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**Rethinking the roles of teachers in the context of kindergarten  
play: listening to children's and teachers' perspectives in  
China**

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## **Abstract**

Grounded in sociocultural play and learning theories, this study aims to explore teachers' roles in play in a Chinese kindergarten from children's and teachers' perspectives. Play pedagogy is dominant in Chinese policies for early childhood education, alongside guidance for the role of teachers in connecting play provisions with their pedagogical practices and strategies. Some studies have sought to understand what educational forms of play mean to children. However, few studies have focused on children's perspectives of teachers' roles in play. Located in the qualitative interpretive paradigm, this research used video-stimulated reflective dialogues to elicit the perspectives of children and teachers in one Chinese kindergarten. The method of thematic analysis is used to interpret and code the data. The findings present different roles of teachers in imaginative play contexts, as well as children's responses and perspectives to teachers' pedagogical practices within these roles. Seven types of the teachers' roles emerged from the children's perspectives: the observes, documenters, enquires, reminders, supporters, play partners and directors. From the teachers' perspectives, they identified themselves as the observers, documenters, supporters, guiders, assessors, directors and play partners. The findings also reveal three interrelated layers of influence with regard to the teachers' decision-making in their roles and pedagogical practices: the personal, the institutional and the societal. Children gave positive feedback to teachers' roles and pedagogical practices when teachers' roles attained a level of intersubjectivity with children's interests and needs in play. The findings suggest that teachers need guidance for positioning their roles flexibly in different play contexts, especially when there is a conflict between children's interests and the development goals imposed by policy documents. This study argues that it is important to understand and embrace the complexity of play in educational settings when evaluating teachers' roles from practice and leadership perspectives.

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# Chapter one: Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of the rationale for this study. First, I present a brief introduction to the play policies and practices in early childhood education in China. Next, I explain how the gaps in the literature underpin this study. This is followed by my reflections on how my positionality has motivated the study. Then the research aims and questions will be presented. In the final section, I provide an outline of the thesis structure.

## 1.1 The rationale for the study

Situated in the sociocultural research paradigm, the overall focus of this study is to explore teachers' roles in children's play activities from the perspectives of both the children and the teachers in a Chinese kindergarten. In China, early childhood education (ECE) refers to the care and education of children aged 0-6 years old (Zhu, 2009). The public kindergartens serve children 3-6 old years in three grade levels: Xiaoban (3-4 years old), Zhongban (4-5 years old) and Daban (5-6 years old) (MOE, 2013). In China, the play-based curriculum has been prevalent in Chinese kindergartens ever since the curriculum reform early in the 1980s (Zhu and Zhang, 2008). A series of government policies emphasise that play should be the foundational activity in kindergarten education (MOE, 2001; 2012a; 2016). Consequently, the kindergarten curriculum is informed mainly by two principal government documents released by the Ministry of Education. The document *Guideline for Kindergarten Education (Trial)* (MOE, 2001) informs early childhood educators in kindergarten practice of specific requirements and curriculum contents in five learning domains – health, language, art, science and society. In 2012, the Ministry of Education enacted the *Early Learning and Development Guideline Age 3-6* (MOE, 2012a) (hereinafter referred to as “the Guideline”), the first official document to set out age-related learning and development goals in the five respective learning domains. Of significance, the

Guideline explicitly stated that “children’s learning is based on the first-hand experience through play and daily activities.” (MOE, 2012a, p.2). Thus, the policymakers have conceptualised play as pedagogy to deliver certain learning and development goals as specified in the policy documents (MOE, 2001; 2012a). Correspondingly, the roles of teachers in play and their pedagogical practices have been informed by the educational policy frameworks and policy-oriented research in the Chinese context.

The contemporary trend of play-based curriculum and pedagogy in the Chinese ECE context resonates with current policy and scholarship on play in many Western countries which also view play as an effective practice in early childhood education (Wood, 2010a, b). However, the way play has been framed in the policy discourses and in practice is seen as problematic and has fuelled debate (Fleer, 2010; Wood, 2010a, b; Rogers, 2011; Rogers and Lapping, 2012; Chesworth, 2016). Wood (2010a) argues that “play does not fit neatly into policy paradigms because it does not always ‘pay into’ defined learning outcomes” (p.18). What children experience and gain from the play activities may not be in line with the learning and development goals proposed in policies. Internationally, a range of studies has shown that children have their own perspectives on play activities, which may not be consistent with the intentions and expectations of teachers and policymakers (Howard, 2002; Liu, Pan and Sun, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Theobald et al., 2015; McInnes, 2019; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2019). Children are active constructors in their lives (Prout and James, 1990), so should they be in kindergarten play activities. Their perspectives in play should be carefully heard and valued. While these studies have explored what play means to children, few of them have shed light on teachers’ roles in play from children’s perspectives. However, it is the teachers, as the ones who implement policy and directly interact with children in play activities, whose roles are important if we want to truly value children’s perspectives and act upon that information in ECE practices (Warming, 2005). This poses an important question: What do teachers’ roles mean to children in play activities?

This question is posed not only due to the gap in the research literature, and the respect for children's perspectives in their lives (Prout and James, 1990), but also because teachers themselves are facing challenges in current Chinese kindergarten practice. Despite the fact that "play-based teaching and learning" practices (Liu and Feng, 2005; Hou and Luo, 2022) have been established in Chinese kindergartens for some decades, teachers are often criticised for not providing play activities that meet children's needs and interests (Yan and Wei, 2008), or for creating "false play" in kindergarten practices (Cheng, 2019a). Dockett and Perry (1996) assert that children and teachers may not share the same understanding and perspectives on the same play experience. Hence, it is important to bridge children's and teachers' perspectives, examine them together, and reconsider the roles of teachers in children's play. Alongside the gaps in the literature and the recognised tensions in Chinese kindergartens concerning play activities, my personal experience also contributes to the rationale for this research. This personal motivation is explained below.

## **1.2 Personal motivation for this research**

Siraj-Blatchford (2010a) states that the researcher's personal values, beliefs, and professional background will inform the construction, interpretation and demonstration of the research. In the following section, I adopt a reflexive approach to present a brief review of my positionality with regard to the motivation and rationale for conducting this research.

My interest in studying teachers' roles in children's play is derived from my personal and academic experience in early childhood education. As the only person in my family who has studied early childhood education, some of my family members often ask me to recommend toys for their children. They are also curious about what materials children play with in kindergartens, and how they play there. It is interesting to note

that when some relatives learned there were similarities in children's play materials at home and in kindergartens, such as "kitchen", blocks, and puzzle games, they suggested that they might be able to teach their children at home if they had the time. They implied that they could provide the children with individualised attention and (I quote) more "fancy toys, like Lego". Whilst this experience was personal and might not represent Chinese parents' perspectives in general, it inspired me to consider teachers' roles in kindergarten children's play. I asked myself, what was the most significant value that kindergarten teachers can contribute to children in play activities, which other adults in children's lives (for example, their parents) cannot easily achieve at home? This question is not to suggest a dichotomy in children's education between home and educational settings. Having been trained as a qualified kindergarten teacher in my undergraduate education, I am aware of the close relationship between home and kindergarten in early childhood education. I am also confident that kindergarten teachers, with the benefit of their professional knowledge and skills, are able to provide children with unique play experiences and development in kindergartens.

My confidence in the distinct value of kindergarten teachers' roles in play has been challenged during my working experience. This challenge did not arise from questioning teachers' professional abilities, but from the disparities between what I had learned in my academic education, and what I observed in kindergarten practices. At that time, I had just finished my master's degree in "Childhood in Society" from the University of Warwick. I returned to China and started my teaching career at a local university with a great passion to engage children's voices in kindergarten research and practices. My interest in studying teachers' roles in play was strengthened by my experience of taking a group of undergraduates for internships in a Chinese kindergarten. Reflecting upon my weekly regular visits to this kindergarten, I recall the views of these kindergarten teachers resonating with me when they emphasised how much they valued children's interests and autonomy in play. I also observed that the children were in control of most aspects of their role-play activities. The children

decided which play activities to take part in, made decisions for their play themes, chose their own play partners, and prepared play materials for themselves. However, I also recall some confusing moments when I noticed that some children had secretly changed their play into another type of play when the teachers were not observing them – for example, using blocks for role-playing in the construction area. There were also some situations of incongruence between teachers and children where the adults encouraged or directly asked children to continue playing the activities that they had originally chosen for themselves, despite the children telling the teachers that they did not want to play anymore. When I discussed this phenomenon with the teachers, sometimes they were frustrated because they believed they had valued the children's voices and adopted a child-centred pedagogy and curriculum design. The teachers also gave their professional opinions that children's interests in play were easy to shift. As such, the teachers believed they played an important role, when children lost their interest in a play activity, to help the children develop the disposition of persistence and focus as well as problem-solving skills through play.

Despite the resonance I felt with some of the perceptions expressed by those teachers at that time, I also experienced a challenge to my previous learnings in childhood studies. If the teachers were convinced that they placed value on children's perspectives in play activities, why did these incongruent situations still occur in children's play? If we truly respect children's rights, to what extent should teachers give control back to children in their own play activities in educational settings? Most importantly, what do teachers' roles mean to children when they are with teachers engaging in the same play context or sharing the same play experience? Thus, I have grown to believe it is essential to explore teachers' roles in play from both children's and teachers' perspectives.

Throughout my doctoral journey, sociocultural theories in early childhood education have greatly informed my research. In particular, some of my questions about the lack of harmony or congruence in relation to children's play interests have been explained

through sociocultural perspectives. Furthermore, my understanding of children's play experiences at home and at kindergarten has grown deeper than it was when I had those conversations with my relatives about children's play in these two settings. Play is a potential space to bridge the cultures between home and school (Brooker, 2010; Broadhead and Burt, 2012; Chesworth, 2016; Yahya and Wood, 2017), but I realised that it was challenging work for teachers to understand what experiences children had brought from home to kindergarten play. Compared to play at home, children's play activities in kindergartens incorporate multiple cultures. Some cultures are brought from their home and community, and some are constructed with their peers and teachers in kindergartens. Given that kindergarten play activities are embedded in these complex and multiple cultural contexts, I believe teachers' roles in play should be clarified and reconsidered within a sociocultural framework. Moreover, as an early childhood researcher, I hope that by rethinking teachers' roles from different perspectives, this study can highlight the professionalism of kindergarten teachers in the field of early childhood education and care.

### **1.3 Research aims and questions**

Situated in the Chinese research context, this study focuses on exploring the roles of teachers in kindergarten play activities from both children's and teachers' perspectives. With this research purpose in mind, the study aims to: identify and explore the multiple roles and pedagogical practices of teachers in children's play activities; understand teachers' choice of pedagogical practices and their role positionings in play; and reveal what teachers' roles mean to children from the children's perspectives. By bringing two sets of perspectives together, this study will examine the intersubjectivity between teachers and children regarding the identification, evaluation and expectations of teachers' roles. Simultaneously, this examination contributes to addressing the ultimate aim of the study: to reconsider teachers' roles in play from the dual standpoints of (a) the children's needs and interests in play, and (b) the instructions on teachers'



roles that are regulated in national policy documents and proposed by research on play. Aligned with these aims, the main research question is presented as follows:

**What are teachers' roles in kindergarten play activities in different contexts from the perspectives of both children and teachers in China?**

## **1.4 Outline of the thesis**

The thesis consists of seven chapters, outlined as follows:

### **Chapter One**

I explain how the rationale for this study is underpinned by the gaps in the literature, the contemporary trend of play-based curriculum and pedagogy in Chinese ECE, and my personal motivations. Following this, I present the focus of this study and the main research question.

### **Chapter Two**

In this chapter, I introduce the theoretical framework of this study – the sociocultural paradigm. Children's play, learning and development are discussed from sociocultural perspectives. Then I move to discuss play-based pedagogy and the roles of teachers in play in international contexts. Next, I introduce play in Chinese contexts through the lens of Chinese cultures, policies and relevant histories. Then I present and discuss the play-based curriculum and pedagogy in the Chinese context. In this section I also address the dominant educational trend and challenges in early childhood education. Following this, I discuss teachers' roles in play from the perspectives of policymakers and researchers. Finally, I present and analyse the literature on children's perspectives on play and teachers' roles in play.

### **Chapter Three**

This chapter sets out the methodology and methods used in this study. I begin with the research questions of the study. Next, I discuss the research paradigm and justify the rationale for my selection. Following this, I describe the research design and data collection process. Then I move on to discuss the ethical considerations in the research and the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, I address my research reflexivity by reflecting on how my positionality has influenced the research process.

### **Chapter Four**

In this chapter, I explain the data analysis process. I start by presenting the rationale for the data organisation and selection. I then move to an account of the procedures in my chosen method of qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis.

### **Chapter Five**

This chapter presents and analyses the key findings of the research. I organise the findings according to the role-play themes that the participants engaged in. I join together the children's perspectives and teachers' perspectives in vignettes that illuminate teachers' roles in children's play.

### **Chapter Six**

In this chapter, I reconsider the findings on teachers' roles using two lenses: the "inside-out" perspective" (Wood, 2010b, p.11) in order to discuss children's identification and evaluation of teachers' roles in play; and the "outside-in" perspective (Wood, 2010b, p.11) in order to analyse teachers' roles in play and to explore the factors influencing their choices on role positionings and pedagogical practice.

## **Chapter Seven**

In the final chapter, I begin by providing a brief summary of the main findings of this research. I proceed to discuss the contributions of the study and the implications for theorising play pedagogy and kindergarten teachers' professional development. To conclude, I identify the limitations of the study and make suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter two: A review of the literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter draws on the literature related to the overarching theme of the study that identifies the roles of teachers in children's play from the perspective of children and teachers. The word "teacher" is used throughout the review in order to unify the multiple expressions which are adopted in much of the literature, for example, the word "practitioner". To resonate with the two groups of participants involved in this study, the teachers and the children, I frame this review within two main parts.

In the first part, I review the literature from the international contexts (excluding China) to the literature which are addressed in the Chinese context. Literature shows that early childhood education in China reflects the traditional Chinese culture, the Western culture and the Communist culture, which intertwine together to influence Chinese early childhood education until now (Wang and Spodek, 2000; Zhu and Wang 2005; Zhu and Zhang, 2008). So far, the play theory has been broadly discussed from multiple disciplines and different perspectives. Since the study is addressed in the educational setting, I will present the literature mainly on the theory that focuses on play in education and child development, one of the four main strands of play theories that are categorised by Bergen (2014). Therefore, in the first section of the first part of the review, I begin with the theoretical perspectives of play within the territories of the sociocultural-historical theory. I discuss the key ideas from this paradigm to present the relationship between play, learning and children's development in early childhood education. Then, the discussion focuses on the dominant practice of the play-based curriculum and play pedagogy in the early childhood education system worldwide. Next, I present discussions about teachers' pedagogical practices in children's play. In the end, I move the discussion to the literature about the core concept of this study, roles of teachers, to shed the light on the challenges and problems teachers meet in role

positioning in children's play. In terms of the review for Chinese literature, I first introduce the perspective of play in the Chinese culture as well as a brief development history of play in early childhood education in China. Then, I review the literature from educational documents to research papers in order to reflect how play, play-based curriculum and play pedagogy are interpreted and applied by the policy maker, professional researchers and kindergarten teachers. In the end, I move the discussion to the literature about teachers' roles from the macro-level government documents about teachers' professional development and roles in the kindergarten to the micro-level pieces of literature in relation to teachers' involvement and pedagogical practice in play.

In the second part of this literature review, I discuss the works of literature in relation to teachers' roles from children's perspectives. Starting from an explanation of how children define the activity as play or not, different types of teachers' roles are then discussed from children's perspectives. In particular, I will focus on the topic to discuss children's perceptions and evaluations of teachers' pedagogical positions and the corresponding practices in children's play.

## **2.2 Understanding play from theoretical perspectives**

Vygotsky's theory has a significant implication for educators to understand teaching and learning in the context of play as well as to provide a framework to conceptualize their roles in the practice of early childhood education (Wood, 2013). Since the research focus is addressed in the roles of teachers in children's play in the educational context, Vygotsky's work on play, children's learning and development are in close relation to the theoretical framework of this thesis. However, the writings that Vygotsky had published were a series of insights into preschool-age children's learning and development, which were sometimes too fragmented to be considered a complete theory (Bodrova and Leong, 2003). Therefore, the theories of the post-Vygotskians

which have progressed from the original work of Vygotsky are also discussed in this chapter, in order to present a more theoretical review for this thesis. While reviewing the theories and empirical studies that drew on Vygotsky and post-Vygotsky's work, I found that terms like "sociocultural theory" and "cultural-historical theory" have been mixed and used to name their original theories. Fler and Veresov (2018) explained that due to the various groups of translations of the original writings of the Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian theories, differences, similarities and tensions existed among the terms. To deal with these inconsistencies, Anning, Cullen and Fler (2009) proposed the concept of "sociocultural-historical theory" as an umbrella term which comprises the theoretical works that reflect Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian perspectives on development and learning. Yet in order to reflect the diverse theoretical strands of Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian and respect the authors' own interpretation of these theories, I decided to retain the various theoretical terms used by authors from different countries in this thesis.

Although this study is addressed in the sociocultural-historical paradigm, some considerations of Piaget's theory are firstly presented due to his profound contribution and influence on early childhood education worldwide (Walsh, 2005). Furthermore, the research findings showed that teachers constantly use Piaget's viewpoints to analyse children's behaviour and explain their roles in the contexts of play, directly or indirectly. It is reasonable that teachers might apply multiple theories (constructivist, sociocultural and other contemporary theories) to their teaching pedagogy when they interact with children. Whilst a comprehensive review and discussion of Piaget's theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, Piaget's core perspectives about play, children's learning and development are presented with a critical examination.

### **2.2.1 Piaget's theory in play, children's learning and development**

One of the most significant contributions of Piaget is his cognitive development theory, which reveals children's intellectual growth and knowledge-making process. Piaget defined intelligence as a basic life function which enables the individual to adapt to the environment with the help of the scheme, "an organized pattern of thought or action that a child constructs to make sense of some aspects of his or her experience." (Shaffer, 2002, p.50). According to Piaget, the earliest scheme is the organized motor patterns which formed in infancy. As the children matured, they construct a more complex scheme to adapt to the environment. During the process of cognitive development, Piaget viewed the child as an active learner who constructed knowledge through operation, experience, active learning and social interaction (Wood, 2013). When the children faced some new experience or needed to solve problems, Piaget believed that initially, children tried to understand the new experience with their existing schemes, a process which Piaget called "assimilation" (Piaget, 1962). But, when there are contradictions between the facts and children's interpretations of the experience, children modify or extend the schemes that they already possessed so that they can adapt to the new experience in the external world. Piaget named this development process "accommodation" (Piaget, 1962). The relationship between assimilation and accommodation is dialectical or back and forth (Hendricks, 2015). However, when children are facing new experiences or concepts, their existing schemas cannot be modified but be changed, and a state of disequilibrium or cognitive conflict occurred in children's minds (Wood, 2013). The Piagetian concepts of equilibrium and disequilibrium have been used to inform teachers' pedagogical practice in early childhood education to enable children's thinking and learning (Lovatt and Hedges, 2015). In the result and discussion chapters, these concepts will be revisited to illustrate how the teachers' pedagogical decision-making in play was influenced by Piagetian theories.

Another significant contribution of Piaget is that he identified four age-related stages of cognitive development: the sensorimotor stage (from birth to two years), the preoperational stage (from age two to age seven), the concrete operational stage (from

age seven to age eleven) and the formal operational stage (from age eleven to age sixteen) (Piaget, 1955). According to Piaget's theory, children do not move to the next developmental stage until they have reached to the period of readiness. The concept of readiness suggested that teachers' instructions to children might be ineffective if they placed their involvement ahead or after children's age-related developmental stage. Moreover, teachers' involvement might interrupt children's active learning and development. Hence, Piaget's age-related stages of children's cognitive development have informed teachers' pedagogical position based on the sequences of individual children's learning and development (Stott and Bowman, 1996).

Furthermore, Piaget (1962) proposed three categories of play which varied with the periods of age and the corresponding stages of cognitive development. Practice play appears at and is significant in the sensorimotor stage when the children are 0-2 years old (Hendricks, 2015). Children explore themselves and the external world through repeated physical movements. In the later sensorimotor stage, some of the children's practice has reached to the point where little conscious attention is needed in the play. Through the ritualized movement, children acquire pleasure from the practice play because of their capacity to control themselves and the external world. The pleasure that children experience in the practice play reflects Piaget's view that play is pure assimilation when children's repeated behaviour is purely for their "functional pleasure" (Piaget, 1962, p.89), yet this view has been criticized (Sutton-Smith, 1966; Hendrick, 2015). Hendrick (2015) argued that in play activities, accommodation was also very important. Players not only experience the patterned, repetitive and ritualized behaviour in play activities but also looked for the exciting, novelty and changeable aspects of the play activities (Hendrick, 2015). Compared to practice play, which is a simple motor activity, symbolic play is qualitatively different (Hendrick, 2015). In symbolic play, children engage in the imaginary situation to behave in a sense of pretence and use the objects symbolically. Symbolic play is prominent between the ages of two to seven, when the children are at the pre-operational stage. During this period, constructive play, added by Smilansky (1990) as the fourth category of play in



Piaget's definitions of play categories, is also dominant. Since both of these two forms of play feature the representational sense, they are regarded as intellectual activities (Wood, 2013). The third type of play is the "games with rules", which first occurred at the age six or seven years old.

Piaget's perspectives on play regarding its association with cognitive development have been criticized because of their overemphasis on the cognitive function of play and overlooking the feelings that play provides to human development (Hendrick, 2015). However, Piaget's age-related stages of children's cognitive development have informed teachers' pedagogical position in children's play, which is relevant to this thesis. Especially Piaget's age and stage categorization of play (Piaget, 1955; Piaget, 1962) and the contemporary critiques of these theories, have contributed to a more critical stance to discuss the teachers' perspectives on their pedagogical decision-making in play in this study. In conclusion, more of Piaget's legacy will be shown through teachers' roles in play as well as their interpretations of their behaviours in the results and the discussion chapters.

## **2.2.2 Sociocultural-historical perspectives on play, children's learning and development**

This section introduces the sociocultural-historical theory as a theoretical framework for the literature and discusses empirical studies in the subsequent sections. Bodrova and Leong (2015) suggested that the interpretation of Vygotsky's perspectives on play should be placed within a broader theoretical context of Vygotsky's legacy in the field of child development, which will be discussed in the section below.

### **2.2.2.1 Children's development, mental function, mediation**

Fleer and Veresov (2018) assert that Vygotsky applies a dialectical approach to conceptualise the development of the human mind. Although Vygotsky agreed that development is a process that combines both biological and social-cultural aspects, he put more attention on the social-cultural aspects of the development process. Compared to Piaget who viewed the social world as one of the factors that influence the process of development, Vygotsky regarded the social environment as a source of development (Vygotsky, 1998). He proposed the concept of the social situation of development to describe child development (Vygotsky, 1998). According to Vygotsky (1998), the social situation of development represents:

[t]he initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur during the development within a given period, determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire new personality traits, drawing them from social reality as a basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual.  
(p.198)

Vygotsky's idea of the social situation of development is at the centre of his perspectives on child development. This perspective is also the theoretical foundation of many other theories and research that are addressed in sociocultural theoretical paradigms, for example, children's interests and working theories. Given that these theories and relevant research are in close relation to this study, Vygotsky's dialectical view on the development is crucial to understand this study. Moreover, Vygotsky's (1998) emphasis on the relation between social situation and development reminded me to pay attention to the social, cultural and contextual factors of the participants in this study.

Fleer and Veresov (2018) noted that the cultural-historical study of development is about mental development of the human mind. According to Vygotsky, the human mind is composed of lower and higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978). Lower mental functions are embedded in the human biological heritage since their birth and

commonly remain throughout human history (Bodrova, 1997). Higher mental functions are behaviours which are “sign-mediated, intentional, and internalized” (Bodrova and Leong, 2015, p.373). For young children, each higher mental function appeared twice in their development process. As Vygotsky (1997) stated:

Every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first, between people as an “inter” mental category, then within the child as “intra” mental category. This pertains equally to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of will. (p.106)

The transition from the inter-psychological plane to the intra-psychological plane is through assistance, collaboration and mediation (Asmolov, 1998). Hedges (2012) stated that the concept of mediation is a transition process as well as a tool to support this transition implicitly and explicitly. Explicit mediation refers to the human and cultural tools which limit and assist the human mind through ideas and activities. Implicit mediation is the communication which is conducted through social roles and inner speech to support learning (Wertsch, 2007). In the process of mediation to acquire and expand higher mental functions, mediators act as agents within the interaction between the children and the environment. Kozulin (2003) categorized mediators into two types, human mediators and symbolic mediators. It is important to notice that children did not spontaneously acquire symbolic mediators without guided experience, which emphasises the importance of the human factor in the process of mediation. Furthermore, Vygotsky suggested that higher mental functions “can be most fully developed in the form of drama.” (Vygotsky, 1929,1989, p.59). Thus, the dramatic condition between people is an important factor to stimulate inter-psychological forms of higher mental functions into intra-mental functions (Fleer and Veresov, 2018). Kozulin (2003) defined people who interact with children as “human mediators” on the interpersonal plane of higher mental function development. In educational settings, teachers play dominant roles as “human mediators” to recognize,

understand and support children's thinking and mental functions through various pedagogical strategies. In addition, dramatic conditions between people may also be created between teacher-children or children-children. More studies are needed to explore how the teacher creates dramatic condition and how children respond to this context. In this study, it is interesting to find that teachers constantly create conflicts between children and/or with themselves in order to develop children's problem-solving abilities. To conclude, the concept of mediation, especially human mediation, is important to inform teachers' pedagogy in educational settings. A more detailed discussion will be presented in the section about teachers' pedagogical practices and roles in children's play.

