Chapter 3
Playing, Playworlds, and Early Childhood Education

In this chapter, we introduce the notion of play, and explain why it is critical *not* to delimit this term to something *sui generis*. Rather, following scholars from different traditions – the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, on the one hand, and the theoretical work of van Oers, on the other, we will argue for the need for a more open-ended take on play. This matter is discussed in this chapter.

A Brief Note on Play Theories

The phenomenon of play has interested scholars from many fields (evolutionary theorists, philosophers, developmental researchers, and others) for a long time. There are therefore a number of play theories, that is, theoretical accounts on what play is and why it exists. In meta-discussions of such theories, they are commonly differentiated into classical and modern theories. Classical theories take different form, viewing play in terms of energy: surplus energy ("play is essentially 'blowing off steam'", Mellou, 1994, p. 91; see also Henricks, 2019) – exemplified by the work of Friedrich Schilller and Herbert Spencer – or the opposite view of energy deficiency ("play as an activity deriving from an energy deficit," implying that "the purpose of play is to restore energy expended in work"; Mellou, 1994, p. 92). Other classical theories view play in terms of instincts: play as practicing for adult activities ("strengthening instincts needed for the future"; Mellou, 1994, p. 92) or play as recapitulation in ontogeny (the individual's development) of phylogeny (the development of the species), exemplified by Karl Groos and G. Stanley Hall, respectively (for a discussion of modern evolutionary-based theories of play, see Bateson, 2011). These classical theories are generally what Mellou (1994) refers to as "'armchair' theories, based more on philosophical reflection" than on empirical research. Still, Henricks concludes his discussion; "it is best to see the classical theories as inspirations, or beginnings, of analysis. The quest of the classic theorists,

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N. Pramling et al., *Play-Responsive Teaching in Early Childhood Education*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 26,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15958-0_3

which was to define play's nature and comprehend its general implications, remains very important" (Henricks, 2019, p. 380).

Modern theories (i.e., theories developed during the last century) include psychoanalytical theory, according to which play is important to a child's emotional development, having "a cathartic effect, which allows children to rid themselves of negative feelings associated with traumatic events" (Mellou, 1994, p. 93), metacommunicative theory, emphasizing that in play, children "learn to operate simultaneously at two levels: (a) the make-believe meanings of objects and actions; and (b) their own identities, the other players' real identities, and the real-life meanings of the objects and actions used in the play" (Mellou, 1994, p. 95). Finally, there are theories concerned with play and cognitive development, exemplified by Piaget and Vygotsky. Central to modern theories of play is that they add the question of what role play plays in the child's development. The discussion about the claims and bases of these modern theories primarily revolves around the question of whether there is any relationship between play and learning (cognitive development, creativity). Some theorists present such relationships while others remain skeptical, arguing, for example, that the benefits of play found in studies are "mainly due to the interaction involved in tutoring whether the context was a fantasy one or not" (Mellou, 1994, p. 97). We note that the theories here briefly presented actualize conceptual issues we discuss in the present volume, including context (and contextualizing) and learning – if, as we do, and in line with a sociocultural perspective, arguing that people learn from all activities they participate in, then surely play constitutes no exception to this rule; the question is then instead *what* they learn and *how*. With the exception of the first classical theories mentioned above (energy theories), all play theories here discussed conceive play as related to learning, but in different ways and explained differently.

These play theories all have what could be referred to as essentialist conceptions of play. That is, they are concerned with the matter of "what play is" (Burghardt, 2011, p. 10); necessitating definition clarifying "what are the commonalities undergirding all play types" (p. 10). In explicitly discussing this theoretical ambition, Burghardt (2011) argues that such a definition is necessary in order to be able to "distinguish the essential from the inessential" (p. 13). He thus proposes (here cited from its latest incarnation) that play is behavior that:

1. appears incompletely functional in the context expressed
2. is voluntary, rewarding, pleasurable, or done for its own sake
3. is in some ways modified structurally or developmentally as compared with its functional counterpart
4. is repeated in recognizable but not necessarily invariant form
5. is initiated when the animal is not under more than mild stress due to poor health, bad environmental conditions, social upheaval, or intense conflicting emotional states such as hunger, thirst, wariness of enemies or predators, and so on. (Burghardt & Pellis, 2019, p. 13)

As we discuss in the present volume, there are certainly objections that could be made to several of these criteria. We will not repeat these here. Arguably, the fact

that this definition is made to include other animals than humans, makes it too abstract to be functional in clarifying the nature and processes of human play; the latter including cultural tools and practices and their transformation.

As we have already mentioned, the play theories here briefly discussed are all what could be referred to as essentialist perspectives, that is, theoretical positions from which play *sui generis* could (and needs) to be defined. Our perspective constitutes a rather radical departure from this common ground amongst different play perspectives, in that we paradoxically argue that it may be, and with our interest is, instrumental to study play *without* defining it (as something in itself, encompassing all instances and delimiting these from adjacent phenomena). Our perspective, of course, does not imply that perspectives defining play are in the wrong; on the contrary, with an interest in, for example, particular forms of play, it is critical to define the object of study (e.g., rough-and-tumble play or role-play). But our interest is not in particular forms of play (or what play is) but rather how participants themselves make known to each other (and thus, per implication, make this visible to the analyst) how they 'take' actions and activities (shifting between acting *as if* and *as is* – we develop this reasoning elsewhere in this volume).

Rather than attempting to define in any clear-cut manner what play *is*, we will thus suggest another way of approaching this phenomenon in our studies. Play has eluded scholarly definition for a long time, not in want of attempts to do so (see e.g., Burghardt, 2011; Burghardt & Pellis, 2019; and Sutton-Smith, 1997, for meta-discussions). Rather than defining beforehand what play 'is', in a manner that encompasses all activities referred to in these terms and at the same time distinguishes these from adjacent kinds of activities, we will build on the philosophical insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein and primarily consider play as the participants' concern. In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein argued that some concepts are better seen in terms of what he calls 'family resemblances' (1953, §§65–67). According to this reasoning, there are no for the 'family' exclusive features that are shared by all 'members', that is, features that are common to all 'members' and at the same time unique to this 'family'. In his elaboration of this idea, Wittgenstein uses the example of 'games':

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: 'There *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games"' – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. (ibid., §66, italics in original)

