

# Chapter 12

## A Play-responsive Early Childhood Education *didaktik*



In this volume, we have presented data on, and analyses of, play activities in preschool with an interest in developing teaching in a form responsive to the nature and tradition of preschool (early childhood education and care). In this concluding chapter, we will summarize some key findings and theorize these in terms of what we refer to as play-responsive *didaktik*. The chapter is structured in the following way: First, we review the previous chapters in terms of critical empirical observations and what they imply. Thereafter, we theoretically elaborate on how to understand teaching and *didaktik* as relevant to early childhood education. Some conclusions and further meta-comments finalize the chapter and the book.

However, to briefly reiterate what we emphasized in the introduction to this study, what we here have analyzed is how *one* important part of everyday preschool activities play out: how teaching takes shape in contemporary preschool against the premise that this process will need to be responsive to play in some way. It goes without saying, again, that children, also in preschool, need to be able to play on their own (individually and in group), that is, have a room of their own, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf. What we have investigated is *one* feature of preschool: teaching and its relationship to play. The ambition has therefore not been to give an encompassing picture of contemporary preschool. There are many other, equally important features of preschool that we do not study, nor make claims about. To focus on something (in our case the relationship between play and teaching) is a prerequisite for research; this does not imply that other features of, in this case, preschool, are not (equally) important. Given the often polemic and heated debate on preschool, not least when it comes to play and teaching, this realization is important to reiterate.

## Some Important Empirical Findings

Taking a meta-perspective on the empirical chapters of this book, there are some important observations that are worth recapitulating. We will now do so before making some more general comments in the form of theoretical elaboration – on what we have found with bearing on developing teaching and a *didaktik* for early childhood education responsive to playing.

A basic premise of our study is that commonplace simplifications such as the dichotomy between traditional-schooled-instruction, on the one hand, and free play, on the other, are unfruitful for informing theory and early childhood education. Some inherent tensions of this kind were introduced and discussed in Chap. 1, providing a point of departure for our exploration.

In Chap. 11, we provided an important empirically grounded analysis of how learning content in the form of an academic skill, can be introduced in a child-initiated play frame, without interrupting the play (see also, Chaps. 9 and 10). The chapter therefore gives an example of play-responsive teaching, and how what is sometimes referred to as academic content can be promoted through such activity. The analysis clarifies how reading and graphical symbols become structuring resources in children's play. A real-world problem (also constituting a prototypical case of academic content learning) is introduced and managed within the fictional realm of play (*as if*). During the play-responsive teaching activity, participants continually *shift between* and *relate as is* and *as if*. This, we argue, is critical to play-responsive teaching. During the course of the analyzed activity, the child in focus appropriates a strategy for solving a challenge pressing to the development of the play. A meta-comment in this regard is that empirical examples like this testifies to the value and importance of in-detailed interaction analyses of early childhood education practices, something that is unfortunately often lacking in claims about play and teaching in this setting.

Making letters and written words parts of a play exemplifies an important contextualization (Pramling & Ødegaard, 2011; van Oers, 1998), where, rather than pondered in the abstract/formally (breaking down words into combinations of letters and recombining these according to conventions) as something in itself. Through this (re)contextualization, these analytical actions of differentiating and synthesizing a cultural tool (text) become part of playful sense-making activities. As seen throughout this episode, the children readily engage in this activity, and as exemplified by the child Maria, appropriating an important cultural practice (Chap. 11). Contextualized in the manner seen in this example, cultural tools and practices are made necessary for play (as highlighted by Vygotskian theorizing): engaging with these tools and practices is what allows the activity to progress.

This example also shows how children in these play-responsive teaching activities not only engage in *as-if* and *as-is* thinking, but also in *what-if* thinking (Vaihinger, 1924/2001). To engage in *what-if* thinking means to anticipate consequences or responses to actions, that is, the realization that if something is changed, this will have consequences that (at least to some extent) can be calculated. In

contrast to the importance of *reflective thinking*, that is, taking a meta-perspective on what happened and why, this is a case of *prospective thinking* (what will happen if...?). Through shifting in activities between *as is*, *as if*, and *what if*, children are socialized into different discourses and modes of thinking. This reasoning also reminds us, lest we forget, that teaching in early childhood education is an activity far more multifaceted and dynamic than to equate it with instruction (see also below). Giving an empirically grounded, theoretically informed nuanced understanding of teaching as an early childhood education activity constitutes an important contribution of the present study.