It is important to notice that higher mental function is not an isolated psychological function, but "a unit of a higher order determined basically by a unique combination of a series of more elementary functions in the new whole." (Vygotsky 1999, p. 43). Accordingly, the result of development is neither an isolated new higher mental function nor a new function that occurs at the end of the development (Fleer and Veresov, 2018). Rather, the result of the development is the "neoformation" (Vygotsky, 1998, p.189), a new type of construction of children's psychological functions through the qualitative change and reorganization of the whole system of functions (Vygotsky, 1998). In each age period, Vygotsky (1998) has characterized a central new formation (neoformation) to develop. Unlike Piaget who indicated that children's development was closely related to their age, Vygotsky (1998) argued that the trajectory of a child's development should not be framed about the child's chronological age because the age "cannot serve as a reliable criterion for establishing the actual level" (Vygotsky, 1998, p.199) of a child's development. In some of Vygotsky's writings, he used the term "age" to represent a psychological category and not only a temporal characteristic (Chaiklin, 2003). As such, Vygotsky proposed that child development in childhood was divided into periods. Each period is characterized by a psychological structure which reflects the child's relationship with the social and material world. (Chaiklin, 2003). As discussed above, the theory of Piaget's age-related development stages has a

profound influence on ECE from educational regulations to kindergarten practice. Teachers' pedagogical practices and roles have been constrained by age-related development goals and learning outcomes. From Vygotsky's perspective, in early childhood, one of the accomplishments of children is to restructure their lower mental functions to transform their cognitive processes into higher mental functions (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). Therefore, Vygotsky's perspective on child development has provided a different lens which reminds us to consider what we mostly want children to learn and develop in play in specific socio-cultural contexts. In addition, it is also important to rethink the roles of teachers in play in relation to the question above.

### **2.2.2.2 Play, ZPD and leading activity**

Vygotsky introduced the concept of "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) as part of his theory on child development (Chaiklin, 2003). Vygotsky identified two levels of child development. The current development level is determined by children's own problem-solving ability. Children's potential development level is determined through "problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The distance between these two levels is the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Bodrova and Leong (2007) interpreted the word "zone" used by Vygotsky suggesting that he viewed development as a continuous process. In the learning process, children move their cognitive function to a higher level to narrow the gap between the actual and potential levels of development. Accordingly, many scholars described the ZPD as a developmental mechanism (Cobb, Wood and Yackel, 1993; Eun, 2019) since it demonstrates children's development progress. In order to reach the potential development levels, Vygotsky proposed two paths for the children to solve the problems they met: being guided by adults or working "in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). That is, adults and knowledgeable peers play important roles in child development. Furthermore, in line with Piaget who values play in children's development process (Piaget, 1962), Vygotsky's idea of play has also been influential in understanding the importance of play in advancing children's

development. Vygotsky (1967) stated that “play is the source of development and creates a zone of proximal development” (p.16). Therefore, Vygotsky’s theories of ZPD have been widely accepted and advocated in early childhood education, especially in the field of pedagogical practices in children’s play.

However, the concept of ZPD has been misinterpreted and narrowly applied in educational contexts (Holzman, 2010; Hedges and Cullen, 2012). It is important to note that in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory, both adults and knowledgeable peers can assist children to reach their potential development level. Compared to adults, Rogoff (1998) suggests that peer interactions enabled children to learn with their peers in a more equal relationship. Therefore, the role of a child’s peer is an important one in children’s learning (Rogoff, 1998). Holzman (2010) argues that the contemporary understanding of assistance in the ZPD has placed the adults’ guidance in a much more dominant situation and neglected the roles of children’s collaboration with their capable peers. As a result, children’s development is dependent on teachers who observe and recognise their current development level, needs and interests in order to support them to move to a higher developmental level. As more knowledgeable members, teachers might put more emphasis on the learning and development goals in the curriculum through their responsive pedagogical interactions with children. Yet the reciprocal interaction between children and teachers may be influenced by power imbalance. Bodrova and Leong (2015) argue that a group of peers may become “more knowledgeable” to the individual in play if they act collectively, even though this group of peers may be on the same or similar knowledge levels as the individual. As such, children are able to create their own ZPD in play by interacting with others. Play has provided a platform for children to develop their social adaptation through activities that create their own potential (Wood, 2014a). So far, studies have shown that children are able to create their own ZPD to reach a higher level of developmental stage. For example, studies show that play can be a place for children to practice power and agency issues, which may not be consistent with the original purpose that educators want them to experience through play activities (Wood, 2014a; Chesworth, 2016).

Rogers (2011) argues that by experiencing power and control through play, children can develop friendships, which is beneficial to children's development. In addition, children are able to practice their agency to form play pedagogy in the process of demonstrating their autonomy to their peers. As Broadhead (2010) suggests, children are in charge of their own development in play. So, the continuity and progression in play should follow the development of children's interests. The literature that focuses on these ideas will be reviewed in the next section on children's interests, working theories and funds of knowledge.

Returning to the ZPD, another misinterpreted implication of this concept is in relation to the question of how play supports children's development. First, it is important to clarify what kind of play creates ZPD and how and under what conditions play creates ZPD to stimulate children's higher development level. Bodrova and Leong (2015) emphasised that the definition of play in Vygotsky's theory only refers to sociodramatic or make-believe play, which does not include many other playful activities that are called "play" by most educators and non-educators, such as game, object manipulations and physical activities. According to Vygotsky, make-believe play has three features: an imaginary situation that is created by the children, play roles which are taken on and acted out by the children and a set of rules that are determined by the roles in play (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). From Vygotsky's perspective, play is characterised by an imaginary situation which was created by the children and the rules embedded in this imaginary situation (Vygotsky, 1978). In make-believe play, the roles children played were mostly the roles of adults. In order to adjust their actions to imitate and engage in socially recognised behaviour of adult role models, children needed to practice planning, self-monitoring, reflection, self-regulation and other intentional behaviours (Elkonin, 2005a). As Vygotsky (1967) emphasized:

Action in the imaginative 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. The child

moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be considered a leading activity that determines the child's development. (p. 16)

Vygotsky used the term "leading activity" as a metaphor to highlight the importance of play in child development. This perspective has been widely used and greatly valued in early childhood educational settings. However, Vygotsky only proposed the concept of viewing play as a leading activity in his paper on play. His colleagues, Leontyev and Elkonin, built on Vygotsky's theory to frame and develop this concept (Bodrova and Leong, 2015; Fler and Veresov, 2018). Of particular relevance for children's development, Elkonin noted that play could only become the source of development and the leading activity when it is "fully developed" or "mature" play (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). At the mature play level, children at the mature play level are able to use role-specific language, define the sequence of play actions and be aware of the rules that fit the logic of real life (Elkonin, 2005b). Elkonin's (2005b) mature play theory is relevant to this thesis because the teachers from this study tended to draw upon the characteristics of different levels of play to underpin their decision on pedagogical positionings in play. More discussions on how Vygotsky's and post-Vygotsky's theories have influenced the teachers' play pedagogies in this study will be presented in the result and discussion chapters.

Furthermore, Chaiklin (2003) indicated that Vygotsky used the term "collaboration" to examine the ZPD. However, Chaiklin (2003) noted that there might have been a misinterpretation of the term "collaboration" in Vygotsky's theory. As Chaiklin (2003) explained:

The term collaboration should not be understood as a joint, coordinated effort to move forward, in which the more expert partner is always providing support at the moments when maturing functions are inadequate...The main focus for collaborative interventions is to find evidence for maturing psychological functions. (p.58).



Therefore, teachers can assess children's ZPD by interacting and cooperating with children (Chaiklin, 2003). This clarification is important to discuss teachers' role positionings in children's play. Studies show that it is prevalent for teachers to place themselves outside of the imaginary play situation to observe children's behaviour (Fleer, 2015; Devi et al., 2020). Chaiklin (2003) emphasises that assistance in ZPD is only meaningful when it is related to the maturing mental function rather than all the mental functions. It is questionable if teachers are able to identify children's maturing mental functions and current development level without being in a "collaboration" relationship with the children.

In summary, the relationship between play and ZPD has a significant implication for educators to understand teaching and learning in the context of play. The debates and clarifications discussed in this section underpin the theoretical understanding of children's play and the teachers' roles in this study. Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian theories have informed early childhood policies, curriculum and pedagogies in many countries (Hedges and Cullen, 2012; Wood, 2014a). Hence, the review will now move to discuss how play has been conceptualised in early childhood education.

## **2.3 Conceptualising play in early childhood education**

The theoretical interpretations of play have highlighted the values of play in children's learning and development. Consequently, play-based curriculum and pedagogies have been conceptualised in early childhood education in many countries. When play has become embedded in educational frameworks, it tends to link with "defined educational outcomes and effectiveness agendas" (Wood, 2010a) by policymakers. As I have discussed above, children are able to define and create their own ZPD which is suitable and situated in their age period. There might be gaps between children's intentions in ZPD and adults' goals in ZPD. As Wood (2014a) argues, "what is

'educational' from the child's perspective may not be recognized as such from the practitioner's perspective" (p.153). In the sociocultural-historical research paradigm, some scholars have explored pedagogies and theories to address the tensions in the play-pedagogy relationship in early childhood education (Fleer, 2010; Hedges and Cullen, 2012). Therefore, the sections below will discuss the literature which is of particular relevance to this study.

### **2.3.1. Children's interests, funds of knowledge and working theories in play**

Children's interests, funds of knowledge and working theories are three important concepts to inform play-based curriculum and pedagogy informed by sociocultural theory. In the international context, the concept of children's interests has been studied in both psychological and sociocultural research. Some psychologists explore the orientations of children's interests by inferring children's play behaviour in different play activities (Neitzel et al., 2008, 2016, 2019). From a psychological perspective, children's interests are associated with the choice of activities they want to participate in (Cremin and Slatter, 2004). Neitzel et al. (2019) suggested that these three factors, children, home environment and parents, influenced children's interests in a complicated way. Children's interests are not only influenced by their personality traits but are socialised and supported by their parents' values, practice and home environment. The relationship noted in the psychological study between children's daily life experience and children's interest orientations resonates with the perception that children's interests derive from their sociocultural experiences (Hedges et al., 2011), the sociocultural perspectives on the orientation of children's interest. However, Hedges and Cooper (2016) reminded us that "what is involved within children's interests that go beyond what is immediately observable in their choices of play" (p.306). Children's interests embed in their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005) and should be inquired through the lens of "real questions" (Wells, 1999, p.91). Funds of knowledge are a kind of knowledge that includes information, learning

strategies, practical skills, and ways of thinking that support household functioning, development and well-being (Moll et al., 1992). In addition, some cultural traits, including parents' language, values and beliefs, disciplinary methods and educational values, can also be identified as the funds of knowledge (Riojas-Cortez, 2001). In educational practice, the funds of knowledge can be used to inform the curriculum and pedagogical decisions based on children's choices and interests (Chesworth, 2016). However, due to the limitations of the curriculum framework, teachers have to put more emphasis on learning outcomes when interpreting children's play, which leads to little focus on understanding children's play in the contexts of daily experience and families (Chesworth, 2016). Studies show that funds of knowledge can provide an opportunity for teachers to interpret and engage in children's interests that are related to their daily life and sociocultural experience (Hedges et al., 2011; Chesworth, 2016; Hedges and Cooper, 2016). To conclude, funds of knowledge provide a theoretical and methodological framework to conceptualise children's interests.

In terms of the working theory, it is one of the learning outcomes of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (MOE, 2017). The concept of the working theory is proposed based on Claxton's (1990) notion of mini-theories and then interpreted and defined by many other scholars through multiple theoretical perspectives. Building on sociocultural perspectives, Hedges and Jones (2012) defined the working theories are

[p]resent from childhood to adulthood. They represent the tentative, evolving ideas and understandings formulated by children (and adults) as they participate in the life of their families, communities, and cultures and engage with others to think, ponder, wonder, and make sense of the world to participate more effectively within it. Working theories are the result of a cognitive inquiry, developed as children theorise about the world and their experiences. They are also the ongoing means of further cognitive development because children are able to use their existing (albeit limited) understandings to create a framework for making sense of new experiences and ideas. (p. 36)

Recent studies have explored multiple themes of children's working theories, for example, working theories about friendship (Hedges and Cooper, 2017), life, death, human nature and other existential matters (Hill, 2015). The main focus of this study is not to examine children's play within these three concepts in the Chinese context. To date, unlike the notion of learning stories which has been valued and applied in Chinese kindergarten practice (Li and Grieshaber, 2018), the concepts of working theory and funds of knowledge have not been introduced to the ECE in China. As to children's interests, little research has studied this concept from a sociocultural perspective. Yet these three concepts are closely associated with understanding children's learning and development in play from sociocultural perspectives. Vygotsky (1986) emphasised that children's learning of concepts should be linked with the everyday life experience and practices of children in their society or cultures. He proposed the concept of intersubjectivity to describe the "shared purpose and meaning among participants in teaching and learning experiences." (Hedges and Cullen, 2012, p.924). Given that play has been conceptualized as a pedagogy to deliver knowledge to children, the concept of intersubjectivity is important in relation to teachers' pedagogical practices in play. The discussion is presented below.

### **2.3.2. Intersubjectivity**

Intersubjectivity refers to a process to share meanings that are established between the participants of an activity (Göncü, 1993). Rogoff (1990) viewed intersubjectivity as "joint shared meaning" (p.67) which was created by two participants who had different perspectives on the same task at first but achieved joint understanding through communication. This resonates with Göncü's (1998) description that intersubjectivity is a dynamic and continuous process as it "changes from one point to another as a result of continuous knowledge exchange and negotiation between partners" (p.120). Accordingly, intersubjectivity plays an important role in children's learning and

development. In social dramatic play, intersubjectivity is regarded as the most essential requirement (Vygotsky, 1978; Göncü, 1993,1998). Garte (2015) found that pretend play fostered social intersubjectivity, which contributed to the development of children's social competence. Additionally, Cannella (1993) found that 5-6-year-old children engaging in collaborative problem-solving tasks created intersubjectivity, enabling them to complete tasks together that they could not successfully achieve alone. Similarly, Whittington and Floyd (2008) emphasised that socio-dramatic play provided maximises opportunities for creating intersubjectivity in children's peer interactions. However, it should not be assumed that intersubjectivity can be achieved in every interaction. Göncü (1993) proposed that the establishment of intersubjectivity in social pretend play required three connected elements. The first element required two or more participants to share "a joint focus of attention that is representational in nature and affective in origin." (Göncü, 1993, p. 188). Göncü (1993) noted that, in order to reach the shared focus in play, participants needed to perceive some similar prior experience. The notion of a shared focus will be revisited in relation to funds of knowledge in sections regarding how children's and teachers' different funds of knowledge have added to the difficulties and complexities in teachers' curriculum and pedagogy decision-making.

The second element was the meta-communication, i.e. the ability to step inside and outside the play frame flexibly to negotiate with play partners. The psychological concept of being inside and outside the imaginary play situation is crucial in understanding play from sociocultural perspectives (Bredikyte, 2010). Vygotsky (2004) noted that experience and imagination are mutually dependent. People's previous life experiences act as the material for them to construct their fantasies into their imagination. However, Vygotsky (2004) clarifies that children do not just reproduce their experience in play but construct "a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desires" (p.11-12). The idea of double experience at play resonates with the double-subjectivity of play and players that is proposed by Kratsova (2014). Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) stated that children are able to be inside and outside

the imaginary situation simultaneously, which distinguishes play from the activity. Children create their own imaginary situations in play and give meaning to the objects to share meanings with other people. Hence, intersubjectivity requires children to manage their double subjectivity in the imaginary play situation to act in the pretend role and be themselves at the same time. In this process, verbal language plays an important role to support children's communication with each other. Göncü (1998) emphasized that:

Children take for granted that their partners share their knowledge, leaving implicit some of their meaning. Doing so obliges children to make and test assumptions about what their partners mean, thus creating intersubjectivity. (p.121)

Accordingly, Göncü (1993) stated that the third element was the communication between the players. The dialogue between the players underpinned the intersubjectivity through the actions and language to co-construct the "playful representation of experience." (Göncü, 1993, p.194). Children make sense of the world through language (Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009). Especially for young children who are not capable of accessing written material, dialogue is considered to be an important cultural tool in teaching and learning (Hedges and Cullen, 2003). These three elements have been used to examine the intersubjectivity in children's imaginative play (Whittington and Floyd, 2008). To conclude, the three requirements of achieving intersubjectivity proposed by Göncü (1998) were applied to illustrate how children construct intersubjectivity with their peers. In essence, these three requirements are also suitable for discussing intersubjectivity between children and teachers. Yet not many studies have focused on teachers' roles in relation to fostering intersubjectivity in children's play. Lanphear and Vandermaas-Peeler (2017) found that teachers' guidance, for example, directing attention and articulating goals played important roles in fostering intersubjectivity in children's participation in inquiry. The values of language have been highlighted in the process of creating intersubjectivity in

children's play experience. Hence, the section below will review the literature in this field.

### 2.3.3. Sustained shared thinking

The notion of sustained shared thinking (SST) first originated as an analytic node from the project "Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)" (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) in England to identify the effective interaction between teacher and children. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) define the "sustained shared thinking" (SST) as follows:

[a]n episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding. (p.8)

Usually, the dialogue is initiated by the child but then sustained through teachers' interaction by challenging the children to think deeper (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The concept of sustained shared thinking has been developed and extended as the study continues. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) categorized two types of SST: the "Child initiated SST" and "Adult initiated SST". Furthermore, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) suggested that sustained shared thinking can also be achieved between children and their peers rather than merely with adults. This longitudinal research found that high quality educational practice was associated with sustained teacher-child interaction. Engaging in sustained shared thinking was found to enable children to learn more effectively and achieve higher cognitive (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) and linguistic outcomes (Sylva et al, 2007).

Researchers have proposed many strategies to build sustained shared thinking between teachers and children. Siraj-Blatchford (2005) lists strategies to support children's SST including tuning in, showing real interest, re-capping, clarifying, suggesting and speculating. One of the most significant strategies to support children's SST is to listen effectively to children's voices by showing an interest in the child-initiated conversation and extending it skilfully (Siraj-Blatchford, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford and Smith, 2010). In addition, many of these strategies are closely linked to language. Wells (1999) suggested that language was the most useful tool because it not only functioned as a communication tool, but also mediated the perceptions between people and created shared understandings. Siraj- Blatchford and Sylva (2004) stated that one of the premises of conducting sustained shared thinking is that both teacher and children should get involved to co-construct the learning process in their interaction. Furthermore, Siraj- Blatchford and Sylva (2004) emphasized that the other premise of building sustained shared thinking is the content should be "instructive" (p.720). I argue that it is worthy of discussing what kind of content is "instructive". Fleer (2010) suggests that it is important to consider the outcomes and contents of conducting shared sustained thinking in play-based teaching and learning program. As Fleer (2010) questioned: "sustained shared thinking about what?" (p.6). As an essential requirement of creating intersubjectivity, the joint focus of attention between teachers and children in play should be emphasized. Teachers need to understand children's goals, intentions and interests in play in order to build intersubjectivity with the children. In the section below, a pedagogical model for creating intersubjectivity in play-based learning will be introduced.

#### **2.3.4 The pedagogy of creating intersubjectivity in play-based learning**

Concept learning is the foundation of early childhood education because it is closely related to "the kind of knowledge that is valued within a community" (Fleer, 2010, p.52) in preschool education. Learning contexts became powerful and effective when



teachers consider the “everyday context” and the “concepts” together in the preparation for children’s learning (Hedegaard and Chaiklin, 2005). Therefore, both children’s daily and prior experiences and the scientific concepts from their teaching goals should be considered. Hedegaard and Chaiklin (2005) proposed the concept of the “double move”, which conceptualized the child’s everyday concepts and the scientific concepts in teaching together. By adopting this concept, teachers are able to engage children in learning activities in which the subject knowledge is situated within meaningful contexts that closely connect to children’s lives in the real world (Hedegaard and Chaiklin, 2005). Based on this model, Fler (2010) proposed a pedagogical model for concept formation within play-based settings. In this model, Fler (2010) proposed that children were able to learn the concepts through play effectively when conceptual and contextual intersubjectivity have been achieved between children and the teacher. Under this circumstance, teachers were able to place themselves inside and outside the imaginary play situation to act as a mediator to develop children’s concept formation through sustained shared thinking with children. Similarly, Whittington and Floyd (2009) suggest that teachers could make useful comments from outside the play frame or step inside the imaginary situation to act as a player, modelling actions that progress the play, solving problems between children, providing helpful information, collaborating and challenging children’s thinking that requires communication and negotiation. However, little research has focused on the flexibility of how teachers place their roles inside and outside of children’s imaginary play situations, especially the reasons and their perspectives for making these changes. Furthermore, few studies have been undertaken in relation to children’s perspectives about their understanding of the shifts that teachers make when they are mediating their roles inside and outside the imaginary situation that children created by themselves. These two questions are closely related to examining intersubjectivity between teachers and children. To conclude, the literature reviewed in this section highlights some complex and sometimes contested perspectives regarding the role of teachers in children’s play. Consequently, these key issues will be discussed in sections regarding teachers’ roles in children’s play.

## **2.4 Teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in children's play**

It is prevalent to present and identify teachers' play-based pedagogy according to their different degrees of engagement in children's play. During free play time, Fleer (2015) identifies a teacher's different pedagogical positions according to the degree of his/her engagement in children's imaginary play, including the teacher being outside of the children's play, the teacher being in proximity to children's play, the teacher's intent being parallel with children's intent, the teacher following the children's play, the teacher being engaged in sustained collective play and the teacher being inside the children's imaginary play. In a study conducted in Northern Ireland, Walsh et al. (2019) observed teachers' play-based pedagogy practice in primary classrooms for children aged 4-6 years old, and identified three types of pedagogies from teachers' play-based practice: non-participatory, over-participatory and appropriately participatory. Based on these categories of teachers' roles, the section below will review the literature of teachers' roles from two lens: teachers' roles inside children's play frame, and outside children's play frame.

### **2.4.1 Roles that are placed outside the children's play**

For most of the time, teachers position their pedagogical practice outside the children's play as an observer who has little interaction with children in the context of play (Fleer, 2015; Devi et al., 2018; Birbili, 2019; Walsh et al., 2019). Some researchers use the term "onlooker" to describe teachers' role when teachers assume they are the observer but have involved in children's play at a low level, for example, by commenting or engaging in verbal interaction with children briefly (Johnson et al., 2005; Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot, 2011; Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). Teachers do not take part in children's

play in order to better observe, monitor, assess children's learning, and provide children with material support in their play (Fleer, 2015). Meade and Cubey (2000) found that in the New Zealand educational context, even though teachers have recognized and understood children's interests, they tend to play the role of the observer to foster children's working theories by providing various material and equipment rather than interact with children to advance their thinking. This resonates with Birbili's (2019) findings that teachers tended to place themselves outside the children's play to "eavesdrop" (Birbili, 2019, p.8) on children's conversation rather than interact with children to get to know more about their interests. In general, teachers act as observers for two reasons. First, teachers may be cautious about their behaviour in order not to interrupt children's play when they did not need teachers' help (Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). Second, from teachers' perspectives, teachers are more likely to place themselves outside of children's play in order to deliver high academic outcomes through play (Fleer, 2015; Devi et al., 2018). Devi et al. (2018) found that teachers rarely participate in children's play, because most of them believed that by playing the roles of observers, inquirers, narrators and materials suppliers in the imaginative play, they were involved in the context of play to support children's play. In addition, Walsh et al. (2019) found that teachers' perspectives on children's development would influence their pedagogical decision-making in play. Teachers who held the viewpoint that children's learning and development naturally occurred as they matured tended to regard their participation as interference in children's play. They adopted a non-participatory approach because they believed any involvement in play could not support children's development unless the children had shown visible signs of 'being ready' to move to the next developmental stage. However, by examining the quality of children's learning experience, Walsh et al. (2019) found that the overall scores of children's higher-order thinking skills on the QLI (Walsh and Gardner, 2005) tended to be low. Furthermore, Walsh et al.'s (2019) findings showed that in some play scenarios, children's learning experience in play was less challenging without teachers' participation, which might reflect Piaget's view that play is pure assimilation.

