as well as what understandings they derived from play, while they explored the content and conditions of their play. This clearly contributes to existing research about children’s play. The study’s findings – both similar to and different from previous studies – highlight

- the importance of the physical context of play (Howard, 2002; Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995);
- the role of peers (Avgitidou, 1997; Corsaro, 1997, 2003; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Huser, 2010; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Skånfors et al., 2009);
- the role of the educator (Corsaro, 1997; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011; Markström & Halldén, 2009; McInnes et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Sandberg, 2002);
- the place of learning in play (Colliver & Fleer, 2016; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Sandberg et al., 2017; Theobald et al., 2015); and
- the children’s freedom of choice and self-control (Howe, 2016; Keating et al., 2000; King, 1979; McInnes et al., 2013; Robson, 1993; Rogers & Evans, 2006; Wing, 1995).
From the children’s reflections on their play, I interpreted play as a place where agency and belonging were experienced. The participating children’s accounts of play in this study mirror existing sociocultural theories of play, including that pretending is a prominent feature of children’s play (Vygotsky, 2004); and that children learn from more experienced others – from adults and, in particular, from peers – in play (Vygotsky, 1978). Play was an important medium for the children in my study to demonstrate their understandings, and to create and share their meanings with other participating children.

Furthermore, the ways in which children described their play and chose to participate in the study contribute to the field of Childhood Studies, particularly acknowledging children’s right to express their perceptions in ways that they prefer, and that reflect their developing competencies (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2015; Lansdown, 2010). The findings of this study add to knowledge about how children perceive, and express their perspectives on their play (Howe, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2015; Theobald et al., 2015).

I was not only interested in how children expressed their ideas about play, but also how they showed their consent to participate. The study contributes to the few extant reports on how children consent, choose to participate, and express dissent (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015; Dockett et al., 2012). Apart from successful efforts to gain children’s consent, the findings of this study detail children’s conditional consent and their strategies for indicating dissent concerning participation. These findings acknowledge children’s diverse forms of participation and ways of showing consent, as well as dissent, using both verbal and bodily expression.

With the mandatory implementation of play-based learning in Australian ECEC services (Sumsion et al., 2014), gaining deeper insight into the different perceptions children and adults may hold of play experiences has growing importance (Glenn et al., 2013; Harcourt, 2011). The findings of this study synthesized children’s perspectives of play into eight key points:

1.) Pretending was the most prominent feature of children’s play.
2.) Children’s perspectives of play were diverse.
3.) Adult-regulation of play contrasted with children’s wish to have control.
4.) Play provided agentic experiences.
5.) Communities of co-players constituted children’s feeling of belonging.
6.) Children reported little about learning in play, but provided testimony that it is a social activity.
7.) Children were social agents and gatekeepers of their perspectives of play.
8.) Children shared their perspectives of play considering rights to privacy.

Researchers have raised the issue that researching children’s perspectives runs the risk of presenting them as a homogenous group, representative of all children (Einarsdóttir, 2014; Waller, 2006). This may be particularly the case in the field of researching children’s play where play traditionally was linked to images of the universal child who always benefits from, and learns through, play (Colliver, 2012; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). If play is implemented in the ECEC curriculum to provide “opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5), these opportunities need to reflect what the children consider as play. The findings of this study provide testimony that children have both similar and different understandings of play (Theobald et al., 2015). Hence, the study suggests that play provision in ECEC should reflect this diversity of children’s perspectives, offer opportunities for children to engage in various play experiences with peers and educators, allow children to make their own play choices, such as with whom they wish to play, and enable children to follow different play interests.

Researchers have challenged Eurocentric or Western notions of play that discriminate against children whose cultural context applies different values to play (Colliver, 2012; Göncü et al., 1999; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Nonetheless, this study suggests the need to recognise diversity even in what seems a homogeneous group; as was the case for the children involved in this study. It also highlights the importance of understanding
and including children’s perspectives in order to prevent discrimination or marginalisation of some children. Differences in play interests and play behaviour have been subject to restrictions from adults’ point of views about which play is favoured, and therefore approved, or otherwise discouraged (Holland, 2003; Rogers, 2010). Often, such less favoured and disapproved play is undertaken by boys. Some of the boys in this study made comments about such restrictions; but mostly, their silence begged questions about how children experience disapproval around their favourite play interests. Questions that beg further study ask what messages are conveyed if it is mainly boys’ play interests that experience censorship due to “undesirable behaviour” (Wragg, 2013, p. 285), and what alternatives to its disruption educators have in order to respond to ‘too boisterous’ physical play or superhero or ninja themes (Holland, 2003).

Despite research findings that show benefits for children of pedagogies of play (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011), a group of international researchers have raised concerns about play in ECEC occurring in contexts of high levels of adult restriction and regulation (EECERA SIG "Rethinking Play", 2017). Such adult interventions have been linked to a view that play should always be directed towards promoting development, growth and learning outcomes (Wragg, 2013), and the perspective that childhood is about preparing for adulthood (Mayall, 2002). Educators are under a lot of pressure to deliver quality and effective programs (Wood, 2010) that enhance children’s learning and to ensure outcomes for children that can be observed and documented (Colliver, 2012; Keating et al., 2000). One consequence of this pressure can be the frequent interruption or disapproval of children’s play that results from adults perceiving play as too “lively, noisy and physical” (Holland, 2003, p. 27), “noisy and boisterous” (Rogers & Evans, 2006, p. 50), or “’aggressive’ and ‘anti-social’” (Wood, 2012, p. 5). Such exhortations often fail to notice the “richness and complexity” of diverse play experiences (Wood, 2012, p. 5).

Even though play has been advocated traditionally in the Australian ECEC (Sumsion et al., 2014), as elsewhere in the world, play is at risk of being instrumentalized for educational outcomes (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). However, the result of such “educational play” could be the loss of the
play’s distinctive qualities (Wood, 2012, p. 5); and the educational outcomes are most likely of less interest to the players, the children themselves (Wood, 2012).

This study raises awareness about the importance of understanding play experiences from children’s perspectives which, in turn, provide a basis for knowing “when and why they choose to engage in play, and in what ways they subsequently benefit” (Howard, 2010, p. 146). Consequently, this knowledge adds to the planning and practice of play-based approaches in ECEC. Taking children’s perspectives as the point of departure for such approaches will not only result in minimizing children’s frustration caused by adult interruptions (Rogers & Evans, 2006), but also in responding to children’s requests for self-control and self-initiation in their play. A co-constructed play curriculum acknowledges the importance of the active role that educators have in children’s play and learning (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011), and the different roles children assign to their educators (Einarsdóttir, 2014; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). Colliver (2012) has suggested that “child- and educator-initiated activities may be blended into co-directed activities” (p. 17), reducing the seemingly dichotomous roles of adults and children (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). Educators are then not just stage-managers, co-players, or play facilitators, and they run less risk of being play regulators. Instead educators and children become co-constructors of play.

Co-constructing play in ECEC includes communicating and planning together for play time, play space, play equipment, and play rules. The children’s perspectives of play in this study highlight the importance of children’s opportunities to:

- merge pretend and other types of play;
- play powerful characters;
- feel included and participate in communities of co-players;
- protect play from peers *just joining*;
- have time to plan for play, as well as to prepare props, before playing;
- have space for playing;
find and retrieve play equipment, rather than to deal with equipment disappearing or being moved to other areas; and
know, influence and create play rules.

Co-construction of play has the potential to avoid children’s feelings of getting into trouble, or experiencing loss of control over their play. Findings from this study indicate that children should be able to exercise their agency over ‘their’ play, and that they should be able to feel that they belong to a community of co-players, including peers and adults, who together can generate appropriate strategies to support and guide play.
Where educators and children have opportunities to reflect together on play and learning opportunities and experiences, there is potential for children’s awareness and familiarity with their learning to grow. Such active participation in shaping their ECEC experiences is at the heart of the principles underpinning the EYLF. Hence, play-based approaches in ECEC including children’s own perspectives consider opportunities for children to exercise agency in self-controlled play activities, peer scaffolding and participation in play communities.

Besides the focus on play, this study contributes new data to the issue of children’s experiences of research participation, and how this can inform ethical research practice with children. The findings have been synthesised into three concepts that have been discussed in the literature: agency, privacy, and relationships (Graham et al., 2013; Prout & James, 1990; United Nations, 1989). The findings have illuminated that children are conscious of their rights to participation and act upon them; and consent is understood as a time- or situation-limited concept, thereby underscoring the importance of provisional, flexible consent procedures (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012; Dockett et al., 2013; Flewitt, 2005; Gallagher, 2015; Howard, 2010). Children’s dissent raises awareness of their right to non-participation, and because children show their dissent verbally and through bodily expressions, it also highlights the importance of researcher responsibility to take all expressions into account. This sensitivity applies to children’s overall choices for participation; including those that the children initiate and create themselves. In this study, play was
not only the subject of exploration, but it was also a means of expression for the children.