Like 'games' in this example, 'play' could be considered a family (see also Cook, 1997, and Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012, where this is also discussed in these terms). Instead of trying to delimit what games or play really have in common and what separate them from adjacent phenomena or activities, Wittgenstein thus suggests considering these in terms of 'family resemblances':

> I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour

> of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: 'games' form a family. (ibid., §67)

Hence, while there may be 'family resemblances' among the 'members of a family', such as eye colour or height, these are not necessarily shared by all 'members' of the 'family', nor exclusive to this family (also in other 'families' there may be brown eyes or tall people). This reasoning proves challenging to the traditional way of defining a concept. However, the metaphor of family resemblances, we argue, is more functional than such an approach to understanding, and in a study managing, the activities generally referred to as 'play'. Theoretically, this implies that while there may be features that are shared by most instances of what would typically be referred to as 'play', we cannot presume that all such instances will share these features. Rather, we may expect a 'criss-cross' of various features to intersect irregularly. Hence, some features may be presumed to be characteristic of play activities children engage in, but not necessarily unique to or common to all these (and other play activities). This more complex understanding of play than defining beforehand 'what it is', has two implications for our present concerns. *First*, it is important in the nature of theoretically informed empirical research to make explicit the theoretical premises and conceptual resources mediating (Wertsch, 2007) our analysis of data, and, *second*, to be open to the matter of play as the participants' own concern. The latter means that what we are primarily interested in is how the participants themselves make known to each other that they speak and in other ways act *as if*, that is, play with reality, and when they do not do so (speak and in other ways act *as is*).

Building on Wittgenstein (1953), on family resemblances, and van Oers (2014), on how activities are formatted – that is, the understanding that any activity can be playfully or procedurally formatted –, we, thus, argue that it is important *not* to define play (what it *is* or *should be*); this would prevent us from being open to how features of the family of play (to speak with Wittgenstein) come into play in initiating, during and concluding mutual activities. Then how do we identify play if there is no traditional definition of it? In the nature of family resemblances, there will be features that recur, but these are not exclusive to the phenomenon in question. In our case, what we look for is shifts between engaging in an activity *as is* and *as if*, the latter an important indicator of play; but in line with our reasoning and Wittgenstein's family resemblances, *as if* is not exclusive to play; also theoretical work in science or fiction, such as novels and movies, render the world *as if*. And play can be initiated without engaging *as if*, at least initially, instead being signaled among potential participants through meta-communication (e.g., 'Let's play…'). The distinction of *as is* and *as if* does not constitute a dichotomy – a mode of thinking we, with educational thinkers such as Dewey and Vygotsky (see also, Pramling, Doverborg, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2017), critique –; when we empirically studied children's and teacher's activities we found that established works of fiction/plays (i.e., *as if*) can come to gain standing by the children *as is* (i.e., as something set that cannot be played with). Still, shifts between talking and in other ways acting *as is* and *as if* are functional in identifying play without needing to try to, in traditional terms, define play. Rather than ask if an activity *is* play (as

defined by certain criteria distinguishing it from non-play), with our approach we can thus analyze different participants' perspectives on activity and how this may fluctuate (participants and activity may fall in and out of play) and be re-negotiated as participants orient toward each other's perspectives (intersubjectivity) and respond to suggested reorientation or development (alterity; see Chap. 4).

The Development of Play: Actions, Objects, and Meaning

In his work on play, Vygotsky has been particularly concerned with two issues: *the origin and development of play*, and *the role of play in the development of the child* during the preschool age. He localizes the origin of play in emergence of unrealizable desires in the preschool child. As an infant, the child's desires (for food and comfort) were possible for the minder to realize. However, during the preschool age, Vygotsky reasons, the child develops desires that cannot be realized (immediately). In response to these unrealizable desires, play emerges in the child. Hence, according to this reasoning, play is understood as "the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires", with imagination being a "new formation which is not present in the consciousness of the very young child" (Vygotsky, 1933/1966, p. 8). However, the child is not premised to know the motives of his or her play, which are considered generalized affects rather than isolated, particular desires. What is particular of play activities, in this perspective, is the creation of an imaginary situation. Creating such a situation "is possible on the basis of the separation of the fields of vision and meaning which appears in the preschool period" (p. 8). We will discuss what this means and implies, below. Vygotsky also connects his discussion of play to the matter of the freedom of play. In doing so, he emphasizes that "there is no such thing as play without rules" (p. 9). For example, if "[t]he child imagines herself to be the mother and the doll the child, [then] she must obey the rules of maternal behavior" (p. 9). Hence, in our somewhat alternative terms, within the frame of a particular kind of play (e.g., family play), certain rules co-constitute the play. Vygotsky formulates this thus: "In play the child is free. But this is an illusory freedom" (p. 10). Even if the child is free to decide what to play – this is, however, we may add, contingent on her cultural experience (see further, Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012) –, in the nature of this play, there are certain play rules without which it would not be this play.

The ability to engage in imaginary situations, Vygotsky (1933/1966) further suggests, liberates the child from situational constraints. The behavior of the very young child – the infant – "is determined by the conditions in which the activity takes place" (p. 11). This discussion has clear bearing on the issue of the material basis of play, as much discussed in contemporary educational philosophy; however, without falling into the pitfalls of much of these more recent discussions. Vygotsky writes about "the motivating nature of things for a very young child" (p. 11). With reference to Kurt Lewin's work, he suggests that

> things dictate to the child what he [or she] must do: a door demands to be opened and closed, a staircase to be run up, a bell to be rung. In short, things have an inherent motivating force in respect to a very young child's actions and determine the child's behavior. (p. 11)

The reason for this deterministic nature of things (material objects) on the young child, Vygotsky argues, is that perception, affection and motor activity have not yet been differentiated. Hence, for the child to perceive, feel and tactilely engage with objects are not separate: "every perception is in this way a stimulus to activity" (p. 11). Not separating what he or she sees, on the one hand, and grabbing, touching, pressing the object, on the other, means that the child's behavior is contingent on the nature of the physical environment. Vygotsky illustrates this unity of perception and activity with the example of a child "when asked to repeat the sentence 'Tanya is standing up' when Tanya is sitting in front of him [or her], will change it to 'Tanya is sitting down'" (p. 12). This also means that there is no distinction made between the word for something and what it refers to. Language has not been discerned as something in itself; rather it is fused with what it is used to talk about. The field of meaning and the field of perception are one and the same for the young child. It should here be pointed out that it is not entirely clear at what age the child develops the ability to distinguish between perception, affection and motor activity, and thus between the visual field and the field of meaning; it may also be the case that children due to other experience and forms of socialization are able to do so earlier today than in Vygotsky's time, but our concern here is not with when children are able to do so, but *that* they do so and the important implications this has for the development of play and learning in and from play.

