”But it’s not always so easy to join the play because one should be here and one should be there”

Teacher Participation in Children’s Pretend Play: A case study of one preschool from a Cultural Historical Activity Theory Perspective
New research shows that adult participation in children’s play is beneficial for learning and development in early childhood. It is particularly socio-dramatic narrative play, in which children and adults co-construct the play events that is beneficial. Research also shows that teachers in the Swedish preschool tend not play with children. The Swedish Education Act and the Swedish Preschool Curriculum contain goals to strive for, specifically regarding play. Greater efforts and insight is needed to pave the way to increase the benefits for children through the use of play (Broström, 2017). The purpose of this study is to develop knowledge that contributes to understanding of the relationship between pretend play and children’s’ learning and development, as well as the development of preschool didactic and pedagogical activities based on this knowledge. To achieve this aim we drew on Cultural Historical Activity Theory to develop and conduct a case study at a municipal preschool. Data was gathered through observations of preschool children and staff in two units and through individual, semi-structured interviews with eight preschool teachers. We found that the preschool teachers rarely engaged fully in children’s play; however, when they did engage with the children in play, their involvement ranged from a slight involvement, to being a stage hand in the play, or being passively engaged in joint play with children. Our cultural-historical analyses revealed mediating activities that have an effect on if and how teachers engage in play with children. We conclude by arguing that teachers need more education about what type of adult child joint play that is beneficial and that the preschool directors have an important job to help manage the preschool teachers time and provide opportunities for them to reflect and document their work in such way that more time could be set apart for them to commit to being fully engaged with children in narrative pretend play.

Search Words: Adult-child joint play, pretend play, preschool, education, Cultural Historical Activity Theory
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1. Introduction

Research based on Vygotsky’s theories of play and learning suggests that there are benefits for the cognitive, emotional and social development of children in early childhood when adults enter into pretend play with children under particular pedagogical arrangements (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2010, Nilsson and Ferholt, 2014; Lindqvist, 1995) However, recent research indicates that preschool teachers in Sweden tend not to take part in children’s pretend play. Instead teachers in Sweden appear to take a more passive approach, focusing more on observing children’s play, organizing for it and encouraging peers to play with each other (Pramling Samuelsson and Sandberg, 2005; Lillvist, Sandberg, Sheridan & Williams, 2012).

The Swedish preschool curriculum states that “The preschool should strive to ensure that each child develop their curiosity and enjoyment, as well as their ability to play and learn” (Skolverket, 2010, p. 9). The curriculum also clearly states that play should be a tool in the preschool work: “Conscious use of play to promote the development and learning of each individual child should always be present in preschool activities” (Skolverket, 2010, p.6). Further the Swedish Education Act states that the work in preschools should be based on science and tested experience. Given the research suggesting the benefits of adult-child joint pretend play, one may consider it important that preschool teachers reflect on their views and methods related to play in preschool, including the role of pretend play in children’s learning and development and how they should relate these views and methods to their work in preschool.

In this thesis we explore how adult-child joint pretend play is understood and applied pedagogically by teachers in Swedish preschools. Our aims is to develop knowledge that contributes to understanding of the relationship between pretend play and children’s learning and development, as well as the development of preschool didactic and pedagogical activities based on this knowledge. We adopt a methodology that brings together a case study approach (combining interview and observation methods) with Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

Our study confirmed prior research that shows preschool teachers in Sweden as tending to leave children to play on their own. At the same time, our observations revealed that the teachers involve themselves with the children somewhat and that this involvement
can be categorized into passive engagement in play, into being a stage hand, and very rarely active engagement. If and how teachers were involved sometimes occurred when they had their own agenda, but also sometimes when they played actively in dialog with children playing for the sake of the play alone. We identify a number of meditational means that affect if and how teachers in Sweden are engaging in pretend play with children in preschool: Swedish preschool education steering documents, norms regarding teacher collaboration, and select persons who interact with preschool teachers (principal, special needs teachers, university lecturers).

2. Background

In the history of Swedish preschool up to year 1998 the focus was aimed on care, play and personal relationships. And up until that year the social services sector was responsible for the preschool. However, as of 1998 the responsibility for preschool provision was taken over by the education sector. The result, was that the former history in conjunction with the new, created a tension between a focus on goal-oriented learning and a pedagogy that was more holistic and care-oriented (Broström, 2017). In view of this, play has always been a valued activity in the Swedish preschools, although in the past a more supervised one. The pedagogues then watched the children’s play to ensure good behaviour. They also observed the play in order to diagnose the children’s play and their actions. This was done so that the children’s development would be monitored and valued against the norms concerning maturation. There were two major attitudes about play that play was therapeutic and the view that play was a learning process (Lindqvist, 1995). However these days preschool teachers are forced to consider curricular guidelines that ask teachers to consciously use play in the service of goal-oriented, teacher lead learning (Skolverket, 2010). These approaches are reflected in the old way of focusing on care and the new way of focusing on education as both of them are brought together in the new term educare (Bruce & Riddersporre, 2012).

Sandberg and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2011) have examined play and learning in relation to the values promoted in the Swedish National Curriculums for Preschool. They argue that the emphasis in the curriculum on combining play with formal learning has greatly influenced how preschool teachers work in these areas. In the past play and learning was treated separately from each other in Swedish preschools. Play was then not considered meaningful for the learning process. But presently the view that learning happens in early
childhood and that it is not just something specific to school activities has been endorsed. As Sandberg and Ärlemalm-Hagsér show, recent research demonstrates that play during early childhood has a positive impact on, among other things, children’s development, their ability to concentrate, and their ability to take instructions later on at school. Sandberg and Ärlemalm-Hagsér also point to studies that show that significant learning outcomes are achieved in situations when preschool teachers have assisted and encouraged children’s play accordingly. When preschool teachers take part in play it’s possible for them to help the children learn and develop in the interplay between children and the adults (Sandberg and Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2011).

2.1 Pretend play and learning in early childhood

Play supports children’s development and learning. It benefits children’s cognition, their socio-emotional development and their physical development. Many possibilities open up for children through play but it is the quality of the play situations that can contribute to an increased chance that they will learn by playing. Both Piaget and Vygotsky argue for the use of playing in children’s education from a young age. The knowledge Piaget had about play derives from a cognitive perspective. He felt strongly that play greatly impacts cognitive processes and the development and learning regarding children early on. Vygotsky believed that children move forward cognitively whilst playing, that the biggest accomplishments for children occur during the time when they play (Aras, 2016). Vygotsky argued that pretend play was a leading activity in early childhood that supported the development of children’s symbolic thinking. Specifically, children’s ability to imagine and create make believe situations in play is something that Vygotsky considered was a means by which abstract thinking could be developed (Vygotsky, 1978). As opposed to Piaget, Vygotsky derived his thoughts from a social constructivist point of view. He looked closely at the social aspects of play and the learning opportunities it could potentially provide when children are assisted by adults, and in such way are stretched beyond what they could do were they on their own (Aras, 2016).

