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## The Importance of the Teachers' Role in Imaginative Play

### Abstract

This study of Norwegian kindergartens investigates how teachers may support imaginative play, drawing on Vygotsky's approaches to play and teachers' positioning in play in terms of different roles. For this study, the empirical investigations were organized as both observations and focus group interviews. The sample was two kindergartens with in total 12 teachers and 44 children aged 3-5 years. The study was conducted in November 2021-April 2022. The analyses point to three main findings; firstly, changes according to daily schedule and content may have effect on play, secondly, the teacher's role may be an obstacle in play, and thirdly, the teacher's role may be a driving force in play. In the discussion of these findings, questions are raised about traditions and a lack of competence together can lead to children not receiving sufficient support in imaginative play. However, when the teachers are a play partner who both add new fictional elements and support the fiction by »lending« their experiences, the play's potential and opportunity space is utilized. The conclusion is that the quality of the teachers' role and involvement will have an impact on children's cultural expression in play.

### Keywords

*kindergarten; Vygotsky; imaginative play; observation; focus group interview*

### Introduction

Institutions within early childhood education and care (ECEC) aim to care for children, child culture, play and learning. The period from birth to the age of 6 has increasingly been considered significant in children's development and culture. Teachers playing with children in kindergarten may inspire the cultural expressions in children's play like songs and narratives.

The great emphasis on play and the value of the teacher's participation and facilitation of imaginative play in kindergarten are the foundation for this study. The study is conducted in a Norwegian context, and it is typical that the concept of kindergarten (in Norwegian 'barnehage') does not distinguish between children under or over the age of three. Kindergarten in Norway is therefore a pedagogical and educational opportunity offered to all children from the age of one until schooling starts at six (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017).

The study carried out interviews and observations in two kindergartens. The two occupational groups teachers and assistants are represented, and to ensure anonymity they are both referred to in this study as teachers. The study draws on Vygotsky's approaches to play and how imaginative play can support children's development, (Vygotsky, 1995).

### Vygotsky and play

In cultural history theory, play is the child's most important activity for developing awareness of the world (Lindqvist, 1997). According to Hammershøj and Jørgensen (2023), there is no consensus in play research on a specific definition of play, but some common criteria are highlighted. These can be that play should be joyful, be separate from reality, be characterized by freedom and that play is an end in itself (33-35). Vygotsky points out that »*Play is the child's school of life, which nurtures the spiritual and the physical*« (1995, 83, translated from Swedish). Play is significant for the formation of character and the development of the worldview of the child.

Imagination is the successor to children's play (Vygotsky, 1998). When imagination, play, and reality are intertwined in children, play becomes an important means of developing abstract thinking, will, and emotions. Everything that is created out of the imagination is based on reality and previous experiences (Vygotsky, 1995). According to Vygotsky, the richer the reality, the richer the imagination. When we do not have our own experience, we can »borrow« the experience from others (Vygotsky, 1995). This relates to his idea that we develop in a social setting and the concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978).

Even if the imagination is based on experience, it is not simply about copying reality; it creates something new: »*From our point of view, imagination is a transforming, creative activity directed from the concrete toward a new concrete*« (Vygotsky, 1998, 163). Children's play is also a preparation for artistic creativity (Vygotsky, 1994). Vygotsky (1995) claims that drama is the form that is closest to the child's play, and in play, the child does not distinguish between the various subject-specific parts but makes the script simultaneously as the story is played out. The pedagogical conclusion is that kindergarten teachers must create possibilities for the child to have experiences so that the imagination becomes richer.

### Context

Kindergartens have been given a more preventive function in Norwegian society (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). About 93% of the Norwegian child population aged 1-5-year-olds attend kindergarten (SSB, 2023). Therefore, it is clear political pressure for kindergarten to lay the foundation for social equalization, especially through the learning of language skills, before starting school for six-year-olds (Håberg, 2017). Friedrich Froebel, who founded the first kindergarten in Germany in 1837, highlighted the children's essential need to play. The intersubjective interactions between teachers and children were largely emphasized (Brostrøm, 2004; Johansson, 2004). Froebelian pedagogy has been revised around the world and taken a direction, of the »...*free play movement*« (Brehony, 2009, 599). Free play is a session on the day when the children may choose what they want to do and who they want to be with (Håberg, 2017). Scandinavian kindergarten pedagogy was largely transformed into a child-centered pedagogy, which emphasized the kindergarten teacher's role as facilitator, also in play (Brostrøm, 2004; Johansson, 2004).