## 2.4.2 Roles that are placed inside the children's play

On the contrary, studies based on cultural-historical theories have proved that teachers' involvement in imaginative play can improve the quality of play and the outcomes of children's learning and development. When teachers play a role in children's play, they add more details to the play stories, extend the play plot, help children solve conflicts within the play and support children to learn specific goals and skills concerning the play episodes (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Fleer, 2015). Studies found that in sociodramatic play, when teachers played the role of the co-player or the play leader, children showed more social interaction with their peers, which facilitated children's play into a higher social level (Hakkarainen, 2010; Vu et al., 2015; Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). In addition, teachers' active roles in children's play also facilitate children's development in the aspects of greater cognitive complexity (Vu et al., 2015). Fleer and Peers (2012) suggested the teacher play an active role in children's play to develop children's cognition and abstract concepts within the imaginary situation through two pedagogical practices: building an imaginary play situation with the children and acting as an interested observer in children's play. In addition, teachers can act as facilitators, analysts and mediators of children's cognitive development in play (Fleer and Peers, 2012). It is worth questioning how teachers can develop the quality of play if they do not take an active role in children's play (Devi et al., 2018). However, even when teachers get involved in children's play, they do not act as the play partner who supports the development of children's complexity. Instead, teachers are more likely to focus on adding content knowledge in the process of participation in children's play to value and examine the learning outcomes in imaginary play situations (Fleer, 2015). So far, many scholars have noted this trend that the educational values of play are privileged due to the government's high support for intentional teaching and play-based learning in early childhood education (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2014; Hedges, 2014; Wood, 2014; Fleer, 2015). Although the Australian government also states the importance of balancing free play and intentional play in the curriculum,

there is no more detailed explanation of how or when to involve in children's play to achieve such balance (Fleer, 2015). Even though children's interests, funds of knowledge and working theories have been valued in play-based programmes, the pedagogical issues still remain.

### **2.4.3 Teachers' pedagogical issues in play-based settings**

One of the main issues is that teachers lack knowledge about these concepts. For example, Peters and Davis (2011) found that teachers have difficulties in identifying children's working theories. This may be because even in New Zealand, working theories have not been fully developed and teachers lack understanding of this concept. Likewise, Birbili (2019) found that teachers do not have a foundation of professional knowledge on children's learning from sociocultural perspectives, which is the essential reason for teachers' misunderstandings or one-side conceptualisation of children's interests. In Birbili's (2019) research, teachers viewed children's interests as a static concept. Teachers noticed and identified children's instant interests in a static moment during children's activity, rather than understanding it with children's social life experience. This might be because teachers lack knowledge of children's interests and are not familiar with the popular culture that children are interested in. In addition, Birbili (2019) found that children's emotional expressions in the activity are the most significant indicator for teachers to identify if children are interested in the activity or not. From teachers' perspectives, children are interested in activities that can bring pleasure, excitement and motivation to them. Katz (1995) argued that the excitement that is presented in the activity may not be children's interests but the "fleeting interest" (p.90). Hence, a lack of knowledge may constrain teachers' roles to value children's interests and working theories in play. Similarly, in terms of conducting SST with children, Purdon's (2016) findings show that most practitioners believed they did not have enough knowledge about the concept of shared sustained thinking, which also led to their poor cooperation with other practitioners when they were trying to conduct

the SST with children. Practitioners' lack of knowledge of sustained shared thinking also reflects on their misunderstanding of this concept. For example, some of the practitioners in Purdon's (2016) study believed that sustained shared thinking can only be initiated by children rather than led by adults. Therefore, practitioners held the opinion that they should "wait" for children to initiate the interaction so that they could build sustained shared thinking with the children.

In addition, teachers may experience dilemmas about making decisions regarding the timing and methods of responding to children's interests and working theories. When teachers intended to foster children's working theories, they worried that their active intervention would disrupt children's existing theories when children are experiencing disequilibrium in play (Peters and Davis, 2011). Lovatt and Hedges (2015) suggested capturing the timing when children were in a state of cognitive disequilibrium. Therefore, Lovatt and Hedges (2015) identified six strategies that contributed to effectively invoking disequilibrium in children's working theories: facilitation, summarizing, questioning, presenting new information, modelling the inquiry and information-seeking approaches, and using resources. Teachers used these strategies in multiple combinations to create cognitive conflict, invoke the state of disequilibrium, sustain the dialogue with and between children, and foster children's working theories. However, Robson (2006) argued that children may lower their self-esteem if their thinking is always being challenged. These studies indicated that teachers were uncertain about the influence that they brought on children, which set them in the dilemma of making decisions about the timing and methods of intervention. Therefore, children's responses and perspectives should be explored. Gaviria-Loaiza et al. (2017) examined children's responses to the roles of teachers in play, including the role of the onlooker, stage manager, co-player, play leader, director and redirector. They identified three types of children's responses which were elicited by teachers' behaviours when the teachers were playing the roles listed above. The first type of response was to reject or ignore teachers' behaviour or suggestions through verbal and/or nonverbal expressions. Gaviria-Loaiza et al. (2017) found that children tended to reject or ignore

teachers when teachers were playing the role of the onlooker who was asking questions or making comments about children's behaviour while they were observing children's play. Furthermore, children looked angry and frustrated when they reject teachers' involvement, which might be because of teachers' insistence on keeping asking questions or commenting until children replied to them. When the children were more receptive to the teachers' involvement, their responses were evaluated behaviours, including the behaviours of resisting and questioning teachers' suggestions. The last type of children's response was the acceptance behaviour, in which children showed a high level of acceptance of teachers' behaviours in their play. Children may actively respond, incorporate and build on teachers' input or behaviours frequently when teachers played the roles of the co-player and play leader. So far, few studies focus on children's responses to teachers' behaviours within the roles that they adopt to support children's play.

Furthermore, the roles of teachers in play have been constrained by the pressure from educational outcomes. Peters and Davis (2011) found that while teachers intend to achieve intersubjectivity in the process of fostering children's working theories, teachers either take insufficient time to get to know children's meanings or selectively choose one aspect of the interests. On the surface, both the teacher and children engaged in the conversation. But the teacher tended to examine children's knowledge rather than sharing his/her own understanding with children due to the imbalanced power relationship between the teacher and children (Peters and Davis, 2011). As a result, they do not fit with children's subjectivity to build a shared understanding with the children. They hijack the activity or control the direction of the conversation with children. Similarly, in play-based curriculum, Birbili (2019) found that when teachers tried to build an interests-based curriculum and pedagogy, they only privileged the interests that are in close relationship to the curriculum goals in their curriculum design and pedagogical practice. Teachers tended to respond to children's interests when they considered the knowledge related to children's interests as worthwhile and necessary for children's learning in kindergarten. It is evident that teachers' knowledge

will legitimately influence their professional practice in educational settings (Pring, 2004). Anning (1998) suggested that certain play interests are privileged over others due to teachers' backgrounds and subconscious biases, which suppress children's interests situated from their unique and diverse funds of knowledge. A study showed that teachers paid attention to and responded to children's interests and inquiries when they shared the same interests with children or/and had the relevant knowledge to support children (Hedges, 2012). However, in reality, teachers are facing difficulty to bridge their own funds of knowledge with children's funds of knowledge due to children's diverse family backgrounds. It is challenging for the teacher to interpret a group of children's interests through the funds of knowledge that different children bring from their families and communities. Therefore, questions remain about whose interests are to be chosen by the teachers in play.

Hedges (2012) found that teachers' decision-making in the curriculum and pedagogical practice was influenced by their funds of knowledge and their professional knowledge. These two kinds of knowledge are infused together to inform teachers' teaching. Hedges (2012) conceptualized teachers' personal and informal knowledge in the funds of knowledge framework and categorized the funds of knowledge into three contexts: family-based, centre-based and community-based. The conceptualization of teachers' funds of knowledge provides a structure to present and understand teachers' opinions when they explain their pedagogical practice in children's play. Because the findings in this study showed that in some contexts of play, teachers placed their in-the-moment pedagogical position intuitively under the influence of their funds of knowledge.

The literature reviewed above has been framed within the international contexts that excluded China, the nation to conduct this study. Thus, the section below presents the literature in the Chinese context.



## **2.5 Play in early childhood education in the Chinese context: culture, policies, practices and challenges**

In this section, I first present and analyse the literature and documents on play through the lens of Chinese culture, relevant history and educational policies. Then I place the discourse of play within the educational field to review the implementation and challenges of play in kindergarten practice. Next, I discuss studies on teacher involvement and pedagogical practice in play. In the end, the discussion on teachers' roles is addressed from the perspectives of the policymakers, researchers and teachers themselves.

### **2.5.1 Play, learning and children's development in Chinese sociocultural-historical contexts**

Addressed in the sociocultural-historical paradigm, this study places the review and discussion through the lens of Chinese culture, history and policy. As a core value of Chinese culture, Confucianism has profoundly influenced Chinese perspectives on children, children's education and development. Advocated by Confucianism, in the Chinese culture, the child is viewed as a "little adult" whose childhood is a preparation for their future life, aiming to pursue educational success in their adulthood (Bai, 2005; Huang and Qing, 2006). Children are expected to excel in education in order to achieve self-fulfilment and gain the qualification to serve the public. Meanwhile, children are also expected to bring fame and wealth to themselves as well as to their families (Wang, 2007). To achieve these goals, Confucianism indicated that children should practice and study hard through memorisation, a critical and effective learning approach in the early years of education to help children learn a great number of inherited knowledge (Wang and Mao, 1996). Confucianism also points out that play will distract children's focus on learning since it is pure entertainment. The Confucian perspective on play

has deeply influenced children's education. For example, in the book "San Tzu Ching: Elementary Chinese" (三字经), a classic and well-known enlightenment textbook, it is stated that "diligence has its reward and play has no advantages" ("勤有功，戏无益") (Giles, 1900, p.12). This book is so popular that even now, almost every Chinese family and early educational setting will be familiar with this perspective.

In addition, the conceptualisation of play in Chinese culture can also be explored from a linguistic perspective through Chinese characters, since the language is the component as well as the medium to express and deliver culture (Guan, 2011). Qiu (2008) summarised that the Chinese characters "wan" (玩), "you" (游), "xi" (嬉) and "ao" (遨) are the main words to represent the word "play". The original meaning of these words is related to actions or sports, which are characterised by relaxation and comfort (Huang and Qing, 2006). The extended meaning of these words also suggested the unserious and half-heartedness of play from the interpretation of "play" in these Chinese characters (Qiu, 2008). Therefore, play is a kind of activity or sport which provides people with entertainment in their rest and leisure time (Qiu, 2008). The active characteristics of play also explained why play is not encouraged in children's learning and development in ancient times, because children are expected to be calm, quiet and unhurried if they want to be ideal children according to the Chinese culture (Bai, 2005).

In summary, in Chinese culture it is dominant to view play as a negative activity or behaviour to pass time and hinder children's success in academic studies. Chinese parents believe that children will lose their ambitions if they indulge themselves in play (Huang and Qing, 2006). Ancient Chinese people recognised the educational value of play in the aspects of cultivating children's moral education, training children's physical capability and fostering children's competitive consciousness and intelligence (Huang and Qing, 2006). However, due to the strong and powerful influence of Confucianism, play has not been accepted in formal educational settings.

The status of play in the educational system has not been improved until the late Qing dynasty, the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history. Due to intense national conflicts and class contradictions, the government of the Qing dynasty initiated a revolution in order to continue to rule the country. In the educational field, the Qing government set up the first Chinese professional preschool organisation, “Meng Yang Yuan” (蒙养院) and enacted the first Chinese preschool educational regulation in 1904 (Qiu and He, 2015), i.e. the “Regulation of the meng yang yuan and the family educational law”. This regulation stated that play was one of the teaching contents in “Meng Yang Yuan” and was presented in the form of physical activity (Yang and Qiu, 2019). Since then, play started to occupy a position in the Chinese early childhood educational system from regulation to kindergarten practice. The forms and types of play have been through several changes under the influence of the social cultural historical evolution in China. For example, after the 1920s, play is not only a purely physical activity but a “complex activity” which includes several types of activities that can develop children’s physical, social, language and other abilities (Wang, 2004). This transformation is influenced by the sociocultural context during that period, when the “child-centred” perspective and the pragmatic theory of education were introduced to China by a great number of returned Chinese scholars who studied in Western countries as well as some Euromerican educators (for example, John Dewey and Russell) who were invited to China for academic visits (Yang and Qiu, 2019). Therefore, many Chinese scholars and educators changed their perspectives on play and the relationship between play, learning and children’s development under the influence of educational theories in Euromerican countries. In this sociocultural context, the “Kindergarten curriculum standard” (幼稚园课程标准) (1936) i.e., the first curriculum standard in the modern history of preschool education, outlines that the kindergarten curriculum is organised according to the children’s daily life activities, which includes activities like music, storytelling and nursery rhyme, play, social and common sense, handwork, quiet rest and having meals (Wang, 2004). As a result, play became one of the curriculum components in kindergarten practice. Furthermore, Zhao (2000) regarded children’s initial activities as the kindergarten curriculum. Therefore, as a component of the

curriculum, play was also regarded as a spontaneous activity that was initiated by the children.

It is beyond the scope of this study to review the whole evolution process of play in the educational regulation and kindergarten curriculum. The purpose of the brief review above is to explain that the development process of play in Chinese culture and history has influenced teachers' perspectives on play in current kindergarten practice. This is relevant to my study, in which teachers showed how their pedagogical positions on children's play are influenced by the intertwined play culture between China and the Western world. Further discussion will be presented in the results chapter.

Ever since the curriculum reform in the 1980s under the influence of Western curriculum models, the idea of "play-based teaching and learning", one of the three main objects of this reform (Li, et al, 2011), has been emphasised in several key government documents and educational policies. As the most influential policy formulated in accordance with the Education Law, the Kindergarten Work Regulations, officially published in 1996 and revised in 2016, states that "the kindergarten education should take play as a foundational activity and should be implemented through various activities" (MOE, 2016: article twenty-five). Furthermore, Article 29 in the same document especially states that "[t]he kindergarten should regard play as an important form to support children's comprehensive development." (MOE, 2016, p.5). In recent years, policymakers have directly pointed out that "children's learning is based on first-hand experience through play and daily activities" (MOE, 2012a, p.2) in the Early Learning and Development Guideline Aged 3-6. Therefore, play is not only a basic activity in kindergarten. The Chinese government has also constructed play in the pedagogical interface to support of children's learning and development in kindergarten education.

In conclusion, play has been valued by the Chinese government at the policy level. However, it is important to realise that the implementation of these educational

regulations is varied due to the huge regional development imbalance across China. Preschool education administration in China adopts a system of level-to-level management. The interpretation and implementation of the regulations are managed by local educational authorities and relevant departments (Pang and Fang, 2012). Thus, some problems and challenges of conceptualising play as a foundational activity will be discussed in the section below.

### **2.5.2 “Play as a foundational kindergarten activity”: problems and challenges**

As presented above, the Chinese government views play as a basic activity as well as a kind of pedagogy in kindergartens, which is consistent with the trend and values in the policies of certain Western countries. For example, both the Guideline (MOE, 2012a) in China and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012) in England have adopted an instrumental view on play in terms of implementing learning and development areas. However, the concept of play in the EYFS is clearly referred to as “planned, purposeful play” (DfE, 2017, p.9), while the term “play” used in the Guidance (MOE, 2012a) is a vague summary. There are no more detailed instructions to clarify the types of play that the policy refers to. This means play can be interpreted and applied as planned and purposeful play, free play or both types. Yang and Qiu (2019) suggest that it is crucial to clarify the definition of play and categorise the types of play in educational laws and regulations. However, play is complex and the types of play have been categorised by many educators from various angles. Hua (2015) stated that in Chinese kindergarten practice, play is categorised into two types according to its educational functions: rule play and creative play. The second type of play refers to child-initiated play that enables the children to create freely based on their own interests, needs and motivations, including role-play, constructive play and dramatic play (Hua, 2015). I would argue that the research on the types of play has been developed to a certain degree theoretically and experimentally. Both educators and practitioners are familiar with the different types of play in early childhood educational

settings. However, I suggest it is necessary to examine the nature of kindergarten play in the Chinese context. Liu (2015) stated that “kindergarten play activity is both nature and educational” (p.368).

While play is regarded as a basic activity, teachers might subconsciously constrain it to be the only choice and/or the best way for children’s learning and development. It can be seen from most of the Chinese educational documents that play is formulated as a “play activity”, which may work in line with the regulation that “play is the foundational activity in kindergarten” (MOE, 2012a). Qiu and Gao (2022) claimed that teachers’ misunderstanding of these two concepts caused the dilemma of implementing “play as the foundational activity” (MOE, 2012a) in kindergarten practice. On the one hand, teachers paid great attention to put this regulation into practice. On the other hand, they were sceptical about the idea that children learn through play. In the section reviewing teachers’ roles in play in educational documents, more discussion will be provided on how the notion of “play activity” may confuse teachers when they play their roles in the context of play in kindergarten education practice.

In addition, after twenty years of practice, the word “teaching” has almost been replaced by the word “play” in kindergarten education practice due to the top-down implementation of the play-based curriculum (Xie, 2006). However, the tension between play and teaching still exists in kindergarten education. On the surface, educational play is dominant in practice. But Men (2016) points out that many so-called “play activities” are actually the cover of teaching activity. This sort of play is used as a means to attract children’s attention to adult-teaching activities or as a reward to children when they finish the learning tasks in those teaching activities (Zhao and Wang, 2015). Li (2010) criticised that this kind of “play” activity not only alienates to the intrinsic nature of play, but also makes it difficult to teach children knowledge effectively. There are several causes for this: pressure from the parents (Xiang and Lin, 2007), curriculum plans and quality assessments are all reasons why teachers focus more on teaching, in order to achieve educational outcomes (Zhao and Wang, 2015). As Huang

(2003) argues, paying too much attention to children's development goals will weaken or even eliminate the enjoyment function of play, which will lead to alienation of play and turning play into teaching. In addition, in certain traditional Chinese cultures, as discussed in the first section, children's play is regarded as naughty behaviour and has negative values on their development. As a result, some teachers and parents are still questioning the value of play in children's learning and development (Qiu and He, 2015). Thus, for a long time, teachers have been struggling to deal with the relationship between play and teaching (Wei, 2008). Liu and Feng (2005) claim that teachers do not have first-hand teaching experience in Western educational settings, where ideas from the kindergarten educational reform originate from. Since almost all the teachers trained and worked in China, they have to apply their past professional knowledge to understand and practice new ideas (Liu and Feng, 2005). As such, practitioners face the challenge of localising Western educational cultures and theories in Chinese kindergarten practice. Hence, it is common to find gaps between teachers' practice and the ideas which are proposed in the curriculum reform.

While reflecting on the relationship between play and teaching, Li (2010) finds that while the current kindergarten practice has transformed from knowledge-based collective teaching to child-initiated play activities, on the contrary, curriculum policies in Western countries started to emphasise literacy and numeracy teaching in early years. Li (2010) indicated that children's early reading and writing education might be overly ignored because of the emphasis on implementing play as a basic activity. I argue that this concern might be caused by the unclear identification of how play leads to children's development as well as the idea that play is supposed to deliver the learning and developmental goals listed in the national curriculum. To date, teaching and learning knowledge in relation to literacy and numeracy is still very complicated and sensitive in early childhood education settings. In the result chapter, this issue will be revisited to discuss the teachers' perspectives on learning numeracy knowledge through role play activities in this study.

To date, the statement of “play as the foundational activity in kindergarten” (MOE, 2016) has become more thorough and in-depth, which has brought about more challenges to kindergarten practice. Li (2019) proposes three conditions to fully identify if the kindergarten has adopted play as a basic activity: if the kindergarten has built the belief and culture to respect children’s play; if the kindergarten has met children’s needs for play, especially the needs for free and initiated play; if the kindergarten has permeated the play spirit into all the educational links. Accordingly, play is implemented from a broader understanding of the kindergarten practice. Not only the play-based curriculum and pedagogy, but also the spirit and culture of play have been emphasised. To meet these requirements, “Anji play” has become a significant practice and has received great recognition in China in recent years. So far, not all Chinese kindergartens have adopted the Anji approach. However, teachers from other areas of China, whose beliefs and pedagogical practices have also been influenced by the principles and values of Anji Play due to the strong popularisation by local and national education departments. As was shown in this study, teachers’ behaviours and explanations reflected their interpretations of the principles and pedagogies that they learned from Anji Play. Therefore, Anji Play carries important implications for considering teachers’ role in play within Chinese contexts for ECE.

### **2.5.3 Anji play as a significant Chinese kindergarten practice**

Anji is a rural area in eastern Zhejiang Province, mainland China. The notion of “Anji Play” not only refers to the play activities in Anji kindergartens, but also represents a play-based curriculum model. In Anji, children have more than one hour of free play every day, which allows them to explore play materials, control the play rules and construct the context of play as much as they can (Cheng, 2019b).

To date, the current Anji Play approach/curriculum is the result of nearly twenty years of curriculum reform which is conducted by Ms. Cheng, the director of preschool



education for the Department of Education in Anji County. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cheng (2019a) found that most kindergartens in Anji remained in a “no play” condition, even though the idea of “play-based teaching and learning” has been implemented throughout the whole country due to the curriculum reform in the 1980s. The teachers prepared rich play materials in the kindergarten classrooms, yet the children did not actually use them due to the teachers’ inherent perceptions that play equates to a waste of children’s learning time. Influenced by the enactment of the Guideline for Kindergarten Educational (Trial) (2001), Ms. Cheng started the kindergarten reform with a group of core leaders to implement the instruction of adopting play as the basic activity (MOE, 2001). However, Cheng (2019a) explained that children were actually playing “false play” during this period of time. Children were constrained within a fixed environment to follow the play rules and methods which were designed by the teachers. They were expected to learn certain educational goals through teacher-designed play (Coffino and Bailey, 2019). As a result, children’s initiative and interest were greatly restricted, which cannot be identified as ‘children’s play’ or ‘true play’ from Ms. Cheng’s perspective. As for the teachers, they became exhausted during the process of organizing play activities, especially preparing a large number of play materials. Cheng (2019a) herself criticised the formalism and utilitarianism that appeared in kindergarten which deviated from her original intention to give play back to the children. Neither children nor teachers experienced the joy of play in kindergarten. Going through the phases of “no play” and ‘false play’ in the kindergarten practice, from 2007 to date, Cheng proposed the concept of ‘true play’ as a third curriculum reform in Anji County. “True play” is initiated by children’s interests and needs, which is also directed and organised by the children themselves (Coffino and Bailey, 2019). Cheng (2019b) defined “true play” (p.19) as real freedom which supports children’s-initiated learning aspiration and their own learning pace. In other words, “true play” is “true learning” (Cheng, 2019b, p.27). This view suggests that play is not only a medium for children’s learning. Instead, play itself is learning. To learn to understand and respect children’s ‘true play’ behaviour, teachers in Anji have also changed their roles in children’s play accordingly, which will be presented and discussed below.

### **2.5.3.1 Teachers' roles in Anji Play**

One of the significant changes in Anji's curriculum reform is to reconsider the teacher-child relationship as well as to redefine the roles of teachers in play (Cheng, 2019b). As illustrated above, children are active learners who learn in the process of free play. In order to create space for children's initiative learning, teachers in Anji follow the principles to have a free hand maximumly as well as to get involved in children's play minimally. This principle indicates the degrees of teachers' involvement in children's play. Yet it does not suggest the timing for the teacher to start interacting with the children in play. More discussion about this principle will be presented in the later section together with the review of teachers' involvement in children's play.