Ashiabi (2007) highlights the important function of pretend play as a means of helping children acquire socially accepted ways of interacting. He writes that children’s acceptance by and ability to interact with peers depends on their ability to interpret and cope with the emotions of others. In this situation the ability to regulate one’s feelings
may mean that one can accept a role that may be different from something that was desired at first, as opposed to walking away in disappointment when the sought after role is brushed aside as non-important or taken already.

2.2 Benefits of adult-child joint play: General Considerations

Over the past several decades there has been research that illuminates how and why preschool teachers participate in pretend play with children and why it is important for preschool teachers to be involved in children’s’ pretend play. This research also makes a connection between this type of play in relation to learning and development in preschool. Some such examples are Edmiston (2008), Pramling and Johansson (2009). In the article of Pramling and Johansson (2005) they argue that adult-child play has benefits for learning. They mention that adults can bring ideas and challenges to the children’s play and they bring up one aspect of Vygotsky’s theory when they write that this lead to development of the play and children’s thoughts (cognitive learning). The preschool teachers in the study sought to safeguard the children’s play and not interfere with it. According to the authors this lead the teachers to miss out on important opportunities, when play and learning could have been brought together.

Edmiston (2008) points out that adult-child play can be beneficial for children that has a talent for thinking of new and interesting ideas in pretend play, but who struggle to interact with peers. Edmiston argues that adult-child play, because it is grounded in dialogue can help children take on other people’s perspective, building trusting relationships, balance uneven power relations between adults and children and between children and children, and it can help children reflect on the consequences of their actions.

Hadley (2009) discusses some of the challenges for adults of being in the play with children. He argues that adults should develop a ‘playful disposition’: that adults should have a willingness to acknowledge and be in touch with the learning of children, and be inside of the ‘flow’ of children’s play, letting go of control, submitting to the same rules as everybody else in the play, and acting in conjunction with the children and respond in such ways that are suitable depending on how their actions are interpreted. When one is used to teaching or explaining things to a child, Hadley argues that it may also be difficult to be in a circumstance when things are somehow made simpler than real life. It is simpler in such way that it has become understandable, manageable and
definable. Further, action and awareness are merged in the play. This means that it is not explaining and teaching that one does, but rather unmediated communication: “In abandoning our self and being someone else we can be direct and say what we mean, say what’s on our mind (as a character in the play – our comment)/.../ while at the same time being wholly mindful of the impact of what we have to say” (p. 15). Apart from the positive aspects of engaging in child play that the author describes, he also points out the importance of children learning to be innovative through play and in such ways be more equipped for life (Hadley, 2009).

Finally, Sandberg (2002) and Ivarsson (1996) discuss qualities that are important for adults to strive for in their play participation with children. Sandberg (2002) argues that adults who are spontaneous, playful, humorous, radiate joy of life, and whom provides time for play can have a valuable impact on children’s development. This is in line with Hadley’s idea of a ‘playful disposition.’ Ivarsson, argues that adults need to commit to the play and show great pleasure in order for it to be as good as possible. She argues that adults also must be conscious about how they affect the play. Simply by using body language one can affect the play, for instance by sending out negative or positive signals (Ivarsson, 1996).

2.3 Adult participation in Pretend Play: The perspectives from Sweden
Previous research show that preschool teachers in Sweden are reluctant to participate in children’s play for various reasons. Below we review some of this research, as well as research from a Nordic context arguing for the benefits of pretend play between adults and children.

2.3.1 Adults on the sidelines: Adult participation as Disruptive of Play
A number of studies suggest that when one examines preschool teachers’ participation in joint adult child play in Sweden one sees that preschool teachers tend not to engage in pretend play with the children. For example, in an interview study of preschool teachers, Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2005) describe differences in the way male and female teachers view adult-child joint play. Whereas the men showed a tendency to engage in play with the children, the female preschool teachers tended not to. With regard to these findings one should however be aware of that the female preschool teachers meant role-play specifically and the male preschool teachers meant play in
general. The reason the female teachers gave for their unwillingness to play with children were that they did not want to disturb the children. According to them, adults joining in the play could cause the play to change in a negative ways. For instance, the teachers worried that they would inhibit some children, since, they believed, some children that seem shy and introverted appear to be more involved and confident when playing alone. And the preschools teachers were of the opinion that children don’t want adults to participate because they are aware that adults can’t remain in the play for so long. They know that adults have to, for example, answer the phone and go away to do other things. The male preschool teachers, on the other hand, reported that they wanted to participate in play because it provided opportunities for them get to know the children more. They also believed that in play they could note when children might need help.

Ivarsson (1996) argues that preschool teachers rarely have a choice of when to join the play or not, sometimes it is something one should do and sometimes it is appropriate not to. In her interview study of early childhood educators, the teachers reported that often it was enough to sit nearby the children and not be active in the play. They also felt that the children were able to tell them if they did not want to have any adults nearby. According to Ivarsson, an issue to consider is that children may not be accustomed to that the adults join in the fun when they play. That they may be more accustomed to that the adults are only present nearby in the room and that they sometime "disturb" the play. But if the preschool teachers would take active part and go into a role in the play, the children may change how they feel about adult’s participation. In the study of Ivarsson (1996) preschool teachers also reported that children in preschool already receive so much attention from adults that they cannot manage on their own. The teachers feel that it is better to supervise the children and let them play independently rather than participating in their play. Children that can manage on their own and not be dependent of the adults is something that the preschool teachers highly value. The preschool teachers also reported that they often have more influence on play than the children in the different situations and the things that goes on. They are aware of the uneven power balance between the adults and the children. The teachers feel that they as adults are too dominant which is something they perceive problematic, and this makes them choose not to participate in the child play. They also express that all the focus often goes to the adults when they participate. The preschool teachers mean that teachers at preschools today take too much
control of the play. They feel it result in children that are being inhibited and children that are constantly feeling watched and controlled by the adults (Ivarsson, 1996).

Weldemariam (2014) study cautions teachers and has a similar view to that of the preschool teachers in the Pramling Samuelsson and Sandberg (2005) study. He argues that preschool teachers interrupting children’s play by joining in may lower the quality of child play.

2.3.2 Adults off the sidelines: Swedish play worlds and adult-child joint socio-dramatic play.

Particular forms of adult-child joint pretend play can promote children’s learning and development in early childhood (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2010, Nilsson and Ferholt, 2014; Lindqvist, 1995). Interestingly, much of the research showing this relationship originates in Nordic early childhood education research. The most notable of these researchers is Gunilla Lindqvist.