### Cultures and roles of play

Gjems and Alvestad (2021) found that kindergartens may be characterized by linear or circular cultures. In the linear culture, play is seen as the children's domain, and the teachers are involved in the play to a small degree. Small playgroups are only tabled when the children themselves request them. The circular culture, by contrast, emphasizes flexible daily schedules, and the teachers acts as leaders in organized playgroups. Gjems and Alvestad (2021) pointed out that the linear culture to a lesser extent supports children's learning because the children may miss several opportunities to take part in narrative and explorative interactions.

According to Sæbø (2020), teachers should alternate between different educational roles in play. Sæbø (2020, p. 69) divides the functions into seven different roles: Play -facilitator, -planner, -starter, -maintainer, -helper, -conflict resolver and, but not least, play-partner. She describes the roles as functions depending on the purpose of the teachers' participation. For example, as a facilitator, you will ensure that the physical room will stimulate play and as play planner you want to plan and organize the play but not participate in the play itself (Sæbø 2020, 69). Play partner is perhaps the most important role as the teacher enters the play because she wants to, and in this interaction with the children, the teacher can experience play's intrinsic value and interaction on many levels (Sæbø, 2020, p. 70). According to Nielsen (2023, p.112) few teachers participate in play because they often take the position as play planners and are not sensitive to which role is required of one at any given time. This is also consistent with findings from Greve et al. (2023). In this context, this study can contribute knowledge about *the teacher's role in imaginative play in kindergarten*.

### Method

This study is based on empirical investigations of Norwegian kindergartens. Given that the topic of the study is how teachers support imaginative play in kindergarten a qualitative approach is relevant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Such an approach can lay the groundwork for capturing nuances and opens up to the informants' experiences and reflections because variables and categories are, to a small extent, predetermined (Postholm, 2010).

### Observations and focus group interviews

For this study, the empirical investigations were organized as both observations and focus group interviews, which are compared to give a picture of how the teachers support the children's play. Together, such combinations may provide, as Fetterman (2010) pointed out, a touch of ethnographic approach, in which the purpose is to *«...try to make sense of what they have collected in terms of both the native's view and their own scientific analysis»* (Fetterman, 2010, 22). Fangen (2010) claimed that observation is a very fundamental form of research because observations give first-hand experiences that provide knowledge of the particular in the meaning of the unique and detailed.

Further, focus group interviews were chosen to obtain the informants' own perspectives, not only as individuals but as a collegial community (Halkier, 2015). We chose to make the interview semi-structured so that the broad outlines and order of the questions were made in advance but with an opening for the informants' inputs, views, and reflections (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

According to Fetterman (2010), comparing information from several sources and testing one against the other has value for the quality of the information. Hammersley claimed that by comparing interview data and observation data, the data material becomes complex and context sensitive, in addition to the fact that *«...relying on interviews alone is rarely advisable»* (Hammersley, 2008, 100).

### Sample

Regarding conducting thorough analyses within the framework of the study, two kindergartens were considered sufficient (Saunders et al., 2018). To identify the relevant kindergartens, the research question was initially presented to a person responsible for development work aimed at kindergartens, who then gave us the names of two relevant kindergartens. We contacted the chairs of these kindergartens by email; they were positive about the study and subsequently asked all the teachers in their kindergartens if they were interested in participating in the study. Chairs are considered key people or gatekeepers, a metaphor for people who are central to a field, guard the gate into the field, and have the resources to mediate contact with other people (Fangen, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996). Upon the chairs' permission, all the teachers in the same kindergarten were asked to take part in interview.

The two kindergartens in the sample are anonymized and are given the titles Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B in the study. Both kindergartens are located in the countryside with proximity to both nature and city. Kindergarten A has five departments with about 100 children, while Kindergarten B has seven departments with about 150 children. The kindergartens themselves decided which departments should be included in the study. In Kindergarten A, the observations took place in the department for the four- and five-year-olds, while in Kindergarten B, the observations took place in the department for the three- and four-year-olds. The sample in the focus group interviews, however, consisted of teachers in all departments.

