Milda Brédikytė

THE ZONES OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN’S PLAY
MILDA BRĖDIKTĖ

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University of Oulu, Faculty of Education, P.O. Box 2000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland
Oulu, Finland

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between play and child development. This work is the continuation of a thesis on children’s verbal creativity stimulated by dialogical drama intervention which I defended in 2001 at the Vilnius Pedagogical University, Lithuania. The first doctoral thesis in educology resulted in the main intervention method (Dialogical Drama with Puppets) used in this project.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on cultural-historical theories developed by Vygotsky and his followers. This approach has influenced on the methodological choices of the study and the concept of the zone of proximal development is a central concept in Vygotskian theory of human cultural development. The concept has been elaborated in an earlier publication (Hakkarainen & Brédikyte, 2008) and is now used as an analytic tool. Other theoretical concepts of Vygotsky like the social situation of development, the unit, environment and mechanism of development are used.

This study is a small sample from the whole research project, which integrated research studies, theoretical courses and practice of master’s degree students in early education. For families and children the project was a play club. From the theoretical point of view the project was a “genetic experiment”, a “playworld” and intervention study aiming at joint creative play of adults and children. In cultural-historical theory cultural environment is the source of qualitative developmental changes of individuals, but each child has to be motivated and self carry out developmental acts. These theoretical principles require special forms of social interaction “mutual interventions”.

The methodological approach opens a new perspective to the study of play and development. Individual play development of some children is followed up several years. Cumulative effects and qualitative changes can be detected easier in this setting. Multi-age child groups change our understanding about play development. Empirical part of this study consists of a few cases, which demonstrate what kind of developmental trajectories are possible. It is impossible to tell exactly what the effect of our play environment is, but observations and interpretations can guide further research activity.

The results of this study demonstrate in which conditions narrative intervention in joint playworld environment can lead to creative acts, what steps are necessary in the development of joint play, how mutuality in adult-child play supports child development, and what elements are essential in play producing pedagogy and professional growth.

Keywords: dialogical drama, play intervention, unit of analysis, zone of proximal development
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Tiivistelmä
Tämä tutkimus selvittää leikkin ja lasten kehityksen välistä yhteyttä. Siinä jatkuu tekijän edellisessä Vilman pedagogisen ylimpien edukologian väittökirjassa 2001 aloittama lasten luovutuksen tutkimus dialogista draamaa käyttäen. Tämä tutkimus tuotti keskeisen intervention menetelmän (Dialoginen nukkedraama), jota nyt käytetään.


Tämä tutkimus on pieni siivu koko tutkimusprojektista, johon kytkeytyi varhaiskasvatukseen maisteripiskelijoiden tutkimusopintoja, teoriakurssia ja harjoittelua. Perheiden ja osallistujien lasten näkökulmasta projektin ydin oli ”geneettinen eksperimentti”, ”leikkimaailma” ja ”interventiotutkimus”, joka pyrkii saamaan aikaan aikuisten ja lasten yhteistä luovaa leikkiä. Kulttuuri-historiallisessa teoriaassa (psykologinen/kulttuurinen) ympäristö on yksilön laadullisten kehityksen muutosten lähde, mutta jokaisen lapsen on oltava motivoitunut ja itse toteutettava kehittävät teot. Nämä teoreettiset periaatteet edellyttävät erityistä sosiaalisen vuorovaikutuksen muotoa ”vastavuoroista interventiota”.


Tutkimuksen tulokset kertovat millaisissa olosuhteissa narratiivinen interventio yhteisessä leikkiympäristössä voi johtaa luoviin tekoihin, miten yhteinen leikki voi kehittyä ja kehittää, millainen vastavuoroisuus aikuisten ja lasten leikissä tukee kehitystä sekä mitkä asiat ovat välttämättömiä leikin pedagogiikassa ja ammatillisessa kasvussa.

Asiasanat: analyysiyksikkö, dialoginen draama, leikki-interventio, lähikehityksen vyöhyke
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1 Introduction

Early childhood has a growing importance in the strategy of lifelong learning in the European Union. The early years are the so-called “golden age of play”, and they form the basis of further development, which cannot be compensated in older age. Rapid societal changes all over the world affect children’s lives in such a way that they have fewer opportunities to participate in joint play activities with other children. Therefore, there are fewer opportunities to acquire and develop play skills and, in particular, imaginative play skills.

According to some researchers (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; 2007; Mikhailenko & Korotkova, 2001) an increasing amount of children do not develop mature forms of play before school age. The results of an international review in sixteen countries (Singer, Singer, D’Agostino, DeLong, 2008) also confirm that children’s imaginative play is disappearing and is often replaced by media use (games, TV programs, DVDs). The growing amount of children with special needs is also one of the indicators of this process. Technological progress has increased the importance of early years development as well. Instead of simple symbolic competence, imagination and demanding theoretical thinking skills are needed in future society. How are these challenges met in Finnish early years education?

The importance of play is recognized in Scandinavian early childhood education, but the need for educational play guidance is not always transformed into active educational measures (Hakkarainen, 2006; 2007; 2008). In educational reality, play and learning are often viewed as equally important but separate or exclusive areas. In the Finnish “Curriculum guidelines of early education and care” (National Institute for Health and Welfare [Stakes], 2004) children’s learning is divided into two domains: (1) experiential learning in play and other typical forms of acting, and (2) cognitive (paradigmatic) learning of content orientations. Play has a role in the development of imagination, empathy, social competences and some other specific skills. Still, in order to achieve “a developmental balance”, different content areas¹ (mathematics, natural sciences, history, society and aesthetic, ethical and religious–philosophical) have to be introduced.

¹ In Finnish early years guidelines (0–5) these areas are defined as ‘orientations’ and it is suggested that children do not need to assimilate the content of different orientations as they do at school.
The main problem of Finnish early education is the lack of concrete holistic educational methods incorporating all aspects of children’s growth, development and learning and at the same time facing the most recent challenges of multiculturalism, inclusion/exclusion, the growing number of kids in the groups, lack of professional skills of the staff, etc. Instead, an instrumental approach typical of school learning is applied. At school age, play is mainly viewed as a tool for attaining academic learning goals. This is evident in terms such as “playful learning”, “play-based learning” or “guided play” (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009).

A considerable number of pedagogical investigations of play stress the didactic significance of the function of play in a child’s acquisition of new ideas or in the cultivation of new abilities and skills. El’konin (1999b, p. 24) argued that the didactic role of play is limited, because “it is an activity within which the child becomes oriented towards the most universal, the most fundamental meanings of human activity”. Vygotsky (1977; 2003) claimed that play supports the transition from operational (concrete) to abstract thinking (in concepts).

Although many psychological theories underline that the first years of a child’s life provide the foundation for a child’s cultural development, Finnish early years guidelines (0–5) still emphasize “well-being” and “growth” instead of development. In addition there is not enough sufficiently qualified personnel (fully qualified nursery/early years teachers) working with young children. As a result, pedagogical emphasis is on individual care and daily routines on the one hand, and on school-like paper tasks on the other, instead of more developmentally appropriate practices such as play and other symbolic activities.

Analysis of current research themes reveals that, mainly, the organization and management of early childhood educational institutions and the use of modern technologies in the classrooms are studied. The character of adult-child and child-child collaborative interactions and their effects on development is minimally studied. New educational methods are not the focus of research.

In this research study I will try to formulate a new cultural-historical approach to early years development by integrating Donald’s (1991; 2002) theory on the evolution of human consciousness, present approaches to drama and play pedagogy and thus propose a pedagogical approach – narrative play pedagogy. This new approach takes into account the specific character of children’s narrative culture, play as the leading activity in early childhood, as well as the creative and collaborative character of human development. I am introducing the concepts of shared play as a space for development, and creative act as a unit of
development. The general goal of all our experimental work is to understand and define the specific role of play activity for the development of a child’s consciousness and their emerging personality. My particular interest is in the development of creative acts and self in the zone of proximal development in early childhood. I look for these phenomena in children’s play and other creative activities.

1.1 Theoretical Basis and Hypothesis

A recent interview study in sixteen countries (Singer et al., 2008) revealed that imaginative play is disappearing from children’s lives. Only 27% of parents reported that their children are engaging in imaginative play activities. Yet, over 90% of these parents believe that play has a central role in promoting children’s learning and development. This trend towards the disappearance of imaginative play was observed both in developed and under-developed countries. Moreover, the pressure for early academic learning and a fascination with early training in technological skills all over the world is radically changing the focus of pedagogical work and affecting the time allocated for play in early childhood institutions.

My argument is that play is not only a developmental contributor (Vygotsky, 1977; 2003) and children’s typical way of acting (Stakes, 2004), but is also the main age-appropriate form of learning in early childhood. There is a growing amount of evidence in favor of the positive impact of play on acquiring academic knowledge and skills. Research into early learning and development shows that when children are properly supported in their play, play does not prevent realistic learning but actually contributes to it (Fromberg & Bergen, 2002). Vygotsky (1977; 2003) claimed that from the developmental perspective play supports changes in needs and consciousness more effectively than school learning. His student and colleague El’konin (2005a; b) developed Vygotsky’s ideas further. He considered play as a source of development of general learning potential or abilities. El’konin (1989; 1999b) listed the following effects of mature forms of imaginative play: (1) development of motivation; (2) understanding of the other person’s perspective; (3) developing the imagination and general creativity; (4) developing volition and self-regulation. The important aspect here is that these effects are the result of mature forms of play in child development. We argue that play promotes child development only if the child moves from elementary to mature forms of joint play. We propose that advanced forms of play have a unique
impact on the cultural development of the child (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008; 2011). Consequently, the main function of an adult is to create educational environments which support the development of mature forms of play in children.

1.1.1 The psychological function of environment in child development

According to cultural-historical theory, cultural environment plays a very specific role in the development of “a child’s personality, his consciousness and relationship with reality” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 347). Environment is primarily understood as the ‘source of development’, not as a ‘setting’. Vygotsky is talking about ‘specifically human characteristics’, ‘higher psychological functions’ and forms of activity when describing the development of a child’s personality and his consciousness. He stresses that only ‘interactions with the environment are the source of these features’ in children. (Vygotsky, 1997b) An important question is how higher mental functions appear in a group of children.

El’konin (1978; 2005a) describes play as a ‘cultural activity’, which means that the ability to play is not ingrained in human biological nature, but is ‘learned’ from the social environment. Due to societal changes in the modern world young children have increasingly less opportunity to acquire and develop “mature forms” of play. We argue here that the future of children is, more than ever, defined by the choices made by adults. Today, adults are more ‘responsible’ for an appropriate developmental environment for children than they were earlier. Recent research in the area of systemic psychophysiology (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Aleksandrov & Aleksandrova, 2004; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; McCaine, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007) provides evidence that culture and societal forms of life affect not only behavioral aspects but the architecture of the human brain as well.

Consequently, professionals working with young children face new challenges in their work. They not only have to support the development of ongoing play among children but also often have to initiate it: to present and model higher forms of play in young children’s communities. To do this, teachers need deeper knowledge, appropriate play support strategies and more sophisticated play skills than before.

A general understanding of the importance of play activity for child development and learning, and a basic knowledge of different forms of play among young children is simply not enough. Our studies and practical activities
during six years in Play Lab have proved this. Teachers need practical skills and experience of active participation in and construction of play activities together with children.

Vygotsky’s (1977; 2003) hypothesis was that play creates the zone of proximal development. He used the concept of the social situation of development (Vygotsky, 1984a; 1998; 2003) as a practical tool of intervention. A zone of proximal development is mainly understood as a linear journey from point A to point B, in which the adult helper has a decisive role. Zuckerman (2007) shows in her analysis that the concept of help has to be carefully elaborated in order to develop the zone concept as an educational tool. The problem is extremely acute in play collaboration, because in Scandinavian “free play” adults do not actively participate in children’s play. Their “help” most often concentrates on children’s conflict resolution and provision of play opportunities, but excludes direct adult participation in joint play activity with children.

The child’s initiative is the primary object of adult help in collaboration, according Zuckerman (2007), both in play and in problem solving situations at school. Still, the provision and modeling of new cultural tools for developing play activity is crucial. The balance between child initiated play and adult help can be attained in the approach, which aims at the joint play of adults and children (Lindqvist, 1995; 2001). Adult help is provided in play form and children always have the possibility of accepting or rejecting the adults’ play initiatives.

Merlin Donald’s theory (1991; 2002) on the evolution of human culture, cognition and consciousness has provided a strong theoretical background for the research and interpretation of play data. The underlying idea behind my hypothesis is Donald’s (2002) claim that “on a cultural level, language is not about inventing words ... it is about telling stories in groups. Languages are invented on the level of narrative, by collectivities of conscious intellects.” (p. 292). The collectivity of the human mind (unified and defined by collectively constructed myths) is the essence of human reality. This collectivity of mind is the basic and defining feature of our modern culture.

Bruner (1996) and Donaldson (1992) talked about narrative construction of reality and narrative mode as the psychological developmental mechanism. These cannot be compensated for by paradigmatic learning, according to Bruner. Following Donald’s theory we claim that “narrative culture” is a stage in child development and a necessary step towards the transition to “theoretic culture” (Donald, 1991; 2002), and paradigmatic thought (Bruner 1996).
These theoretical ideas have very important implications for education. There have been several serious attempts to transform some of the ideas into pedagogical approaches and methods.


In Finland Pentti Hakkarainen (2002; 2006; 2008; 2010) and his research group have been developing a narrative learning approach both on a theoretical and on a practical level. The aim of the experimental work is to formulate a new approach to early years development and learning (0–8 years) and to propose a *narrative learning* approach based on the specific character of children’s narrative play culture. The current research project is a part of this experimental work.
Child Development in Cultural-Historical Theory

This study has been carried out within the framework of cultural-historical theory, which, in the words of El'konin (1989), set the stage for the development of “non-classical” psychology. For classical psychology all psychological processes are pre-given and social relations have a role in the factors of mental development. For Vygotsky, “psychological functions are given in the form of social relations which are the source of the origin of these functions and their development within humans” (1998, p. 473). This statement differentiates cultural-historical psychology from so-called classical psychology, as it contains the non-classical approach to human consciousness.

Primary forms of affective-semantic structures of human consciousness exist objectively outside of each individual, exist in human society in the form of works of art or any other material creations of people. That is, these forms precede the individual or subjective affective meaningful formations.

Recognition of their objective existence outside the individual consciousness is an extraordinary step in psychology. (El'konin, 1989, p. 477)

Non-classical psychology has elaborated the method for the study of developmental processes. In classical psychology the analysis of development is carried out by dividing and analyzing phenomena into separate elements (e.g., processes, functions, behavior, etc.), non-classical psychology studies psychological phenomenon/processes by dividing them into ‘holistic’ units (‘analysis into units’), which retain all the basic properties of development. Development is studied “in statu nascendi” and has to be produced in interaction.

The need for a new approach in psychology and the main principles was described in Vygotsky’s work “The crisis in psychology” (1982a; 1987). He analyses the historical development of psychology as a science and reveals the need for a dynamic shift in paradigms. Throughout his whole life Vygotsky was developing the principles of a new psychology. Vygotsky named this peak psychology because the new psychology was interested in the highest developmental achievements of the personality – its “peaks”. Vygotsky (1982b) explained this in connection with the understanding of development: “As a transformation of what was given initially? As neoformations? In that case most important is what developed last” (p. 166).
This is typical of the cultural-historical approach in psychology turning its attention towards the sources, factors and mechanisms of development, different obstacles to development and the ways to overcome those and especially the possibilities and potentials for development.

2.1 Natural versus Cultural Development

Quite radically for his time, Vygotsky (1983a; 1997b) differentiated two lines of psychological development: natural and cultural. Usually, these two lines of development are so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish them. Classical psychology still doesn’t stress this difference and, instead, cultural influences on child development are studied.

Vygotsky (1997b) claimed the history of the cultural development of the child to be analogous to the “living process of biological evolution” and introduced the concept of a conflict between the primitive and the cultural forms of behavior as the moving force of cultural development. “The very essence of cultural development consists in a confrontation of developed cultural forms of behavior which confront the child and primitive forms that characterize his own behavior” (p. 99).

This notion of conflict implies that cultural development is not a smoothly evolving process of internal potentials, but rather a struggle between natural (biological) and artificial (cultural) forms of behavior. Cultural development in early childhood is more a miracle than a natural process, as it is not predetermined by the biological or genetic structure of the human being. In Vygotsky’s opinion, cultural development is of a revolutionary type; it could be characterized as a very complex process of “sharp and basic changes in the type of development itself, the changes in the driving forces of the developmental process” (ibid., p. 110).

The development of human behavior proceeds through successive stages, where every stage negates the preceding stage to a certain degree, and at the same time preserves some properties from the preceding stage in a cryptic form.

Vygotsky observes a difference between growth and maturation, which he connected with the unfolding of already present inner potentials and cultural development. “We believe that child development is a complex dialectical process characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation of one form into the other,
interwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes that overcome impediments that the child encounters” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 73).

It is clear that in his opinion not every change could be regarded as developmental change. Only qualitative changes reorganizing the whole psychological system of functioning could be viewed as development in any real sense. The conclusion could be drawn that Vygotsky focuses on the relationships between phenomenon and the processes or mechanisms that bring changes in the relationships. “His main interest lay in origins, turning points, synthesis, transformations, and interactions of social, psychological, and cultural phenomena” (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003, p. 65).

Although Vygotsky was writing 80 years ago, his ideas are up to date. No wonder that El’konin & Zinchenko (2002) pointed out that Vygotsky’s view of development is not condemned to the past but is, rather, still not fully understood and comprehended. Using Vygotsky’s terminology, development could be described as drama unfolding around the relationships of real and ideal forms, their mutual transformations and transitions. The creator of and the actor in the drama – the developing child, the stage – is the child’s life.

The main factors of development defined by Vygotsky’s follower El’konin (1989, p. 490) are: (a) conditions – the growth and maturation of the organism; (b) sources – environment, ideal form (of what development must come at the end); (c) form – assimilation (creating his/her own); (d) moving forces – the contradiction between the assimilation of instrumental, operational (knowledge and skills) and the social aspects (needs of the society) of the activity.

2.2 The Sources of Development

Development of a child is rooted in cultural environment. We have in mind small culture – like everyday family life, local habits and traditions, but also bigger culture like human culture in general, traditional folk culture, national culture and the culture of the global world. Forms of human behavior are not encoded in the morphology of a human body nor given in the objects of culture explicitly. Human children have to encode the sense and meaning of cultural forms and objects themselves. The content of cultural development is the active searching for and disclosure of the societal meaning of cultural forms and active appropriation through making them their own property in order to become a full member of the human community. Active mastery of cultural forms of behavior and experiences is the living source of psychological development of the child. By
entering the cultural world the child masters not just the operational skills but also the ability for co-creation, co-construction and co-acting with others alike. Culture is not just ‘outside environment’ to which the child has to adapt. (Kudriavtsev, 1997.)

Although coming from a different tradition, Donald’s (1991; 2002) ideas on the evolution of human consciousness are very close; “the cognitive tools that we use to do much of our thinking seem to be dependent on our cultural institutions, and all our symbolic tools are imported from outside – that is, from culture. … the human mind is unlike any other on this planet, not because of its biology, which is not qualitatively unique, but because of its ability to generate and assimilate culture. The human mind is thus a “hybrid” product of biology and culture. … The human mind cannot come into existence on its own. It is wedded to a collective process, and the very sources of its experience are filtered through culture. The generation of culture is thus a key question in human evolution” (p. xiii).

2.2.1 The Environment

Vygotsky (1996a; 1994) saw the sources and recourses for development in the child’s interactions with their environment: cultural content, human relationships and cultural tools. He stressed the essential role of the environment in the development of specifically human forms of activity (higher psychological functions). According to cultural-historical theory, the cultural environment plays a very specific role in the development of “a child’s personality, his consciousness and relationship with reality” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 347). Environment is understood as the “source of development”, not as a “setting”. Vygotsky is talking about “specifically human characteristics”, “higher psychological functions” and forms of activity available in the environment when describing the development of a child’s personality and his consciousness. He stresses that only interactions with the environment are the source of these features’ in children.

An ideal or final form [of behavior] should be present in the environment and it should interact with the rudimentary form found in children, and what would result is a certain form of activity which then becomes a child’s internal asset, his property and a function of his personality. (1994, p. 353)

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1994) explains that if a certain ideal form is not available in the environment and the development of the child would proceed without any
interaction with the final form, then that form will fail to develop properly in the child. This is a very serious claim and it raises many questions for educationalists. Vygotsky sets very high expectations for the educational environment and pedagogical work by asking: “how does the group [group of children in the classroom] create higher mental functions” in a child? (1997b, p. 107). What Vygotsky means is that, initially, these functions are formed in the group as relations between children and only later do they become mental functions of the individual child. We might ask whose responsibility it is that ideal forms of behavior would be present in educational environments.

2.2.2 Interaction between Ideal and Real Form

Vygotsky (1994) points to a very specific feature of child development, which is characteristic only of childhood development:

The greatest characteristic feature of child development is that this development is achieved under particular conditions of interaction with the environment, where this ideal and final form (that form which is going to appear only at the end of the process of development) is not only already there in the environment and from the very start in contact with the child, but actually interacts and exerts a real influence on primary form, on the first steps of the child’s development. (p. 348)

An ideal form could be viewed as human culture in general that the newborn child finds in the world. Culture (ideal form) is an invitation for the child to act, to respond and to enter into a dialogue. If the child would accept the invitation an act of development might take place. The essence of the developmental act is that the subject (child) appropriates the ideal form, and then masters it. The ideal form becomes transformed into the real form of the child’s own behavior.

The division between ideal and real form is rather relative as an ideal form always has its representatives acting as mediators of development. Three major classes of mediators were proposed by Vygotsky (1982b; 1987): the human mediator, material tools and psychological tools (including symbol, myth and sense).

When investigating the role of environment in development Vygotsky (1994) proposes that the environment should not be understood as a static entity but rather as changeable and dynamic. A child’s reaction is changing as they grow and develop and their relationship and emotional ‘perezhivanie’ of seemingly the
same environment would be different at different periods of their development. The same event “occurring at different ages of the child, is reflected in his consciousness in a completely different manner and has an entirely different meaning for the child.” (p. 344)

This aspect has important implications for the educational practices as it points out that the child’s changing relationship with their environment would result in different developmental outcomes for the child. From the methodological point of view he proposes an important and useful concept – child’s emotional experience – living through – [perezhivanie] their environment as a conceptual cell for the study of the role and influence of environment on the psychological development of children.

In one of his last writings Vygotsky (1984a; 1998; 2003) introduces the concept of “social situation of development” by which Vygotsky means “the relations between the personality of the child and his social environment at each age level” (1998, p. 198). According to Vygotsky,

at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality that surrounds him. The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the social becomes individual. (Ibid., p. 198)

As a consequence of all the developmental changes age-related neoformations appear. This leads to the reconstruction of the whole structure of the child’s consciousness and the child becomes a completely different being than he was at the beginning of the age period. This means that the social situation of development must also change. A new situation of development unfolds, and this becomes the initial point for the transition to the following, higher age level. In Vygotsky’s (1984a; 1998; 2003) opinion, reconstruction of the social situation of development makes up the content of the critical ages (developmental crises) in a child’s development.

“Thus, we could present the division of age into periods in the following ways:

- Crisis of the newborn.
- Infancy (two months to one year).
- Crisis at age one.
- Early childhood (one to three years).
- Crisis at age three.
- Preschool age (three to seven years).
- Crisis at age seven.
- School age (eight to twelve years).
- Crisis at age thirteen.
- Age of puberty (fourteen to eighteen years).
- Crisis at age seventeen.” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 196.)

### 2.2.3 The Mechanism of Development: General Genetic Law

The development of the child occurs in an active adaptation to the environment. A central argument of Vygotsky’s theory is that cultural development proceeds from the collective towards individual behavior forms. He proposed the general mechanism of development – “the general genetic law of cultural development”, which he formulated in the following way: “every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as an intramental category” (1997c, p. 106). Vygotsky is using the term “social” in its broadest sense, meaning that everything cultural is social. “Culture is both a product of social life and of the social activity of man, and for this reason the very formulation of the problem of cultural development of behavior already leads us directly to the social plane of development” (p. 106). We might say that social relations determine the final results of the cultural development of the child.

The general sequence of the cultural development of the child could be schematized in the following way: (a) other people act on the child, (b) the child begins to interact with those around him, (c) the child begins to act on others: adults, peers, toys and environment, (d) finally, the child acts on themself regulating their own behavior.

This general sequence of child development is a very important principle in our experimental work. We follow and support all developmental steps. It is very common that teachers concentrate only on the first two steps: they act on the child, i.e. they teach something and are satisfied when the child responds in a proper way. However, they usually don’t follow how the child is practicing their new skill on others nor how it is applied to themself.
2.3 Goals and Moving Forces of Development

In Vygotsky’s opinion the goal of cultural development is mastering one’s own behavior. Through mastering the psychological tools a man would become a master of his own behavior and psyche. When a subject masters cultural forms his real form of behavior becomes cultural (corresponds to the ideal form). Cultural mediators, along with the act of mediation, bring changes in the mental processes and human consciousness. “Man introduces artificial stimuli, signifies behavior, and with signs, acting externally, creates new connections in the brain” (Vygotsky, 1997c, p. 55).

2.3.1 Psychological Tools

The notion of psychological tool is essential the understanding of Vygotsky’s (1981; 1982a; 1997b) view on cultural development. The concept of “psychological tools” or “instruments” is one of the cornerstones of Vygotsky’s psychological theory. He was interested in the role of sign systems as mediating devices and his view was very much an extension of Marx’s notion (Blunden, 2010) of how the tool mediates human labor activity. He developed this idea in his psychology, analyzing how “psychological tools and their complex systems” mediate human social processes and thinking. In both cases the point is that tools are not only used by humans to change the outside world, but also to “direct their own (or another) mind and behavior”.

The following can serve as examples of psychological tools and their complex systems: language; various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps, mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs, etc. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137)

Psychological tools being the product of historical development are social by nature, not organic or individual. They are artificial devices directed toward the mastery or control of behavioral processes. “By being included in the process of behavior, the psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions” (p. 137). And, along with natural acts of behavior, creates “artificial, instrumental, functions and forms of behavior” (p. 137). It could be said that psychological tools become the main instruments leading and determining the
cultural development of man. Psychological tools give a new artificial direction to a natural process and this direction is provided by means of an instrument.

Mastery of a psychological tool and, through it, mastery of a natural mental function always raises the particular function to a higher stage, increases and widens its activity, and re-creates its structure and mechanism. Natural mental processes are not eliminated in this. They enter into combination with the instrumental act. But they turn out to be functionally dependent in their structure on the instrument being used. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 143)

Bodrova et al. (2007) use the terms “tools of the mind” and “cultural tools” instead of “psychological tools”. Kozulin (1998) uses Vygotsky’s original concept of “psychological tools”. Egan & Gajdamashko (1997) and Egan (1998; 1999) use the terms “cognitive tools”, “intellectual tools” and sometimes “cultural tools” under the influence of Vygotsky, but he doesn’t follow Vygotsky’s interpretation of the more general idea carefully enough and gives his own interpretation of the term.

2.3.2 The Act of Cultural Mediation

In the act of mediation lies the mystery of development, mystery of transformation of real form into ideal. (El’konin et al., 2002)

The essence of mediation is in denial of immediacy. All psychological relations that link us to reality and other people are never direct. In perception, thinking, action and communication psychological tools guide our psyche. The most important of these tools are language and other forms of representation. Mediation seems to be the necessary condition of the human psyche. Bakhurst (2007) sees the significance of the concept of cultural mediation in at least five aspects of human thinking: (1) it is characteristic exceptionally of human psychological capacities; (2) the possibility of self-consciousness; (3) condition of creative thinking; (4) necessary condition for the development of subjectivity; (d) the unity of the psyche and the world.

In the course of the mediational act, objects, tools, signs, etc. become incorporated into natural forms of behavior and transform them into ideals, cultural entities. In the broadest sense they become instrumentalized forms of actions and activity. Exactly this kind of inclusion or incorporation takes place during the joint, united action of the subject with another – the mediator. Such
unified act of mediation is more than assimilation or acquisition. This is co-
creation and in the course of this act, a new unique, individual ideal form on the
basis of the real form of a subject’s behavior is arises (this might be close to what
Piaget named accommodation).

This is a crucial aspect. The subject-child does not take any ready-made ideal
form from the adult-mediator nor does the adult impose their ideal form on the
child. A new ideal form of a child’s behavior is created/generated as a result of the
act of mediation. The term created or generated reveals better the complicated
process of cultural mediation, rather than internalization, which is usually used in
Anglo-American texts. John-Steiner & Mahn (1996) point to the same aspect of
the process of internalization, seeing it as “transformative rather than transmissive”. Kahlil Gibran (1996) described the essence of the teacher’s
mediation in his “The Prophet”: “The teacher who walks in the shadow of the
temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and
his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his
wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.” (p. 34)

This kind of co-creation could be best observed in how an infant starts
producing new signs, such as different kind of cries, hand and body movements,
seeking to express their intentions. An infant creates some kind of ‘code’
symbolizing his emotional state that could be recognized by an adult (most often
only the mother). El’konin & Zinchenko (2002) point out that co-creation starts
from the most difficult part, namely from giving rise to a common language,
which is the tool for communication. The child’s contribution to the act of
mediation, of co-creation, is first of all an investment in one’s own development,
own behavior and self-awareness. This is the beginning of a child’s self-
development. Through this invention an infant spontaneously starts guiding adult
behavior. Exactly at this point, according to Zinchenko (1996) and Kudriavtsev
(1997), lies the beginning of human creativity, and the development in general
receives the creative direction.

Ilyenkov (1977) over 30 years ago wrote that the main problem of education
is the fact that our schools offer children ready-made knowledge in the form of
correct answers. Most children are not ready to assimilate the knowledge and
have to remember without real understanding. As a result they master arbitrary
memory, but do not develop their own minds, critical thinking and the ability to
make judgments, all of which are skills crucial to the creation of anything new –
including new knowledge!
We have to rethink our understanding of what knowledge is. As Eisner (1999, ix-xii) points out, “Knowledge is not a thing ... but a living process that occurs within the human mind. ... Knowledge is not an object, it is a process.” Egan (1999) reflects upon the situation in education arguing that much schooling today refers to an essay-text literacy, which is efficient, neatly packaged knowledge. It allows little room for knowledge gained from personal experience. The main “job” of teaching has been passed to high quality textbooks. The structure of a typical textbook tends to support the belief that the textbook or encyclopedia exhibits the ideal form of knowledge, but books do not contain knowledge. Books contain symbolic codes. Knowledge exists only in human minds.

In emphasizing the difference between inert symbolic codes in books and living knowledge in human minds, we need to pay attention to something significant and often neglected, about teaching. The point is not to get the symbolic codes as they exist in books into students’ minds... the teaching task is to reconstitute the inert symbolic code into living human knowledge. The point that knowledge is living seems crucial... The instrument best able to ensure the transformation from codes to living knowledge is the imagination. (Egan, 1999, p. 51)

That’s why we still say that some teachers are better because they have the “gift” of teaching: they are using their imagination to stimulate their students’ imagination, which is needed to create living knowledge in their minds!

El’konin (1994) wrote about “the crisis of childhood”, which is connected with the crisis of mediation and with the crisis of the whole system of education. According to him the initial goal of education was “transmission” of culture or in other words mediation between culture creation and culture consumption. But in reality educational institutions limit their task to passing information about cultural phenomena and not revealing the sense and meaning of the phenomena.

In traditional cultures the teacher’s role was of greatest importance – they were seen as the mediators of cultural heritage. El’konin (1994) is trying to describe the psychological mechanism of such mediation. An adult acts as mediator only as far as he himself starts testing the situation where his (adult’s) idea becomes an object of a child’s interest and testing. The mediator has to be excited and absorbed deeply with the idea he is presenting to others (children) if his aim is to get them involved as well. According to El’konin, (1994) mediation is a process of searching for ways of attracting children’s attention to some
important topics or ideas, and to initiate the process of exploration of these ideas in their play or learning activity.

I can see certain similarities in a teacher’s and theatre director’s work. When a play is staged in the theatre it has to contain some basic ideas particularly important for the present time, to the group or bigger part of society and even the whole of humanity in order to be successful. The next task is to find the best form to express these ideas, to make them really close and exciting for the spectators. As Stanislavsky (2001) said, the supertask of a really good theatre group is to set up a dialog with the audience, to domesticate it and after that to foster the process of self-change and development in spectators.

One of the most famous actors of the 20th century, Stanislavsky’s student Mikhael Chekhov (2002, XX), believed that the core of a theatrical event was to be found in the actor’s relationship with his audience. It was vital to engage with what he called “the will of the auditorium”, to reach out to each member of the audience and share the creative act with him or her. “I understood that members of the audience have the right to influence the actor during a performance and that the actor should not prevent this”.

The example of the theatre helps to understand more deeply the process of cultural mediation and connection between mediator and the audience. Theatre is an institution of cultural mediation through cultural co-creation. The existence of the theatre depends on how successfully it fulfills its function. The theatre can’t survive for long if people don’t like its production. If education views its general function as cultural mediation, the same challenge of co-creation of new knowledge is met in teachers’ work. The teacher also has to bring joy and satisfaction to his students: joy of sense and knowledge creation.

This type of mediation is based on a specific approach. Showing one’s attitude and relation to the ideas and activities is necessary. The artistic director and actor are always extremely excited about the ideas they are presenting to the people; the teacher, on the contrary, usually tries to be neutral.

And this is the most important aspect of mediation – you can’t get people interested in the ideas if you as mediator remain neutral towards them. Especially small children, but also adults, get involved through the emotions of the presenter and only later with the ideas. If the teacher is indifferent to the ideas (or knowledge) he is presenting, the children also remain indifferent and are not motivated. Fisher (1984) pointed out that people make their choices in life based on narrative rationality more often than on logical argument (paradigmatic mode).
2.4 The Subject(s) of Development

According to Kudriavtsev (1997), childhood is a period of the development of human potentials, the basic possibilities for future development. With the help of appropriate educational guidance and support, a child masters the fundamentals of the creative potential of culture.

The child is born into a social world where he is surrounded by the people who interact with him. Child development starts as a response to social interaction with other persons (mother, father and other family members) as a dialogue and co-creation of common culture. According to many authors (e.g. Fogel, 1993; Lobok, 1997; Hobson, 2004; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Fogel, King & Shanker, 2007) children are active participants in the cultural system from the very beginning. Their cultural life begins from the simple actions of creating elementary cultural forms (gaze, smile, movements and sounds). By performing all these actions the child is starting the process of self-development: through creating the culture they are simultaneously creating themselves.

Lobok (1997) claims that a child’s cultural development begins not from internalization of cultural norms, but from some elementary actions of “creating primeval culture”. In his opinion every child, before being able to interpret signs of adult culture, creates their own subjective reality – “a mythology”. This reality forms the basis for interpretation of meanings that cultural objects have. Such a view clearly points to the self-development of the child.

Fogel (1993) suggests that infants are active participants in a cultural system from the beginning, right from birth, and even earlier. He assumes that the three concepts – communication, self and culture – are not separate entities, but that each one is a facet of the developing individual and each of them develops in relationship to the other (each facet defines the other, each facet creates the other). “Infants learn to communicate as they define themselves. They create culture for themselves as they communicate with more culturally skilled individuals. They define others in the process of defining themselves. Development arises from being a part in a dynamic discourse with other people” (p. 16).

Corsaro (1997) proposes a new notion of interpretive reproduction, instead of the old term socialization, which traditionally meant adaptation and internalization. “The term interpretive captures the innovative and creative aspects of children’s participation in society. … The term reproduction captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are
actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction” (p. 18).

According to the reproductive view, children do not simply imitate or internalize the world around them, but they strive to make sense of the adult world and to participate in it. In doing this they come to collectively produce their own peer worlds and cultures.

My hypothesis about the development on the most general level is that creative “drive” is the moving force of the development, and the aim of the development is to accomplish creative potential of the individual. Self-development is the cornerstone of human development as it is the only way to build unique consciousness. In his notebooks, Vygotsky (Zavershneva, 2010, p. 26) in his diary concluded that “consciousness is a dialog with oneself” and that this inner dialogue has its beginning in a co-created joint act of mediation.

From the perspective of cultural-historical theory the true unit of development is an integrative whole that includes the child, the adult and the symbolic tool provided by the culture (Kozulin, 1998). We should add that the space of development is the space between the zone of actual development and the zone of potential development, and the mechanism of development is the act of mediation.

Kudriavtsev (1997) points out that when talking about cultural development the unit of development should not be an individual child taken in isolation but an integral system of adult-child interaction. Initially such a psychological unit is formed between the infant and the mother. The unit ‘child-adult’ presents the poly-subject of development.

2.5 The Zone of Proximal Development

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is perhaps the best-known and most widely used innovation in Vygotsky’s work. He adopted the term from others, but gave it a new life in his theoretical framework. Vygotsky used the concept in two different contexts – school learning and play. Although he introduced the two contexts chronologically at the same time, he defined the concept using very different criteria. This difference allows diverse interpretations and uses of the term.