Lindqvist observed that preschool teachers in Sweden do not generally take part in adult child joint play. She asked how it could be that play was not practiced in Sweden in spite of the nation’s reputation as child-centered and forward-looking. Lindqvist argued that daily routines and adult’s perceptions and knowledge formed the foundation for play activities, when it instead could have been founded on respect for children’s play (Nilsson, 2010). Lindqvist felt that the uncertainty amongst preschool teachers when it comes to play didactics is not surprising. She observed that different traditions have influenced the Swedish Preschool since its origin. For instance traditions that have, among other things, idealized play, put it in relation to doing useful things and made play stand for children’s own world only:

“Play has become one aspect amongst many others of child development. Moreover, play signifies childrens own world, which has made it difficult for adults to use it as a pedagogic method. Attempts has been made at solving this problem by applying a dualistic approach, in which child development is regarded as a phenomenon separated from direct adult interference. It is no surprise that preschool teachers have an ambiguous approach to play” (1995, p.38)
Lindqvist (1995) studied Vygotsky and his followers’ theories of play and found that they had focused narrowly on the social psychological aspects of children’s learning. She argued that it was also important to focus on the aesthetic and cultural aspects of pretend play. She wrote: “There is a need for a new interpretation of Vygotsky’s ideas, one which recognizes children’s creative abilities in play instead of focusing only on reproduction. The interesting basis is that of psychology as cultural science and not as a biological theory, and this is the kind analysis I would like to return to” (p.33). Lindqvist’s arguments are important to bear in mind in view of the history of Swedish preschool and how it has shaped the work in preschools of today, and in view of how teachers in Sweden are required to base their work in schools on research and practical experience.

Adult child joint play is central in Lindqvist’s theory. Lindqvist argued that playing a role offered freedom for teachers from ordinary roles and language, which in turn can help them relate to children in new ways. In her pedagogy, Lindqvist believed adult-child joint pretend play should be based on a narrative, typically based on children’s literature, that should be flexible enough to enable the children to influence the trajectory of the story. In this way it can provide opportunities for the children to be authors, directors as well as actors, so that they can reflect on the happenings and alternatives in the development process. It is interesting to note that Lindqvist stated that there also ought to be a theme or some emotional elements in the play. She argued that these elements would assist the children’s dramatic relationship (the fact that children often ad basic conflict into their play) if it is imparted into the story. A precaution which if taken would ensure that the play is more meaningful (Lindqvist, 1995).

2.4 Adult-Child Joint Pretend play in Swedish Preschools today: A Cultural-Historical Analysis

Now that we have laid out the general background of the pedagogical questions we wish to examine, we turn to a description of the theoretical framework we will use to examine these questions.

The theoretical framework we use is Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). CHAT is based in the sociocultural approach developed by L. S. Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues (Leont’ev 1981; Luria 1971). This theory argues that appropriation of cultural
tools in an active way is how humans make meaning. Cultural tools become available and are spread through interpersonal, mediated activity.

CHAT researcher study human learning and development through qualitative studies of how humans develop and maintain these activities over time. These activities are understood to have various components that mediate how a person, or subject, acts in the world (see Figure 1, p. 10). These mediating artifacts include tools, community, rules and division of labor. The relationship between the artifacts and the subject (what they stand for in the actual situation), affect what the subject does in the environments they operate in and the object around which the activity is organized. Changing the object into an outcome that meets specific human needs is what motivates the activity.

CHAT researchers focus on dilemmas and tensions that take place in these activities in relation to people and the organization of the activity. What is of interest to CHAT researchers is how people think about and resolve these dilemmas because it is in the conscious effort to understand and resolve dilemmas that learning can take place (Cole & Engeström, 2007).

Figure 1. A basic CHAT representation (Engeström, 1987, p.78) of the constituents of a human activity, to enable analysis of transformations productive of socially valued outcomes.

Given the description we have presented of CHAT let us consider the preschool as an activity system. Specifically, let us consider the position of the teachers as active subjects in this system and the various means that mediate how they may work with pretend play in the preschool (See Figure 2)
Looking first at the **tools** available to the teachers, the most relevant tool to consider for our purposes are the various steering documents that the teachers use to guide the work they do in preschool (e.g. the Swedish preschool curriculum, The Education Act). It is relevant on the one hand because it gives teachers specific guidance related to how play should be “used” in preschool as does traditional methods and material which are also types of tools (Nilsson and Alnervik, 2015).

Next, let’s consider the **rules** that teachers are subject to. Here we can consider rules in terms of the various values and beliefs that shape how preschool teachers engage with the children, their colleagues, and the parents. It is here that we can see tension between values related to care, play and socialization on the one hand, and more formal learning on the other. At the same time, we can see connections between the mediating elements (rules and tools) since traditions and fundamental values are expressed as goals in the Swedish curriculum for the preschool and the school law and regulate the preschool activity (Nilsson and Alnervik, 2015).

Next, let’s consider **community** . The community in the preschool is made up of all the different categories of professionals and other officials including, for example, the teachers union, the research council, the teachers and staff at the school including the principal, the Swedish school Inspectorate and the special education teachers. At the
same time the children and their parents also play an important role in the community of the preschool.

Finally, let’s consider division of labor. For example, the team of teachers responsible for each unit in the preschool share various responsibilities. At the same time, these teachers are also part of a division of responsibilities that includes the preschool principal, other teachers, as well as outside staff like mother-tongue teachers, who sometimes provide advice and support to the unit teachers. This advice and support can mediate how the teachers think and work with play and children in the preschool. This framing of the problem is something we will come back to later in the paper when we present our discussion and results. We will then illustrate preschool as an activity system and how we have looked at it in relation to our research question from a socio cultural view.

3. Research Rationale, Aims and Questions

3.1 Rationale

We have presented the evidence of the learning and developmental benefits of pedagogically arranged adult-child joint pretend play. With regard to this we would like to clarify that the goal oriented way of thinking may be easily adopted in preschool culture because of the goals in the Swedish preschool curriculum amongst other things. It is however the fact that evidence point to the multi developmental aspects, stimulated in pretend play (in meaning making dialog between children and adults together) when no predetermined goals are formulated, which is of interest. We have also reviewed the evidence that preschool teachers in Sweden tend not to engage in pretend play with children. Furthermore, in view of state requirements that preschool teachers base their work on scientific knowledge and proven experience it is important to understand how currently preschool teachers think about, arrange for and participate in or not, pretend play with children. If there are ways to work and arrange situations so that children learn and develop in ways that are more beneficial to them, it is of importance to investigate this further in order for the preschool activities to develop and improve.
3.2 Aim
To develop knowledge that contributes to understanding the relationship between pretend play and children’s’ learning and development, as well as the development of preschool didactics and pedagogical activities based on this knowledge.

3.3 Research questions
1. Do teachers engage in pretend play with children in preschool? If so, how?
2. How do teachers understand the developmental and pedagogical role of adult participation in children’s pretend play? What does their application of this understanding look like in practice?

4. Methods
We conducted a case study of teacher’s engagement in pretend play with children at a local municipal preschool. The study combined semi-structured interviews with individual teachers and field observations of children’s activities in the preschool. We drew on concepts from CHAT to design and interpret this study.

Case studies are applied in order to study an individual, a group of individuals or activity from a holistic approach. Gathering comprehensive information is very important, which means that the researcher need to use different methods when gathering the data. Field studies are often mentioned synonymously, as case studies are often carried out in the natural environment of the people concerned (Patel & Tebelius, 1987).

4.1 Field site
We conducted our research at a municipal preschool. The preschool has six units, with 113 children attending, and 22 preschool teachers, two preschool teacher’s assistant, and one additional staff member.

We chose to conduct our study at the preschool where we both conducted our seven-week teaching practicum as the base. Our decision to conduct our research at this school was based on considerations related to the quality of our research. We reasoned that our prior experiences at the school gave us insight in to the day to day work of the school that someone without experiences would lack. Furthermore, we had developed a rapport with
our supervisors and teachers, which facilitated our research entrée.