In line with this principle, Cheng (2019b) uses a metaphor to define the role of teachers in play: "children are at the front and teachers are in the back" (p.30). This metaphor has been widely used in current Chinese kindergartens to guide teachers' pedagogical practice. It was also quoted many times by the teachers in this study to explain their roles in play. In addition, this principle suggests that children play a dominant role in play activities and in the process of constructing the curriculum. As for the teachers, according to Ms. Cheng, teachers in Anji mainly do three types of work during their daily teaching to obtain information about children's learning and development for their later support in children's development. The first task is to observe and discover children's findings. The second task is to listen to and take notes on children's records. The last one is to have conversations with children, including individual and collective dialogues (Cheng, 2019b). Studies show that the observer is the most dominant role that teachers play in Anji kindergartens. Wang et al. (2018) define teachers as professional observers and appreciators of children's play. By visiting Anji play, Chang (2018) observed that teachers in Anji kindergartens seldom talk. During the process of the play activity, they merely took photos and cameras to record children's play quietly. It can be seen that the teachers are no longer in control of curriculum building. Instead,

they follow children's needs and interests to let the curriculum emerge. Cheng (2019b) concludes that:

The definition of teachers' roles in the Anji kindergarten curriculum has transformed the teacher from knowledge deliverer and curriculum content designer to discoverer of children, defender of children's learning opportunities, and co-constructor of the curriculum. (p.31)

Dai and Qiu (2016) argue that to achieve this transformation, teachers are required to have very high professional attainments in order to interpret children's play behaviour properly. However, in reality, few teachers are able to reach this professional standard. The concern that Dai and Qiu (2016) proposed resonated with some of the teachers' perspectives in my study when they are trying to implement the mode of Anji play in their own practice. The difficulties and uncertainties that they met will be presented in the result and discussion chapter.

However, while Anji play has been appreciated and spread in early childhood education, some scholars have started to reflect on the issues and localizations in practising the Anji model, for example, the safety issues in outdoor play (Dai and Qiu, 2016). It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the issues of Anji's play. Yet I believe it is necessary to hold a more cautious stance to view and learn from Anji Play. So far, most of the literature that introduced Anji Play is presented by practitioners from inside the Anji educational system. This literature has provided valuable first-hand experience and instructions on Anji Play. Few scholars have conducted empirical studies about Anji's Play. There are some recent empirical studies that focus on presenting the daily routines in Anji kindergartens (Li, 2019), discussing the emerged curriculum contents (Zhou, 2017; Liu, 2019) and introducing teachers' professional development (Yu, 2017). More empirical studies about Anji Play are needed in order to provide more solid evidence to examine and evaluate the mode of the Anji curriculum from outsiders' perspectives. In 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Education

enacted the main working points at national level. In point 23, it is stated that early child education should “implement the popularisation plan of ‘Anji Play’, advance children’s care and education scientifically” (MOE, 2021). It can be assumed that Anji Play will have a more profound influence and implications on teachers’ beliefs, pedagogies and curriculum design in kindergarten practice. Although the Anji approach is inspiring, it is not sufficient to learn from Anji by adopting surface-level practices, or acquiring “Anji’ resources” (for example, using the “Anji ladder” in outdoor play), because this approach is grounded in principles and beliefs about children, families and communities, and the unique path of curriculum reform and kindergarten teachers’ professional training. Therefore, kindergarten practitioners need to question the extent to which the Anji approach can be generalised or melded in their own kindergarten practice. It is worth noticing that the success of the Anji curriculum reform is supported by the teachers’ professional training program (Cheng, 2019a). This suggests that teachers play important roles in learning from the Anji Play. Furthermore, children’s opinions about their play experience and teachers’ roles in Anji have not been fully explored. This is an important field because children’s perspectives are crucial to evaluate whether Anji Play has achieved the goal of respecting children and their play rights. In addition, since the roles of teachers in Anji have been through a transformation, it is also important to understand this transformation from the children’s perspectives. This question will be presented in some parts of my research results since some teachers have used the Anji approach and ideas in their pedagogical practice in children’s play.

## **2.6 The roles of teachers in children’s play in Chinese kindergartens**

### **2.6.1 Teachers’ roles regulated in educational documents**

In 2012, the government has enacted the Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards (Trial) (MOE, 2012b) to promote teachers' professional development and construct high-quality groups of kindergarten teachers. The content of the standard consists of three main sections: professional ideas and ethics, professional knowledge and professional abilities. "Supporting and instructing the play activity" (MOE, 2012b, p.5-6) is one of the professional abilities in the Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards (Trial) (MOE, 2012b). Liu (2013) specifically clarified that play in this section refers to the types of creative play (role play, constructive play and dramatic play), rather than pedagogical play for teaching. Furthermore, the policymakers have listed the following four basic requirements that give more detailed descriptions of these abilities:

44. Provide play conditions that meet children's needs and interests, characteristics of age, and development goals.

45. Take full advantage of the space of play activities and design rationally. Provide rich and appropriate play material to support, initiate and promote children's play.

46. Encourage children to choose play content, partners and material autonomously. Support children in playing actively and creatively to fully experience the happiness and contentment of play.

47. Guide children to achieve physical, cognitive, linguistic, social and other aspects of development in play activities. (MOE, 2012b, p.5-6)

Liu (2013) suggested that teachers' professional ability to support children's play required them to be able to actively support and encourage children's spontaneous free play activities. As for the ability to guide children's play, Liu (2013) emphasized that teachers' instructions to children's play should be based on "children's needs to development" (p.118). It is argued here that children's needs to develop may not be consistent with the development needs from the perspectives of policymakers and practitioners. Children might need to develop their interests which are addressed in

their funds of knowledge. Sometimes these interests may not be acceptable to adults, but can actually satisfy children's needs and support their development (Hill and Wood, 2019). However, requirement 47 directly indicates the development goals of each learning area for teachers to fulfil. In addition, the Guideline (MOE, 2012a) which was enacted in the same year provided different learning areas of development goals to the different age groups of children with respective guidance to teachers. Accordingly, it is accessible and practical for teachers to achieve these age-related development goals in children's play. In terms of children's needs and interests, no more instructions have been given in this policy, which means teachers may not have enough guidance to discover children's interests and needs in their play. In practice, some scholars have found that teachers do not appreciate children's interests in the context of play, which is another reason to turn play activities into teaching (Yan and Wei, 2008; Zhao and Wang, 2015). However, these studies do not further discuss solutions to solve the problem. As a consequence, the term "children's interests" in the Chinese context has acted as an under-theorised "catch phrase" (Birbili and Tsitouridou, 2008) in early childhood education. But in the international context, the concept of children's interests has been studied systematically. So, the literature from international contexts can inform studies on children's interests in China.

According to requirement 44, children's needs and interests, characteristics of age and development goals are three main factors for teachers to consider when they fulfil their roles in play. These policy documents suggested that, compared to children's interests, a strong policy force has pushed kindergarten teachers to position their pedagogical practice and roles in more close relation to children's academic learning in play. Wood (2014a) stated:

Policy constructions of play as pedagogy are instrumental: the focus is on planned and purposeful play, and the forms of learning that are privileged reflect developmental levels and learning goals. (p.152)

However, it is worth noticing that the concept of “play” is presented differently in different countries, which in return, reflected the policymakers’ interpretation and the intention of placing play in the educational contexts. As previously discussed, compared to a more precise description (e.g., planned, purposeful play), the term “play activity” is a rather vague, wide and general concept, which may mislead teachers’ decision-making in play pedagogy. This concern is evident in Yang’s (2013) study on teachers adopting play-based teaching and learning in almost every activity in kindergarten life in order to cope with the vague indications of play on paper. From the teachers’ perspectives, the instruction of “teaching and learning through play” is not clear or practical enough since these educational documents have not provided detailed and specific guidance to implement playful pedagogy in kindergarten practice (Yang, 2013). Recently, scholars have noticed that teachers’ difficulties in carrying out play as a basic activity might be due to their misunderstanding of the different concepts of play and play activity. Qiu and Gao (2021) clarified that the concept of “play” did not equal the concept of “play activity”. Play featured pleasure, freedom and relaxation. Yet in the play activity, children may not feel relaxed and free to play at they wish, since the purpose of the play activity is to stimulate children’s development. Therefore, children need to follow rules and stay very focused. Children can only experience simple happiness, or a one-sided experience from the play activity when the teacher overly emphasised the aspects of pleasure, autonomy, freedom and relaxation features of play in the play activity. As a result, teachers find it hard to support children’s play due to the lack of educational goals in the activity. To date, little research has explored teachers’ perspectives on play and play activity in Chinese contexts. On the one hand, I assumed that the arguments proposed by Qiu and Gao (2021) were quite innovative. These views were proposed by Qiu from the first table conference organised by the China National Society of Early Childhood Education, aiming to inaugurate a new historical process (China National Society of Early Childhood Education, 2021). On the other hand, as a rather abstract and complex concept, it is not enough to conceptualise teachers’ perceptions of play through interviews. It will be more meaningful to explore and examine teachers’ understandings of play and play

activity through their behaviours in play contexts. In this study, Qiu and Gao's (2021) arguments about teachers' understanding of play and play activity resonate with some of my findings that some teachers showed complex feelings about children being purely free and happy in play. Although the focus of this study is to explore teachers' pedagogical practice and the corresponding roles in children's play, it has also filled the gap to some extent of how teachers' understanding of play and play activity influenced their in-the-moment decision about pedagogical practice.

In addition, Yang and Qiu (2019) propose that it is imperative to formulate a guideline for preschool play which focuses on the concrete issues of implementing play in kindergarten practice, (for example, teachers' common observation and guiding methods in play). The advice to formulate guideline for play activities in kindergarten (Yang and Qiu, 2019) may provide more practical, unified and clear guidance for teachers to position themselves in children's play. Yet a potential concern comes from the power of educational regulations, especially from the national policy level, which may have rigid and inflexible effects on teachers' pedagogical practice in children's play. In the section on teachers' roles in children's play, more discussion will be presented to show that many studies have already discussed and proposed instructions in relation to teachers' involvement, pedagogical practice and roles in children's play. However, few studies have discussed how the teacher changes roles in between play contexts which contain uncertainty initiated by a child's needs and interests in play.

In conclusion, from a national regulation level, the requirements listed above try to give full-scale instructions on teachers' roles, even though they put more emphasis on guiding teachers to deliver educational values of play to children. Teachers play the roles of supporter and instructor in three aspects: designing and preparing the play materials and environment, delivering development goals of different learning areas through play, and interacting with children during the play activity. These three aspects



have been further developed and systemized by researchers and scholars into instructions for teachers' involvement and pedagogical practice in children's play.

## **2.6.2 Teachers' instructions and pedagogical practices in children's play**

In general, the literature about teachers' instructions in children's play activity mainly covers two angles: the developmental stages of play activity and different types of play activity in the kindergarten. The studies that focus on different play activities are less conceptualised in their approach. Hence, I will review the literature examining the development stages of play activity. First, I will briefly address the nature of instruction before and after the play activity. Then, my principal focus will be on findings in the literature about teachers' instructions during the process of children's play activity, since the aim of this study is to explore teachers' "in-the-moment" roles in the context of play.

In the play preparation stage, some researchers have suggested that teachers integrate their "hidden" instructions within the play environment (Qiu, 2008; Lei, 2012). Qiu (2008) proposes more specific strategies and methods involving the use of signs, materials and space to regulate children's behaviour and stimulate their development. Lei (2012) suggested that it was also important for teachers to prepare the knowledge and experience involved in children's play activity by cooperating with the children's families. After the play activity ends, teachers need to offer feedback to children through having dialogues and discussions with the children (Qiu, 2008; Lei, 2012). Turning now to findings on instructions during the play activity, Chinese scholars and researchers tend to focus on the methods, forms and timing of those instructions (Qiu, 2008; Lei, 2012; Hua, 2015). These three aspects have been conceptualised as the framework for investigating and understanding teachers' pedagogical positions in play as well as the lens for analysis of problems in teachers' behaviour during children's play activity.

### **2.6.2.1 Conceptualising teachers' in-the-moment pedagogical practice in play: timing, form and strategies**

#### **The timing of intervention**

According to Guo and Zhang (2017), scholars have discussed the timing of teachers' interventions in play in terms of three dimensions: child-related factors, teacher perspectives and the situation of play activity. Many researchers propose teachers to intervene in children's play when the children lost interest in play or had difficulties continuing the play activities because of peer conflict (Cheng, 2012; Jin, 2012; Wan and Liu, 2013). From teachers' perspectives, it was appropriate for them to intervene in children's play when the children actively went to teachers for help (Guo and Zhang, 2017). Li and He (2017) suggested that the best time point for intervention is when both the teacher and children shared the intention to play together. In terms of the situation of play activity, teachers were expected to intervene in situations where lack of safety is a factor in play and/or the play activity did not go smoothly (Chen, 2008; Cheng, 2012; Jin, 2012). While these three dimensions provide a framework for teachers to make decisions about when to get involved in children's play, I argue that there might be gaps and conflicts between each dimension in the same context of play. Hua (2015) has integrated children's behaviour factors with the play contexts to set out guidance on when teachers should intervene in play:

1. When the children do not engage in the imaginary play situation that they created by themselves;
2. When the children have difficulties in communicating and interacting with others;
3. When the children repeat their original play behaviour again and again, and have difficulties in developing their behaviour and repertoires in play;
4. When the children lack materials to continue the play activity;
5. When the children have difficulties in the aspect of play skills;

6. When the children present negative behaviours in the play activity. (pp.229-230)

In a recent interview about Anji Play, Hua (2021) added that in different contexts, teachers need another criterion to make decisions about the timing of intervention. For example, she explained that teachers should intervene when there are safety issues in children's play. Different teachers may have different ideas about what constitutes risky behaviour by children. However, Hua (2021) did not elaborate a criterion on this point, but she emphasised the importance of considering the context of play and having flexibility to make decisions about when to intervene.

### **The forms of intervention**

Liu (2015) stated that teachers used mainly two forms of intervention. One was to instruct children's play through language, including description, inquiring, and reframing children's answers in multiple ways. The other was to use facial expression, movement and other non-verbal methods to demonstrate and give suggestions to children in the play activity. Similarly, Hua (2015) identified two forms of teachers' intervention in children's play: external and internal intervention. When making an external intervention in children's play, the teacher does not participate in the play but instead acts as an outsider who guides, supports, illustrates and gives advice on children's behaviour as well as on the roles and plots of the play. Since the form of external intervention directly controls the process of play, it is also described as the "direct instruction" (Hua 2015, p.227). Correspondingly, the internal intervention is called the "indirect instruction". Here, the teacher participates in the children's play by taking one of the roles in the play context in order to give instruction on children's behaviour. Hua (2015) emphasised that the decision on which form of instruction is most appropriate should be based on the children's age and the needs of play in the circumstances. These two forms of instruction have been widely used in kindergarten practice and widely covered in the relevant literature.

## **The strategies of intervention**

In terms of the methods of intervention or mode of involvement in children's play, scholars have identified strategies based on the degree of teachers' participation within the teacher-child interaction in play. In general, the intervention methods described by different scholars are mostly very similar in terminology and content. However, in some studies, scholars label certain methods differently. Also, the teachers participating in the present study did not always use these terms uniformly. Therefore, these differences in terms will be noted when I review the methods concerned.

Across the relevant literature, the most widely mentioned type of involvement in play is teachers playing in parallel with the children with no overt intervention and interaction (Lei, 2012; Hua, 2015). Qiu (2008) described this method as 'parallel involvement'. By placing themselves near the children in play, a teacher acts as the model for the children's behaviour when they do not know how to play or have little interest in the play (Qiu, 2008; Lei, 2012; Hua, 2015). Hua (2015) also argued that when children were aware the adults were doing the same kind of play in parallel, it operated as a support and recognition to children which would promote children's greater interest and persistence in play. Other than playing in parallel with children as a way of getting involved in play, teachers could also choose to play jointly and cooperatively with children. In this process, children still dominate the play activity (Lei, 2012; Hua, 2015). However, in play contexts where teachers believed the children needed their guidance or help, they could increase their involvement to give direct instructions to the children. Therefore, Qiu (2008) named this method as "intersection involvement", indicating teachers' flexible change in level of involvement when playing together with children.

The discourse on teachers' intervention strategies in children's play, as introduced above, has had a profound influence on teachers' pedagogical practice in kindergartens in China, since it has been presented in most textbooks of early childhood education as well as discussed in relevant research literature. However,

practitioners are still facing problems and challenges when they intervene in children's play. In a quantitative study of 549 kindergarten teachers, Qiu et al. (2013) found that teachers reported difficulties in giving instructions on children's play. Specifically, they found it hard to identify the main issues in children's behaviour, to choose the appropriate timing and methods of intervention, and to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructions. Overall, knowing when to intervene in children's play, and knowing which methods are appropriate are the two main challenges for teachers in their instructions on children's play (Qiu et al., 2013; Wang and Liu, 2013). The findings of these studies indicate that teachers' instructions for play might not be as effective as they should be, which will be further discussed in the section below.

### **2.6.3. Examining teachers' instructions in children's play: effectiveness and challenges**

In their review of the literature over the period 2011 to 2020, Feng and Xin (2021) concluded that Chinese scholars have discussed two main themes in their studies of teachers' instructions in children's play: observation and involvement strategies.

#### **2.6.3.1 Observation**

Observation pedagogy has risen in importance in recent years in recent years. A large amount of research has evaluated teachers' observation abilities, suggesting that, in general, teachers' observation skills are weak and need further improvement (Zhu, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Dai, 2018; Li et al., 2018). According to several studies, the most dominant problem with teachers' observations is that they do not have a clear focus when they observe children's play (Qiu and Wang, 2013; Zhu, 2017; Chen, 2018; Li, 2021; Zheng, 2021), which also leads to teachers' weak abilities in capturing educational moments (Zhu, 2017; Dai, 2018). Furthermore, teachers' interpretations of their observation data tend to remain superficial in that they mainly describe

children's behaviours or narrate the scenarios of children's play. In a recent study, Li (2021) found that teachers were not able to interpret children's behaviour in terms of age-related learning and development goals. In addition, Li (2021) examined teachers' documentation methods, finding that they tended to use narrative to record their observations and that their observation documents were either too detailed or too brief.

Researchers have explored the reasons for teachers' weak abilities in observation. The most significant factor is that teachers are not familiar with children's developmental levels of play behaviour and the developmental goals that children should be achieving at their current age and stage (Li, 2021; Zhang and Zhou, 2021; Zheng, 2021). Zhang and Zhou (2021) refer to the gap between children's current level of development and the ideal level as "children's development needs", which they suggest is similar to the concept of ZPD. Therefore, many scholars recommend to use the Early Learning and Development Guideline Age 3-6 (MOE, 2012a) help teachers set appropriate criteria to observe in order to identify an individual child's current development level in play (Li, 2021; Zhang and Zhou, 2021).

### **2.6.3.2 Intervention**

In the relevant literature, one of the most prevalent problems concerning teachers' intervention in children's play was the fact that teachers were unclear about the timing, method and content of intervention (Qiu et al., 2013; Zhang and Zhou, 2021). Zhang and Zhou (2021) stated that lack of pedagogical content knowledge was the fundamental reason for teachers' difficulties in identifying the key points of observation and intervention in children's play. The concept of "pedagogical content knowledge" (PCK) has three dimensions: subject knowledge, knowledge of students and knowledge of pedagogy (Huang and Tian, 2015). Addressing these three dimensions, Zhang and Zhou (2021) asserted that teachers were not familiar with the content and learning goals pertaining to different subject knowledge in different types of play activities. Furthermore, some teachers also lacked understanding of how children learn

the subject knowledge through the corresponding types of play activities. For example, the key educational value of role-play activity is to develop children's imagination, language and social communication. Children acquire the knowledge and experience relevant to this educational value through playing the roles, mediating the symbolic tools and imagining the plot of the story. Zhang and Zhou (2021) argued that teachers must be aware of the educational value of different types of play activities and the corresponding learning behaviours, in order to be able to identify the focus of observation, understand children's behaviour, and make effective interventions in children's play. The educational value of the play activity is an important factor for the teachers to consider when making decisions on their own roles in children's play. Yet a potential concern with this emphasis is that the heavy emphasis on subject knowledge may constrain teachers' pedagogical practice and set them in the dilemma of positioning their roles in the context of the play. It is also questionable that if all types of play activities are suitable to deliver the academic knowledge to children. To date, little research has been undertaken in the Chinese context to explore the problems and tensions they face when they are trying to teach children through role play activities. Some of the present research findings will address this gap.

Another issue concerning teachers' intervention is they may do too little or too much. In other words, either they do not intervene at all in children's play or they overly control children's play when they get involved in the play situations (Li and Ma, 2014; Li, 2020). Li and Ma (2014) suggest that when teachers do not interact with children it is because teachers cannot understand children's play or they simply view the play activity as the children's own business. In this scenario, teachers act as spectators who only watch children during their play activity. Zhang and Zhou (2021) criticised this approach, stating that the educational function of play cannot be fully achieved when teachers make no interventions in children's play. In contrast, highly controlling behaviour on the part of teachers intervening in children's play is also problematic since it has negative influences on children's initiative and capacity to be active and creative in play (Zhang and Zhou, 2021).

In addition, teachers often fail to fully satisfy or pay attention to children's emotional needs in play. Li (2019) found that teachers seldom actively responded to children or expressed their emotions when the children came to them to exhibit or demonstrate something in role play. Guo (2007) found that most occasions when children came to teachers to initiate interaction, it was in order to gain recognition for their behaviours or things they had made in the play activity. This research resonated with the findings in the present study that children frequently initiated their interaction with teachers in order to get emotional satisfaction. To date, not many studies have investigated teachers' roles in relation to children's emotional needs. Guo and Zhang (2017) argued that teachers should attend not only to the play behaviours of children that are relevant to their cognitive development, but also to their emotional needs. Hence, the present study seeks to provide more insights into how teachers responded to children's emotional needs in play and what were children's perspectives on the teachers' responses to their needs in play.

#### **2.6.4 Teachers' roles in children's play**

As I have concluded in the section about teachers' roles in play regulation, teachers have roles in three key aspects: play environment, interaction with children, and children's learning and development. The roles proposed by scholars and practitioners are closely relevant to teachers' instructions and pedagogical practice in play in these three aspects.

Qiu (2008) stated that the teacher's role as observer is the most important one since teachers' other roles are based on observational skills. Hua (2015) suggested that the key purpose of observation was to discover the relationship between children's behaviour in play and children's development goals. Li and Ma (2014) proposed a similar but differentiated role – the onlooker. They suggested that the teacher as



onlooker does not engage in children's play but acts as an audience to appreciate their behaviour in play. The teacher watches children's play nearby to understand children's interests and needs as well as to show children their support through indirect participation (e.g., verbal language, facial expression and gestures). This view resonates with the perspectives of most of the teachers in the present study who regarded their role as a kind of support for children's play. Yet, children's perspectives on the teacher's presence have provided more insights into this role, which will be presented in the results and discussion chapters.

Turning to the aspect of play regulation that involves guiding children's learning and development through play, many researchers recommend teachers to play the roles of supporters (Hua, 2015) and instructors (Qiu, 2008; Li and Ma, 2014) to encourage, help and extend children's play through the play material and supportive language. Hua (2015) emphasised that teachers should be very cautious about the language they use in children's play because teachers' language has significant impacts on children's behaviour and emotional experience in play. Therefore, in their role as supporter, the teacher should use open-ended questions to inspired children when giving them advice, and should end the dialogue with affirmation and approval.

In addition, many researchers suggest teachers take co-player roles to engage in children's play (Qiu, 2008; Li and Ma, 2014; Reng, 2015). Li and Ma (2014) note that to teachers, the key point of playing with the children is to give up their power and authority. I would argue that in current educational settings, it is hard for the teacher to completely "be the child" (Li and Ma, 2014, p.120). Moreover, few researchers have given detailed strategies of how to play with children in imaginative play situations as play partners. This question is important yet easy to be ignored by educators and researchers. In the discussion chapter, this question will be revisited to discuss the tensions that teachers faced when they chose to be co-players in children's play.

Finally, teachers are recommended to act as the provider of materials (Wang, 2013; Hua, 2015), the environment creator (Hua, 2015; Reng, 2015) and the organiser (Qiu, 2008) who prepares the play environment and materials for children. Hua (2015) added that as a creator in children's play, teachers also needed to guarantee sufficient time and space for different types of play activities and to prepare the knowledge and experience relevant to the play. Qiu and Wang (2013) criticised that some teachers spent too much time on the decoration of the play environment, to the extent that they ignored or did not adequately involve children's interests in the play environment and materials.