In Chap. 7, research by Hakkarainen et al. (2013) on going from a rational to a narrative mode of thinking is discussed (this distinction does not imply that narrative is irrational, rather that it constitutes a different form of rational rendering from what is traditionally referred in these terms, or alternatively, paradigmatic thinking; on the latter, see Bruner, 2006). This transition from a rational (paradigmatic) to a narrative rendering of reality, arguably constitutes a particularly challenging task (see Pramling & Säljö, 2014, for a discussion). Given the central standing of narrative as a mode of sense making and communicating in early childhood education, how also paradigmatic modes of thinking can be promoted within activities thus mediated constitute a pressing issue for research to clarify. Chap. 10 provides an empirically grounded analysis of precisely this matter. In the activity therein analyzed, a paradigmatic mode of thinking par excellence – mathematical problem solving – is promoted through engaging children in a narratively elaborated mutual play activity. The activity also makes evident how the entire group of children are a developmental asset in organizing for children’s learning and development in preschool. Children are participants and agents in their own and each others’ learning and development (cf. Oshiro, Pihl, Peterson, & Pramling, 2019). The latter claim is critical to our perspective on teaching, according to which teaching cannot be ascribed merely one participant (e.g., the preschool teacher), as we elaborate below. Returning to Chap. 7, it provides empirical examples of how participants, through meta-communicating, coordinate their perspectives on how the *as is* of reality relates to the *as if* of play. One example is: “This is grass but we pretend it’s straw” (Excerpt 7.4, turn 3).

In Chaps. 5 and 6, how teachers do to attempt to gain access to and become participants in children’s play are analyzed. These chapters show, among other things, how children may resist suggestions from the preschool teacher about how to develop play, or, if you will, play with a well-established play format. This gives a contrasting image to the popular dichotomous notion of creative and open children and restricted and closed teachers/adults. Clearly, reality is more complex, with teachers/adults and children being more or less creative on different occasions, for varying reasons. Challenging the common conception of creative children and a-creative teachers/adults is an important contribution of this study, as it yields a more nuanced conception of how participants relate to play (and creativity), opening up for informed, empirically-grounded discussions about how to provide more developmentally creative practices that children and teachers can share, mutually engage in.

These chapters also highlight that the issue of teachers' participation in children's play is not merely one of gaining access to and being accepted as participants (play partners), but something that can continue to be a somewhat negotiated issue throughout a play. Hence, teachers' participation in children's play is far more complex than merely one of whether they can gain access to these. As shown in our analyses, teachers' participation requires responsiveness to children's perspectives, but in order to provide new developmental incentive, they also need to be able to plant the seeds of new directions and play possibilities in response to taken-for-granted or explicitly agreed-upon premises of play. As our analyses show, this is a very challenging task, but one, we argue, that is critical to teachers being able to support children's learning and development in play-responsive ways, that is, to engage children in teaching interactions within and/or in extension of play. Chap. 6 also gives a fascinating empirical example of children's creativity, through our analysis of what we theoretically conceptualize in terms of alterity (Wertsch, 1998), in showing how a teacher's suggestion to introduce a novel feature of a play can be resisted by the children in a way that allow them a way out of the mediation suggested by the teacher. The children, through their creative response to the teacher's suggestion, theoretically speaking, counter alterity with alterity. This example therefore also functions as another reminder, if one is needed, that children are not 'receivers' of developmental actions (e.g., instructions) but agents in their own and each other's learning and development. Phrased differently, children are participants in their own development. Facilitating such participation, for example through supporting their development of new forms of playing is critical to the ambition of early childhood education to promote children's agency.

These are all empirical observations that have important theoretical implications for how to theoretically understand and, in extension, develop early childhood education.