Through interpreting the data through ‘spaces’ (Palaiologou, 2014), three ethical spaces for researching children’s perspectives have been conceptualised: physical, social-emotional, and creative. Previous studies raised attention separately to physical and social spaces (Birbeck & Drummond, 2015; Dockett et al., 2009) and safe spaces for children’s expressions (Lundy et al., 2011; Waller, 2006). This study proposes a framework for reflection about the three concepts – agency, privacy, and relationships – through all three of these ethical ‘spaces’, where reflective questions are departure points and stimuli for ongoing ethical considerations.

The generation of the ‘Ethical spaces framework’ is the innovative contribution of this thesis to ECEC knowledge, not only for ethical research involving children. Understandings of children’s participation in research provide insight into children’s perspectives on play and have great potential to inform the role of play-based pedagogy in early childhood. This thesis highlights that children show awareness of their rights, and their competence to act on them. They were active contributors to the generation of knowledge. Their contributions can inform existing policy and practices debates regarding the pedagogy of play, particularly when children’s agency and rights to participation are taken seriously.

The children in my study shed light on what understandings they, the players, hold about their play experiences. However, the study also highlights that there is not one universal definition of play, nor even one that holds for all children in this study. Rather, children shared some understandings, but also contradicted each other when it came to discussing their experiences of play. The diversity of the children’s perspectives in this study should be celebrated, noting as Wood (2012) stated, that play is a complex phenomenon that might never be entirely apprehended.

First, we can never fully understand the complexities of play, even from the perspectives of the players themselves. Second, although adults’ attempts at understanding play will continue to be challenging and exciting, their attempts at managing and
controlling play will always be problematic. (Wood, 2012, p. 4)

In light of the study’s findings, a co-constructed play curriculum can promote the provision of spaces for pretend play where children can explore and develop their agency. The current tendency among some educators to regulate play pedagogies and to judge play as good or bad, can be overcome when children’s perspectives of play are the foundation for co-constructed play curriculum. Co-construction promotes children’s agency insofar as their definitions of play as a self-controlled activity is nurtured. Applying the creative and social-emotional spaces to shaping pedagogy in a co-constructed process affords further opportunities for children to demonstrate their decision-making competence as well as their exercise of control.

Co-constructing play curriculum with the children can also contribute to improvements in the educational quality of ECEC settings. When children’s expressions through play were considered within the creative space, learning from peers in play was revealed. Hence, learning can be enhanced when play is in control of the children. In addition, conversations with children about learning in and through play provoke children to think about their learning. While play is an agentic context for children and can function as a stimulating context for researching children’s perspectives, researchers should consider and ensure that children’s privacy is respected at the same time.

Adult perspectives have dominated play research and hence the play-based approaches in ECEC practice. As I have presented, adults, and more particularly educators, play an important role in facilitating, enhancing, but also regulating play. The results of this study affirm the view that the children “escape and contest the definitions, boundaries, rules and policies that adults impose on play” (Wood, 2012, p. 4). As the children will not ignore adult regulations but respond to them, this highlights the importance of taking children’s perspectives as the point of departure for continuous reflections of play-based pedagogies and ethical research practices.
7.2 Future research possibilities

Play is an international right of children in all countries which have signed up the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). Around the world, the numbers of children attending ECEC are constantly growing. Yet, the ways different children use and experience play are under-researched, as are the ways educators may support children’s play. Recognising this, further research could provide insight into the benefits from understanding greater diversity of children’s experiences, generally and particularly of play, for educators and their educational practices.

The study indicates that children’s requests for self-control in play are often challenged by adult regulations around play time, play space, and play rules. One suggestion to overcome this is that educators might consider moving towards co-construction of play. This suggestion raises questions for future research around the involvement of children in co-constructing play curriculum and provision. Studies, such as ‘Spaces to play’ using the Mosaic approach provide testimony of how listening to children have informed change (Clark & Moss, 2005). Researching the implementation of the co-construction of play curriculum can also be informed by action research approaches or participatory, rights-based research with children as co-researchers (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Lundy et al., 2011).

The findings of this study have shown that children indicate dissent and choose to participate in verbal and nonverbal ways. Bodily expressions have been an important source of information in this study to gain insight into children’s perspectives of play. This has also been supported by other studies (Dockett et al., 2012; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). For example, Pálmadóttir addressed the importance of bodily expressions of young children and applied a phenomenological approach and Merlau-Ponty’s (2003) concepts of the ‘lived body’ and ‘life worlds’ to her study (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015). While Pálmadóttir was reliant on the nonverbal expressions of the toddlers in her study (Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015a; Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015), research with older children might support the body as a medium of expression. The focus on the body as the anchor of experiences and
expressions of those experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 2003) has added to my interpretation of children’s nonverbal constructions of knowledge for this study. Future research could gain from applying such a lens.

7.3 Trustworthiness, limitations and challenges

It is important to consider this study’s trustworthiness, limitations and challenges. Firstly, Hatch and Coleman-King’s (2015) construct of trustworthiness and Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) strategies provided the foundation for the credibility of this study. In this study, the extended time period of data generation, and the relationships built with the participating children contribute to the study’s credibility. Further, the processes underlying the constructivist grounded theory approach used in this study contribute to research rigour (Thornberg, et al., 2015). What is generalizable from this study are the theories and methods applied in its implementation, rather than the specific results that are based on interactions with one group of children in one specific context. With transparency of the methodology, readers and other researchers are able to apply it and transfer it to their research (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015). In addition, the study’s consistency with findings of previous research contributes to trustworthiness. There was consistency between what children shared about their play understandings, and what previous research has revealed. In other words, the results and theories from previous research helped to confirm the findings of my study.

However, the findings of this study also exhibit limitations. The study was only able to present those perspectives which the children shared with me. Even though my attempts to gain insight into their perspectives included considering verbal and nonverbal expressions, my stance on children as holder of rights, social agents and gatekeepers of their data required that I respected children’s dissent and their decisions about what they wished to contribute. I interpreted those decisions as the children’s acts within their rights to participation and to privacy. In addition, the findings could only reflect the perspectives of these children who wished to participate. Hence, my conclusions cannot be assumed to be representative of the whole group of children in the study setting, or of children generally.
Additionally, researching children’s perspectives is limited insofar as that I, as the researcher, am still an adult interpreting what children shared. Data interpretation is a subjective, rather than objective or neutral act: the researcher always interprets the data under the influence of the study’s theoretical perspective (Einarsdóttir, 2014). Thornberg et al. (2015) identify the challenge of the adult frame towards the data generated. To reduce my adult frame, and come closer to children’s perspectives, I chose to have conversations with them in groups, and leave the direction of conversations as much as possible in children’s hands. With this, I aimed to give the children space to share what they were interested in discussing. In addition, I considered children’s verbal and nonverbal contributions to the conversations. But there were moments where children’s conversations did not completely make sense to me, and I had to acknowledge that the children and my “meaning-making” (Thornberg et al., 2015, p. 413) were disparate. However, interpretation of data is always challenged by the question of whether or not the understandings and experiences of others are represented, not just in research with children. Charmaz (2006) reminds her readers and users of grounded theory that the end product of research is always the researcher’s ‘construction’. The findings generated in this study are therefore limited in these regards.

Further, voluntariness was an important ethical principle underpinning the study, so children who did not interact with the research at all might well have held other ideas and understandings than those reported. Children attending other ECEC settings might have again co-constructed different findings; for example, the children in this study seemed to be unfamiliar with the idea that play and learning may, in some circumstances, link together. Children who are familiar in discussing their learning in play with their educators could have added their perspectives to this matter. The decision to generate data in one setting was seen as a strength as it allowed me to spend a considerable amount of time with the participating children and hence created trustful relationships with them. However, it also limits the generalizability of results.