Some time during the preschool years, the child develops the ability to separate the field of vision (what he or she actually sees in the milieu) from the field of meaning. This separation occurs in play when actions are separated from objects, and meaning comes to arise from ideas rather than from objects:

> Thought is separated from objects because a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a horse. Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas and not by objects themselves. This is such a reversal of the child's relationship to the real, immediate, concrete situation that it is hard to evaluate its full significance. (p. 12)

This is not done easily; rather the ability to make this separation develops, requiring some object to first function as a pivot; that is, the stick may become a horse, but only later can the horse be enacted in play without a physical object (e.g., a stick), entirely in the imaginary sphere.

At first, the child perceives objects as they are designed. However, with the development of his or her speech, the child is able to sever the meaning of the object from the object, allowing her to constitute a new meaning. Hence, from the object having 'decided' the meaning, the meaning (it comes to serve in play) decides the object (i.e., what it is; e.g., the stick is a horse). Doing this kind of transformation of objects – ascribing them new meaning – is something the child first does without realizing that this is what she does;

> just as a child, before he [or she] has acquired grammatical and written speech, knows how to do things but does not know that he [or she] knows, i.e., he [or she] does not realize or master them voluntarily. In play a child unconsciously and spontaneously makes use of the fact that he [or she] can separate meaning from an object without knowing he [she] is doing it; he [she] does not know that he [she] is speaking in prose just as he [she] talks without paying attention to the words. (p. 13)

Hence, awareness in the child of what he or she does develops during the course of playing. Vygotsky formulates this in terms of action and meaning, arguing that for a young child "action dominates over meaning and is incompletely understood; a child is able to do more than he [or she] can understand" (p. 14). This reasoning thus implies the importance of engaging children in mutual activities and through this participation become aware of what they know – as well, we might add – that others may know differently (cf. Pramling, 1996).

> Just as operating with the meanings of things leads to abstract thought, in volitional decision the determining factor is not the fulfillment of the action but its meaning. In play an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object. How does the child 'float' from one object to another, from one action to another? This is accomplished by movement in the field of meaning – not connected with the visible field or with real objects. (p. 15)

When the child is able to separate object from meaning, allowing her to give the object a new meaning in the context of play, the environment to large extent loses its 'motivating force' (see above). The child becomes able to play with reality, rather than being 'steered' by it. It is vitally in this creative space that play takes place; the mundane world can be transformed into imaginary realities.

In his discussion of the development of play – and the child's development through playing – Vygotsky makes use of the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD):

> The play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, but play provides a background for changes in needs and in consciousness of a much wider nature. Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginary sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives – all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. (p. 16)

In the context of this discussion, he also introduces the concept of 'leading activity': "The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be termed a leading activity which determines the child's development" (p. 16). Saying that play is the 'leading activity' of the preschool-age child, and that studying is the leading activity of the school-age child, means that this is the dominant form of developmental engagement at a particular cultural community at a particular time, not that the child does not learn anything while in preschool ('merely playing').

While the ability to separate the field of vision (and thus the dependency on material objects) from the field of meaning is integral to the development of play, Vygotsky also discusses how "the child starts with an imaginary situation when initially this imaginary situation is so very close to the real one" (p. 16). At this stage

of starting to play, "[p]lay is more nearly recollection than imagination – that is, it is more memory in action than a novel imaginary situation" (p. 16). This means that when children start to play (a particular kind of play, e.g., going to the supermarket to shop food), she does so in a manner primarily imitative of what she experienced going there with her caregivers. Gradually, however, she starts developing the play, introducing novel features and perhaps actors, more clearly separating the play from its experiential basis. This reasoning implies the importance to the development of children's play to (a) allow them to make rich experience from and with which they can play, and (b) therefore also the importance of more experienced participants (caregivers, preschool teachers, siblings, friends) who can provide new cultural resources for imagination and play. Imagination in this perspective is therefore not something primarily internal (the ability to imagine is, however, gradually appropriated so that the child becomes able to engage in imagination without overt action), but a means for broadening a person's experience (Fleer, 2011), making possible for the child to engage in what she herself has not experienced firsthand. Building on Vygotsky's work on play (1933/1966), Fleer in addition makes the point that children's play is 'bidirectional', that is, "When children give new meanings to objects in their play they move away from reality, but when they test out the rules of society through role play, they move towards reality" (Fleer, 2011, p. 231). We will return to this line of reasoning when we present Fleer's study more in-depth, as well as when we discuss Vaihinger's theoretical work (1924/2001).

Key-References in Research on Play

In this section, we review some studies of more general interest to our present study. These are studies that, in part, share our research interest, and also work that highlights more fundamental issues such as how adhering to play as fundamental to children's learning and development is contingent on sociocultural traditions. Other important research, that we build upon, is instead presented in the context of particular empirical analyses.

A quite well known study, conducted by Lindqvist (1995) bears some more detailed commentary since the present study in several ways aligns with it. The purpose of Lindqvist's study was to study "in what way the aesthetic subjects, mainly in the forms of drama and literature, can influence and enrich children's play" (1995, p. 19). A basic premise of her study is that it is "a reaction against the preschool approach to play as a 'free' activity and an expression of children's self-regulation," instead arguing for the need to regard "play as a cultural activity which concerns both adults and children" (p. 5). The influence of drama and literature on children's play is studied in the context of what Lindqvist refers to as "an extensive didactic project" (p. 18), where a drama pedagogue introduces a number of stories within the framework of a theme called *Alone in the Big, Wide World*. These stories

included *Pippi Longstocking in the South Seas* (*Pippi Långstrump*), *Alfie Atkins* (*Alfons Åberg*), *Peter No-tail* (*Pelle Svanslös*), Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words*, and Tove Jansson's *The Invisible Child*. After dramatizing, children with their 'pedagogues' played with the characters and themes.