The most referred to context is school learning and problem solving. The most often quoted definition of the ZPD is the following:
The child’s zone of proximal development is the gap between the level of his actual development, determined with the aid of tasks that he can solve independently, and the level of his possible development, determined with the aid of tasks that he can solve under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with more capable companions. (Vygotsky, 2003, p. 379)

It is obvious that Vygotsky is speaking about a school-age child’s learning situation. This context may have led to simplified interpretations of the concept and concealed its real potential. Changes in ordinary problem solving are a narrow developmental context and may tempt us to simplify the unit of analysis of development.

Another context, which from the very beginning introduces different challenges of learning and development, is play. Vygotsky (2003) described the ZPD in play as follows:

Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and in itself is a major source of development. (p. 220)

This definition is full of metaphors and most attributes of the more popular term from school context are lacking. Did Vygotsky develop two separate concepts or did he intend to elaborate a more comprehensive framework which could unite the idea of the ZPD in different contexts (e.g. play, learning and work)? Valsiner (2000) supports the idea that Vygotsky aimed at one unified concept and Vygotsky (2003) explicitly writes about the wish to see the two contexts using the same conceptual frame, but at the same time developmental potential of play is more emphasized:

The relationship of play to development should be compared with that of teaching – learning to development. Changes of needs and consciousness of a more general kind lie behind the play. Play is the resource of development and it creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginary field, in the imagined situation, building of voluntary intention, the construction of life plan, motives of willing – all this emerges in play. (p. 220)
The most serious challenge of developing the general concept of the ZPD is expressed in the last sentence of the quotation. Put in other words, how the ZPD is connected to the development of *imagination, intentions, life plans, motivation* and *will*. Traditionally, these aspects of development are not discussed in the analysis of learning.

When developing the concept of the ZPD in the school context Vygotsky (2003) described development on the level of psychological functions. He writes:

…”the zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the "buds" or “flowers” of development rather than the “fruits” of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively. (p. 379)

When describing the ZPD in a play context he changed the focus from higher psychological functions to the relations between functions and psychological systems as units of analysis of development. Such concepts as personality and psychological age were used as developmental concepts instead of higher mental functions. The introduction of new units of analysis of development can be connected with the stage model of development, in which crisis periods indicate qualitative changes in the psychological life of an individual. Each crisis period indicated the change of the psychological mechanism of development. The mechanism of personality level development was connected with new forms of relations between psychological organization of a growing personality and social situation of development. An interesting problem is how differently development is represented in the two main contexts of the ZPD? The problem-solving context in the classroom does not indicate further developmental effects other than transition from aided individual problem solving to independent individual problem solving, which can be explained as the result of internalization of new psychological functions. Critical in this setting is the change of psychological functions. Problem solving is more or less a tool of changing psychological functions. In play context we cannot use the same problem solving metaphor in the definition of the ZPD.

Another essential difference between problem solving and play is the type of rationality: problem solving is based on logical analytic rationality and play on narrative rationality. Most failures in defining the specific nature of play are based
on attempts to apply formal logical rationality to the analysis of play. Narrative rationality dominates in children's play. We suppose that it is necessary to define the zones of proximal development in play using the laws of narrative rationality.

The ZPD in problem solving in the classroom context is defined by stating the solutions and results in individual or adult guided problem situations. We may call the solutions "product creativity", which adult help supports. In play ready-made criteria of creativity are not available, because the emphasis is more on creative process and group activity. In the beginning of the play process no one can tell what the "result" will be.

In the problem-solving paradigm of the ZPD the emphasis is on the learning of an individual child. Adult help takes place in a system of three elements: child – problem – adult. The system picture is different in play settings. Problems are embedded in a system of role relations in imaginative situations. In a system of role relations the zones of proximal development are shared and several people are stakeholders. The situation is collectively created, but individual interpretations and zones may be different. This is very clearly visible in play episodes of multiage groups. The younger children (2 to 3 years) understand the function of roles and play actions differently when compared to older children (4 to 5 years). We may talk about different levels of learning and play in the same play frame.

In Vygotsky's cultural historical theory the concept of developmental potential is elaborated more than the ZPD. The developmental potential of play is connected first of all to the development of imagination and symbolic competence. These characteristics are results of the whole play age and play experience during several years.

The full integrative definition of the ZPD should include one more step: from joint action (problem solving) to child initiated social experimentation and developmental qualitative, system level change. This step is lacking in the ZPD problem solving in a school context, because any correct solution of the problem seems to be enough. In joint problem solving a new higher mental function is still shared social relation and not yet internalized function. The internalization phase is not included in the basic definition of the ZPD as the distance between individual and joint problem solving. Another problem is that the focus is on individual change instead of broader cultural units. In many interpretations problem solving is an individual enterprise and the teacher is just a helper, not a learning partner. Adult help is not a mutual process in these interpretations, as
Zuckerman (2007) proposes. In play context the necessity of joint experimentation is obvious and an extended concept of the ZPD is needed.

The full definition of the ZPD, taking into account Vygotsky's general methodological approach to human development, includes two steps: (1) from joint dramatic collisions (problems) to potential developmental changes, and (2) from joint supported action to individual or collective experimentation and personality change.

We propose an expanded definition of the ZPD combining the two original definitions. This definition proposes two distances: 1) between individual action and joint higher level potential, and 2) between joint higher-level potential and \textit{qualitative change in personality}. Learning is not limited in this definition to individual or joint problem solving. A decisive step is learning, which leads from potentials to personality change. (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008).

Brain studies from different fields (Abbott, 1997; Cane, 1997; Cane, Cane & Crowell, 1999; Sylwester, 2000) revealed that the brain works most effectively when it has to act on the edge of one’s abilities and possibilities, to be constantly challenged and at the same time to be able to meet the challenge. This is what we can easily observe in the behavior of young children.

\section*{2.6 Self-development}

Personality change is possible only through self-development. The ability for self-development is very much predefined by the type of interactions that the child is experiencing in their development.

Zuckerman (2007) described very precisely an adult position favorable for the self-development of a child:

For the adult the task of constructing a meeting with the child on the territory of play, learning activity, or directly emotional or intimate-personal communication is always a new task, however experienced the adult may be in solving similar tasks. The task is new for the adult because he is seeking for the first time a method of adjusting his action to the action of this specific child in such a way that something new should arise at the place where the two actions meet (and as far as possible nothing should be destroyed). (p. 51)

An adult is unable to fully set up the perspective of child development, however, how broad this perspective will be in many respects depends on what strategic line of educational cooperation an adult will choose. Different types of interaction
between the child and the adult pave different pathways of cultural acquisition and have different developmental outcomes for the child.

Kudriavtsev (1999) differentiates three main types of adult-child interaction in educational environments: (1) reproductive type, where the child has to copy the adult model; (2) quasi-heuristic type, which seems to be more interactive, based on hands-on activity and problem solving, but the adult still preserves a position of authority; and (3) developmental type based on genuine cooperation between the child and the adult, which could be also called productive. Only the third type presupposes the process of creative development and self-development in the participants, both the child and the adult.

Developmental type interaction could be described as the process of creative co-construction, co-production through expanding the boundaries of one’s consciousness. This kind of collaboration always starts from the situation of uncertainty on the one side and openness on the other. An adult mediator should keep in their mind’s eye three different zones of development of each concrete child simultaneously. First, the zone of proximal development – mastery of a new type of operating/acting and appropriation of an ideal (cultural) form. Next, the zone of distant development and self-development (employment of new skills for personal aids). And finally, the zone of potential development that is always unknown to the adult and should be seen as endless. The space between the zone of distant development and potential development is where creative acts are accomplished and where the child is operating in the mode of self-development; this is the space where all creative personalities reside. The whole process could be expressed in the following way: “Let’s do it together!” and then, “Go on, I can help you, but you can do it better!” Adult help should not be seen as completed action but rather as an orientational basis for the child’s own actions. Child development proceeds through the act of cultural mediation from co-development to self-development through creative acts.

It seems that a child’s self-development creates the ZPD for the adult. A child’s creative (developmental) steps are the indicators of a teacher’s achievement or indicators that the teacher is working in the child’s zone of proximal development and they are creating a new zone of proximal development for the teacher.
2.7 Developmental/Creative Act

In the cultural-historical approach the construction of self is closely connected with the development of subjectivity and the subject of activity. The core problem is how a child becomes the subject of joint activity and can carry out creative acts.

Bozhovich (2004) studied personality formation and claimed that the act is the unit for studying personality. The concept of an act is different from the concept of action (which does not necessarily include internal motivation), and from the overly broad concept of activity. “An act always presupposes a special type of activity in the subject. It is accompanied by a competition among motives and the making of a decision, although in many cases this competition is not consciously perceived by the individual” (p. 32).

In this connection we can talk about co-creation of new culture. Creative acts are dually oriented: in the change of the world of objects and of the acting subject. In the construction of self the mechanism of role taking is important. Simultaneous presence of two positions (“me as myself” and “me in a role”) creates the challenge of comparing and reflecting one’s own self. By taking a role the child constructs a mirror for self-change using story/narrative as a tool for self-development (in young children this is not a consciously perceived act).

A principal difference of the cultural historical approach can be found in the studies of Petrovsky (1984) on such social psychological phenomena as attraction or social relations in teams. Traditional logic says that the personal characteristics of people in a dyad or a bigger group define the success. Petrovsky showed that attraction and social relations depend on the nature of joint activity and not vice versa. We may similarly suppose that a creative act does not depend on self-concept but on the joint play activity.

El’konin (1994) proposed the concept of “creative act” as a unit of analysis in his attempts to study developmental phenomena. He borrowed the term from Losev (1982) and elaborated it to describe human development. A creative act has special potential and forms a turning point in developmental processes. A truly human act is an act of cultural co-creation, not a form of consumption of culture and cultural products. Only productive action can be called a developmental act. The product of a developmental act irreversibly changes the environment and the
subject of the activity. We can suppose that “creative act” is elaborated from the idea of “genetic experiment” that Vygotsky (1983a; 1997c) proposed².

Can we use this unit in the analysis of development in play? Are irreversible changes of the subject possible in play? Many researchers focusing on short play periods in their research would answer negatively to this question. But the answer can be different if play is analyzed as the leading activity of play age (from about three to seven years) and the content of play is focused upon. In this developmental trajectory qualitative changes of cultural co-creation and the use of cultural symbolic tools can be discerned. The difficulty of following these changes is connected to the specific nature of play actions, in which sense making and emotional experience dominate. Irreversible changes happen in the domain of experiencing events and phenomena. After the formation of a new set of sense making with accompanying emotional experience and symbolic tools a return to the old way of understanding and experiencing is not likely.

As a result of our experimental work we revised the concept of the creative act and redefined it within the contexts of children’s pretend play and early learning. We would like to define creative acts in concrete situations as moments of the appearance of qualitatively new phenomena in a child’s activity:

1. Methodologically catching these moments requires the construction of favorable environments and a follow-up study of play and learning.
2. In most cases a creative act is not an individual phenomenon, but a collective unanticipated creation.
3. Children are not consciously changing themselves or acquiring new traits, but participating in joint activity, which challenges them to confront their momentary real self.
4. Often adult and peer provocations or disturbances are behind these moments. Adults may have the role of a helper who can reveal what the children’s behavior looks like and reinforces new features.

The main prerequisites for creative acts are: (1) rich and quite long experience of participation in “cultural activities” together with adults and other children such as storytelling, puppet presentations, dramatizations, creative drama, painting, drawing, modeling, making puppets, other play props from different materials; (2)

² Genetic experiment was first introduced as the invention of new tools in problem solving, but the concept has the connotation of the genesis of new psychological formations as well.
an environment rich in materials and self-made play things, but not ready-made toys and games.

It seems that in general creative acts are provoked by the critical situation for the child. In most observed cases the creative act is anticipated by a particular kind of irritation, and feelings of uncertainty and dissatisfaction; we may call these “agonies of creation”.

**Conditions** for the creative act are:

- Self-organized and self-performed activity (if an adult is participating, they have the role of helper)
- Time (most of the observed cases lasted from forty minutes to two hours)
- Self-chosen and arranged “special” spaces (for example a house “built” behind the couch or under the table; a castle in a creative drama center, etc.).

Still, it is important to elaborate and describe the mechanism of creative act in play activity.

### 2.8 Creativity and Cultural Development

*If we understand creativity in its true psychological sense as the creation of something new, then this implies that creation is the province of everyone to one degree or another; that it is a normal and constant companion in childhood.* (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 33)

In contrast to the widespread view that creativity is the province of those who are gifted with some special talents, Vygotsky proposed a different approach. “Any human activity that gives rise to something new is referred to as creativity regardless of whether what is created is a physical object or some mental or emotional construct that lives within the person who created it and is known only to him” (ibid., p.7). This definition makes it clear that he was not so much interested in the product of creativity as in the psychological aspect of the creative process, of the creative act as such.

One of the most important areas of child and educational psychology is the issue of creativity in children, the development of this creativity and its significance to the child’s general development and maturation. We can identify creative process in children at the very earliest ages, especially in their play… *children at play represent examples of the most authentic, truest creativity*… A child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what he has
experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a *new reality*, one that conforms to his own needs and desires. (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 11)

### 2.8.1 Children's versus Adult Creativity

A child assimilates culture creatively. A child fills in the semantic fields of culture, realizing (often unconsciously) the unmanifested possibilities residing in it.

Here a clear difference between the adult and children's creativity should be made. The products or results of adult creativity could be characterized as novel, original, relevant and useful for the bigger society. Children, with rare exceptions, do not create or invent something new in this sense of the word. The main work which the child has to complete is to ‘open’ for themself the whole cultural world that has been created by humankind. To do this the child has to use all their efforts: to employ all their body and soul, so to say. What the child is doing is rather *re-creating, rediscovering* the surrounding culture for themself rather than creating something new for the world.

It is important to distinguish creativity as "discovery for others” and creativity as "discovery for themself." In the first case, for example, new technical inventions, works of art and scientific discoveries are made. In the second case the novelty of the products of creativity is rather subjective. From the psychological point of view this subjective aspect is more important. The creativity as "discovery for themself" does not create a new product but brings changes, develops the creator – the child. In fact, creativity as "discovery for themself" is largely the "discovery of oneself," or creation of oneself, although often not perceived by the "discoverer".

The entry of the child into the human world right from birth – is a continuous chain of “discoveries for themselves”. Mastery of the most basic ways of using cultural objects always takes the form of “discovery for oneself” for a small child. It is not reproduction following a certain predetermined pattern, it is re-creation. Thanks to this process the reproduction of the creative power throughout society is taking place. This means, that “discovery for oneself” is only a first and necessary step, a social and psychological condition for the following step, which might be the “discovery for others”. Vygotsky viewed historical creativity (“big C” in terms of Csikszentmihályi, 1990; Gardner, 1993) and individual creativity (“little c”) as dialectically connected.
By learning to use different cultural objects (a spoon, a hammer, a pencil, scissors, etc.) the child is not simply mastering their specialized functions, but learning to act like a human being with human things in general. The process requires creative activity from the child: active orientation and search, overcoming of internal and external obstacles, solving problems, and involves the generation of new functional systems of their psyche. As Moran & John-Steiner (2003) noticed “creativity transforms … the creator through the personal experience of the process” (p.72).

The unit of a child’s thinking is not a single fact – despite being of a very young age any fact around them the child passes through the “network” of their own worldview. Lobok (1997) calls it the mythological perception. At different stages of development the picture of the world that the child constructs is more complex and slightly different: at first one-dimensional, then two-dimensional, etc. But one feature in it is constantly present – a picture of the world a child creates following the aesthetic laws. As studies show, aesthetic sensitivity, sensitivity to beauty, already manifests itself in early childhood. Some scholars consider it as innate/inborn; in any case, we can say that in creating their image of the world a small child is engaged in *artistic creation*.

Analyzing the phenomenon of child syncretism as an attempt to bunch together the most varied elements, which may have no internal connections, resulting in an undifferentiated, fused image; Vygotsky (1982b; 1987) observes that the essence of this tendency is to replace the lack of objective connections with the surplus of subjective connections. The child takes connections of impressions and thought to be actual connections between things. Such tendency has always distinguished the thinking of so-called geniuses in science and culture!

Exploring the patterns of children's thinking in the period before conceptual thinking, Vygotsky (1982b; 1987) defined this thinking as *thinking in complexes* (complexive thinking) and singled out five major forms of such thinking:

1. Associative complex
2. Complex-collection
3. Chain complex
4. Diffuse complex
5. Pseudoconcept

A description of all five forms of thinking is extremely close to how cultural historians describe the sphere of mythological thinking, and quite an accurate description of a creative mind!
We might conclude that stability, duration and strength of children's involvement in various creative activities, in the first place creative play, indicate that the nature of childhood has a common human need for creativity. The satisfaction of this need ensures the development of vital human mental capacities. *Imagination* is among them. The ideological and theoretical creators of the developmental education approach (Il'enkov, 1977; El'konin, 1989; Davydov, 2004) regarded *life-creating, productive imagination* as a *universal property of human consciousness*.

### 2.9 Creative Imagination and Development

*Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.* (Albert Einstein, 1931, p. 97)

Probably not many people would agree with this idea if they did not know that it belonged to Einstein. Usually, imagination is connected with creative or artistic activities. Significance of imagination is neglected and seems not to be important for “normal” thinking in everyday life situations. Hughes (1988) proposes a different view, in his opinion, “the word imagination usually denotes … the faculty of creating a picture of something in our heads and holding it there while we think about it” (p. 35).

Accepting this means that imagination is important for everyone. Vygotsky (2004) argued that imagination is crucial to all mental development and is the foundation of abstract thinking and concept formation. He claimed that imagination is the basis of all human creative activity and an important component of all aspects of cultural life. Absolutely everything around us created by the mind and hand of man is the product of human imagination.

In psychology two main types of imagination are presented: *reproductive* – relaying on memory and generating images that one knows, sees or remembers, and *productive* (creative) – generating images of objects or phenomena that do not exist or which one hasn’t seen/observed. Reproductive images in “pure form” occur seldom, the main amount of images is the images of productive imagination. This indicates that imagination must *play an important role in the process of thinking*. The human brain not only stores our previous experiences but also constantly combines and reworks the elements generating new connections.
resulting in new behavior. This active work of productive imagination makes humans oriented toward the future and creating the future.

If we see our world as constantly evolving, then the role of creative imagination becomes even clearer because it guarantees the generation of new ideas. Modern schooling operates with “ready made” theoretical knowledge and often forgets how this knowledge was once generated and thus avoids involving children in the process of productive creation. Davydov (1996) wrote about “theoretical generalizations” as the origin of concepts.

2.9.1 Relationships between Imagination and Real Life Experiences

From complicated relationships between imagination and reality Vygotsky (1997a; 2004) separated four main types of connections of mature (adult) imagination: (1) the creative activity of imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of previous experience – the richer the experience, the richer the act of imagination; (2) complicated association between the final product of one’s own imagination and some complex real phenomenon obtained from someone else, so-called social experience; (3) emotional connection between imagination and reality has two directions: emotions influence imagination and vice versa – the products of imagination influence emotions; (4) the construct of imagination representing something substantially new (technical devices, instruments, creations of art and literature, etc.) affects the reality. Only the first and third type of linkages can be observed both in adults’ and children’s imaginative activities.

2.9.2 Mechanism of Creative Imagination

Creative products of imagination have a long history and their development can be described as a circular path. The elements are taken from reality: in the mind of the creator elements are transformed into products of imagination, given material form and returned to the same reality as a new active force with the potential to affect reality.

Every act of creation is only a short episode; the highest point is preceded by a long process of preparation or gestation. At the start of the process is always accumulation of external and internal experience followed by dissociation and association of the impressions acquired through perception. After that individual
images are unified into a system, a complex picture, which is finally embodied in external images or objects.

Imagination is dependent on the following psychological factors: experience; needs and interests (intentions) that arise from the basic need to adapt to the environment; combinatorial abilities and practice; individual technical abilities; tradition and environment.

Stanislavski (1988) differentiated three types of imagination: (1) active, that has an initiative of its own, (2) lacking own initiative but easily aroused by outside suggestions, and (3) “poor”, not aroused by any suggestions, implementing someone else’s ideas but not creating their own images. Stanislavski’s classification is based on his practical experience in theatre work with adult actors. From the educational point of view his opinion that “imagination should and could be developed”, is, to a certain point, important.

2.9.3 Imagination in Children

Imagination evolves from developing memory, which is a central psychological process of preschool age. Evolving memory together with imitation “gives birth” to imagination that is manifested in, first, play actions with adult caregivers and later with peers. The real “blossom” of imagination is seen in pretend or imaginary play. Vygotsky (1984a; 1998) described child’s play as imagination in action and adolescent’s imagination as play without action! As the child grows and matures his active and visible imagination manifested in play activity becomes his inner psychological tool. In early age the main engine of imagination is a child’s natural curiosity.

In childhood imagination can be defined as the ability to create images of objects, people, situations, etc. in one’s mind and to think about them. In other words, imagination is image making.

The ability to create an image in one’s head is crucial. In child psychology the changes in mutual relationship between the image and action is the basis of defining the successive stages in the development of a child’s thinking that proceeds from visual-operational, to visual-pictorial, then to abstract-logical, and finally to theoretical. All activities of the creative cycle, such as creative forms of play, visual arts (painting, drawing, molding/modeling), movement, music, storytelling, etc., support development of this process in early age if all creative activities are not organized as the specialized training of early professional skills. Children should not be seen as future painters, dancers, musicians, etc., but as
creative personalities able to create the future world. Artistic creativity at early age develops general creative potentials of children including special abilities, but primarily supports the formation of general abilities, and the most central among them is imagination (Polujanov, 2000).

In his research on the development of children (1966), Bruner proposed three modes of representation: enactive representation (action-based), iconic representation (image-based), and symbolic representation (language-based). The modes of representation are integrated and only loosely sequential as they “translate” into each other. Symbolic representation remains the ultimate mode, for it “is clearly the most mysterious of the three”. Bruner's theory is confirmed to be effective when a progression from enactive to iconic to symbolic representation is followed.

To grasp the true essence of an object or phenomenon, the child has to imagine it – to translate it into an image, and look at it from all possible perspectives – to “turn” it in one’s mind, to explore it (Davydov, 1996). Such activity enables the child to look at the world from an unconventional, sometimes even paradoxical perspective. Chukovsky (1968) described this phenomenon as “inversions” or “topsy-turvy” [pereviortishi]. He called them “mental games and thinking games”. The purpose of such games, according to Chukovsky, is to exercise his newly acquired skill of verifying his knowledge of things:

We know that the child – and this is the main point – is amused by the reverse juxtaposition of things only when the real juxtaposition has become completely obvious to him. No sooner, for instance, does he acquaint himself with the most useful truth, that heat burns, than he is ready to derive great fun from the jolly English folk song about a droll person who burned himself with cold porridge. … this mental game signifies for the child the successful culmination of a certain series of mental efforts which he has made to master his concepts of the world around him. (p. 101)

Egan (1999) is writing about the principle of “binary oppositions” when describing how the child’s imagination functions. Vygotsky (1997a; 2004) is talking about dissociation and association when describing imagination.

To imagine, to translate one’s existence into an image: gesture, action, play, drawing, words, means to communicate, to express one’s point of view. More than that, it means an invitation to dialogue and dispute with other people. Adults often evaluate any random combination of images, any unexpected associations
and analogies that a child may think of, as creative. Creative imagination always reveals some essential aspects of the object or phenomenon.

Egan (1999) pointed out: “children’s thinking is not merely some embryonic and simple form of adults’ thinking but has distinctive characteristics of its own – some of which are clearly superior to typical adults’ thinking” (p. 29). He has in mind imagination.

2.9.4 Relationships between Imaginative and Realistic Thinking

It is essential to keep in mind how differently adults and children construct their knowledge and understanding of the world. Adult knowledge is created on the basis of information available to them. Children’s knowledge is created on the basis of strong emotional experiences, which is their knowledge of the world – experiential processes prevailing. In fact, it is better to say that children’s knowledge is imagined. Young children know so little about the real world that they have to imagine it. Children imagine life as it should be or they wish it to be rather than as it is.

The main questions they are trying to answer are: “What is the world?” “What is good and what is bad?” “What is the sense and meaning of human life and activities?”

Every parent and every teacher have a lot of examples of children’s answers to some of the questions.

(4 year old boy)
– Mother, now I know why God has created Santa Claus!
– Why?
– Because he can’t bring Christmas presents to every single child himself, he needs Santa Claus!

(Teacher education student)

I am the mother of three children and can observe the creativity of my children daily. A few days ago my five year old daughter explained to me her own theory as to where the sun disappears. The sun was shining for several consecutive days and now the day was cloudy. She told me that after several sunny days the sun was so exhausted that she had to ask her good pal Mr.
Shadow to do the work for her for a few days. Mr. Shadow accepted and became her substitute. This is why the day is cloudy.

There is no need to hurry to replace the creative mode of thinking with more rational, more realistic forms of thinking in early age. Rational and abstract forms of thinking grow out from imagination and, ideally, grow along with it. Imagination is the foundation of formal, abstract modes of thought (Egan, 1997; 1999). Ribot (2002), Vygotsky (1994; 1997a; 2001; 2004) and some others were of a similar opinion. The uniqueness of a child’s picture of the world is rooted in its syncretism, about which Piaget (1972), Koffka (1924), Werner (1940) and many other psychologists have written. This is often regarded as a negative factor that prevents the child from developing a correct view of things.

The ability to “see the whole before the parts” is a very special, integral way of looking at the world that is characteristic of young children. It is also manifested in the ability to look at the world through the eyes of others or through the eyes of mankind in general, i.e. to see the world in a truly integral fashion. (Iljenkov, 1984; Kudriavtsev, 2001.)

2.9.5 Imagination and Realistic Thinking in Childhood

According to Ribot (2002), creative imagination in its full development passes two periods separated by a critical phase: the period of independence or blossoming, a critical moment and the period of final formulation. The first period of independent imagination starts at about 3 years of age. For a long time it lacks any rational element. The working of the mind (reason) emerges later (about 4–5 years of age), grows slowly and gradually begins to affect the imagination. Developmental lines of imagination and intellect coincide only, when the child is around 12–14 years of age. Approximately at this age the further development of the imagination proceeds in two directions: in many people imagination is decreasing. However, in some cases the development of imagination proceeds in parallel with the development of intellect. The divergence characteristic of childhood disappears and imagination, which is now closely associated with thinking, keeps pace with it. This path of development is characteristic of creative personalities (Ribot, 2002).

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3 Age is very approximate; this is the transition from childhood to adolescence
Deep analysis of the development of imagination in childhood and the explanation of its role in the development of the child’s consciousness is given in one of the late lectures by Vygotsky, in 1932 (1982b; 1987). In his lecture Vygotsky analyzes the very complex relationship of imagination and realistic thinking. He is heavily criticizing the ways in which mainly Freud and Piaget but also other psychologists understand imagination in the psychology of his times. There is a clear division between imagination/fantasy (also called autistic thinking) and realistic thinking (also called logical thinking). Both forms of thought were seen as being completely opposite because of the different primary source of their appearance and of different goals. Autistic thinking was claimed to have its roots in the subconscious, and the aim of it was the achievement of pleasure; consequently, it is personal and nonverbal. Reality is the primary source of realistic thinking, which is conscious and its goal is to study the surrounding reality. Consequently, it is social and verbal.

Vygotsky proposed a different view and in principle revealed that both forms of thinking are closely interrelated and are necessary parts of the thinking process. After an explicit analysis of existing approaches Vygotsky (1987) presented in detail his main arguments:

1. Firstly, he analyzed the relationship between imagination and speech. Criticizing Freud and Piaget, who claimed that early forms of a child’s fantasies are subconscious, nonverbal, nonsocial activity conditioned not by the cognition of reality but by the attainment of pleasure. It is a non-communicable form of activity. Based on his research findings Vygotsky claims that, on the contrary, there is a clear dependence of imagination on the development of speech. Speech frees the child from the immediate impressions of an object and provides him with the power to move with freedom in the sphere of impressions, designating them with words.
2. The second aspect is that the activity of the child’s imagination is highly directed. From the beginning to the end, it is directed toward a goal that the individual is pursuing.
3. The third aspect is connected with the emotional side of imagination. The images created by the imagination arouse real feelings and emotions. Imagination is an activity rich with deep and real emotional experiences.
4. Comparing the work of imagination with realistic thinking processes, Vygotsky comes to the conclusion that imagination cannot be viewed as a function existing alongside other functions. Imagination is a complex form of mental activity that exceeds the boundaries of the processes that we call functions and can be called a *psychological system* having a complex functional structure (p. 348).

5. At the end, Vygotsky pointed to the most important moments characterizing the relationship between imagination and thinking:
   
a) Both forms of thinking are developing in a very close kinship, in fact more careful study revealed that the two processes *develop as a unity* as there is no essential independence of the two developmental processes. Moreover, by observing such forms of imagination that are linked with creativity, we find that the boundary between realistic thinking and imagination is erased. Imagination becomes a necessary, integral aspect of realistic thinking.

b) In spite of this unity a certain opposition exists between imagination and thinking. The essential feature of imagination is that consciousness *departs from reality*, towards a comparatively autonomous activity of consciousness in which there is a departure from any immediate cognition of reality. The purpose of this movement lies in the fact that a more profound penetration of reality demands a freer relationship with the elements of that reality. The result is that the processes through which the cognition of reality is achieved become more complex and richer.

c) The potential for free action that we find associated with the emergence of human consciousness is closely connected with imagination, with that unique psychological set of consciousness *vis a vis* reality that is manifested in imagination (pp. 348–349).

Vygotsky’s analysis demonstrates that imagination is a necessary integral part of the thinking process and should be the focus of educational work the same as realistic thinking is, especially in early childhood.

6. Kudriavtsev & Nesterova (2006) also point out that the development of imagination before school is the only proper strategy supporting psychological readiness for school. He calls imagination “a bridge” that

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4 Vygotsky is using Freud’s division of primary form imagination as subconscious activity and realistic thinking as conscious activity in young children.
connects preschool and primary school education. His conclusions are made on the basis of a study of relationships between creative imagination and logical thinking in preschool children. The results of the study revealed the interdependence of imagination and thinking. Analysis of the results of the study yielded the following conclusions: (1) the better the preschooler's imagination, the easier they became involved in the training situations and into meaningful collaboration with an adult; and (2) poorly developed imagination made it difficult for the children to become involved in training situations and to build a constructive dialogue with an adult. This happened in spite of rather highly developed specific skills such as basic literacy and math.

The main ideas of the chapter could be summarized in the following words:

Creative imagination is not a discrete mental process (along with perception, memory, thought, and attention), but a general property of the child’s consciousness (and of man in general), a universal root of all the basic manifestations of the human mind. Hence, the development of the imagination and the system of creative abilities based on it forms a central link in an integral process of mental development in the preschool child. (Kudriavtsev, 2001, p. 14).

Huizinga (1949) has called human capacity to imagine in childhood as creating “a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature” (p. 23). Similarly, Lotman (1998) explained the purpose of puppets, play, theatre and creativity in general thus: “From the first toy to theatrical stage human being is creating “the second world” in which through playing he doubles his life and tries to comprehend it emotionally, ethically and cognitively” (Lotman 1998).

Egan (1997) notices that young children’s main tools for grasping the world and expressing their sense of it are poetic:

This poetic world – emotional, imaginative, metaphoric – is the foundation of our cultural life, as a species and individually. Logico-mathematical forms of thinking, or rationality, do not properly displace the poetic world, but rather grow out of and develop along with it; they are among its implications. The language and lore, fantasy narratives, metaphoric play, and games of young children constitute an oral culture that persists from generation to generation, sustained by the techniques of the poetic imagination and the psychological capacities evoked, stimulated, and developed initially by the need to
remember and increasingly by the satisfaction the enlargement of our power over language gives us. (p. 69) (Emphasis in original.)

We can conclude from theoretical analyses that watching stories and movies on the screen too early in life and too much, prevents developing one’s own imagination and one’s own ideas. To a certain point it develops visual but not verbal thinking. Nowadays children live in a very much visualized and noisy world that leaves very little or almost no space for silent concentration and thinking. Children have very few possibilities to build images in their minds, to verbalize them and to communicate to others. They don’t speak to express their own ideas, but speak in order to repeat someone else’s ideas.

Listening and creating one’s own stories using all possible channels develops the imagination. The process of creating a story is integrative not just on the level of all skills and abilities the child possesses but involves all his knowledge and cognitive capacities and is shaped in the aesthetic form. Every child’s story is in principle about the relationship “me and the world”.

2.10 Narrative Mode of Human Thought

Narrative ... is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change – a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, “scientific” modes of explanation. (Herman, 2009, p. 2)

Many researchers (Kreiswirth, 2005; Hyvärinen, 2006; Herman, 2009) have pointed to a “narrative turn” unfolding across multiple fields of inquiry over the past decades. The concept of “narrative mode of thought” proposed by Bruner (1986), has inspired research in many fields, from developmental and clinical psychology to sociology, education, social welfare, management, political thought and policy analysis, health research, law, theology and cognitive science. The narrative mode stands in sharp contrast to “logico-scientific or paradigmatic modes of thought” and, though their objectives vary, sets of research studies in each of the fields often display some common features based on the narrative approach.

Bruner (1986) suggested that there are two primary modes of thought: the narrative mode and the paradigmatic mode. In narrative thinking, the mind engages in sequential, action-oriented, detail-driven thought. Thinking takes the form of stories and “gripping drama”. According to him, “we organize our experiences and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative –
stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (Bruner, 1991, p. 4).

In paradigmatic thinking, the mind transcends particularities to achieve systematic, categorical cognition. Thinking is structured as propositions linked by logical operators.

Fisher (1984) introduced the narrative paradigm into communication theory by proposing that the way in which people explain and justify their behavior has more to do with telling a credible story than it does with producing evidence or constructing a logical argument. Fisher reacts against the traditional paradigm of the rational world as being too limited and instead suggests a new paradigm of “narrative rationality”. He claims that:

- People are essentially storytellers;
- Although people claim "good" reasons for their decisions, these reasons include history, culture and perceptions about the status and character of the other people involved (all of which may be subjective and incompletely understood);
- The test of narrative rationality is based on the probability, coherence and fidelity of the stories that underpin the immediate decisions to be made;
- The world is a set of stories from which each individual chooses the ones that match their values and beliefs.

### 2.10.1 Developmental Stages of Narrative Mode

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<th>Author</th>
<th>Developmental stages of modes</th>
<th>&quot;Episodic&quot; culture</th>
<th>&quot;Mimetic&quot; culture</th>
<th>&quot;Mythic&quot; or &quot;narrative&quot; culture</th>
<th>&quot;Theoretical&quot; culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The four modes by Margaret Donaldson (1992)</td>
<td>Somatic – shaped by human bodies and senses</td>
<td>Mythic – shaped by the use of oral language</td>
<td>Romantic</td>
<td>Philosophical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The five kinds of understanding by K. Egan (1997)</td>
<td>Ironic – all shaped by the use of written language</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Merlin Donald’s (1991) model of consciousness evolution presents an original theory of how the human mind evolves from its presymbolic form to the era of artificial intelligence. Donald synthesizes a vast amount of data from anthropology, paleontology, linguistics, cognitive science and neuropsychology and proposes that in the emergence of modern human culture there have been three radical transitions. The most general tools that have effected these transitions he describes as the body’s mimetic skills, oral language and external symbols. These tools produce stages of cultural development, which he calls Mimetic, Mythic and Theoretic.

Developmental psychologist Donaldson, in her book “Human Minds” (1992), proposes the common framework for defining the four main modes of mental functioning. The four main modes are defined by four loci of concern:

First mode – point mode – the locus of concern is always the present moment, ‘here and now’.

Second mode – line mode – the locus of concern includes the personal past and personal future, we may be concerned with events that have happened in the past or that might happen in the future: that is, with the ‘there and then’.

Third mode – construct mode – the locus of concern is with how things are ‘anywhere, anytime’ – or at least ‘somewhere, sometime’. There is an attempt to deal with a nature of happenings in space-time, some generality.

Fourth mode – intellectual transcendent mode – the locus of concern is out of space and time, it is ‘nowhere’. The best possible example is mathematics, which deals with patterns of relationship (Donaldson, 1992).

Donaldson’s four modes of mental functioning correspond with four different evolutionary phases of human consciousness proposed by Donald (1991). In his work, Egan (1997; 1999) nicely combined Donald’s evolutionary framework of human consciousness and Vygotsky's approach to the cultural development of the child. He borrows Vygotsky's idea of internalized psychological tools generating cultural ways of understanding in children. Egan developed his original recapitulation scheme based on the development of intellectual tools (he also uses the term cognitive tools) that shape our understanding of the world. “By acquiring specific intellectual tools, the modern individual generates similar kinds of understanding as existed for people using those tools in the past” (1997, p. 30). He proposes five kinds of understanding:

- **Somatic** – pre-linguistic, determined by the kind of body and senses we have
- **Mythic** – product of learning to use oral language

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- **Romantic** – a product of learning literacy
- **Philosophical** – a product of learning the fluent use of theoretical abstractions
- **Ironic** – a product of learning how to use language reflexiveness for complex communicational purposes

Based on those five kinds of understanding and on cognitive tools specific for each kind of understanding, Egan (1997; 2005) proposes an alternative approach to planning teaching and designing the curriculum. This new approach is called Imaginative Education (IE).