## A Note on Agency

"The notion of agency is arguably at the very core of sociocultural perspectives on learning", Mäkitalo (2016, p. 64) writes in a commentary on the concept, clarifying how "[i]t alludes to the capacity of humans to distance themselves from their *immediate* surroundings and it implies recognition of the possibility to intervene in, and transform the meaning of, situated activities" (p. 64, italics in original; see also, Gillespie, 2012). This reasoning indicates that agency is contingent on mediation; that is, with mediation, a space of negotiation between action (perceiving, thinking, acting) and surrounding emerges. Hence, the concept of agency indicates how human action cannot be understood in terms of contingent stimulus-response patterns, to use the vocabulary of a bygone era of psychological theorizing. With the interest of the present study, we can say that play lives precisely in this dynamic space, allowing the world to be perceived, (re)thought and acted upon *as if it were* other than conventionally understood (what is conventionally perceived as a table

can be remediated (Nilsen, Lundin, Wallerstedt, & Pramling, 2018) as a pirate ship or tree hut, for example). With the appropriation of cultural tools and practices, these resources “begin to mediate an activity,” and “new generative conditions unfold that invite further action and alternative forms of participation” (Mäkitalo, 2016, p. 64). Agency thus denotes the possibilities of the child to change the course of (her participation in) activity (see Clarke, Howley, Resnick, & Rosé, 2016, on what they refer to as “enacted agency”, as distinct to “sense of agency”). In the context of our present concerns, being able and allowed to participate in activities not only in terms of *as is* but also in terms of *as if* are critical to the institution of preschool being responsive to children’s play agency. How teaching plays out in such activities is contingent on how such shifts in discourse (alterity) are responded to.

The concept of agency reminds us that human interaction is inherently negotiated; participants do not merely react in predetermined slots or in predefined ways (in fact, resisting complying with a suggestion is an important part of agency, Rainio, 2008; cf. Excerpt 6.5 in Chap. 6 of the present volume). Actions and phenomena can always be taken in more than one way (cf. Bruner, 1990, on human sense making). Shifting from *as is* to *as if* or redirecting activities in novel directions (theoretically referred to as alterity) can be understood as clarifying the distribution and redistribution of agency. While we have not consistently highlighted agency *per se* in our analyses, we consider what we analyze as indicative of enacting, responding to, and the redistribution of agency (cf. van Oers, 2012, on education as the promoting of student agency). Teaching typically entails a redistribution of agency (Magnusson & Pramling, 2017), in that who does what in an activity changes with the increased familiarity/experience of the learner. This redistribution of division of labor has typically in psychological theorizing been conceptualized in terms of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; van de Pol & Elbers, 2013). However, while recognizing the need for theoretical specification of the metaphor of scaffolding in studies fundamentally different to the one studied in Wood et al.’s founding study (see Oshiro et al., 2019, for an in-depth discussion and empirically-grounded specification), we suggest conceptualizing another metaphor for the evolvement of mutual teaching activities: triggering. In a following section, we therefore elaborate somewhat on the latter concept<sup>1</sup> and how we consider it different from common use of the concept of scaffolding.

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<sup>1</sup> Developing the concept of triggering, we have become aware that the term is to some extent used in the related literature (e.g., de Koning, 2012; Janssen-Vos & Pompert, 2012; Magnusson & Pramling, 2017; van Oers, 2012), but without being developed as a concept. With our elaboration, we contribute with a conceptualization and differentiation of triggering as a concept for understanding a part of teaching activity in early childhood education. Etymologically, the word ‘trigger’ leads back to ‘to pull’ and later ‘set off’ (Barnhart, 2004). Hence, the metaphors of the term indicates that – in the context of our present concern – triggering could be understood as pulling someone into, for example, a responsive activity, or as setting of (i.e., set in motion) a response. As here indicated, and we further discuss, triggering is a fundamentally responsive concept. Even if set in motion (‘set off’) by one participant, a trigger by necessity requires a response; the response is in effect what makes the action a case of triggering.