Discussing play, Lindqvist (1995) asks, "Why is play not clearly defined in preschools?" (p. 23). While agreeing with her that it is important to recognize play in early childhood education, the question, as posed, builds on a problematic premise: that play can be defined in a clear-cut manner (that play essentially is something). In contrast, and as we discussed earlier in this chapter, we argue in line with van Oers (2014) that any activity can be more or less playfully formatted (implying that play is part of a continuum rather than a separate entity) and with Wittgenstein (1953) that what we call play is characterized by family resemblances rather than inherent properties uniting all such activity while at the same time distinguish these from adjacent kinds of activities (see also, Pellegrini, 2011b, on play as being both "ephemeral and versatile" rather than a "unitary construct", p. 4). Hence, from our perspective, the question is not what play is, but rather how play (in many of its varied forms), so to speak, come in play in shared activities in early childhood education (and how teaching can be responsive to these actions).

Reading Lindqvist's study is fascinating; it provides many vivid and engaging descriptions of the emergence of play through dramatizing. However, while illuminating, the mode of presenting data in the form of narrative descriptions makes it less functional for closer analysis and critical scrutiny. It is, for example, not possible to see how many of the claims made are actually grounded in represented empirical data, and it is not possible to re-analyze the data presented with an interest in the more specific processes of interaction (e.g., the fluctuation of intersubjectivity and what it means to the trajectory of play), as we do in the present study. It is therefore, unfortunately, not possible to discuss how to understand the similarities and differences between the findings reported in her study with the findings of the present study. What we can clarify, on a more abstract level, is how these two studies relate to each other. We do so in Table 3.1.

As can be seen in Table 3.1, while there are clear similarities between Lindqvist's (1995) and our study, there are also important differences: not least that we are interested in developing a concept of play-responsive teaching for preschool, while she is interested in the 'influence' of culture in the form of aesthetics on children's play (the problematic notion of 'influence' is discussed in Chap. 2 of the present book). What we share is an appreciation of play in preschool as culturally and institutionally embedded and, hence, where the personnel (referred to by Lindqvist in terms of pedagogues but by us as preschool teachers) have important roles to fill as participants in shared imaginary activities (playworlds). However, as we argue, it is also important that there is some shifting and relationship building between these imaginations (*as if*) and *as is*.

Table 3.1 A schematic presentation of some of the similarities and differences between Lindqvist (1995) and the present study

Lindqvist (1995)	The present study
Interest in how the aesthetics subjects (primarily drama and literature) "can influence and enrich children's play" (p. 19)	Interest in the processes of play-responsive teaching in early childhood education
Particular theme (Alone in the Big, Wide World) introduced by a drama pedagogue	Ordinary activities[a] introduced by the preschool teachers or the children themselves
Talk about 'content' (the theme, alternatively "the literary text (the story)" (p. 219)	Talk about 'content' as what is constituted in talk in play activities
Talk about teaching ("it is the dialogue between child and adult that teaches the child the cultural, aesthetic forms", p. 214); however, the term 'teach(ing)' is never conceptualized	Talk about teaching as play-responsive directed coordinated activity (this is basically what we develop and theorize in the present study, see Chap. 12 of the present volume)
Builds on an "influence" (e.g., pp. 19, 70 *et passim*) model to account for the relationship between drama and literature and play	Builds on a mutually constitutive relationship among participants in activity (and provides a critique of an influence model; see Chap. 2)
Problematizing 'free play'	Problematizing 'free play'
A didactic project (didactics is not explicitly conceptualized in the study)	A combined research and development project in early childhood *didaktik*
Builds in part on Vygotsky (particularly *The Psychology of Art*)	Builds in part on Vygotsky (particularly his work on the cultural development of the child)
Empirical data (primarily) in the form of video observations	Empirical data (primarily) in the form of video observations
Studying "*planned* dramatizations and *organized* play sequences" (p. 68, italics in original)	Studying spontaneous, by children initiated, as well as by preschool teachers initiated, play

Descriptive/narrative rendering	Transcripts and Interaction Analysis
Emphasizes the importance of adults sharing playworlds with children	Emphasizes the importance of adults sharing imaginary (*as if*) activities (playworlds) with children and shifting between and relating such *as-if* worlds with *as-is* experience and forms of knowing
Outcomes of the study emphasize children's play as developing (on the basis of teaching) and adults/pedagogues becoming more "play-minded" (p. 18), and thus, the importance of adults/pedagogues to children's play	Outcomes of the study emphasize playing as something learnt (this goes for children as well as adults), thus also the importance of the preschool teachers to children's play, and a conceptualization of teaching as play-responsive activity within an early childhood education *didaktik*

[a]What is here meant by 'ordinary' preschool activities is mundane, non-exotic, activities in which children and teachers engage (see Chap. 4 for an elaboration). In contrast to much work of a developmental kind, we do not study experts from outside preschool entering and conducting activities; the latter is particularly common in studies of arts education, where musicians or artists come and do things with children (Marjanovic-Shane, Connery, & John-Steiner, 2010; cf. also Lindqvist's, 1995, work, where a professional drama teacher comes to the preschool). Ordinary, in our present account, also means that activities are in line with the institutional arrangements, conditions and regulations; concretely, this means that there are no tests or evaluations of individual children's knowledge, that knowledge is not compartmentalized (Bruner, 1990) and transmitted as subject matters in delimited lessons. Hence, the activities we analyze could be considered 'ordinary' in the sense that they are not alien to early childhood education (preschool) in Sweden, where we conduct our research (and in other countries). Of course, from some cultural horizons, this kind of ECEC may appear alien.

An additional note that could be made in the context of this discussion is that since we do not discuss the concept of the child, it may appear that we premise a universal child. There are three points we would like to make in response to this concern. *First*, being responsive to children means to be open to differences among children in experience and knowledge; hence, this perspective premises that children in a group differ, and furthermore that this is a fundamental asset in all participating children's development (see Pramling, 1996, for an elaboration). *Second*, our analytical focus is not on particular children but on activities (and these encompass the group of children with their variation, the teacher, and cultural tools made use of). *Third*, it could be argued that we presume – albeit in a very particular sense – a universal child, in the sense that we argue that the theoretical perspective we develop and its practical implications are not exclusive to particular children, but would be beneficial for all children.

Developmental Education/Basic Education

There are many overlapping ideas between Developmental Education (DE), as developed in the Netherlands by Bert van Oers and colleagues, and our present work and perspective (in Table 3.2, we point out some important convergences as well as note some differences). Briefly, DE (or Basic Education as it is referred to with the younger children; the approach of DE is for primary school at large), is an approach, grounded in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory.