	Kindergarten A	Kindergarten B	Total
Observations	7 teachers	5 teachers	12 teachers
	24 children	20 children	44 children
Interviews	3 teachers	4 teachers	7 teachers

Table 1 Sample in each kindergarten

We provided information about the willingness to participate by handing out an information letter and a notification form, which the teachers signed before the interviews took place in November 2021 (Kindergarten A) and January 2022 (Kindergarten B). Before this, an information letter, interview guide, and notification form were submitted to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Given that the study examines the teacher's role in play, it was also necessary to obtain permission from the parents of the children. Children were not the subject of research, but it was still important to pay adequate attention to account for children's vulnerability in research (Einarsdóttir, 2007). In the representation of observations, we therefore considered that the teachers' actions and statements were being emphasized.

### Conducting the study

The study started with one interview in each kindergarten, followed by several observations. It was decided that both authors would conduct the interviews. The interviews were recorded because *»Memory fades quickly, however, and unrecorded information will soon be overshadowed by subsequent events«* (Fetterman, 2010, 116-117). The interviews were largely about how the teachers facilitated play.

For practical reasons, one of the authors carried out the observations. However, the transcription, analysis, and writing of the article were done together. Hammersley and Atkinson (1996) pointed out that the role that researchers choose to take is important for how observations are interpreted. In this study, partially participatory observation was chosen so that the observer was present in the room, sat by herself, and took notes. When the children got in touch, she answered their questions well but did not take part in the play herself.

The observations normally took place between 9 and 11 a.m., during which the day program was at free play, and each observation lasted for about 60-90 minutes.

	Kindergarten A	Kindergarten B	Total
Interviews	1	1	2
Days of observations	8	7	15

Table 2 Numbers of interviews and days of observations in each kindergarten

The observations were recorded continuously by the author who carried out the observations. A logbook of ideas and reflections on experiences during the observations was maintained. According to Fetterman (2010), such notes are written for one's own part and not for the audience. The use of a logbook led to increased attention to one's own choices, interpretations, and reflections and thus to one's own interpretive role in the various phases of the project.



The observer experienced saturation of observations and ended the data collection after 15 days in the two kindergartens. This is in line with Saunders et al. (2018, 1899), who indicated that »...*decisions about when further data collection is unnecessary are commonly based on the researcher's sense*«.

### Analysis

The preparation for analysis started with transcribing the interviews and writing observation notes on a PC. As transcription provides proximity to data and a basis for new discoveries, we chose to personally transcribe the interview recordings. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1996), analytical ideas can emerge while working with observation notes and transcribing.

The two data sets – interviews and observations – were coded separately. The interview data were first read through thoroughly several times and then divided into one main finding in each of the two kindergartens. In kindergarten A, the main finding is related to changing the daily schedule, while in kindergarten B, the main finding is about the relationship between planned theme areas and children's input about the play. Both findings are categorized as changes that effect play. The observation data was also thoroughly read through and further divided into two main findings, which cut across the two kindergartens. One finding is examples when the teacher's role function as an obstacle in play while the other finding gives examples of teacher's role function as a driving force in play.

### Verification

Maxwell (1992) defined reliability as a research process carried out in a credible and trustworthy manner, and validity refers to conclusions about findings and not primarily to data or methods. He argued that good qualitative research derives much of its validity through the researcher's ability to produce and establish confidence in conclusions about findings. Emphasis is therefore placed on a thorough description of the study's research process. In accordance with the study's qualitative approach, both the analysis process and categorization are presented. Generalization is not relevant in qualitative studies; however, Stake (2000) pointed out that findings can inspire, thereby promoting a naturalistic generalization.

### Results

#### Findings 1: Changes that affect play

We chose to conduct observations of the kindergartens in the morning because lots of free play occurred at this time. The informants in kindergarten A said that they previously had a daily plan, which extensively divided the day into many activities. However, this had changed: »*Now we have chosen to have quite open days, simply. We do not have a very tight structure*«. As an example, the informant said that circle time, which they previously conducted in the morning, was currently conducted just before lunch »...*precisely so as not to break up the play more than necessary during the day. Then, we rather, take the circle time just before the meal, when we still have to break up*« (Kindergarten A).

The informants claimed that a fragmented daily plan could be destructive and an obstacle to free play, and when they used such a plan, they had taken it with them throughout the day. Since the changes in the rhythm of the day, the informants experienced a different sense of

calmness during the day: *»I feel we own our time more now. Now it is in a way, our day from start to finish, and then it is a little more like lowered shoulders«* (Kindergarten A).

In Kindergarten B, so much emphasis was not placed on changing the rhythm of the day to achieve more coherent time for play, but rather that the content throughout the day should be in accordance with the children's own interests. The informant in this kindergarten said that a lot of work was done with themed work.