Bruner (1986) proposes that *narrative is a universal mode of human language* and a *universal mode of thought*. It develops in response to cultural models. According to Donald (1991) and Egan (1997) the essence of the mythic culture is “the construction of conceptual ‘models’ of the human universe”. “The myth is the prototypal, fundamental, integrative mind tool. It tries to integrate a variety of events in a temporal and causal framework. It is inherently a modeling device, whose primary level of representation is thematic” (Donald, 1991, p. 215). Nelson (1998, p. 346) defined narrative as a *universal way of organizing memory and knowledge*, a “general processing mechanism”.

In our work, narrative as a universal mode is not enough. For us, the most important question is what the role of narrative mode in child development is.

Bruner (1986) proposed some precise criteria for determining what narrative is. Bruner’s definition of narrative is quite general and could be better applied for adult narratives and storytelling. Most small children’s narratives don’t fit Bruner’s criteria simply because they haven’t yet mastered the complex level of language competence and their narratives can be displayed in nonverbal forms such as play, representational body movements, drawings, etc. Herman’s (2009) focus is also on face-to-face storytelling, print texts, and graphic narratives that involve word-image combinations and film.

Engel (1999) developed a nice definition of narrative while having in mind very young children: “A narrative is an account of experiences or events that are temporally sequenced and convey some meaning. A narrative can be of an imagined event or a lived every day event. But, unlike a story, which is told or communicated intentionally, a narrative can be embedded in a conversation or interaction and need not be experienced as a story by the speaker” (p. 19). I will add that it needs not necessarily to be expressed in a verbal form.

We consider children’s play, drawings, and representational body movements as narratives because they provide insight into the development of abilities that
will later yield full-blown adult-like stories. The most important thing we are looking for is the child’s personal view of the events, a personal sense or personal “theme” – the child’s own narrative voice.

Usually in our thinking human thought is expressed in the form of language and when we think about narratives we also expect them to be in the form of spoken or written language. Probably this is the reason that it is in language that scholars have mostly examined narratives.

I would define from a cultural-historical perspective narrative (story) as a psychological tool formalizing and unifying human thought and knowledge into thematic units – units of thought. Narrative is a basic unit, the smallest cell of our thinking.

2.10.2 Development of Narrativity in Childhood

In general, narrative can be displayed in many nonverbal forms – in movement by dance or mime, through pictures, music, silent film, etc. The existence of narrative in nonverbal forms suggests the possibility that as a form it may develop independently of language. Nowadays children not only hear stories told or read but also watch narrations in picture books, on television and in films, and construct narratives in play.

According to Donald’s (1991) claim, in human evolution as well as in child development, mimesis precedes language as symbolic form and this implies the priority of nonverbal forms of narrative. Consequently, as a form, narrative at the beginning develops independently of language.

In early childhood “the development of thinking and the development of speech do not coincide but proceed along different paths” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 196). During this period there are other narrative displays where narrative thought is cultivated.

The first narratives of early childhood are routine events carried out together with caregivers. The simplest narratives are socially guided by adults and to a certain extent imposed by the cultural ways of organizing the life of very young children. Routine events in children’s lives familiarize them with the basic structure of the event: beginning (usually implicit), conflict (the actual happening) and resolution (the end).

At first, individualized narratives of children might be connected with personal affective experiences and important events. The children would play out these narratives literally (physically): through their body movements, gestures
and vocalizations. Often the adult would “translate” such early mimetic narratives into a spoken language. One of the defining features of early narratives is the mode of representation – these narratives are recalled and represented through the movements of the body. We might call them bodily narratives. The child’s initiative is expressed in the child’s attitude or “point of view”. This is the main difference between early imitation and the mimetic narrative activity of a young child. Donald (1991, p. 170) describes this difference very clearly:

Mimetic skill or mimesis rests on the ability to produce conscious, self-initiated, representational acts that are intentional but not linguistic. (…)

Mimesis adds a representational dimension to imitation. It is the process of re-enacting and re-presenting an event or relationship.

Memory and conscious, self-initiated body movements are involved in the representational act of narration. As a result of these actions play activity arises in child development – the first independent, symbolic activity of the child. Human thought is expressed in the form of the bodily movement, of a child’s actions. Play activity becomes the space where narrative thought is developed and where the most radical transformations take place.

At the beginning of play activity the main vehicle of narrative is the child’s own actions and gestures. Children between the ages of 2 and 4 years – “mimetic society in miniature” – have narratives of everyday life where imaginary situations are literally played out. Language use in these shared activities help to mark them, to move them forward, but not to represent them as such in the child’s cognitive or communicative productions.

When the child gradually moves towards more developed forms of play, oral language becomes the main vehicle of the narrative thought. In other words, play activity is the space where transition from the mimetic stage towards the mythic/narrative stage takes place in child development. The basic structure of a narrative form and a model of communication are mastered at this stage by young children.

2.10.3 Six Abilities of Narrative Competence

After a thorough study of language development in young children, Nelson (1998) proposed six abilities necessary for the development of narrative competence. She followed the development of these abilities during the early years before school and came to the conclusion that “Understanding or
constructing a coherent whole story from disparate scenes on one-time hearing or
telling is no doubt a late development” (p. 218).
Although children’s narratives become more complex and complete toward the
end of the preschool years, even by 6 or 7 years of age, children are not yet
skilled storytellers.

Table 2. Development of six abilities necessary for the development of narrative
competence (Adapted from Nelson, 1998).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six abilities necessary to the development of narrative competence.</th>
<th>The level of acquisition of six abilities before elementary school.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The ability verbally to project events in time, including the temporal and causal relations between events.</td>
<td>The ability to project events in time verbally, including temporal and causal relations (2–3 years).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The ability to formulate connected discourse using cohesive linguistic devices and to understand discourse so connected.</td>
<td>The ability to formulate connected discourse using cohesive linguistic devices (3–4 years), less certain is the ability to use the devices in connected discourse to interpret episodic accounts from other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The ability to differentiate the canonical from the non-canonical and to mark events in terms of necessity, probability, and uncertainty.</td>
<td>Preschool children have a firm grasp of the canonical nature of routine events, and mark the non-canonical as uncertain and contingent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The ability to take the perspective of different actors and of different temporal and spatial locations.</td>
<td>The ability to take the perspective of different actors and at different times and places appears uncertain during the early years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The ability to resolve deviations from the expected course of events in humanly and culturally understandable terms.</td>
<td>Young children do not seem to differentiate the routine from the “troubled”; they do not produce problem-oriented stories or provide resolutions for disruptions of canonical events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The capacity to recognize and reformulate enduring culturally significant themes.</td>
<td>There is no evidence that young children recognize the enduring cultural themes that are incorporated into folktales and fairy stories.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These different abilities could be revealed in children’s own narratives, they also may be expected to enter into children’s comprehension of narratives told by others. Nelson points to the fact that “Extended discourse, whether narrative or paradigmatic in form, requires the cognitive and linguistic capacity to set up and hold in mind a representation of a complex reality formulated in language” (ibid. 190). Narrative discourse is not possible until complex language is learned. But we don’t have to think that the complex language must be acquired first and then

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it is time for narrative competences. Narrative is practiced and developed in all possible nonverbal forms before it becomes linguistic. Early childhood professionals should be aware of that. Donald (1991) claims that “Humans must have invented their symbols [language] because they needed them for the types of mental models they were creating” (p. 225). I think we often forget that narrative competence is not just about language it is about thinking and complex relationships as well. We have to understand that behind the rich language there are complex thinking processes. We already have to take care of both the child’s thinking and language in early years.

2.10.4 Constructing Self through Developing a Personal Narrative Voice

It is through telling stories that children develop a personal voice, a way of communicating their unique experience and view of the world. (Engel, 1999, p. 2)

Listening to and telling stories are cultural activities. Gradually, through participation in these activities children “in grow” into the culture (enculturation).

Susan Engel (1999) in her book “The stories children tell” is focusing on the development of a personal narrative voice of a child, and the role of that voice in constructing a self through stories. She argues, “The most interesting developmental changes have to do with the emergence of a child’s personal narrative voice” (1999, ix). Engel believes that through stories children construct themselves: “through telling stories … children develop a personal voice, a way of communicating their unique experience and view of the world” (Engel, 1999, p. 2).

This personal voice is used to build a personal history. At about 4 years of age a long-lasting narrative-based autobiographical memory system begins to emerge. “Narrative models and influences in early childhood help to transform the episodic memory system into a long-lasting autobiographical memory for significant events in one’s own life, and thus a self-history” (Nelson, 1998, p. 181). The stories we tell play a vital role in shaping what we feel, think and know about our lives. Engel (1999) argues that “to a great extent we are the stories we tell, and our memories of personal experiences are what give us a history and a sense of who we are ” (p. 14).
Children tell stories not only to represent experience as they know it to be, as they know others know it to be, but they also tell stories to represent experience as they would like it to be. Children use stories to understand their world, but also to invent and re-invent their world. The act of remaking your world, the imaginative control over that world, is a vital component of human experience and one of the main aspects of imaginary play. In play children weave together real concerns (worry, care, duty, interest, etc.), real experiences and fantasy are used to convey what is important for them.

Children not only tell stories of actual experience to build a sense of self, they also invent stories about things that might happen, that couldn’t possibly happen, that they wish would happen, or that they hope … will never happen. (Engel, 1999, p.12)

The most important thing about a story is that through their story, the storyteller conveys meaning. In children’s stories the key to understanding and responding to the story often lies in understanding the sense, the perspective of the narrator.

2.10.5 Building Order from Chaos

Narratives, like language have the same overarching functions: we construct stories to think with (the mathetic function) and to communicate through them (the communicative function). Nelson (1989) emphasizes the role of language as a form of mediation that creates order in the world. In her opinion language constructs the experience it describes rather than merely reflecting that experience. A focus on language as a system that creates order contrasts with the view that language merely maps or reflects the objective order of the world.

Bruner and Lucariello (1989) argue that narrative language and narrative thought play a special role in integrating affect, cognition and action. They begin with the premise that early in life, action, feelings and knowledge are undifferentiated. Young children experience these aspects in a holistic way. Once children recast their experience into story form, they distance themselves from the experience. Narrative gives child a form for distancing themself, for disentangling feelings, thoughts and actions. It is argued that “the means for the child’s more reliably distinguishing from what she knows or experiences about the world is inherent in the structure of narrative discourse” (Bruner & Lucariello, 1989, p. 76).
Bruner and Lucariello (1986) suggest five features of narrative that contribute to this process: sequencing, canonicalization, stance taking (pose, attitude, point of view, viewpoint, and opinion), intentionalization and metacommentary. These narrative components allow children to create accounts of events they have experienced and to focus on understanding unusual effect-laden experiences (such as the birth of a sibling) in relation to the compelling structure of everyday routines.

Together with Engel (1999) we can conclude that stories are both a product of a developmental process and a vehicle of development. In early narrative activities children master the basic psychological tool of thinking and with that instrument they start constructing their own identity – a personal narrative voice and their own worldview. By listening to and appreciating cultural narratives children learn their culture and by creating their own narratives they become members of their culture and of their society.

2.10.6 Story as an Art Form

Fairy tales are unique, not only as a form of literature, but as works of art which are fully comprehensible to the child, as no other form of art is. As with all great art, the fairy tale’s deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life. The child will extract different meaning from the same fairy tale, depending on his interests and needs of the moment. When given the chance, he will return to the same tale when he is ready to enlarge on old meanings, or replace them with new one. (Bettelheim, 1982, p. 12)

Oaklander (1988) agrees with Bettelheim(1982) and stresses that the impact of fairy tales is so strong because of their artistic qualities:

Fairy tales do indeed hit squarely on the basic universal emotions: love, hate, fear, rage, loneliness, and feelings of isolation, worthlessness, and deprivation…. if it were not for the fact that the classic fairy tale is … a work of art, it would not have the impact that it does. There is something rhythmical and magical about the way a fairy tale reads, providing a flow into and out of the listener’s heart and mind. (p. 93)

Oaklander and Bettelheim are talking about the therapeutic power of traditional stories, they heal people and one of the reasons is their artistic quality. Story, a
piece of art, has the power to heal. What is so specific about art that it has such power? Vygotsky (1971) in his book “Psychology of art” reminds us, “art arises originally as a powerful tool in the struggle for existence” (p. 235). In his opinion art is a psychological means for striking a balance with the environment at critical points of our behavior. “Psychological investigation reveals that art is the supreme center of biological and social individual processes in society, that it is a method for finding an equilibrium between man and his world, in the most critical and important stages of his life” (p. 250). Furthermore, he explains that from the psychological point of view “any work of art is a system of stimuli, consciously and intentionally organized in such a way as to excite an aesthetic reaction” (p. 27). The starting point of this reaction is the “emotion of form and then something else following it” (p. 37), something else that Vygotsky defines as emotional thought/thinking.

We will try to trace this process in young children on the basis of a traditional fairy tales. Studies from different fields (literary, linguistic and cultural) have made it clear that fairy tales do not directly reflect reality. Folklore is an interpretation of reality conceived in totally different categories from our own. It is always a transformation of a particular aspect of reality. From our point of view it is very important to realize what happens when the story is read or told to the child. A traditional story is centered on the main character and is focused on resolving the main character’s personal fate (Propp, 1986). Identifying themselves with the hero, children grasp the text’s hidden semantics that are conveyed through the actions of the main character.

Zaporozhets & Neverovich (1986) and their colleagues were interested in how the process of aesthetic perception (esteticheskoe vosprijatie) develops in young children. Their research focused on the perception of a fairy tale. Very young children are not able to differentiate between the object and its image. They might be frightened by a picture in a book or when asked where is the tail of a cat, try to turn the picture. A very similar process happens with verbal expressions. It is well known that young children have problems with understanding fables, metaphors and fictitious meaning or fiction. Aesthetic perception is not just the mental capacity to understand symbolic meanings of artistic images and identify the real objects or phenomenon behind them. It is the

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5 Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Aesthetic education, perception (esteticheskoe vospritanie, vosprijatie) in cultural-historical tradition is an important area of educational work.
ability to enter the imaginary situations, mentally participate in the actions of the character, to identify with their emotional experiences – *soperezhivat'*. Such qualities of aesthetic activities broaden the scope of the spiritual life and are essential for the intellectual and moral development of the child. In aesthetic reaction effect and intellect work together.

Zaporozhets (1986) and his research team found out that at the beginning of preschool age the sense of actions “is singled out by the child not through mental inferences and thought operations, but through a direct emotional relation to the main character, through participation in the events in the story” (El’koninova, 2001a, p. 41). A small child takes a position “inside” an imaginary situation. He tries to intervene in the events, take the side of the main character, etc. Zaporozhets *et al.* (1986) have shown that while listening to the story a child follows the actions of the main character with his “inner eye” – “living through together with…” (soperezhivat’) and assisting (sodeistvovat’): he literally experiences all the events physically and emotionally. Recordings of autonomic reactions accompanying listening to a story have also confirmed this.

Only gradually does a child obtain the ability to *act mentally in imaginary circumstances* (an imaginary situation, according to Vygotsky). Zaporozhets (1986) points out that this is one of the most important changes taking place at preschool age. *Clear composition, dramatic events and rhythmical movement* of the events in the fairy tale help the child to step into the circle of imaginary circumstances and mentally assist the heroes of the story.

Another important aspect of aesthetic reaction is connected to the moral development of children. Teplov (1946) already noticed that even for the young child it is possible to grasp the moral meaning of the act if it is expressed not in the form of abstract reasoning but in the form of real actions. In his opinion the educational value of a work of art (in this case a story) is that they allow children to enter “into the life situation” and to experience that aspect of life that is reflected in the light of a particular worldview. As a result, certain attitudes and moral judgments gained in the course of this experience have greater compulsory force than those obtained from the adult's, and is just formally accepted. The events depicted in stories are the most powerful factors triggering an aesthetic reaction in young children. Very soon children become attracted not only by the exciting events of the characters but become interested in the sense-making aspect of the narrative.

Traditional tales, fairy tales and stories are unique *works of art*, which are fully *comprehensible* to the child. What makes them comprehensible is first of all
the form\textsuperscript{6} (sjuzhet) or composition – a unit of a particular kind: a beginning that sets up a conflict, a middle that complicates it, and an end that resolves it. The next important feature concerns dramatic events that provide emotional involvement and motivation, and rhythmical movement, not just a dry rational sequence of events that hold children’s involvement to the end of a story. The last and maybe the most important is the content\textsuperscript{7} (fabula) or theme. The theme has to do with universal human and cultural values, moral aspects of human relationships, power relationships, etc.

Stories are the never-ending resource of emotional and aesthetic experiences for children and adults. The space of aesthetic experiences is the place where children and adults can really be together. As soon as we start thinking and rationalizing, reflecting on our experiences, analyzing the object which caused our reaction, we separate ourselves from children and from each other. Is it possible to stay together in the space of “narrative culture” and to develop educational activities with children in that space? I am going to discuss storytelling activities that could have some implications for educational practices with small kids.

2.10.7 Storytelling as a Creative Act

For centuries traditional stories and myths were oral creations. Myths, traditional stories and tales were passed from one generation of storytellers to another. Stories were stored not in books but in people’s minds. Collins & Cooper (1997) suggest that storytelling is among the oldest forms of communication. Emergence of the written word slowly changed storytelling practices. Nowadays, adults are more often reading stories from books than telling them “by heart”. What difference does this make and how significant is the difference?

In traditional preliterate society oral storytelling does not involve repetition of a memorized text – each performance is a new composition: “The preservation of tradition by constant re-creation of it” (Lord, 1964, p. 29). It is true with any good storyteller. This is exactly what small children do while playing the same story again and again – they never repeat it in the same way – every time is different! Clearly that it is very creative activity.

\textsuperscript{6} Sjuzhet – form; the story line; a particular instantiation of the fabula in story form.

\textsuperscript{7} Fabula – content; universal theme; what the story is about.
The storyteller Jay O’Callahan (1985) nicely describes this process by defining storytelling as the “theatre of the mind”. “The ability to visualize, to create images in the mind, is at the very heart of storytelling, not just for the listener, but also for the teller” (p. 11). The storyteller has the pictures, the images in their mind eye but not words when telling the story. In the process of telling the story he is constantly transforming those pictures into the words. When you are listening to a really good storyteller you start “making pictures” or images in your mind as well. And only the “living word” is capable of doing this! When someone is reading a story from the book this process of making pictures in one's mind should be also present. This very important aspect is completely lost in story reading practices.

Creative storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to reach the deepest, inner “spiritual” level of communication. Communication, which breaks all barriers: of age, gender, cultural and experiential. Good narration or storytelling first of all creates a personal relationship.

In such communication the role of the storyteller comes in first place. The German philosopher Benjamin (1936) tried to analyze the tasks of the storyteller. He stressed that the storytellers have to seek not just to pass on information about a concrete object, topic or theme, but to create a community through involving the audience into the process of “active” listening.

The storyteller is not a teacher, a poet or theoretician, but first of all a human being who tries to build an almost “physical” bridge between quite different, but sometimes very close experiences. Using his whole body (eyes, lips, arms, voice, body posture, etc.) and the heart they reveal his deepest experiences, trying to promote new understanding. Such activity involves the listener and brings them “inside” the story. The storyteller appeals to everyone personally, excites the listener and stimulates changes. They encourage listeners to do the work of authentic interpretation.

So the process of storytelling starts from the storyteller and their wish and ability to share their wisdom and experience with others. The process of storytelling starts from communication and then moves to togetherness and subsequently to the community.

The storyteller witnesses his experience and the listener can’t resist, they become “involved”. The story appeals to their feelings, values, life choices, and touches the listener personally and forces them to take a position towards the basic aspects of life such as good and evil, loneliness, powerlessness, suffering, death, one’s own identity, etc. The listener starts reflecting on their own
experience and the interpreting it. For the adults this is an inner process but children react instantly and very spontaneously. If the story really touched them they would make comments, give advice, and ask questions. Children’s interest and possible interpretations of the theme are visible in play, drawing and other representational activities.

Not every storytelling activity can have such impact on the child. The theme of the story should be close or familiar to the child, the artistic quality of the story is important and of course the quality of storytelling itself. Creative storytelling stimulates the child’s own creative powers and this is only the question of means or cultural tools that the child would choose. For small children the most typical choice is creative play.

2.11 The Spaces for Early Development: Play

*Often, those human experiences that are the hardest to depict and understand are the most important.*

*What is the meaning of love?*

*Why do we experience death?*

*What is the role of children’s play?* (Bruce, 1993, p. 237)

2.11.1 The Origin of Play

Historical documents reveal that play as a developmental stage is closely tied to the general development of childhood. After the appearance of childhood as a stage children’s play is possible. The first explanations about the origin and essence of play were general philosophical or psychological explanations without actual studies on play. These explanations were often derived from general theories of human nature or psyche. Among these theories were such concepts as surplus energy (Schiller, Spencer), relaxation (Patrick), recapitulation (Stanley Hall, Wundt), growth (Appleton), ego expanding (Lange, Claparede), infantile dynamics (Lewin, Buytendijk), catharsis (Freud) and pre-exercise (Groos). Play was perceived as a means of energy regulation or otherwise connected to human instincts.

Modern explanations are based on research into children’s play. There are at least three types of explanations, none of which exclude each other:
1. With play children are able to master and control their life or at least that part of their life which play forms (Garvey, 1977; 1990; Paley, 1992; 1997; 2001; 2004; Corsaro, 1997; 2003).

2. Play is children’s first independent activity system, which they feel they own (Hakkarainen, 1990; 1999).

3. Play is a holistic, creative and aesthetic prototype activity, from which other forms of creativity are developing. Play is at the same time a source and means of development, because it creates the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1977; 2003).

Modern play theories are based on general psychological theories such as psychoanalytic theories (Freud, Erikson), cognitive-constructive theories (Piaget), cultural-historical theories (Vygotsky), interaction theories (Mead), and theories of communication (Bateson). An interesting attempt to analyze play is to focus on improvisation in play interaction (Sawyer, 1997).

Many researchers agree on some basic visible characteristics of play, but they are still continuing to interpret and define play. For many play is joyful, flexible, imaginative, and intrinsically motivated (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Quite often, the main concern in definitions is “what is play and how to separate it from other types of behavior”. Definitions help us to draw limits and frame what to study. Hughes (1999, p. 25) give an excellent example of this type of frame: “Play has five essential characteristics. It is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, non-literal, and actively engaged in by participants. Early theories of play emphasized its biological and genetic elements ... while contemporary theories stress the emotional, intellectual, and social benefits of play”.

2.11.2 Societal Development and Play

Among the few attempts to explain the connection between present play forms and societal context is comparative anthropological play research, which focuses on specific forms of play in different cultures.

Another dimension in attempts to analyze the connection between the historical development of society and the appearance of certain forms of play is El’konin’s (1978; 2005a) work. Changes in children’s social position and childhood were explained in his analysis as the historical forms of play. El’konin shows how the origin of children's play is connected with the change of children's social status in society at a certain historical moment. Play motivation and its
need are societal, not biological. Children’s participation in social life is a general explanation for play motivation. Also, instruments in play have a social nature. They are not the results of children’s spontaneous intellectual development. Play is socially elaborated and guided by offering materials and toys, scripts and rules. Play themes and contents of play often repeat children’s experience of television programs, video games and computer materials. We may have an illusion of the spontaneous nature of children's play at home, where an adult's influence takes the form of distinct everyday situations.

2.11.3 Play as Human Activity

In contrast to western approaches to children’s play development cultural-historical psychology has defined play as a specific type of human activity (Vygotsky (2003), Leontiev (1978), El’konin (1978), Zaporozhets (1986). In this theoretical frame play is not just children’s fun and their escape from reality.

It always has a clear connection to the surrounding society, cultural environment and historical time. Play reflects and refers to reality; it has a specific societal content and object. This reference and play’s status in the chain of changing activity systems is necessary for understanding its essence. We need simultaneously individual and societal perspectives in the analysis of play.

The concept of activity and activity systems tries to combine these perspectives. A general requirement for any activity type is a specific object, which differs from other activity types (Leontiev, 1978). In play it has been difficult to discern its purpose, because play as a leading activity in childhood (El’konin, 1999b) does not produce any visible results/products. Many play theories argue that the play process itself is essential and no real results are attained. We can suppose that play, as children’s first independent activity (Hakkarainen, 1999), produces psychological potentials and abilities such as imagination and self-concept.

Additional characteristics showing the specific nature of play as an activity are typical play actions. They have a dual nature: actions are real, but sense making guides them, not cultural meaning. Typical play actions (Hakkarainen, 1990) have specific functions, which are oriented towards different aspects of play: (1) actions for separating imagination from reality, (2) actions constructing the plot of play, and (3) actions for specifying the object of play.
2.11.4 Types and Stages of Play

Cultural or individual orientation in play research results in different concepts and categories of play. As a consequence, stages of play development are different depending on the given context. For example, Parten (1932) proposed six different stages of play development focusing on social aspects of the activity:

- Unoccupied (play)
- Solitary (independent) play
- Onlooker play (behavior)
- Parallel play (adjacent play, social coaction)
- Associative play
- Cooperative play

Piaget (1972) proposed a system of stages, which has gained the status of scientific truth. The following list of developmental stages has some additional elements compared to the original one:

- Sensory-motor play 0–2 years;
- Constructive play 2 years plus;
- Pretend play 3–7 years;
- Socio-dramatic play 4 years plus;
- Games with rules 7 years plus.

Recently, the National Institute for Play in the USA has published their “seven patterns of play” based on “scientific research”. The orientation of research is made clear in the summarizing conclusion: “scientists have recently begun viewing play as a profound biological process” (http://www.nifplay.org). The seven patterns are:

1. Attunement play
2. Body play & movement
3. Object play
4. Social play
5. Imaginative and pretend play
6. Storytelling – narrative play
7. Transformative – integrative and creative play

A cultural-historical and activity approach focuses on different aspects in the play process and child development. At the same time it is important to have in mind
very different historical, ideological and socio-cultural contexts behind play research conducted in the framework of a cultural-historical approach. Research was conducted in educational institutions or with children who attended such institutions. Until recent years no research on play was conducted in more “natural” family and home settings in Russia.

Mass forms of public preschool education emerged in Soviet Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. During the Soviet period most of the children were raised in kindergartens. Many educational research institutes were involved in research into early development. Children’s play was always on the research agenda. Thanks to this it was given an important place in early childhood curriculums. Play was claimed to be the first form of autonomous activity developing a child’s independence. At the same time it was stated that adults should guide children and help them to move through the developmental stages smoothly. The principles of purposeful formation and guidance of play activity in early childhood pedagogy were thus developed (Mendzheritskaia, 1946; Zhukovskaia, 1963; Usova, 1976).

In the long run the principles were turned (mainly by administrators checking the quality of teachers’ work) into a strict requirement to teach children play skills. In practice, many teachers started “training” children by assigning roles and demanding children follow given play scripts. As is stated by Mihailenko & Korotkova (1997), play in kindergartens turned into “organized mass happenings” (p. 6). Although almost every early childhood program in Russia claims that Vygotsky’s and El’konin’s cultural-historical approach is behind their educational practices, the reality may be somewhat different.

In everyday practices play activity might look like “pure pedagogical formation” as defined by Shchedrovitsky (1995). Shchedrovitsky viewed play as a specific form of a child’s life, constructed by society with the aim of guiding and shaping child development. In his opinion developed or mature forms of play are elaborated under a certain level of adult guidance and assistance. Only under such conditions does the mature form of play activity support the acquisition of the variety of different contents and affect the psychological development of the child.

The three basic stages are singled out by the cultural-historical approach: the preparatory stage, play as a leading activity and play as a form of activity. Transitions from one stage to another are made through psychological crisis (El’konin, 1978; 2005; Mihailenko & Korotkova, 2002; Kravtsova, 2007). Each stage can be divided into subtypes.
Preparatory stage

- Familiarizing play activity 0–2 years
- Representational play (otobrozetelnaiya), 1–2 years

It is not play in the proper sense until the movements and interactions with objects are more exploratory and imitative but not consciously included into a meaningful context (rules, scripts, imaginary situations).

Play as leading activity (2–7 years)

It is imaginative play, which includes transformation of objects, oneself, situations (Vygotsky’s “imaginary situation”). This group of play activities can be divided into several sub groups:

- Solitary directorial representational play 2–3 years
- Role play 3–5 years
- Games with rules 5 years plus
- Developed & expanded collaborative directorial play (razvitaiya i razviornutaiya rezhisorskaiya igray) 6 years plus

During preschool age (2–7 years), the child masters increasingly complex ways of constructing play activities. They start from object oriented actions, then move to short everyday life episodes; the role is already present because the child acts as someone else (driver, mother) but is not aware of that. Later the child moves to role oriented play when they starts taking different roles and naming them. In parallel children become involved in construction play and simple games with rules. At the end of preschool age, play activity is developed in a group of children through the construction of the plot; roles became secondary, subordinate to it. Children develop complex plots based not only on everyday life experiences but also on favorite tales, stories, TV programs, etc.

Play as a form of activity

- Games with rules (5 years plus) form the basis of this group of play activities:
  - Lively, mobile games (podvizhnyie)
  - Table games (nastol’nyie)
  - Verbal play (slovestnyie)
In spite of the different theoretical frameworks the stages of play development in many aspects coincide.

2.11.5 Psychological Meaning of Imaginative Play

In his writings, Vygotsky (1996b; 2003) named imaginative play as the highest level of play among other types of young children’s play activities. When talking about play activity in his famous lecture in 1933 he analyzed imaginative play most explicitly. In Minick’s (1987) opinion “Vygotsky saw the development of the child’s play activity as providing the foundation for the emergence of new forms of behavior and for the development of forms of imagination and abstract thought that are connected with them” (p. 30).

I believe that the meaning and value of imaginative play is not understood well enough, not only by the parents and teachers but also by many researchers. Singer (1999), one of the defenders of make-believe play nicely wrote: “Pretend play … is … the foundation of a long-term incorporation and consolidation of major human characteristics: our human imagination, our capacity through consciousness to form experiences into stories, to manipulate memory representations of our physical and social worlds into new scenarios” (p. 7). I am convinced that imaginative play is the most complex and most significant activity for the development of young child’s consciousness and as current research confirms (Elkind, 2007; Singer et al., 2008) it is endangered activity. Better understandings of the processes that are employed in the course of play are needed for psychology, education and parenting practices.

After careful analysis of play development in the human lifespan Kravtsova (2007) draws the conclusion that play could be defined as a unit of psychological development of the personality in the frame of non-classical psychology. Having firsthand access to most of Vygotsky’s notes and diaries she has the possibility to follow his original ideas and to develop them further in building experimental practices and conducting her research. Kravtsova defines very clearly what distinguishes play from non-play activity. In her opinion, regardless of the nature and content of play activity, in a true psychological sense activity can be called “play” only under such circumstances that if a player, no matter a child or an

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8 Elena Kravtsova is Vygotsky’s granddaughter.
adult, acquires the ability to be above the situation. This means to see the self and the situation from internal and external points of view simultaneously. The same aspect of imaginative play was noticed by Ariel (2002): “a player has to be both inside of the play and outside it, a self-observer.” (p. 140). Kravtsova defines this position as *double subjectivity*. What is more interesting is that in her opinion a double point of view is necessary to comprehend the psychological essence of play. It is necessary for play researchers and for the teachers working with children as well. In fact, Kravtsova is repeating Vygotsky’s claim that proper play starts only when the imaginative situation is created. They both give the imagination a decisive role.

According to Vygotsky (2003) imaginative play arises at the transitional period from infancy to toddlerhood as a result of the maturation of new needs and motives for acting. Play becomes possible because of the appearance of *imagination*, a new formation of the child’s consciousness. Developing imagination, arising from the child’s action, enables the child to separate the field of vision from the field of sense⁹ and as a result, an imaginary field is created.

At the beginning of play, the imaginary situation is very close to the real one. Piaget (1972) described it as “deferred imitation”, whereas Vygotsky defined it more as memory than imagination. Imagination resolves the unrealizable desires of the child. The appearance of an imaginary field enables the child to turn their desires and wishes to this fictitious world and lead the fictitious “I” to act on it. That is probably the reason why Vygotsky (1977; 2003) calls play “illusory” wish fulfillment. Imagination serves as a tool for creating an imaginary situation where a fictitious “I” can act a desirable role. However, to reach this illusory wish fulfillment the child has to pay a price. Every imaginary situation contains rules of behavior; the essence of the rules is that one has to act in a particular way, defined by the chosen role.

I would argue that it is only from the “outsider’s” view an illusionary wish fulfillment. From “inside”, from the child’s role position, it is real to a certain point. While performing concrete actions the child both emotionally and physically is “living through” the situation. This “experiencing” gives him a feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Here lies the paradox of play activity according to Vygotsky, which is a contradiction between a child’s freedom to choose what they most want to play

⁹ In the translations into English we say “the meaning field”, but we think the Russian term smyslovoe pole has broader meaning and use as sense-field.
and at the same time they renounce their spontaneous impulsive actions and try to follow the rules of play behavior. In play the child does what he wants most of all, because play brings pleasure. At the same time, they subordinate themselves to the rules and renounce what they want most. The paradox is that by doing so the child acquires maximum pleasure in play. Such behavior marks the transformation of the child’s wishes and the beginning of volitional behavior. The child starts guiding themself through the chosen role but in play situations only.

Before this happens the child has to accomplish the very complicated work of separating thought from concrete objects and from actions. This process can be observed when the child moves from simple pre-play actions towards mature forms of play. Vygotsky points to one more paradox of play: the child in play is operating with an “alienated meaning in a real situation”. The child is acting in an imaginary situation and manipulating objects with substituted meanings, but … moves around in an absolutely realistic way. In Vygotsky’s opinion, this is the main genetic contradiction of play. Why does the child act in such a complicated way? The answer to this question might clarify the essence of imaginary play.

Vygotsky mentions that imagination originally arises from a child’s action and views children’s play as “imagination in action”. When an imaginary situation is created, the child is only partly acting in an imagined reality. Method of movement is situational and concrete: “sense-field appears, but action within it occurs just as in reality.” (1977, p. 94.) The child is not able to think and act purely on the mental level yet.

Play can be understood and explained only in the context of the development of the whole structure of a child’s consciousness following the qualitative changes in sense and meaning making. Vygotsky understood play and its role in the development of human consciousness as “movement from concrete operations to abstract thinking” and stressed that development of speech and thinking has a key role in this process. Therefore it is important to analyze the development of speech and thinking while trying to explain children’s play.

According to Vygotsky, the development of speech proceeds through the following stages:

1. Pre-speech stage (before 9-months-of-age\(^\text{10}\)), natural, primitive – at this stage if the child needs something they make identical sounds (cries) in different

\(^{10}\) All ages are very approximate, as the stage depends not so much on the age of the child as on the level of the development of their speech.
situations, and this is purely external action, depending on direct or conditioned reflexes.

2. Magical, natural stage (about 2–3-years) – a child relates to a word as one of the properties of a thing together with its other properties. The external connection of things is assumed to be the psychological connection or, in other words, connections between things are seen as connections between thoughts.

3. External stage (about 4–5-years) – a child uses words as signs (egocentric speech). They discover basic external rules or an external structure of speech; the child notices that there is a word for everything; that given word is the conditional designation of the thing (symbolic function).

4. Internal speech (about 9–10-years) – stage of authentic thinking.

It is essential to keep in mind that the development of speech and thinking occurs independently from each other, but at a certain instant, at approximately the age of two, both meet. It is even more important to have in mind that at the moment of meeting of speech and thinking the child does not discover the meanings of the words, e.g. they do not know that words are names of things and objects: “The child at first masters not the internal relation between sign and meaning, but the external connection between the word and the object” (Vygotsky, 1997c, p. 130). The small child acquires words; he acquires them in an external way from adults. An adult forms every concrete word and a direct connection between a given word and the corresponding object. From the very beginning, the child is learning language by imitating and there is a long way towards the mastery of speech as the universal tool of thinking, or the means for affecting the world.

Approximately at the same age (around 2-years-of-age), imaginative play starts. This is the time when movement from concrete operations with concrete or replica objects to actions with substitute objects can be observed. At the very beginning of imaginative play activity the meaning of the object becomes separated from the real object and is transferred to another play object, a substitute or “pivot”. What is the function of the substitute object? Why it is needed for the child?

According to Vygotsky, the abstract field (imaginary situation) appears before voluntary operation with word meanings. If we try to explain the situation using the well-known example of a child riding a pretend horse (stick), we might presume that the sense-field is created by the physical action of the child “riding” a stick – “a horse”. The substitute object (a stick) enables the child to perform the
action of riding and through doing this keep in mind the meaning of a real horse and to maintain the imaginary situation (sense-field).

At the moment when imaginary play starts the words still don’t carry the meanings of actions and the objects to which they belong. Only children’s own concrete actions are imparting the meaning to the objects and to the words. The same concrete actions bring sense-field into motion, e.g. moving from one event to another.