## Teaching in a Play-responsive Way in the Dynamic Space Between Alterity and Intersubjectivity

As Wertsch (1998) has emphasizes, there is an inherent and dynamic tension in human communication between intersubjectivity and alterity. Intersubjectivity does not presume that all participants understand the content in the same way, only that there is partially and temporarily sufficient coordination (Rommetveit, 1974, 1992) for them to go on (Wittgenstein, 1953) with a joint activity. Participants will still exit an activity with (partly) different understanding, just like they entered the activity with (partly) different understanding. There is also alterity, that is, participants understand differently even when engaging in a shared activity (e.g., play). In fact, it is to large extent alterity – as a dynamic counter-force to intersubjectivity – that is critical to the (potential) development of activity. Some intersubjectivity must temporarily (and partially) be established in order for children (with our without a teacher) to engage in a shared play project. At the same time, in order for the play to not simply keep being repeated, responding to differences in understanding and intention is critical to developing play and what children can experience through participating in this activity. As seen in our empirical studies, participants may reject what is theoretically referred to as alterity, even creatively responding in ways that from a theoretical perspective is another example of alterity. What and how to play are potentially contested throughout play, from its initiation to conclusion. During the course of play, the relation between participants will fluctuate between intersubjectivity and alterity. In the context of our present concern, we argue that play-responsive teaching takes place in the negotiated and dynamic intersection between temporarily sufficient intersubjectivity and alterity, rather than making the fallacy of seeing the relationship as dichotomous, with teaching as intersubjectivity and playing as alterity. *Play is not alterity*; it entails some alterity and some intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity and alterity are inherent features of teaching and playing and their interrelationship.

Granted, if conceptualized from an essentialist perspective, that is, as if it were something definite, unambiguously definable, play may be understood as alterity. However, as argued by Vygotsky (1933/1966) children's play is initially more recollection of experience than imagination. Hence, understanding play as evolving, we cannot make alterity inherent to play. Furthermore, as we show in our study, play may lose its alterity, so to speak, in that after increased imagination in play, imaginativeness may again come to be replaced by an approach to how it (the play) 'really is' (as we have seen in children resisting suggestions about how to develop play in a novel direction). Hence, understanding play as socio-historically evolving and contingent, play is not necessarily characterized by alterity. In contrast, an essentialist conception is a-historical and, allegedly, a-contextual. The latter kinds of conceptions are contrasted by empirically grounded conceptions. Researching play, we argue, highlights the importance of developing theoretical resources that allow us to conceptualize change, arguably decisive for the phenomena and processes we study in developmental research/educational psychology.

## The Concepts of Triggering and Alterity

One conceptual resource that we introduce into our analyses in this project is ‘triggering’. This concept denotes actions (which may be verbal or in other modalities, including simply starting playing) that allows scaffolding the investigation of some content or engaging in problem solving. Evidently, the concept of ‘triggering’ as here understood is somewhat adjacent to the concept of ‘alterity’ (see above). However, there is at least one critical difference between these concepts: ‘alterity’ denotes an action that suggests a novel direction of an already initiated activity in a way that questions what may or may not be within the scope of the present activity (framework) as it is understood by its participants. An example would be if in playing ‘family’, a child suggesting that also pets could speak with the children and parents of the family (and potentially also other characters of the play). If other play partners accept such a suggestion for how to play, this would potentially lead the play to develop in ways other than if they were to deny pets this role in the play. Hence, proposing a novel feature of a play that requires some renegotiation of the play frame, which may or may not be made explicit, is what we refer to as ‘alterity’ (see e.g., Chaps. 6 and 10, for empirical examples).

In contrast, the examples of triggering in our empirical chapters can be summarized as:

- The adult creates space for co-narration => (triggers) the *as-if* dimension of the play
- The adult introduces the possibility to talk-in-character => the *as-if* dimension of the play
- The adult directs the narrative as narrator => the narrative of play
- The adult meta-comments on something going on in the play (*as if*, or within the narrative frame) => *as is* a problem to solve
- The adult poses questions in relation to something going on in the play => dialogue *as is*

Hence, alterity and triggering could be distinguished thus: alterity refers to actions that initiate taking and activity in a novel direction; triggering refers to initiating actions in play that potentially enriches activities cognitively and/or aesthetically. The processes referred to by these terms are important to how the educational potentials of play play out in early childhood education. In this book, we have given ample examples of what form these processes may take in such activities. It is further noteworthy that the examples of triggering we have listed here were all initiated by the adult (preschool teacher), while what we refer to as alterity (as seen in our chapters) were initiated by children as well as by preschool teachers. This difference indicates that triggering, as closely related to initiations to scaffold children’s understanding or problem solving, implies other experience than being able to take ongoing play in a novel direction. However, this is not to say that the latter is something all children naturally know; rather, also redirecting play activity presumes



imagination, something contingent on experience, and thus something that can be learned (Vygotsky, 1930/2004).