A challenge in the current study results from the research context. In particular, the childcare centre’s context was not one in which it was easy to
protect privacy of participants during data generation. For one thing, privacy was challenged through educator presence. For protective reasons, the educators working with the children were always nearby. In addition, the presence of the educators has the potential for providing an environment for the children where they feel safe. After all, the educators were familiar to the children. Having a familiar person close by could potentially benefit the study in that the children were to share more, than being with an unfamiliar person. While both, the protective and the potentially beneficial aspects are understood – and in the case of protection required – it can be a potential barrier to the children discussing matters, such as overstepping rules, in presence of their educators where they fear getting into trouble from them. As the results have shown, children were reluctant to talk about such topics. On some occasions, they shared understandings, and this could have resulted from the opportunity they perceived when the educators were busy with other children in the classroom or outdoor area where conversations between the participating children and I were undertaken. The children were aware of the presence of their educators, as there had been situations where the educators interfered: they commented on children leaving the conversation, or made chastising comments when children explored my equipment. As well, the presence of peers challenged privacy. Even though the children mostly enjoyed sharing their play-videos and discussing their ideas together, the peer group also produced moments where unpleasant topics arose. However, the children demonstrated agency to deal with their privacy needs, using strategies such as sending peers away, or refusing to answer anyone, even their peers. The peer group as a context for data generation has been more of advantage than a challenge, as children can be powerful participants exercising collective agency (James, 2009).

7.4 Personal reflections

I came to study children’s perspectives of play from a fascination with children’s play, including how they can be so completely absorbed in play that they forget the most basic human needs, and how they are able to imagine the impossible, diving into fantasy worlds and slipping into any character they wish. However, my interest in understanding what children experience in play, and what is important to them, was born out having
witnessed children’s play, seemingly for no reason, being interrupted, restricted or even banned by educators during my work as an educator myself in German Kindergartens. Throughout this study, I have faced my personal background, the influences of my education and my former work as an educator. I reflected on my motivation for this study, and had to realize that I shared some romantic views of the child at play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010) which led to focusing first just on situations where children played without their educators being present. Hence, the first play-videos I recorded ignored any situations with direct educator involvement, such as the table activities provided in this classroom. Continuous conversations with my supervisors and the engagement with the existing literature, as well as the children involved in the study, have supported me in reflecting on my personal influences and the underlying presumptions that I brought to the data generation.

My previous professional experiences as an educator have also challenged me as a researcher. I have caught myself in situations that I wanted to avoid, such as ‘acting like an educator’ and intervening in conversations among the children. For example, the way I aimed to approach the children and also to facilitate the group conversations was to be an interested adult, different from the educators. I assumed that play was linked to children’s challenges with adult rules and regulations that they would rather refrain from discussing with the educators who set such restrictions to their play. Hence, I tried to be different from the educators. When I listened back to my recorded conversations, I realised that I had not only set up rules for the conversations, such as to stay on the chairs, but also that I sometimes started to concentrate on behaviour management rather than following up with children’s reports. In one conversation with Braxton and Hudson, Braxton pretended to be asleep and imitated snoring noises which I responded to reminding Braxton that I tried to record our conversation. I told him that the snoring could drown Hudson’s voice who was reporting about their play. Not only had I reacted similar to an educator which I had aimed to avoid, but with my educator-similar interventions, I might have also missed opportunities to co-construct knowledge with the children.
The setting’s circumstances contributed to the situations where I felt the need to manage behaviours and, perhaps, missed children’s conversations: almost all of the group conversations were held during running routines in the classroom. The children and I watched their play-videos so they could consent to share them while other activities were taking place. Consequently, some children did not want to be interrupted in what they were doing elsewhere; the level of background noise (children’s and educators’ voices, but also noises from the dishwasher in the kitchen next door) made it hard to listen back to some recorded conversations and might have contributed to children focusing on other things happening around us. In addition, all the while other children and educators were in ear-shot and challenged privacy protection. Even though the educators were very cooperative and wanted to assist me to find ways to enable my data generation, their priority, of course, had to lie with their curriculum and responding to daily situations. I understood that times had to be modified flexibly as the educators wanted to ensure they met situational and children’s needs. Similarly, I agreed that my research and my presence should not interfere with classroom routines. Undertaking research in the ‘natural’ context, and not for example under laboratory conditions, required me to face and accept such challenges.

From this study, I have learned how important relationships are to co-construct knowledge, and how much I can learn from listening to the children with an open mind. The children have led me to places that I was not able to consider at the start of this journey. I have also experienced new ways of expression, which I hope will shape my future research practices with even more respect for alternative forms for consent, dissent, and participation. Children’s play and children’s rights remain my passion. The children’s expressions were not always understandable to me, and I felt insecure and ambiguous in situations, but I might have learned the most from such frictions, where the research process did not run smoothly as planned, and made me puzzled.

When I presented the proposal of my doctoral study to the university’s research committee, a quote from Kathy Charmaz gave me encouragement:
Choose topics that ignite your passion. If need be, dispute negative decisions from your institutional committees. Do something that makes a difference in the world. Then enter the phenomenon and open yourself to the research experience. Face the inevitable ambiguities. Flow with the existential dislocation of bewilderment. Bring passion, curiosity and care to your work. In the end, you will transform our images of studied life, and your research journey will transform you. (Charmaz, 2004, p. 991)

Looking back to where I started and to the present where I stand now, I am excited about the journey that the children allowed me to walk with them, and what possible adventurous detours I might have shown them along the way.
8 References


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373
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9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix A: Ethics approval

26 February 2015

Ms Carmen Husser
Charles Sturt University
School of Education
PO Box 789
ALBURY NSW 2640

Dear Ms Husser,

Thank you for the additional information forwarded in response to a request from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

The CSU HREC reviews projects in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans.

I am pleased to advise that your project entitled “Children’s perspectives of play” meets the requirements of the National Statement and ethical approval for this research is granted for a twelve-month period from 26 February 2015.

The protocol number issued with respect to this project is 2015/010. Please be sure to quote this number when responding to any request made by the Committee.

Please note the following conditions of approval:

- all Consent Forms and Information Sheets are to be printed on Charles Sturt University Letterhead. Students should liaise with their Supervisor to arrange to have these documents printed;
- you must notify the Committee immediately in writing should your research differ in any way from that proposed. Forms are available at: http://www.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/word_doc/0012/263768/Research-Project%2015010.doc (please copy and paste the address into your browser);
- you must notify the Committee immediately if any serious or unexpected adverse events or outcomes occur associated with your research, that might affect the participants and therefore ethical acceptability of the project. An Adverse Incident Form is available from the website, as above;
- amendments to the research design must be reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee before commencement. Forms are available at the website above.

www.csu.edu.au

OCEG Provider Number for Charles Sturt University is 060007 (NOS), 410970 (HE) and 032099 (NOS). JREU-21971-708-2014.
• if an extension of the approval period is required, a request must be submitted
to the Human Research Ethics Committee. Forms are available at the website
above;
• you are required to complete a Progress Report form, which can be
downloaded as above, by 20 November 2015 if your research has not been
completed by that date;
• you are required to submit a final report, the form is available from the
website above.

YOU ARE REMINDED THAT AN APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE CSU HREC
CONSTITUTES ETHICAL APPROVAL ONLY.

If your research involves the use of radiation, biological materials, chemicals or
animals a separate approval is required from the appropriate University Committee.

The Committee wishes you well in your research and please do not hesitate to contact
the Executive Officer on telephone (02) 6338 4628 or email ethics@csu.edu.au if you
have any enquiries.

Yours sincerely

Julie Hicks
Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Direct Telephone: (02) 6338 4628
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au
Cc: Professor Sue Dockert, Professor Rob Kerry

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and
Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in
Human Research (2007)
9.2 Appendix B: Principal Information letter

INFORMATION LETTER

Research project: Children’s perspectives of play
Chief investigator: Carmen Huser, Master in Early Childhood Education, student, Doctor of Philosophy – Education
Supervisor: Professor Sue Docksett, Professor in Early Childhood Studies, School of Education, Albury
Professor Bob Perry, Professor in Mathematics, and Transition to School, School of Education, Albury

Dear ____________________,

Your childcare centre is invited to take part in a study being conducted by Carmen Huser. It is part of a program of research for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, being supervised by Prof. Dr. Sue Docksett and Prof. Dr. Bob Perry. I am requesting your centre’s participation in this project.

I am aiming to explore what children’s perspectives of play in their prior to school service are. The information that I will generate through the study will be used to write my PhD thesis. I will report the findings to the responsible authorities, in some journal articles and/or conferences, and to your centre.

Purpose and aims of the project:
Children’s perspectives of play is a research project that is designed to explore children’s play experiences in prior to school and their perspectives of these experiences. Play has been part of children’s experiences in education and has recently received new attention with the mandatory implementation of play-based learning approaches in early childhood education services in Australia. The project aims to provide opportunities for children to express their views of play, and to investigate how children’s perspectives are reflected in the play spaces provided and the educational practices adopted. It is possible that enriching discussions between children, educators, and the researcher evolve from this project.