In summary, we might say that very unique forms of behavior characterize the age of play during this period of development: the child is already beyond the magical stage and is able to differentiate between psychological and physical relations. A stick representing a horse is not a horse for the child, but at the same time, it is not a sign of a horse (the same as a picture or a word). “This is really a transitional stage when the pivotal object (stick) is neither an illusion nor a symbol yet” (Vygotsky, 1997c, p. 249). The child’s action is the key point at this period of play. Play is not a symbolic activity yet.

The creation of an imaginary field is only the beginning of a child’s ability to construct symbolic worlds and to create symbols. Differently from Piaget (1972), Vygotsky (1997c) claimed that imaginary play is not symbolization in the pure sense. “In play, we see a unique form of using signs: for the child, the process of play itself, that is, the use of signs itself, is still closely linked with entering into the meaning of these signs, into imaginary activity; in this case, the child uses the sign not as a means, but as a goal itself” (p. 250). This is reflected in how the child chooses substitute objects: on the one hand they seem to be quite flexible when choosing substitutions, but on the other hand properties of things are important, not anything can be anything. The main properties of things have to be retained in order to enable the child to perform concrete actions.

“To sever the meaning of horse from real horse and transfer it to a stick (necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating) and really acting with a stick as if it were a horse is a vital transitional stage to operating with meanings. A child first acts with meanings as with objects and later realizes them consciously and begins to think” (Vygotsky, 1977, p. 13). At this level of play the child is experimenting with separate roles and actions but not involved in a construction of play narratives or more complicated plots.

Arbitrary verbal meaning occurs in the play of four- and five-year-old children. An exceptionally rich oral connection appears that interprets, explains and imparts meaning to each separate movement, object and act. The child not only gestures, but also discusses and explains the play to him and organizes it into
one whole through speech. Words are used as signs of things and actions, the child is using them actively, and so an egocentric speech develops. The child acts and speaks simultaneously and thinking emerges during action. This is the period of “as if” actions with substitute objects and construction of simple plots based mainly on everyday experiences.

Vygotsky’s student and follower El’konin (1999b) criticized the Piagetian view on symbolization in play as well. He based his criticism on the series of experiments carried out by Russian researchers (Lukov, 1937; Vygoskaia, 1966) with the aim to clarify the connections between the object, the action and word in role-playing. The findings from a series of experiments indicated that at the beginning, when imaginary play appears, two relatively separate systems coexist: (1) system of connections between the word and actions and (2) system of connections between the object and actions. The relationship between these two systems of connections undergoes a substantial change in the preschool period. At the end of this period, “the connections between actions and an object and with the word signifying the object constitute one single dynamic structure” (1999b, p. 56).

El’konin (1999b) made an assumption that “play is … a unique practice of operating with words in which changes in relations among the object, the word, and the action take place” (ibid., p. 57). This is the essential process in play activity at this stage of development that transforms a child’s thinking by giving them a new tool – a word. The child enters the play phase using mainly bodily movements and gestures as a tool for expressing their thoughts and ideas – the mimetic stage according to Donald (1991) – and forsakes this phase of development equipped with new tool for the expression of their thoughts and ideas – a word.

Children start using language for negotiations with peers and planning future play activity, which means that words for them start acquiring meaning and sense of objects and actions. Narrative language appears and speech becomes the main means of representation: gradual unification of speech and thinking, and speech becomes the vehicle of thinking. Speech moving ahead of action serves as a means for important mental progress: the child starts organizing their own behavior. Language is used for planning and organizing activity. However, only at school age (7–8-years) does the child plan necessary actions in words and only thereafter carry out the operation.

Play activity at this stage could be described as a generalized schema of play actions: imaginary objects, but mainly verbalizations about actions and objects of
play. Activity is developed through the construction of the plot; roles become secondary, subordinate to the plot. Children develop quite complex imaginary plots based not only on everyday life experiences but also on favorite fairytales, stories, cartoons, TV programs, etc. This is the level of developed narrative role-play.

Vygotsky (1977) defined imaginary play as an “intermediary” between the purely situational constrains of early childhood and thought that is totally free of real situations. Such definition reveals the transitional nature of play and explains its role in the development of the human mind as a movement from concrete operations to abstract thinking, e.g. thinking in concepts.

In developed imaginary play, action arises from ideas rather than from things, the child is liberated from situational constrains through their activity in an imaginary situation. The creation of an imaginary situation is a step towards abstract thought, which marks a new level of abstraction, arbitrariness and freedom.

We can summarize that imaginary play is a qualitatively new step in the development of the child’s consciousness. It is connected with the emergence of imagination. Play activity provides the space for the meeting of a child’s thinking and speech. This results in the radical transformation of their thinking: speech becomes the tool of thinking. Developing play activity supports the transition from situational constrains and episodic memory towards the creation of imaginary situations and symbolic world models.

2.11.6 Play and Learning

Play should be understood as the interaction of real and ideal form, and as a specific form of acquisition. The ideal form is an adult and very generalized form of human relations. The process of acquisition proceeds through the unfolding of the external activity of the child. The main steps of acquisition are: a model – reproduction – control (El’konin, 1989).

There is no doubt that the acquisition of certain cultural tools such as reading, writing, etc. is possible at quite an early age. We know there is a tendency to start formal education earlier and earlier. This does not eliminate the period of play or change its character. Mastery of reading and writing itself doesn’t lead the child to the system of human relations. Only role-play highlights and focuses on human relations, as this is the specific subject of role-play activity. In fact, the genetic analysis of play activity reveals that the elements of play activity are only to a
very limited degree the prerequisites of play activity as such. To a much greater
degree they are the prerequisites for many other activities such as work/labor,
learning, and especially of different creative activities (drawing, painting,
storytelling, music, movement, etc.) of preschool children (El’konin, 1989).

2.11.7 The Importance of Mature Forms of Play

According to Vygotsky (1997c), “a child’s symbolic play may be understood as a
complex system of speech aided by gestures” (p. 135). In general, Vygotsky,
(1997c) saw “play, drawing, and writing ... as different moments of an essentially
single process of developing written language” (p. 142). The results of my first
thesis (Bredikyte, 2000) provided empirical justification for this idea. Vygotsky is
talking here about the development of language and speech as such and different
levels of symbolization: first in gesture-sign, then in picture-sign and at the end in
letter-sign.

I argue that play is the primary form of a child’s thinking at an early age. Play
actions can be understood as materialized thoughts (needs, wishes, ideas) of
which a child is not completely conscious. First play actions are the only possible
forms of expressing ideas and the substitution of language. Our focus is on child’s
thought as such and how play, drawing and speech are used to produce ever
increasingly elaborated thoughts – narratives.

The development of a child’s thought and ability to express thinking, first in
gestures and actions through play and other symbolic media, and then gradually
through oral narratives, is our primary interest. A child uses play as a medium to
create narratives about themself and the world. We understand narrative as “a
universal mode of thought” and “a form of thinking” (Bruner, 1986; Donald,
1991; Nelson, 1998). Narrative is a necessary basis for formal, theoretical
thinking and narrativity is a central factor in many art forms, especially those that
depend on oral or written language. We view the development of narrative
thought in children as a necessary step towards formal thinking (concepts) and
theoretical comprehension of life.

The main feature of mature narrative play is the ability of the players to
develop shared ideas and to construct a plot (storyline) together. We call this form
of play developed narrative role-play and use the following criteria to define it.
Such play is:

- Social/collective in character (several participants)
- Imaginative (based on productive imagination)
- Creative (not stereotypical and repetitive)
- Developing over time, lasting several months or longer (developed by individual children, a group of children or adults)
- Challenging (demands action at the highest level of play skills)
- Having a narrative structure (a storyline is constructed during play)

This type of play constitutes a motivating storyline, and its enactment provides exciting experiences, or ‘perezhivanie’ (a term more common in theatrical terminology, but which has the same meaning in play). Perezhivanie results in a new and deeper understanding of phenomena, and is one of the results of mature narrative role-play. Vygotsky (1984b) claimed that, “the activity of the actor is itself a unique, creative work of psycho-physiological states” (p. 321), and the same is true with creative play. Involvement in creative play activity provides the opportunity to experiment with different psychological states, social roles and relationships.

In play analysis, it is important to keep in mind the fact that mature forms of play activity proceed on two planes, as Vygotsky (1977; 2003) has indicated. For the researcher who is analyzing children’s play, it is crucial to look not just at the child’s external actions but to try to find out the real meaning (the child’s initial idea) that is behind the external form. This deeper meaning can be “opened” by observing children’s play for a longer period of time or stepping into the play and “provoking” the child to respond, thus revealing the basic idea.

### 2.11.8 Factors Enhancing Imaginative Play

From cross-cultural, anthropological and historical research of play we know that play varies in different cultures and in different historical periods. In some cultures children are not playing, or play differently (Schwartzman, 2009; Göncü & Klein, 2001). In non-western cultural contexts play is usually handed on from generation to generation of children, without adult support (Rogoff, 1998; 2003). Current research into children’s play (Postman, 1982; Elkind, 1982; 2007; Frost, 2010) reveals that developed forms of imaginative play are disappearing and many children become involved in all kinds of highly structured, mechanical computer games from a very early age. Apparently for that reason many early years curriculums underline the importance of imaginative play for children and propose ways of enhancing play activities in educational institutions.
Bruce (2005) writes that the adult role is crucial in helping children to develop their play activities. In her opinion “helping children to play requires the most sophisticated teaching strategies of all” (p. 3). She proposes very concrete play support strategies, which teachers should use when: (1) observing children’s play, (2) supporting and extending play, and (3) engaging in the play.

Singer (1995) proposes that “parents can enhance their child’s development of imaginative skills through storytelling, reading, and even through floor play with them and also through toleration, indeed enjoyment, of the child’s pretend games” (p. 18).

Bondioli & Savio (2009) in their review of the latest research into children’s imaginative play, report that

researches provide evidence to the firm belief that play is an ecologically determined activity whose quality is strongly affected by contextual elements ... Never is evolution to be expected; it does not depend only on maturation and it is highly affected by the circumstances … there is no evidence of a clear and precise correlation between symbolic play abilities and age; the development of pretend play and of the abilities related to it depends both on maturation’s aspects and mostly on favorable conditions – i.e. inner conditions of emotional confidence and external conditions such as: playing opportunities, suitable space, suitable time and suitable materials, possibility of sharing play with more expert acquainted peers, adults’ appreciation. (p. 12)

Bondioli & Savio (2009) propose that children’s make-believe play should be observed and assessed using appropriate tools like SPARS\(^{11}\) or similar and that teachers should intervene and train children to enhance their play abilities. A similar opinion is held by Bodrova & Leong (2007) and their Tools of Mind project, Mihailenko & Korotkova (2001) and others.

Our play observations in Finnish day care centers reveal a general tendency towards play regression. The following data is from a play session of 25 children (4–6 years) in the day care center of a small city.

*Anu (5:2) and Kati\(^{12}\) (5: 7) start their play session by lifting a plastic basket filled with animal figures onto a table. They pour the contents on the table, and each girl starts to group a few figures on her own side. Anu selects wild

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\(^{11}\) SPARS is an observation tool revealing children’s symbolic play abilities, Bondioli & Savio (2009).

\(^{12}\) All names have been changed.
animals (a lion, a tiger) and Kati prefers domestic animals (cats, horses, cows). No joint play is initiated; each girl just manipulates her own animal figures on her own side of the table.

The whole classroom is divided into play pairs or individual players. Only two groups, of three children each, have started joint play. In the first group, three girls play “Home”. Each girl has a pretend role and interacts with the others as if she were in that role. The second group consists of three boys playing “Squirrels”. They simply lie on benches; nothing else happens during the session.

Observations in day care institutions and survey studies indicate that mature forms of play are becoming increasingly infrequent. The necessary adult guidance focusing on children’s joint play and the enrichment of moral challenge and symbolism of play is often lacking. Scandinavian “free” play nowadays consists of short replays of the high points from TV-series, computer games and other virtual media. Curriculum guidelines for early education and care (Stakes, 2004) do not set any goal to enhance the quality of children’s play, and teacher education does not train people in the necessary teacher competencies (Hakkarainen, 2010). There is a need for developing more mature forms of play, for example, by having adults intervene in children’s play.

2.11.9 Adult Help in Play

According to Vygotsky, play age (from 2–7-years) includes two crisis periods (at three and seven years). We propose three qualitatively different types of help for the whole play age. An important aspect in our typology is the social situation of development and qualitative changes in adult help. Different types of adult help focus on different aspects of learning in a play context. Adult play help has a different function in the different stages of the developmental trajectory of play age, and the methods of constructing the ZPDs are different. We can divide play age roughly into three qualitatively different periods depending on the initiative in interaction.

1. At the beginning of play age (around 2-years) adult initiative is very important. The continuity of role actions and understanding of the conventionality of play has to be supported by the adults.
2. After this, children's own initiative is crucial. Adult presence may be a necessary condition for play, but their initiative may break the play process. Adult’s help is needed in co-construction of a motivating storyline.

3. After five years there is a need for adult help in enriching the moral challenge and symbolism of play (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008, p. 7).

2.12 Play Intervention

There are a number of different approaches and intervention methods for promoting children’s play. My choice to use creative drama interventions is connected with my professional background. I was trained as a puppet theatre director and have much experience working in the puppet theatre and on TV. I experienced how easily young children can be invited into story worlds created on the stage or screen, how quickly they get involved into improvised interactions with characters from the show no matter whether there are puppets or actors in the roles. I saw how much more effectively the symbolic language of the theatre arts conveys the meanings in the scripts. I am convinced that life experiences that children acquire from arts are much richer and deeper than the knowledge they are thought to acquire in classrooms. To my disappointment, play interventions as a rule aim at goals that are not specific to play activity and could be better achieved through other activities. Pragmatic and rational (cognitive) goals totally undermine the specifics of play activity. For example, such unique features of play as creativity, imagination and improvisation are not the goals of play interventions.

In Anglo-American settings, play intervention tends to be controlled by a focus on its pragmatic effects as we can see in a recent review of the literature by Mages (2008). While creative drama intervention is defined as “an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experience” (Davis & Behm, as appears in Mages, p. 127), when one examines the criteria for successful drama intervention the focus is on the concrete impact of creative drama experiences on children’s language use and skills (language development). The review ends with a recommendation for future research, proposing the development of a strong research paradigm that allows the systematic manipulation of cross-study variables in order to reveal mechanisms within creative drama. This same goal of revealing the mechanism of play in the form of measurable variables and controlled gains is also expressed in a
comparative study of play therapies (Reddy, Files-Hall & Schaefer, 2005). We think that this aim and the definition of creative drama are fundamentally at odds with each other. By definition, creative drama and play should be open to unexpected results.

For us, the impact of play on the development of a child’s general learning potential must be the primary focus of any play intervention as well as any study of such intervention. Play is a process of creating something new, such as an idea, a sense, or a meaning. Participation in this creative process develops new psychological traits and gradually leads to a new level of functioning. From the point of view of the cultural-historical approach mature forms of imaginary play develop general abilities (learning potential) in children:

– General creativity (creative improvisation, symbolization, etc.)
– Motivation
– Imagination
– Volition and self-regulation (executive function)
– Understanding of the other person’s point of view

There is no doubt that the child can acquire certain academic skills more easily during play, but such learning should not be the main goal of creative drama interventions and play activity, nor the main criteria of evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention.

In our play interventions, joint creativity and improvisation is the central focus, rather than academic learning. Our goal is that the child moves to more mature forms of play and takes responsibility for organizing and developing the play activity together with other children. The participation of adults (students) is an appropriate method for the co-construction of joint “playworlds”.

According to Lindqvist (1995), a playworld is a conscious effort to create a “shared culture” or imaginary world, which “children and adults come to share when they interpret and dramatize the theme in the classroom” (p. 70). By taking different roles and enacting the dramatic events of a story, the participants become involved into the perezhivanie of common phenomenon. It moves students ‘inside’ the play activity and puts them on a more equal position with other children. From a developmental point of view, this is a very challenging situation that requires genuine involvement and a high level of sensitivity and creativity from the participants.
In a similar vein, Sawyer (1997) defined children’s play as an improvisational activity and compared it with the activity of improvisational actors as well as jazz musicians and other artists. Lobman & Lundquist (2007) introduced a practical method enhancing educators’ improvisational facility.

We believe that the best ways to acquire and develop play skills are: modeling of higher forms of play (that of elder children or students), providing the opportunity for joint play activities, and providing all necessary support for successful play participation.

Research findings from our Play Lab revealed that flow experiences (Csikszentmihályi, 1990) are a part of most successful students’ play interventions. For this reason, we also consider the level of emotional involvement of the participants when evaluating play activity as successful or unsuccessful. Most teachers have no such experiences at all and resist becoming emotionally involved with children in the classroom. Some professional teachers told us that emotional involvement means a lack of professionalism. In their opinion, a teacher should always be neutral, in their words an “objective” observer as their main task is to organize, guide and control the situation.

On the contrary, we want them to be spontaneous, to improvise, to have the courage to make mistakes, and to be creative and inventive. Often teachers are not used to collaborating with children and taking children’s ideas into account rather than imposing their own. They are afraid of “making mistakes” or “losing control” of the children in their charge and in fact are avoiding, even resisting, spontaneity and creativity in their work. These are the main reasons why creative drama methods are used to develop the play skills of both children and adults.

2.12.1 Creative Drama Interventions

*Of all the arts, drama involves the participant most fully: intellectually, emotionally, physically, verbally and socially. As players children assume the roles of others, where they learn and become sensitive to the problems and values different from themselves. At the same time, they are learning to work cooperatively in groups, for drama is a communal art, each person necessary to the whole. As spectators, children become involved vicariously in the adventures of the characters on stage.* (McCaslin, 2006, p. 4)
In general, drama could be understood as:

− A piece of writing to be performed by actors; play for the theatre, television, radio;
− A form of literature;
− A way of teaching.

The term *drama* comes from the Greek word meaning "action", which is derived from "to do". We might say that the essence of drama is: actions creating critical/contradictory situation – dramatic collisions.

“Drama was exposure, it was confrontation, it was contradiction and it led to analysis, involvement, recognition and, eventually, to an awakening of understanding” (Brook, 2008, p. 40). Peter Brook is describing the role of drama in Elizabethan Theatre 400 years ago, but he managed to capture the very essence of drama, which is still true today… or, better expressed, it is timeless essence.

In our context the meaning of drama as *active doing* is very important as it perfectly conveys the very nature of childhood. The same as confrontation, contradiction conveys the nature of cultural development of the child as it is understood in the frame of the cultural-historical school.

The use of drama in education was prompted by certain dissatisfaction with the existing situation and by the need for new ideas. *The creative dramatics* movement emerged in the first quarter of the 20th century in the United States. According to a prominent American children’s theatre authority, Nellie McCaslin (1981), creative drama is a “specific teaching tool”. I would say that it is a *way for developing the whole personality*.

Creative dramatics as a method is built on genuine human abilities and needs. It is the most appropriate way to work in early childhood environments. Drama with young children should be seen as *creative playing – playmaking* (McCaslin, 2006).

### 2.12.2 Search for One’s Own Creative Method

*For young children play, drama and life are experientially inseparable.*

(Baker, 1981, p. 222)

Besides the basic principles of creative and child drama there are only a few very concrete methods created by prominent educational practitioners and drama
pedagogues that are close to our approach and which have influenced our experimental work.

One of them is the famous American kindergarten and preschool teacher Vivian Paley (1992; 1997; 2001; 2004). She uses a unique approach in her work with children. Watching their play she writes down the play stories and later asks children to enact them. This idea came to her after watching children at play in her classroom.

“Watching the children at play, I began to understand that drama formed the primary substance of their relationships in the classroom” (Paley, 2002).

Paley (1992) uses storytelling in her classrooms as well. She creates her own stories for children based on their play and conversations. Acting out children’s stories is the core of her kindergarten program.

We also borrow some of the techniques proposed and developed in the 1980’s by the representatives of the “Newcastle school”, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton (1995):

1. *Teacher-in-role* (TiR) method when the teacher assumes a role and interacts with pupils. TiR works effectively when the teacher shifts in and out of their role first to stimulate dramatized episode and then to reflect upon it. It would be more accurate to call it “teacher in and out of role”. The power relationship between pupil and teacher is changed when this method is used. The TiR method gives the teacher the opportunity to be something not-teacher like, and that is when a more productive dialogue can be created. The TiR method with small children uses traditional stories as a way to get children to look at the world. This teaching method enables the children to meet the characters from stories and open up a dialog with them because the teacher is taking a role and stepping into the story themself. The method is not concerned with retelling the stories but rather exploring them.

2. *The Mantle of the Expert* is a dramatic-inquiry based approach to teaching and learning. Here kids in the classroom assume the roles of experts. The main idea of the method is that the class does all their curriculum work as if they are an imagined group of experts. Children are given special tasks by assigning them the ‘roles’ of experts and superhelpers. They are given very concrete tasks in the classroom and not asked to ‘act’ the role. This is about taking up a new viewpoint, about looking at the situation in a new way.

The closest to our approach, both theoretically, ideologically and practically, is Gunilla’s Lindqvist (1995; 2001) play pedagogy and her *playworlds*. Together
with Jan Lindqvist she developed a very unique “aesthetic pedagogy of play” for preschools. The practices were borne out of her investigation of the connections between play and culture: cultural aesthetic forms such as drama and literature. Her approach is based very strongly on cultural historical theory and on Vygotsky’s ideas of art, creativity and play. She coined the term playworld, meaning “a shared world of fiction”, where adults and children play together in roles. The main constituents of the playworld are:

- Exciting/meaningful theme
- Dramatic plot (story, narrative, etc.)
- Enactment (dramatization) of the dramatic plot

The concepts of ‘perezhvanyje’/‘living through’/‘experiencing and “liberating dialogue” are crucial for the approach. Building up a playworld is a long process, and play is the center of this process.

2.12.3 Dialogical Drama with Puppets Method

My own drama method called dialogical drama with puppets (DDP) was developed and tested in 1992–2000 in Lithuania while I was working and conducting my research work at Vilnius pedagogical university. The aim was to develop play pedagogy for preschools. The focus was not just play but all creative activities of young children. The DDP method is a result of this work. The method is based on creative drama and storytelling. The primary goal of the DDP method is to involve children in a dialogue initiated by the teacher and to encourage them to join and gradually to take an active part in the activity. Basic components of the DDP method:

- Stories, traditional folk tales, fairy-tales, fiction, self created stories
- Puppet presentation (can be dramatization) of a story
- Dialogical form of interactions
Table 3. Stages of implementation of the DDP method and roles of the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of implementation</th>
<th>Teacher’s roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Choosing a story</td>
<td>Organizer, observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Preparing a story presentation</td>
<td>Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Story presentation</td>
<td>Organizer, mediator, model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Free exploration of a story</td>
<td>Observer, supporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Preparation of a new (children’s) story presentation</td>
<td>Observer, supporter, helper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Children’s story presentation</td>
<td>Observer, supporter, helper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Drawing of the story</td>
<td>Observer, supporter, helper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Creating new stories</td>
<td>Supporter, helper, model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The DDP method was proved (2000) to be an effective tool supporting the development of general creativity, self-expression of children through different forms of creative play and especially through oral storytelling. I think that the most significant aspect of my research project was the fact that children’s oral stories were constructed as a response to the cultural story. The DDP method proved to be an appropriate tool to apply to different aged children and served as a model for a narrative based curriculum.

Organization and design of the current study is partly a continuation of my previous research completed in Lithuania in 1996–2000.

2.12.4 Forms of Storytelling

Different drama methods in early childhood education bring new features to traditional story reading and storytelling activities. Listening to storytelling or reading is an individual activity even if the story is presented for a group of children. Toye & Prendiville (2000) describe the difference with the narrative as “much of the active participation is going on internally, in children’s imagination…. The listening child’s physically passive involvement is able to create the pictures visually to accomplish the story. It is a predominantly individual experience” (p. 17).

We agree with this statement but we have to ask: when is the child able to create visual pictures in their imagination? But it is not just the visual picture: stories do not present usual animals and usual people; stories present their relationships and their attitudes. These attitudes express cultural human values. Hughes (1988) suggests that stories may be called units of imagination and understanding (of the world and human relationships). “The more and the better we know these stories, the more of ourselves and the world is revealed to us.
through them. They became like “little factories of understanding” (p. 35). Following Vygotsky’s (1977; 2003) explanation of play development and Nelson’s (1998) six abilities of narrative competence (Chapter 2.10.3, Table 2), I think that such kinds of activity are basically for elder children with an already developed imagination, play and language skills.

Creative dramatization of a story is a collective activity: joint sense field is constantly created and negotiated in a dialogical form. Dramatization with young children is more productive if we ignore narrative and turn attention of the participants to key moments, key characters and their dilemmas. Dramatization means that we are “inside” the events and not “outside”, as is often the case in story reading activity. “The pupils can be liberated to explore what they understand of the original author’s ideas, they can embellish, expand and create new ones ... They become a powerful community with the ability to solve problems and resolve dilemmas.” (Toye & Prendiville, 2000, p. 18). Enacting the story, individual experience is placed in a social context, which is very important for young children.

According to Davydov (2004) and Zuckerman (1994), learning is a collective activity for young children. Thus, dramatizing involves children in the shared sense of creating activity together with adults at a very early age. Drama is a method for building a joint world through conflicts, dialogues, negotiations, explorations, new experiences and sharing. In the following table different forms of story presentation and children’s participation are compared.

Table 4. Comparison of different forms of participation in the activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening to a story</th>
<th>Watching a story presentation (puppet presentation or creative dramatization)</th>
<th>Participating in a (children &amp; adults playing together)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physically passive</td>
<td>Physically passive</td>
<td>Physically active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally involved</td>
<td>More emotionally involved</td>
<td>Fully emotionally involved, identification, perezhivanie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual experience, as if parallel play</td>
<td>Individual experience, as if parallel play</td>
<td>Social interactions, shared experiences, as if socio-dramatic play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being 'outside' the story</td>
<td>Being in-between the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the story</td>
<td>Being fully 'inside' the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in the past</td>
<td>Being in the present 'here and now'</td>
<td>Being in the present 'here and now' Collaboratively (children &amp; teacher) solving problems and resolving dilemmas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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We can see that listening to a story, watching puppet presentation or dramatization and playing out or enacting a story are, in principle, different activities. What does it mean for educational practices? I haven’t ever observed in the classroom (except my own experimental projects) that a teacher would use all these ways of introducing stories to children on a regular basis. It seems that teachers don’t see in these activities any potential for pedagogical work.

When children are listening to a story they have to comprehend it only from the words and the best that preschool age children can achieve is to understand the plot or storyline, but not necessarily from the first listening. If the teacher is a good storyteller the child might get some idea about the relations between the characters and, if pictures support the storytelling, more children will understand what has happened in the story. This is my interpretation because we never know from this activity how and what children understand.

When they watch a puppet presentation or dramatization where characters in roles enact the story, they can not only listen to the words but also see the actions. Different age children can understand the story events and become more emotionally involved. The teacher can see children’s reactions and get some clues about their comprehension of the story.

A totally different situation occurs when children themselves enact the story’s events. They all become physically active, emotionally involved, they interact between themselves and carry out story events. They reconstruct story events. Their understanding and thinking is revealed in their actions and in the creation of their own version of the story. In story enactment children always take from the story only what is close to them and is for some reason important. The teacher observing children can get valuable information about them: their skills and abilities, their interests and needs. Everything, indeed, that is needed for planning and further pedagogical impact.

We can summarize that during story reading or storytelling activities children have to build visual images only from listening to the words. During puppet presentation children build visual images from listening and watching. They understand better, become emotionally involved more easily and remember better. They are ‘getting’ the story through their eyes, ears, and hearts and later through their minds when thinking about it.

When children enact the story they live it from inside and try to solve the problems that are important for them but what is characteristic of this kind of activity is that they don’t get the story so well! Our research has proved that even adult students, when participating in such roles, often don’t clearly follow the
whole picture of the story. It is even more true with small children, and that’s why one more activity is needed – reflection and story reconstruction.

2.12.5 Psychological Meaning of Creative Drama

Drama is being “as if”. It is a total process, internal and external, that occurs when we transform our creative imagination into acts, when we create mental fictions and express them in spontaneous play, creative drama, improvisation, role-play, and theatre. Like life itself, it is an experience we live through. In life we deal with actual thoughts and acts; in drama we deal with imagined thoughts and dramatic acts. The difference is that drama involves "as if" thinking and "as if" action. (Courtney, 1990)

Vygotsky (1997a; 2004) points to two main reasons why dramatization together with verbal creativity is the most frequent and widespread form of creative activity practiced by young children. The first reason is the fact that “drama, which is based on actions, and, furthermore, actions to be performed by the child himself, is the form of creativity that most closely, actively, and directly corresponds to actual experiences … the drive for action, for embodiment, for realization that is present in the very process of imagination here (in drama) finds complete fulfillment” (2004, p. 70).

The second reason is that “drama … closely and directly linked to play, which is the root of all creativity in children … drama is the most syncretic mode of creation … it contains elements of the most diverse forms of creativity” (ibid., p. 71). Vygotsky had in mind different creative activities children are engaged in while preparing dramatization: they have to compose the play, make the props, scenery, costumes or puppets, create some kind of “music” or songs, dances or movements if needed. At the same time they are the actors, the audience, the playwrights, set designers, stage managers, composers, and so on. And all these activities are meaningful and purposeful parts of the general objective: namely, dramatization of a tale or story, self created narrative or play. Vygotsky (2004) quotes Petrova: “In drama, the child’s creation is in the nature of a synthesis – his intellectual, emotional, and volitional powers are activated directly by the force of life itself, without any excess stress to his psyche” (p. 72). Similarly Lindqvist (1995) is pointing to symbolic resources in play:

- Lyric and musical, dynamic model of reflecting reality = playing with movement, objects and language (like in music, poetics and moving)
- **Dramatic and literary** model of reflecting reality = creating tension, contrasts, symbols, rituals, rhythm, light, voice, etc.
- **Visual symbolic, dynamic** model of reflecting reality = playing with colors, forms and materials (drawing, painting, modeling)
- **Quatralog in play** = the child is the writer, player, public and themself at the same time

We need to have in mind that Vygotsky described the activities of primary school children. At that time most of the activities are very often planned, organized and guided by the adults. The whole process brings to mind “real theatre”. Vygotsky (2004) warns against such dramatizations:

> Attempt to directly reproduce the forms of adult theatre are not suitable for children … It must not be forgotten that the basic law of children’s creativity is that its value lies not in the results, not in the product of creation, but in the process itself. It is not important what children create, but that they do create, that they exercise and implement their creative imagination. In a true children’s production, everything … must be created by the hands and imaginations of the children themselves and only then will the dramatic production acquire its full significance and power for the children. (p. 72)

Also, he mentions that “certain educators introduce dramatization as a teaching method, to such a great extent is this active way of portraying events with one’s own body compatible with the child’s imagination” (p. 74). These ideas were written in 1933!

Generalizing, we can say that Vygotsky cares most about the significance of creative activities for child development or more precisely for the development of higher psychological functions. It is important to pay attention to and think of the different aspects of dramatic activities he mentioned in his book. Some of the ideas might seem controversial; for example, he is saying that it is not so important what children create, but what is important is that they do create, that they exercise and implement their creative imagination, and at the same time the child must understand why they are doing something and be conscious of the goal of their work. It is very important that children’s productions are undertaken for a definite goal. These ideas bring us to the understanding that a child’s activities have to be purposeful for them. There is no place for just technical training of a particular skills needed someday, somewhere in later life (the child is not able to think so far ahead).
I want to stress once more that drama is representational activity, which serves as a means for symbol creation. In the early stages of development all creative activities serve as a means of experiencing and communicating one’s understanding of the world, similar to the arts for adults. According to Lotman (1998) art always seeks truth (not scientific, of course) and expresses it in a specific art (semiotic language). Another quite “magical” feature of art is that it is able to touch a person through raising an aesthetic reaction (Vygotsky, 1971; 2001; Iljenkov, 1984). Aesthetic reaction is also a creative act and so we might say that art arouses in people the need for creation (Ilyenkov, 1984), but only children fulfill this need in the true sense of the word.

This is connected with the specifics of children’s thinking; they are not able to understand the world by means of intellectual operations, they learn through active experience. Young children’s life experiences are quite limited, and all cultural sources are of great significance. Not just as an object for contemplation, but as stimuli for their own creative actions.

Lotman (1998) describes in detail the differences between the two audiences: “adult” and “children” (“folk”, “archaic”). Adults, approach creative text13 as a source of particular information: observe, listen, read, sit at the theatre or concert, stand in front of a sculpture or a picture at the museum and all the time remember: “don’t touch”, “don’t disturb the silence” and of course “don’t climb on the scene” and “don’t interrupt the play”. The second audience – “children” – approach creative texts as participants in play: they shout, touch the pictures with their fingers and move them, talk to the people and animals in the pictures, interrupt the play, tell the actors what to do, hit a picture of a witch or wolf in a book and kiss Little Red Riding Hood.

In the first case the audience has the role of passive receiver of information and the author, creator of the text (book, music, picture, etc.) is the active part. In the second case the author’s role is minimized and the text created initiates reaction and provokes sense-generating play (smyluporozhdajushchaja igra) – the audience is the most active part here. The results of such play often surprise adults and, as many researchers have noticed, children are even able to produce art forms from time to time.

Briefly summarizing, I would list a few important reasons why we use creative drama work with young children. On a general level, I am convinced that

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13 Lotman uses the term ‘creative text’ in the broadest meaning, including all possible forms of artworks.
if used properly, creative drama supports the development and learning of young children in the most appropriate way, because: (a) it is closely and directly linked to play (role-play, socio-dramatic play); (b) to a syncretistic vision of the world; and (c) to a collaborative form of learning in young children.

Creative drama became a concrete instrument that enabled us to create a living pedagogical method and to implement important theoretical ideas through research activities and experimentation in a play club.
3 Hypotheses and Research Questions

Our point of departure was a set of theoretical assumptions – the hypothesis on which we construct developmental narrative (play) pedagogy:

1. Collectivity of human mind suggests (Vygotsky, 1994; Donald, 2001) that cultural development is a collaborative process. All educational activities should be constructed bearing in mind this basic principle.

2. Cultural development is a dynamic process; it is not about passing the existing (static) cultural model from one generation to another but a constant re-construction and re-creation of it. Cultural forms of activities cannot be taught or learned in school, they should be adopted through concrete shared experiences and ‘perezhivanie’.

3. Play is the prototype environment for the cultural development of the child in early years: creative imagination (flexibility of thinking), symbol construction (symbolic function) and narrative competence are developed in play.

4. Proper adult help in play development has to take into account the psychological essence of play. Active adult participation in genuine play activity reveals the essence of play activity (Kravtsova, 2007).

5. Construction of a shared playworld should be the center of educational work in an early childhood group; all other activities should support this. All linear curriculum models should be replaced with narrative playworld models.

The general developmental hypotheses serve as the basis for organizing an experimental environment and defining research problems. The research questions are:

1. Why and how shared narrative play activity creates the zones of proximal development of children and adults?

2. How to construct narrative environments promoting child development and learning in play?

3. Why adult participation in shared play activity is important for the transition from simple to more mature forms of play?

4. How narrative adult intervention promotes creative acts at different periods of play development: Creative act as a main goal of adult intervention.
4 Methodology

4.1 Constructing an Experimental Environment

The problems are studied in a specific play environment (the research laboratory of play “Silmu”) constructed at Kajaani campus. The main tasks of the research project are: (1) to construct the theoretical frame for narrative play pedagogy in early childhood; (2) to describe the curriculum and pedagogical methods supporting a child’s development and learning through play activity; (3) to define the main criteria of effective and appropriate adult intervention into children’s play; and (4) to describe the necessary conditions for the developmental acts in children and adults during their joint interactions in play.

Vygotsky’s (1987) methodological approach is used as the theoretical basis of experimental environment. He proposed the concept of “genetic experiment”. According to him the experimental-genetic method “artificially elicits and creates a genetic process of mental development” (p. 68). The method seeks to analyze the whole process from an initial to the final stage. The method is based on dynamic analysis of the whole moving and flowing process of formation of mental functioning, which has to be analyzed.

Analysis aims at scientific explanation of phenomena in experiment. It is directed towards the disclosure of the “reasons and conditions,” all the “real relations” that form the basis of psychological phenomenon. Vygotsky (p. 69) called this kind of analysis “conditional-genetic analysis”, that “proceeds from disclosing real connections that are hidden behind the external manifestation of any process,” this means “disclosure of its genesis, its causal-dynamic bases”.

The other very important feature of the analysis proposed by Vygotsky is the object of analysis. The object of the analysis is not the final result or the product of development, but the process of establishment of the higher forms of behavior. Vygotsky (1987) summarizes three determining points of psychological analysis: “analysis of the process, not thing, analysis that discloses the real causal-dynamic connection and relation, but does not break up the external traits of the process and is, consequently, an explanatory, not descriptive analysis, and, finally, genetic analysis, which turns to the initial point and reestablishes all processes of

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14 The research laboratory of play “Silmu” (Play Lab) http://www.kajaaniyliopistokeskus.oulu.fi/tutkimuskonsortio/developunit.htm, is a part of the Research Center for Developmental Teaching and Learning at Oulu University in Finland.
development of any form that is a psychological fossil in the given form” (ibid., p. 72).