4.2 Participants

Eight preschool teachers participated in the study. Seven of them were female age from 27-62. Three of the female teachers had worked between three to six years and the other four teachers had worked between 12 – 39 years in the profession. The male preschool teacher was 52 years old and had worked 24 years in the profession.

Twelve children participated in the study; six children age one to two in one department and six children age three to six in another department.

4.3 Semi-Structured interviews

We chose to carry out semi-structured interviews in order to document the preschool teacher’s thoughts and perspectives concerning play in preschool, and in particular, the teacher participation in preschool play. The teachers were interviewed individually. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

To assist us during the interviews, we compiled an interview guide with prompts and questions designed to help us gather information to address our research questions (see Appendix 1). The guiding topics for our interviews were: The types of play teachers see take place at the preschool, opinions about the different types of play, thoughts about play for learning versus play as learning1 and thoughts about play competence. We also had two goals concerning play included in the preschool curriculum that we planned to have a discussion about. Teachers thoughts on play competence were of interest because of the study of Lillvist et al (2012) in which an account for teacher’s views on this topic area are given. We reasoned that asking teachers about play competence could function as a valuable source to compare against to increase the understanding of preschool teacher’s thoughts on play. To prepare the teachers for the interviews we also sent them an email prior to us meeting them (see Appendix 2.). In the preparatory email we asked

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1 Play for learning encompass the view that play is used as a tool to reach a predetermined goal, whereas play as learning involve no predetermined goal - the play in itself bring about learning (Nilsson, Ferholt, & Lecusay, in press)
them to write down two examples about play (that they had experienced) prior to the interviews and send their text to us. This was done in order to stimulate their thinking about the topic and to help us get into conversations with them with their answers as a starting point during the interviews.

### 4.4 Field observations

Field observations were conducted in order to get a general sense of the kinds of play that took place at the school over the course of the day and to gauge the frequency and nature of teacher participation in this play. Observations were conducted in two departments: Two days (Day one: 8:30-12:00, day two 8:30-11:15) in one department for children age 1-2, and a single day long observation (8:30-16:00) in one department for children age 3-5. We choose to involve ourselves (participant observation) with the children when we observed them so that our presence would not appear strange. Observation field notes were recorded within 48 hours of the observations.

Every effort was made to conduct observations in those units where research participant teachers did their work. We got consent, and we were able to do observations at the department for children age 3-5 and we got consent and we interviewed three preschool teachers from this department. We did observation at one department for 1-2 year olds and we interviewed one preschool teacher from this department. In addition to this we also interviewed three preschool teachers from the other department for 1-2 year olds.

### 4.5 Analysis Methods

Our analysis process involved repeated readings of the interview transcripts and field notes. When we conducted these readings we looked at the texts from the perspective both of our research aims and questions, and from the CHAT concepts of activity systems and mediation (see Section 2.4 above). Specifically, we thought about the preschool teachers as actors in the activity system of their preschool. Through our readings of the texts we identified themes related to teacher participation in play, and examined the relationship between these themes and the different mediational means of the preschool activity system.
4.6 Trustworthiness and Ethics

A small scale qualitative study which involved three units, the current research intended to provide an in-depth characterization of the teachers’ views with respect to the developmental and pedagogical role of adult participation in children’s pretend play and if and how they engage in play. The research was therefore carried out in the specific context in which they work. No generalizations about adult child pretend play can thus be made based on interviews and observations drawn from our words.

We followed the ethical protocols outlined by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers and from the parents of the children who were part of our observations. We were careful to inform all the participants’ that their identity would never be revealed. It was made clear to the preschool teachers and children that they could drop out of the study at any time.

5. Results

We begin by addressing our first research question: Do teachers engage in pretend play with children in preschool? If so, how? The interviews and the observations showed that the preschool teachers, in line with the findings of previous research, tended not to participate in imaginary play with children and that when they did, their level of engagement varied. The teachers reported that on occasion they engaged in pretend play with the children. During our observation days at the preschool teachers did not engaged in imaginary play with the children. Based on what they reported in their interviews, when the teachers did participate in imaginary play with the children, they appeared to take a passive role (e.g. as a kind of “prop” character, or helping with “stage management”). Importantly, we documented differences between what the teachers wished they could do and what they actually did when it came to engaging in pretend play with children. The opinion that the reality of the working day at the preschool can throw over the plans and intentions that were there originally seemed to be important. We also observed differences among the teachers with respect to seeing potential for a greater involvement in children’s play vs. seeing greater practical difficulties in arranging for play with the children. We understand that there are demands in the profession that
complicate the work of a preschool teacher however we interpret this difference as a
difference in attitudes (compare seeing a cup as half full or half empty).
We identified three general topic areas through which the teachers organized their
thoughts and discussion with respect to the nature of preschool teacher’s participation in
children’s play. It is through these topic areas that we are able to address our second set
of research questions: How do teachers understand the developmental and pedagogical
role of adult participation in children’s pretend play? What does their application of this
understanding look like in practice? The three topic areas we identified were:

5.1 Beliefs and perspective on adult participation in children’s play
5.2 Teacher Play Competence
5.3 Organizational constraints

5.1 Beliefs and perspectives on adult participation in children’s play

Through our analyses we identified three general categories of beliefs that teacher’s
expressed regarding adult participation in preschool play and its role in children’s
learning and development. These areas were: adult participation in play to teach children
rules, adults helping children develop socio-emotional skills through play, and adults
needing to respect the children’s wishes that the adults not participate in play so that the
children can process things. We found that these beliefs fell into two broader categories
of perspectives held by the teachers regarding adult participation in play: “Letting play
be” and “The preschool teacher as co-player.”

5.1.1 Letting play be

When the teachers described their thoughts about participation what became clear was
that all the preschool teachers felt that it was important to know when to hold back and
when to participate in play. They talked about this knowledge in terms of it being a skill:
one has to be sensitive to the situation and what is the right thing to do. All of the
teachers interviewed agreed that that children who play nicely by themselves or who ask
to play on their own should be left alone to do so. For example, some teachers said the
following:

“I will not interfere with the play without them having invited me in” (Teacher 2).
“To reverse from the play …take a step back from it” (Teacher 1).

A contradictory element could be seen in one interview in which the teacher argued that adult involvement in play would increase the amount of play time, while at the same time the teacher noted that adult involvement could ruin children’s play. While in general the teachers described a tendency to hold back from participation in play, there were a number of important exceptions. A key exception to this idea of letting play be concerns the emergence of interpersonal conflicts among the children engaged in play. For example, some of the teachers noted that when things get out of hand and conflicts arise, the preschool teacher feel the need to step in to prevent children harassing one another and solve interpersonal conflicts. At the same time, some teachers described the emergence of interpersonal conflicts among playing children as providing teachable moment to take a role in the play and teach them how to behave and how to act towards each other. Finally, one teacher noted that sitting near the children’s play allowed them to be available should the children ask questions.