Methods:
This research project understands research with children as a collaborative activity between adult researcher and child participants. The children will be actively involved in gathering and interpreting data. The researcher would like to invite children in several activities to explore together, for example, what they identify as play, what their understandings of play are, and what connections children make between play and learning. The participation will include:

• The researcher will watch the children play and take notes of these observations;
• The children will be video-recorded while playing when they allow this;
• The children will watch video-taped play scenes and talk about their ideas with the researcher what play means to them;
• The children will have opportunities to discuss with the researcher about what they have found out about play.

In terms of feasibility, six to eight focus children in the age of 4–5 years old will be chosen whose data will be used for the study. However, it will be possible for more children to participate in the research activities.
Permission:
All participants (and their legal guardians) will be given information about the project beforehand. Parents will receive written information to read and a consent form to sign. Children will be read out a booklet that uses images to explain content and children's participation and rights during the project. Children will also be asked to give assent to their involvement.

Children's participation is very welcome, but there is no obligation to be involved. Even if parents and their children choose to participate it is still possible to withdraw from the project. It is also possible for the children to be involved for whatever parts of the project they choose. There are no negative consequences should they choose not to participate or can only participate in some aspects of the project.

Permission from all children's parents and the children of the preschool group will be sought. However, for feasibility, only 8-9 children will be chosen as focus children, and their data will inform the project. More children will be welcome to engage in activities I will offer. Participation is voluntary. Children will be asked for permission each time I will interact with them. Children have the right to dissent any time. However, it is important for them and their parents to understand if they choose to be involved in a group discussion interview, and they chose to withdraw part way through such an interview, all information they have contributed up until that point cannot be removed from the data generated in the project.

Confidentiality:
Results from the project will respect confidentiality. Your centre and the participants will not be identifiable from the results of this study. Only my supervisors and I will have access to this information. For the reports, fantasy names will be used that the children can choose themselves at the beginning of the study.

All information that is collected (e.g. video-record and transcripts of group discussions) will be stored in a secure place where only I will have access, a locked cabinet and a password-secured computer in my locked office at university. All information will be stored for 5 years before its complete destroy.

Confidentiality becomes very important in terms of publishing results of the project. Children might propose to present their perspectives in public, to their communities, to new children in their centre or to children in another centre. I will discuss with children when and where data is public and if children understand that others can identify their perspectives.

It is anticipated that research findings will be presented to the research community at national and/or international conferences, as well as presented to the local community. If I find that videos or other identifiable data are really interesting and would like to use it for a conference presentation, I will ask participants and their legal guardians for permission first. I will not publish any such identifiable data without consent in writing. I am happy to discuss usage of material during the conduct of the study.

Timeline:
The research project is embedded in a 3-year study course which will lead to my qualification of Doctor of Philosophy in Education. The children's participation will take place from February to December 2015 where I will collect information through observation and conversations with the children. The actual research activities (observations, group discussions, etc.) will start after a time of familiarization. The exact time frame will be devised by the children and myself, reflecting if more or less time is needed for familiarization. Spending time together in play, in informal conversations and in daily routines, the children and I can build trustful relationships and establish ways of communication.

Ethical considerations:
Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer.

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 6338 4028
Email: ehsco@csu.edu.au
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you have read this information and agree for your centre to participate in the project, just fill out the consent form I have provided and return it to me. I am happy to discuss any further considerations. Please contact me to arrange a meeting.

Sincerely,

Carmen Huser  
PhD student

Phone: (02) 0001 9480 (work)

Email: chuser@csu.edu.au

This information sheet is for you to keep.
9.3 Appendix C: Principal consent form

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
PO BOX 755
Albury NSW 2640
Tel: +61 2 6020 1600
Fax: +61 2 6051 6420
Email: cuwe@csu.edu.au

Date

CONSENT FORM

Research project: Children’s perspectives of play

Chief Investigator: Carmen Huser, Master in Early Childhood Education, student; Doctor of Philosophy – Education
Supervisors: Prof. Sue Dockett, Professor in Early Childhood Studies, School of Education, Albury
Prof. Bob Perry, Professor in Mathematics, and Transition to School, School of Education, Albury

I (print name) __________________________ give consent/do not consent (circle one) to the participation of my
centre (centre’s name) ___________________ in the above research project.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Letter, a copy of which I have retained.
I have read and understood the Information Letter. I acknowledge that the procedures and time involved for the
project have been explained to me. I had time to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my
satisfaction.
I understand that my centre’s participation in this project is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw my centre’s
participation at any time.
I understand that my centre’s involvement is strictly confidential and that no information will be used in any way that
reveals its identity without my consent.
I understand that video recordings will be made as part of the study, and that they are not to be used in any
publication from the research without explicit consent.

CONSENT FROM PRINCIPAL OF CENTRE:

Print Name: __________________________

Signature: __________________________

Date: __________________________

NOTE: Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any
complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the
Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 9338 4820
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Sincerely,

Carmen Huser
PhD student

Phone: (02) 8051 9480 (work)

Email: phuser@osu.edu.au
Appendix D: Educator (Kindergarten classroom) Information letter

Dear [Name],

You are invited to take part in a study being conducted by Carmen Huser. It is part of a program of research for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, being supervised by Prof. Dr. Sue Dockett and Prof. Dr. Bob Perry.

I am aiming to explore what children's perspectives of play in their prior to school care are. The information that I will generate through the study will be used to write my PhD thesis. I will report the findings to the responsible authorities, in some journal articles and/or conferences, and to your centre.

Your participation:
I will be visiting your preschool group for several days per week between February and December 2013. I will observe children during different play activities and will video-record play scenes with children's permission. I will select some children for gaining more insight in their perspectives of play and discuss children's play experiences with them in small group discussions.

In terms of feasibility, six to eight focus children in the age of 4-5 years old will be chosen whose data will be used for the study. However, it will be possible for more children to participate in the research activities.

Confidentiality:
Results from the project will respect confidentiality. Your will not be identifiable from the results of this study. Only my supervisors and I will have access to the information I will have collected. Pseudonyms will be used. All information (e.g. video-recordings and transcripts of group discussions) will be stored in a locked cabinet and a password-secured computer in my locked office at university. All information will be stored for 5 years before its complete destroy.

If you have read this information and agree to participate, just fill out the consent form I have provided and return it to me. I am happy to discuss any further considerations.

Sincerely,
Carmen Huser
PhD student

Phone: (02) 6051 0480 (work)
Email: chuser@csu.edu.au

This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix E: Educator (Kindergarten classroom) consent form

Date

CONSENT FORM
Research project: Children’s perspectives of play

Chief investigator: Carmen Husar, Master in Early Childhood Education, student, Doctor of Philosophy – Education
Supervisors: Prof. Sue Doekert, Professor in Early Childhood Studies, School of Education, Albury
Prof. Bob Perry, Professor in Mathematics, and Transition to School, School of Education, Albury

I (print name) ___________________________ give consent/ do not consent (circle one) to my participation in
the above research project.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Letter, a copy of which I have retained.
I have read and understood the Information Letter. I acknowledge that the procedures and time involved for the
project have been explained to me. I had time to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my
satisfaction.
I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time.
I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and that no information will be used in any way that reveals
my identity without my consent.
I understand that video recordings will be made as part of the study.

Print Name: ______________________________

Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

NOTE: Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any
complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the
Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 8558 4629
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Sincerely,

Carmen Husar
PhD student

Phone: (02) 9051 9490 (work)
Email: chusar@csu.edu.au

www.csu.edu.au

CHEC/2059 (PhD) loan numbers for Charles Sturt University are 000005? (NSW), 315470 (VIC) and 025668 (ACT). AERF 03 878 709 551
9.6 Appendix F: Parents (Kindergarten classroom) Information letter

Date

INFORMATION LETTER

Research project: Children’s perspectives of play
Chief Investigator: Carmen Huser, Master in Early Childhood Education, student, Doctor of Philosophy – Education
Supervisors: Professor Sue Dockett, Professor in Early Childhood Studies, School of Education, Albury
Professor Bob Perry, Professor in Mathematics, and Transition to School, School of Education, Albury

Dear ____________________________,

Your child has been invited to take part in a study being conducted by Carmen Huser. It is part of a program of research for a Doctor of Philosophy (PHD) degree, being supervised by Prof. Dr. Sue Dockett and Prof. Dr. Bob Perry. I am asking for your permission that your child takes part in this project.

I am aiming to explore what children’s perspectives of play in their prior to school service are. The information that I will generate through the study will be used to write my PhD thesis. I will report the findings to the responsible authorities, in some journal articles and/or conferences, and to your centre.