El’konin (1989) pointed out that Vygotsky attempted to turn psychology into a science of the new, non-classical sort. The object of psychological research of this new psychology is the process of development. The essence of the research method could be defined as modeling of the process of development under experimental conditions.

Vygotsky (1987) proposed the method, however he had no time to elaborate it. His own research was more of a demonstration than a real implementation of the experimental-genetic method. His followers (Leontiev, 1983; Zaporozhetz, 1986; Gal’perin, 1998; El’konin, 1989; Davydov, 1996) made attempts to elaborate Vygotsky’s ideas. Kravtsov (2010) concluded that most of these attempts should be defined as formative experiments. In his opinion, El’konin’s and Davydov’s (1996) experimental work on developmental education is the most successful elaboration of the experimental-genetic method. There are three very important aspects that differentiate formative experiment from genetic experiment in Kravtsov’s opinion. Vygotsky (1997c) wrote: “The research that we have in mind is always an equation with two unknowns. Developing the problem and the method proceeds, if not in parallel, then in any case, by jointly moving forward. Finding a method is one of the most important tasks of the researcher. The method in such cases is simultaneously a prerequisite and product, a tool and a result of the research” (p. 27). In Vygotsky’s opinion both the object of study and the specific research method does not exist before the research is begun. One more important requirement for the experiementer is to be involved in experimental practice: “the activity of the researcher is not simply taken into consideration and reflected at every stage of the experiment, but to a significant extent the experiment is performed on the experimenter” (Kravtsov, 2010, p. 5).

In order to study the development of play activity we have to experimentally construct environments promoting new creative forms of play. Following Vygotsky’s (1997c) methodological recommendations we have to start from

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15 Forming experiment [Lat. formare – shape, form] – a method of psychological investigation. The distinguishing features of the formative experiment: (1) the object of study is its anticipated product or result with properties assigned in advance; (2) aims at identifying the causes and conditions of the process; (3) the researcher is an active creator and transformer of the object/subject of study pursuing certain goals.

16 After El’konin and Davydov established experimental school No 91 in Moscow in 1960 the experimental work was moved from a laboratory environment to real classrooms and big groups of children, the method acquired the name of teaching experiment.
genesis, then establishment and ultimately follow the dynamic unfolding of the whole process of the development of play activity to its highest point and then follow its transformation to a new activity system – learning activity. We have tried to grasp the process of play development as “the whole … not just its external or internal aspect” (p. 76).

We are aware of the fact that our attempts are always only interpretations of Vygotsky’s ideas. Our attempts are only first steps towards developing a research method for the study of children’s development in play activity.

Our initial idea was to accept different aged children in our experimental group. Very soon we realized that this corresponds to the requirements of genetic experiment and we even expanded the age range of children. The youngest child was 4 weeks old and the eldest 5 years and 7 months old. In this way we ensured that all stages of play and even pre-play behavior would be available for our study. During 5 years more than half of the children who attended our experimental site stayed for more than 2 years.

We had a very unique situation because we were able to observe and follow the process of play development from the initial to the developed stage. At the same time it was a big challenge to create the curriculum and organize activities where all ages could find appropriate activities. Still, the biggest challenge was to create the environment (in the Vygotskian sense) where we (the organizers) would fulfill our promises: to support the creativity of children’s play, teach the students and conduct research on play. By doing this we have to satisfy the individual needs of all participants including ourselves. Our participants were children and their family members, students and university teachers-researchers.

We adhered to Vygotsky’s (1994) ideas on creativity and environment as “the source of development”, and generated our own understanding of a “good” developmental environment. Our basic principle in constructing the play environment was continuous enrichment of children’s experience in cultural content and new forms of activity. By cultural content we mean not new knowledge or information, but new narratives – stories and folk tales. By new forms of cultural activities we understand different forms of creative activities – arts (in the broadest meaning). Our main activities are storytelling, sometimes reading, and story presentations through dramatizing or puppet presentations, also storytelling by painting. We try to include music, singing, moving, and traditional dancing games. It is important for the young children to observe adults involved in different creative activities, to join them and participate in the activities.
4.2 Adult Role and Character of Interactions

Our role was not only to observe children’s play, but also to intervene, actively play, and to construct play together. Such a decision was based on the theoretical assumption of play as a “cultural activity” (El’konin, 1978), which means that the ability to play is not ingrained in our biological nature, but “learned” from the social environment (especially higher, developed forms). Traditionally, different forms of play were passed from generation to generation through participation in joint play activities of multi-aged children. Due to the rapid socio-economical and technological changes in developing societies, young children have fewer opportunities to participate in joint play activities in mixed age groups. As a consequence, there are fewer possibilities to learn play skills from each other. Vygotsky (1994) was writing about how important it is that ideal forms of behavior are present in the environment, otherwise they fail to develop properly in children.

We try to create a specific place for the children, a playworld where everybody can find their place. In this environment adults are always ready to play with children and implement their ideas. We mainly use indirect forms of guidance. Even our guided group activities, such as morning and farewell circle or story presentation are never obligatory.

We have a rule that children under 3 years of age always have free choice. Of course we invite them, but children know that they can leave at any time. Our main point is to organize all activities in such a way that children would want to participate. We carefully ensure that every child can find their favorite activity and their own individual way to participate during the session (4 hours). Naturally, children's freedom is limited by time, place, space and our timetable, but within these frames we want them to create their life freely. We see our role as helpers and supporters.

We try to escape direct guidance and instruction about how the child has to behave and participate. We have 3 basic rules regulating children’s behavior. These rules are introduced once a year in autumn, when we start our activities. If some problems arise we simply ask children if they remember the rules and somebody always reminds the rules to the rest of the group. From time to time

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17 Behavior rules:
Walk on stairs, don’t run
Try to be careful about your friend’s play
Take care of your friends
you can see a young child hurrying up the stairs and repeating to themself: “don’t run, don’t run on the stairs”. Our main principle is that we want the child to be as free as possible in their choices and at the same time to be responsible for the consequences.

We like Rogoff’s (1998; 2003) concept of learning through intent participation, where she examines a cultural tradition in which children learn by keenly observing and listening-in to ongoing activities as they participate in mature community activities. This approach is common in some cultural communities in which formal schooling has not been prevalent. We think this type of learning is natural for very young children and is a usual way of learning in children’s peer cultures. We can also observe such rather natural kinds of learning in our children.

Adult roles and forms of interaction:

– Adults are organizers and creators of cultural environment and model higher forms of behavior for children.
– Adults actively play with children. Children and adults are seen as co-creators of joint activities, co-players.
– Interactions between adults and children are dialogic and are of an improvisational character.

Adults support the development of play by enriching children’s experiences:

– Extending the content (new ideas/stories) and the forms of activity (storytelling, puppet presentations, dramatizations, constructing shared s, etc.)
– Extending adult participation using indirect and direct methods of intervention (showing interest, in-role participation, modeling, etc.)
– Extending the provision (new materials, self-made play things, etc.)

4.3 Planning the Curriculum and Activities

We call our curriculum play generating narrative curriculum. The syncretistic nature of early childhood and a child’s holistic vision of the world is our point of departure. We define early age before the acquisition of written language as mimetic and narrative stages in development and as an active period of “world-making” and “myth creation” (Donald, 1991; Nelson, 1998; Herman, 2009).
Young children’s narratives are primarily displayed in nonverbal forms – in movements, play, pictures, etc. 

Curriculum constructed in the form of a story about/around some important theme corresponds to a child’s vision of the world.

The following general planning scheme has been used in our empirical play projects with children.

Table 5. General Planning Frame.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unifying THEME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety and danger, friendship, sharing, fears, telling lies/cheating, power relations, leadership, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STORY + JOINT PLAYWORLD OF ADULTS AND CHILDREN</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring the theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROJECTS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in different activity centers, resulting in creative “production”, such as puppet-theatre presentations,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dramatizations, self made books, paintings, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“FREE PLAY”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s independent, ‘free’ play activities supported by adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unifying theme – children’s interests are revealed in their (play) behavior and activities. The selection of a theme is based on observations. General themes introducing basic human values are planned during the year. The closest themes for young children are usually: safety and danger, helping and friendship, coping with fears, cheating or telling the truth, breaking the rules, fighting for leadership, etc. One quite concrete aspect of the theme is the so-called “hot topic”, which is revealed when observing children and their play activities, listening to their conversations and comments, talking with parents.

When a topic is clear an appropriate story is chosen or created. With the first intervention with new children it is convenient to start from some known children’s story. We often use animal folk tales with small children as a starting point. When reading books to the children or telling stories we try to find out which story or character they like most. In our experimental site traditional folk tales such as “Turnip”, “Jack and the Beanstalk”, and “The Mitten” were used. “Winnie the Pooh”, “Kalevala” and “Mestaritonttu” projects have also been successful.

Story is used as a tool of “opening” and clarifying the theme. Stories are used for raising questions and aggravating contradictions. There is always a dramatic collision in a good story, some exciting events to which children respond. Story
works as an *integrating tool*: story form creates a frame\(^\text{18}\), a “world”, a context and a background for the events.

A well-chosen story provides emotional involvement and motivation. A motivating story helps children safely explore some of their most painful experiences and provides safety because the child is constructing the story on the edge, as “dangerous” or “frightening”, as far as they are able to deal with it.

What makes a good story?

- Fascinating theme
- Exciting and contradicting ideas (moral dilemmas), both good and dangerous, expressing different values and viewpoints
- A good story provides emotional involvement and motivation of the participants

We use the following models of story building with young children:

- Cumulative model
- Two world model
- Journey model

*Projects* are in different activity centers that clarify and explore specific aspects of the selected theme. After story presentation children are free to choose what they want to play, the choices are presented to them at the end of the morning circle and once more after story presentation. Children can freely choose between their own ideas and projects in different centers. Sometimes they are activities, sometimes ideas and at other times, just centers.

The idea of *initiated* and *supported* activities is to propose activities for the children by introducing new materials, new tasks, developing particular skills or supporting children’s own ideas.

Our observations over five years demonstrate that children’s activities develop along three main lines: reflection of a presented story in different activities, developing a long lasting play activity (fórmula play, Castle play, Dragon’s play, Princess play, etc.), practicing skills such as gross motor by climbing, jumping, swinging, etc.

Children’s ideas and narratives revealed in independent play activities are used to develop future story presentations.

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\(^{18}\) A frame is always adjusted to the child’s age and their ability to comprehend a particular story.
Independent, free play – Children develop the theme further and new sub-themes emerge. Child’s independent play activity is a space for self-development, their growth, creativity and learning. The child’s “problems” are best revealed in independent play. Observing children in free play the teacher can see how children apply the knowledge and skills they were aiming at. Children need to have enough time and space for their independent activities. Our goal is to keep a balance between adult and child initiated activities. The general expectation is that child initiated activities and especially independent play activities should increase.

4.4 Story Presentation as Interventional Tool

Story presentation is a central intervention (lasts about 10–15 minutes) at our experimental site. It is organized every club day after morning circle. Story presentation is carried out as dramatization, puppet show, sometimes parallel telling (in roles) and painting.

Functions of the story presentation:

1. The story presentation introduces important topics and themes. All participants, both children and adults, share the experience.

2. The story offers a cultural interpretation of the topic, presents a “cultural”, “ideal” point of view, which might be different from children’s interpretation. In this way the collision of different opinions is created: subjective – what I think; everyday, “realistic” – what others (adults and peers) think and do; and cultural, “ideal” – how one is expected to think (morally). This contradictory situation might be the starting point of a creative or developmental act, which marks the starting point of personality development. A favorable “developmental tension” can be created. We might say that the traditional story is also bringing cultural-historical dimensions to the dialogue.

3. Story presentations are planned and rehearsed but they are rather improvisational. During the whole presentation children are invited to express their opinion, to give advice; sometimes they are asked for help and have to resolve difficult situations. Such forms of presentation we call dialogical improvisation.

4. Story presentation introduces different forms of cultural activities to the children in a meaningful way. There are several reasons for doing so:
a) To introduce the cultural forms of human activity as such;
b) To aspire to better “understanding”, not just to appeal to children’s “minds” through oral language, which is not enough with small children. All their senses have to be used when aiming at emotional ‘soperezhivanye’, co-experiencing;
c) Adults presenting the story become more involved into the creative process in front of the children. This is the only way for adults to stimulate creativity in children: one has to demonstrate it.

The general aim of the story presentation is to raise a problem that stimulates productive creativity on all possible levels: comments and dialogues (quite seldom among young children), creative play, drawing, etc. Story presentation works as a model of thinking: it enacts an idea in a dramatic form and involves the participants in the process of identification; invites response, or starts a discussion. Story presentation stimulates children’s thinking and presents a model of dialogical communication. Our goal is creative communication with the world, each other and oneself through collective narration (storytelling).

Storytelling or story reading used to be a traditional activity with small children. Today storybooks are available in every classroom but storytelling is an exception. We favor storytelling more than story reading and we play stories in a different way. For us the story is a source of creative interpretations for children and adults.
## Table 6. Comparison of different ways of application of a story with children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional way of using a story</th>
<th>Innovative way of using a story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story is a given fixed model</td>
<td>Story is a flexible model:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Not ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective (not personalized)</td>
<td>Personalized (personal traits and themes included)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>Flexible and changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The role of the teacher</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizer</td>
<td>Observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Evaluator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenter</td>
<td>Presenter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluator</td>
<td>Mediator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-creator of a model – story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-participant of a shared activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher’s activities are directed</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards the presentation of a model – story</td>
<td>Towards careful observation of a child’s activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards the improvement of a child’s action, activity and understanding</td>
<td>(the aim is revelation of the “themes” and “problems” of individual children and the whole group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards the creation of a new story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The role of the child</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperfect imitator of an adult</td>
<td>Co-creator of a model – story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child’s activities are directed towards</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>Collective creation of a meaningful story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorization</td>
<td>Developing own narrative voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedience</td>
<td>Creating the rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training skills</td>
<td>Learning new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning the rules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.5 Activities

In contrast with Piaget, we believe that development proceeds not toward socialization, but toward converting social relations into mental functions. For this reason, all of the psychology of the group in child development is presented in a completely new light. The usual question is how one child or another behaves in a group. We ask how does group create higher mental functions in one child or another. (Vygotsky, 1997c, p. 107)

Using Vygotsky’s terms our goal is to create higher mental functions in children. This means that we aim at acquisition and appropriation of psychological tools.
and we try to operate in the zones of proximal and distant development in our experimental environment. Following Vygotsky’s line of thinking we see collective play activity as the space where the major developmental steps are nurtured, tested and carried out. Therefore elaboration of collaborative play activity is the goal of our educational work.

On the individual level we aim at the development of every child to their highest potential in each new social situation of development. But because we can’t “force” the development of a child and because the development of play activity is a collective phenomenon, we focus our pedagogical efforts on joint play activities, carefully observe and follow individual children and adjust collaborative activities to fit everyone’s developmental needs.

All activities at the experimental site aim at:

- Enriching children’s emotional and cultural experiences
- Bringing new ideas and opening up new possibilities
- Introducing new knowledge about the world
- Demonstrating new behavioral models
- Practicing new skills

4.5.1 Planning of the activities

Planning is based on careful observation and pedagogical documentation. Students write field notes and individual child observations. On the basis of their observations a joint on-line report is compiled after each session. In addition to field notes and observations, play activities were videotaped using 2–3 portable digital camcorders. The main researcher also wrote field notes, analyzed videotapes and selected the most important episodes for joint planning sessions with students.

Each planning session started from watching video episodes, discussing the report and searching for the most important points for further planning. Concrete child’s experience, cultural and social context is always kept in mind. Children’s initiatives and intentions are the starting point for adult planning and intervention. Developmental goals are set both on group and individual level.
4.5.2 Organization of the activities

The activities can be divided into three major types:

1. **Organized and guided activities** of all children,
2. **Initiated and supported activities** in small groups or individually,
3. **Independent play activities** in small groups or individually.

Only group activities for all and some projects are planned in detail, other activities are improvised.

**Organized and guided activities** include a daily morning and farewell circle and story enactment. The theme of the story is discussed and decided by the adults but it is based on the topics coming from children’s play and discussions. The main tasks of the students during organized and guided activities are: to take responsibility for the activity, to be active and involved, and to be flexible.

**Initiated and supported activities** start after the story presentation. They include: activities in all eight activity centers, thematic projects for elder (4–5 year olds) children, etc. All the activities in the activity centers are planned and prepared by adults but children can always decide what to do and when, since each center has a variety of activities to choose from.

The main tasks of the students during initiated and supported activities are: to make friends and play together, to support each child’s initiatives, provide help when needed, and to observe carefully.

After organized activities the children need to have enough time and space for their independent play. Play is observed by the adults present using participatory observation and the results of observation are used for the planning of further activities.

**Independent play activities** of young children may start after morning circle in parallel with the babies’ music session. Elder children start self-chosen projects or other supported activities. The main tasks of the students during independent play activities are: to observe, show interest and appreciation, help and support only when needed.

At the beginning of our work (in the autumn), time is divided equally between adult guided and independent activities, but our goal is one hour of adult initiated activities and two hours of child-initiated activities. In principle, we try to keep this balance and provide enough space and time for children’s independent play activities. The general rule is that the children’s participation is voluntary; they can come and leave whenever they wish regardless of the plans.
and time schedule. Consequently, the only way to attract children is to build an interesting and motivating activity.

4.6 Description of the Project and Participants

The present study is part of a larger research project that has been carried out in the Play Lab at the Kajaani campus of Oulu University in Finland since 2002. The research laboratory of play “Silmu” was established bearing in mind three main functions: (1) a creative play club for children and families, (2) a learning and research site for students, and (3) an experimental site for university researchers. Creative club activities for children were organized as a part of the obligatory university courses for the students of early childhood and primary education (future kindergarten and elementary school teachers).

Three courses: Pedagogy of Under 3-Year-Olds19, Pedagogy of Play, and Guiding Learning in Early Childhood, organized their studies around Play Lab activities. Creative drama methods are studied as a part of the play pedagogy course. Students are introduced to several creative drama methods (Chapter 2.12) and the main principles of improvisational theatre, and have to apply them to working with children.

In their everyday practice with children, students use the dialogical drama with puppets method as a part of a morning circle, preparing a short puppet presentation or dramatization. Later the same students, in roles or with puppets, might join children’s play activities and help to develop a joint playworld. We use all of the methods in a rather free manner. Many students apply creative drama methods later when practicing in day care and primary schools, building various settings in their classrooms while implementing narrative learning projects.

4.6.1 The Setting

The setting of the play environment is a small, cozy house on campus. There are seven rooms, including a kitchen and a space in the basement that can be used for creative activities. Eight main areas are available for children’s activities: (1) blocks and building play area, (2) home play area, (3) story reading, telling and music area, (4) an area for board games, (5) meeting & art area, (6) handicraft

19 The course was conducted by researchers K. Jakkula and H. Munter
area, (7) creative drama area, and (8) a kitchen. All the areas are “open” to the children, and students are available to provide necessary support.

**Schedule**

Students come to the experimental site at 8:00 and have one hour for planning and preparation. Children start coming before 9:00 in the morning.

**Table 7. Schedule of the activities in play club.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free choice</td>
<td>9.00–9.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning circle</td>
<td>9.30–10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story presentation (1)</td>
<td>10.00–10.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playtime (2)</td>
<td>10.30–11.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch (3)</td>
<td>11.15–11.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free playtime (2)</td>
<td>11.45–12.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farewell circle</td>
<td>12.45–13.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Music & movement for small children might be organized in parallel,
(2) Playworlds or some other projects for elder children might be organized,
(3) Lunch is not fixed, adults bring some snacks to the children and they eat only when they feel hungry, sometimes elder children don’t eat at all if they become involved in some motivating activity.

The time frames are rather free and more orientational natural rhythm of the activities determine the time when to stop or move to a new activity.

**4.6.2 The Players**

**The Children**

Approximately 62 children (0 – 6 years) from 30 families have attended the laboratory for creative play over the six years.

Once a week a group of 13–17 children (between the ages of 6 weeks to 5 years) attend the club for creative play and participate in specific activities with the university students. Children come with one of their parents and stay for 4 hours. Most children would come with their mothers, but fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers were participating as well. Most of the families stayed with us as long as their children had to go to preschool group or mothers to work. Several mothers returned after having a new baby. For example two families participated
in our activities during five years. Both families brought three of their children to the club.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of stay</th>
<th>Less than 1 year</th>
<th>1 year</th>
<th>2 years</th>
<th>3 years</th>
<th>4 years</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The age of participating children ranges from a few weeks to 6 years but our main focus is on 2 to 5-year-old children.

The Students

During six years almost 160 students from the department of teacher education (kindergarten and elementary school teachers) participated in the activities with children. Pedagogy of Play, and Guiding Learning in Early Childhood courses were organized so that every second week students had a theoretical lecture for 2 hours, and every week they had 4 hours of reflection and planning seminar and 4 hours of practical work with children in the Play Lab. In addition, students might spend 1–2 hours for planning and preparing the upcoming activities. Most of the students spent three semesters in the experimental site.

4.6.3 Study Procedure

The project started in autumn 2002. The local newspaper published an article describing the site and the activities that were planned for families with young children. The university researchers discussed the aims of the creative play club in the article. This article was enough to get the first 15 families who were interested in our activities. We invited all families with children to the first meeting at our site where they could see the site and learn more about our activities. We explained that all activities would be documented and the data used for teaching and research purposes. Parents were given the relevant form, which they had to sign in case they decided to attend our club. All participating students and teachers also signed the same form.
4.7 Methods of Data Collection

The curriculum constructed in the form of a story about an important theme, together with the general planning scheme and story presentation as our main interventional tool – are instruments for producing data in our study. This set of instruments was developed and elaborated during six years of constant experimentation and it is already one of the results of my study. In the course of the research I developed instruments alongside the formulation of research problems.

The character and the amount of data obtained are defined by the task to provide courses for the students. From each session in the site we obtained: (1) 6 to 8 hours of filmed material, (2) written on-line report about the whole day (compiled by all participating students including researchers), (3) field notes on different activity centers, (4) written observations of individual children, and (5) very often detailed narratives of the most interesting play activities.

In the following paragraphs I will describe the kinds of data we were collecting from each session in our experimental site.

4.7.1 Video Taping

All activities in the site were videotaped on two to four cameras. The filming and the presence of observers have an impact on the behavior of all participants. But in our laboratory videotaping gradually became a natural part of the environment.

We developed a set of strategies and rules for filming in all possible situations, which have helped us not only to record the activities but also to support the players (both children and students) while filming.

In the beginning, two people from the university TV studio conducted the filming. In spite of their professional skills they needed constant guidance in their work: what to film and where, when to stop and move to another area. It became clear that the operator required a better understanding of the activities. It was decided that permanent members of the team should start to do the job. Quite soon filming was delegated to the students. We obtained more interesting data, but poor film quality.

After each session I copied the material onto DVDs, wrote short remarks and picked the most important episodes for the planning sessions. Those episodes were discussed with the students during joint reflection and planning meetings.

During six years we obtained about 600 hours of video data.
4.7.2 Field notes, observations of individual children and detailed play narratives

In addition to filming all students the researcher took field notes of their participation in the activities, and periodically carried out individual child observations. Each child was followed and observed by two students. A child’s own portfolio with limited access was created on-line, where students could add their observations every week. At the end of the semester responsible students would write a more specific summary on a child’s progress. This summary was discussed together with the child’s parent(s). Students were divided into small groups of 3–5 persons. Tasks for each group and for every individual student in the group were always changing, which guaranteed that every student tried different roles and responsibilities available in the experimental site. On the other hand, the whole group of 15–20 students had to work as a team during the year.

4.7.3 Joint reports and reflections

A joint on-line report based on participatory field notes, and observations was compiled after each day. The reports included short reflections, questions, proposals, etc. for the planning session.

4.7.4 Artifacts

Children’s drawings and paintings, many of which were supported by written narratives, as well as puppets and play props made in the handcraft center.

4.8 The Process of Data Analysis

I made the first rough data analysis while preparing for the seminars with students. I watched new data every week and picked important episodes for discussions and further planning. I tried to pick the most problematic and the most successful episodes. Often students in their reports described the episodes they wanted to discuss. Our discussions of video data were not analysis in any real sense, but they did help to locate and classify the most significant episodes. Data and discussions with students enabled me to build a comprehensive picture of the activities developing in our experimental environment.
Teaching defined not only the amount of data but the unit of observation as well. Because of our main goal – to support the development of creative play among children – the focus was always on play activities and on main intervention – story presentation. The main requirement for filming group activities was to capture the whole activity from the beginning to the end. Video observations of an individual child focused on their play actions, participation in other activities, transitions from one activity to another, as well as all interactions between children and adults.

Writing an on-line report and reflection and planning sessions with students were the first steps of my analysis of the data.

After the first year I noticed regularities pointing to connections between student’s interventions and children’s activities. Some impressive episodes of creative behavior of children, discussions with student and theoretical readings helped me to formulate the central research problem: how to support the child’s movement towards self-development in play? During the second year of experimentation I started elaborating El’konin (1994) concept of the creative/developmental act as a unit of development (Chapter 2. 7). The next step was to define the units of analysis that would capture all necessary aspects of the process leading the child towards creative steps of self-development and ultimately to the creative act.

4.8.1 The Unit of Analysis

One of the defining features of cultural-historical psychology is the method by which developmental processes are studied. Vygotsky (1987) proposed to study psychological processes by dividing them into ‘holistic’ units, which retain all the basic properties of the whole and cannot be further divided without losing some of them. The problem of the unit of analysis before Vygotsky (1987) was discussed by Shpet (1989) and by Vygotsky’s contemporaries Bernshtein (1990), Rubinshtein (1989), Bakhtin (1979), Leontiev (1981) and Luria (1982).

In this project the amount of data and units of observation were predefined by our decision to integrate student teaching with research activities. Only gradually after defining research questions, was I able to single out the units of analysis of my study. Unit of analysis is defined by the research questions or by the tasks the given study is going to answer. The analysis should always be carried out in connection with the bigger units. In my case, that is with a concrete level of a
child’s play skills at a given moment and in connection with the whole process of
the development of the child.

The subject of development in a cultural-historical theoretical framework is a
poly-subject – namely, adult-child. This definition implies that an adult should be
included in the unit of analysis. Zinchenko (2000, p. 27) proposed that “actions in
the real human world” could be seen as a unit of analysis, not only of behavior or
activity but of the human psyche as well. In his opinion, real action is a condition,
a mechanism, and a source of energy for psychic development.

How can we define real actions in play activity? This must not be merely any
action but only such actions of a subject that brings play activity into motion.
Such actions are a possible unit of analysis, but it is not the unit of development
of the child or play activity. In some cases actions can be the steps that move the
activity and the child’s development forward but can also stop it or move a step
backwards. At this point more questions emerged: under what conditions or
influences do the actions of the subject bring them to a creative act in play? Does
creative act in play activity at the same time become a developmental act of the
child/participants?

Long term observations and experimental work made me to think that the
decisive factor must be the forms of interactions between the participants (adults
and children and between children). These very forms are constructed through the
actions of the participants. I defined the unit of analysis of play activity as actions
of a subject (poly-subject) that construct a play event and move the activity
forward. In order to analyze all possible forms of interaction I applied a system of
units of analysis in my study.

I have tried to reveal the whole chain of interactions in our experimental
environment starting from: (a) direct adult participation in play with a child, to (b)
direct participation in shared imaginative narrative role play, (c) indirect cultural
intervention in the form of story presentation, and (d) independent free activities
of children. I analyze interactions both on an individual and on a group level:
between a child and an adult, and between adults and children in collaborative
joint play. I want to figure out the connections between all these interactions and
creative acts performed by different children.
4.9 Methods of Analysis

In general, I obtained five types of data from each play session: (1) video records & photos, (2) field notes, (3) children’s observations, (4) student’s group reports and reflections, (5) artifacts.

The field notes, individual and group reports are written independently by the participants of the session and later compared and discussed during joint seminars with all participants (students & researcher). All reports include reflection at the end.

Students’ reflections are used as an important resource for analyzing play sessions and interpreting the data. Their experiences of direct participation in play enabled me to capture the inner state of an adult player in addition to the changes in children’s participation.

The analysis of play sessions and student interventions started with writing explicit narratives of each session. Data from the different types of reports are included in the written narratives. Transcripts from chosen video play episodes are made using the Inscribe program.

In addition, each play session is characterized by taking into account the following aspects: student’s and children’s involvement (i.e., children stay in the centre during the whole session, very concentrated, refusing to eat or leave); eagerness and enthusiasm (i.e., children demand students to play with them, ask to continue the theme/play, invite other children, etc.); joyfulness and playfulness (i.e., shining eyes of the participants, excited voices, laughter, jokes, etc.). These three aspects of involvement, eagerness, and playfulness are used in grouping play sessions into ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’.

The following questions were used in a general evaluation of play interventions:

1. Was the play social?
2. Was the play imaginative and creative? (Vygotskian definition of reproductive and productive imagination is used)
3. Was it persistent?
4. Was the play challenging? (Requiring work at the edge of one’s abilities)
5. Were participants in roles?
6. Was some story line (sjuzhet) constructed?
The next set of questions describes more precisely the process of play interventions:

1. How the activity was constructed:
   – Spontaneously improvised, co-constructed;
   – Partly planned, partly improvised;
   – Initially planned and creatively implemented, or imposed and guided;
   – Shared, parallel or separate simultaneous activities in the same area;
   – Spontaneous and chaotic, not guided.

2. Was the main theme (fabula) shared by the participants?

3. How was dramatic tension created?

4. Were participants emotionally involved?
   – What was the level of involvement (flow experience) of the participants?
   – What was the level of performance? (Classification of Morgan and Saxton, 1987 is used).

5. Were the dialogues creatively improvised? What kinds of dialogues prevailed?
   – In role,
   – Out of role (metacommunication),
   – Out of play conversations.

By answering these questions, the specific aspects of each play session and the character of adult intervention, including the phases of preparation, implementation, and reflection, were revealed. Explicit play narratives were followed by short characteristics of each play session.
5 Analysis of Cases

In this chapter I will present some results of my empirical research. First, I will describe direct adult participation in play with a small child moving from separate play actions towards play activity. Then I will explore students’ participation in shared narrative role play with a group of diverse age and play skills children. After that, I will trace paths to creative acts as a result of students’ cultural intervention – puppet presentation. Finally, I will present the individual path of sense creation in play lasting for 2 years.

5.1 Case 1: from Play Actions to Play Event with Adult Help

In this chapter adult help through direct intervention in a young child’s activity is analyzed. My focus is on how the play event is constructed through dialogic interactions between the child and the adult.

5.1.1 Play setting

The activity takes place in the block center. The center is located in a big room that is divided into two spaces by a low shelf. One half of the room is the dramatic play area and the other one is for building, blocks, wooden railroad, etc. There are many people in the room. In the block center are two students, two young boys and a mother.

A young boy (1.8) is playing with the railroad and a student is supporting him. Another boy (2.1) is walking around taking some toys and looking around. A student is observing him and writing field notes.

During the whole activity, which lasted about 1 hour, children and adults were coming and leaving. I am analyzing a boy’s (2.1) and a student’s joint tower building activity that lasted about 45 minutes.

5.1.2 Players

The student

A male student, Marko, is responsible for the activities in the block building center. His task is to help every child who wants to play in the center. This time
the student had the goal to play with Ville (2.1). During the planning seminar we discussed that the boy was experiencing certain difficulties and that we needed to find a way of helping him.

The boy

Ville (2.1) has visited our experimental site for 2 years. His mother first brought him when he was 6 weeks old. When Ville started play club in the autumn, we noticed that he was not very happy. He stayed with his mother all the time and did not play with students or other children. We tried to film him more in order to have more data.

We discussed this with his mother and came to the conclusion that the boy was going through a developmental “crisis”. Recent changes in his social situation must have influenced his behavior. The main change was that his elder brother Esa (5.3) had started a preschool group and was not coming to our play club any more. Ville was used to playing with his brother or at least in the same space. Usually, the elder brother was the leader and organizer of their play activities, and Ville was used to following his brother’s directions, but not to lead.

Another important factor could be connected with language development. The boy had already started to use separate words in the spring, his vocabulary then grew during the summer, but in the autumn he was still using separate words. His spoken language was not very clear and it seemed that in critical situations he did not use words but started crying at once. The mother tried to use language with him a lot and we decided to do the same. He seems to be lacking “tools” and the ability to communicate and express his wishes and ideas.

5.1.3 Tower Building Activity

In the morning Ville came in a good mood and started playing with his mother and a student in the block center. Soon the mother left and the boy played with a student in the dramatic play center for a while. Later Ville participated in the morning circle with his mother. After morning circle he went upstairs to the kitchen to eat.
Trying to join child’s play

When Ville came back to the block center, he wanted to reach a big plastic bucket with small cars, ships and planes, which was standing high on the shelf. The student Marko helped him to get the bucket. Ville started exploring the contents of the bucket, reaching cars, ships, helicopters, trains, etc., naming them or just exclaiming: “oh”, “ooo”, “oops”, etc.

He took a tractor and started attaching different cars to it one by one, like carriages in a toy train. He managed to make a long tractor-car caravan from eight different cars and started driving them around the block center. Marko then took three ships, attached them to each other making a similar construction and followed Ville while making car sounds. Ville watched him smiling and kept on playing.

He started digging thread from the carpet with the tractor and “putting” the imaginary content (probably sand) into the lorry. He is talking and explaining everything using separate words (some of his speech is unclear and impossible to understand): “ups”, “oho”, “ooo”, “pip, pip, pip”, “ship”, “copter” (helicopter), “digging”, “going”, “moved through”. The play lasted about 10 minutes and then the boy disappeared to the kitchen, where his mother was drinking coffee and chatting with other mothers.

Marko followed the boy and found him under the table. The boy’s mother suggested that he should go and play with the friend and the boy eagerly returned to the block center. Marko and Ville continued playing with the tractor and cars. The boy started moving with the tractor among the big light cardboard blocks lying everywhere on the floor. He was hitting the blocks with the tractor.

Stepping into child’s play, expanding the initial child’s idea (Episode 1)

The first play episode lasted about 1 minute. A student initiated the activity by proposing to the child that he build a tower and then to hit it with the tractor.
Fig. 1. Starting to build a tower.

*Student (building a tower from the blocks):* Let’s build a tower first and then try to hit it with the tractor…

The student made his proposition both by action [by doing] and in words. He repeated his proposal three times and all the time he was building a tower and following the child’s reactions. The child was observing carefully and listening attentively, but did not join the building.

When the tower was six-blocks high the boy collided with his whole body into the tower and destroyed it.

Fig. 2. Destroying the tower.

*Student:* Oho! I guessed that this would happen… It went to pieces. We did not have the patience to use the tractor when a bigger one arrived and
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it seems this was a bigger tractor [having in mind the child not a
toy].

Almost at once he got up from the floor shouting excitedly: “Oho!” The boy
stretched his hand to the “ruins” and asked to build a new tower saying: “More!”
This means that he not only understood, but also accepted the student’s idea of
play.

The student did not interpret the child’s falling on and destroying the tower as
“bad behavior”. He was able to see the situation from the child’s point of view
and guess a deeper meaning of the child’s action. Further development of their
joint activity revealed that this particular episode of falling on the tower became a
very important part of their interaction. Based on the child’s behavior during the
following episodes we would interpret that by falling with his whole body on the
tower and ruining it the child was illustrating the concept of falling. Vygotsky
(1997c) describes such phenomena as gesture language pointing to the fact that
only the child’s own concrete actions are imparting the meaning to the objects
and to the words.

By generalizing we can say that the student introduced the concept of
building to the child and implemented the idea through action. The child was
observing carefully and listening attentively but he did not join the building
activity. He took over the activity only at the end (by destroying the tower). This
means that he not only understood the student’s idea and concept but he also
accepted the proposed idea. It is possible to interpret the activity as shared
because both participants were active and attentive both to the actions and to the
words of each other, and “took turns” in two constituent parts of the activity:
building and destroying the tower.

**Language**

The dialogue reveals that both participants were involved in shared activity. The
student was mainly speaking and the child was responding to the student’s words
with his facial expressions, exclamations, body and hand movements and finally
with his whole body.

The student introduced quite a complicated literary technique to the child in
this short episode: (1) descriptive language when interpreting what happened
when the child has fallen down and destroyed the tower, after which the student
said: “It went to pieces” and (2) a comparison when describing the child as a
“bigger tractor” which destroyed the tower. He also revealed his own thinking by saying that he had “guessed that this would happen”. This is an indicator of the fact that the student is able to estimate the child’s inner psychological state. This can be interpreted as an attempt to understand the child’s mind. It is clear that the student is trying to speak to the child in short sentences, using simple, known words but at the same time he introduces two sentences of developed, adult language. The meaning of these expressions is not clear to the child and he can only guess at it. But they put a new developmental perspective on his language.