## A Note on Scaffolding and Triggering

The concept of scaffolding is prevalent in many analyses of and discussions about early childhood education and children's learning and development (e.g., Sun & Rao, 2012; van de Pol & Elbers, 2013). Conceptualizing interaction in terms of changing division of labor has proven illuminating of strategies employed in supporting new insights and abilities in children. However, for our present purposes it may be less functional. Critical to the process referred to by Wood et al. (1976) in terms of scaffolding is that typically the adult provides some structuring of activity allowing the learner to (learn to) solve a problem. Scaffolding is therefore directed towards a particular goal (e.g., laying a puzzle, building a structure). Many teaching activities are of this kind, even if in education many of the goals concern appropriating discursive tools (e.g., learning to reason in certain terms) rather than manipulating physical objects. But when it comes to play, one feature that is integral is open-endedness. When playing, participants do not necessarily know beforehand where they will end up (that we neither know where learners will end up in terms of understanding even in highly structured teaching is something we discussed in Chap. 3). This feature of play implies that scaffolding may not be as functional for conceptualizing these kinds of activities. Instead, we suggest that the actions of more experienced participants in play-responsive activities are conceptualized in terms of triggering. With this term, we denote actions that open up for fantasizing, engaging in exploring what is to a large extent unexpected, unpredictable, open. Arguably, there is always a direction in an activity, even an open-ended play activity, but this direction may change during the course of activity, and playing in a – metaphorically speaking – certain direction does not preclude that it is clear where play partners will end up.

## Reconceptualizing Teaching and Early Childhood *didaktik*

On the basis of the criteria of teaching as discerned by Barnett (1973), and as rephrased in our terms: – an intention to make possible for someone else/others to see/realize what oneself has seen/realized; responding to the response of the learner(s), that is, adjusting one's way of showing/explaining etc. to the understanding indicated by the learner(s) – we can now draw these to their conclusion, furthering Barnett's reasoning, through arguing that this means that teaching conceptualized in this manner, cannot be ascribed one of the participants. That is, if taking this perspective to its conclusion, we cannot suggest that teachers teach (or should teach) in preschool. Rather, in the nature of our conceptualization – based on Barnett (1973) and others,



but here developed – teaching is a mutual activity in which teachers can engage children to participate. Since teaching in this conception is responsive to the responses of other participants, all participants (teacher and children) are equally important participants in the kind of activity we refer to as teaching. Hence, a criterion is that *teaching is a mutually co-constituted activity*. This, however, does not imply that what participants take with them from participating in this activity will be identical; learning will always partly differ between participants. Thus, participants enter teaching activities with partly different experience and they leave the activity with partly different (but different than before) experience. There is no causality (or as it is today sometimes referred to ‘linearity’) between teaching and learning. Neither is it necessary to partake in teaching in order to learn; people learn a great many things without participating in teaching activities. However, in the institutional setting of preschool, children are to be introduced to and supported in starting to appropriate culturally valued forms of knowing. Hence, how teaching plays out will be critical to how the institution responds to this task. Even if teaching, as we here conceptualize it, is a mutual activity, teachers do have a critical role to play; being more experienced participants, teachers challenge and support children taking on challenges through a multitude of practices; in the present study we have seen practices such as:

- asking questions (of many different kinds, within, outside and about play and other forms of activity),
- highlighting *as if* and *as is*, and the relationship between these forms of activity),
- meta-communicating,
- pointing out (through embodiment and through verbal means),
- introducing cultural tools (including, importantly, expansive language; cf. scientific concepts in the Vygotskian sense),
- instructing (i.e., informing children about, for example, what something is called, or what it is),
- recapping,
- reminding and
- recontextualizing phenomena.