The kindergarten had an annual cycle, in which the same themes were dramatized, played, and talked about again year after year, with some annual adjustments. The informants experienced that children's play is affected by the experiences the kindergarten facilitates. For example, *»When we go down to the shore to look for crabs, the children play about being crabs back in kindergarten«* (Kindergarten B).

The informants emphasized that circumstances that could change the plan were considered. They shared that, conversations with the children that resulted in the topic of the next circle time, different from what had been planned, or experiences on a trip that gave impulses, could change the planned arrangements. The informants said that this meant that they recognize the themes and experiences in the children's play.

Even when a theme had been thoroughly planned, the teachers may not work out the plan if the children were very busy with other things: *»We teachers were very interested in having a theme, The Huckybucky Forest [a well-known Norwegian children's book]. We might have done everything right, but the children may have no interest in the theme. They could be very interested in something else, so we must change the plan«* (Kindergarten B).

The main impression of the interviews was that both the rhythm of the day and the content were changed to allow good conditions for play.

## Finding 2: The teacher's role as an obstacle in play

Finding 2 is based on observations. The area inside both kindergartens consisted of a large room surrounded by several smaller rooms. The smaller rooms could be closed with a door, while the large rooms could not be physically closed.

We found that sometimes the teacher can prevent play from developing beyond the starting point of the play. When the teacher is not influenced by children's input, the play does not develop. And in one case, we can even discuss whether it develops into play at all. We present two examples of these scenarios.

### Considerations from a chair

In one of the side rooms, a teacher was sitting in a chair. She played music from her mobile phone, and 4-5 children ran around. Upon closer inspection, the observer discovered that they were listening to music from a familiar story and that the children were playing, that they were different characters from the story.

In the story, some of the characters chased each other, and the children did the same in the play. One of the children wore a cloak and ran after the other children. In the room was a small corner table, the top of which the children used as the »free« zone, where they were safe from being taken by the character in cloak. The children took turns being the different characters in the story and chasing each other around.

The teacher sat on a chair the entire time, while the music played from her cell phone. Once, she picked up a plastic toy from the floor and threw it to one of the children and said:

»It is now time«. The child threw the toy back, and the teacher accepted and said nothing more. After the music from the story stopped, the children flocked around the teacher who still had the cell phone in her hand.

Suddenly, one of the children said: »I have seen a book at home about a human eaten by a shark«. The teacher replied: »Fortunately, that is rare. It is more common for a human being to be kicked by a donkey than for a human being to be eaten by a shark«. The children did not respond further to the play but spread around the room. The teacher's comment seemed to puncture the play, as the conversation did not develop any further.

#### Trail master

In this case, the observer sat down to observe two children playing a boardgame at one of the tables in one of the smaller rooms. There was also a teacher present who watched the game. Then, one of the children got up and started running into a wall so that he crashed. The other child joined in this physical play and did the same. The teacher left the room to get something. One child said to the other: »Shall we do it again?«

The teacher came back into the room, bringing pillows and mattresses and made a small trail. She told the two boys she would monitor their run time for them. Before they could run, she told them how to run the trail and then demonstrated it to them. When the children started running through the trail, she monitored the time taken by each boy.

In both of these examples, the teachers had the role of initiating or monitoring the play. Nielsen (2023, p. 112) claims that when the teacher remains in these roles, the consequence is that they do not participate in the play. Sæbø (2020) emphasizes the value of teachers being able to juggle between different pedagogical roles in play. Then they start out as initiators and may end up as play partners. Improvisation is a fundamental skill the teachers need to be able to play (Greve et al., 2023). These two examples show how the teacher can prevent the play from developing when they are unable to change their pedagogical role in the play.

#### Findings 3: The teacher's role as a driving force in play

Finding 3 is based on observations. In several observations, we observed that the teachers played together with the children. They seemed to attract more children during the actual play. Common to the two following observations is that the children came up with the initiative or suggestion on which the teacher acted.

#### The baby's vomit and vomit

In one of the side rooms, a play had been going on for a while before the observer had entered. A teacher with some children sat around a table with plastic cups and plastic food. One of the children cooked in a small kitchenette and served fictitious food and plastic food to the teacher.