5.1.2 The preschool teacher as co-player

While the general tendency, as observed in the interviews as well as in the field observations, was that the teachers held off on playing with the children, the teachers spoke about a variety of factors that influenced whether or not they decided to become involved in pretend play, and the nature of that involvement. These factors included the age of the children, the amount of time the children had been playing and the children’s intention regarding the role that adults might play in their play actively.

The bulk of all the interviews suggest that the most frequent times adults engaged in children’s play they were passively involved. We define passive involvement as sitting next to the children without really engaging with them unless they were given a prop such as a toy cup of tea. In these situations the adult would enter into the role in the play and in character for instance ask for a biscuit or some milk to go with it. Another way in which adults participated was in a kind of “stage manager” role. This role involved teachers being assigned a kind of stage management task (e.g. playing music) that
addressed the needs and wishes of the children with respect to the play. It seemed that preschool teachers assumed a passive involvement in the play had the children invited them in.

For example, one teacher described working with three children who were role-playing about Laban the ghost (Little Ghost Godfrey – English translation) a Swedish children’s book character. One child played Laban, another played another character, Labolina, and another played the father. Someone sang and it was almost like a musical and a lot of acting. During this time the teacher was not part of the role play but mentioned that the role of managing the music had been assigned to the preschool teacher by the children. The teacher was also helpful to the children when they put on clothes and scarfs. With regard to using dressing up clothes, it seemed like quite a few of the preschool teachers regarded the children having access to clothing and props as important. The teachers that talked about the subject in more detail described their opinion of wearing dressing up clothes as adults. This they regarded less important. They described that on occasions they could wear a hat and that they also could dress up for traditional events. One teacher explained that dressing up on traditional events was not appreciated by the children. She mentioned that she once wanted to feel involved together with the children on Lucia, and had dressed up in a long red tunic and a Santa hat. “And the only thing the children were doing was to look at me. It was weird, it was not the same me. The children thought it was strange when I as an adult were wearing Santa Claus clothes and that took a lot from the Lucia program” (Teacher 3). It was also mentioned by another preschool teacher that dressing up fully as an adult (in the normal day to day activities) was not appreciated by the children.

These various examples of teacher involvement in children’s play have been observed in prior research. Fleer (2015) describes five types of positioning which show “how teachers demonstrate pedagogical positioning in the context of being in and out of the imaginary situation” (Fleer, 2015, p. 1807). These are; 1. Teachers proximity to children’s play. 2. Teachers intent is in parallel with the children’s play intent. 3. Teacher is following the children’s play. 4. Teacher is engaged in sustained collective play with groups of children. 5. Teacher is inside the children’s imaginary play. The teachers we interviewed were both proximal to and followed the children’s play;
however, while the teachers spoke much about the importance of “being in” the imaginary situation of the children, they reported that they were rarely “in” overall.

5.1.2.1 What do children learn when the adults play with them?

The preschool teachers had a number of observations regarding if and what the children learned when the teachers participated in the pretend play. All expressed that learning took place in these occasions; however, the teachers varied in their views concerning the content and nature of the learning, on the one hand seeing their participation as key to this learning, and on the other, seeing this learning as at times left to chance.

In terms of teachers appreciating their role in supporting learning, some argued that their own involvement in the play helped children develop their imagination while others saw pretend play as tool for helping the children feel recognized (e.g. being in role and recognizing the child through recognition of the pretend elements of the play - “what a yummy cake you have made!”). With respect to the development of imagination, the following example is important:

“But I am there supporting them in the play and are there and fantasize and can contribute it feels like the learning becomes greater. Because I may sit on knowledge in my fantasy world which they do not yet possess. Then I am able to complement them and then maybe it can trigger them in a different way somehow. If one asks the question “where are we going?” They might not have communicated that bit had I not taken part. Because one challenge their imagination to think one step further. Yes we are going to A6 [shopping center] or something they can relate to, really one tries to incorporate other bits into the play so that one get it to flow. That one as a grownup takes part because the children have started to play in such way by themselves more and more now” (Teacher 4).

Two other preschool teachers argued that teachers need to teach the children to play. One teacher in particular argued that taking on a role in the play can be useful for introducing new things to inspire the children and show them how to play with those things. Similarly, one preschool teacher spoke about how teachers have to find the right tools to motivate the play, and that teachers be present as a support. From the content of the interview we interpret that by support they mean to prevent conflicts, be there to make the children feel safe and assist them.
A preschool teacher, one who reported engaging in pretend play with the children, offered this example of how the person would talk to the children in play: “Look how high I have built. What beautiful colors or shapes or something like that. This is becoming a nice house. Does someone want to live with me? I am on my own now. I do not have a friend to live with me”. The same teacher also gave an example of his experience engaging in pretend play with the children, and how he drew on his role to direct the children’s actions: “There is a baby there. Oh it is all by itself /…/ hush we need to be quiet my baby is sleeping here. You go with your prams. I will look after the baby” (Teacher 7). A related example is drawn from our observations of the small children’s department; we noticed an adult talk to a child in role-play language in order to get a child to put away toys and leave a doll and a pushchair in its right place. The preschool teacher spoke to the child in a character and said “the baby can sleep now, we let the baby sleep”.

Another example that illustrates how teachers appreciated the role that joint pretend play can have for supporting a child’s imagination involved one teacher from the oldest children’s department. She described a situation when she and the children played Spiderman. She did not have so much knowledge about Spiderman but seemed to be fascinated about the children’s imagination. Particularly how the children imagined Spiderman’s vehicle she explained: “It became a car, it came an airplane, a boat different types of vehicles./…/ It became so much. And we brain stormed together about what it should be, and the wings on the car - how it should be. It was really fun one get such connection” (Teacher 6).

It should be said that for all these examples of teachers recognizing the role that their participation in pretense can play in supporting children, some teachers also felt that what and how was learned was at times left to chance. For instance, one teacher noted with respect to learning in play that, “Whatever will be will be” (Teacher 4)

5.2 Teachers’ perspectives on their own play competence

Play competence was something that the teachers were asked to reflect upon before and during the interviews. More specifically, teachers were asked for their definition of what
play competence means from the point of the preschool teacher in the profession (not as children’s ability to play).

A number of teachers reported that to have play competence it was important that they as teachers expressed joy when they play with the children. One teacher explained that it is important because the children would know straight away if the teacher did not enjoy playing with them.

Another feature that was mentioned by the teachers was to present oneself as being involved. For example, it is important to have imagination, to play with the children on their level (e.g. sit on the floor with them), give of one self and not be worried to make a fool out of oneself (to “dare to flip out” as one teacher put it, and be like one of the children, dress up and do something a little crazy). It is interesting that the teachers mentioned to dress up and do something a little crazy as an element to play competence. Especially as we have also given an account of the view that dressing up fully as an adult are not regarded as something that were appreciated by the children and that dressing up partly can make the situation awkward (see page 19).

One teacher explained that play competence for preschool teachers was the same as for the children, to be able to join the play and imagine things in the same way as children do.

Play competence was seen by some as a skill that could be developed. One teacher thought play competence was the ability to join the play and develop it and to help the children continue playing. They felt that past experiences have made them have more play competence. It was also mentioned that ability to get a sense of what the children are doing before enter into the play with them.