Evidently, there are many mutual points of reference between the work of van Oers and colleagues and our present work, and their contribution is duly appreciated and acknowledged. It may also be pondered over the fact that despite grounded in a particular theory versus in empirical study in ECEC settings (and primarily in another theoretical tradition), many conclusions drawn are the same and the two

Table 3.2 Similarities and differences between Developmental Education/Basic Education (DE/BE) and Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC)

Developmental Education (DE) (van Oers, 2012b), for younger children (4–8 years called Basic Education (BE); Janssen-Vos & Pompert, 2012; van Oers, 2012a)	Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC)
"[A]ims at broad development of children's agency, and at facilitating children's appropriation of a wide range of cultural tools in different curricular areas (literacy, mathematics, art, technology, moral thinking etc.)" (van Oers, 2012a, p. 290)	Widen the child's cultural experience through giving her access to an increased repertoire of cultural tools and practices (per implication facilitating the child's agency)
Founded on theory	Founded on empirical study in preschools
Built on Vygotskian cultural-historical theory	Built on Vygotskian cultural-historical theory (sociocultural perspective) and – and primarily – other theoretical traditions: phenomenography, variation theory, and developmental pedagogy
Implemented in primary schools	Founded on actual activities in preschool; no need to transform knowledge to be applicable in ECEC settings
Emphasizes teaching to be based on playfully formatted activities that make sense to the child	Emphasizes being responsive to play (and that formatting may fluctuate during the course of activity, and, importantly, that such shifts between what we call *as if* and *as is* are critical access and development nodes for this form of educational work with young children)
Descriptive (on rare occasions: de Haan, 2012; Roof, 2012; van Oers & Poland, 2012, conversational data are represented; however, these snippets of data are not analyzed in terms of interaction), in fact, "the need for more detailed" "empirical evidence" is explicitly emphasized by van Oers (2012a, p. 294)	Interaction Analysis of empirical data

approaches appear like intellectual siblings. What provides the basis for our contribution with the present study is that we do Interaction Analysis (IA) of empirical data from everyday preschool activities. IA allows us to illuminate in detail the nature of the processes of teaching in play-responsive ways (e.g., how children and preschool teachers participate in, and contribute to such activities, how these activities emerge and develop, and how and what contents come into play and are appropriated). Through this analysis, we are able to contribute to the important work of, for example, Lindqvist (1995) and van Oers and colleagues (as summarized in van Oers, 2012b). That many conclusions drawn by these three studies at least to some extent converge provide mutual strengthening of claims made and a basis for conceptual generalization.

Another scholar conducting key work in the domain to which we intend to contribute, Marilyn Fleer, in a number of publications, has researched and theorized children's conceptual development in play-based settings. In one particularly relevant study (Fleer, 2011), she clarifies how engaging children in imagination is critical to play and the conceptual development of what is sometimes referred to as academic content. As van Oers and his colleagues' work (see above), and in part our work, Fleer's work is theoretically grounded in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. Arguing that imagination and play traditionally have been seen as individual achievements, disconnected from reality, Fleer emphasizes that such conceptions make it difficult for early years teachers to contribute to children's play and development as well as making it difficult for scholars to theorize these processes. Instead building on Vygotsky's work, imagination is understood as a means of broadening a child's (as well as adults') experience; that is, imagination allows us to experience what we have not seen or heard ourselves (cf. Luria, 1976). Imagination and play also builds on the child's experience; there is thus an important dialectic between experience and imagination and play (ibid.; Vygotsky, 1930/2004, 1933/1966). Rather than being disconnected from reality, Fleer (2011) argues that imagination move children toward and away from reality, and that it is always related to reality. Imagination moving the child toward reality can be exemplified by role-play; in exploring social roles children learn about real life. An object becoming something else can exemplify imagination moving the child away from reality (Vygotsky's famous example of the broom becoming a horse; Vygotsky, 1933/1966; or a table becoming a tree-hut). Since we only in part build upon the same theoretical ground as Fleer (2011) our terminologies are not entirely overlapping; however, they are compatible (cf., e.g., moving toward and away from reality with shifting between acting *as is* and *as if*). Through moving in and out of reality (or in our terms, shifting between speaking and in other ways acting *as is* and *as if*) – as children do in play – they develop an awareness of this distinction between imagination and reality, Fleer argues. This allows children to investigate as well as liberate them from their immediate surroundings (Fleer, 2011; cf. our discussion of agency in Chap. 12 of the present volume):

> With this background play experience, children can engage with the concrete materials deliberately introduced to them as representations of ideas that teachers wish children to examine – such as when a one-centimeter block is used to represent a rudimentary measure-

> ment tool in mathematics. Giving new meaning to a block (i.e. a measurement device) is not such a huge conceptual leap for children when they have had experiences in imaginary situations giving new meanings to objects in play. [—] Through making conscious the distinction between imagination and reality in play, children are conceptually primed to work with real objects and imagined (or abstract) ideas which represent reality. Thus allowing for a profound penetration of reality whilst at the same time becoming liberated from earlier […] forms of cognition. (p. 231)

Hence, according to this reasoning, it is through engaging children in imaginative play activities that early childhood education fosters the foundations of conceptual development, and hence, also academic learning. This perspective therefore implies particular pedagogical roles played by teachers:

> Rather than the teacher noticing what the child has found, or the children being encouraged to see what else they can find, the teacher considers what might be the core concept that would be necessary for the child to build relational knowledge between what they find, the habitat in which it is found, and the food sources available [Fleer's empirical example is in the domain of ecology]. That is, the teacher reduces the complexity of the material world to the essence of a core concept. A core concept that will help the child make meaning of their surroundings. Importantly the teacher must help the child see the interdependence between habitat, species and food source. It is an understanding of the relations between these that creates theoretical thinking for the young child. (p. 233)

This is a pedagogical role quite distinct from commonly held assumptions about not intervening in the child's own exploration of the world (cf. Hedges', 2014, critical discussion, referred to later in this chapter). Fleer's (2011) study also contains an excellent illustration of the everyday importance of conceptual understanding (reminding us, lest we forget, that concepts are not merely relevant to the scientific/academic disciplines):