Your participation:

This research project understands research with children as a collaborative activity between adult researcher and child participants. I would like to watch your child play. I also would like to take short video-records of your child playing. The videos will only be used to stimulate discussions with your child and other children. In small group discussions, the children have opportunities to comment on their play-videos and tell about their views of play at the preschool.

Participation is voluntary, and your child will only take part if both you and your child agree. There is no obligation for your child to be involved. Even if you and your child choose to participate it is still possible to withdraw from the project. It is also possible for your child to be involved for whatever parts of the project he/she chooses. There are no negative consequences should you or your child choose not to participate or can only participate in some aspects of the project.

For feasibility, only 6-9 children will be chosen as focus children, and their data will inform the project. More children will be welcome to engage in activities I will offer.

I will ask your child if it is ok to watch/video-record the play or to talk to your child each time I interact with your child. Your child has the right to dissent any time. However, it is important for you and your child to understand if your child chooses to be involved in a group discussion interview, and wishes to withdraw part way through such an interview, all information your child has contributed up until that point cannot be removed from the data generated in the project.

Confidentiality:

Results from the project will respect confidentiality. Your child will not be identifiable from the results of this study. For the reports, fantasy names will be used that your child can choose at the beginning of the study.

All information that is collected (e.g. video-records and transcripts of group discussions) will be stored in a locked cabinet and a password-secured computer in my locked office at university. Only my supervisors and I will have access to this information. All information will be stored for 5 years before its complete destroy.

If I find that videos or other identifiable data are really interesting and would like to use it for a presentation or publication, I will ask you and your child for permission first. I will not publish any such identifiable data without your consent in writing. I am happy to discuss usage of material during the conduct of the study.
Ethical considerations:
Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints
or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive
Officer:

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 6338 4026
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you have read this information and agree for your centre to participate in the project, just fill out the consent form I
have provided and return it to me. I am happy to discuss any further considerations. Please contact me to arrange a
meeting.

Sincerely,

Carmen Huser
PhD student
Phone: (02) 6061 9480 (work)
Email: chuser@csu.edu.au

This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix G: Parents (Kindergarten classroom) consent form

CONSENT FORM
Research project: Children’s perspectives of play

Chief investigator: Carmen Huser, Master in Early Childhood Education, student, Doctor of Philosophy – Education
Supervisors: Prof. Sue Dockett, Professor in Early Childhood Studies, School of Education, Albury
Prof. Rob Perry, Professor in Mathematics, and Transition to School, School of Education, Albury

I (print name) .............................................................., give consent/ do not consent (circle one) for my child (print child’s name) .............................................................., to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Letter, a copy of which I have retained.
I understand my child can withdraw from the project at any time and does not have to give any reason for withdrawing.
I acknowledge that the procedures and time involved for the project have been explained to me. I had time to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
I consent for my child to:
• being observed by the research chief investigator during his/her attendance at the centre;
• participate in informal conversations with the research chief investigator;
• being video-recorded during child-initiated and educator-led activities at the centre;
• participate in video-recorded group discussions with his/her peers and the research chief investigator.

I am informed that all research activities are only undertaken with my child’s consent. My child’s participation is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences for my child if he/she disents.
I understand that my child’s personal information will remain confidential to the researchers.
I agree that results of the study will be presented at national and/or international conferences.

CONSENT FROM PARENT/GUARDIAN
Child’s name: ..............................................................

Print Name: ..............................................................

Signature: ..............................................................

Date: ..............................................................
NOTE: Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 6593 4620
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Sincerely,

Carmen Huser
PhD student

Phone: (02) 6051 6400 (work)
Email: chuser@csu.edu.au
9.8 Appendix H: Child participant assent booklet

Some images in this ‘child assent form’ originate from cartoons that capture everyday situations in ECEC settings, and were used with permission from the cartoonist (R. Aif, personal communication, April 10, 2015). I would like to acknowledge Renate Aif’s illustrations.

This project is about children’s play. Carmen is interested what you know about playing. She would like to talk to you about what you think play is.

To know more about play, I would like to observe you playing. This might involve watching you and writing down what you are doing and saying. I might ask you to have conversations with me. And you are invited to talk to me any time, too.

I would like to record your play with a video-camera. Like this, I will create short play-movies.

---

I would like to watch these play-movies with you in a little group. I might ask you to tell me more about play while you watch the movies. You will be able to talk about play, or to show what and how you play.

I would like to record our group conversations about your play experiences with a video-camera, so I can listen and watch our conversation again. Like this, I can tell other people what you know about playing.

The videos and my notes will be saved to my computer. I will not show them to anyone else unless you allow me to do so.

When I tell other people what you told me, I will not use your real name. You can choose another name. What name would you like me to use?

You can tell me anything you like about what you know about play at preschool, but if you tell me something that makes me worried about your safety I will tell someone who can help you.
Your parents were asked if it is ok that I talk to you, watch you and record your play and conversations with the other children. They have signed a letter. If you are ok with it too, you can write your name here.

Or instead you can draw a picture of yourself!

You can circle the face that tells me how you feel about joining the project.

If you have not understood everything, that is ok. You can ask me, your educators or your parents. We will help you.

If I am not at your preschool, and you wish to ask me anything, you can let your parents or educators know to phone me on 0260519480 or to email Carmen chuver@csu.edu.au