One preschool teacher talked about the challenge to involve children in play (which we also connect to play competence). This teacher mentioned that these challenges could be related to reasons such as experiencing difficulties at home, having difficulties with friends, having no energy and having a diagnosis of some kind. She explained that all these things make it difficult and said “There we (meaning the preschool teachers) fill a super important function to get the children into the play. Children who play are happy children” (Teacher 6).
5.3 Organizational Constraints: Relation between administrative responsibilities and possibilities for organizing play

Organizational aspects were mentioned as critical to whether or not teachers became involved in joint play with the children. Specifically, the demands of day to day tasks in the preschool made organizing and participating in play difficult. For example, teachers noted interruptions by the phone, by other colleagues, by parents, and by meetings they had to go to. One preschool teacher felt that preschool teachers were able to spend more time with the children in the past and felt it was better before: “We do not really have the quality time with the children like we had before,” (Teacher 5). The amount of documentation that has to be done in contemporary preschool was also mentioned as a source of interference in play.

Teacher’s reported varying degrees of optimism regarding the possibilities for overcoming organizational problems. Whereas some would talk about it in a negative way some saw possibilities to arrange for play so that practical issues would not be a hindrance. One of the times when the preschool teachers actively organize for play is when they consider the environment. And the things that the children have to play with, as several have expressed different thoughts about this:

“When one has to organize the environment so it invites to play” (Teacher 7).

“And I think it’s improved a lot because we have changed around the furniture somewhat to get it right. Because the environment wasn’t used in the way we thought at first. So we changed the rooms and rearrange it and so now since then it has just sprouted out” (Teacher 2).

“The role-play becomes a little different when they have some clothes one has provided” (Teacher 4).

One preschool teachers talks about the fact that they have bought some new action figures to the children, and that they in the working team have discussed if this was appropriate yet another preschool teacher mention that she introduces new toys to the children through role-play.
6. Discussion: Cultural Mediation of Teacher participation in Children’s Play

We now draw on a CHAT theoretical framework to think critically about our observations concerning teacher’s involvement in preschool pretend play, and what potentially influences the preschool teacher’s thoughts and actions related to play.

6.1 Beliefs & Perspectives on Adult-Participation: Cultural Mediation of Teacher’s Philosophies of Play Participation

Looking at the result through a CHAT perspective we see that a teacher’s relation to the community and the division of labour is critical to the kinds of beliefs and perspectives the teachers develop about adult participation in play. One key example concerns the relationship between the teachers and their principal and special education teacher. The special needs teacher met on an as-needed basis with the preschool teachers to talk and give advice to the teachers about the children. A number of teachers noted that the special needs teacher emphasized the importance of children learning to play. For example:

“We had a special needs teacher who said if they do not learn to play it will be very tough for them in the future, that the play is a start for children that I just regarding cooperation and empathy have a crucial role in helping them” (Teacher 1).

Another teacher explained that they have sat down with the special needs teacher and the preschool directors and discussed that the preschool teachers need to be close nearby the children when they play and teach them to play. The reasoning that was advocated in this meeting by all was that a child who does not learn to play is at loss in many situations and they have emphasised the social competences and the skill to interact socially. The special needs teacher have specifically expressed that the children need to learn to play by themselves. So the preschool teachers have almost set up this as a goal “they need to learn to play by themselves” especially among the older children (3 years) and like that's

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2 The sentence is a direct translation of the spoken language which is not grammatically logic. We cannot know for sure if the teacher is referring to her own opinion in the end of the sentence when she says “I” or if she refers to the special needs teachers’ view that she as a preschool teacher have this crucial role. We do however believe that the teachers opinion (if she was talking from own point of view) may well have been derived from the discussions with the special needs teacher.
a good thing. They want to prepare the children and teach them to play before they move to a department for slightly older children.

By this we can understand that instructions which preschool teachers receive from the special needs teacher and the preschool directors during their joint meetings have a mediating effect on the way in which the teachers decide whether or not to engage in play with children and how they decide to engage in play with children. We can represent this relationship using the Activity System triangle (see Figure 3)

![Figure 3. Activity system triangle representing teacher’s philosophies of play participation.](image)

Another key example of how the teacher’s relation to the community and the division of labor affects teacher’s beliefs and perspectives about adult participation in play concerns the participation in the preschool by university lecturers (see Figure 3, Division of Labor node). In our field site preschool, some of the teachers who participated in our study, had also participated in a seminar that was given at another preschool by a university lecturer/researcher. This seminar was on the topic of adult-child joint play. Indeed one of the preschool teachers that had attended this seminar mentioned it had an impact on her thinking concerning play with the children. She described it as confirming what she knew about play with children, and as making her understanding of the topic become clearer. We can see how this imparts in depth knowledge which guides the teachers into thinking differently about something like play. This was mentioned especially in one of the interviews when the preschool teacher spoke enthusiastically about the university lecturer’s information about play.
6.2 Play competence: Cultural Mediation of Teacher understandings of the relationship between play and learning.

Based on the observations discussed in the results about play competence and teacher beliefs and perspectives about play, we can see that there is a tension between teacher’s views about play and their views on teaching. The teachers appear to emphasize teaching, here defined as goal-oriented, teacher led activities over play (compare with the Education act, the education within the entities for schools aim for all children and students to gather and develop knowledge and values, our translation, SFS 2010: 800, Chapter 1, 4§). We see this for instance, in the examples of the teachers arguing about the importance of taking advantage of the play situation to teach children about proper behavior, either by intervening in situations of interpersonal conflicts between children, or through modeling proper behavior in the play (e.g. the example of guiding the child in proper placement of the pushchair). This is in line with, but not exactly the same as recent arguments promoting the use of play for acquiring specific kinds of knowledge (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2009). Similarly, the emphasis on teaching by the teachers is present in the examples discussed above regarding “teaching children how to play.” This suggests that play’s developmental benefits are things that can be standardized and taught. This suggests that play’s developmental benefits are things that can be standardized and taught. It also suggests that grownups are better than children at playing. This is contradictory to our belief that adults sometimes can need to be taught how to play from the children. As one may lose ability to play in adulthood (Skolverket, 2014).

We also see from the result that reason for one of the teacher ascribing value to her own role and play competence is because of the experience that children, due to difficulties at home, due to difficulties with friends, due to having no energy and due to having a diagnosis struggle to play. Children’s involvement in play was in this example seen to signifying their state of mind, as playing children were perceived as happy children.

We also found that the preschool teachers we interviewed had an intuitive sense of how to be with children in play. For example they considered it important to give of one self and not be worried to make a fool out of one self. We see a similarity here to Hadley (2009) who suggested that adults should develop a ‘playful disposition’. He also bring up that a consequence for teachers when they position themselves inside of the flow of the
play is letting go of control. Developing a playful disposition seems important as to not put a damper on the play but rather the opposite.

One can ask where the focus on teaching comes from. In the previous section we already indicated that it potentially comes from the mediating effects of the community and the division of labor (e.g. Expectations and advice from the preschool principal, special education teachers). We can also include the mediating effects of tools like the Swedish preschool curriculum, and as we take for granted although it was not touch upon in the interviews, even the Education act. As we noted in our background, both these documents promote teaching in preschool, and an instrumental view of play, and these are documents that one teacher described as important for guiding the work.