**Involvement in construction: taking turns (Episode 2)**

The episode lasted almost two minutes. This time the child initiated shared activity by proposing to build a tower right after he destroyed the first tower: “more!” – he announced. The student started building a new tower but this time he is directing and helping the child. The boy is very active and eager to build and the student is helping him. He is placing one block, then giving another block to the child, then waiting. He is directing the child to bring more blocks and waiting all the time. He supports the child’s activity by making positive comments.

![Fig. 3. Learning to build a tower.](image)

In this episode the student initiates the tower collapse. When the tower is eight-blocks high he stops the building activity and proposes: “And now try to drive the tractor towards the side”. He is following carefully the child’s actions and giving
advice and showing where to hit. He is clearing a space on the floor, which helps
the boy to approach the tower better. The child is trying to hit the tower from six
different positions and the student is giving advice, showing and supporting the
actions all the time. When finally the tower collapses, both are very happy and
laughing from their hearts.

Fig. 4. The boy is destroying the tower.

*Student:* You were almost left under it, that’s what kind of collision it was!

(*Both laughing.*)

Tower building lasted about 54 seconds and tower destroying about 37 seconds.
Both parts of the activity were equally important and we can summarize that the
student was “teaching” the child not only to build the tower but also to destroy it
very carefully. This episode reveals that the child became an active participant in
the activity but he also closely follows the student’s directions.

**Guided building (Episode 3)**

The episode lasted about a minute and a half. The activity started from the
student’s question: *Are we going to build a new tower?* “New!” repeated the
boy, taking a block and starting to build; he looks very enthusiastic and active.
The child brings new blocks and the student only shows where he can get more.
Both are working hand in hand and taking turns. The child is speaking quite a lot,
but the words are not clear, yet still he is supporting his actions with words or
exclamations. He is repeating some words after the student. The student is very
attentive: observing the child’s movements and actions, looking to his face all the time and especially when speaking, trying to “understand” the child’s thinking and intentions. He managed to notice the moment when the boy almost destroyed the 4-block high tower and at that point he stopped asking for more blocks.

The student provoked tower destruction a bit later looking into the child’s eyes, smiling and asking: “And what now?” The boy responds by looking back at the student’s face and falling on the tower; the student is catching him and commenting: “The whole fella [fellow] crumbled down there.” The tower is destroyed and both are laughing.

The student becomes involved in play (Episode 4)

The activity lasted about 2 minutes. The child again initiated the activity at once after the tower collapsed. He started running around and bringing blocks one by one. The student is sitting on the floor and instructing the boy how to place the blocks. He is putting one block at a time, waiting for the child to put his block. They are not speaking much, only some “well”, “yeah”, “right” can be heard.

Fig. 5. Building a very high tower.

Student: You will have soon built a tremendously big tower!

Student: This time maybe you will drive with a tractor?

Child (bringing one more block and shouting): High! Oh, high!
When the child destroys the tower he at once then turns to the student and looking straight into his face falls on the student’s knees. The student catches the boy and turns him in the air.

*Student (commenting):* You fell like that tower. As the tower …

**Fig. 6. The student is turning the boy in the air.**

This time a child destroyed the tower with a tractor but then fell down on the student’s knees. The child is repeating the similar action for the third time (he destroyed the tower by falling in Episodes 1 and 3). But this time the boy falls *intentionally* into the student’s lap after destroying the tower with the tractor. This is clear because the tower is on the child’s left side and the student is sitting at his right side, so after destroying the tower the child turns to the student, looks at his face and falls into his lap, but not on the tower.

Previous falling episodes can be interpreted as destroying the tower, but this time there is something new. In Episode 1 the child just fell down on the tower and destroyed it. In Episode 3 he was falling close to the student and the student caught him because he was afraid that the boy might get hurt. In this episode the child *provoked* the student to play by falling on his knees. We may think that the boy wanted to be ‘caught’ by the student just as it happened in Episode 3. This time the student understood the boys falling as an *intentional* invitation to play and turned him in the air, thereby *fulfilling the child’s expectations* and as if saying: “Yes we are playing and having fun together!”

The child is not able to verbally describe his thoughts yet, but demonstrates the fall of the tower with his own body by falling down himself on the tower. We can interpret this as a meta-communicative message, “this is play” (Bateson,
Falling down like a tower was earlier more an embodiment of the thought, now it was an invitation to play.

**Language**

In previous episodes the student was using words to describe what was happening at the current moment, at present. This time he is predicting what will happen soon: “You will have soon built a tremendously big tower!” and planning: “This time maybe you will drive with a tractor?” He repeated his proposal in the form of a question two times until the boy answered “yeah … a tractor”. When the boy falls on his knees after destroying the tower, the student described the action by using a comparison: “You fell just like that tower. Like the tower…”

There are new elements of cooperation in each successive episode: the child is actively using new words, noticing and showing letters written on the side of the blocks, holes in the blocks. He is becoming more and more active not only in building but also initiating dialogue with the student. He is pointing to the objects as if waiting for some comments from the student and then repeats the words several times and tries to use them in new situations. He is very patient in building a high tower and then hitting it many times before it collapses. Between the play episodes he looks through the window, notices school children playing in the schoolyard and comments on their play.

**Enriching joint play activity with reflection (Episode 10)**

This is a very rich episode where new aspects of the child’s behavior are manifested. The boy is quite active and free. He is noticing a “hill” – a few blocks lying to one side like a hill, showing holes in the blocks and as if initiating dialogue with the student, introducing additional topics to their play. The student responds and comments.

This time the boy tried to destroy the tower quite early and the student stops him from doing this twice. But he was quite patient while the child hit the tower at the end. He destroyed the tower with the tractor and it took many (8) attempts for him before the tower collapsed. After the tower collapsed the boy, again for the second time, fell down intentionally on the student’s knees! The student again turns him in the air.

After that a totally new activity started. The child was trying to tell what happened: he is bending down with his body several times as if demonstrating
how the tower fell and supporting his movements with exclamations and facial expressions. The student was listening and adding more comments to this gesture story.

**Fig. 7. The tower was falling on me!**

*Student*: Muksis, look how many blocks were falling on you!

*Child*: Muksis, upsis and pam! [*Onomatopoetic words describing clashes in Finnish*]

*Student (repeating after the child)*: Upsis and pam! You were under them. Yes!

**Fig. 8. It was falling like this…**

*Child (repeats after the student)*: Under… (bends down) under them.
Student (looking at the bending child and responding): Yes, that’s what happened.

Fig. 9. This tractor hit it-

Child: … and tractor.

Student: Yes you collided with the tractor. And then they all [the blocks] fell on you when the tower collapsed, right?

Fig. 10. All the blocks fell down.

Child (listening attentively and smiling): Yeah!
This is in principle a new activity in the child’s behavior – a reflection. The child is not only supporting his actions by gestures and words as he did in previous episodes but also trying to tell what happened after the event. The student is very supportive, helping to tell the whole story of their play in words. The child is listening carefully while adding movements, gestures and words illustrating the whole narrative. The boy is trying to tell what happened: he is bending down with his body several times as if demonstrating how the tower fell and supporting his movements with exclamations: pum, pam; his face is very expressive, the student is listening and adding some more comments to his gesture story. This is a joint narrative reflection initiated by the child. Both participants are creating a narrative of their play. Here we can speak about the actions in the zone of proximal development of the child. Without a more competent partner the child would not be able to do this, although he is ready for any such kind of activity! The same kind of reflection is repeated in Episodes 11 and 13.

**Reaching togetherness and flow experience (Episode 13)**

This is one of the most playful episodes of the whole activity. The student introduced a new strategy of building and spontaneously made a “funny face” (big eyes and a very surprised face expression).

*Student: Now, let’s put one on another (the student makes a funny face)*

**Fig. 11. Student made a funny face.**
The child interpreted this as an invitation for face-making play and at once made a funny face by showing his tongue. The student, in response, also showed his tongue.

Fig. 12. Funny face play.

Both taking turns in showing their faces to each other.

The boy was very satisfied and initiated face-making play a few more times, interrupting the tower building. Both participants seemed totally involved in the activity and their interactions were very spontaneous and improvised. Both felt confident and relaxed.

This time they built a tower 15 blocks high. The boy managed to put his last block as high as the 14th storey! This time the child had enough patience and the student did not have to stop him from destroying the tower before it was high enough. The reason might be the fact that the student proposed building a ‘thinner’ tower, using only one block per storey instead of two. This made the building activity quicker. Another reason is that an older girl started building her own tower in parallel and she was also helping the boy a few times to build his tower. The participation of the girl might have created some kind of a competition in tower building, which might have kept the boy from destroying his tower earlier.

In fact, this time it was the student who initiated the tower collapse when he realized that the boy couldn’t reach the top any more. The student made a very serious, “thinking” face and asked what was going to happen next.
Fig. 13. What will happen now?

Student: Now … what’s going to happen next?

(Student makes a “wondering” face.)

Child (making exited face and even jumping into the air): PAM!

The boy destroyed the tower with his tractor after just a few tries.

Fig. 14. The tower has just fallen down.

(The tower collapsed after a few strokes!) Child: PAM!

After the tower collision the boy initiated a short reflection by demonstrating with a few blocks what had just happened. The student supported him and after that proposed to build a new tower. “JOOOOOO!” [yeees] shouted the boy.

This episode indicates that both participants are flexible, relaxed and involved in spontaneous and creative interactions, which can be described as flow.
experiences (Csikszentmihályi 1990). They are laughing a lot, look really happy and are not paying attention to other children and adults around.

5.1.4 Interpretation of the Activity

The whole activity lasted about 45 minutes, the tower building activity itself about 33 minutes. From the beginning the student was observing the child and looking for the chance to play together. First he tried to join the boy’s play actions and their joint activities lasted for about 10 minutes. When the activities stopped the mother proposed to the boy to play with the student, naming him “a friend”. The boy returned to the block center and then their tower building activity started.

The mother’s suggestion was the starting point for joint play. The next step was the student’s proposal to build a tower together and then to hit it with the tractor. The original idea of the child – hitting the blocks – was enriched by the student’s idea of building a tower. During the whole activity these two ideas became united into a tower building and ruining play.

The child became involved in the activity: after the first episode, when the tower was built and destroyed the child asked for “more”. During a period of 33 minutes they were building a tower 15 times and only 3 times did the student propose the activity. In all other cases the child initiated tower building. The child was eager to go on but the activity stopped because the student left for lunch. I tried to write down a storyline of their play and here is the narrative:

Two builders were building a tower, a very high tower. Then the tractor came and started hitting the tower. It was hitting it many times and very hard and finally the tower collapsed. The higher the tower the more exciting the collision.

When the student stepped into the child’s activity it can be described as going around with a “tractor” and hitting things available in the block center, mainly blocks. We can presuppose that the child took the role (not consciously) of a tractor or tractor driver himself. Most probably he could remember a tractor he saw some time ago. He might have been imitating his brother’s actions with the tractor during their play at home. The boy was not adding any other events, only repeating on and on single action – collision. For that purpose he used the existing environment and concrete objects available. This is the typical behavior of a young child.
In a strict sense this is not a play activity but only the first step towards it. According to Vygotsky (2003), play starts when an imaginary situation appears. The next requirement further developed by E’ikkonin (1989) is roles and plot.

When the student entered the child’s activity he proposed building and transformed separate actions into “two stroke” play: first you build and then you demolish. The student’s actions constructed a play event – the basic unit of analysis of play activity. The same basic unit was repeated fifteen times during the whole joint activity. Every repeated episode was richer, more advanced and was adding new features to the child’s behavior. I would define Episode 13 as the most free and creative and would apply a very nice term used by Bruce (1991; 1996; 2005) – free flow play.  

1. Reaching the mutuality

At first sight play is activity organized and guided by the adult. But we have to ask: is this play for the child and how much are they implementing their own ideas? Careful analysis of the child’s involvement and participation in the activity revealed that he was playing.

At the beginning of the interaction the student tried to follow the child’s actions. When the boy made a long tractor-car caravan and started driving it around the block center the student made a similar construction and followed him making car noises. Ville watched the student’s actions, smiled and kept playing, only commenting on his own actions to the student but he did not start more active cooperation (looks like parallel play). This kind of play lasted about 10 minutes and then the boy left for the kitchen. In this short episode the student was the follower and the child was the leader.

20 Features of Free Flow Play (Bruce, 1991; 1996): (1) Play is an active process without a product; (2) Play is intrinsically motivated; (3) Play exerts no pressure to conform to rules, goals, tasks or to take definite directions; (4) It is about possible, alternate worlds which involve the concepts ‘supporting’ and ‘as if’ and which lift the player to the highest levels of functioning. This involves being imaginative, creative, original and innovative; (5) Play is about participants wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships, and becoming aware of what we know (metacognition); (6) It actively uses first hand experiences; (7) It is sustained, and when in full flow, helps us to function in advance of what we can actually do in our real lives; (8) In play we use technical prowess mastery and competence that we have previously developed. We are in control; (9) Children or adults can initiate play but each must be sensitive to each other’s personal agenda; (10) Play can be solitary; (11) It can be with others, each of whom is sensitive to fellow players; (12) Play integrates everything we learn, know, feel, relate to and understand.
In most cases students would behave in a similar way. They would try to follow the child’s actions and sometimes they would add some new actions but would stay on the level of play actions. The students would explain that they don’t want to destroy a child’s play that’s why they would not propose their own ideas. We think it is not enough just to follow the child and not add anything to the activity. It is important to initiate the exchange of ideas and to create something new together. The starting point is the child’s *initiative* but skills to cooperate and participate in shared activity should also be developed.

In this particular case, the student made the right guess about the child’s *intention* and chose the right *strategy of interaction* with the child.

### 2. Child’s intentions

*Revelation of child’s intentions* is a precondition of a successful adult intervention in children’s play. In other words it is necessary to find the idea which the child is trying to explore in play. Only on the basis of this idea is a successful joint play activity possible. The child’s intentions can be revealed only in action, which means that the adult has to start interacting with the child. There is still a very strong tradition among early childhood professionals and parents that play is the children’s own business. Many teachers believe that adults spoil children’s play if they interfere in play. A strong belief is that other children would not do that. We think that there is no difference who steps into the activity. The activity will be “spoiled” or became different in any case. Still, a professional adult in contrast with an inexperienced child might help to develop the activity. In addition, an adult might help to preserve and clarify the intentions of the participants and at the same time demonstrate novel and flexible behavior models.

How do we know what the child’s idea or intention is? The child can’t tell us because they themselves are not aware of their intentions and not able to express them in words. Older children (4–5-years-old) can often say what they want to play, like family, robbers, princess, etc., but the topic does not reveal which aspects of human relations the child is exploring. Is it danger or safety, fear or bravery, protection and the fight against evil robbers? Young children are often interested in playing with certain objects or things but from our point of view something more is always behind the interest.

Long term observations can reveal more about the child’s interests and intentions because they are best revealed in actions and behavior. In order to reveal the child’s ideas an adult has to create situations in which the child’s
intentions become visible. The following examples may help us to understand the idea.

A young 1.8-year-old-girl became interested in a swinging horse. Her father was with her. When the father noticed the girl’s interest, he took the girl and seated her on the horse’s back. The girl expressed her dissatisfaction and climbed down at once. Then she took a big soft bear and seated it on the horse. After a while she took the bear away and started climbing the horse herself. The father supported her a bit. He realized that the girl was interested not in swinging but in climbing on the horse and then down. This activity lasted for some time, the girl was getting better and better and the father was supporting her less and less. The father realized the girl’s intention to climb up and down and supported her.

Very often we can observe the situation in which an adult (parent or student) starts explaining that the swinging horse is for swinging but not for climbing and would try to make the child swing but not let them explore other possibilities. Most of our young children performed the same ‘climbing practicing’ activity with a small armchair or high stairs: climbing back and forth, trying to carry different objects in their hands as if making the activity more and more challenging. At the beginning some mothers would not support such activity and would try to ‘move’ the child to safer and, from the adult point of view, more ‘purposeful’ activity.

Adult behavior in such situations defines to a great extent the character of the child’s behavior and development. If the adult wants to understand and follow the child’s intention they should support the child’s independence. If the adult is too active there is a danger that they make a ‘false’ decision about the child’s intention and substitute the child’s idea with their own. Such behavior gradually turns the child passive and dependent, not able to lead their own activities and develop their own ideas. This is especially important for slow and shy children.

The idea of building a tower and then hitting it with the tractor was quite spontaneous but as the student pointed out in his reflections, this was the result of careful observation of the child’s previous activities. The student mentioned that he noticed many other boys of similar age interested in playing different kinds of crashes, collisions, etc. He said that he remembered that as a young child he was also very much interested in all kind of ‘dangerous’ situations. Typically an adult would ‘teach’ the child to play nicely with a car or to build a tower and try to eliminate any destructive actions. We have examples from our play lab activities where children with an adult are involved in these kinds of activities. For our
analysis of especial interest are two cases of tower building when a boy and a girl were involved in tower building with their grandmothers.

In one case a girl (2.9) entered the block center with her grandmother. Grandmother proposed that she build a tower from big blocks. The girl started building and her grandmother was guiding her all the time. She was commenting on every action like “yes, that’s right” or “no, not like this” and so on. The activity lasted about 5 minutes and then the girl stopped saying that she didn’t want to build any more. Grandmother told her to use more blocks but the girl did not listen and moved to another activity.

A very similar case was observed in the block center when an adult (grandmother) was teaching a young boy (2.3) to build a tower. The grandmother started building the tower and the boy wanted to ruin it. The grandmother did not let him but instead asked him to build. The boy added a few blocks but then again wanted to destroy the tower. This kind of activity lasted no longer than 5 minutes.

Comparison of these three cases can lead us to some insights into play activity. In all three cases adults proposed building a tower to the children but only in one case did the activity last 33 minutes, while the other two lasted for about 5 minutes. Only in the tower building and destroying case did the child become very much involved in the activity and did not want to stop it. How can we explain the difference?

If we try to define the object of all activities we might get some answer. In cases that lasted only 5 minutes adults defined the object of play and it was building actions. In both cases adults were teaching children how to build. This is a typical situation. Adults often see blocks the same as many other toys, as tools for teaching the right ways to use them. They don’t take time to find out how the child wants to use the object.

In the tower building and destroying case the object of activity was the exploration of the concepts of falling, destroying and building and the connections between them. Through physical actions and emotional perezhivanie the boy was exploring the state of falling, crashing, colliding and then building again and again. This is a familiar and emotionally affective experience for the small child. To fall down and get hurt, to ruin something, to split or to break is an everyday experience. No wonder that he became so involved in the play activity proposed by the student. The student managed to grasp the child’s intention probably because he had chosen the right strategy for their interaction.
3. Strategy for joint interaction

From the very beginning he became a participant in the activity and was trying to find out the child’s interests. For a while, observing the boy hitting big blocks on the floor, he guessed that to hit a tower would be more exciting. After making this successful proposal he mainly followed the child’s reactions and responded to them. He was not acting as a ‘teacher’ but more as a co-player. The student admitted afterwards that as soon as he managed to establish living contact and mutual understanding with the child the whole activity and all other interactions came much more easily. Their activity was total improvisation: in a dialogue they were exchanging the ideas and building common understanding and a shared sense of the play activity.

After the first tower building and crashing episode the child became the leader of the activity and the student took his role as a helper, supporter and a model for imitation. The student is not just ‘demonstrating’ certain basic skills essential for successful participation in play activity. He is involving the child in activity where he gets the opportunity to practice them. They were practicing the model of turn taking or dialogue both in actions and in oral language (learning to build a shared activity): the student is very careful and attentive, responding to every word and action of the boy. Their dialogue proceeds all the time on two levels: (1) in spoken language and (2) in actions or “gesture language”. The entire time the student introduces “key words” for this particular activity repeating them several times, “showing” the meaning of the words through actions and using appropriate words while commenting upon the actions of the child. Already after the first episode the child starts repeating some of the words after the student and later he is using more and more words supporting his own actions.

On the other hand, the student starts repeating some words and exclamations after the child, showing his support, appreciation and understanding, thus building togetherness.

The student was constantly enriching the child’s language by introducing some literary techniques such as descriptive language and comparisons. He was even describing his own thinking to the child, predicting, planning and so on.

On the one hand, the student was trying to speak in short sentences using simple “known” words but, at the same time, he introduced examples of “developed” adult language. The meaning of these expressions is not clear and can be only “guessed” by the child. But they set up the developmental perspective
The student also supported the slightest initiatives of the child, for example in Episode 10 when a new ‘tool’ – reflection – appeared. Careful observation of the episode reveals that it was the child who initiated the reflection. Of course this was just a short pause and a few words and a very thoughtful expression on his face. The student noticed this tiny episode and developed it to an explicit shared reflection. He started describing the events and the child kept illustrating them with his body movements, facial expressions and exclamations. The child initiated the reflection two more times (Episodes 11 and 13) and the student again supported him.

One of the most improvisational and joyful episodes was Episode 13. The student, while introducing a new strategy for building, spontaneously made a “funny face” (big eyes and a very surprised facial expression). The child interpreted this as an invitation for face-making play and at once made a funny face by showing his tongue. The student in response also showed his tongue. The boy was very satisfied and initiated face-making play a few more times, interrupting the tower building. Such episodes indicate that both participants are flexible, relaxed and involved in spontaneous and creative interactions. The student admitted that he was so pleasantly surprised by the child’s creative initiatives for their interactions that he stopped caring if he as an adult might look “stupid” or “funny”, which can be interpreted as a loss of consciousness of the self (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). He noticed that ideas for play were coming easily and spontaneously.

4. Teaching by doing and free learning

It is evident that there is a lot of teaching in the student’s activity, but this is very specific “teaching”. It can be described as active demonstration and employment of certain skills, but it is up to the child to imitate and start using some of them or not. This is active teaching in the context of ongoing play. Learning, which takes place, is necessary to move the play activity forward. A play situation creates the need and motivation for the child to learn new skills.

This kind of learning can be called “free” learning. This is very typical of young children’s learning, which is holistic and participatory and proceeds through careful observation and gradual imitation. We call it free learning because the child imitates only what he is able to understand and is ready for.
This kind of learning is the same or very close to what Rogoff *et al.* (1998; 2003) describe as “intent participation” when describing children’s learning in natural settings in traditional societies.

I want to stress that the student is not teaching the child directly; he is focused on developing their joint play activity. The child’s teaching and learning proceeds in the context of play and through play. The child became deeply involved in the activity, which required a higher level of functioning. The child demonstrated certain skills, which were not present in everyday situations only because he participated in this concrete play activity. His learning was contextual, embedded in the activity and came as a result of participation in play activity. But it will take time before all the skills and abilities become visible and stable in non-play situations.

As a result of successfully organized joint activities the student managed to help with the child’s communication and interactions with others, turn taking, block building, use of language, and expanded the vocabulary. Together they were explicitly exploring such concepts as: high, higher, tremendously high, more, again, collision, building, destroying, etc. The whole organized intervention of the adult helped the child to move to a more developed level of play.

Optimal adult help is of a very specific nature; the adult should always adjust his actions to the child’s abilities. In other words, an adult’s activeness should be inversely proportional to the activeness of the child. Suvorov described (2003, p. 76) the universal law of interiorization: “the law of graduated shared activity” that could be defined as “first together and then by oneself”. The essence of the law is that an adult should notice the first signs of a child’s attempts towards independence and gradually weaken his help/support thus providing the space for his/her self-development.

### 5.2 Case 2: Adult Help in the Narrative Role-Play of a Child Group

In this case I will follow a more advanced level of group play activity. The case concerns direct adult participation in building a joint narrative role-play in a small group of children. I will focus on the developmental changes of the activity: the level of participation, involvement and creative initiatives of the participants. I’ll analyze the most successful and the least successful sessions and define the main characteristics of successful adult participation. I finish my analysis by discussing the effects of adult interventions both on children and on students.
5.2.1 *Play setting, participants and their tasks*

Narrative role-play takes place in the creative drama centre (occupying two rooms on the ground floor of the house) right after the students’ puppet story presentation. Three to four students are assigned to support children’s play in the centre; one student is responsible for video recording and one to two students write field notes. All these students, except the person filming, may become involved in joint play. Often students stop writing and join in the play if they suddenly come up with a good idea. We have decided that creative play is the most important activity, so the other activities of the adults are subordinated to it, except for video recording.

The students are assigned to promote joint narrative play of the group of children remaining in the creative drama centre after the puppet presentation. They are instructed to take an active role in children’s play and to apply the most suitable elements of the creative drama methods. Students are encouraged to use the whole building and to connect narrative play activities with other creative activities. In practice, this means that the players might be using all rooms in the house to create such environments as a “castle”, “forest”, “robber’s hiding place”, “jail”, “far away land”, etc. Activities such as making different props and costumes, drawing a map, painting a castle, or constructing a ship or a house are also a part of the play.

This is a new social situation of development both for the children and the students. The play activity is more advanced; most of the children want to play with other children but lack sufficient skills and experiences. Age, play experiences and expectations of participating students are very different and sometimes even opposite.

For the students this is a complicated task. The students have to be inside the activity, to act only when needed and do only what is really needed. The students’ main task is to support the development of joint play activity. Besides that the students have to give necessary individual support to participating children.

Here I use the new units of observation and analysis. This is connected with a new developmental situation and mechanism of development in children. First of all this is already imaginative role play, whereby children assume roles during play. All children have their own ideas about what they want to play. The main task of the adults is to find a common idea for play that satisfies every participant and to construct a play narrative that will motivate children to participate. Why is
it important that children play together? We believe that play skills are acquired only from play interactions through active participation.

5.2.2 Results

In the following paragraphs I will describe my findings after analyzing all 12 play sessions during the term. Four types of data were used in the analysis:

- A joint report by the group responsible for the activities in the centre.
- A report by the person filming.
- A report by the researcher based on her field notes and video observation.
- Student observations (1–2 persons) about the activities. The observations are made during the session.

First I give a short description of successful and unsuccessful play sessions and describe their main characteristics. Then I describe in detail the main features of successful adult intervention and discuss what changes the participation in joint play activities have brought to children’s and adults’ behavior.

5.2.3 Analysis of Successful Play Intervention

Short description of successful play intervention

The play session named “Castle play” was the most successful play activity during the autumn term. The activity lasted about 90 minutes, 8 children of various ages (from 3.8 to 10-years-old) and 4 students participated. Here is the short story line of the play:

Three brave knights (three boys in knights’ costumes) started fighting and chasing a dragon. At the same time, two girls decided to build a castle. After the castle was built, two robbers attacked the castle and stole two crowns. Everyone went searching for the robbers and the missing crowns. A King from a distant kingdom made a visit to the castle. After his visit, a letter from the robbers demanding money in exchange for the crowns was received. The knights decided to arrange a “trap” for the robber and to catch him. The plan succeeded and one robber was caught and taken to jail. At that time, another robber captured the King and kept him in an unknown hiding place. Brave knights went to search for
him, and soon they found the robber, rescued the King, and brought the robber to jail. The King was brought to the castle and a party was arranged.

Analysis of key characteristics of successful play intervention

The theme of play came from the children and was shared by all participants. Three boys started the play. Immediately after the puppet story presentation, they put on helmets and started running around the building, fencing with swords, and proclaiming that they were searching for the dragon. Students and children were familiar with this “historical” play theme that had been going on for six years in our play lab. Brave knights fighting evil was the leading play theme among our children since the first year of play lab activities.

Students took the children’s idea as a starting point for joint play. They proposed building a castle and at once two girls joined the activity. One student took the role of the princess and through that role could “guide” children in some complicated situations. Other students changed their roles depending on the emerging script of play.

When the castle was ready, one knight discovered a message in a castle post box that said, “Be aware of the robbers!” Everyone became very excited, and the knights were ready to defend the castle. Just a few minutes later the two robbers (students in roles) attacked the castle and managed to grab two golden crowns in spite of the fact that knights were fighting fiercely.

After the attack, the children became interested in who the robbers were and where they went when they disappeared. They started running around and searching for any possible traces of evidence about the robbers and their hiding place. One girl proposed putting two guards at the entrance to the castle in case the robbers returned. Two students, the same ones who played the robbers, took the roles.

After the first attack more children joined the activity, and it became clear that the student’s participation was a success. Soon a new message was found in the post box. Each new event was introduced/constructed quite spontaneously depending on the situation and the children’s behavior. The student who was filming wrote in her report, “The storyline had not been planned exactly; the events in play activity were evolving naturally.” (Anne’s field notes, 10.18.07)

The students were constantly involved in a dialogue with the children and decided on their next steps in response to the children’s actions. For example, when the children were building a castle, the students decided to have a post box
near the gates because one boy was very eager to be a postman bringing newspapers to the castle. After that, the students decided to put the robbers’ message in the postbox, prepare a robbery episode, and evaluate the children’s reaction. The excitement and shining faces of the children was a sign for the “robbers” to proceed.

There were not many explicit negotiations between the students and children; mainly it was the student in the role of the princess who was participating in the children’s discussions. She was the one who was passing the children’s ideas to the other students. For that reason, each new event was, to a certain degree, unexpected by the children, but the next step was made only after children reacted to the previous one. For example, if the children showed no interest in some idea or event, the students would make a new proposal and move in another direction. In this way, the students managed to keep the children’s interest and involvement during the whole activity.

This principle of “turn taking” in constructing play events is crucial. Such dialogic interactions can be described as “creative improvisations” (Sawyer, 1997; 2001) that are typical for children’s pretend play. The concept of “co-regulated communication” by Fogel (1993) may also be relevant here. The character of the interactions reveals that the activity is co-constructed and co-regulated between students and children.

Students reported in their reflections that it was very challenging to decide what the right moves were and how to enact them. On the other hand, seeing how involved and excited the children were was a huge satisfaction. “It was both fun and tense because we became more and more involved with play activity and we did not want to spoil it. If we think now about what happened we were really playing, and it was fun and challenging at the same time.” (Henna’s field notes, 11.18.07)

An outstanding attribute of the activity was the deep emotional involvement of the participants. Both students and children were immersed in the activity. This might be connected with the students’ decision to take roles and enter into the children’s play. The students were always encouraged to take roles in the creative drama center, but not all the students were eager to do so. On this occasion, though, they felt it was the only way to involve children of such different ages in joint play. As a result, all of the students were in roles as well as most of the children.

The students managed to create quite a complicated plot right from the beginning. Some events were planned, such as the robbery and the “trap” for the
robber, but some just arose from the situation. For example, when students needed more characters they had to play several different roles in different episodes. The tricky thing was that two guards protecting the castle from the robbers had to play the robbers as well. When the robbers first appeared, their faces were covered and children could not identify them. But the older girls became suspicious about the guards and led the rest of the children to find the truth.

Some children were very smart players and demanded that the events should be planned and performed “truthfully”. This posed a challenge to the students. The participation of older children “forced” the students to be inventive and creative in telling lies, changing costumes, and finding hiding places in order to keep the secret as long as possible. Without bigger children, such exciting and long play activity probably would not have occurred. Their participation raised the play to the construction of a complicated plot – a play narrative actually. The improvisational character of student intervention introduced a qualitatively new level of challenge and developmental impact. It is important to note at this point that creative improvisation of this nature can only be learned through practicing (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Sawyer, 2001).

We can conclude that the activity was spontaneous, improvisational and creative. Students were constructing a coherent storyline through dialogic interactions with children. A dramatic tension was created with robber’s roles, dangerous events, and deep ‘in role’ involvement. Activity was spontaneously improvised and co-constructed in a dialogic form; the students took into account the children’s ideas all the time. All of the students and most of the children were in roles and emotionally involved; “flow” elements were evident in most of the play episodes. Most dialogues were in roles and creatively improvised. The activity was very challenging and motivating. Emotional involvement of the participants is an essential character of successful play intervention.

5.2.4 Analysis of Unsuccessful Play Intervention

**Short description of unsuccessful play intervention**

The play session “Ship play” was one of the two unsuccessful play interventions during the autumn term. It lasted about 40 minutes; 3 children (from 3.4 to 5-years-old) and 4 students participated. One child “escaped” in the middle of the
Another young boy was constantly leaving “boring” episodes and coming back when more exciting events happened. Two children, a girl and a boy, started building and furnishing a ship, and the students supported them. After the ship was ready, children went shopping, prepared food, and went to sleep. There were two princesses in the ship, while the other participants were just travelers. At a certain moment robbers attacked the ship and stole the crown. Everyone left to chase the robbers and search for the crown, but the search was unsuccessful. Then the travelers received a message with a map showing where the stolen crown was hidden. They started a new search but couldn’t find the crown. Back in the ship, the travelers ate, slept, and searched again. Two robbers attacked the ship and tried to kidnap the princess. One robber was caught and the other one disappeared with the princess. The children searched for the princess, rescued her and finally found the crown in a dark goblin’s cave.

**Analysis of key characteristics of unsuccessful play intervention**

In their reports, the students wrote that they were not satisfied with the activity. They described the activity as “boring” for both them and the children. The students were surprised that the children were not emotionally involved in the episodes with the robbers. They thought it would be the most exciting event and would create dramatic tension. Instead, long episodes of fishing, making food, and sleeping in the ship were more attractive for both the children and the students.

Careful observation and analysis of video material revealed that the robbery episodes were poorly organized and performed. When two robbers (students in roles) attacked the ship it didn’t look like an attack. Two persons with masks unexpectedly entered the room, took two crowns and simply left. The princess (student in role) made a “surprised” face and was looking at the children as if waiting for some reaction from them, but the children looked at her and were not sure how to react. “The robbers have stolen our crowns, we should go to search for them,” said the princess in a calm voice. Without enthusiasm several children (2 boys and a girl) followed her.

The search episode was rather long (about 7 min.). Children were going around the building without finding any clues or signs, nothing unexpected happened, and they were observing other children’s play more than searching for the robbers.
When the searchers returned to the ship, the students proposed going fishing, then eating and sleeping. This episode was again long (10 min.), but children and students enjoyed it and were more involved than in the robbery and search episodes.

In the morning, the message with a plan showing the robber’s hiding place was found in the ship. Children and students went to search for it but did not find anything. After they returned to the ship, two robbers (students in roles) attacked the ship. One robber was captured and imprisoned by children; the other disappeared with a princess (student in role). Children went to look for the princess. Two children soon returned to the ship. One boy, in the role of a knight, and two students finally found the princess, and then an interesting situation occurred. “When we finally found the kidnapped princess, Erno (3.4 year-old boy in role) the knight did not want to save her and said that we (students) should save her. We burst out laughing. Somehow I was unable to take the play seriously. We were pretending that we were playing and could not hide our smiles in the most important episodes. Children definitely noticed this and were not seriously involved either.” (Anne’s field notes, 11.22.07) The comment reveals that students did not take the activity seriously.

After the princess was rescued, students initiated two more search operations because the crowns were still missing. One of the operations was a disaster; two boys left for other play activities and the girl stayed to make food in the ship. Then a new message came, hinting that the crowns were hidden in the goblin’s cave. The cave was set up in a dark cellar room. This “dangerous” and exciting task mobilized and brought together all three children, and two younger girls even joined them.

Discussions with the students revealed that they planned the play events beforehand and tried to follow the plan during the play session. The students implemented a pre-planned activity, formally taking roles and guided children to follow their plan. The last and most successful episode in the goblin’s cave was not pre-planned; it came as a spontaneous idea to one student when she saw that children were not interested in playing together anymore. This episode saved the whole activity; both the students and children clearly enjoyed it.

It is important to prepare for the intervention. In fact all of the students were asked to make some plan and to discuss possible ideas to be elaborated during the play session with the children. This “bank” of alternative ideas is a part of the preparation. The success of the intervention depends heavily on the implementation of the plan. At this stage, the emotional involvement, the
perezhivanie of the evolving situation, which should result in emotional sensitivity to the situation and the people involved, becomes very important. One has to be “open” to children’s proposals and ideas and be ready to incorporate them. Sensitivity helps the students to make the right choices, and all pre-planned ideas provide the basis for spontaneous improvisation.

Such sensitivity was missing during most of the episodes in this intervention. Students did not leave the space for the children’s ideas to be incorporated into their plan and were not ready to improvise together. The character of the implementation stage is best described in the report by the student who was filming: “No spontaneity, no creative improvisations, no dramatic tension, and the whole activity is ‘not alive’ for the students” (from the summary of play session, 11.22.07).

This might explain the reason why it was so difficult to find the theme for joint play. “It was rather difficult to start the play, although children were waiting for us to start playing with them right after the puppet presentation. I couldn’t find out what the kids were interested in. In addition, Roosa (4.6) and Urho (5) seemed to have no interest in playing together.” (Niina’s field notes, 11.22.07) Instead of proposing several ideas for joint play, students were ‘pushing’ their plan, which resulted in individual children constructing their ‘own’ play themes inside the main play.

The whole activity was not coherent; the episodes were all very different from each other. The episodes connected with the robbery were less successful than episodes in the ship. During home-type play episodes in the ship students were more involved, more relaxed, and even spontaneous. There was an impression that students were somehow resistant to playing the robbers story. Why, then, did they try to introduce robbers into their play? Probably because they knew that this was the favorite play theme for many participating children, or maybe they were afraid to change their plan.