If you do not feel like talking to me after a while, or if you do not want to be watched, you can stop any time. It is ok.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!
## Appendix I: Coding framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signalling play</td>
<td>Participants narrate about their play experiences signalling play in various ways.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signalling play using the word play</td>
<td>Participants signal that they talk about play by using the word play. Participants use the word play:</td>
<td>John: I was playing Barnacles. (M246, 17/09/2015) Chloé: Well, we were playing hairdressers. (M218, 20/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing a role/ theme</td>
<td>…when they tell about playing a role or a theme. Themes function to frame the play content, and at the same time define the roles/characters that are enacted in this play theme.</td>
<td>Sophia: We were playing snakes and ladders. (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing a game</td>
<td>…when they talk about playing a game. The game can be a board game with predefined rules, or a self-invented game. It might not be called ‘a game’ if it is self-invented, but there is a set of rules, or series of actions involved, and/or a goal.</td>
<td>Louis: And I was playing with John. (M280, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing with a peer</td>
<td>…when they recount playing with another peer.</td>
<td>Elsa: Playing with the playdough. (M283, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing with toys/ material</td>
<td>…when they tell about playing with toys or other material.</td>
<td>Sophia: So we were playing on the slide. (M286, 05/11/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing in a specific space</td>
<td>…when they mention the location of the play experience. A location can receive a label that signals that playing and the space are linked, such as home corner play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing actions (the act of making in play, movement)</td>
<td>Participants do not mention play but they relate to their play. The act of making is a signal for play. Participants describe their physical actions in play.</td>
<td>Hudson: then I pushed one sideway when I drived through. And we tried to knock them all over. (M287, 05/11/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play processes</td>
<td>There are different processes that occur in play described by the participants.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretending</td>
<td>Participants identify aspects of their play that are pretend. The process of pretending is described in various ways.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly naming the pretence</td>
<td>Participants use clear words in identifying the pretend aspect, using words such as ‘pretend’, ‘not real’ etc.</td>
<td>Chloe: I took my shoes and jumper off because I (pretending to be?) the baby in the corner, and to be naughty and cheeky, so I ( ) and then I ( ) to run away. I: So you tried to be, what did you say naughty and cheeky in that game. Chloe: Yeah, and I needed to run away ((smiles at me)) ((giggles)). I: Aha. Run away from who? Chloe: From my mum and dad. I: Who was your mum and dad? Chloe: Oh, it’s not real, it’s pretend. (SAM_9967, 24/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enacting a role</td>
<td>Participants narrate being a character to identify pretending as a process.</td>
<td>Hudson: John was Mr. Todd, and we were running away from him. Braxton ((walking towards me, jumping from one foot on the other and like catching something with his hands)): ‘cause we were Peter Rabbit. (M216, 20/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving objects new meanings</td>
<td>Participants show the use of pretending when they describe the act of giving new meanings to objects.</td>
<td>Elsa: Look you go under the table. Sophia: That’s a tunnel. (M209, 11/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imagining non-existing things to exist/to happen</strong></td>
<td>Pretending is presented when participants mention things or actions that do not really exist, but are imagined to exist.</td>
<td>Sienna: And we were going to sleep, and Zara waked up and heard a monster. (M250, 24/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Including or excluding peers</strong></td>
<td>Participants tell that peers are included or excluded in play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding</td>
<td>Exclusion is openly mentioned when participants state that they don’t want a peer to play with them. There are different strategies to exclude someone, such as by having a rule who can play, or by not sharing toys. But also just joining is stated as an act of children who try to be included in their peers’ play although they are not.</td>
<td>Jessica: Even Louis. But Louis. Louis wasn’t. We didn’t want him to play. Others: No. I: You didn’t want Louis to play with you? Sophia: And he just joined in. He didn’t ask us. I: Ok, and if Louis had asked you if he can join what would you have done? Jessica: We would have said no. (M284, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Including</strong></td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Jackson: (…) And on this page I was playing with Elle. She wanted me to play with her. That was a few days later. And I wanted, we were both making some smooth sand. (M250, 24/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with games and rules</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inventing games and rules</strong></td>
<td>Participants mention games and rules that they invented. They describe rules, or suggest rules in the conversation.</td>
<td>What about we have two turns with I spy with my little eye? (Elsa, M2U00209, 11/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Following rules of known games</strong></td>
<td>Participants explain rules of known games, such as board games.</td>
<td>Sophia: And if you end on one you have to go one step, and if you end on the snake then you have to go down. (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparing play props</strong></td>
<td>Participants report on making play props.</td>
<td>Ethan: And this is police acting. ((stands up and shows his belt)) So so handcuffs ( ) handcuffs. And keys. And that’s me wearing the handcuffs. Leo: And there’s me making the handcuffs. And there’s me making the handcuffs. Once more making handcuffs. (M289, 05/11/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning in play</strong></td>
<td>Participants reflect if there is learning in play, and what they learn in play. This category also entails children’s accounts that there is no learning in play, or that they are unsure about learning occurring in play.</td>
<td>Olinda: Sometimes we learn how to do stuff. Like. ((voice now gets more silent)) We don’t know. Sometimes we write people. (M282, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contextual influences on play</strong></td>
<td>Participants’ accounts reveal a range of contextual influences on their play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ECEC environment</strong></td>
<td>The direct context of the ECEC environment influences play…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peers</strong></td>
<td>…which includes the other children in the classroom. Participants talk about peers’ impact on their play.</td>
<td>Chloe: Well, it was Olinda’s idea. (Olinda nods)) (M218, 20/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provided spaces</strong></td>
<td>… which includes the spaces provided for play. Children’s comments point to that there are specific spaces provided for play in the ECEC setting.</td>
<td>Louis: John, I was playing with you ((tipping John on his shoulder)) in the cubby house right here. ((pointing to cubby house)) Now it’s moved right over there. (M279, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rules</strong></td>
<td>… which includes context-specific rules. This excludes examples where it is clearly a rule set up by teachers, or if children name other children as the source for the rule. In this case, it is a peer influence. In the former case, it is teachers’ management of play using rules.</td>
<td>I: Are there rules doing the belly flop? Ethan: We weren’t allowed to uhm push. I: Yeah, not to push who? Ethan: To push the people without jumping. I: Don’t push other people while you’re jumping? Ethan: Yeah, if someone’s in the way then you’ll hurt them when you jump. (M279, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past experiences</strong></td>
<td>… which includes experiences and events that have been carried out in the ECEC setting.</td>
<td>Olinda: We saw that in the ambulance. (M252, 29/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home environment (parents, experiences)</strong></td>
<td>Participants’ home environment is mentioned to inform play, including parents as play partners, and experiences at home or family events.</td>
<td>Chloe: Sophia, why did you wanna make a story? Sophia: Because there was a house and there was a tent. And then we saw each other at the circus and then we tried to make a circus. ‘cause like that, and then - Chloe: That was a long time ago. Sophia: Yeah. (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pop culture</strong></td>
<td>Participants mention characters from TV shows and movies and merchandized play products that take up their play.</td>
<td>Elsa: Yes. Uhhm, when Elle was ( ), and Rashmi just stop us. A ghost. And when we turned around, we iced her. I: You iced her. How did you do that, Elsa? Elsa: ‘cause I had a shirt with Elsa on it. (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Dressing up as TV characters/wearing shirts displaying characters** | Being dressed up as a character is understood as part of play. Wearing a shirt that displays a character influences the content of play, for example the character’s special powers exercised in the movie seemed to be transferred to the person. | }
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing a character from a TV show/movie</td>
<td>TV shows and movies influence play. Participants report about enacting those characters. The knowledge of the TV show characters shapes the play content.</td>
<td>John: We were tr- we were the baby shredders I: You wanted to get rid of the baby shredders? Who are the baby shredders? John: Uhm, the white bits, the white bits. I: The white bings? And what can the white bings do? John: If you touch them you will turn into a poisoned shredder baby. (M250, 24/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing with merchandized products/playing with material that represents merchandized products (transformers etc.)</td>
<td>Participants talk about playing with products that are merchandized and part of the current pop culture. Also, play material at the ECEC setting is used to replace the actual product, for example mobilo construction material represents transformers.</td>
<td>Hudson: Mine can turn into a special (skeebo?) and that’s a different Optimus. ((changing his transformer into a different form)) (M254, 29/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers as managers of play</td>
<td>Teachers are mentioned in a way that they manage play by facilitating, or controlling and interfering it.</td>
<td>Sophia: We were playing “snakes and ladders and we had to roll the dice, for every one or ten or two::? (…) I: So, you had to, you said you have to throw a dice. Sophia: And if you end on one you have to go one step, and if you end on the snake then you have to go down.(…) I: How did you know about those rules, Sophia? Sophia: Because the teachers told us before we play. (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers as facilitator</td>
<td>Teachers are mentioned: they explain rules and content of games; or are part of the play experience.</td>
<td>Sophia: We were playing “snakes and ladders and we had to roll the dice, for every one or ten or two::? (…) I: So, you had to, you said you have to throw a dice. Sophia: And if you end on one you have to go one step, and if you end on the snake then you have to go down.(…) I: How did you know about those rules, Sophia? Sophia: Because the teachers told us before we play. (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers as controllers/ interference</td>
<td>Teachers are mentioned to restrict play, limiting time and space for children’s self-initiated play. When teachers are mentioned as source of a rule, this is included in this code.</td>