To conclude, the studies examining the roles of teachers in play are fairly harmonious in how they name and discuss the roles. The discourse mainly focused on defining teachers' roles and offering critique. In summary, the roles of teachers in children's play include the observer, onlooker, co-player, instructor, supporter, organiser, creator and provider. Scholars may identify different roles in the same aspects of children's play. For example, concerning children's play materials and environment, Qiu (2008) suggested the teacher is the organiser while some scholars used the term environment creator (Hua, 2015; Reng, 2015) or materials provider (Wang, 2013; Hua, 2015). In addition, scholars have come up with rather comprehensive roles for teachers to fulfil in the contexts of play; these roles are conceptualised as discrete and separate, in order to inform teachers' pedagogy. However, in a play activity, children's behaviour in the context changes from moment to moment, which may require teachers to shift their roles flexibly. As Li and Ma (2014) stated that:

Teachers' roles are not fixed. It is hard to identify teachers' roles in children's play with one standard answer...The idea teachers are always able to change their roles according to the needs from different play contexts to develop play and enjoy the pleasure of play together with children. (p.120)

A recent study has identified five states or stages of play in the dynamic development process of children's pretend play. These include establishment, pause, continuing, reconstruction, and end (Lian and Huang, 2020). However, in the literature there is little attention to the relationship between teachers' dynamic roles and the contexts of play. Considering children's double subjectivity in play, few researchers in China have provided considerations and recommendations to teachers about how to place their roles inside and outside imaginative play situations flexibly. Furthermore, to date, there has been little scholarly exploration of teachers' roles inside and outside children's play from both teachers' and children's perspectives. To fill this gap, the present study seeks to explore and analyse teachers' in-the-moment pedagogical practice and corresponding children's responses in the same context of play, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of how and why teachers transfer from one role to another within different play contexts.

## **2.7 Researching play in international educational settings from children's perspectives**

While this study is underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical paradigm, it is also addressed in the field of Childhood Studies, especially the sociology of childhood. In the sociology of childhood, children are competent constructors of their own lives (James and James, 2004) who are able to make difference in societal change (Corsaro, 1997; James, 2009). Hence, the sections below draw attention to the studies that explore children's perspectives on play and teachers' role in play within educational settings.

### **2.7.1 A brief overview of the theoretical backgrounds of researching children's perspectives**

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in studying children's lives, learning and development from their own perspectives, which is in the wake of the recognition of the child's rights that are regulated in the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989). In particular, Articles 12 and 13 (United Nations, 1989) state that the child has the right to be heard and given the voice to make decisions in matters concerning their everyday life at home, school and community. Driven by the promotion of children's rights through international conventions (United Nations, 1989, 2005), a research paradigm in studying children and childhood, Childhood Studies, has emerged and has developed into a multidisciplinary research field during the last decades (Sommer et al., 2013). From the developmental psychology research lens, children are viewed as 'becomings' (Qvortrup, 1994) and their childhoods are positioned to be a preparation stage for adulthood (Mayall, 2002). In the field of Childhood Studies, Einarsdóttir (2014a) suggests that the ideas about children and childhood have built on the corresponding perspectives in the postmodern research field, which view children as agentic competencies who can express their perspectives and create their cultures and knowledge in their own lives (Dahlberg et al., 2007). These ideas also related to the conceptualizations of children and childhood in the sociology of childhood, which see children as social actors and active participants (Christensen and Prout, 2002), and theorise childhood as a social construct (James and James, 2004). The reconceptualization of children in the sociology of childhood implies that children are capable of holding rights and citizenship to express their perspectives, and actively influence and make contributions to their social worlds in their interactions with adults (Corsaro, 1997). Therefore, in the field of sociology of childhood, research focuses on how children give their voice in matters concerning themselves, negotiate and create a culture with adults and others in the process of interactions with them, rather than studying the child as a unique individual in the world (Einarsdóttir, 2014a).

Within this growing research field in Childhood Studies, the term "children's perspectives" has been used dominantly in studying children's own experiences,

worldviews and behaviours. So, what are children's perspectives? By comparing this term with the "child perspectives", Sommer et al. (2013) give a clear definition of this concept:

Children's perspective(s) represents children's own experiences, perceptions and understandings of their life world. In contrast to the child's perspective, the focus here is on the child's phenomenology as a subject in their own world. That is what adults strive to understand through their child perspective approach. (p.463)

Whilst these two terms, "child perspectives" and the "children's perspectives" look similar, Sommer et al. (2013) clarify that a child's perspective does not represent the child's experience. Furthermore, they argue that clarification and consistent definitions of these two terms are needed in order to understand "what kind of professional knowledge 'will be' relevant or not" (Sommer et al., 2013, p.463) when adopting a child-oriented approach in early childhood education framework. Since this study aims to listen to children's voices to understand their thoughts and feelings about the teachers' roles in play in kindergarten practice, it falls under the field of researching children's perspectives. However, the literature that are reviewed below includes the studies adopt the children's perspectives or the child's perspectives, in order to have an integrated understanding of how children's experience in play are interpreted, and how children's own opinions are presented by different researchers.

In the context of Chinese early childhood education, a growing body of literature has emerged to focus on the research fields in children's perspective, children's rights, new sociology of childhood and doing research with children through multiple methods (Liu, 2013; Wang, 2013; Liu, 2014; Chen and Li, 2015; Li, 2015; Huang and Zhao, 2020; Liu, 2020; Wei and Yan, 2021). By using Cite Space to analyse the literature from the data source, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Xiao and Wu (2020) find that the term "children's perspectives' is one of the top three significant keywords in the academic literature that focuses on studying kindergarten curriculum from 2009-

2019). In fact, since 2005, more and more studies have explored children's perspectives on teacher-child interactions, outdoor activities and some abstract concepts, like "happiness" and "beauty" (Wei and Yan, 2021). However, Shi and Wang (2019) criticize that many of the studies that name "children's perspectives" are actually addressed in the field of 'child perspectives' (Sommer et al., 2013). As Wei and Yan (2021) propose, whilst the research on children's perspectives has become an important part of the Chinese early childhood education research field, the exploration and development of the theories of "children's perspectives" are still at the initial stage that many questions remain to be clarified. A review of the research in the Chinese context suggests that it is very important to examine the methodology of the studies before I take reference from the research results. Now the discussion moves to how children identify and understand play from their perspectives in the international research field.

### **2.7.2 Children's perspectives on the definition of play**

Internationally, studies of children's perspectives on play emerged in the late 20th century. In mainland China, the studies of children's perspectives on play followed the kindergarten curriculum reform in the 1980s. In order to examine the practice of play-based curriculum and the outcomes of implementing the Regulations on Kindergarten Education (MOE, 1989), a study in 1995 first explores children's perceptions and feelings about play activities in kindergarten (Liu, 1995). Whilst Howards et al. (2006) find that children's perspectives on play are influenced by their educational experience from different nations, some commonalities emerge within the range of ways for distinguishing play from non-play activities when reviewing the Chinese and other countries' studies about children's perspectives on play. Einarsdóttir (2014a) summarize some common criteria that children usually use to distinguish play activities from work and learning, including the contexts of activities (physical and social

environment), the level of control that children have in the activity, and the roles that adults play in the activities. These factors are discussed in the following sections.

### **2.7.2.1 Context of activities**

A range of studies shows that the context of an activity is an important factor for children to identify if the activity was play or not (Liu; 1995; Wing, 1995; Howard, 2002; Liu et al, 2005; McInnes et al., 2013; Theobald, et al, 2015; Li and Zhang, 2017; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2019). The context of activities in these studies ranges from the national context of activities to the physical site of activities, to the types of the materials in the environment of activities, and the stages that the activities situate in. Evidence showed that children's perspectives to play, especially their cues to categorise the classroom activities are influenced by their educational experiences (Howards et al., 2006). For example, the same research method, the Activity Apperception Story Procedure (AASP), a two-part procedure to collect children's perceptions, has been used to explore how children distinguish play, learning and work in both UK and Australia. Studies in the UK show that children regard an activity as learning or work if a teacher is present (Howard, 2002). On the contrary, studies in Australia reveal that there is no significant relationship between teachers' presence and children's definitions of play and learning. Even though teachers are present around children and involved in their activities, children will still regard those activities as play (Howard et al, 2006). In terms of the physical site of the activities, Liu (1995) finds that children tend to identify outdoor activities as play in Chinese kindergartens. However, the site of the activity (indoors/outdoors) is no longer an influential factor fifteen years later when the same methods are used to explore children's perspectives on play in Chinese kindergartens (Liu et al., 2005). Liu et al. (2005) analyse that because of the top-down curriculum reform, kindergartens have set special times and spaces for children's indoor play activities. Thus, indoor activities can be perceived as play just as outdoor activities. Consistently, by adopting the same research method and analytical framework, a recent study also shows that within the activities that

children define as play, both indoor and outdoor activities are included (Li and Zhang, 2017). These studies suggest that even in the same national education context, children's criteria for labelling their activities as play or not change over time due to their different play experiences in educational settings over time. In addition, the types of materials that contain in the activity environment are also one of the criteria that children use to identify if an activity is play or work. In Howard's (2002) study, by using Activity Apperception Story Procedure with 4–6-year-old children, he finds that children categorize the photo with a table as work, whereas they link the photo that presents the activity on the floor as play. In the Chinese research context, the toys and materials used for the activities are the most significant factors that influenced children's judgment on whether an activity was play (Liu, 1995; Liu et al, 2005; Li and Zhang, 2017). However, in an Icelandic study that explores children's perspectives through video-stimulated conversations with children, Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2019) find that the ways how children use the play materials in preschool settings may influence their identifications of if an activity is play or not. When the children are playing with materials without using their imaginations, for example, lining up blocks, they do not view their activity as play, even though there are play materials present in the video image. This finding resonates with a Chinese study which also indicates the imaginary play situations that are present in photo images are a criterion that children use to define an activity as play or not (Li and Zhang, 2017). These findings reveal that children make a synthetic judgement when they are identifying if an activity is play or not. That is, children pay more attention to the ways of interacting with play materials that demonstrate in the videos or photos, rather than the visual existence of play material in the images. In addition, Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2019) suggest that children's identifications to play were related to the stage of the activities in which they are currently involved. They find that children did not regard themselves as playing when they were planning, setting up and preparing materials for play (Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2019). Their findings are consistent with an Australian study which use the same method to explore how children distinguish between play and learning (Theobald et al., 2015). These results are worthy of noticing because they suggest that



the materials used in the studies might influence children's judgments on play or not play. While using photo images as cues to explore children's perspectives on play, researchers only provide a fragment of activities for children to make judgments. Compared to still photo images, using videos may offer children more complete and sustained scenes of activities for them to identify if an activity is a play or not. Therefore, these studies contribute to the considerations of selecting research methods for this study.

#### **2.7.2.2 Children's control, choice and agency in activities**

Several studies find that children identify an activity as play when they can control the play situations and make decisions in the activity in the aspects of play rules, play materials and play partners (King, 1979; Rogers and Evans, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017). In an American study, kindergarten children indicate that they experience less standardization, but more self-direction and voluntary choice in play activities than in work (King, 1979). Similarly, Nicholson et al. (2015) found that children in their study express their emphasis on exercising their agency to influence situations in the activities that they define as play. In addition, Theobald et al. (2015) suggest that besides agency, children also value their ownership in the activities that they describe as play. The sense of ownership that children emphasise in the study (Theobald et al., 2015) is in harmony with children's idea of owning the play activities (Paley, 1988; Nicholson et al., 2015). In Chinese contexts, the level of freedom that children have in the activities is one of the criteria that children use to define an activity as play (Liu et al, 2005; Li and Zhang, 2017). In other words, children's definitions to play activities are associated with the extent of their choice and control in this activity, which is consistent with the studies from other nations (King, 1979; Rogers and Evans, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Theobald, et al, 2015).

### **2.7.2.3 Teachers' existence, behaviours and roles in activities**

In the studies that use the Activity Apperception Story Procedure (AASP) to categorise if an activity is play or not, children tend to regard an activity as play if teachers are absent in the image (Howard, 2002; Wong et al, 2011; Howard and McInnes, 2013). However, this result varies across different countries. Howard et al (2006) suggest that educational systems and experience influence teachers' roles in the play, which further influences children's definition of play. In addition, studies show that even in the same country, the relationship between teachers' roles and children's definitions of play varies across different periods. In two Chinese studies conducted in 1995 and 2005, teachers' pretence is one of the top three criteria that children use to define an activity as play (Liu, 1995; Liu et al, 2005). In recent years, by using the same research methods and analytical framework, Li and Zhang (2017) find that the factor of teachers' presence is no longer a prominent factor that influences children's judgment on the definition of play. Li and Zhang (2017) reveal that when children see teachers exist with play materials in photos, they define the activities in photos as play. Some children interpret teachers are telling or teaching them how to play or how to use the play materials. On the contrary, an activity would be regarded as teaching if children only see the solo image of teachers in the photo. These findings suggest that the cues children use to identify if activities are play or not are interrelated with each other. Children consider the factors of both contexts and teachers' roles when they define if an activity is play or not. Recently, McInnes (2019) explored both children's and practitioners' perspectives on play and not play activities in the context of play-based curriculum in Wales, UK. Children view the adult presence as not being play whilst teachers do not use this cue to differentiate play and not play activities.

### **2.7.3 Children's perspectives on their play experience**

In recent years, some studies have shifted their focus from how children identify and categorize if an activity is play or not, to children's perspectives on their play experience. Some studies find that some children express negative perspectives on play when they experience a sense of exclusion and unpleasant feelings in their play activities (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Einarsdóttir, 2014a). On contrary, in some studies, children express positive comments about their play experience that they describe play as fun, enjoyable and pleasurable (Howard, 2002; Rogers and Evans, 2006; Huser, 2010; Glenn et al., 2013). Similarly, a study in a Chinese kindergarten finds that children highlight their pleasure experience in play when they use the Mosaic approach to present their perspectives on the free play activities in the classroom (Li and Yuan, 2019). These findings suggest that children's perspectives on play are significantly related to the enjoyment and pleasure feelings that they experience in play activities. Furthermore, another Chinese study shows that the fun and enjoyable factors of play are the defining features of a good play activity from children's perspectives (He et al., 2022). This finding suggests that children's enjoyable experiences in play may be associated with the quality of play that children evaluate. This poses an important question: from children's perspectives, what kind of play can bring them fun, pleasure and enjoyment?

Through video-stimulated dialogue, He et al. (2022) find that children view play as a fun activity when the play has multiple materials and children are able to control the play according to their own interests and needs, for example, playing sand. In addition, children from He et al.'s (2022) study indicate that they also gain enjoyment and excitement from some risky play. Moreover, Li and Yuan (2019) suggest that children's pleasurable play experience is associated with experiencing a sense of achievement in play activities. They find that children present feelings of enjoyment when they are experiencing roles of righteous, powerful or capable persons, like the policeman and the mother in role-play activities (Li and Yuan, 2019). Different from the findings in the Chinese research context, some studies from other countries suggest that children's enjoyment of play is closely associated with the friendships that they build with their

peers in play activities (Corsaro, 2003; Rogers and Evans, 2006; Huser, 2010). This is particularly evidenced in a German study that kindergarten children view the existence of friends in play is the most important factor to make play enjoyable (Huser, 2010). These findings resonate with the results from an Icelandic study which explores 5–6-year-old children's perspectives on their preference for activities in early childhood educational settings (Einarsdóttir, 2005). Children from this study suggested that they enjoyed play activities because they valued the opportunities of playing with their peers in play without being disturbed by their teachers.

In summary, studies in China and other countries present certain common factors about how children define an activity as play, which reveals that research in this area has become rather mature to some degree. Whilst teachers' existence is still a variable that influences children's definitions of play and not play, teachers' pedagogical practices and their roles that are present in activities are more significant for children to make identifications on the activities, rather than teachers' visual existence in photos. The roles of teachers in play and children's perspectives on play are of particular relevance. Thus, more studies are needed to dig deeper into the precise roles that teachers fulfil during play activities and what their behaviours mean to children.

## **2.8 Exploring the roles of teachers in play and educational settings from children's perspectives**

So far, there are very limited studies that specifically focus on the roles of teachers in play from children's perspectives in the international research context. Given the dominant status of play in early childhood education practice, some studies that explore teachers' roles in preschool education have also presented some of the children's perspectives on teachers' roles in play activities. Among these studies, most of them are addressed in the Nordic areas. In the Chinese research context, the research of children's identifications of teachers' roles is involved in the studies about

children's perspectives on play and teacher-child interactions in play activities (Li, 2016; Zhu, 2017; Li and Yuan, 2019). Therefore, considering the limited research in the field of children's perspectives on teachers' roles, all these relevant studies will be reviewed and analysed below.

### **2.8.1 The identifications of teachers' roles from children's perspectives**

Studies seeking children's perspectives on the roles of teachers in play tend to report the teachers' roles through children's descriptive narratives or responses in conversations with the researchers, concerning teachers' pedagogical practices and behaviours in play. It is assumed that it might be challenging for the children to structure their language to categorize the teachers' roles with specific "words" in the same way that adults use in the research contexts when they make definitions of teachers' roles with specific types of terms. In other words, the review of children's perspectives on teachers' roles is framed to present what are teachers doing in play or educational settings from children's perspectives.

#### **2.8.1.1 Observing children**

In an Icelandic study, many children used the word 'watch' to describe teachers' behaviours in play, which suggests that they view the teachers' role as an observer in play activities (Einarsdottir, 2014b). Whilst the teachers have little intervention in children's play, children in this study express their impression of being controlled by the teacher under their frequent observations while some of them also interpret the teacher's intention as to ensure they can carry on their play smoothly. In a Chinese study, children identify teachers' roles of observers through photo elicitation interviews with the researcher (Li, 2016). However, children from Li's (2016) study have not given further opinions about their experience of being observed by teachers in play.

### **2.8.1.2 Making and regulating rules for children**

Children from a range of studies view their teachers as decision-makers who control the rules regarding multiple aspects of the play situations and educational settings (Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2014b; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015; Li, 2016). In Einarsdóttir's (2014b) study, children described teachers as controllers and rulers who have the power to decide whether they could continue playing outside or not if they break rules. Besides making decisions on the play rules, teachers also make the most use of the physical play environment to regulate children's actions. For example, for those very young children (aged one to three years old), teachers decide the containable number for each play activity and the location of both play activities and materials (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). In addition, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015) find that some teachers deliberately place toys on high furniture in order to control children's accessing play materials in the classroom. These findings accord with a study in Swedish preschools, which notes that children need teachers' assistance because the way that teachers organize the materials has restricted children's possibilities to manage the situations on their own (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009). Whilst children's perspectives suggest that their decision-making in play has been controlled by teachers, Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015) find that children's actions in their study indicate their acceptance of teachers' control in their play situations, even though teachers' rules have restricted some of the children's opportunities to make meanings in their play. However, it is worth noticing that in the study of Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015), children show their respect for teachers' rules and cooperate with teachers' decision-making in the play situations in which children actively invite teachers to share their experience and joy with them. This poses an important question: do children's perspectives on being controlled and regulated by the roles of teachers relate to teachers' role positionings of being inside or outside children's play frame? This question is closely associated with the research questions of this study, which will be addressed in the result chapter.

Furthermore, children are not only able to accept teachers' control to a great extent, but also make full use of teachers' power and competence for the enforcement of play rules. Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2009) find that children will come to teachers for help when other children, or sometimes the teachers themselves, break the rules and obstruct their play, which indicates that from children's perspectives, teachers play the roles in governing and protecting the play rules. In addition, Margrét Ólafsdóttir et al. (2017) indicate that children are able to manipulate teachers' rules to achieve their own intentions of excluding other peers in play. While teachers in this study do not allow children to exclude their peers from the play activity, they also make rules about the exact number of children for each play, which gives children the excuse to exclude other children that they do not like from their play (Margrét Ólafsdóttir et al., 2017).

### **2.8.1.3 Supporting and Assisting children**

In some studies, children view teachers as trustworthy, competent and authoritative adults whom they can turn to for help (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Therefore, children's perspectives from several studies show that teachers play the roles of supporters and assistants in play and educational settings. (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015; Li and Zhang, 2017). One significant difficulty for which children need support occurs in peer social interaction. Children need support from teachers to resolve conflicts with other peers in play (Sandberg, 2002; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Furthermore, studies find that children express a true need to gain assistance from teachers when they want to enter play with a group of children or obtain a position in their peer group (Kragh-Müller and Isbell, 2011). Whilst these studies suggest that teachers act as supporters to communicate with children about their peer interactions in play, a Chinese study indicates that teachers' communications with children may not always be smooth in teacher-child interactions

(Zhu, 2017). Zhu (2017) finds that children express their negative responses to teachers when they identify that teachers are playing the roles of communicators. Some of the children from Zhu's (2017) study suggest that they will conceal their feelings and secrets to teachers that they are not willing to communicate with teachers in play. These studies suggest that despite children identifying teachers' roles of supporters in play, their responses and comments to teachers vary due to their different play experiences. As such, more studies are needed to explore what kind of supporting roles teachers should play to receive positive feedback and responses from children in play activities.

Another type of support that children need to gain from teachers is associated with materials. Studies in Nordic areas find that from children's perspectives, the teachers play the role to provide materials in play situations and organize the physical environment in preschools (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014b; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). In addition, studies show that children view the teachers as playing an important role in acknowledging them as competent individuals, which indicates teachers' roles of supporters from children's perspectives (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Moreover, some studies find that children are aware of teachers' roles of teaching in early childhood education. In Einarsdóttir's (2014b) study, though children did not have the concept of 'teaching', they did regard the teachers' involvement as a way of helping them learn knowledge during their play. In an Australian study, children describe teachers played important roles in their learning activities to deliver the information to them in fun ways (Theobald et al, 2015). Besides giving children direct help in their learning, children from some studies seek teachers' support in clarifying or guiding their activities in play and in the task that they are dealing with in preschools (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). These findings are consistent with a Chinese study which shows that children view their teachers as the play instructors who guide them to the play rules and teach them how to play the games (Li, 2016).



#### 2.8.1.4 Playing with children

While studying children's perspectives on teachers' roles, some studies find that children expect their teachers to actively take part in their playful actions to share the joy of play with them (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014b; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2015) find that when teachers engage in children's play, children's perspectives on teachers' roles highlight the importance of teachers being playfully and emotionally involved in play situations. These results resonate with Sandberg's (2002) study which shows that children view teachers as substitute play partners if they cannot find other peers to play with them. Similarly, some studies in the Chinese research context also show that children view teachers as play partners in their play activities (Li, 2016; Zhu, 2017). Moreover, in Zhu's (2017) study, most children indicate that they enjoy playing together with teachers whilst a small number of them considered that the teachers are not allowed to participate in children's play since teachers are adults. Children's understanding of whether adults can play with them as co-players may be associated with teachers' pedagogical practices when they get involved in children's play activities. Xue (2009) points out that in most play activities, even though teachers take part in children's play, they still position themselves as adults in their teacher-child relationships that their direct intention is to give instructions to children in play activities. In a situation like this, Yuan and Huang (2013) describe teachers as "ostensible play partners" (p.24) that do not actually engage in play to build play experience with children. As a result, in Yuan and Huang's (2013) study, teachers' images are missing in children's drawings about their play activities when they describe play as one of their favourite activities in kindergartens. This finding resonates with Yuan and Li's (2019) study which also shows no teachers' images appeared in children's drawings when they explore children's perspectives on play. Accordingly, Yuan and Li (2019) assert that children do not regard teachers as play partners in play activities. These studies suggest that children may have different perspectives from teachers about if teachers have actually

played with them as play partners. Therefore, more studies are needed to bridge both children's and teachers' perspectives about teachers' roles in play. In addition, considering children's perspectives on teachers' roles as play partners vary across different studies, more thorough investigations about teachers' roles, especially their pedagogical practices are needed in order to explore what kind of play partners children value, cooperate and respect in their play activities.

### **2.8.2 The evaluations of teachers' roles from children's perspectives**

While exploring children's perspectives on teachers' roles, some studies have also shed light on what aspects of teachers' roles children like or dislike in play situations or educational settings (Kragh-Müller and Isbell, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2014b). Studies show that teachers' personal traits are closely associated with if the children like or dislike the teachers' roles in their minds (Kragh-Müller and Isbell, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2014b). Children from these studies indicate that they like teachers who are kind, nice and smiling to them, whereas they do not like teachers who are angry or use their authority to scold children. These findings are consistent with a range of Chinese studies which indicated that children's perspectives on the ideal or 'good' kindergarten teachers are mainly focused on teachers' appearance and characteristics (Dai, 2005; Yang, 2010; Li, 2011; Xu, 2013). In addition, teachers' behaviours in educational practice also influence children's preference for teachers' roles. Einarsdóttir (2014b) suggest that children express their appreciation to teachers when teachers give them support and assistance in preschool. On the contrary, children express negative perspectives on teachers' roles when teachers limit children's decision-making in play situations (Einarsdóttir, 2014b). While these studies focus on children's preference for teachers' roles, very limited studies have gone further to investigate children's evaluations of the qualities of their teachers' roles and associated with examining the quality of early childhood education services (Clark, 2005; Li, 2011; Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). Rodríguez-Carrillo et al. (2020) indicate that children depict high-quality

teachers as people who value children's diversity and provide children with individualized support in early childhood education. In addition, children from Rodríguez-Carrillo et al.'s (2020) study highlight the importance of ensuring their happiness by being good teachers in preschool. To be more specific, children suggest that high-quality teachers will actively engage in their play to share fun and joyful moments with them (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). This finding resonates with Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir's (2015) research, which suggests that children's emotional pleasure and excitement are interrelated with teachers' responsive reactions that are characterised by emotional closeness to children in play situations. These results may explain why children from some studies view good teachers as equal play partners in their play activities (Li, 2011; Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). Furthermore, Li (2011) finds that children emphasise the ideal teachers should give them enough time and freedom to play. These studies suggest that teachers' roles in play are associated with children's perspectives on the quality of their learning experience in early childhood educational settings, which highlights the importance of studying children's perspectives on teachers' roles in play activities.