Joint discussions revealed that the students were not trying to construct a plot that would be interesting and exciting for them. That’s why they were not motivated to participate and really play with children. Their roles and interactions with the children were formal; the students were not emotionally involved in the activity. A lack of student emotional involvement is one of the explanations for unsuccessful play intervention.

We can summarize that the activity was planned beforehand and later implemented following the initial plan. It felt more like a stereotypical home play (long episodes of preparing food, eating, sleeping, etc.), with episodes from
stereotypical robbers play mixed in, which was quite boring for both the students and the children. The storyline was a schematic repetition of previous play sessions except for the last episode in the goblin’s cave. Although the story line seemed coherent, the play activity itself was more like a collection of separate episodes. No dramatic tension was present in spite of the fact that some students and children were in roles (not in all episodes) and pirates were attacking the ship. Children did not want to search for the princess when the pirate captured her. There were very few in-role dialogues, and those that occurred developed mostly out of play conversations.

We were pleased that only two intervention sessions were ‘unsuccessful’. On the other hand, analysis of these two sessions with students became a very important learning opportunity. By analyzing the student’s reflections, watching the videotaped episodes, and comparing these unsuccessful episodes with successful ones, we managed to grasp the factors necessary for a successful intervention.

5.2.5 Play Intervention as a Tool for Play Development

As a result of the analysis of 12 play sessions, the following characteristics of the students’ actions that led to successful adult intervention were singled out: (1) motivating shared theme; (2) active ‘in role’ participation of students; (3) emotional involvement of students; (4) dialogic character of interactions; (5) dramatic tension in play script; (6) coherent and fascinating script; (7) elaboration of the ‘critical’ turns in play. In the following sections we will examine each of these characteristics in order to understand the necessary criteria for successful adult play intervention.

1. The motivating theme

The theme of danger was the main theme of all the play sessions during the autumn. This was a theme of serious debate amongst the adults involved. The theme had already been dominant among 4- to 5-year-old boys for the previous four years. New children came but the theme continued to live despite the students’ resistance. Some kind of resistance was raised every time a new group of students started the course in Play Lab. Some of the students claimed that the theme of danger, and all kinds of fighting, is “violent” play, which should not be supported in educational institutions. After long discussions between researchers,
students and parents, the students agreed to build play activities ‘exploring’ the theme of danger. This decision did not eliminate other possible play themes if they were to arise during the course of activities.

Really exciting play started only when a mysterious and dangerous event happened or a character created some kind of dramatic tension. Often the idea came from the children. The importance of the theme of danger is revealed in children’s active participation in creating tension. From the third play session on, children started ‘helping’ students in creating tension in joint play. In addition to the robber’s character, the girl Roosa (4.6) introduced a troll’s figure. A young boy, Erno (3.4), introduced robbers (session 5) during the next play session (No 6). He actively searched for and arrested the robbers, but in a few minutes, when appointed to guard the prison, he set them free (4 times during one play session). During the following session (No 10), a girl, Lotta (4.10), took the leading role and created tension by introducing a pirate captain and a robber who had stolen Santa Claus, his compass, and a Christmas tree just three weeks before Christmas! During the next play session (No 11), a boy, Jyrki (4.6), introduced dangerous Snowmen, living on a far away, northern island. During the last play session (No 12), after a student had read a message announcing the King’s arrival, the children unanimously decided that the mysterious King must be dangerous and that they had to be ready to protect their castle.

2. In role participation and emotional involvement

The most critical step of student participation was the decision to take a role and enter into the children’s play. The ‘in role’ position forced the participants to follow the rules imposed by the role and to think both as their chosen character and as themselves simultaneously. This was the critical moment for many students, when they realized that at the same time as they act, they should carefully follow the children’s reactions to the character’s behavior. “I suddenly realized that I could guide children’s reactions and behavior through the behavior of my character!” (Viljami’s field notes, 11.01.07)

This is the moment when students become emotionally involved in the relationship, both with their own character and with the participating children. They become sensitive to the evolving situation and the situation starts motivating their further steps. At this point, the student may start a dialogue between his character and the children that helps him to clarify an interesting theme or topic for their joint interaction.
In all twelve sessions, students applied the same intervention strategy; they took roles and made attempts to enter into the children’s play. Ten attempts were successful and two failed. The explanation can be found in the fact that in both unsuccessful cases the students only announced their roles without being deeply involved in the activity. A student reflected in her report: “We were pretending that we were playing.” (Anne’s field notes, 11.20.07) The experiences from successful play sessions are quite different: “It was exciting for them [the children] to see that adults were completely immersed in play. For me it was funny to see my peer students’ involvement in roles, and it helped me to carry out my own role as the Captain.” (Anna’s field notes, 10.04.07) Deep involvement results in flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and a high level of performance. This is evident from both the video observations and the students’ written reflections.

The students emphasized that their involvement was closely related to the children’s involvement. “The children were very enthusiastic and involved and I noticed myself that I was totally involved and absorbed by the play activity.” (Henna’s field notes, 11.01.07) It seems that involvement in the emotional ‘perezhvyvanie’ is one of the most important characteristics of a successful play intervention. Some students indicated that role position helped them to understand what the imaginary situation really meant. “For the first time I realized the meaning of the imaginary world. This is the world which you can create as you wish because you create the rules of this world. It gives you a feeling of freedom, and the only limit is your own imagination. At the same time, it is a “tricky” freedom, because you can destroy the imaginary world as soon as you break the rules you have created …” (Niina’s reflections, 1.15.2008)

3. The character of the interactions

An important aspect of a successful intervention is the character of the interactions between children and students. In successful sessions, these interactions are spontaneous and dialogic; students listen to and hear the children’s ideas and use them as the starting point of joint activity. The students reflected on such moments, “We tried to bring new elements into play … but at the same time it is important to keenly observe children and pick up hints from them about the direction of a fruitful play activity. … Such play requires rather heavy thinking in a situation where nobody knows what to do next. But the intensive observation of children helps a lot.” (Anna’s field notes, 10.04.07)
Students involved in all of the successful sessions sought to cooperate with the children as the only way to construct an exciting play activity. Sawyer (1997) pointed out that one of the most improvisational activities of 3- to 5-year-old children is social pretend play. It is no wonder that the two most successful activities were spontaneous improvisations with no initial plan, just a very general idea. In such cases, genuine interaction is the only productive way to move forward. A set of guidelines that improvisational actors have developed for their work was very useful to the students, especially “no denial”, “don’t write script in your head”, and “listen to the group mind” (Sawyer, 2001). All of the participating students in successful sessions reported on the improvisational character of play activities. They also described two aspects of such improvisational activities: challenge and enjoyment. “It was fun and challenging at the same time”. (Henna’s field notes, 11.18.07)

4. Motivating aspects of adult participation

A coherent and fascinating plot was extremely important for motivating student involvement. Students were talking about the feeling of satisfaction and excitement they had when they managed to co-construct an exciting storyline that captured the attention of all of the participants.

There were additional important aspects in successful activities that made those activities exciting and motivating for the students. Often, the same students played several roles, constantly changing costumes, which is usual in children’s play. Some students played both a castle guard and a robber, or a policeman and a robber, during the same session. Sometimes they helped the children (as policeman or guard) to search for themselves (as robbers). Some children did not realize that the students had dual roles, but older children suspected it without being able to identify the real persons behind the role. Suspicions created additional tension and students wanted to keep the secret as long as possible.

Students wrote about humor and having fun together. “We had a lot of fun playing together. Every time someone proposed some ‘crazy’ idea, we supported it and were eager to implement it immediately!” (Niina’s field notes, 10.04.07) Besides playing with the children, the students were also playing among themselves so there were several levels of play going on at once. When the students experienced the state of deep emotional involvement with the children, they realized that unexpected turns in a story line were crucial for their own involvement and participation, so they started improvising and being more
spontaneous. For example, as time went on they created unexpected, funny or provocative situations more often. One student (Henna’s field notes, 11.01.07) explained that it was a great satisfaction to see a look of surprise or excitement on other students’ faces. “Such situations just inspired me and gave me a feeling of satisfaction!” she admitted. Even though the main story line was planned together, there was always space for improvisation in successful play interventions.

It seems that this multi-layered play is a necessary condition of real adult involvement and creativity. Playing together has to be fun for adult participants as well. This multi-layered aspect of play was not present in the unsuccessful play interventions. That might also be the reason why some students described in their reflections that it was difficult to participate. We presume that participation for the students was difficult because the children were not excited and sometimes even not interested (they would leave the play activity or were coming and leaving constantly). We think that the level of children’s involvement is connected with the level of adult involvement; children are very sensitive and have a perfect intuition to detect who is really playing and who is just pretending.

5. Critical turning points in play activity

Properly handling the critical ‘turning points’ is a significant factor characterizing successful adult play intervention. At such moments, play activity slows down, becomes repetitive and boring, and moves towards a dead end. Adult help is crucial at these turns. In all successful sessions, the students managed to provide appropriate help. Participation in successful play sessions demonstrated how students could anticipate when the play was becoming boring before the children explicitly expressed it. In those situations, the students have to do something (introduce a new character, turn of events, etc.) before the dead end. On the other hand, students admitted that interesting play activity cannot last forever (our play sessions lasted 45–90 minutes), so it is important to plan a logical ending which provokes children to develop the same theme next time.

All these listed criteria are very closely intertwined, all are necessary steps in a successful adult intervention, and all bring about certain changes not only in the children but in the students as well.
5.2.6 Changes in Children's Individual Participation

The most visible changes can be traced in the participation of the three most frequent players: Roosa (4.6) and the two boys Urho (5) and Erno (3.4). Together, these children participated in 7 play sessions. A difficult challenge in play intervention is how followers and solo players are invited to fully participate in joint play.

Roosa (4.6) has visited the playgroup for 2 years, was used to playing with her elder sister (6), who left for preschool. For her this is a new and challenging situation. She never played with other children except her sister and, a few times, played with a student in the home play center.

Roosa (4.6) participated in 11 play sessions and spent most of her time playing in the creative drama centre. She only missed one session during the autumn holiday, when her elder sister and mother were visiting the site and she stayed with them in the handicraft and art centre, constructing and painting a car. However, she observed the creative drama play and joined in at the very end. A student wrote in her field notes “It is pleasant to observe how Roosa is now more courageous compared to last year. During this play activity I saw how she lived through the events and was eager to participate.” (Laura’s field notes, 10.25.07)

Roosa’s behavior changed noticeably from session to session. During the first session she observed the play from time to time and joined in with the final episodes. She participated in the next session from beginning to end. She was still tense, silent most of the time and resisted taking a role. She was very “suspicious” of any new proposal to join an imaginary world, always saying “no” or just shaking her head. At the same time she became easily involved in out of play discussion about making food. We had the impression that she was not so interested in imaginary play but rather wanted to obtain the students’ attention. The turning point in her participation was the episode in Abdullah’s shop, when a student playing Abdullah said that he could only sell crowns to “real” princesses. Roosa wanted the crown so much that she agreed to be a princess and joined other princesses dancing. It was a good way to involve her in the role-play. By the end of the activity she was already in the role of Princess and quite comfortable.

During the third session the students could hardly recognize her, e.g. she became an organizer of the activity: proposing the topic for play, assigning roles to the students, explaining how to build the ship. In fact she was repeating all the ideas from a previous play session imitating the students. She even imitated the poster and the intonations of the student who played the Captain. This was quite
typical of some other children. Every week we could notice how children “borrow” and appropriate students’ ideas.

The students admitted that she had suddenly become somehow more relaxed and confident: “her behavior has changed a lot, she became really brave and active.” (Anna’s field notes, 10.11.07) Roosa was one of the organizers of the play activity, she would always stay in the creative drama center and would wait for play. She was active in the initial stage of play, giving ideas as to what to play, how to build a castle, or a ship but not so active later when constructing exciting play events.

The most significant changes were observed throughout the three initial sessions. She started from a point of resistance and uncertainty then moved towards careful observation and silent participation in the second session and active participation in the third play session.

At the same time the students noticed that the children, including Roosa, were only interacting with adults but not with each other. It was as if they were “deaf and blind” to each other’s ideas and proposals. For example they would not hear each other’s proposals but would listen when students would say something, even the same idea. They would not interact with each other, only with adults. Sometimes it looked like they were competing with each other for the students’ attention. The field notes state: “adults still had to make an effort to guide and move the joint play activity forward. The children interacted amongst themselves very weakly and their play needed a lot of adult support, so that they could play together.” (Karoliina’s field notes, 10.04.07)

The older boy Urho (5) has been in playgroup for 3 years and usually plays only with one boy (5), with small cars, trains and building materials. He likes to cause dramatic collisions (e.g. car or train accidents, falling houses, etc.). He observed elder boys playing knights and robbers but did not participate in role-play in the creative drama center. He avoids speaking with students, and speaks mainly with his mother and a friend.

Urho (5) was present in 9 play sessions and his level of participation did not change drastically. He became interested in creative drama activities two years earlier. He was very curious about the “Knights and Dragon” play the elder boys were involved in. However, he never joined their play activities. When he became the eldest boy of the club he played mainly with his friend (a 5 year-old) with cars, trains and building blocks. Urho came to play during the first play session but did not join in the play activity of other children. He ran and messed around with his friend. During the next session he spent quite a lot of time sliding or just
sitting on the slide and observing play, sometimes making comments. A student described his behavior: “He did not actively participate nor did he take a role. When he was asked to join in he was uncertain (he looked down with a shy smile and shook his head) and did not join the play. Yet he was in the middle of the play events for a long time and observed the others carefully. He was physically already in the play ship. He went down the slide, which was part of the ship construction. When asked, he did not want to take any roles, but the theme [meeting dangerous pirates] clearly interested him. I am sure that next time he will participate in a role.” (Niina’s field notes, 10.04.07)

From the second play session onwards Urho became a constant participant in the creative drama centre but it took some time before he became more active. Quite unexpectedly during the seventh play session he came up with a spontaneous solution and took on the role of a tracker dog. In the middle of the activity when everybody was searching for the robbers Urho started sniffing the carpet like a dog. “Do you smell robber?” – asked the Captain (student in role). – “Yes, I do” – answered Urho also in role. Everybody appreciated the idea and agreed to include the dog. Urho became an active player but he never took a leading role in the activity during the autumn.

The youngest participant Erno (3.4) has been in playgroup for 2 years, a very active child, he has a lot of ideas for play and, in general, speaks a lot, knows many letters and can read his own name as well as some other words. He is very enthusiastic about play activities with students, knows many of them by name, but doesn’t play with other children. If he participates in shared play he doesn’t pay attention to other children’s ideas or proposals.

Erno (3.4) took part in 8 play sessions, once he had observed the sessions from time to time. In general, he was a very active child, always full of creative ideas, very excited and eager to participate. Normally, he would run around the area staying in different centers for a short period of time and would participate in several parallel play activities. He did not listen to the other children’s ideas, often did not follow the joint play storyline but started implementing his own play ideas. Very soon the creative drama centre became his favorite area. He stayed for longer periods of time and stuck to one activity at a time. He refused to go for a short lunch in the kitchen when his mother invited him.

After two play sessions he started taking roles. His first role was ship’s cook and later, after the robbers’ attack, he became a knight. At first he simply announced his role but was in fact acting as himself and then switching to a new role. This experimenting with roles was connected with the developing story line.
in the play narrative: in a new episode he might take a new role. He might not have announced that he was taking a role but he was clearly behaving like a policeman, a knight or a castle guard. He would make police car sounds, wear a helmet and have a sword in his hand. He would not only have these outside role attributes, but would also perform corresponding actions and follow the rules of the chosen role.

A student’s field notes reveal how important experimentation with the feeling of danger was for him. “There was a lot of repetition in this play activity. Robbers were caught, put into prison and then escaped or were set free many times. Erno (3.4) set the robber (student in role) free and told me that she had escaped and disappeared! He wanted to search for the robbers again. Searching for and catching the robbers was very exciting for the children. It was not boring to search again and again. Play for the children must have felt much more exciting when the robbers were free. When the robbers were in prison there was no feeling of “danger”, which attracts children.” (Johanna’s field notes, 11.01.07)

5.2.7 Discussion about the Effects of Adult Intervention in Children’s Play

The described changes in individual children’s behavior did not significantly improve their ability to construct an exciting narrative play activity collaboratively. Two unsuccessful play sessions demonstrated that when the students did not help in the construction of dramatic tension through exciting play events, the children’s activity dropped back to a lower everyday script level in spite of the fact that these children already had a long play history (7 sessions). On the other hand they were playing together and having fun, which was not the case at the beginning.

It is important to note that after two months the children started playing with each other more often and without the students’ help. They also interacted in everyday situations like eating, and working in the handcraft center, amongst others. Some of them became friends. These changes are only the first indicators of the impact of student intervention. Child involvement in permanent play relationships is a necessary step towards mature narrative role-play.

The conclusion can be drawn that all observed changes are only the first steps towards self-initiative, construction of joint plot and leadership in play. Our claim is that only student participation kept the children of different ages and levels of maturity together. The students involved the children in joint play activity by
building interesting play environments (castle, ship), constructing exciting play events (sailing in a ship, pirate attack, search for robbers and stolen treasures) and creating dramatic tension, and by modeling play actions and dialogues in roles.

The process of gradual assimilation and accumulation of previous experiences could already be observed from the video material. Children are constantly assimilating and developing further the ideas, behavioral models, play building strategies, roles, even voice intonations and movements used by students and other children. We believe that besides these observable indicators, children are assimilating the creative and improvisational character of the activities in our experimental site. We argue that children’s creative play and development are only possible in creative environments. Available adult models prepare critical turning points and qualitative changes in play activity and child development.

More careful analysis of the sessions and comparison of both successful and unsuccessful sessions enabled us to define the most significant aspects of successful adult interventions: (1) motivating shared theme; (2) active ‘in role’ participation of students; (3) emotional involvement of students; (4) dialogic character of interactions; (5) dramatic tension in play script; (6) coherent and fascinating script; (7) elaboration of the ‘critical’ turns in play. The most critical aspect is emotional involvement, which is closely connected to the character of implementation (improvisational, spontaneous, creative) and students’ ability to construct multi-layered play.

We have tried to demonstrate with our empirical data how difficult but important play intervention is. Play interventions are meant to bring certain changes in the participants. Our play interventions were planned with the aims of supporting the development of children’s play and providing opportunities for the university students to develop their competence in guiding children’s play. We have to admit that the impact on the students was beyond our expectations. Students described in their reports and discussions some of the changes. Here are some conclusions from students’ discussions and final reports.

1. It is not simple to play with children, participation in play requires:
   - Learning the ‘language’ of play
   - Real involvement – “once accepted you really have to play, not just ‘pretend’ that you are playing…”

2. Play with children is a challenge but also a pleasure.
3. Playing requires creative thinking, improvisational skills and the courage to explore new possibilities.
4. Children like adults who play with them; they view them as friends.
5. Playing with children helps to understand their ideas and their thinking better.
6. It is amazing how easily an adult in role can influence a child’s behavior!
7. If children are deeply involved in play, they are able to concentrate well for a long time.
8. If play is motivating, children can learn many things that are necessary for the activity.
9. The ability required of the teacher is to learn to be involved in play and to be able to observe the whole situation as if from the outside at the same time.

The experiences of the students participating in successful play sessions became a significant step in their professional growth as teachers. Still, this process is quite slow. Participation in play interventions (in-role participation) appeared to be a difficult task for most students. It took some time (2–4 weeks) before they became involved in joint play activities with children and then a long time of practicing before adults become competent players.

Analysis of the students’ reflections and final reports revealed the growth of their professional knowledge and understanding obtained from their participation in play interventions. Their increasing ability to function on more professional levels could be observed from session to session. A necessary skill of a professional teacher, the ability to capture both adults’ and a child’s point of view simultaneously, is best developed in shared play activity with children. Collaborative co-construction of joint activity promotes development of all participants, both children and adults (professional growth).

In a group play situation the unit of analysis of play – the event – is constructed through negotiation and dialogue. Adults (adult help) have to keep children within the play frame (inexperienced children constantly “fall out” of it), to pick up on children’s ideas and use them for play construction. Here the term scaffolding\(^2\) might be used. Adults should prop up/shore up the whole structure of play in those moments when it is starting to fall apart. In practice this means that they have to help individual children to participate in the activity but also to take an active role and to move the activity one step forward when it is needed.

\(^2\) The term ‘scaffolding’ comes from the works of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976). The term ‘scaffolding’ was developed as a metaphor to describe the type of assistance offered by a teacher or peer to support learning.
5.3 Case 3: Creative Acts in a Play Environment

The support of the child’s initiatives requires freedom and responsibility to make their own choices. In other words, the child self-development is supported by constantly “pushing” them to act in the zone of distant development. This means that the child is not obliged to follow adult examples and ideas, but they have to learn to act on their own. As a consequence they acquire the independence and courage to explore and express their own ideas. We presuppose that the first steps of self-change are taken in play activity and the child has to become a different person in play before their everyday behavior will change.

The acquisition of cultural forms of behavior implies creativity. In our experimental site we can observe the explosion of creative acts around five years of age in many children. In the following section I will analyze different forms of self-development – creative acts – in children evoked by puppet story presentation. I will focus on the turning points in children’s play behavior. My goal is to look closer at the mastery of cultural tools in the social environment.

The setting

Usually, story presentation is organized in the basement floor of the house. There are two rooms that we call creative drama rooms. The most creative narrative play activities start there. When children need a secret place for their play, they also go there. There are no windows, so different lighting can be used. We keep many costumes and props for role-play in these rooms. For puppet presentation students make a small stage from big soft blocks. Children sit in front of the stage on mattresses and watch the presentation. They make comments and sometimes are asked for help. Simple self-made puppets and soft toys are used for the presentation.

Puppet presentations are intended for elder children, but often mothers come with young children and babies. Depending on the day, from 4 to 12 children and some mothers are watching the presentation.
From three to five students are involved in the puppet presentation; two students are filming. All puppet presentations and dramatizations are recorded on two cameras, as it is important not to miss children’s reactions, comments and interactions with students and other children. I use transcripts of the videotapes in my analysis.

The intervention

A short (7–10 minutes) puppet show using dialogical drama with puppets is performed right after the morning circle. Usually we start with a traditional folk tale and develop it further, adding new events and adventures that “borrow” the themes and ideas from the children’s play during the previous sessions. Often children make comments, or students directly ask them to give advice in critical situations. Sometimes puppet presentations have a direct impact on children and they develop the ideas in their play. Some children use only puppets in their play and create their own story. Sometimes they elaborate the adventures further. Mothers told us that some children make their own version of the puppet story for their family members. In some cases they make their own puppets at home!
Lucas

Lucas has attended our club for three years. The observation period lasted six months (5.2 – 5.8). Lucas is independent, he possesses quite strong character traits of individualism and perfectionism. He is very curious, eager to learn reading, writing, and math. He loves to work in the handicraft center with paper and scissors, plasticine, drawing and cutting figures, painting large narrative-based pictures. All his activities are purposeful and usually productive: he likes to make or create something that he can show to his parents and students, and then take home. During the last two years he has not made close contacts with other children and has preferred to play with students, with his younger sister (2.9) or by himself.

First participation in a puppet presentation – resistance

During the first two weeks Lucas was not interested in puppet story presentations. But this time his mother insisted that he should watch the puppet presentation. Finally he agreed. The story presentation lasted for 11 minutes. Students were developing the Russian folk tale *The Turnip* further: creating new events and adding new characters.

Within 3 minutes Lucas became interested and started to follow the presentation. From time to time he was looking around with an angry expression on his face. As soon as he concentrated his attention on the presentation his expression changed. He listened and followed carefully students’ and children’s interactions. Twice he was about to sit down, cast an angry glance at us (me and students standing behind him) and remained standing.

I would describe Lucas’ participation as *resistance fighting raising interest*: he did what his mother asked him to do, and even if he liked the activity, he did not want to admit that.

Second participation in a puppet presentation – raising interest

Lucas took part in the activity two weeks later. Nobody asked him; he just came and sat down with other children. He became involved from the very beginning,
but did not comment or respond when asked. He only smiled. Lucas was all ears and eyes: following everything what was going on around him. He watched acting puppets, sometimes raising his eyes to students’ (actors’) faces, listening to the words. He was completely concentrated on the presentation and even the shouting of some young children did not distract his attention. When four children came and stood in front of him he just moved to another place.

Lucas’ participation can be described as raising interest and getting to know the activity better.

Fourth participation in a puppet presentation – active participation

The story presentation took about 6 minutes. All children followed the presentation carefully; they reacted to many words and phrases, sometimes laughing. After a minute Lucas made a comment (for the first time) together with other children, quite silently, as if only to himself, but it was possible to hear the words. After a minute he responded again and then once more. By the end of the presentation he spoke easily and freely, and gave a few suggestions. After the presentation he was eager to go and help in making a new house for the characters of the story. This was a turning point in Lucas’ behavior, because from this day on he participated actively: commenting, responding and asking questions.

Lucas’ participation and his role changed from an attentive observer to the active participant.

Fifth participation in a puppet presentation – active co-construction

Lucas was active and made comments from the very beginning. A student asked for his advice and Lucas responded immediately. He was in a good mood, smiling a lot. Sometimes a girl, Noora (the same girl he will later ask to participate in his puppet presentation), who was sitting beside him made some comments. Lucas responded silently. He was building a personal relationship and this was new in Lucas’ behavior.

Immediately after the story presentation all children ran to the art area to paint a rural landscape for the story. Children painted together on a big piece of paper on the wall. Lucas was painting green grass, a house and a river next to Noora, sometimes speaking and helping her (painting was not among Noora’s’ favorite activities) to paint a yellow field.
Lucas kept on painting and conversing with another boy and a student for about 20 minutes. He painted a river, a lake, and several golden fishes in the lake. He stayed on when the other boy left, and was enjoying painting and adding many details, explaining everything to the student. The student wrote down his comments on the painting.

Lucas was comfortable and free. He seemed to get a sense of the activities, and he was quite flexible with children. He carried out a personal conversation with Noora during the story presentation and painting. He was not angry (very unusual) when a younger girl added a few details on the house he was painting! Later he enjoyed painting with another boy. Conversations with the students used to be important to him, but now he made contacts with other children.

Lucas’ behavior was changing noticeably from one session to another. In many situations he behaved like a different person. He was really an active participant and was fond of the activities. He was co-constructing them with students and other children.

The last puppet presentation (organized by Lucas) – organization & leadership

Fig. 16. Lucas’ and Noora’s puppet presentation.

This was the last day in our club before the summer break. Only two students were present for two hours, for the other two hours children were playing by themselves.

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After lunch Lucas organized his own puppet presentation. He started bringing all the decorations, puppets and props that the students had used in their puppet presentations. He arranged everything on the floor in front of the couch: two houses, all the puppet-characters, an apple tree, a pond (a piece of paper painted blue), snow (pieces of white paper), grass (green paper) and mushrooms. Lucas invited Noora to play with him. He suggested they should discuss their plan and then invited all the mothers and other children while ringing a bell. “The presentation is starting!” he announced. When people arrived he explained to them in detail where they should sit and how to behave.

Lucas played two role characters: a centipede – Pööpöti and the clown. Noora was playing the fly. They were improvising their dialogues. Then suddenly Noora’s younger sister Paula came and started to interfere in their play. Lucas stopped and told her to go and sit down, but she did not listen but tried to take a role in their play. Noora accepted Paula but Lucas once more asked her to leave. Paula stopped just for a minute and started again. Noora was not upset with Paula’s behavior and continued playing. Soon Lucas also calmed down and stopped seeing Paula as a threat to their show.

Noora sometimes responded to Paula’s actions in role when her behavior was too dangerous (Paula almost destroyed the decorations several times) and Lucas followed her example. They used all the puppet characters from the student’s puppet presentations. From time to time they negotiated between themselves what to do next. For example, after six minutes Noora asked Lucas to move from the place he was sitting, as she wanted to act there. A minute later she directed him to act on the roof.

It seems that Noora was concerned about their interactions, while Lucas sometimes became too involved in his own actions. Noora interacted with Paula as well. At a certain point Lucas became so inspired that he started singing his words. He was no longer upset about Paula’s behavior. He even accepted Paula into their play. When Paula suddenly started ringing a bell Lucas just took the bell from her and kept on playing. “The title of the story is Pööpöti’s winter nightmare”, – he announced almost at the end of the show.

The most dramatic event of the story was Pööpöti’s dreadful nightmare. The centipede got frightened, ran outside the house shouting for help and fell into the pond, nearly drowning. Luckily the Troll came to rescue. When they finished the story Lucas announced: “The end.”
5.3.2 Interpretation of the Puppet Presentation

The whole presentation took 13 minutes. Lucas did not lose his temper, and was not shouting or fighting. He was flexible and took Noora’s advice. It looks as if he is controlling his behavior quite well but right after the presentation when leaving for home he was back to his usual behavior and the mother had to guide him. This is an example of how play helps to manage the child’s own behavior.

Lucas independently organized the whole presentation (nobody asked him). He invited Noora to help him. They were doing well, co-regulating their actions and words. The whole activity was Lucas’ idea and he was very concerned about creating the story. Due to Noora’s flexibility the whole activity was carried out smoothly to the end.

As a result, they managed to co-construct a story with a beginning, dramatic events and an end. The show demonstrates that they are familiar (not consciously) with the basic structure of a story. They created the presentation spontaneously with no rehearsing and without help. At the end Lucas named their story “Pööpöti’s winter nightmare”, which seemed to be very important to him.

During the activity children demonstrated different skills and abilities, such as playing different roles, changing voices, playing several roles at a time, listening to each other, interacting and building the story plot through the dialogues. At the same time they observed the audience and made comments on their behavior. They both, especially Lucas, demonstrated the highest level of behavior or in Vygotsky’s words they were “a head taller” compared to usual behavior. I would regard this activity as the beginning of a creative act for Lucas. It is important to reflect on the whole path of his participation in the activities connected to story presentations during the year.

Reflection on Lucas’ developmental path

Lucas’ participation changed from resistance to self-initiative as is illustrated in the following chain: resistance —» raising interest —» involvement —» active participation —» leadership and organization of the activity.

Lucas was first resisting the activity and only his mother’s persistence made him join in. We observed similar situations with several children that a certain “push” or encouragement was needed for trying something new.

The mother “pushed” Lucas into a new social situation of development but he took the following step: nobody expected him to organize his own puppet
presentation. We can observe the child operating in several zones of development. The first – zone of proximal development – active participation in a puppet story presentation and connected activities such as drawing, painting, constructing, etc., and mastering new forms of behavior. The next step – employment of newly acquired skills and abilities for personal aids – could be defined as self-development in the zone of distant development.

I am looking at the boy’s developmental steps in the context of on-going activities and in relation with other people (mother, children, students). I am trying to capture their interactions, because these INTERACTIONS are going to become his individual psychological functions! From session to session it is possible to follow that each time he proceeds through the following sequence: observing carefully, silently accepting, sometimes trying to respond and next time initiating and actively trying. We have not observed the boy’s behavior outside our club environment, but I presume that he is practicing the new skills everywhere before he makes the next step.

Noora’s role in the show was decisive for Lucas in taking a creative step on that particular day. I am sure it would have happened some other time, in different place and context because the boy was ready for the next step. How successful this step could be depends on all preceding experiences and interactions of the child. The concrete social situation and the character of interactions define the final step towards the creative act.

Careful observation of the episode (video & transcript) revealed that both Lucas and Noora are equally important for the success of the activity. Noora is not just helping as it might look at first sight. She is demonstrating a different behavior model of interactions with her younger sister Paula, which Lucas accepts and follows. She is all the time (in role) keeping up a dialogue with Lucas and reminding him that they are playing together. This is very important because Lucas was constantly forgetting Noora and speaking his monologues without paying much attention to her presence. He would also turn his back to the audience closing the scenery. Noora nicely reminded him (through her role character) to move and turn to the audience. I would say that because of Paula and Noora’s participation we can speak about Lucas’ movement towards the creative act. Paula acts as a trigger, provoking his usual response and Noora acts as facilitator and the model of a new behavior.

A creative or developmental act is defined as irreversibly changing the environment and the subject of activity. How could this definition be applied in a concrete situation? We should see a creative act as a process not just a one-off
event. Lucas’ behavior changed only in the concrete play situation with very concrete partners: Noora and Paula. Anyway, this change is very significant as the child behaves in a qualitatively different manner than before. Other participants (social environment) notice the change and their behavior also changes.

Adults should notice the change and behave accordingly: expect similar play behavior, give the child more responsibilities and interesting tasks. At the same time adults should support the child’s ideas and help them to implement them. Students might ask Lucas’ advise when preparing a puppet presentation, or invite him to play a role. We sometimes try to make puppet presentation based on a child’s own story. Lucas’ story could be used in this way. On the everyday level it is important that parents also give the child more opportunities to practice their independence and responsibility.

A task for theoretical analysis is how cultural activities are used in creating the social situation of development. The functions of a story enacted with puppets are very diverse and seek many goals. It introduces an important theme or topic, brings shared experiences, gives cultural interpretation, stimulates children’s ideas, practices dialogical improvisation, provides better understanding of a story through emotional perezhivanie, demonstrates a model of creative activity and involves children in cultural activities.

How can a teacher support children achieving all these goals? The child can “choose” what is appropriate for his developmental situation depending on his developmental stage and needs. An open and flexible model of cultural activities and social interactions rich in opportunities is created.

In our experimental environment during the year children saw 18 puppet presentations, Lucas was watching 9 of them (he was participating only every second week in our activities, on the other hand participation was not obligatory for all children). When the child gets the sense and meaning of the activity he becomes an active participant and often a co-creator. Gradually, some children were able to perform this activity as an act of self-development, like Lucas organizing his own puppet presentation. Many children are very eager to draw or paint some characters or events from the story presentation. Young children play some personally important episodes later with soft toys or finger puppets. A few children made the plasticine characters with students in the handicraft center and played their version of the story to each other, just for fun. Some children made their first puppet presentation later at preschool or primary school.
5.3.3 From Uncertainty to Self-Confidence: Lucy’s Case

Lucy

Lucy attended our club for one year. The observation period lasted six months (5.8 – 6.2). Lucy is a joyful, good-natured and friendly child. She is active, very social but quite shy especially with new people and in new situations. She never gets into any conflict with other children.

Lucy has a two years and four months elder brother and was playing mainly with him and 5–6 other children from the neighborhood. Lucy had very few possibilities to interact independently with other people, including children, and express her own ideas because of her dominant and protective brother.

The mother said that Lucy was not playing pretend and role-play and she wanted her daughter to become a better player.

When Lucy came to our club she was shy, but eagerly participated in the activities. When asked she quietly answered to her mother and the mother had to tell to the rest of the group Lucy’s answer.

Red Riding Hood project

Together with other children Lucy (6.2) watched the puppet story presentation “Little Red Riding Hood”. The story was presented using a transformer puppet revealing all the three characters. Little Red Riding Hood emerged when the puppet was turned upside down and the two other characters were hidden under the dress.

The following episode takes place in the block center. Four children and three students are involved. Noora (3.5) has placed the Red Riding Hood puppet in a chair and plays with other toys on the floor.

The first episode, part 1

The Little Red Riding Hood theme starts with a conflict. Lucy is approaching the room. She observes the puppet on the chair and takes it. Noora immediately interrupts her play and wants to have the puppet back. The student finds a smaller almost identical transformer puppet for Noora and starts to persuade the children to give a story presentation using the puppets.
Without saying a word Noora starts moving her puppet on the shelf in the middle of the room mumbling something silently, nothing can be heard. Lucy is behind her sitting on the floor with the bigger puppet, observing. Lucy is not very comfortable with the situation, most probably giving a “presentation” to others is a challenge for her. She starts quite unsurely: “Once upon a time there was a girl …”

Very soon she comes to the shelf and starts acting with the bigger puppet. She knows the story, is able to tell it, replays all the main events and gives advice to Noora: “You should not say it! Otherwise this will … bang! Not yet! Not yet!” when Noora (as a wolf) wants to eat the grandmother. Lucy is speaking for all characters and telling Noora what to do. Noora is much younger and cannot combine storytelling with the puppet presentation; she mainly moves the puppet and follows Lucy’s directions eagerly.

Lucy brings the story presentation to an end: “Then comes Little Red Riding Hood, the real one. And then this [wolf] ate them both and the hunter comes”. With the words: “RATATATATATATATA! And then the stomach will be opened and then comes … and they lived happily ever after! Goodbye!” Lucy purposefully falls on the floor as if demonstrating the end of the show.

This first episode started from uncertainty and lack of confidence. Lucy hadn’t made a presentation before (when she had to present her family photos her mother did it), but quite soon she started directing Noora. Both girls know the story well. Lucy is telling the story quickly, supporting her words with symbolic movements. Noora also knows the story but is not able to tell it in words, only by performing the necessary actions.

If the student did not ask Lucy, she probably would not participate in the activity. The student’s proposal took her by surprise. Her proposal was spontaneous and was a trial to avoid conflict between the girls. Only later did she realize how productive it was. The student realized new unknown possibilities for the child and also for herself as a teacher. This is a very simple example as to how children’s activities can be moved forward. Children don’t know the rich capacities residing in themselves. They usually repeat the models that they observe in their environment.