<td>Olinda: Uhm we play on the carpet. And sometimes the teachers say, don’t play on the carpet. (M282, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional experiences in play</td>
<td>Children report on a range of diverse emotional experiences in play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing positive emotions</td>
<td>Children mention positive emotional experiences in play.</td>
<td>Chloc: We feel happy about it… (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing negative emotions</td>
<td>Children tell about negative feelings emerging from a play experience.</td>
<td>I: Ok, what would you like to tell us about this moment? Elsa: Uhm, Chris was trying to uhm ( ). I: Oh, take that away from you [her pretend microphone]. How did you feel? Elsa: Sad. (M248, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing malicious joy</td>
<td>Children show enjoyment watching a play episode and laugh about a peer’s misfortune.</td>
<td>Ethan: Ok this is the funny part. Leo: Yeah this is the funny part. ((laughs)) I love this part. Ethan: I wanna drive in the funniest ( ). Leo: You know Jarvis was gonna catch a bike. ((screams)) (…) I: Ok. So Ethan and Leo. Would you like to tell me a little bit about - Ethan: We were making motorbikes. And Jarvis cracked his in half and ahm that’s the funny part ’cause he falls on his bike and crack. (M296, 12/11/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation for play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being reminded of play motivates</td>
<td>While watching and discussing a play episode, the participant shows interest in playing again the same play that has been recorded.</td>
<td>John: Ahhh I wanna do that again. ((standing up and pointing towards Louis)) ((Louis comes back and sits down.)) I: What do you wanna do again, John? John: Mobilo. ((pointing to the table where they have played before)) I: Playing the transformers? ((John nods.)) (M254, 29/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out about things</td>
<td>Participant identifies a reason for playing to finding out “how everything worked”.</td>
<td>Rose: Because we wanted to see how everything worked. (M252, 29/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play is fun</td>
<td>Children mention the fun aspect of play.</td>
<td>Chloe: (…) and the problem why we wanna play is to have fun. (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play theme and what it involves motivates</td>
<td>The play theme, the content, and what it involves motivates the participant to play.</td>
<td>Hannah: Why did you wanna play that? Chloe: So, animals get sick or get hurt, that’s why we’re there. (M218, 20/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playing a role/ a specific character motivates</td>
<td>Enacting a particular character is a motivation factor.</td>
<td>I: What do you like best at &lt;Centre’s name&gt;? Hudson: When I play ninja turtles. I: When you play ninja turtles. ((Hudson nods several times)) And why is that? Hudson: I like to be Leonardo. (M287, 05/11/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing for its own sake</td>
<td>The participant refers to no other factor than play itself why he or she wants to play.</td>
<td>Jessica: I just wanted to. (M251, 29/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Playing with a friend</strong></td>
<td>Participants mention their peers as reason for playing.</td>
<td>Sophia: And I like doing this because I like Scarlett and she always asks me if she is not playing with me if she can play with me and I always say yes. ((wiggles her body)) I: So, why do you say yes when Scarlett asks you? Sophia: Because I like her and I like playing with her. (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation rights</td>
<td>Children consider and exercise their participation rights.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Being conscious about rights</strong></td>
<td>Children demonstrate that they are holder of rights, conscious about having rights of participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflecting consent watching rule</td>
<td>Participants show they understood the right to first watch a play movie to give consent to share. They are aware of that all children that are seen in a video have the right to watch the video to give their consent.</td>
<td>Chloe: There are other children who need to see it, Ethan. Sophia: Yeah we try to find Ro. Rose needs to be in this one. ((pointing to screen)) Rose does. I can see Rose here. (M2U00212, 18/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being specific what to watch and talk about</strong></td>
<td>Participants show they understood their rights of participation by requesting to watch a specific play movie, or by selecting a specific sequence in a play video they want to talk about. They demonstrate an understanding of that they have a right to see those episodes when they had been video-recorded. They demonstrate an understanding that they have a right to discuss particular video-sequences. The particular request to listen back to recorded conversations is excluded from this code.</td>
<td>Ethan: Now can we watch the one where I jump off the table? (M212, 18/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requesting to listen back to recorded conversation</td>
<td>Participants show awareness of their rights when they request to listen back to their recorded conversation. They understand that they have a right to listen to all records taken off them.</td>
<td>Scarlett: After afternoon tea, after that, can we watch the video that we are talking about? I: Which one? Scarlett: That one ((pointing to the camera)), that where, where do we talking about this. I: Oh, ((pointing to camera)) exactly the video that we are taking at the moment? Scarlett: Yeah. I: you wanna watch the one where we can hear our chat? Scarlett: Yeah. Sophia: Do you mean this one? ((pointing on the screen, still re-running the same short video we had focused during our chat)) Scarlett: No. ((pointing to camera, almost overstretched her arm)). The chat one. (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sharing</td>
<td>Participants show they understood that they have the right to not share their data with others: Participants might send other peers away while watching a play movie.</td>
<td>Ethan: This is not your video. Louis. Is it alright if you go away? (M289, 05/11/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking information about procedures</td>
<td>Participants demonstrate that they have a right to get more insight into procedures and of being well informed about their participation.</td>
<td>Sophia: Did you switch this one yet? ((looks at audio-recorder, then at researcher)) I: Yes I did. Olinda: How come we don’t hear it? Sophia: Because. I: Because it’s taking your voices and we cannot hear while we’re recording them. Olinda: Oh that’s weird. (M282, 27/10/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consenting</strong></td>
<td>Children use a range of strategies to give consent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving direct verbal or non-verbal agreement</td>
<td>Participants give their consent by agreeing to tell researcher and/or peers about their experiences, including saying yes, or nodding to researcher who is asking for consent.</td>
<td>Ethan: You can share all of the videos. (M279, 27/10/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting and initiating</td>
<td>Participants show their consenting by initiating on their own: they invite to have a chat with the researcher, ask to be video-recorded in play or in a conversation, and request to watch more videos or look at photographs. Requesting to watch more but unspecified videos differs from requesting to watch specific videos.</td>
<td>Elsa: Can we have another chat? I: Hmm? Elsa: Another chat. I: Another chat? Now or later? Elsa: Now. I: Now. Yeah. What do you want to chat about now? Elsa: Uhmm. Uhmm. (M209, 11/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditionally consenting</td>
<td>When participant gives consent, there is a condition linked to consent. The consent is limited to the participant’s condition, for example limited to a specific time frame.</td>
<td>I: Is it ok if we meet with other children next week and we’ll watch this video with other children together? Like Sarah and - Ethan: Ethan! I: Leo? Would you like to share your video? Ethan: I wanna share this video with you today. (M296, 12/11/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dissenting</strong></td>
<td>Children use a range of strategies to dissent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving direct verbal or non-verbal account of dissent</td>
<td>Participants show their dissenting by responding with no or shaking their heads to researcher’s requests</td>
<td>Sophia: (We don’t want that?) We want some more! I: But anything more about your doctor’s play? Sophia: Jessica. Jessica: No. I: Shall we finished our chat about this now? Sophia: We are already done. (M251, 29/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ignoring researcher question</td>
<td>Participants’ strategy to show dissent is to ignore the researcher’s question by changing the subject, or staying quiet and do something else. These actions include moving attention to the laptop.</td>
<td>I: Oh, you did hurt yourself. Does this sometimes happen in play that you hurt yourself? ((Sophia lets herself fall on her hands and says “Ow!”)) Chloe: When should we close the computer? I: After we finished. Chloe: Can we finish now? (M212, 18/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving the conversation</td>
<td>Participants leave the conversation for showing their dissent. This category includes children’s requests/expressions wishing to leave.</td>
<td>Elsa: I’m going outside. (…) Sienna: Can I go outside? Come Zara, let’s go outside. ((Sienna and Zara leave.)) Ethan: Can I go outside as well? (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signalling the end of a chat</td>
<td>Participants express their dissent: signals can include phrases or words that indicate the participant’s decision to disengage. The phrases or words have almost a symbolic character, similar to a STOP sign.</td>
<td>Leo: That’s all. (M279, 27/10/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not elaborating an issue</td>
<td>Participant responds to research question but leaves parts unelaborated, or participant denies parts what another peer has claimed. It is a different strategy to ignoring a researcher question; the subject is not changed. The participant is selective what is elaborated.</td>
<td>What actually happened here? ((pointing to screen)) It looked in between that you had a bit of an argument about this game. Sophia: We didn’t. (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing something else (playing)</td>
<td>Participants have dissented for the moment and are busy doing something else, for example they play a game.</td>
<td>((Scarlett then runs towards Sophia and they start a chair-chasing game.)) (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation processes</td>
<td>Children establish processes of participation. They choose ways of participating.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spotting</strong></td>
<td>Spotting is a process that participants do while watching video-recorded play scenes or photographs. They spot themselves or others. It might be a verbal or nonverbal or combined act. It might be initiated through a search for a record of oneself, and/ or finalised with claiming ownership of the record.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spotting myself</strong></td>
<td>Spotting oneself is apparent through the verbal expression that a participant has spotted him/herself in a record.</td>
<td>Jackson: That was me there. (M216, 20/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spotting a peer</strong></td>
<td>Spotting a peer is apparent through the verbal expression that a participant has spotted a peer in a record.</td>
<td>Louis: There is John, and there is Hudson. Hudson, that’s you, and that’s John. (M254, 29/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Searching or asking if I am in the video or photograph</td>
<td>The participants pay attention to search for themselves, and in unsuccessful attempt pose the question where they are, or if they are in the video, or where their photographs are.</td>
<td>Rashmi ((gets up and walks towards screen)): Where is me? In the doll pram? (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pointing to screen</strong></td>
<td>Pointing to screen is often an accompanied act to spotting. The participants point to the screen where they spotted themselves or a peer.</td>