> What is important here for building children's theoretical knowledge and thinking is how the child's relationship to the material world changes. [—] For example, young children who accompany their family on shopping trips, helping to find groceries, will develop everyday understandings about a shopping centre, knowing that if asked to find a toothbrush, that this item will be found somewhere along one of the aisles. They are likely to run up and down the aisles until they find it. However, if a child has a concept of a shopping centre being a classification system, then their actions are likely to be very different – that is, they are likely to find the toiletries section first, and then locate the toothbrush. This is a more direct and theoretically informed approach. Having a concept of a classification system as a theoretical model is a highly imaginative activity, allowing for a transformation of how children think and act in the material world. (pp. 234–235)

Developing children's conceptual understanding is important to the child's everyday life, not only to his or her subsequent academic success; it allows children to act and experience the world in more purposive and functional ways. Importantly, Fleer's work (2011, see also 2010) provides ample ground for understanding how engaging children in imagination and play are critical to such development, and also therefore should remain as foundational to early childhood education practices rather than be replaced by direct instruction (see also our discussion in Chap. 12 of the present volume). While recognizing the kinship of our work and Fleer's work, what we can contribute to this literature is close interaction analyses of the processes of play activities where a number of different contents are constituted and concepts actualized (and perhaps appropriated).

The Diversity of Beliefs about and Practices of Play

In an extensive and thorough review of international research on adults' beliefs about play, children's play with parents, and children's own play, Roopnarine (2011) conceptualizes play as "both culturally framed and unframed activities that are subsumed under the umbrella of 'playfulness'" (p. 20). This conception is elaborated thus:

> As distinguished from conventional definitions of play, playfulness is a more universal phenomenon and includes childhood and parent-child unframed play activities that co-occur during caregiving and in children's encounters with different individuals and objects within specific developmental niches. (p. 20)

This notion of playfulness appears in line with how we approach play in the present study. However, while Roopnarine includes what she refers to as 'framed and unframed activities', that is, both activities initiated as play and playfulness that enters other kind of activities, we would argue that when children (or adults) introduce playfulness into what has been initiated as activities other than play, they in fact, at least temporarily, reframes the activity as play(ful). Still, the openness to identifying and analyzing playfulness beyond activates clearly initiated in terms of play is necessary, we adhere to, when investigating what we refer to as play-responsive teaching.

An important finding of Roopnarine's review is that parents differ in their view of the merits of play. Parents from what is referred to as European or European-heritage cultures, and particularly among higher-educated middle-class backgrounds, differ in being positive to "'concerted cultivation' during socialization (constantly coaching, creating opportunities) compared to low-income families who believe that children naturally acquire certain skills" (p. 21), including play support. Regarding the latter,

> here was a positive relationship between play support and parental education, and an inverse relationship between parental education and academic focus, suggesting that parents with higher levels of educational attainment were more likely to endorse play as a means for learning early cognitive and social skills than those with lower levels of educational attainment. (p. 23)

That is, higher-educated parents are more positive to play as a means of facilitating children's development – and children's development more generally than promoting particular learning outcomes – than lower-educated parents. Among the latter group, "economic and social pressures may lead parents to choose didactic approaches over play in early education in order to minimize the risk of attendant to school failure later on" (p. 22). It is important to realize that what is here referred to as 'didactic approaches' denote practices based on traditional school instruction, and therefore practices markedly different from what we, in the present study, refer to as (play-responsive) *didaktik* (see Chap. 2 *et passim*).

Not surprisingly, but importantly, variation in parental beliefs concerning the value of play corresponds with the frequency, nature and quality of parent-child play (Roopnarine, 2011), with parents in European and European-heritage

communities engaging, for example, in playful activities with children and objects in ways that involve labelling more than parents with other cultural backgrounds.

The role – if any – of play in education is, of course, controversial (e.g., Pellegrini, 2011a, 2011b).[1] In their extensive review of studies on play in education, Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, and Berk (2011) deduce this controversy to a more long-standing debate on how children learn. They argue that historically there are two traditions to this question, what they refer to as "the 'empty vessel' approach" and "the whole-child perspective", respectively (p. 342). The former is presented thus:

> Arising from the essentialist and behaviorist philosophies, some believe that there is a core set of basic skills that children must learn and a carefully planned, scripted pedagogy is the ideal teaching practice. In this 'direct instruction' perspective, teachers become agents of transmission, identifying and communicating need-to-know facts that define academic success. Learning is compartmentalized into domain-specific lessons (mathematics, reading, language) to ensure the appropriate knowledge is being conveyed. Worksheets, memorization, and assessment often characterize this approach – with little academic value associated with play, even in preschool. (p. 342)

In terms of Swedish preschool, we argue, such an approach is not feasible; in Swedish preschool there are no worksheets or assessment of children's knowledge (this is not allowed according to law), neither is knowledge compartmentalized into the instruction of particular subjects as such (themes rather than lessons constitute the form of facilitating children's experience and learning). In addition, the notions of direct instruction and transmission of knowledge are unproductive to understand how teachers and others facilitate children's development and learning, as we extensively discuss in the present volume; see also the important distinction we make between 'instruction' and 'teaching' in Chap. 12).

In contrast to the 'empty vessel' approach, described by Fisher et al. (2011) above, they present what they refer to as 'the whole-child approach', in which children themselves are ascribed an active role in their learning, where meaningfulness is critical, and "play, in particular, represents a predominant method for children to acquire information, practice skills, and engage in activities that expand their repertoire" (p. 342). A recurring concept in discussions and theorizing emphasizing children's active participation is agency (Clarke, Howley, Resnick, & Rosé, 2016; see also, Chap. 12 of the present volume).

While our present position is aligned with the latter conception (i.e., what is above referred to as 'the whole-child approach', as distinct to an 'empty vessel' approach), it is important to remember that dichotomies like the above distinction are simplifications necessary for some analytical purpose. In actual practice – as necessarily investigated empirically – one would not expect to find clear-cut examples of either one. While sympathetic with the latter, rather than the former perspective, something that is under-communicated in the latter is the important

[1] Burghardt (2011) renders experience that "it is often necessary to avoid the label 'play' when seeking to integrate playful activities into school curricula. The lay view that play is not serious, and thus not important to 'real' education, is still all too common" (p. 10; see also the discussion of Vaihinger (1924/2001) in the present volume for a powerful refutation of such objections).

roles of more experienced peers and in particular teachers in children's learning and development. Hence, rather than arguing for one or the other position (perspective), it is critical to theorize teaching in play-based activities in more nuanced ways than what dichotomies allow.