The first episode, part 2

At once after the first puppet show the student invites the children from the “audience” to give their presentation.
The student takes the bigger puppet herself, and gives the smaller one to Ofelia (3.4). Noora takes a puppet-crow in her hand. The student is following the children’s actions and saying what is happening in the story. Lucy takes a different role this time. She sits on the floor and supports the events with music by playing the xylophone. She gives a sign by playing music when the presentation can start. She intervenes at once, when the “actors” forget the mother: “The mother! The mother! It was the mother who asked her to go!” The story has been changed so that Little Red Riding Hood met the crow instead of the wolf; they died, woke up, and then went to grandma. Lucy bangs the xylophone and reacts to the changes: “The whole story is destroyed!” “Should we play it again?” – asks the student. Lucy answers that yes, and that they need to have the lines [manuscript] like real actors do. “Let’s do all the words on a paper and then you read them!” – she explains. Anyway, activities stopped after this discussion and children moved to another activity.

In this episode Lucy started from directing the presentation through music (playing xylophone), but very soon she intervened with words and by the end even stopped and criticized the presentation. She directed not only children but also the student. This is a big change in her behavior, and it seems she gained confidence through organizing and “teaching” others. From the developmental point of view this is a very important step because through regulating others, children gradually learn to regulate themselves.

The second episode

Later the same day Lucy returns to Little Red Riding Hood in a short role-play. The activity took place in a big meeting room. Three girls are trying to play together. No adults are supervising them; one adult is filming. The whole play session takes place on the couch. At the beginning Liisa (3.10) is sitting on the couch, and Lucy (6.2) is on the floor.

Lucy has the smaller transformer puppet and Liisa (3.10) has a “Flower Princess” puppet with a long red skirt under which there is a stick as feet. The puppet looks like a flower; there is a head among the petals. Noora (3.5) has a stick puppet in her hand and she tries to join the play using her “bear” as a role character.

Liisa’s puppet lies on the couch; Lucy is just turning her puppet from grandmother to Little Red Riding Hood. Liisa tries to get the puppet, but Lucy does not give it to her.
Fig. 17. Two Red Riding Hoods!

_Lucy_: I am Little Red Riding Hood!

_Liisa_: I am Little Red Riding Hood too!

The girls look intently at their puppets, and fiddle with them in their hands.

_Lucy and Liisa, both_: Me, me, me, me!!!

_Liisa_: Grandma said that I am Little Red Riding Hood! Grandma said that I am Little Red Riding Hood!

_Lucy_: But my grandma said that I am Little Red Riding Hood!

_Liisa_ (makes a proposal): You don’t know! You are not Red Riding Hood but a red man!

_Adult_ (behind the camera): Two Little Red Riding Hoods!

The adult comment is connected to the fact that several children want to have the same role at the same time, and this does not lead to proper role play (e.g. there were three princesses trying to play together, but they were constantly imitating each other and simply repeating the same actions). Proper role relations are possible when mutual dependence exists between different roles. Liisa suggests that Lucy would be a red man. But Lucy does not accept it. The girls begin to compare their puppets, sometimes in roles, sometimes as themselves. Noora comes to the couch with a table-theatre puppet, a bear, in her hands. She climbs to
the couch behind Liisa and listens and looks at Lucy and Liisa trying to get in their play.

The competition between Lucy and Liisa brings them into conflict and Lucy goes to the other end of the couch.

![Image](image199x469.jpg)

**Fig. 18. The conflict between the two Red Riding Hoods.**

In this episode Lucy tried to start role-play with two girls and wanted the role of Red Riding Hood, but Liisa did not give up the role. She claimed to be the real Red Riding Hood. This is conflict between the two girls and they are trying to persuade each other.

When Lucy did not succeed in getting the role she wanted, she went aside for a while. Two younger girls followed her clearly showing that they still want to play together.
Fig. 19. Lucy changes her puppet into a grandmother.

After a few minutes Lucy transformed her puppet into grandmother and proposed a journey to England on the ship ...

Lucy: It is time to go to the ship! Come now to the ship to England!

Liisa: I don’t like you, grandma, because your daughter Little Red Riding Hood is bullying me!

Seems that Liisa can’t forget the conflict. Lucy tries to console her.

Lucy: You are much more beautiful than she who mocked you!

Noora takes her bear, comes closer to Liisa and Lucy from the other end of the couch and begins to growl at their puppets. She is looking for the chance to play together.

Liisa (to Noora): Why do you growl there; you cannot threaten me.

Liisa (to Lucy): Hi grandma, I am afraid because the bear is coming.

Liisa’s puppet goes quickly to grandma (Lucy), wanting protection.
Lucy (to Noora): Bear! Go away, you cannot bully my daughter!

Noora: Grr grr grrr grrr…

Liisa (to Noora): Go away bear from my mother – my grandma!

Liisa (to Lucy): Come here grandma!

Noora runs away. Liisa and Lucy continue with each other, in their roles.

Liisa: Little Red Riding Hood, grandma, you have Little Red Riding Hood under your dress. It should not be there …

Lucy: I’ll eat it! Now it is in my stomach.

Noora comes back very soon with grandma and a boy table puppet, but the bell is ringing for the farewell circle.

From the moment when Lucy changed her mind and transformed her puppet into grandmother their joint play was going to begin. After the first scene with the bear we can see that Liisa did not forget the conflict. She reminds Lucy all the time how mean that “other Red Riding Hood” was. Lucy finds good ways to console Liisa. First she praised her beauty and then she said that she was going to eat that “bad” girl and at the end she said again: “You are more beautiful than whomever”. This was enough and the girls were ready to play further, Noora returned with two new puppets but the bell announced the end of the day.
This is a typical situation. When children start role play together, most frequently conflicts arise from a “powerful” role: every girl wants to be a mother, princess or queen and every boy wants to be a knight, Indian chief, king or boss. The critical moment comes when nobody wants to give up and play stops. It is not a simple situation, because some children don’t want to give up, they try different possibilities (from power, negotiations, to compromises).

Red Riding Hood’s play started from such a situation. Both girls Lucy and Liisa creatively used their play roles to resolve the tension. It is obvious that every girl in the episode is looking for some solution. The wish to play together is stronger than the ambition to play a particular role. Only Liisa is not going to give up her role. Noora is changing her puppets constantly and tries very hard to get into Lucy’s and Liisa’s play, but they are so involved with their roles that they hardly notice her efforts. The Turning point in this situation is Lucy’s decision to take grandmother’s role. This is how children, by trial and error, begin to realize that in order to move the play forward there have to be different roles. Proper play is about events and relationships between the characters. The next step is finding a common theme and building a story line through constant negotiations.

Lucy’s decision to take the grandmother’s role could be also seen as a movement towards a developmental act. When she left our experimental play lab she was a real master player. Her participatory trajectory could be described as a movement from uncertainty and lack of self-confidence to taking responsibility for the co-construction of joint play activity.

Numerous watching of the episode revealed one more tension between the girls. In fact most of the time, only Liisa and Lucy were playing together. Noora tried very hard to get into their play but was not accepted. Why was she treated like this? The reason might be that young inexperienced children lack the skills to interact with more than one playmate. What makes it even more interesting is that Liisa and Noora were neighbors and friends. They were used to playing together. Lucy was much older and maybe they were even competing with each other for Lucy’s attention?

5.3.4 Discussion of the Case: Development of Play as Collectively Distributed Activity

We tend to think that individual children and their ideas cause the development of the activity. In fact all participants (even the most passive and shy) are important. When children start playing, the activity itself creates tension and demands
creative steps from the players. This might be the situation which Vygotsky (2003) described as "play creates the zone of proximal development of the child" (p. 220). The players are demanding those steps from each other because the activity may fall apart! When finally a creative step is made and the whole play activity moves forward all the participants witness the creative act and the ownership of the act is also collective.

Young children create and develop their play spontaneously and collaboratively improvising as Sawyer (1997) describes. Play activity develops through creative acts carried out by individual children but those creative acts are possible only in concrete play activity. They are collective products of that activity and at the same time the vehicles through which the activity develops.

This happened in Luca’s puppet presentation and in the Red Riding Hood play episode. It was Lucas who decided to give a puppet presentation for children and mothers, but without Noora he could not manage to implement it so well. The same for Noora: without Lucas she might never have tried to make a puppet presentation.

As for the Red Riding Hood play episode, without two young girls – Noora and Liisa – “pushing” Lucy to make a creative step and start joint play, it wouldn’t have happened.

At this stage of development direct guidance is almost impossible, but careful observation is necessary. Appropriate adult help is very important. In Lucas’ case no adults were involved directly but with Lucy there were adults who slightly pushed to make a puppet presentation and then supported them in a productive manner.

5.4 Case 4: A Story of Don Quixote the Lonely Dragon Fighter

The case of the boy Niilo (3.4) was chosen because it captures many creative steps in the development of the same child and because these steps are represented very clearly and distinctively. The case presents a very complicated path of the development of the child’s symbolic functioning. We start from his affective experiences of separate play actions, move to collaborative play activities and then to drawing accompanied by oral storytelling. The case is a prototypical example and a perfect illustration of Vygotsky’s (1997c) claim that “play, drawing, and writing – may be presented as different moments of an essentially single process of developing written language” (p. 142). He viewed play, drawing and writing as a single line of the history of writing that leads to
higher forms of written language and thought. We are not reaching the level of written language in our analysis because of the age limits of our participants, but in future I intend to analyze this missing link.

This is an example of how cultural development is manifested in an individual case. We believe that this case is partly shaped by the environment of the play research laboratory. To a certain point the course of Niilo’s development proceeded in an expected and planned way. At the same time we were constantly surprised by the concrete forms it took. I would call Niilo’s developmental steps expected unexpectedness.

The boy Niilo (3.4) was among the most receptive children to all kinds of cultural interventions. He was very open and responsive to all new cultural forms that students were introducing to children. Niilo applied many of them to his own activities quite creatively. For example, he made puppet presentations for his father at home, creating his own versions of stories presented in the club. One such puppet presentation he brought to the play club, but was too shy to present it and his mother presented it during a morning meeting. Niilo was sitting to one side and making some comments. Such kinds of impact were expected, they were the goals of our interventions and Niilo ‘responded’ to these interventions perfectly.

This might be partially connected with the fact that the boy was in some way a ‘special child’ because of his sickness. Niilo had a severe allergy but his condition was improving all the time. According to his mother’s claim, participation in our play club supported this process, significantly providing rich and meaningful activities. Gradually he was acquiring the necessary skills and tools for the expression of his feelings and ideas.

**5.4.1 The First Year: Becoming a Member of the Creative Play Group**

Niilo (3.4) started creative play club with his mother and little brother Juhani (0.8). The activities attracted Niilo greatly and he was eager to participate from the very beginning. Nevertheless, it took some time (almost the whole autumn) before he got fully adjusted. During the first few months Niilo was literally traveling around and observing everything. First he was observing other children and students playing but soon he started to play in different activity centers. From the very first day he noticed big building blocks and these became his greatest attraction for a long time. He became very much interested in the knight’s helmet,
a sword and a shield. He picked these props from the very first day and from that day he was wearing or carrying them constantly.

Fig. 21. A lonely dragon fighter.

Niilo was very interested in puppet presentations organized by the students every week. He never missed them and was always very concentrated, watching the presentations, following the events. He would often turn to look at his mother and share his reaction with her; in some dramatic moments he closed his eyes or covered his ears for a few seconds.

He least liked drawing/painting and singing during morning meetings. He started singing our welcome song together with other participants only during the last year in the club. But he loved to observe the music teacher’s activities with other children, when she presented a short improvised forest story through singing.

Niilo was interested in other children’s activities but did not join their play. He played alone or with a student. Even later he seldom played with other children. However, during his first day in the club he already met a boy who became his friend. The boys met in the block building area and were building a high wall or even a castle from big wooden blocks. This activity remained Niilo’s favorite during the whole period of his stay. Both boys were exceptional children, each in their own way. Gradually they formed a close friendship. In the
beginning, their joint play activity was running around and messing together, but sometimes they became involved in building activity for a longer time.

During the spring period Niilo was actively building alone. He tried new activities with other children and students, such as painting together, constructing a house for puppet story characters in the handicraft center, participated in car play and role play activities with students and elder boys.

The first year was experimentation with castle building, knight’s role and dragon’s figure emerging from play, storybooks and his own imagination. This is a preparatory stage for a more developed narrative role-playing. Separate episodes were played out: castle building, fencing, fighting an imaginary enemy. Symbolic figures of a knight and dragon were chosen but the unifying play storyline is not yet constructed.

5.4.2 The Second Year: Blossoming of Role Play and Drawing Activities

After the summer break Niilo (4.4) was full of creative ideas and clearly needed other people to help to implement them. Now he was very well acquainted with the activities, felt confident and ‘at home’. He was constantly wearing the knight’s helmet and carried the sword in his hand; his favorite activity to start the day was castle building. Each morning he took the knight’s helmet and the sword, brought them to the block building center, put them in the corner of a future castle and started building castle walls.

The need for collaborative play activities was evident. During the autumn Niilo’s building activities expanded to role-playing. His most successful play activities would consist of a long (about an hour) and elaborated episode of castle building with some students. The building activity might be interrupted by short episodes of role-play such as hunting in the forest, searching for food or fighting the Dragon. These role-play episodes would last from 5 to 10 minutes and then again building or repairing the castle.
Fig. 22. Hunting in the forest.

Usually he would build the castle together with a student, or with a child or alone, but role-playing demands more than one person.

Fig. 23. Knight Waiting for the Dragon.

Students were trying to invite other children to Niilo’s play by introducing some new characters and events.
Niilo never opposed the trials but his attitude was not very clear. It looked like he wanted other children to join his play but at the same time he would not directly invite other children to play with him. When students did this he accepted. He let the students incorporate new ideas into his play but did not accept children’s ideas. Sometimes when students accepted the good ideas of other children he just stepped aside and observed for a while but did not actively participate in the events. He did not protest or leave the play but gave space to others and waited for the appropriate moment to go on with his own ideas. Observation revealed that Niilo had a strong idea or an inner feeling about what he wants and does not want to play.

The period after the New Year the mother called the “golden” period of Niilo’s participation. Castle building and Knight and Dragon play developed in many new directions; new themes emerged. For example Niilo started cooking in the castle, which moved to long-term cafe/restaurant play. He invited children and students to visit his restaurant. Other topics were pirate play and racing car play, which developed into city play. Few boys started to play with small racing cars. Students decided to introduce city play and together with children began to draw the streets and houses on a paper (1.5 m x 1.7 m). Niilo gradually discovered the pleasure of drawing. He spent much time drawing streets, crossroads, houses and trees, people in the buildings, traffic signs and lights. He enjoyed drawing more and more.

Interest in drawing increased during the spring and according to the mother was connected with changes in their family life. Just at this time his father left to study for six months and was away from the family. Niilo missed his father very
much and then drawing brought a solution. He started drawing short stories about real and fictional events that had happened to him and asked the mother to write the stories and send them in her letters. We can talk about real need coming from a real life situation. This need motivates the child to start a new activity or to change their behavior. Drawing was the least attractive for the boy when he started attending play club.

His first drawing attempts were stimulated by the students’ puppet presentation. Instead of playing with the puppets students painted the whole story in front of the children. Only the main characters were puppets. All other characters and story events were painted in front of the children in the course of picture storytelling. After story drawing many children came and developed the story further or created their own versions.

![Fig. 25. Painting a story.](image)

Niilo’s letters to his father expanded into a diary. He was very sick during the whole spring and the summer and began drawing his own face ‘happy’ or ‘sad’ (recommendations from the psychologist). His drawings became dark, chaotic with big dinosaur, mammoth or monster figures in the background. Then he asked his mother: “Where does evil comes from?”

At the beginning of the summer the mother gave him a few notebooks and suggested that he could make his nature diary. Niilo was excited by the activity and drew a large number of plants next to a dried plant, drawings of dinosaur fossils, the X-ray images of various animals, and self-made photos from nature. He was drawing and filling his nature diary during the whole summer.

The second year is a period of active narrative construction in play activity. Long episodes of castle building were included into a story of a lonely knight
defending the castle and fighting the dragon. Intensive book reading with the mother parallels play activities. In spring, new themes appear in play: restaurant and city play where new forms of symbolization such as drawing are intensively used. The boy (4.8) moves towards an ‘opening’ of the sense of drawing and painting. Drawing accompanied by oral storytelling becomes a habit (irreversible change) of expressing and communicating one’s life impressions and sending letters to one’s father.

5.4.3 The Third Year: Crisis in Narrative Role-Playing Compensated by Drawing and Oral Storytelling

After the summer break it became clear that Niilo (5.4) lacked play friends. He was the eldest boy in the group and there were no male playmates. As a matter of fact, two younger boys were admiring Niilo’s play but they were not equal partners. All four potential male co-players were so-called ‘leader’ types. It was practically impossible for them to follow each other’s ideas. Additionally, a new group of students started in the club and they were not yet good players.

Most of the time Niilo was involved in painting and after that he tried to develop his favorite knight and dragon theme. Often two or three younger boys joined him but only for a short time. One day he started, with three other boys, to build a castle for their play but after 10 minutes one boy started to develop another theme and moved to play in the next room. The initial idea was to play knight’s school (Niilo’s idea), where knights would practice fencing. Two other boys agreed but did not follow Niilo’s play idea. They started messing around: running, sledging and they finally destroyed the castle. When boys left for another area Niilo seemed to be upset about losing his play friends. He set up a knight’s shop where he was selling helmets and swords. He went upstairs to advertise his shop to children and students. He played alone until the farewell circle.

In the mother’s opinion this might have stimulated him to draw a series of pictures telling a story after they returned home. The mother wrote down the story and they together made “The Book of Knights”.

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A knight stood on the wall of the castle. Two dragons approached. The knight saw the dragons. The smaller one escaped, but the bigger one came nearer and nearer.

The other knights came, but it did not help. They started to think together what to do. The dragon went around the castle. Then the knights drew a big figure of a knight on canvas. They hung the figure on the castle wall. The dragon got frightened when he saw the figure and drove away from the castle (2.11.2006, told & illustrated: Niilo 5.5 years)

The next week in the club he painted a huge picture developing the same Dragon and Knights theme.
Both the book and the painting represent rather mature creative works at this age. They expressed in generalized form the theme that this boy was exploring during several years in our club. We interpret his book and painting as a possible answer to the question he asked his mother about evil. It could be interpreted as a search for the possible ways of fighting the evil.

The third year – the failure to develop mature forms of joint narrative play on the one hand but creative storytelling through drawing and painting – resulted in the creation of the Knight’s Book and a big painting of the knights defending the castle. *Narrative construction through painting/drawing supported by oral storytelling.*

### 5.4.4 Discussion of the Case: the Path of Myth Creation in Play

We have an exemplary case of the path of myth creation (Nelson, 1998; Donald, 1991; 2002), and world-making (Herman, 2009). The child made an attempt to comprehend a personal life situation, to communicate his personal world model through the most appropriate symbolic forms. Most likely the fact that these experiences are strong and constantly reoccurring (his sickness) enables the child to find such exact and vivid forms of expression. His storybook and painting are perfect examples of creative work on the level of ‘real or pure’ art, fitting into some basic requirements of adult creativity (Collingwood, 1958). The child created them independently from a very strong inner need to understand his own emotional experiences.
The mother commented that the boy started drawing and “documenting” his exciting life impressions in his nature diary. Later he kept on writing his diary at school. We can talk about irreversible changes: documentation of one’s emotional experiences became a more stable form of expression (Lobok, 1996). We might think that he has developed a need for reflection, the re-thinking of important events. Vygotsky’s (1971; 2001) explanation that creative art is born from the need to survive and to establish a balance in human life might be useful.

The role of the lonely knight, he chose the first day. It represented the affective state of his inner ‘I’ perfectly. In his storybook (Book of the Knights) and painting (Defense of the castle) Niilo created the image of the world which captures the ‘perezhivanie’ of his life situation in a metaphoric/symbolic form. The world, in which he has the role of the fighter against evil, is evidenced by and is noteworthy by the fact that he is a nonviolent fighter!

This example demonstrates how complicated and creative the process of human development is. On the one hand the sufficient adult help is extremely important and can move the child to take creative steps. On the other hand it shows very clearly that the child is the real “master” of his development. At this stage of development direct guidance is not possible. No one can force the child to make creative steps. No one can plan the concrete time, place, results or final forms of a child’s development. We can teach a child to write letters and his name, but we can’t make the same child create a storybook, a drawing or puppet presentation as a form of expression of their own thoughts and ideas. Self-development is hard work and has to be accomplished by the child themself.
6 Results

I will now briefly discuss the results in relation to my main research problems.

6.1 Why and how shared narrative play activity creates the zones of proximal development of children and adults?

The first research problem is directly addressed in cases 1 and 2, where direct adult participation in shared play activities is analyzed.

Shared play activity is always an “unknown” situation for the participants. Already this situation creates the ZPD for the adult. He has to take certain steps in order to find out the child’s interests and intentions and then to take a step and join the children’s activity, “the task of constructing a meeting with the child … is always a new task” (Zuckerman, 2007, p. 51).

Often the task is very challenging, especially when children with very diverse play skills and interests are involved. In Case 1 the student observed the boy’s play before he made the first proposal. The next step was finding the common topic and language for communication. In Case 2 it was easier to choose the theme because children knew what they wanted to play. The real challenge was to develop play activity further, especially when many skilful children were participating in the activity.

In Case 2 I derived the main criteria of successful adult intervention to children’s play: (1) motivating shared theme; (2) active ‘in role’ participation of students; (3) emotional involvement of students; (4) dialogic character of interactions; (5) dramatic tension in play script; (6) coherent and fascinating script; (7) elaboration of the ‘critical’ turns in play. The study established that the main characteristics of successful adult participation in individual and group play activities are the same even when the age of children ranged from 2 to 10 years.

In a play situation the unit of analysis of play – the event – is constructed through negotiation and dialogue. Adults (adult help) have to keep children in the play frame (inexperienced children constantly “fall out” of it), to pick children’s ideas and use them for play construction. Adults should support the whole structure of play when it is starting to fall apart. In practice this means that they have to help individual children to participate in the activity but also to take an active role and to move the activity one step forward when it is needed. Developmental steps in adult’s professional growth are based on dialogical tension between different positions (adult contra children).
All the steps we have described are needed to keep play activity alive in a way that it creates the ZPD for all participating children. The main indicators of the successful play activity are that participants are not leaving, are motivated and at some point start developing the activity more independently. Some children start moving to the zone of distant development and self-development.

In Cases 3 and 4 children’s movement from the zone of proximal development to the zone of distant development is analyzed. What is very important in the cases is that children themselves choose the challenging tasks for their activity or are pushed by other children to take developmental steps.

6.2 How to construct narrative environments promoting child development and learning in play?

The answer to the second research problem is our pedagogical approach – narrative play pedagogy, which was elaborated and tested during the period of six years in the creative play lab Silmu. In Chapters 1 and 2 the theoretical background of the approach is described and in Chapter 4 practical methods of organization and implementation are described.

Cultural-historical psychology forms the framework of narrative play pedagogy. The main ideas about the cultural development of the child, the role of the environment as the source of development are applied by constructing the curriculum, organizing the activities and forms of adult participation in the experimental site. Dialogical drama with puppets (Bredikyte, 2000) is used for narrative interventions with children.

We call our curriculum play generating narrative curriculum. Curriculum is constructed in the form of a story about an important theme. Our general goal for child development at early age is creative communication with the world, each other and yourself through collective narration. Story presentation is our main tool of intervention. We focus our pedagogical efforts on collaborative play activities, adjusting them to the developmental needs of individual children. All activities aim at enriching children’s emotional and cultural experiences, bringing new ideas and possibilities, introducing new knowledge, demonstrating new behavioral models and practicing new skills. Planning is based on observation and pedagogical documentation. Children’s initiatives and intentions are the starting point of adult planning and interventions.

Adults take an active part in children’s activities and their roles are constantly changing from active organizing and guiding to observing, helping and
supporting children’s ideas. Adults are seen as organizers and creators of cultural environment and a model of higher forms of behavior. Children and adults are co-creators of joint activities. Interactions between adults and children are dialogic and are of improvisational character.

Activities are divided into three major types: organized and guided, initiated and supported and independent activities of children. Our general goal is that children can have enough time for their independent play activities.

6.3 Why is adult participation in shared play activity important for the transition from simple to more mature forms of play?

This research problem is addressed in all cases but on a different level. First I claim that in initial stages of play in our study only student participation kept the children of different ages and levels of maturity together. The students involved the children in joint play activity by building interesting play environments (castle, ship), constructing exciting play events (sailing in a ship, pirate attack, search for robbers and stolen treasures) and creating dramatic tension, and by modeling play actions and dialogues in roles. This was the first step, which prepared inexperienced children for their participation in more elaborated forms of play.

Shared play activity prepares the participants (children & adults) for creative acts and self-development. I would call shared play activity a learning space that fosters the growth of all participants. In shared play a system is co-created, which is always more complex that the selves of the participants. It creates the opportunity to acquire shared experiences and move to a new level of functioning (including new skills). The process is dynamic and dialogic; participants constantly “push” each other to move forward, exploring new ideas and new possibilities. This is the mechanism of how the ZPD in play is created.

In Cases 1 and 2 the process of gradual assimilation and accumulation of shared experiences can clearly be observed from one session to another or even from one episode to the next. Children are constantly assimilating and developing further the ideas, behavioral models, play building strategies, roles, even intonations and movements used by students and other children.

In addition, children are assimilating the creative and improvisational character of the activities, which is better revealed in Cases 3 and 4. In all cases children were imitating their previous activities with students. They were regulating and organizing themselves and each other through roles, dialogues and
negotiations. Children imitate adults and use the same models, which they practiced together.

I can conclude that shared play activities with adults or competent peers prepare critical turning points and qualitative changes in play activity and child self-development.

6.4 **How does narrative adult intervention promote creative acts at different periods of play development: Creative act as the main goal of adult intervention**

In all analyzed cases the children, as a result of adult narrative intervention, take creative steps.

A creative or developmental act is defined as *irreversibly changing the environment and the subject of activity*. In concrete situations we see the creative act as a process not just a onetime event.

Narrative interventions performed by the students are creating a rich cultural environment for the children. For example, the story enacted with puppets introduces an important theme, helps to acquire shared experiences, stimulates children’s ideas, practices dialogical improvisation, involves them into the emotional perezhivanie of the events and demonstrates a model of creative activity for the children. The child can “choose” what is appropriate for their developmental situation depending on their developmental stage and needs. An open, rich in opportunities and flexible model of cultural activities and social interactions is thus created.

When the child gets the sense and meaning of the activities they become active participants and often also co-creator. This happened with Ville in Case 1, where he became an active participant and even the leader of tower building activity. In Case 2, participating children also became more active and skilful participants of shared narrative role-play. Still, in both cases the students were responsible for the construction of the play narrative. The situation is different in Cases 3 and 4. As a result of participation in narrative play activities, children became able to perform the activity as *an act of self-development* like Lucas organizing his own puppet presentation and Niilo making a puppet presentation, drawings to his father and, finally, a book, big painting and a diary.

Narrative interventions create the *social situation of development* and only prepare for the creative act. Individual children carry out creative acts.
A significant result of my study is the finding that for many students participation in narrative interventions and shared play activities with children became developmental steps in their professional growth as teachers. Their increasing ability to function on a more professional level was observed from session to session. Collaborative co-construction of joint activity promotes development of all participants, both children and adults.
7 Discussion

When we started our experimental work in 2002 I already had the main framework and the principles of narrative play pedagogy, including the dialogical drama with puppets method as the main interventional tool. During the following years we developed theoretical background and concrete tools of practical implementation. In this study I have tried to illuminate some aspects of our developmental work. My focus was on creative steps in children and students. Nevertheless, narrative play pedagogy created an environment supportive of growth and development of all participants not only children and students, but also researchers and parents as well.

The main goal of our activities was to help children to develop play that in turn develops them. We created a pedagogical method the essence of which is that adults actively play with children. Such an approach is not very common. Usually adults teach children how to play properly or leave play to children themselves.

Participating students employ different cultural tools in the creation of imaginary worlds. Stories are told, read, dramatized, drawn or painted, etc. Initial stories are interpreted or recreated and they are also used as models for the creation of new children’s stories. Through their active participation students not only extend the content and the forms of children’s activities but they radically change the very character of children’s activities and in particular children’s play.

We have to ask how equal partners our students are and how much joint play is the children’s “own” play? Presumably students’ play with children is not the same as children playing with other children.

Iljenkov (1977) and Sutton-Smith (1997) have argued that equal relationships between adults and children is in principle not possible. We agree with this claim and do not consider play with adults and among children identical activities. They are different in principle, but from an educational point of view both are necessary. Adult’s play with children in no way eliminates children’s play with peers and so-called free play.

Play intervention is carried out for the sake of improvement, help, or “provocation”, which in turn will move the activity and the children’s level of performance forward. Our goal of intervention is to initiate the construction of joint play activities, lasting for a period of time and to provoke creative acts in participants.

Construction of shared play can be seen as an activity that supports the development of new skills and competencies (including the whole variety of
cultural/symbolic tools) in the participants. We also want to reach the deeper, psychological level. For us a creative process that transforms human experiences is essential. In a shared play all participants become involved in experiencing, or ‘perezyvanie’, a joint phenomenon. This process requires that participants “step out” of their own understanding and “meet” the understanding of “another”. Often it is a dramatic clash of two, three or more understandings based on different experiences.

A playworld creates the opportunity to acquire shared experiences and new understanding. Shared experiences foster change in people and move them to a new level of functioning (including new skills) because of a deeper relationship and understanding of both the phenomenon and each other. The process is dynamic and dialogic; participants constantly “force” each other to move forward exploring new ideas and new possibilities. We think this is the mechanism of how the zone of proximal development in play and in interaction is created.

How the ZPD is constructed in joint activity is best revealed in the tower building activity (see Case 1). Namely in the case when a student transformed separate play actions into social play activity by becoming a player himself. The student organized separate play actions into the structure, by adding tower building. The full structure consists of three parts: beginning (which in most cases is not explicit), conflict (most often played by the children) and resolution. In fact, this is the more theoretical model because children usually don’t play the whole structure, but in developed play activity the structure can easily be seen.

The child was able to comprehend and follow the idea because it was in the zone of his proximal development. This is the reason why the boy was motivated to participate in the activity. He was not able to construct this level of play just by himself but he was able to participate and even to become an active leader of it when the student constructed the activity. The student’s actions created the next step by proposing a more advanced form of activity, which opened new developmental possibilities for the child.

For the student, the activity became a ‘turning point’ in his ability to support children’s play and a developmental step in his professional growth. The student admitted that this was probably the first time during his studies when he was really playing and totally involved (in flow) in the activity. The student noticed that he managed to communicate and understand the child very well and was surprised how significantly adult actions affected the child’s performance. He concluded that it was a big challenge and a pleasure to play with the boy.
We can talk about the creative act in student’s professional development and question if flow experiences are a necessary component of the creative act. Csíkszentmihályi (1990) emphasizes the growth of the self as an important aspect of flow experiences. In his words, improvement of skills is connected with the growth of the self. When participants of joint activity invest their energy in the perfection of interaction, they both become a part of the system, which is bigger than the personal self. Their own selves expand boundaries and become more complex, and require the improvement of skills on a new level. *This moment I regard as the point where the activity starts to develop the participants.* Later, improved skills foster the growth of the self. The improvement of skills in this episode cannot be analyzed and understood separately from the activity and interactions of the participants.

My conclusion about the effects of this play activity is that both participants were teaching each other and learning at the same time. They were fostering each other’s development. The student was not an expert in play and was all the time searching for the best possible step to improve the activity. These are the main characteristics of the activity that produced developmental effects in both participants.

The activity was spontaneous, creative, improvised, and co-constructed. The initial idea of play the student got from observing the child’s play actions. A simple story line was constructed during the play: building and destroying the tower. Dramatic tension was created through the falling of the tower. The activity is co-constructed through dialogic interactions. Participants have not declared their roles openly but they might be guessed. Both participants were emotionally involved. Flow experiences are evident almost during the whole play activity. The activity was challenging and motivating, it became a developmental act for the students’ professional growth and an important step in the child’s ability to participate in joint play activity with other people.

On the basis of several observations of children’s play, I argue that the starting point for play is a strong need to express certain emotional experiences and ideas. The child is searching for the medium of expression. He starts playing. At first imitating adults and peers, and seeking for the resources in cultural environment. With the help of more competent peers children start to construct a play structure.

We might say that the child starts developing the play, but as soon as the basic play structure is created it starts to guide the actions of the participants. Our analysis of play activities revealed that in play situations the participants are
expecting certain steps from each other because of the evolving play activity (storyline, events, roles). The activity itself creates certain tensions and demands creative steps from the participants. The activity becomes the player – the object that also plays with the player (Buytendijk, 1933). If no appropriate steps are made, the activity will stop.

At the beginning individual children start developing play, but at a certain point play activity begins to guide the actions of the players. As with any artistic creation, play activity demands that certain rules (through roles) and structure (form) are followed, all of which are necessary for the implementation of the idea.

The play activity starts developing the players ... Not any single player, but all players, no matter whether young or grown up. Even if a creative step that moves the whole activity is made by an individual child all the participants witness the creative act and the ownership of the act is also collective.

In summarizing I would say that play activity develops through creative actions carried out by individual children, but those creative actions are possible only in that concrete play activity. They are collective products of that activity and at the same time they are the vehicles through which the activity develops. Developing activity develops all participants. The players, even participating in the same play activity, each develop on their own level.

This would explain why participation in joint play activities results in creative acts for the children and students. This is the reason why adults should focus their pedagogical efforts on the development of joint play activities and to be able to integrate child’s teaching and learning into the context of play.

Adult guidance and help in play should proceed in two main directions: (1) to develop joint activity of children, and (2) to support individual children participating in the activity.

In principle, direct impact of the adult on development or learning is a fiction. An adult should create the experiences through the activities (not just separate tasks), participation in which would demand the child to act on their highest level, which in turn, sooner or later, will bring them to a creative act.

This is what we can observe in almost all analyzed cases. In some cases, as in Lucas’ puppet presentation, Lucy’s last play episode with Noora and Liisa, Niilo’s book drawing and Castle painting, the students did not directly organize the activities. In all cases children were imitating their previous activities with students. They were regulating and organizing each other through roles, dialogues and negotiations. But even in these cases with direct student intervention (tower building play & robber’s play with a small group of children), students were
organizing children's actions through the play activity: through its structure, storyline, events, roles, etc.

In all analyzed cases developmental acts preceded in the zone of distant development as acts of self-development. This is the space where direct adult guidance is not possible. Adults can only prepare and support the creative act but not "produce" it. Anyway, this is enough!

It is much easier to disturb creative acts than to support them. If the adult is too active and lacks sensitivity, too much oriented to predefined tasks, he can easily prevent creative acts and even change the character and direction of the child’s development (Zuckerman, 2007). The child’s active position to do everything themself can be transformed into passivity when the child expects others to do things for him. As we can see from our cases, developmental acts need time, space, care and trust on the part of the adults.

In play a child develops and masters the structures of their own thinking. They lay the foundations of the inner forms of basic human notions. Play provides the channel of expression of the child’s emotional experiences and releases their spiritual potential.

Play has many levels. The visible play is not the whole play. External forms of play are only hints of the inner forms, like the tips of an iceberg. Creative, imaginative play is enormously spacious; it can accommodate all possible experiences of the young child and provide the space to explore those experiences and enact them with other children. When we observe children playing we can follow the visible events, the external narrative. Each individual child participating in the same play activity constructs their own version of the narrative. Often children incorporate their own play themes into a bigger play. When we play together for a longer time we realize that there are many different levels of play and many small themes in one big play activity.

The potential of advanced imaginary play is enormous and everything depends on the skills of the players. These skills are developed only through playing together. Skilful adult participation helps to incorporate several children and their themes into one creative endeavor. The more experienced children become, the easier they construct long lasting play activities on their own.

Analysis of students’ participation in play interventions provides us with some significant insights into teacher education where play intervention may seem a waste of time because the immediate benefits are not visible.

Our findings reveal that creative drama interventions are the tools for professional growth, creativity and freedom of the teachers. Participation in
children’s play in roles develops the whole range of abilities that traditional teachers simply don’t possess. Our students reach a better understanding of the children’s position, and point of view. Through participation in children’s activities students acquire new perspectives with regard to their role in educational situations. These new perspectives enable them to reflect on their professional skills. Students develop their imagination, creativity, spontaneity and improvisational skills. They practice to adjust their educational plans to the needs and interests of a concrete group of children and to the needs of individual children. They learn to build their work in the zone of proximal development. They learn to use *play as the source, context and medium for a child’s learning and development*.

Our experimental work proved to be a successful model for student training but raised many questions and problems. Drama methods present a new challenge for teacher competences. They orient the teacher towards child-centered construction learning situations. The teacher has to master cultural tools as the mediator and supporter of children’s creativity. The children’s point of view is more important than the mastery of subject matter knowledge.
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