Figure 4. Activity system triangle representing mediation of teacher understandings of the relationship between play and learning.”

Dalhberg, Moss and Pence, (1999) writes about the meaning making and quality discourses. The quality discourse is based on trust in expert knowledge and a belief that facts can be generalizable. The quality concept stands for values that are deduced from logic reasoning and deemed specific and correct. Taking the quality discourse point of view it is universality, objectivity, certainty, stability, closure that is important. The methods applied in order to gain knowledge about something involve gathering information in a decontextualized manner. Such methods are; rating scales, check lists, standardized inspection procedures.
The meaning making discourse, on the other hand, comes from a viewpoint that values subjectivity and understanding the context of learning (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). When judgement of values are being made it is made in dialogue with others seeking for answers to critical questions. Through this way of making evaluations the interpretation is derived from several people that have interpreted and judged phenomenon in an informed way, taking in consideration influencing factors and circumstances.

Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue that the meaning discourse is focused on democracy, and that the foremost method that is used in the meaning making processes is pedagogical documentation. The method originates the early childhood education pedagogy of Reggio Emilia. It involves showing what goes on in the preschool by creating and collecting documentations. It also involves time of reflections when the documentations are interpreted with critical eyes. A process which requires listening and argumentative skills as dialogue is important by way of gaining deeper understanding and produce new co-constructed knowledge (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence’s, 1999).

Discourses mediate how teachers work and they do so through the tools (curriculum) and rules (norms and values) that the teachers work with (see Figure 4). The examples we have discussed show that the teachers are caught in a tension between a view of play focused on teaching (quality discourse) and focusing on play for its own sake (meaning-making discourse). We see that the steering documents and the suggestions from the special education teacher mediate the promotion of a quality discourse which filters down to the staff, causing them to operate in certain ways (e.g. thinking in terms of knowing a right way of doing things, the right way to play, the right type of toys etc.). This is opposite to an approach where the preschool teacher enters into a dialogic process with the child. Some of the teachers appeared to be philosophically in tune with this approach. As we noted, they talked about “working at the children’s level,” expressing joy, and seeing play as an opportunity to engage in imaginative activities with the children (e.g. the Spiderman example). However, somewhat contradictory, the teachers also saw these as opportunities to engage in direct instruction. One example of this direct instruction approach is from our observation day on the small children’s department; we noticed an adult talk to a child in role-play language. In order to get a child to put away toys and leave a doll and a push chair in its right place the preschool teacher speak to the
child as if she were in a character and says “the baby can sleep now, we let the baby sleep”. This is an example of what Fleer (2015) describes as adult intentions clashing with the children’s intentions when adults participates in play, where the adult’s goals take over the goals of the children (the adult effectively ending play when perhaps the child was set on continuing).

It is also interesting to note that the teachers showed some uncertainty about the connection between learning in play. Some teachers were of the opinion that learning took place during the occasions when they sat next to the children and took part to some degree but let the children be in charge. They seemed to hope for learning to take place depending on the situation. At the same time, teachers spoke about learning as something that they had a responsibility to direct. Here again we see the tension between quality vs. meaning making discourses, and between the name that is given to preschool provision in Sweden: education and care, Educare.

This was evident in one teacher’s observation that currently in preschools in Sweden there has been a lot of focus on learning and that care has been forgotten. The education and care tension is also present in one teacher’s observation about her use of traditional adult guided play activities, activities that she had a lot of experience using with children. The preschool teacher manages the play as opposed to joining the play, another reflection of an emphasis of quality over meaning making.

Also related to the question of teachers’ beliefs and perspectives on play and play competence, are the contradictory observations that the preschool teachers made about feeling anxious to disturb the play, but at the same time expressing confidence in ways to enter into play (e.g. at the level of the children, with joy, without inhibitions) that they believed were appropriate and that are in line with recommendations in recent relevant research (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2010; Fleer, 2015, Hadley, 2002).

With respect to the teachers’ hesitation to enter into play, Broström (2017) argues that this is rooted in prevailing views and misinterpretations. Fröbel, whose views came to have a great influence on Swedish preschool historically, pointed to play as crucial for children’s learning and development. Although he meant that adults could play an important role in the children’s play, his thoughts about play as a free expression from a child’s soul was interpreted in such way that made preschool teachers stand in the sidelines as observers of a free play for children deemed best left alone. According to
Broström (2017) this romanticized view of play also surfaced by misinterpretation of Vygotsky and was drawn from his thoughts that children perform in more advanced way in play but which was ignorant of his thoughts on adults function as scaffolding in the learning process for children in what Vygotsky named the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). These misguided views have shaped the activities in preschool and are still lingering and seemingly affecting preschool teachers thoughts today.

6.3 Organizational Constraints: Mediation of Possibilities for Participating in Play

Finally, our observations in the results show that the preschool teachers are and feel constrained in their ability to engage in play with the children by organizational issues stemming from everyday personal and administrative demands. Here a CHAT perspective points us to the mediating functions that tools, division of labor and rules have on the relationship between organizational demands and the ability to engage in play with the children (see Figure 5, p. 30). With respect to division of labour, a number of organizational issues were discussed by the teachers. Most often mentioned were the various responsibilities that the teachers were expected to meet. These ranged from parent-teacher conferences, to special activities for the six year old children who are finishing preschool at the end of term, but most demanding of all were the various tasks associated with goal-setting, assessment, reflection, documentation and analyses. Some teachers noted that these activities steal time from the children, and they wondered, in the end, how useful this documentation work is. The teacher’s observations are also in line with recent research showing that the teachers occupied themselves with administrative tasks during children’s free play time (Aras, 2016).

Here we see an important link among the mediators in the activity system triangle, as the rules (norms about what and how to evaluate in preschool education) and tools (steering documents with general and specific work requirements for the teachers) mediate a division of labor that indeed can take up significant time from the teachers (see Figure 5). It might seem that the many tasks the teachers have would allow for more predictable work routines, but other tasks make the environment unpredictable. Required meetings take time and staff away from working with the children. Likewise when someone is ill and the remaining staff has to deal with the job of arranging for a stand in pool staff to come instead. Many of the teachers interviewed observed that they need to be very
flexible in order to adapt this situation and that at the same time this makes it difficult to spontaneously be present and ready to engage children in play.

Figure 5. Activity system triangle representing mediation of teacher possibilities for arranging their own participation in play.

It seems as if the reality of preschool work and the stresses of the everyday activities could be a contributing factor to the teachers wanting the children to get along and for everything to flow as smooth as possible. It can possibly be seen in the joyful expression of someone rejoicing when there is a flow in the play and is concerned that their entering into the play would ruin it:

“If I had gone in there even more I feel I would have probably ruined that moment. /.../ they showed such respect towards each other, they helped each other, really it was such interaction /../ it was such giving and taking, so I felt hallelujah”

Also linked to the tools and rules – specifically with the demands that the steering documents are placing on the teachers and at the level of community – how the School Inspectorate pressures schools – teachers report that they have a lot of documentations to do. One preschool teacher mentions this in an indifferent kind of way wondering who reads it all and to what use they have to do all their writing. From this we can understand that the tension between the preschool teachers’ experiences from the past are somewhat in conflict with the new ways of working at preschools, and that they miss having more time and perhaps another focus in their work.
7. Conclusion: Implications and Future research

Our study confirmed prior observations that preschool teachers in Sweden tend not to engage in pretend play with children. The teachers in our study saw adult participation in a contradictory way, as both valuable and potentially disruptive of play and therefore passive engagement or involvement from the outside of the play are the most common approaches.