Several children entered the room, picking up some of the baby dolls lying around. Suddenly, one of the children started a play of a baby doll throwing up. Three other children played with the dolls, while the teacher and the child in the kitchen play were still busy with the food next door. The children who played with the dolls made statements such as »The doll vomit on the bed«, »...on the floor« and »...the washing machine is here«. One of the children »...washed« away the vomit with a spoon on the floor and then addressed the teacher: »Take him to the doctor, but first he must eat ice cream. It is very dangerous for babies«.



The teacher entered the children's fiction by including the three children in the kitchen play; they sat at the table while the baby dolls kept being sick. The teacher continued the play by serving food and helping to put diapers on the baby dolls.

After a while, the teacher left the room to get paper towels. One of the last children to arrive started throwing the plastic food on the floor. Some of the other children followed their example, and among other things, a cup ended up on the floor. When the teacher returned to the room, she calmly picked up the cup and continued to play without reprimanding the children. The play continued until the observation ends.

#### »The Laserman«

When the observer entered one of the smaller rooms, two teachers and eight children played in a fiction that she did not quite understand.

A boy knocked on the door, one of the teachers opened it, and the children in the room said: »Ah, it's the Laserman!« The children and the teacher played, following a rule that the person who came in was the »Laserman«. However, one of the children said to the last child to arrive: »That is not the way the game is played«. The teacher then explained that X (the name of the child) did not understand whether the »Laserman« was good or bad.

The play stopped briefly, and the teacher said to one of the children: »Can you let them know that they have to sniff us up?« The child then turned to the rest of the group of children and said: »We have to sniff them up«.

The teacher acted on the children's initiative and provided information so that misunderstandings between the children were resolved. The observer had the impression of a complex play with many simultaneous turn-taking roles. One teacher drove the play forward by being a part.

In both of these examples, we see teachers who are able to improvise and alternate between several pedagogical roles (Greve et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2023; Sæbø, 2020). This results in the teacher's role as a driving force in play.

## Discussion

### Sensitivity according to daily program and content

In both kindergartens, the informants said that emphasis was placed on a certain sensitivity with regard to following the children's input. This applies to both the organization of time and activities, and to topics that the children find captivating and interesting. Creating such a framework for children's play may strengthen imaginative play because of cohesive time and because the theme evokes something in the child. This is in accordance with a circular culture emphasized by Gjems and Alvestad (2021). Such a culture is characterized by flexibility in the program, and it is one in which the teachers take responsibility for adding something to the children's play. It is not enough for the children to organize their own playing time; the teachers must also contribute. Giving room to change the schedule and content of the kindergarten is also in accordance with the curriculum for all Norwegian kindergartens because it emphasizes the child as a subject and that they should have an influence on the kindergarten offer.

It may also be relevant to point out that even if play is on the schedule, this is not sufficient to ensure that all children are included in the play. Greve et al (2023) claim that it should be respected that not all children can play with someone (p. 222). When teachers get involved

in play, on the other hand, it becomes easier for children who cannot find playmates to participate. Coherent time for play, with opportunities to try out different groupings (play ensembles, p. 222) can therefore support both individual children's participation in play and create safe play relationships between the children.

At the same time that the kindergarten must facilitate the children's play, the children must be educated for and prepared for an unknown future, of which not even the teachers have a complete overview. Gamlem and Rogne (2016) pointed out that creativity, collaboration, and communication are relevant skills that may be central to the future. Finding new and sustainable solutions for people, states, nature, and climate is challenging, but the ability to be creative can be crucial. To develop creativity is therefore important, and imaginative play may support this skill (Rasmussen, 2023).

#### Sensitivity according to taking part in children's imaginative play

The study found several examples of teachers who did not alternate between different educational roles (Sæbø, 2020, p. 69) in play. Some looked at the play from the outside and showed little interest and commitment while others were deeply involved. It could be several possible reasons for this. Greve et al. (2023) point out that the status of play may have an impact on teachers' involvement in play. Thoresen (2019) emphasizes that teachers often are afraid of destroying the play. This may be an expression of the belief that children should be allowed to play in peace with little interference. Such a view finds support in traditional Scandinavian pedagogy, which has placed great emphasis on the child's autonomy and initiatives (Håberg, 2017). When the ideal is to give neither instructions nor advice (Johansson, 2004), the children are left alone to design the play. For some children, preferably those with good language and social skills, it is easy to get involved in imaginative play, while others may need support from teachers. Regarding social equalization, a passive, non-playful teacher role will be most unfortunate for children who come from a home environment with little stimulation.