### **2.8.3 Reflection**

In summary, a small range of studies has explored children's perspectives on the teachers' roles in play internationally. These studies have provided certain guidance for doing research in this area. Researchers tend to involve children in the process of data collection, which is instructive to my own research design. Furthermore, these studies also provide referential value in how to conduct research that respectfully involves children. These previous studies have demonstrated how children view their teachers in educational settings and categorized the roles of teachers from children's perspectives. However, few of them have explored children's preferences and evaluations of teachers' roles, especially their perspectives on multiple pedagogical practices that are adopted by the teachers in play. Despite some studies that have

explored children's preferences for teachers' roles, these results tend to focus on how teachers' personality traits influence children's perspectives on teachers' roles. Especially in the Chinese context, while studying children's perspectives on the idea teachers' roles, researchers mainly leave their investigations on the surface of teachers' appearance and characteristics. So far, few studies have shed the light on children's perspectives about their experience in interacting with different roles of teachers in play situations. A very limited Icelandic study has revealed children's perspectives on some specific roles, like supporters and controllers (Einarsdóttir, 2014b), which leaves potential room for future research in the Chinese context. Furthermore, given teachers' multiple pedagogical positions in play contexts, more research is needed to bring children's perspectives in examining teachers' different roles in play situations, for example, observers, documenters and guiders. These fields of research are crucial if educators intend to engage children's perspectives in policy and practice to make a difference to them. Therefore, the literature review in this research field leads to the core research question of this study: what are children's perspectives on the roles of teachers in play?

## **2.9 Conclusion**

Due to the curriculum reform that was influenced by Western educational theories, play, especially educational play has been emphasized by the policymakers in China. In both Chinese and international contexts, play pedagogy is dominant in early childhood education policies. Literature also shows that the roles of teachers in play share a lot in common. Currently, some western studies show that play does not always fit into the policy framework and play pedagogy may be problematic. Hence, internationally, some studies and scholars are trying to understand the complexities of the existential and educational forms of play that are meaningful to children (Wood and Chesworth, 2017). This led to the research on the importance of sociocultural theory and

particularly Vygotsky's legacy in children's learning, development and play, and the notions of 'children's interests', 'funds of knowledge' and 'children's working theories.

However, studies in China are still focusing on implementing play pedagogy in kindergarten education with the support of several educational documents that have been published recently. At the policy level, the requirements on the roles of teachers in play have privileged the development goals over the children's interests to some degree, which positions teachers' roles in a dilemma situation. This issue has particular relevance for the proposed study because it suggests that the policy version of teachers' roles in play may be problematic. The value orientation of the dominant educational play and the vague instructions for teachers' roles in the policy documents have constrained teachers' roles in play and set them in the dilemma. New perspectives should be applied to reconsider the roles of teachers in the context of play.

Internationally, teachers are expected to notice and respond to children's needs, interests, and the related knowledge that emerges through their activity choice. However, the tension is that children's working theories that are generated from their interests and needs may not be consistent with the learning outcomes and developmental goals in the national curriculum. As Hill and Wood (2019) stated:

...[t]here remain fundamental tensions between what is proximal for the child or peer group as their learning is generated within peer cultures, and what is proximal from the perspective of adults' goals or intentions. (p.8)

The literature reviewed above has shown children are capable of creating child-led zones (Holzman, 2009) for their proximal development. In addition, the current trend of valuing children's rights and perspectives also emphasized children's agency and autonomy in their own learning and development. Children should be able and have the ability to make decisions about what they need to learn and what knowledge is

important for their development. Therefore, it is very important to understand what kind of support they need to gain in this learning process, and how they would like to be supported by the practitioners in the educational settings. So far, in both international and Chinese contexts, some studies have explored the roles of teachers in the contexts of play from children's perspectives. However, most of them mainly provide basic and descriptive information about the categories of teachers' roles in play from children's perspectives. Few of them have explored children's evaluation of the roles of teachers in the contexts of play, especially in contexts when there is a conflict between children's interests and the development goals imposed by the national documents. This study intends to fill this gap by presenting children's responses to teachers' pedagogical practice in play as well as children's evaluations and feelings about teachers' roles. It is expected that children's perspectives on teachers' roles in play will reveal their needs for a teacher's guidance, provide feedback for teachers' pedagogical practice and finally, reconsider teachers' roles. In conclusion, this study will therefore make an important contribution to understanding what teachers' roles are to children in the context of China.

# Chapter three Methodology and methods

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology adopted in this study. Sikes (2004) asserts that methodology and method are two different concepts that are used to describe a research process. The term method refers to the research techniques and tools used for gathering and analysing data (Sikes, 2004). In contrast, the term methodology does not merely refer to the strategies of collecting and analysing data but is also concerned with the theoretical and philosophical considerations associated with investigation in a research project. Sikes (2004) provides a clear definition of this concept:

Methodology refers to the theory of getting knowledge, to the consideration of the best ways, methods, or procedures, by which data that will provide the evidence basis for the construction of knowledge about whatever it is that is being researched, is obtained. (p.17)

Accordingly, the selections of methodology and methods are closely associated with the researchers' ontological and epistemological positions, as well as their assumptions about human nature and agency (Sikes, 2004). Sikes (2004) emphasises the importance of the match between research questions and the choice of methodology and methods. In agreement with Sikes' (2004) theories, this chapter starts by stating the research aims and questions. Following this, the chapter discusses the research paradigm that informs the methodological considerations of this study. The methodological framework which is underpinned by social-constructivist ontology stance and an interpretive lens is outlined. Additionally, assumptions made about human nature and agency are outlined in this methodological framework, which mainly relates to the axiology regarding children as competent and agentic constructors in their lives (James and James, 2004), and conducting research with children. Following

this framework, a rationale is given for using video-cued multivocal ethnography as the methodology in this study. Based on the justifications for the methodology, this chapter then moves to describe the research method. The use of video-stimulated reflective dialogues to inform the data collection process is presented reflectively, followed by descriptions of the sampling process and introductions to the research context and participants. Next, this chapter discusses the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of this study. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the reflexivity of this research by considering how my positionality as well as my paradigmatic and philosophical positions have influenced my role as a researcher and the decisions that were made before and during this research.

### **3.2 Research aims and questions**

Situated in the Chinese research context, this study aims to explore the roles of teachers in kindergarten play activities from both children's and teachers' perspectives. The main research questions and the sub-research questions for this research are as follows:

#### **Main research question:**

What are teachers' roles of kindergarten play activities in different contexts from the perspectives of both children and teachers in China?

#### **Sub-questions:**

1. What are teachers' perspectives on their roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play, and what are children's identifications of the teachers' roles within the corresponding play contexts?



2. What are children's interests and needs in different contexts of play and how do teachers understand these needs and interests within the corresponding play contexts?
3. Why do teachers choose certain roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?
4. How do children respond to teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?
5. What are children's perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?

The following sections outline the research paradigm that underpins how these research questions will be answered.

### **3.3 Research Paradigm**

A paradigm is a set of worldviews that are organized coherently as a whole (Hughes, 2010), and is a set of beliefs which guide actions in designing and conducting research (Sikes, 2004). Duffy and Chenail (2008) have suggested that a paradigm contains four sets of values: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. The interrelationship between these concepts is correlated and coherent. The epistemology is axiological and together with the ontology, have a direct impact on the choice of methodology and methods (Sikes, 2004; Carter and Little, 2007). Following this framework, I will first start by justifying my philosophical assumptions from the perspectives of the ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Based on my philosophical positions, the methodology of this study will be illustrated and discussed.

### 3.3.1 Ontology assumption: social constructivism

Ontology refers to “what exists for people to know about” (Moon and Blackman, 2004, p.1170). The assumptions associated with ontology consider whether a person views social reality, aspects of the social world which are external and objectively real, or “socially constructed, subjectively experienced, and the result of human thought as expressed through language” (Sikes, 2004, p.32). Knowledge about social reality is co-constructed through collective and shared meaning-making process (Hughes, 2010). I believe that my ontological position is located in the social constructivism paradigm. Cohen et al. (2018) note that constructivism is also termed as constructionism and that these two terms have been used interchangeably in some studies. In order to unify the use of these two terms, the word constructivism is adopted in this thesis. Bryan and Charmaz (2007, p.189) define social constructivism as a theoretical perspective that “people create social reality(ies) through individual and collective actions” (p.189). The process of social construction is not isolated but embedded in social cultural contexts that human agents are situated in. Dahlberg et al. (1999) assert that “knowledge and its construction is always context-specific and value-laden” (p.23). In this study, which is grounded in sociocultural theories, I view play as a cultural and socio-historical phenomenon (Fleer and Veresov, 2018). In current educational trends in the Chinese context, play-pedagogy is dominant in early childhood educational policies and kindergarten practice, alongside guidance for the role of teachers in connecting play provisions with their pedagogical practices. Accordingly, in this study, teachers’ roles, together with their pedagogical practices in play, are socially constructed within this specific context embedded with Chinese educational values and trends.

In addition, Kim (2014) suggests that researchers who position themselves in the social constructivist paradigm take active roles in the collaboration of exploring and constructing knowledge with participants. This view of researchers’ roles is aligned

with the contribution of this researcher to this study. While this study aims to engage both children and teachers to share their understandings of the teachers' roles in children's play, this study also requires another agent to bridge these two perspectives into the collective meaning-making process to co-construct knowledge about teachers' roles. My presence, as a researcher, played an active role in bridging and generating meaningful insights to create shared understandings and meanings (Lincoln et al., 2011) about the roles of teachers in play situations. Therefore, I choose to position this study within the social constructivism paradigm, which recognizes that the notion of "teachers' roles" is socially constructed through negotiation with multiple subjective experiences and perceptions under specific social, cultural, and historical educational settings.

### **3.3.2 Epistemology assumption: interpretivism**

As the other main branch of philosophy, epistemology is about "how people create knowledge and what is possible to know." (Moon and Blackman, 2004, p.1170). Accordingly, the assumptions of epistemology are concerned with the nature of knowledge, which is closely related to ontological assumptions (Sikes, 2004). As described above, situating research in ontological position of social-constructivism, this study considers that knowledge and reality are socially constructed through individual and collective interactions (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Hughes, 2010). In harmony with the social constructivist paradigm, Interpretive Theory also view knowledge is situated in specific locations, perspectives, and experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, the epistemological standpoint of this study is positioned within the interpretivism paradigm since the knowledge created is from the personal, experiential, and contextual perspectives. In addition, the current focus of play research has shifted from not only understanding what play does for children, but how children create their own play cultures (Wood, 2016). In recent years, Wood (2016) found that the interpretivist epistemology has been widely applied in studying play from children's

perspectives because it provides opportunities for “understanding variations within and across the contexts, and cultural-historical influences on children’s play repertoires” (p.298). Situated in the domain of play research, in which the research focus is to understand what teachers’ roles in play mean to children, this study strongly aligns with the interpretivist research paradigm.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) assert that the nature of interpretivist research is to “investigate the interpretations of the situations made by the participants themselves, to understand their attitudes, behaviours and interactions” (p.20). Since the philosophical assumptions of this study are situated in the social constructivism and interpretivism research paradigms, the knowledge from this study is socially constructed through children’s and teachers’ experiences and perceptions. Accordingly, the design and approach to this study were unavoidably subjective in terms of data interpretation and the perspectives adopted towards this data will greatly affect the knowledge created from this study. Thus, it is important to question whether research findings are trustworthy enough to be defined as knowledge, and bring credible information to develop practical recommendations and solutions in kindergarten practice. This requires the researcher to take a reflective and reflexive stance during the research process in order to monitor the integrity, quality and trustworthiness of the study (Macbeth, 2001; Buckner, 2005; Teh and Lek, 2018). Furthermore, doing an interpretivist study also requires the researcher to justify the validity and reliability of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that trustworthiness may be more suitable rather than validity and reliability in naturalistic research. Accordingly, further considerations of the validity and reliability of this study will be discussed in Section 3.5 Trustworthiness of this research and Section 3.7 Reflexivity of this research after the first considering the research procedure and approaches to generating data in this study.

### 3.3.3 Axiology

Axiology is the values or ethical principles that should be maintained when conducting research (Duffy and Chenail, 2008). Two values were important when conducting this study: maintaining reflexivity through the whole research process and conducting research with children ethically and respectfully. In this section, I mainly discuss the axiology of this study concerning perspectives on recognizing children as a competent agency, as well as conducting research with children as part of early childhood research.

The axiology this research is anchored in the field of Childhood Studies. As considered in Chapter Two, a shift of conceptualising children and childhood has arisen in the research paradigm of childhood studies, which recognises children as agentic and competent beings who have rights and abilities to construct their own lives (James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002). Correspondently, the concept of childhood has also been reconceptualized as a social construction in which children's perspectives are important constitution of their own childhood (Prout and James, 1990; James and James, 2004). Christensen and James (2000) point out that a shift in paradigm means a "repositioning of children as the subjects, rather than the objects of research" (p.3). Traditionally, many psychology studies have conducted the research on children because they view children as "incompetent, unreliable and developmentally incomplete." (Mayall, 2000, p.121). The shifting views of recognizing children's competency and agency are closely associated with the shift from conducting research on children to doing research with children (Christensen and James, 2000; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Punch, 2002). Consequently, some researchers have focused on developing participatory approaches for conducting research with children. Participatory approaches draw upon multiple techniques to involve the research participants in the process of constructing data to produce knowledge about themselves (Gallagher, 2008). Gallagher (2008) notes that participatory approaches

for research with children have been advocated in the research fields of childhood studies and children's geographies. Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in research using multiple creative and innovative participatory research methods seeking children's perspectives about their lives and educational experience in early childhood settings. When reviewing these approaches, one significant characteristic of these studies is using visual materials as cues to elicit children's perspectives, for example, photos, drawings, or videos. However, these cues vary according to whether children have participated in producing these visual materials for later interviews with researchers. For example, many studies have involved children in taking photos or making other visual data, like drawings in the data gathering process (Clark and Moss, 2001; Rogers and Evans, 2008; Einarsdóttir, 2014b; Clark, 2010; Li and Yuan, 2019). One of the most popular participatory research approaches is the Mosaic Approach, which has been used to explore children's perspectives regarding outdoor play spaces and the environment in early childhood educational settings (Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark, 2010). This approach draws upon a range of age-appropriate and creative participatory research methods to generate children's perspectives, including drawings, taking photos, child-led tours, making maps, observations, and interviews (Clark and Moss, 2001; 2005). In other studies, visual materials, like photos and videos, are provided by researchers to stimulate children to give their perspectives during the research process. As reviewed in Chapter One, internationally, many studies have used the Activity Apperception Story Procedure (AASP) to explore how children distinguish between play, work, and learning. Researchers ask children to categorise a set of photographs into different boxes which represent play and non-play activities correspondingly (Liu; 1995; Howards, 2002; Liu et al, 2005; Howards and Hill, 2006; McInnes et al., 2013; Li and Zhang, 2017; McInnes, 2019). The photographic stimuli used in the AASP approach presents different types of cues for children to make judgements about play, learning, and work, based on their early classroom experience, for example, space, adult's pretence and materials. In addition, some studies have utilized videos as the stimuli to discuss with children their perspectives on play and other aspects of play activities, for example, rules, teacher' roles, and interests

(Theobald et al., 2015; Chesworth, 2016; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2019; He et al., 2022). While children are not been involved in making visual materials for research, they play important roles in generating data describing their perspectives.

These studies demonstrate that it is possible for children to engage in the research process to offer their valuable insights into their daily lives and learning experiences. Furthermore, compared to using traditional methods to listen to children's voices, like focus groups, the multiple innovative approaches that have been adopted in these previous studies are more developmentally appropriate for children participating in research as competent experts (Clark and Moss, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2014a). However, when using participatory approaches to conduct research with children, some scholars caution that children's participation in the research process may be tokenistic and that their voices are not taken seriously, despite the perspectives of these children having been sought by adult-researchers (Lundy, 2007; Brooker, 2011; Harcourt et al., 2011; Tisdall, 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Lundy, 2018). While engaging in the research process with adult-researchers, the participation experience of children in these studies might have been subject to tokenism, for example, their perceptions have no influence on decision-making after they have been consulted, or they have not been given sufficient time and space to express their opinions, or they have been restricted in discussing certain issues which are less significant (Tisdall, 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2016). The term "tokenism" originates from Sherry Arnstein's participation ladder of citizenship (Arnstein, 1969) but has been reworked by Roger Hart to examine the practice of children's participation in society (Hart, 1992; 2008). Hart's (1992) definition of "tokenism" is as follows:

Tokenism is used here to describe those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. (p.9)

This definition has been carefully considered in this study to inform the axiology of doing research with children with regards to how to respect and protect children's agency when they participate in the research process. In other words, a key consideration for this study was to empower children to exercise their agency in the research process, and avoid a tokenistic participation experience in the research.

Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) assert that:

[t]he very notion of 'empowerment' implies that without aid and encouragement from adult-designed 'participatory methods', children cannot fully exercise their 'agency' in research encounters. (p.503)

They further explain that children's agency, empowerment, and self-determination that are highlighted by "child-friendly" participatory approaches may need to be examined because children's engagement in these methods are backed by techniques designed and implemented by adults (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). These arguments have relevance for this study, which sought to implement appropriate methodologies and research procedures whereby children would have sufficient opportunities to express themselves freely, and exercise their agencies in terms of constructing the meanings of teachers' roles through a "hundred (and more) languages." (Rinaldi, 2001, p.79). Furthermore, while it is important to ensure children's agency in providing their voices in research, it is also important that these voices are carefully listened to and valued by researchers. Drawing upon the "pedagogy of listening" that emerges from Reggio Emilia practice, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) highlight the importance of taking an ethical perspective to respect the otherness of children's thoughts by listening to children in an interactive, interpretive, and dialogic manner. This means that researchers need to accept and respect children's ideas and theories which might be surprising, inappropriate, incorrect, and incalculable from an adult perspective (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). This proposal of "pedagogy of listening" is an important consideration for this study that arises from the axiology of viewing children as experts in the knowledge



construction of teachers' roles. Consequently, this requires researchers to take an authentic approach to listening to children's perspectives and taking them seriously, rather than excluding, ignoring and marginalizing children's ideas and theories that they do not approve of or recognize.

As will be described, assumptions about children as competent and agentic knowledge constructors have clear implications for the methodological and methods selections in this study. Specifically, thoughtful considerations are addressed through data generation methods, in relation to the questions of what and how children make decisions, selection and analysis process, and how to take children's perspectives into account while avoiding being tokenistic during the process of conducting research with children.

### **3.3.4 Methodology**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) remind us that the selection of research approaches "is a deliberative process in which the key is the application of the notion of fitness for purpose" (p.285). The nature of this study is qualitative because this research approach enables participants to provide detailed and in-depth understandings of actions, behaviours, meanings, and phenomena through naturalistic enquiry (Gonzales et al., 2008). This research methodology aligns with the research purpose which aims to make sense of teachers' roles within the phenomenon of play through investigating the perspectives from both children and teachers in kindergarten settings. This approach also encourages the production of children's perspectives and understandings on play through rich data and detailed descriptions (Hughes, 2010). In addition, this study is also informed by an ethnographic methodology. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) suggest that there are sufficient similarities and overlaps between qualitative methods and ethnographic methods, despite there being differences between these two approaches. Hence, there may be one or more paradigms within

which this research sits (Cohen et al., 2018). While involving children as research participants in narrating and explaining their play activities, it is crucial to adopt a suitable method to encourage them to speak their voices in a supportive way. Prout and James (1990) propose that ethnography is a particularly suitable method to study childhood since it offers children more possibilities to actively participate in the research process and make their voices heard.

An ethnography is a “descriptive, analytical, and explanatory study of the culture (and its components), values, beliefs, and practices of one or more groups.” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p.292). This definition aligns with the purpose of this study, which is to gain insights from two groups of participants (teachers and children) about their beliefs, values, and opinions about teachers’ pedagogical practices and role positionings in play. Furthermore, while studying teachers’ roles, these roles are situated within the contexts of children’s play activities where complex situations exist, for example, the intertwined power issues between children and teachers. Wood (2016) has suggested that ethnography is particularly suitable for understanding the complexities and exploring the intricacies of play if the researcher has enough time to be immersed in the contexts. Accordingly, by adopting an ethnographic approach, this provides immersion in the research field to understand the complex play situations that teachers’ roles are situated in. In addition, in ethnographic research, data generated from the fieldwork is characterised as having “thick description” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). In thick description, this “presents details, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another.” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). This characteristic of ethnography resonates with the aim of this study: to interpret and present a holistic and contextual account of teachers’ roles from the voices of children, teachers, and the researcher.

In ethnographic research, researchers immerse themselves in social settings for a considerable amount of time to observe people’s behaviour, listen to, and have conversations with people (Bryman, 2016). Hence, participant observation is used as

the main method to generate data in ethnographic approach. Aubrey et al. (2000) suggest that participant observation enables researchers to immerse in the contexts in order to construct a part of the participants' everyday life experience. As such, researchers limit the intrusion to participants when they are observing their ongoing behaviours that commonly occur in their daily lives. However, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest that the methods are multimodal in ethnography. In this study, video-stimulated interviews were considered most suitable for collecting data in this research. Videos can be watched and analysed by different groups of participants repeatedly, which makes it possible to bridge the perspectives of children and teachers on teachers' roles from a same play context. Moreover, video recordings can be slowed down when it is necessary to observe and analyse some verbal and non-verbal interactions from the participants, which provide "rich" data for the 'thick descriptions' in ethnographic research. Furthermore, Robson (2010) suggest that videos can provide contexts for children to provide opinions on matters that make sense for them. As such, while using videos for dialogue with the researcher, children are recognized as experts in their lives (Robson, 2010), which is in line with the axiology and ethical stance taken in this study. Therefore, this study draws upon "video-cued multivocal ethnography" (Tobin et al., 2009, p.261) as the methodology for this study.

Video-cue multivocal ethnography is a methodology that was first used in a cross-cultural study to explore preschools from the perspectives of early childhood educators (preschool teachers and directors) in China, Japan, and the United States (Tobin et al., 2009). This methodology was inspired by multiple origins, but the primary orientation is ethnography since the research purpose was to illustrate the cultural dimension of early childhood education in these nations (Tobin et al., 2009). In this study, the researchers used the same videotape as cues to stimulate interviews with different groups of participants with different nationalities to investigate multivocal perspectives towards early childhood education (Tobin et al., 2009). This research design aligns with the rationale of this study: to examine teachers' roles in play from the perspectives of both children and teachers when they are situated in the same context. For this

study, it was vital to select an approach which can elicit both groups of participants' perspectives on the same experiences that they have been involved in. Situated in the social constructivism ontological paradigm, this study views that the meanings of societies are constructed and shared by individuals in their specific sociocultural contexts (Dockett and Perry, 1996). Dockett and Perry (1996) assert that each participant may not share the same understandings of the same play experience when they are making meanings about this experience, even though they engage in the same play experience. Similarly, this study assumes that children and teachers may or may not have the same perspectives regarding teachers' roles even though they take part in the same play experience. Therefore, the research design from the video-cued multivocal ethnography provides opportunities for the participants to tell and retell the same story from different perspectives (Tobin et al., 1989), which suits the research aims and paradigms that underpin of this study.

However, this study cannot fully adopt Tobin et al.'s (2009) approach since the approaches of shooting and editing the videotapes in their study were not appropriate for this research. In video-cued multivocal ethnography, researchers take and edit videotapes to contain "strong characters, dramatic tensions and narrative coherence." (Tobin et al., 2009, p.13). Thus, their video taking mainly focused on the typical daily routines of everyday life in preschool, key issues in early childhood education (including separation, fighting, misbehaviour, mixed-aged play and teachers-children intimacy) and the scenes that the teachers highly suggested be included (Tobin et al., 2009). However, in this study, the video-taping and editing process may not have paid special attention to those typical and dramatic moments since the research aims to present an authentic account of teachers' roles within play contexts. Chesworth (2016) suggests that it is important to provide the participants with video recordings which are as accurate as possible, since these documentations are materials to stimulate the participants' perspectives. Therefore, this research sheds light on children's everyday play activities that maintain both dramatic or harmony play situations in the videos in order to provide authentic and holistic video recordings to the participants.