Reviewing studies on play and learning, Fisher et al. (2011) conclude that "the findings show that play can be gently scaffolded by a teacher/adult to promote curricular goals while still maintaining critical aspects of play" (p. 342). What they refer to as 'playful learning' consists of two parts: free play and guided play. The latter has two aspects: adults enriching children's environment with toys and other objects relevant to a curricular domain (e.g., literacy), and adults playing along with children, including critically, asking questions and "the teacher may model ways to expand the child's repertoire (e.g., make sounds, talk to other animals, use it to 'pull' a wagon)" (p. 343). Hence, while children's play provides the basis for this form of pedagogy, "teacher guidance will be essential" (p. 343). Teacher guidance, as Fisher et al. point out, "falls on a continuum" (p. 343), that is, the question is not whether or not the teacher participates (or should participate) but the extent to – and more critically, how – she does so.

The example of developing preschool children's shape concepts can illustrate the merits of this form of pedagogy. In the study, children were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: guided play, direct instruction or control condition. In the guided play condition, children were encouraged to "discover the 'secret of the shapes'" and adults asked what the researchers refer to as 'leading questions', such as how many sides there are to a shape. In the instruction condition, in contrast, the adult verbally described the shape properties to children. In the control condition children listened to a story instead of engaging with shapes. Afterwards the children were asked to draw and sort shapes.

> Results from a shape-sorting task revealed that guided play and direct instruction appear equal in learning outcomes for simple, familiar shapes (e.g., circles). However, children in the guided play condition showed significantly superior geometric knowledge for the novel, highly complex shape (pentagon) than the other conditions. For the complex shapes, the direct instruction and control conditions performed similarly. The findings suggest discovery through engagement and teacher commentary (dialogic inquiry) are key elements that foster shape learning in guided play. (p. 345)

Hence, there is no difference in learning outcomes between guided play and direct instruction when it comes to relatively simple content, but when it comes to more complex content, guided play outperforms direct instruction; in fact, as found, when it comes to complex content, direct instruction was no better than what the control group performed (i.e., in this case, direct instruction made no difference to learning outcomes, on a group level). As clarified by Fisher et al.'s reasoning, teacher participation is critical to the success of guided play, not least to engage children in talking about the matters at hand and how these may be understood.

In their extensive review of research on play and learning, Fisher et al. (2011) show how correlational, interventional, and comparative research all show the benefits of learning on the basis of play. They give examples from domains such as language and literacy, and mathematics, as well as social and self-regulative skills.

Particularly dramatic play is emphasized as developing children's language and literacy skills, requiring play partners to make known to others their intentions and play scenarios, and for participants to synthesize their ideas and suggestions into a shared narrative.

While there are many commonalities between the explanatory framework of Fisher et al. (2011) and our present study, differences in research traditions also emerge. This is evident when Fisher et al. ask, "What are the optimal combinations for literacy development (e.g., the number of literacy learning activities, length of time per activity, time devoted to free vs. guided play)?" (p. 349). These are all quantitative matters, that is how much of X and Y are optimal to support children's development. In contrast, from our theoretical point of view, what we need to ask is qualitative questions, for instance, what qualities of teacher-child interaction, and children's interaction, are critical to scaffold children's development in various domains of knowing; what modes of participation by more experienced participants such as teachers promote children's play, and through play, learning beyond play; in what way can conceptual resources necessary for the development of play be planted within the framing of ongoing play, and how may these conceptual resources be planted in establishing a mutual play frame for children to play in and beyond? These are all questions that require a different kind of analysis and, in part, different kind of empirical data, to the questions posed by Fisher et al. Asking the kinds of questions we pursue in the present study requires detailed interactional data from everyday activities in preschool (for further discussion, see Chap. 4).

Analyzing and discussing discourses on play and learning in early childhood education, Hedges (2014) argues that "reluctance to incorporate content in children's learning arises from non-empirical traditions and ideologies" (p. 192). A historical precursor to what is today often voiced as objecting to ambitions to support children's learning in early childhood education, is Rousseau (see also, Chap. 1 of the present volume):

> In the eighteenth century, Rousseau promoted play as a natural form of children's healthy development as playful, innocent and optimistic human beings. The role of education was to let these instinctive abilities unfold without adult interference. The type and extent of content knowledge learning developed in this apparently effortless way remained unspecified and Rousseau's ideas were developed without any empirical basis (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Yet these ideas have been the origins of a long-held child-centered ideology related to play as a spontaneous activity that ought not to be interfered with. (p. 193f.)

In terms of a common set of metaphors, children's abilities have thus come to be seen as 'unfolding' (as if prewritten on a piece of paper that, when unfolded ('de-veloped'), reveals what is already there waiting to be recognized. Accordingly, teachers and other adults should not 'intervene' in the allegedly natural scheme of things. As Hedges (2014) points out, such a stance risks making content knowledge invisible and unattended. In contrast, and recognizing the importance of allowing children to develop insights into many domains of knowing, Hedges argues that some critical questions to such approaches are "when adults might provide input into children's spontaneous play, what the substance of that input might be and the pedagogical framing for such contributions" (p. 196). The questions are well aligned

with the interest of the present project. Building her reasoning on research by Fleer (2010) and others, Hedges (2014) concludes 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.). (As we have already clarified what we refer to as *didaktik* in the original German/continental tradition is markedly different to what in the English-speaking world is referred to as didactics.) In our study, we intend to analyze such 'links' between, primarily playing and teaching, and thus in extension with learning.

The Sociogenesis of Forms of Play and Its Implication for ECEC

As cogently argued, and based on empirical study (e.g., anthropology), by Elkonin (2005), even traditional toys and forms of play with a long history that appear to be unchanging have in fact changed over time. The development of toys and forms of play is further intimately interwoven with the child's changing place in society. The origin and development of role play constitutes one illustrative example. Basically, Elkonin's line of argument is this: In a traditional society, there is a low level of division of labor and people live and work together. This also means that child rearing is not separated from socialization to work. Phrased differently, the world of children and adults is to a large extent the same. Without a clear division of labor, every child needs to learn what adults know, and after a brief period in which the child is a 'child', he or she starts to work with adults. The child learns through participating in the world shared with adults (work).