Looking at the result from the teachers perspective about play and joint-play with children through the lens of activity theory there are several things that we noticed. By the way that teacher described their participation in meetings and interaction with other people in the field such as special education teachers, principals and university lecturers, we saw the ways in which teachers’ positions in the activity system of their preschool can shape how they think about play. Further all the administrative and educational work – represented by tools and division of labor - required of the teachers as members of the activity system has an impact how the preschool teachers think and arrange for play too. From these findings we conclude the following implications for research and pedagogy.

As fast as the world is changing today and as we are all heading towards an unknown future it seems to us as if the importance of children’s learning through adult child joint play could not be stressed enough. They should get to face the rest of their lives more equipped and able to use their innovative ability. Because as Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2010) states; “Play-based narrative learning leaves space for children’s and adults joint and personal creativity” (p. 62). It seems to us that for a child to collect experiences of getting to influence and co-construct the play in dialogue with playful adults would certainly enrich them for the years to come. In our result we learnt that many of the preschool teachers mentioned the importance of teachers being happy when they play with children. Something we also mentioned in our background. We consider this to be a key factor. It seems that preschools today are in need of adults that incorporate and organize for play in the preschool activities, in which attitudes and working methods certainly would be eased with a joyful approach.

We believe that in order for the new research about adult-child joint play should be embraced radical changes need to be made. Especially because the attitude sometimes seem to reign is “whatever will be, will be”. The fear of entering play as an adult
combined with everyday organizational difficulties (meetings, tidy rooms and phone calls etc.) appears to be an important limitation for teachers.

We noted the ways in which teachers did not fully participate in play but also were not completely passive. Teachers, for example, took on a role as a stage hand in the children’s play. We consider this to be a kind of intermediate space that could perhaps serve as a help for teachers to become more engaged in play. In other words, because teachers are already partly “in” play they have an opportunity to go in deeper. There may be many times such as these when preschool teachers can enter into play spontaneously and unplanned. Times that could be valuable, although the play time is not prearranged in such way that optimizes potential for children to learn something, such as in Lindqvists theory of play. But it can be good as the preschool teacher can still have the sensitivity and the literacy to see learning in the moment. It can also be good to leave learning up to chance as long as the preschool teachers get fully into the play and engage themselves in meaning making dialog with the children.

Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (p. 61, 2010) note that “often play and school-like learning is confronted claiming that genuine learning cannot take place in play, only as a result of teaching”. Perhaps the teachers need to come to value play in a new way. As the authors write that new competences are required from teachers that aim to teach children and help them develop. And argue that the best role model example for children is the teacher’s creativity. In order for this change to be made it seems that the preschool directors and the preschool teachers themselves must be aware of how the areas that are seen in the nodes effects how the preschool teachers arrange for play. They may also need some more teaching about what type of play is beneficial.

Finally, there are various implications for research of our study. Future research could advantageously investigate the relationship between all the kinds of activities that the teachers are doing. How it influences the way in which they engage in play, and do larger research projects to see what it looks like across the country. The same research area could thus be studied more systematically.

Our current study involved individual teacher interviews. It would be useful to examine the same topic based on focus group interviews, as they are a way forward to acquire qualitatively different and perhaps richer information of the topic area. It could be of
value for preschool didactics since these kinds of interviews could provide information about how teachers think about collaboration with respect to play and children. Preschool teachers need to collaborate with one another so that space for adult-child pretend play can be created and these types of play can be designed and implemented.

As we mentioned earlier, the Reggio practice of pedagogical documentation has become an important way for teachers to think about children’s development. Future research should also study pedagogical documentation as a tool that teachers use to organize play in preschool. If interviews and observations were used as well by way of studying how preschool teachers think about and work with questions of pretend play and preschool pedagogy it would shed more light on the topic.

The preschool should be a compliment to the home. It should have meaning and significance in the children’s lives. Regardless of their time spent there, our desire is that all children should play and thrive in this environment:

“Children who play and play well are happy children. One hear children’s laugh then and then everything is ok. It is well with those children and it is towards that we should strive. Joy and imagination is as such – a wonderful day at preschool. When one has lovely memories in the body when one walks home from there. It is good then. Because then we have it too. Then one go happy away from work. A day like that I feel yes. Today the children have got what they need” (Teacher 6).
8. References


Appendix 1

Intervjuguide

1. Anländ 15 minuter innan för att förbereda (ljudinspelning)
2. Prata om samtyckesformuläret
3. Introdusera projektet
4. Genomföra intervjun
5. Fråga dem hur länge de har arbetat som förskollärare, fråga dem hur länge de har arbetat på just den här förskolan.
7. Eventuellt fråga dem mer om vad barnen gör? Vilken typ av lek? (Utomhus/Inomhus)
8. Prata om vad förskollärarna tycker om olika typer av lek; lätsaslek/ hunden och köttbenet (visa dem en bild)
10. Prata om vad de olika läroplansmålen kan betyda för dem;

   Förskolan ska sträva efter att varje barn utvecklar sin nyfikenhet och sin lust samt förmåga att leka och lära (Skolverket, 2016)

   Ett medvetet bruk av leken för att främja varje barns utveckling och lärande ska prägla verksamheten i förskolan.
11. Lek för lärande jämfört med lek som lärande (undervisningslek som lärare har tänkt ut och lek som barn utför spontant – vilken betydelse tillskriver förskollärarna de olika typerna?)
12. Avsluta intervjun 10 minuter innan sluttiden
13. För över ljudfilen från den första intervjun till en dator eller en extern hårddisk innan nästa intervju. Ta en paus mellan intervjuerna.
Appendix 2

Intervju förberendeande text

Du får den här texten för att du har ställt dig villig till att delta i en intervju. Intervjun är semi strukturerad vilket innebär att vi kommer samtala tillsammans. Beräknad tidsåtgång vid intervjutillfället är cirka 40 minuter till en timma.

Lek är viktig för barns utveckling och lärande. Ett medvetet bruk av leken för att främja barns utveckling och lärandeska prägla verksamheten i förskolan (Lpfö 98, Rev 2016, sid 6).

Eftersom ovanstående text är hämtad från läroplanen så är vi intresserade av att prata om vilken typ av lek som sker på förskolan där du arbetar.

Som förberedelse för intervjun kan du tänka ut ett exempel på lek som sker inomhus och ett exempel på lek som sker utomhus. Det skulle också vara hjälpsamt om du ville ta dig tid att skriva ner två till tre meningar om vart och ett av dina exempel och skicka det till oss i ett vändande mail.

Tack på förhand!

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