Some previous studies have made changes to this approach for different research purposes. Recently in China, He et al. (2022) drew upon this approach to explore the characteristics of “good” play activities from children’s perspectives. Based on the perspectives of the kindergarten teachers and scholars 43 common play activities were collated and edited into a ten-minute video recording. Children who agreed to take part in this study were required to give a score for each type of play activity (He et al., 2022). This study indicates that children are able evaluate play activities through this approach. In addition, the study provides reference for the length of video recordings that may be suitable for young children when using this approach. Yet it is argued here that children adopt a passive position during the research process, since they are unable to decide the content of the videos. Closest to the methodology and methods of this study, in England, Chesworth (2016) has developed this approach in a manner while respecting children’s agency in the research process when examining children’s play interests from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and children themselves. Compared to Tobin et al.’s (2009) study, children are able to decide which play activities they want to watch and discuss them with the researcher (Chesworth, 2016). These examples indicate that certain levels of adjustment and development of research methods are needed when using video-cue multivocal ethnography in studying play from children’s perspectives. As I discussed in the axiology section, this study aims to conduct research with children in an ethical and respectful manner. Therefore, whilst video-cued multivocal ethnography can describe the research approach of this study, the idea of “telling and retelling of the same event from different perspectives” (Tobin et al., 1989, p.4) was generally adopted for the research design of this study. Further considerations of research methods will be discussed in the research design section, particularly from the perspective of children’s engagement in the data collection process.

### 3.3.5 Research methods

A range of studies have used video as the cue for conducting a reflexive and dialectical dialogue with participants in the educational research field (Stevenson, 2015; Haw and Hadfield, 2011; Reitano and Sim, 2010; Lyle, 2003). As to this study, as I have pointed out in previous sections, a research method was required that would highlight children's agency when they took part in the research process. In the field of early childhood education research, a technique called the "video-stimulated reflective dialogues" method has emerged in the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) project in England (Moyles et al., 2002), in order to explore practitioners' professional knowledge and reflections about their pedagogical practice. Compared to other methods that used videos as cues for interviews, such as video-stimulated recall, video-stimulated reflective dialogues give the participants agency to control the focus and pace of the video materials (Moyles et al., 2002). In the SPEEL project, practitioners fully choose and control the video recordings for their following interviews with researchers. Moyles et al. (2002) describe this procedure as vital when using video-stimulated reflective dialogues in their research since this step enables the practitioners to "feel a sense of ownership over the research and not view it as something which is 'done to them'." (Moyles et al., 2002, p.465). Accordingly, I chose video-stimulated reflective dialogues as the research method for this study. This method not only suited well with the design of this study, but also aligns with the theoretical and philosophical positions of this study: to collaborate and co-construct the knowledge with participants in a respectful manner that ensures the opportunities for participants, especially children to exercise their agency in the research process.

This method has been used with adults to elicit their professional perspectives about pedagogical practices and teachers' roles in a range of studies (Moyles et al., 2002; Powell, 2005). In terms of using video-stimulated reflective dialogues with children, a range of studies has shown that this method has been effective to explore children's

insights about teaching, learning and their daily life experience (Morgan, 2007; Tanner and Jones, 2007; Robson, 2010; Robson, 2016; Lewis, 2017). For example, Robson (2010) found evidence of how children display their metacognitive and self-regulatory behaviours when she uses video-stimulated reflective dialogues to investigate children's perspectives and reflections on their activities in early childhood settings. Robson (2010) highlights that video data create

[a] context for interaction and shared reflection between the researcher, the child and the video episode, and is particularly supportive of participatory research which seeks to elicit children's own perspectives on their lives. (p.239)

Furthermore, in Robson's (2016) later study of exploring how children displayed self-regulation and metacognition skills in school activities, she found that compared to observing children's behaviour, using the method of video-stimulated reflective dialogues was more significantly supportive for children to evaluate and reflect upon their behaviours in relation to metacognitive regulation. Given children's evaluations of teachers' roles in play are important data for this study to generate, video-stimulated reflective dialogues sat well with the research aims of this study.

While adopting this method with children, Robson (2016) reminded the researcher to focus on "what children were thinking about rather than just recall of an activity" (p.192). She emphasised the importance of following children's commentaries to elicit their perspectives and inspire their reflections, rather than narrating the contents of videos (Robson, 2010). Hence, in her study, Robson (2010) not only used a semi-structured interview schedule in her reflective dialogue with children, but also paid great attention to children's commentary on the movements in the video recordings. Similarly, in Moyles et al.'s (2002) study, whilst authors/researchers had given some questions to prompt teachers' thinking during their dialogues with teachers, they highlighted the importance of encouraging the teachers to "talk openly about their own practice" (p. 468). The elements from these studies provided valuable and important experience in

using video-stimulated reflective dialogues to generate data for this study. These experiences were closely associated with the pragmatic questions of using this method in this study, for example, how and who to select the video recordings for dialogues and how to organize the dialogues with the participants. Further considerations about these key elements of using video-stimulated reflective dialogues will be discussed in the section that follows.

### **3.4 Research design**

Based on the original research design of visual-cue multivocal ethnography (Tobin et al., 1989), the data collection process followed the sequence from taking the videotapes, to editing the episode and in the end, using the same episode to stimulate the conversation with children first, interviewing the teacher secondly. These procedures will be demonstrated and examined in a reflexive stance later in this section. First, I will present how I selected the samples and accessed the participants for this study. Following this, I will introduce the background knowledge of the research site and the participants in this study.

#### **3.4.1 Sampling considerations**

When considering the sampling issues of this study, the premise was to clarify what was selected in the sampling process. That is, what the samples for this study were. Gentles et al (2015) assert that the key point of defining sampling is about finding the nature of sampling units. Sample units can be referred to as people, documents, organizations, and so on, the identification of which will be directly guided by the research questions (Bryman, 2016). In this study, the main research question is to explore the roles of teachers in the contexts of play from both children's and teachers' perspectives. To answer this question, these two participants' perspectives on teachers' roles in the same play context serve as the sample unit of data for this study.



Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) caution that in interviews, it is crucial to collect sufficient perspectives from the interviewees because the size of the samples represents the data of the study. Situated in the qualitative research paradigms, the point of sampling was not to acquire a large number of samples for generation, but to obtain useful information to understand the complexity and depth of certain contexts or phenomena (Gentles et al., 2015). However, this does not mean that the size of the samples does not need to be considered and justified because this issue is associated with data saturation, an important factor to examine the validation for the research (Bowen, 2008). Saturation is widely used as a guide or indicator to justify if sufficient data has been collected and the sample size is proper (Gentles et al., 2015). Data saturation is the point when no new insights or concepts emerge and no issues are apparent in the data (Bowen, 2008; Bryman, 2016). Bryman (2016) suggests that instead of justifying or explaining when saturation is achieved, “saturation is often claimed” (p.418). Given the sample unit is teachers’ roles from participants’ perspectives, this study claims that the sampling process will continue until no new teachers’ roles have been identified and no new perspectives arise by the participants in the data collection process.

After considering the question of what to sample in this study, it is important to discuss how to sample with regards to selecting suitable methods and explaining the process of this study. This requires the researcher to purposefully select “individuals, groups and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon” (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p.111). A key consideration of sampling was the extent to which the results of the sampling process could provide useful data that fitted into the research aims of exploring teachers’ roles in play from both teachers and children’s perspectives. With this in mind, the purposive sampling scheme was appropriate for this study. To be more specific, the strategy of “critical case sampling” (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007) is chosen for this study. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007):

In critical case sampling, individuals, groups, or settings are selected that bring to the fore the phenomenon of interest such that the researcher can learn more about the phenomenon than would have been learned without including these critical cases (p112).

In this study, the key factor in the interviews with participants was teachers' roles in play. Considering this specific focus of the sample unit, it is suitable for this study to adopt this strategy in this study. Furthermore, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) assert that sampling in qualitative inquiry is more than selecting the appropriate individuals for the study, it is also about several parameters of the research such as settings, contexts, locations, and events. Since data from this study were generated from teachers and children in kindergartens, it was vital to first select suitable research settings for the participants of this study. However, the rationale and process for selecting the kindergartens were linked together. Consequently, in the section below, I will explain the reasons of the kindergarten choice for this study, together with describing the process of gaining access and consent to do the research in the selected kindergarten.

### **3.4.2 Research site**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) remind us that how to selecting a sample that is accessible in a practical way is a key issue and an early factor that must be decided in the research. With this in mind, I decided to select a kindergarten located in the province where I used to live and work. My previous working experience in a local university enabled me to build connections with some educational staff from the local educational bureau. Hence, with their help, I was able to find suitable kindergartens more easily and conveniently for this study. Moreover, the selection of the research site was based on the research aims, designs and paradigm of this study. Since play is viewed as a sociocultural construction in this study, familiarity with the location

enabled me to better understand kindergarten play activities within the sociocultural contexts where they are situated.

Given the aim of this study was to investigate teachers' roles that situated in play activities, it was crucial to select the kindergarten which was able to provide sufficient play opportunities to be documented and discussed for this study. Meanwhile, it is also very important that teachers in this kindergarten are qualified enough that they were aware of the educational policies and follow the guidance from the educational policies and local department. Considering the Chinese early childhood education context, I decided to choose the public paradigm kindergartens as the research setting for this study. On the one hand, public kindergarten is subject to the government. On the other hand, being classified as the paradigm kindergarten by the government means that this kindergarten has played the exemplary roles of implementing the educational laws and delivering scientific educational concepts in local early childhood education (MOE, 2003). As I have introduced in the first second chapter, national documents have emphasized that play is the foundational activity in kindergarten (MOE, 2001). Therefore, the public paradigm kindergartens are positive to provide sufficient play activities for later date generations.

With this criterion in mind, when I contacted an educational member of staff that I was familiar with, I introduced and explained my study and the criteria for kindergarten selection to her. She then gave me the contact numbers of some kindergarten headteachers she knew from the lists. In an ethnography, it is very important for the researchers to spend a considerable amount of time to immerse themselves in the research field (Fetterman, 2010; Bryman, 2016). Considering the nature and the design of this research, I decided to devote all the fieldwork time to only one kindergarten, in order to experience the social contexts of the research site and to obtain in-depth information about data collection.

Two kindergarten headteachers showed interest in this study. I had two separate meetings with them, where I brought the printed information sheet, two consent forms and my student ID card. Although both of the kindergartens agreed to be videotaped, one headteacher was a little concerned about the children's reaction to my presence, while the other headteacher welcomed me to do research in her kindergarten. Under this circumstance, I chose the kindergarten which was more comfortable with this method. I visited this kindergarten a few times when I was working at the university. Consequently, I had already gained some familiarity with the environment, curriculum and teachers in this kindergarten, which contributed to building a harmonious cooperative relationship with the participants for this study. In the ethical consideration section, a full account of gaining consent from participants will be presented. In the following section, the background knowledge of this kindergarten and the research participants for this study will be introduced.

### **3.4.3 Research context**

The Sunflower Kindergarten<sup>1</sup> is located in a vice-provincial city in southeast China. This kindergarten is located in a local neighbourhood which belongs to a start-up community. The community is in the urban-rural fringe area of this district that compared to other districts of the city, the housing price is rather low. According to the kindergarten headteacher, most parents have a college or university degree and work in schools, small business companies, individually owned stores and other work areas. Because of parents' working schedule, a lot of children's grandparents also live with them so that they can take care of the children when their parents are still working. Some teachers from this study mentioned that they often saw the children from their classes play together in the playground of the neighbourhood after their grandparents have picked them up from kindergarten. Not many of them have taken extra classes

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<sup>1</sup> The kindergarten headteacher chose to use this pseudonym for their kindergarten in this thesis.

in their leisure time, for example, painting training classes. These family backgrounds are helpful since they provide some contextual knowledge about children’s daily life experiences in their community, which are suppositive to understanding children and their play activities in this study.

Sunflower kindergarten is a provincial paradigm public kindergarten, which is directly under the jurisdiction of the educational bureau of this district. There are three types of demonstration kindergartens, i.e., provincial demonstration kindergartens, municipal demonstration kindergartens and country district demonstration kindergartens (Zhang and Tang, 2010). Being identified as a provincial demonstration kindergarten suggests that this kindergarten represents a relatively high educational quality in this district and has strictly followed the instructions of government policies. According to the document provided by the headteacher, play activities take up about half the amount of time when children stay in kindergarten, which aligns with the policy that play is the basic activity in kindergarten (MOE, 2001). Table 3.1 provides a daily schedule for the children aged 4-5 years old in this kindergarten.

**Table 3.1 Daily schedule for the children aged 4-5 years old**

Time	Content of Practice/Activity
7:45-7:50	Morning Reception/Welcome
7:50-8:50	Morning outdoor activities
8:50-9:15	Activities of daily life
9:15-10:30	<b>Learning activities and play activities</b>
10: 30-11:00	Outdoor activities
11:00-14:20	Lunch, stroll, afternoon nap
14:20-14:45	Activities of daily life
14:45-15:40	<b>Learning activities, play activities and other activities</b>
15:40-16:10	Outdoor activities
16:10-16:30	Activities of daily life

16:30-16:45	Review and organization
16:45-17:10	Leave

This daily schedule helped me decide when to take videos of children’s play so that I could collect the maximum amount of suitable data for this study. In this kindergarten, play has been involved in most sections from the arrangement of the daily schedule, including the sections of morning reception, outdoor activities and the specific section for play activities. Whilst children spend a lot of time during their outdoor activities, it is not easy to capture children’s behaviour when they were moving frequently during outdoor play activities. Hence, I decided to focus on children’s indoor play activities and to collect data during the schedule highlighted in bold, which were the time for the play activity, the learning activity, the physical activity and the special activity. According to the kindergarten headteacher, the play activities only refer to role play whereas learning activities include collective teaching activities and area activities. In area activities, children are able to choose multiple types of activities freely. These activities are arranged in different areas of the classroom and include reading, drawing, construction play, games with rules, and some table games. Therefore, I was able to document children’s different play experiences during these two periods of time. More detailed considerations about taking videos in this kindergarten will be presented in the section on data collection.

### 3.4.4 Participants

In this study, the participants include teachers and children. According to the kindergarten headteacher, children aged 5-6 years old take part in fewer play activities in their second semester because some of these activities are used for the preparation of school readiness for their upcoming learning in primary schools. Hence, I decided to conduct this study in the classes for children aged 4-5 years old. Compared to children who are 3-4 years old, children at this age stage have stronger verbal

expression abilities. In this kindergarten, there are nine classes in total, three of which are for children aged 4-5 years old. Each class contains two professional teachers and one child-care worker who is mainly responsible for children’s care and not involved into teaching. I contacted these six professional teachers by text first and then sent them the information sheet and consent form. One teacher declined my invitation because she did not have enough time for the intensive interviews. The other two classes of teachers agreed to take part in the research. So, I arrange a meeting with these teachers at their convenience to discuss the details of conducting the research in their class and signed the consent form at the same time. Meanwhile, they also introduced the basic information of their class to me. The kindergarten teaching team is composed of rather young teachers. A lot of them have worked for less than three years. Not many of them have working experience of up to five years. Among four teachers in this study, only one teacher has working experience for over 5 years. Table 3.2 presents the details of these teachers’ backgrounds<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 3.2 Teachers’ backgrounds**

	Class No.1		Class No. 2	
	Alice	Bella	Claire	Daisy
Academic Backgrounds	Bachelor Degree	College Degree	Bachelor Degree	College Degree
Working Experience	6 years	2 years	4 years	2 years
Title	Director of the three middle classes	Director of Class One	Director of Class Two	No

As shown in the table above, two types of teacher qualifications were presented among these teachers’ education backgrounds: a college degree and a bachelor’s degree. In China, the government adopts a multi-layer preschool teacher training and education

<sup>2</sup> The teachers’ names in this study are pseudonyms.

system from the late 1990s to now (Hu and Hu, 2018; Yuan, 2018). Both secondary education and higher education play roles in fostering preschool teachers. In terms of higher education, multiple institutions of higher education are responsible for preschool teachers' training, including colleges, normal universities and comprehensive universities (Yuan, 2018). There are two types of college education training systems: a three-year college education for students who just graduated from high school, and a five-year college education for students who had completed their junior middle school education (Tao and Zhu, 2021). In this study, teacher Daisy has a college degree in preschool education as she completed her three years of preschool education in a vocational college. As to teacher Bella, after she completed a three-year college education, she took a three-year upgrading education to receive her undergraduate degree in preschool education. It is worth noticing that whilst all types of higher education institutions aim to foster kindergarten teachers, differences exist between college and undergraduate education regarding the training objectives and career positionings. Undergraduate education aims to cultivate kindergarten teachers with research and leadership abilities while college education pays more attention to students' skills training in the aspect of pedagogy and art, for example, the skills of dancing, drawing and singing (Cai, 2019). As is evidenced in this study, the teachers who graduated with a bachelor's degree played important roles as directors in the kindergarten. Furthermore, as will be revisited in the results chapters, the teachers' professional backgrounds were associated with their daily work and training which were arranged by the kindergarten. Hence, the table above provided some overall understanding of the teachers' educational backgrounds for this thesis.

In the two classes that take part in the research, each class has thirty-five children. In the original design, this study intended to select and follow six key children who had an interest in engaging in the research method and who demonstrated relatively strong oral expressions in their class. However, this proposal was questioned and rejected by the ethical approval committee of the university because they were concerned that the choices of a few key children may have disappointed the rest of the children who may



also have an interest in taking part in this research. Therefore, I changed the design to involve children whose consent was given both by themselves and their parents in this study. I have to admit that at first, I did not fully recognise this method because clearly, it brought a heavy workload to the data collection process. Moreover, I believed that a deeper understanding may be gained if I only follow and focus on a small number of key children. Despite these disadvantages of using this strategy could not be ignored, reflecting upon the data collection process, I saw the value of this decision-making about the ethical considerations of doing research with children. When introducing the study to the whole class of children, most of them and their parents agreed to take part. During the phase of the pilot study, I found these children not only accepted and adapted to my existence as a documenter in their play contexts, but also showed great enthusiasm for being filmed. At the end of the pilot study, two children even came to me to ask when I would go to their play theme to take videos of their play. Throughout the whole research process, children's interest in me taking videos of their play activities was sustained, which echoed the possibility of the potential disappointment that would have been experienced if only a few children were chosen for this study.

The initial number of children who gave consent to this study was 32 in the first class and 33 in the second class. Considering the number of children, every day, I chose one or two children to take videos of their play activities. As I spent two months in each class for the formal research, each child had opportunities to be filmed. During the pilot study, I chose the key children according to their classroom numbers in turn. Whilst this strategy may be fair and open to children, it was not suitable and pragmatic for taking videos of children's play since these key two children might choose different role play themes and play activities to take part in. Hence, in the formal research, I decided to choose one or two children from the same role-play theme or play activity so that I was able to document their play at the same time collectively. This strategy also provided valuable data about children's peer interaction in play, which supported my understanding of children's behaviours and peer culture in play. These data contributed to exploring and interpreting children's perspectives on teachers' roles

when the teachers interacted with key children in the same play context. Therefore, each time I chose a role-play theme or play activity randomly and repeated it after all the role-play themes and play activities had been documented. Whilst my selections of the play theme or activity were random, they were also flexible and sometimes purposeful, which depended on the dynamic play contexts and children's ongoing consent situations. For example, I had taken one play theme continuously for two days when I found the children's play actions on the first day were prepared for emerging new play scenarios with teachers' roles on the second day. The process of "choosing" was a two-way process, which brought some challenges to the process of selecting children participants for this study. During the process of taking the video of the key children, one of them may refuse to continue cooperation at any time. Given the child who refused to continue may interact with other children from her/his play context, I had to change to take videos of different play themes or activities due to ethical considerations. To cope with a situation like this, I always chose the other two potential children from different play themes or activities before each day's data collection in order to shorten the process of choosing the new key children during the precious filming time. Gaining consent from children is an ongoing process since the children who were actually involved in the research can only be assured during the data collection. Further discussions of dealing with children's ongoing consent/dissent will be explained in the ethical considerations section.

### **3.4.5 Data collection process**

#### **3.4.5.1 Taking videos of children's play**

In Tobin et al.'s (2009) video-cue multivocal ethnography, the researchers emphasized that the videotapes are not data but the cues to prompt the discussions in the later focus group interviews. Whilst I agree with this approach that video recordings are not data for this research, I also view the video recordings as crucial materials for

generating data in this study. My documentation would directly influence the participants' perspectives on which aspects of teachers' roles did they offer in this study. Hence, documenting children's play on video was a key aspect of this study, which will be discussed in relation to the questions of when, what and how to conduct this process.

I chose to enter the research field during the periods of 9:15-10:30am, and 2:45-3:40pm. As I have explained in the section on research context, during these two periods, children collectively take part in multiple play activities for a rather long time, which provided me with sufficient opportunities to take videos of their play. Based on my observations, teachers tended to take 20-25 minutes in the morning and 10-15 minutes in the afternoon for collective teaching activities and leave the rest of the time for play or learning activities. The content of collective activities varies, sometimes it was concerned with the academic learning of five learning areas that are regulated in the national curriculum outline (MOE, 2001). At other times, teachers used this time to update, share and discuss some play topics with the children, such as their later play plans. Given their discussions provided valuable background information for children's play, I also documented this process through fieldnotes, video recordings or audio recordings, depending on teachers' decisions. The filming started from the start of play activities to the end of the activities. It was impossible for me to foresee when and what play activities the teacher was to pay attention to or interact with the children whom I observed. There were situations when I followed the children through the whole play activity but no teacher was involved. Thus, I went to the kindergarten every day to capitalize on the opportunities to take videos where both teacher and children were involved in the same contexts of children's play activity.

In terms of how to take the videotapes, Jewitt (2012) suggested that the researcher needs to consider several factors, including the location, height, types of cameras, focus field, light, length, and whom to operate/edit. In this study, I used a camera with HD recording set to take videos of children's play. I operated a mobile camera due to

the request by the kindergarten headteacher who was worried that a tripod may bring potential risk to children. A moving camera is able to capture detailed information but can be highly intrusive and artificial at the same time (Cohen et al., 2018). To be unobtrusive to the participants, I kept a comfortable distance between the participant and me, even though this sacrificed the details on some occasions. However, the potential “observer effect” of the researcher might still mean that children may unconsciously play “roles” under the researcher’s filming (Valkanova et al., 2004). But, Blikstad-Balas (2016) suggests that if the participants stay with the camera for a long time, the intrusive features of filming can be reduced. Similarly, Robson (2011) suggests that collecting large amounts of data can help ameliorate this the researchers’ impact on the participants. Since the filming time in each class was two months, it provided enough time to collect data and ameliorate the potential observer effect. Another concern brought about by operating a moving camera is the focus field of video taking. By using an Interchangeable Lens Digital Camera, I was able to choose a wide-angle lens or a lens with a close-up focus, which allowed me to adopt a flexible strategy according to different contexts. The close-up lens enables me to document children from a distance while capturing detailed information, for example, a small hand movement. The process of zooming in and out on the play contexts represented the researcher’s subjective perspectives, which required a self-aware, reflexive approach and ongoing considerations during the research process (Chesworth, 2016). This issue will be revisited in the section on reflexivity to discuss how my positionality influenced the filming focus and field.

In addition, a high-quality video is closely associated with the quality of sound that has been recorded within the videotapes (Haw and Hadfield, 2011). When using a camera to record children’s play activities, one of the problems is the integrated microphone within the camera will pick up sound from all around, including the inherent noise from classrooms. Whilst providing microphones for the participants may solve this problem, it brings the risks of disturbing children’s play, since wearing microphones might limit children’s movements in play and has ethical implications regarding children’s privacy.

During the pilot study stages, I found that the background noise in the video recordings had little influence on the participants' understanding of these videos. One possible explanation is that it is easier for them to recall their play experience from the videos that have just been documented. Therefore, I continued to use the camera itself to take videos of children's play without using other sound recording tools.

It was important to consider the ethical issues in relation to children's ongoing consent/dissent during the filming process. I also paid attention to avoid taking the video of the children whom both they and their parents did not give consent to this study. Moreover, while taking the videos, some private and potentially negative situations were also excluded during the filming process. These issues will be discussed in the ethical consideration section.

#### **3.4.5.2 Editing the episode**

Both children and teachers had been involved in the selection of the episode. Given this study highlights children's agency of their participation in the research process, I prioritised children's perspectives on selecting the play scenes for our later interviews. After finishing the videotaping, I talked with the key children for about 5 minutes about which parts of their play activities they would like to watch and discuss. Some children were able to recall their actions in detail while they had been filmed, which enabled them to explain clearly to me which play scenarios they wanted to see. However, not all the children had ideas about what they wanted to see later in our interviews. They tended to reply "all of them" or "I don't know" to me when I asked their opinions. Additionally, sometimes the play scenarios that children chose did not involve teachers' roles in them, despite the teachers being present in the video recordings. In these situations, I turned to teachers for advice. Based on both participants' perspectives, I edited the video recordings into 5-10 minutes of the episode. In the original design, the length of the episode was 10-15 minutes. However, in the pilot study, most of the time, children lost their focus after 10 minutes. Thus, I controlled the length of the episode

to under 10 minutes. There were situations when a whole play story could not fit into a 10 minutes episode. In that case, instead of extending the length of the episode, I edited it into a series of episodes in case children lost their interest and focus.