Hence, teachers do critical work in teaching, but teaching is not solely of their doing, rather, as here conceptualized, it is a mutual activity where children are equally important participants. Still, as a more experienced participant and as the representative of the institution, the teacher has responsibility for teaching to take place. Hence, despite teachers and children being on equal footing as participants in co-constituting teaching activities, teachers differ from children in being accountable for such activity to take place in manners that are engaging and developmental. An additional clarification here is that to suggest that teaching is a mutual activity does *not* imply that participants will leave the activity with identical understanding. As we have repeatedly emphasized, there is no causality between teaching and learning, and children make sense of what they experience on the basis of previous experience and how they participate in activities. Hence, a conception of teaching as mutual activity does not imply a notion of homogenization where individual

differences are obliterated. Rather, as we have also emphasized, and investigated for a long time (see e.g., Pramling, 1996), differences in experience among children in a group is responded to as a *didaktikal* asset in making children aware of *different ways of understanding* and solving problems. That is, intentional outcome of teaching is to develop in children a greater repertoire of different ways of understanding, not to make every child understand in the same restricted way (the allegedly ‘correct’ way).

We understand teaching as an *activity*. As such, it is co-constituted by the coordinated (responsive) practices or actions of participants (and the tools they use), for instance pointing or asking. However, the word teaching is often used in a way that exemplifies what in linguistics is called nominalized (i.e., the process through which something, in this case an activity, is transformed into a noun); this transformation implies a reification (cf. Säljö, 2002). Conceiving of teaching as an *object* rather than an activity paves the way for fallacies such as claiming that the environment as such (if prior organized by the personnel) can teach children. Our perspective is *not* harmonious with the latter kind of perspective.

## Teaching Is Not Instructing

Conceptualizing teaching in the manner we here do, clearly distinguishes the concept from the adjacent concept of instruction. If someone in the know tells someone what something is (conventionally understood as) or how something is done, he or she has instructed the other person, regardless of how – or even if – the latter responds to this instruction. In contrast, teaching presumes responsiveness to the response of the other participant(s); without this mutual responsiveness, there is no teaching. Hence, in contrast to what in everyday speech is referred to as ‘teaching someone’, we reserve teaching to such mutually responsive activities we have conceptualized above. Phrased in another way, *instruction is an action* while *teaching is an activity*. Hence, instruction can be done – and is typically done – by one person to one or several others, while teaching is a mutual activity where, for example, the children participating in the activity are as critical as the teacher is. The distinction we make between teaching and instruction further means that in early childhood education settings such as preschool there will likely be both teaching and instruction taking place. At times, direct instruction, arguably, has a role to play even in early childhood education, to clarify how things are conventionally referred to or done. However, instruction can never be the sole, or even the dominant, mode of action in early childhood education. The reason for this is that it is irresponsive to children’s knowledge and participation in activities. Without grounding in children’s experience, what children encounter will not make sense to them.

## Teaching as Responsive and Directed Coordination

In Chap. 3 of this book, we referred to Hedges' (2014) work, and her argument that "playful and integrated pedagogical models depend on teachers' ability to recognize and act on possible links between play and content in a genuine way. This is in contrast to trying to slip content disingenuously into children's play, emphasizing content as if it were the only end-goal of play or teaching content didactically" (p. 200f.). Regarding the reference in her reasoning to 'didactics', we have already clarified that what is typically referred to by this term is markedly different from what we (grounded in the German/Continental tradition) refer to as *didaktik*, so we will not further comment on that. However, what Hedges writes about in terms of the importance of teachers recognizing and acting "on possible links between play and content", is something that we suggest we can contribute to illuminate theoretically on the basis of our empirical study.

What we argue is that some kind of content is always constituted in talk (conversation), but it is not necessarily a content shared by all interlocutors/participants. Teaching therefore critically consists of coordinating perspectives (not least *as if* play and *as is*/established knowledge) in supporting children to discern or appropriate something new (or something familiar understood in a new way, from a new perspective). However, this coordinated activity is not premised to result in identical understanding among participants, since people make sense of what they encounter; and how they do so is contingent on their experience, interest and ways of participating in activities (intersubjectivity is at best temporary and partial; Linell, 2014; Rommetveit, 1974). Furthermore, teaching is directed coordinated activity; there is an intention in the teacher (i.e., the one taking this role, it needs not be an actual teacher/professional, also others, more experienced adults or other children can take this position in activity; for empirical illustrations of the latter, see Kullenberg & Pramling, 2016, 2017), but not necessarily or commonly shared by the learner, to make someone else see/realize something oneself has seen/realized. In Swedish, this distinction between seeing and realizing is closely intertwined: *se/inse* (cf. English: sight/insight). Teaching as directed coordination (cf. Kultti & Pramling, 2015) can further be differentiated in the following manner, as encompassing:

- different perspectives and experience
- *as if* it were (play/playfulness and creativity) and *as it is* (conventional, institutional understanding)
- local (deictic) language and expansive language
- showing and explaining
- different semiotic means/modalities
- children's experience and allowing them to make new experience (appropriate new perspectives, discern new phenomena), and thereby outline teaching simultaneously in continuity and discontinuity with children's experience

In terms of coordinating, or to use the metaphors of contextualization we discussed in Chap. 2, teaching critically consists of interweaving differences in ways that result in a more multifaceted fabric (not a monochrome surface), that is, the intended outcomes of teaching in early childhood education is not for children to simply take over the understanding of the preschool teacher or develop identical sense. The latter is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, understanding is partly (and temporarily) shared and therefore also different among participants in an activity. It is, as we have argued elsewhere (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2011), the fact that people have different experience and understanding that we have anything of interest to offer, and learn from, each other. Critical to teaching in early childhood education therefore is to make the variety of experience among the children (and teachers) of the group a *didaktikal* asset. This serves to make children aware that not everyone understands the same, which is, arguably, a premise for the development of democracy, and to increase the repertoire of children's ways of understanding (Pramling, 1996).

## Continuity and Discontinuity with Children's Experience

An institution such as preschool can be conceptualized as a node where the interests of many stakeholders intersect: children, caregivers, preschool teachers and politicians. From a social point of view, this kind of institution serves as a means of caring for the wellbeing and development of the growing generation; it reproduces culturally valued forms of knowing that in complex societies cannot be left to the primary socialization of children in their immediate family relationships (cf. Elkonin, 2005, Chap. 3 of the present volume). Forms of knowing such as the symbolic cultural resources of literacy and numeracy are too complex to be appropriated by every child without some form of teaching. This means that what children experience in such settings cannot be entirely continuous with the experience they have made, and make, outside this institution. Through participating in teaching activities in preschool (and later, school), children are introduced to and supported in appropriating many culturally critical tools and practices. This is one of the points of institutions such as preschool and school (Luria, 1976). However, in the nature of learning, what children experience in these institutions cannot be entirely unrelated to what they have experienced, and experience, outside these. If the child cannot in some way relate what she encounters in these institutions with her life outside these, it will not make sense to her. As emphasized by Vygotsky (1934/1987), so called scientific concepts (institutional categories) are made sense of by the learner in a dynamic relationship to her everyday concepts (taken over through socialization in mundane activities). This means that an institution such as preschool by its very nature will be both continuous with and discontinuous to the child's experience; this is emphasized by key educational theoreticians such as Dewey (1916/2008), Vygotsky (1934/1987), and Säljö (2006; see also, Pramling, Doverborg, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2017).

## Education as a Meta-narrative

In contemporary debates in Sweden about teaching in preschool, the notion of education has also emerged. This notion has not previously been used in discussions about early childhood education in Sweden. From our point of view, in part building on the work of Mercer (2008), an education refers to teaching activities being related in a – for the learner – meaningful way. Phrased in terms of what we have studied in the present project, weaving narrative threads between activities – metaphorically speaking, forward and backwards, that is, how what we do now relates to what we did yesterday or what we will do tomorrow –, a number of teaching activities (including play activities) becomes part of an overarching narrative that can be referred to as an education. Hence, an education from this point of view is constituted by a form of meta-narrative encompassing a number of what could otherwise by the child be perceived as disparate activities. Such a meta-narrative makes previous experience the foundation of new experience, facilitating cumulative learning.