<td>Braxton: John! ((pointing with both hands with pointy fingers on screen)) (M216, 20/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Claiming ownership</strong></td>
<td>After spotting themselves, the participants express that the video is theirs, or that the photograph belongs to them and wish to take the photograph home.</td>
<td>Jackson: I wanna take all of mine. I: Maybe we can make something to - Sienna: =Zara, Zara can take those two, and can take these two. John: These are ours, Jackson. (M250, 24/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Peer interviewing</em></td>
<td>Children interview their peers as a participatory process. They might draw on experiences from routines they know as “show and tell”, copy the researcher behaviour, or follow the researcher’s suggestion to ask their peers some questions.</td>
<td>Molly: And Olinda was the ghost. ((laughing, kneeling, moving her upper body, her arms do a crawling-movement in the air. Then she sits back on her legs)) Elsa: And she scared, and when I pulled... Molly: And she came follow me. (…). Elsa: And we laughed. (M249, 22/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Collaborative telling and completing story</em></td>
<td>Participants tell about their play collaboratively and completing the story. Children might use the same sentence structure or exact same words to begin the sentence, when completing the story.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Creating and following interviewing rules</em></td>
<td>Participants create interview rules. The rules are proposed verbally to other participants, and/or are followed by participants.</td>
<td>Chloe: I’ll ( ) Olinda, and Hannah, you’ll be with Dana. ( ). ((Chloe gets up and walks over to Dana.)) Chloe: Dana, if Hannah ((pointing to Hannah)) puts her hand up, you answer her. ((pointing to Dana, walks back to her sit, mumbling)) I answer this. ((Hannah raises her hand, looks to Dana, smiling. Dana shows no reaction. Hannah puts her hand on her head.)) ((Chloe walks towards the laptop.)) I: Look, Dana, Hannah has a question. ((Chloe turns around to the girls, steps back towards her seat but keeps standing.)) Hannah: Dana. (M2U00218, 20/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explaining to peers</td>
<td>Participant explains to peer either after being interviewed or through own initiative. Explanations can be accompanied with pointing to screen. This kind of pointing to screen is different to the spotting-pointing. Here, the pointing draws attention to players’ actions or location or material involved in play action.</td>
<td>Hudson: And that stops our tyres ((looking at Ethan)), before going into, before going into the monkey before going into that climbing things. Ethan: Are you meaning the bars? Hunter: Those black bars. It’s ((pointing to screen)), see that’s what we use it for. For doing that. (M212, 18/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being interviewer and asking questions</td>
<td>Participants enact as the interviewer and prompt questions to other participants.</td>
<td>Sophia: What was the funniest part that you did in the video? (M298, 19/11/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting peer to perform</td>
<td>A participant invites another participant to perform, show something.</td>
<td>Sophia: Do that again, Ethan! (M209, 11/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting on peer’s play</td>
<td>A participant comments on the recorded play scene of another peer. The comment might include a suggestion how the peer can alternate something in their play.</td>
<td>Ethan: You know, you’re funny. ((turning to Hudson holding his hands as if he is holding the tricycle handlebar leaning sidewards, Hudson looks at Ethan)) Going just on two wheels. That was funny. So, was it about – (…) Ethan: You know, Hudson. Make a ramp with those box ‘cause the box won’t let it. You just crash into it ((making a movement with his left hand)) and then destroy the ramp. (M212, 18/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performing as participation</td>
<td>Participants use a range of performative expressions as part of their participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Being in role</strong></td>
<td>Enacting a character, being in role is used as a form of participatory performance. The performance might include changing the voice and/or doing movements according to the character in role.</td>
<td>Braxton: Wuahh. I am the monster. ((moving “like the monster”)) Wuaahhh. ((sits down)) Wuahwuah (does crawling-movement of his arms)) (M216, 20/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building for audience</strong></td>
<td>Participants build to show to others what they talk about, or what the play contains.</td>
<td>Louis: I’ll show you. You put the arms up ((changes the mobilo)), you put the legs up ((changes the mobilo)), and then it can transform into a bird. ((changes the mobilo, then holding his figure up in front of his eyes)) ((Hudson has rebuilt his mobilo figure, while Jason keeps watching Hudson’s hands.)) (M254, 29/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Imitating action from video or photograph</strong></td>
<td>The participant copies/imitates the action he or she did in the video/photograph, or a peer did in the video scene.</td>
<td>Ethan: I was running so fast. I was running so fast. ((gets up and holds hand and leans his body forward as if he was running)) (M213_214, 18/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Using gestures to explain</strong></td>
<td>The child uses gestures when explaining the play experience.</td>
<td>Hudson: It’s because, me, Nathan, we kept racing, and we taking turns, and then we keep, that’s kept stopping our wheels, and we kept going around that ((showing a curve with one hand)) little block, and then ((hand moving again as the hand and stopping it with the other hand)) once we hit each other in the first round when we ran around that. (M212, 18/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performing for video-camera or audio-recorder</td>
<td>The child acts in front of the video-camera, or speaks into the audio-recorder, not necessarily for purposes to respond to researcher.</td>
<td>((Ethan gets up dancing, glances towards camera, sits down again.)) (M209, 11/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Observing and documenting</td>
<td>Children choose ways of participating that involve observing other participants or documenting the participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being a camera person or video director</td>
<td>A participant watches through the camera, or comments on what is happening while standing by the camera, or asks other participants to perform for camera.</td>
<td>Chlo: I wanna watch the camera. ((she runs to the video-camera and looks on the display)) Ethan look at me. I wanna take a video. (M251, 29/09/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing participating peers</td>
<td>A child watches the participants.</td>
<td>(John stands behind the camera and asks what we are doing.) John ((calls a friend)): “Watch this!” (M172, 28/07/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing down conversations</td>
<td>A participant claims to write down what has been said in a conversation with the researcher.</td>
<td>I: Do you maybe want to tell me more about what you were doing? Chlo: Oh, let’s write them down. ((jumps up and walks to the bookstand at the wall)) (M247, 17/09/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercising peer power</td>
<td>Children exercise peer power using verbal or physical cues. Exercising power can disable others’ participation possibilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercising power verbally</td>
<td>Verbal exercise of peer power includes shushing participants, tell them to stop talking. It can also mean participants talk about another participant that they make decisions that affects others’ participation.</td>
<td>Jessica: And it depends if we want her to be in it, isn’t it? Sophia: Yeah. Jessica: And we don’t want her to be in it. Sophia: Yeah we don’t want to be in it. Ok? (M282, 27/10/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Exercising power physically</strong></td>
<td>Physical exercise of peer power includes holding peers back, putting hands on their mouth to stop them from talking, and any other physical ‘attack’ that has impact on others’ participation.</td>
<td>Olinda: Shhh ((pressing her hand on Chloe’s upper body)) I can hear it. ((pressing her hand now on Chloe’s throat when Chloe attempted to say more)) Be quiet. ((Chloe presses her lips together, then continues)): And then... ((Olinda immediately covers Chloe’s mouth with her hand, while Chloe reaches her hand towards Olinda’s hand.)) (M218, 20/08/2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social-emotional participation</strong></td>
<td>Children participate socially and emotionally.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional reactions to participation</strong></td>
<td>Participants react emotionally while participating. They express their feelings or talk about their feelings in relation to their participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Experiencing distress</strong></td>
<td>The participant shows distress.</td>
<td>Chloe: Don’t, don’t laugh! ((leaning just a little bit forward.)) ((Olinda who sits next to Chloe holds her back, touching Chloe’s arm with her hand.)) ((Chloe looks at Olinda.)) ((Olinda continues to watch the screen, letting go of Chloe)) Chloe: ( ) Hannah, it’s not funny. (M218, 20/08/2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feeling annoyed</strong></td>
<td>The participant shows feelings of being annoyed through the way he or she responds.</td>
<td>Ethan: I already sa:::w that one. (M209, 11/08/2015)</td>
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| Feeling left out or disappointed | The participant shows disappointment.                                        | Hannah: When did you take a video of me, Carmen? ((she walks towards me, standing close))  
I: I am not sure.  
((Hannah shakes her head)) We don’t see each other that often at <centre’s name>, he?!  
Hannah: No. ((shaking her whole upper body when she shakes her head)). I don’t think you take any of me.  
((walking backwards away from me))  
(M218, 20/08/2015)                                                                 |
| Feeling positive            | The participant expresses positive feelings towards his or her participation. | Sophia: And I was laughing at you as soon as I saw you taking the photo.  
I: Sophia, why did you have to laugh when you saw that I was taking the photo?  
Sophia: ‘cause it was so funny.  
(M251, 29/09/2015)                                                                                                                                 |
| Feeling unsure              | The participant shows he or she feels unsure about participating.             | I: How do you feel about that? Elsa: I don’t know.  
(M283, 27/10/2015)                                                                                                                                         |
| Showing enjoyment           | Participants show their enjoyment in participating, such as laughing.       | ((Ethan and Leo laugh continuously for one minute with one short break.))  
Ethan <<mumbling>>: Stupid  
Leo: ((laugh)) I’m so stupid. ((laugh))  
((Leo breaks out into more laughing, that is accompanied by grunting.))  
((Ethan laughs.))  
Ethan: Hey Leo.  
((Leo giggles.))  
(M279, 27/10/2015)                                                                                                                                         |
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<td>Working out relationship with researcher</td>
<td>Participants ask the researcher about her role, or make comments that show children’s investigation on researcher role. They work out their relationship with the researcher, for example by requesting the researcher as a play partner.</td>
<td>I: I just have to make sure I write everything down that I am doing here. Just for university. Sophia: Haven’t you went to university yet? I: I have been there for many years. And then I worked. And then I went back to university. And now I’m learning about — Olinda: Teach kids? I: I’m already an educator. But I wanna learn how I could be a teacher at university. And also how to research. ((Olinda walks away. )) Jessica: Why can’t you work here? (M282, 27/10/2015)</td>
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