With new conditions of living – agriculture and animal husbandry – more complex forms of production emerge. These forms of production are associated with the invention of new tools (e.g., the plow). This leads to a greater division of labor in society, and children's world becomes increasingly separated from the world of adults (work). With the emergence of such new tools, children can no longer practice the mastery of these; a plow, to continue with the example given, is far too heavy for children to handle and a miniature plow cannot be put behind an ox to plow the earth. It is at this point in time that what may be referred to as 'real toys' emerge, that is, objects that represent real work tools but that cannot be used in such a way. While we do not focus on toys per se in the present study, Elkonin's historical elaboration also incorporates the emergence of new forms of play, which has more direct relevance to our present concern.

When children can no longer share or prepare for adult activity (work), children start to role play. That is, when no longer able to participate in adults' work, children start playing what they perceive adults doing. Hence, Elkonin concludes, role play develops in the course of society's historical evolution as a result of changes in the

child's place in the system of social relationships. It is thus social in origin as well as in nature (Elkonin, 2005), rather than something evolving naturally irrespective of socio-cultural situation.

To reiterate, the historical development of role play illustrates how new forms of production (work) is associated with new tools. The invention of such tools necessitates an increased division of labor in society. This results in children starting to interact more with other children than with adults, and that childhood as a developmental phase is prolonged (cf. Dewey, 1916/2008). Observing what adults do but children cannot (due to, e.g., lack of physical strength), children start role playing what adults do. This separation of children from the everyday life of adults eventually leads to the institutionalization of educational arrangements (preschool, school) since children's learning and development need to be catered for in other ways than through participation in adult work. With this separation from the immediate work of the closest adults, opportunities for choosing from a wider repertoire emerges. That is, the child no longer by necessity develops the same kind of skills that its caregivers and extended social family have, but can be introduced to also other skills and forms of knowing. Increasingly, the child's repertoire of forms of knowledge is critical to establishing socially just institutions (Pramling, Kultti, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2019). Facilitating such more multifaceted development is done through introducing children to forms of play (e.g., what roles they can play in society beyond those immediately available to each child) and cultural tools of various kinds (e.g., crayons, pens and paper, hammer, nails, saw, etc.) associated with forms of activity.

Elkonin's work provides an important reminder that adults, such as preschool teachers, are critical to expanding the experiential basis of children's imagination (what children can imagine possible to do, engage with; cf. Fleer, 2011) and that such more experienced co-participants are critical to making sure children are given ample opportunity and support to develop their play and are introduced to new forms of play (and thus to new forms of skills and knowledge).

Engaging the Youngest Children in Teaching Activities *as Is* and *as If*

How preschool teachers interact with the youngest children in preschool in ways that make visible some of children's experience and allow them to start appropriating new perspectives was studied by Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson (2010). Studying evolving activities, with small groups of children aged 1–3 years, around some simple objects (buttons, containers and a blanket), what repertoire(s) children were introduced to and engaged in was analyzed. These encompassed:

- Co-fantasizing (where the buttons were used as props in evolving playful fantasies).
- Enacting aesthetic sense and sharing joy (i.e., attending to sensuous experience: how the buttons feel and sound)

Table 3.3 A schematic meta-illustration of two forms of activity: one more static in nature (cultural reproduction) and one more dynamic (human development). Adjusted from Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson (2010, p. 28)

Static (cultural reproduction)	Dynamic (human development)
As is (size, colour, shape etc.)	*As if* (pretend play, what something looks like, metaphor)
The objects *per se*	The activities afforded by the objects (e.g., sound-making)
Conventional	Unconventional (creative)
Remain with what is at hand (the buttons)	Go beyond (associate, re-connect to what is outside) the present objects (and situation)

- Exploring what something is and/or how it can be used (i.e., attending to the colour, shape, size of the buttons, or that they can be rolled and be put on clothes)
- Speaking and in other ways acting in metaphorical terms (where the buttons become, or remind of, e.g., snowballs, leaves, fruits and vegetables)
- Receiving and giving acknowledgement (i.e., showing each other what one sees, and receiving confirmation and perhaps a name for the object; cf. Tomasello, 1999, on joint attention)

In some of the studied groups, all these forms of activity were present; in some other groups this was not the case. These activities show different ways that teachers can engage children in joint activities supporting children's identity as knower (receiving acknowledgement and confirmation) and support their further development (e.g., becoming aware of new ways of making use of the objects at hand and the perspectives from which these can be perceived: *as is* and *as if*). The kinds of activities analytically discerned are clearly not mutually exclusive. For example, speaking and in other ways acting in metaphorical terms may, through others' responsive engagement, develop into continued co-fantasizing. However, the nature of these activities may for analytical reasons be schematically described as distinct, with one seen as a form of 'cultural reproduction' and the other as 'human development' (Bruner, 1996), that is, where one is focused on introducing children to and passing on established forms of knowing, the other is focused on generating their ability to think anew and make novel sense (see Table 3.3).

It is important not to read this schematic elaboration as dichotomous, that is, as if *didaktik* was a matter of one or the other. Rather, during the course of an activity, there may be shifts between these, temporarily privileging one or the other. It is also important not to read this in normative terms, that is, as if one was better than the other. Rather, from an analytical perspective, it is clear that children in their development need to be engaged in both strands of activities, and thus be given ample opportunities and support to learn what something is (as established, shared knowledge) and what something may be (as if it were). The importance of this variety of experience, and appropriating a repertoire of different perspectives (cf. Pramling, 1996) can be emphasized in terms of what developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson argues constitutes a distinguishing human characteristic: our 'hybrid mind' (Nelson, 1996, 2009), that is, the human ability to render the world and our experience in a great variety of ways: narrative, paradigmatic, mathematical, musical, poetical, embodied, and many others.

The discussed example also serves to highlight that *didaktik* is not restricted to teaching in the mode of *as is*; this form of joint activity may also be carried out in the mode of *as if*, and importantly – as we will argue and show empirically in this study – to go between these modes of sense making.

Summary

In this chapter, we have reviewed key theory and research on play and its relation to teaching and learning. Particularly, we have acknowledged the work of Vygotsky, Elkonin, Lindqvist, van Oers and colleagues, and Fleer. We also presented meta-studies, including work on socio-cultural variation in caregiver beliefs about play, learning and development. Finally, we have discussed work showing empirically how teaching is not restricted to *as is*, but also can encompass *as if*.

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