## Concluding Note

Discussions about *didaktik* revolve around questions concerning the professional knowledge base (professional language) of the teaching profession (Ingerman & Wickman, 2015). Hence, it concerns the development of conceptual resources for analyzing, speaking about (e.g., with caregivers, politicians and others concerned talk about educational principles and choices), and planning (the orchestration) of teaching activities/trajectories. *Didaktik* research therefore aims at contributing to collective knowledge building in science and in the teaching profession/teacher education. One of the outcomes of the research presented in the present book is that it clarifies – through detailed process studies – how teacher participation and responses are instrumental to the continuation and development of mutually engaging play-responsive teaching activities. Learning about the nature of these interactional processes is important to the professionals of early childhood education. Appropriating tools functional in analyzing mutual activities is key to being able to discern what difference makes a difference, and therefore how to provide more engaging and developmentally challenging and supportive participation in play-responsive activities with young children. In the present project, we have contributed to the development of such tools of the trade, through coordination and development of theoretical tools and empirical observation. Carrying out the study in close cooperation with the preschool teachers themselves (and the heads of preschools), and building the study on empirical data from everyday preschool activities, assure ecological validity, meaning that there is no ‘translation problem’ when, for example, through in-service education or preschool teacher education, disseminating this knowledge to the profession.

In this study, we have contributed to conceptualizing teaching and *didaktik* relevant to early childhood education and care (the Swedish case of preschool). Conceptualizing how children's learning and development can be supported through early childhood education without residing to either pole of the common dichotomy of traditional-schooled-instruction, on the one hand, and free play, on the other, is important if we want to savor the unique and favorable nature of early childhood education institutions such as preschool, without shying away from the task to also contribute to children's learning and development.<sup>2</sup> It is further critical that such conceptualizations are grounded in empirical research, rather than on ideological or philosophical basis, since it is only the former that is responsive to how participants themselves (children and preschool teachers) actually experience and participate in activities (Pramling Samuelsson, Kultti, & Pramling, 2018). The conceptualization we have provided with this study is at heart a mutually constituted activity where children are as important as the preschool teacher, and where responsiveness is crucial; responsiveness to children's experience and to play. In being responsive, this does not imply simply following whatever wants are expressed by (some) children; rather, a key task for the preschool teacher is also to introduce children to new fields of knowing and new ways of playing. Thus, responsiveness in this conception denotes both being reactive (i.e., responsive to children's initiatives and interest) and being proactive (i.e., introducing and giving children ample opportunities to experience what they may not have been able to on their own). The reason we conceptualize teaching in terms of *play-responsive* rather than the more common term *play-based* (e.g., Pyle & Danniel, 2017; Walsh, McGuinness, & Sproule, 2017) is – in addition to implying that responsive is a responsible stance (i.e., a way of working for establishing a socially just institution) – precisely to indicate that an activity does not necessarily start in play (i.e., be *play-based*, but that it has to be responsive to play if it comes in play), and thus, metaphorically speaking, the bi-directional nature of responding to as well as initiating play. In fact, providing an alternative to simplifications in the form of dichotomies constitutes a meta-point of the present study. Children's learning and development are far too complex and dynamic

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<sup>2</sup>Our elaboration, amongst other things, highlights the importance of supporting children learning to play and through play learn about worlds: imagined and real, and their interrelatedness. There are challenges attached to what we call play-responsive teaching in early childhood education and care. These include empirical, methodological and theoretical (scientific ones) as well as practical (educational/*didaktikal* ones). Regarding the former: a challenge posed by letting preschool teachers themselves document activities when they spontaneously take place is that the initiation of activities may not at all times be captured, and these may be critical to how activities develop. This is an empirical and methodological challenge of how to capture the kinds of activities we are interested in analyzing. A theoretical challenge is how to conceptualize activities that encompass play without reducing these to predefined criteria: what play is (how we take on this theoretical challenge is clarified in Chap. 3). For early childhood education personnel (e.g., preschool teachers) co-constituting play-responsive teaching with children is challenging; critical is to find and make visible (i.e., noticeable and knowable) relationships between *as if* and *as is* – so that children can learn about real problems and issues through engaging in fantasy (*as if*), and conversely, how cultural tools and practices (*as is*) can be made into resources for developing imaginary scenarios (*as if*).

phenomena to be understood in terms of either or. Abandoning such polarity thinking, generally conducted on ideological or philosophical basis, is crucial for the advancement of theory and, informed by such theory, the development of early childhood education and care practices developmentally fulfilling to all children participating. With this book, we have made an attempt to contribute to such developments.

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