#### Support through explanations and an expanded universe

The study finds several examples of how the teachers cleared up misunderstandings and acted so that there was a good flow in the play. For example, in the observations of the »Laserman«, it turned out that one of the children needed role clarification—was the Laserman good or bad? The teacher then explained, that is, the teacher meta-communicated. A similar observation can be made when new children joined the play.

The children were from three to five years old and had different verbal skills. Therefore, it is essential that teachers support communication in the play, as Vygotsky emphasized. Language is a tool for developing children's mental processes, according to Vygotsky (Rieber, 2004). In play, children develop their linguistic repertoire, but development does not take place in a vacuum. Children may not sufficiently explain something to each other; it is also necessary that significant others with more knowledge and competence contribute to the communication (Vygotsky, 1995).

The study also finds many examples of teachers actively participating in play, taking on roles, and adding elements. In the story of babies who vomit, the teacher showed how to put on a diaper. She demonstrated with a »real« diaper. The teacher also expanded the play by entering into a dialogue with the children, such as when she asked what was for dinner. She

accepted the child's fiction when she got a cake in response. Although this was not a realistic answer, by the teacher taking part in the child's fiction, she was helping to expand and extend the play. When the child lacked sufficient knowledge, the teacher went in and demonstrated. This can be an expression of lifting the child into the proximal developmental zone by lending her experiences to the child (Vygotsky, 1995).

In another scene in this case, when the teacher was served coffee, she said that the coffee was a little hot. Then, the child went and got fictitious water. In contrast to the experience of the child in the story *Considerations from a chair*, who said that he had a book at home about a shark that eats humans, the teacher came up with a rational and fact-based answer. This comment did not seem to develop the play in the same way as the coffee cup comment.

However, in the story *The baby's vomit and vomit*, the teacher was involved in the play, even if the theme was not realistic. She accepted the children's fiction and was fully involved, and she did not make any rational statements, such as that then the ice had melted. This seemed to have caused the play to continue; it did not stagnate the play. This can be an example of the relationship between fiction and reality. Vygotsky (1995) emphasized that everything that is created out of the imagination is based on reality and previous experiences; therefore, the richer the reality, the richer the imagination.

#### The teacher's role as an obstacle in play

In both study's cases in which the teacher played music on her phone or set up an obstacle course with certain rules, the play did not develop beyond a running play. This form of play is perceived as the simplest (Olofsson, 1993). In both cases, the children became fictional characters, but the course of action did not go further than running one after the other. Even if the children had used a good Norwegian children's book, given our extensive universe, it is interesting that when the teacher turned on the music without adding anything more, the children seemed not to master playing the complexity of the story. This is not satisfactory, even from the starting point of a rich literary universe. When the teacher does not go beyond his or her role as initiator of play (Sæbø, 2020), we observed that the teacher became less of an active play partner. This is supported by Nielsen (2023, p. 112), which finds that the teacher's position as a supervisor or initiator means that teachers are less likely to participate in play.

In the example of the Trial master, the teacher decided what the content should be like. The teacher set the trial, explained the rules, and showed the children how to run through the trial. The children were invited in to participate, but there was no development and no more children joined in. If we follow Hammershøj and Jørgensen's (2023, p. 33-34) points about what play should contain, one can ask the question whether »...trail master« developed into play. Their first point is that play should have freedom, and in this example the children were shown exactly how it should be carried out without the teacher opening up the children's input. Our point in including this example is to show how the teacher can be an obstacle to the development of play, or that the activity may remain an activity and not develop into play at all. Having knowledge of how to support play by taking on functional roles such as play-facilitator, -planner, -starter, and -maintainer and play-partner (Sæbø, 2020, p. 69) may help teachers taking part in the children's imaginative play to a greater extent. Thus, the teacher must be a mediator between the fictional world and the real for the play to develop (Lindqvist, 1997).

### Conclusion

The main finding of this study is the value of the teacher's ability to change his involvement in play according to the context. Teachers' involving in play do not necessarily lead to more imaginative play. We also found that when the teacher is a play partner who both adds new fictional elements and supports the fiction by »lending« their experiences, the play's potential and opportunity space is utilized.

An empirical approach with the use of observations and empirical data, such as this study, can contribute to more knowledge about the phenomenon of play in kindergartens. The study's empirical material and discussions are largely linked to Vygotsky's theories on imaginative play. The study can have transfer value to other contexts and help to highlight the central importance of teachers in children's play.

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