#### **3.4.5.3 Having conversations with children**

The conversation with the children was arranged at noon before/after lunchtime or at the end of the school day. It was flexible for children to choose the timing for the conversation according to their willingness for the day. Including the time for watching the episode, the whole process of having the conversation with children was no more than 30 minutes. When children chose to have the conversation before/after lunch, we usually sat side by side on the cushion of the balcony in the classroom, which was comfortable and quiet. When we had the conversation at the end of the school day, we moved to the next room because it was very noisy when the parents were coming in and out of the classroom to pick up the child. To support children's recall, ideally, the conversations with them were conducted soon after the activity itself on the same day or no later than two days. However, this design was not possible on some occasions, depending on children's temporary consent/dissent on that day and variable activity arrangements from the kindergarten, such as the "kindergarten open day". Some studies have found that children were able to competently recall past events and make abstract considerations with the support of replaying the videos (Forman, 1999; Robson, 2010). These findings were also evidenced in this study as children's recall of their play was still strong after one week and sometimes, children were even able to describe some details of their play actions or sequence that had been documented in that day.

Children were encouraged to control playing the episode while watching. Most children were very excited about operating the laptop. However, there were small amounts of children who showed a sense of lost and were uncomfortable using the mouse and keyboard. Therefore, I gave them my support flexibly according to their willingness.

Before starting the video-stimulated dialogues with the children, I always re-emphasized the research principles and steps to the children: they could withdraw or suspend the research process, talk with me at any time and pause and/or repeat the videos at any moment. As time went on, some children became very familiar with this procedure that sometimes they interrupted my words to ask me to show them the videos directly. Even so, I made an ethical decision to insist on carrying out this procedure in order to remind them of their rights as research participants. Furthermore, it was important to define if the children and the teachers regarded the play context in the episode as play. After finishing watching the episode, the first question for children was: What were you doing in this episode? What kind of activity were you doing in this episode? Here, I avoided using the word “play” at the very beginning in order not to suggest to children the judgement about this context from the adults’ perspectives.

While conducting video-stimulated reflective dialogues with children, children’s behaviours were diverse with regard to their responses to the videos and to my questions. Some children did not talk or interact with me as they were engrossed in the video-watching process. After the episodes ended, these children tended to wait for me to ask them questions, or narrated some play scenes with brief descriptions, such as “Teacher Alice was watching us.” Some other children made comments on the play episodes while they were watching. Sometimes children would pause the videos to talk with me, or directly speak out the words such as “stop” or “wait” before they made any comments. Moreover, it was worth noting that sometimes children were eager to discuss what was relevant to them in the video and ignored some key elements which were closely associated with my research question. For example, children preferred to discuss their friends in the play episodes with me, rather than talk about the roles of teachers whom they had frequently interacted with in the videos. Sometimes children expressed clear intentions that they did not want to discuss teachers’ roles in play, despite they were happy to offer opinions about other elements in the episodes. Furthermore, sometimes children’s commentaries were not even relevant to the play episodes but to their individual lives. I recalled one boy who

passionately talked about his new sneakers and his other shoes to me for around ten minutes when he saw his new sneakers appearing on the screen. Hence, I had to face the challenges of dealing with children's unexpected behaviours and diverse responses that emerged in the video-stimulated dialogue encounter.

Robson (2010) highlights the importance of listening to children's commentaries on the contents of the videos as key elements to promoting children's reflections upon their actions and thoughts in the videos that they had been documented. Situated in the sociocultural research paradigm, I am aware of the values of how the children's initial responses to their play episodes would contribute to shaping my follow-up questions and the later stage of data analysis. On the surface, these children's narratives, commentaries, and answers to my questions may be less associated with my research questions. Yet they contained valuable information about children's funds of knowledge, their home culture and daily life experiences in relation to their actions and perspectives in the play episodes. Hence, I valued and expected to focus on children's responses and commentaries that emerged during the process of watching the episodes. This decision was also made in order to respect children's rights in participating in the research and sustain their continued interest in participating in the research process. Given that my axiological standpoint is situated within Childhood Studies, I decided to prioritise the discussions about the topics which children initiated and showed interest in and encouraged them to control our dialogues during the research process. Practically, I always actively listen to children's narratives and commentaries to collect the data which were initiated by themselves first. Then I responded to and engaged in the topics that the children were interested in during our dialogues. I viewed myself as a passive yet encouraging (Charmaz, 2006) interviewer whose main roles were to listen and encourage the children to talk openly about their play episodes.

Whilst this decision had been made to support children's agency and rights during the data collection process, it inevitably decreased the data collection progress. In



particular, it brought the potential risk of missing crucial data with regard to research questions. Therefore, I adopted an iterative technique during the video-stimulated dialogues in order to release the tension when conflicts existed between following children's interests and achieving my research aims. To collect data iteratively, Rapley (2011) reminds us to "always return to the field with the knowledge you have already gained in mind and let this knowledge modify, guide or shape the data you want to collect next" (p.278). After the children gave their perspectives on the play episodes, I started to take a more active role to invite them to share their expert knowledge about their play experience with me in a more critical and reflective manner. While using video-stimulated reflective dialogue, some researchers provided semi-structured questions for the participants to consider when they were watching the videos (Moyles et al., 2002; Robson, 2010). In this study, based on the main and sub-research questions, I prepared a framework of reflective questions which cover children's identifications to teachers' roles, their interests in play, evaluations of teachers' behaviours and pedagogical practices, expectations on teachers' roles, and children's comments on the play contexts that they were involved in (see Appendix six for the full framework of questions). These questions were worded in ways which were couched in familiar language and were clear for them to understand. It was of crucial importance to note that these questions were not proposed to children in sequence, nor were they only used after children finished watching the episodes. Accordingly, these semi-structured questions acted as a checklist for me to decide when and how to lead children to focus on my research questions during the video-stimulated reflective dialogues. In other words, the questions that I prepared were the probes or follow-up questions which enabled me to ask for clarifications and details about what the children just talked about (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In practice, this put high demands on the researcher in terms of focusing on children's commentaries, responses and even mood when watching the videos. Hence, I adopted some strategies that Siraj-Blatchford (2005) identified for supporting children's shared sustained thinking, such as tuning in, clarifying, showing real interest and speculating. In some ways, I suggest that I was constructing the shared sustained thinking with the children in our interviews

about play and teachers' roles (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). For example, when children's commentaries resonated with some of my research questions, I caught up with these moments to build on and extend their comments to further explore their perspectives. When children initiated some fleeting body language, such as stomping and sighing, or expressed some ambiguous perspectives on a certain part of the episode, I firstly recorded this feedback and the corresponding time slots in order not to interfere with them. Next, I returned to the time slots to confirm, clarify or discuss with the children about their commentaries on the scenes that the children mentioned at that moment. Consequently, these strategies ensured children exercised their agency in the research process and at the same time, providing opportunities for me to collect the data relevant to my research aims.

Seidman (2013) asserts that "the interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power—who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, who benefits" (p.101). Honestly, I was put in a tough position to balance the dynamic power relationship between children and me that was inherent in the interview process. My role as a researcher indicated that the strategies I used in the interviews must be examined in an ethical and reflexive stance. A key consideration was how my power relationship with the children had influenced the decision-making in the interview process, which will be further discussed in the section examining the place of reflexivity in this study.

#### **3.4.5.4 Interviewing the teachers**

As I have indicated in chapter one, teachers' time is almost fully occupied by multiple tasks that they have little time left during their working hours (Yang, 2013; Chen and Jiang, 2015). This was also the situation in this research. Therefore, teachers tended to watch the videos with me at the end of their working day, during the evening or at the weekend, depending on their convenience. It is acknowledged that the time arrangements of doing research with the teachers have taken some of their private

time and influenced their life to a certain degree. In the original design, the maximum time for the interview was about thirty minutes. However, sometimes our interview lengths were over thirty minutes. In this situation, I usually paused our interview to confirm with the teachers if they wanted to continue or arranged it for the next time.

Compared to the children, the teachers were able to control the video recordings flexibly so that they would pause, playback, or fast forward the episode during our interviews. Moreover, the teachers tended to discuss their roles in play actively after we watched the episodes. Sometimes, the teachers were able to provide a completed and reflective account to narrate and discuss their roles in the play episodes. The teachers' acceptance and familiarity with this method might be due to their previous experience of using a similar technique in their professional training. However, I still prepared some questions for prompting teachers' thinking (see Appendix seven) and adopted the strategies of "tuning in" during our interviews. Furthermore, I also confirmed some of the children's perspectives that I had previously gathered from the teachers during our interviews. As I have noted in chapter one, children's deeper interests were embedded in their experiences in families, communities, and other settings (Hedges et al., 2011; Hedges and Cooper, 2016). Given this study did not engage the children's parents in the research process, it was important to collect information about children's funds of knowledge through their teachers. This strategy will be revisited in the data analysis chapter to discuss how to triangulate different sources of data to understand children's play actions and perspectives in an authentic account.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

According to the University of Sheffield's Ethical Review Policy, three main principles are outlined in the guidance: consent, anonymity, confidentiality and data protection,

and safety and well-being. Thus, based on these three principles, I will discuss the ethical consideration of this study below.

### **3.5.1 Consent**

In this study, although the participants are the children and their teachers, the access to the participants is controlled by the “gatekeepers”, which, in this study, are the kindergarten headteachers (Cohen et al, 2018). Hence, I needed to obtain consent from the kindergarten headteachers and parents before approaching potential participants. Informed consent followed a rigorous order from kindergarten headteachers to teachers, to parents, and in the end, to children. The written information sheet and the consent form were given to teachers, parents and kindergarten headteachers (see Appendix two to four).

In the section introducing the research context and participants, I have explained how I contacted and gained consent from the kindergarten headteacher and teachers. In this section, I mainly introduced the process of gaining consent from parents and children. Particularly, since gaining consent was an ongoing process, I will also discuss how I negotiated with children throughout the research.

#### **3.5.1.1 Gaining consent from parents**

According to the teachers from these two classes, the legal guardians of children in their classes are their parents. I introduced myself to parents or children’s family members at the beginning and end of school days when they came to kindergarten. I distributed the information sheet and consent forms (See Appendix three) to them and introduced my research to them informally. This process was usually accompanied by the teachers because it was their daily routine to talk with children’s parents or family members when they sent children to the kindergarten or picked up children from

kindergartens. Teachers always introduced me to the parents briefly, which supported me to build a trusted relationship with the parents at the beginning. In general, parents sent back their consent forms to me the next day. I was able to collect the initial consent from the parent in four days. All the parents in the first class agreed to permit to allow their children to take part in this research. Two parents from the second class did not approve of this study for their children to take part in this study. Throughout the whole research process, no parents withdrew their consent back from this study. I believed my similar cultural background with these parents helped me gain their trust and consent smoothly in this process. Further considerations about the contribution of my insider positionality to this study will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **3.5.1.2 Gaining initial consent from children**

The teachers offered about 30 minutes of their teaching time for me to conduct the introduction. I set up a collective discussion group involving all the children to explain and discuss the information sheet and consent form with them. Age-appropriate language and a PowerPoint were used to illustrate the content of the information sheet and instruction on the consent form (See Appendix four). I started the introduction by introducing myself to the children. Harcourt and Conroy (2011) believed that it was important to explain the concepts of a university, the work of the researcher and the purpose of the research to children because it was the first step to building a potential partnership with the children. However, there were some terms and concepts which were beyond children's lexicon or vocabulary even though age-appropriate language was used, for example, the concept of "research". Harcourt and Conroy (2011) suggested that using the common language which was already a part of classroom culture helps children make connections between their daily life experience and the research enterprise. During the time I spent in these two classrooms, I found that teachers often asked children "what questions do you have?" and "How to solve these problems." Thus, I introduced myself and the study by making a connection to children's prior experiences in kindergarten. I told them I came to their class because

I was very interested in their play activities, but I also have many questions that I wished to ask them. I explained the details of the study and paused on each slide to give children the opportunity to ask questions.

As to the consent form, although verbal consent is sufficient for children, the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee (UREC) (n.d.) has suggested that when photos of children are taken in the research process, it is advisable to obtain written consent from both children and their parents. Since this study generated substantial quantities of videotapes of children, written consent from children was necessary. Some children were able to write their names in Chinese characters. The rest of them who could not write their full names chose to write their numbers in the classroom as a way to represent their signature.

In addition, I emphasised to all children that they could refuse or agree to take part in the research at any time. Considering it is an “ongoing process” (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015, p.46) to seek consent from the children, I also discussed with children how to withdraw their consent at any point in the research process. The children and I agreed that they used the “thumbs up” sign to show their consent for my filming. They chose the sign of shaking hands to indicate that they wanted me to stop filming their play. However, the process of negotiating informed consent may be complex and messy (Gallagher, 2015), which will be presented in the following section.

### **3.5.1.3 Negotiating ongoing consents with children**

In the first few weeks, the children were very sensitive to my presence in their play contexts. When they looked at me, I pointed to my camera to show them I planned to take videos of their play. I started to take videos until the children showed the “thumbs up” sign to me. Over time, as children became familiar with my daily filming behaviour, they simplified the sign of giving consent from “thumbs up” to simply nodding their heads or smiling at me. In some contexts, they were immersed in their play that they

did not notice my presence. Due to ethical considerations, I chose to actively make them aware of my presence in a less intrusive way, for example, by making some gentle noise, or moving to a place where they could better notice me. Usually, children glanced at me and returned to their play. Their quick eye contact with me acted as fleeting indications for me to start taking videos of their play. During the course of the study, not often had children required me to stop filming. Most of the time, they were engrossed in their play activities.

However, despite these children showing acceptance and interest in being filmed by me, sometimes children refused to watch video recordings with me. They indicated that they did not want to take up their time for later interviews. Similarly, some children decided to temporarily withdraw from the interview process after they had watched the episodes. Sometimes children did not directly tell me that they did not want to continue our dialogue. However, their body language showed that they wanted to withdraw from the interviews, e.g., sighing, looking around, and stopping responding to me. Harwood (2010) cautions that children's behaviours should also be taken into account in the consent procedures. Thus, I always stopped the interviews to ensure if children wanted to continue when I notice these nonverbal expressions.

Whilst it was disappointing for me to face these situations, I always accepted their decisions. I viewed this as a way for children to be reassured that their withdrawal would not receive any sanctions or influence for their future engagements in this study. Sometimes children would come back to me again to ask me if they could still watch the video recordings that they refused to watch a few days ago. In a situation like this, I would manage to adjust my arrangements to find a suitable time to meet the children's requirements.

### **3.5.2 Anonymity, confidentiality and data protection**

According to Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018), the issues of anonymity, confidentiality and data protection should be considered for both institutions and individuals. These issues were mentioned together with the information sheet and consent form to the kindergarten headteachers, teachers, children and their parents. They had been informed that their names would not appear in any derived products of this research, including the thesis, conference report or publications. However, sometimes the participants may want to give up their confidential rights and anonymity (BERA, 2018). Harcourt and Conroy (2011) indicated that it was important to give children the choice about how they wanted their ideas and experience to be referenced by the researcher while children were regarded as the active participants of this study. All the teachers and some children chose to ask me to select pseudonyms for them. As to the rest of the children who did not want to use pseudonyms in this study, they told me that they had English names that they wanted to use in this thesis.

Another crucial issue about anonymity is that visual data is involved in this research. One concern about the visual material is that it may be misused by others (BREA, 2018). This issue is connected to data protection. The participants had been informed that only my supervisor and I had the access to the data. During the course of the study, the data had been carefully stored to ensure no one had access to it. In this study, the data includes videotapes and recordings of the interview. I had emphasised to the teachers, children and children's parents that some of the play episodes might be used in future presentations, conferences or lectures only when all of them gave written permission for the project. Additionally, the audio data will be destroyed after I complete the research. All these issues had been clarified in the information sheet and mentioned in the consent form.

Furthermore, some studies solve the issues of anonymity and confidentiality by pixelating the images of children's faces from the video data, even though the research has gained full consent from everyone (BERA, 2018). However, this method needs to be reconsidered in terms of whether concealing the identities will influence the data



analysis (UREC,n.d). In my study, the behaviour and facial expressions of the participants (both teachers and children) were important to the data analysis because they were used as cues to explore the participants' feelings and thoughts during the interview. Besides, no participants (including children's parents) had proposed the requirement of pixelating their facial images during the period of data collection. Hence, the original video materials were used when I had interviews with the participants. However, in this final thesis, the participants' facial images have been pixelated to ensure anonymity.

### **3.5.3 Participants' well-being**

I paid attention to the comfort that they experienced during the interviews. Other than giving the participants freedom to choose the location where they feel more comfortable and relaxed to have conversations with me, I also sought to build a sense of comfort for them. A friendly research atmosphere and a good rapport with the researcher all contribute to creating a comfortable experience for the participants in the research process (Birbeck and Drummond, 2015). Hence, during the study, I made efforts on establishing a reciprocal, respectful and cooperative relationship with the participants.

## **3.6 Research schedule**

After I obtained ethical approval, it took me a week for participant recruitment. As I mentioned before, due to the previous cooperation, the kindergarten headteacher, some of the teachers and I had built a rather mutual trust relationship. Accordingly, the period of participants recruitment was shorter than I expected. I spent one week to conduct the pilot study and started the formal study on 17th December in the first class. According to the original research design, I collect the data five days a week. Required by the headteacher, I was not able to collect the data on the kindergarten open days.

So, other than those days, I went to the kindergarten everyday through their study time period. Table 3.3 present the schedule of the data collection process.

**Table 3.3 The schedule of data collection**

Date	Schedule
2018.12.03	Obtained the ethical approval
2018.12.04-2018.12.09	Participants recruitment in the first class
2018.12.10-2018.12.14	Pilot study in the first class
2018.12.17-2019.1.18	Formal data collection in the first class
2019.1.19-2019.2.24	Winter holiday
2019.2.25-2019.3.15	Formal data collection in the first class
2019.3.18-2019.3.22	Participants recruitment in the second class
2019.3.25-2019.3.29	Pilot study in the second class
2019.4.1-2019.5.17	Formal data collection in the second class

In total, the whole research process lasted for 5.5 months. I spent 2 weeks for participant recruitment and pilot study in each class. The formal data collection in the first class lasted for 8 weeks and 7 weeks in the second class.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness of the research**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) remind us that validity and reliability have different interpretations in different research paradigms. As such, they highlight the importance of “demonstrating fidelity to the approach in which the researcher is working and to abide by the required principles of validity and reliability.” (Cohen et al., 2018, p.245). Hatch and Coleman-King (2015) advocate the early childhood qualitative researcher to apply other concepts such as trustworthiness to examine the validity and reliability of their research, rather than to justify their work based on whether it meets the criteria of positivist research assumptions. The term trustworthiness has been proposed by

Guba and Lincoln (1994) as an alternative approach to assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria to make up trustworthiness in qualitative research, each of which paralleled with the concepts used in quantitative research of validity and reliability.

The first criterion is credibility, which is used to replace the quantitative concepts of internal validity. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) suggest that internal validity can be addressed in both qualitative and quantitative research to judge if the findings of the research can be sustained consistently by the data and the research. To ensure my interpretations were credible to the perspectives generated by the participants, I constantly went back to the participants to confirm the data with them. In addition, Hatch and Coleman-King (2015) suggest the researcher provide multiple representations of reality to ensure credibility the trustworthiness in qualitative research. Moreover, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) indicate that triangulation is a powerful technique to seek the validity of the research. In naturalistic studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed to address credibility by triangulating the methods, sources, researchers and theories of the research. In this study, the research design of “telling and retelling of the same event from different perspectives” (Tobin et al., 1989, p.4) resonated with the technique of triangulation within methods that Denzin (1997) proposed. As one form of methodological triangulation, this triangular technique focuses on examining the reliability and confirming theories of the research (Denzin, 1997). Given that different participants may not share the same perspectives of the same play experience that they both engaged in (Dockett and Perry, 1996), triangulating different perspectives from different sources of data contributed to understanding the complexity and multiple aspects of teachers’ roles from different perspectives, as well as to present the knowledge of teachers’ roles in a holistic and an authentic account. In addition, whilst the video recordings are not the data, these video materials also provide detailed and authentic information of the participants’ behaviours and the play contexts that they engaged in. Sometimes the participants’ descriptions or narratives in the dialogues were inconsistent with the actual play

situations or events that I documented in the videos. Hence, the data generated from participants' perspectives, together with my observation through video recording, constitute different sources of data for triangulation, which not only helped me collect coherent, detailed and credible data, but also assured my confidence in the research results and interpretations of data.

The second criterion of trustworthiness is transferability, which refers to the external validity in quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This criterion is to discuss to what degree the findings of the research can be generalized to wide situations, populations, groups, times or settings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). As this is a small-scale qualitative study that only focuses on one Chinese kindergarten, it is acknowledged that the findings were embedded in a special sociocultural educational context. Consequently, it is impossible that the participants in this study are representative of the population as a whole. As such, in this respect transferability could not be assessed in this study. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that transferability could be made if the researcher provided sufficient, rich, detailed and in-depth data descriptions to the readers and other researchers who had an interest in translating the data into their studies. I abided by these suggestions to enhance the transferability by providing a detailed 'thick description' of the research process and findings of this study.

The third criterion is dependability, which parallels the concept of reliability in quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This criterion retrieved the first criterion of credibility/internal validity, which involves triangulation, respondent validation, reflexive journals and other aspects of the research process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Hence, besides the approaches that I used to ensure credibility, I also used the research journal to record each phase of the research process, in order to address the issues of dependability. I documented my decision-making on the data collection and analysis process, my observations of the play situations and my elaborations on the contexts of this kindergarten.

Confirmability is concerned with “establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination, but are clearly derived from the data.” (Tobin and Begley, 2004, p.392). This is the last criterion for examining the trustworthiness of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) compared this criterion to the concept of objectivity from quantitative research. They emphasised that confirmability was important because it ensures objectiveness through the findings being confirmed by others. In this study, I aimed for confirmability by constantly checking and reflecting upon the data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) assert that it is important for researchers to consciously and deliberately acknowledge and question themselves and be aware of the influence that they brought to the research. I kept a research journal to record the procedure I went through. I reflected upon my interactions with the participants in our interviews concerning the questions of why I asked this question at that time and why I interpreted their perspectives or reacted to their responses in that way. By doing so, I addressed the issues around confirmability by justifying how my positionality had influenced the ongoing decision-making of the research process. These reflections were linked to the reflexivity of this study, which will be presented in the following section.

### **3.8 Positionality and Reflexivity in this research**

Positionality is the way we see ourselves and the world, which is influenced by a number of factors, including our beliefs, cultural values, gender, race, and insider and outsider status (Bettez, 2015). To be more specific, Moss (2015) indicates that positionality affects how researchers define research questions, select methodology and interpret the data. In the introduction chapter, I have explained how my academic background acted as the motivation for these research questions. In this chapter, I mainly focus on how my positionality has influenced my decision-making in every stage of the research process.

It is important to note that, this reflection is closely associated with the role of reflexivity in this research. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) remind us that it is crucial to recognise the inevitable influences of positionality on the research when holding a reflexive stance to examine the ongoing research process. This is because researchers are not completely neutral and our positionality can also bring issues of bias during the reflection process. Given the interrelated relationship between these two concepts, the researcher's positionality and research reflexivity, in the following sections, I will give an honest account of examining the reflexivity of this study through the lens of my positionality. This includes reflecting on how my positionality has brought positive and negative influences to this study, as well as how I confronted with the challenges that had been derived from my positionality.

Hopkins (2007) concluded that the positionalities include the aspects of our personal identities and the experience of research, for example, the discipline, working experience and the philosophical beliefs of the researcher. These multiple identities suggest that an individual researcher may possess a set of statuses of their positionality in the research process (Milligan, 2016). Reflecting upon my research process, I realised that I had taken on different positionings in this study due to my multiple identities that are derived from my personal and educational backgrounds, which will be discussed below to underpin the reflexivity of this study.

### **3.8.1 An insider's reflections on personal identity**

Moss (2015) asserts that researchers' identity includes the aspects of nationality, language and culture. Given my nationality as a Chinese who has been brought up and lived in the same province as most participants, I share the same language and culture with them, which positioned me as an insider (Irvine et al., 2008) in this study. My personal identity is the main reason for choosing the site of the kindergarten, which

then proved to bring several benefits at different stages of data collection and analysis of the research. As an insider, this identity helped me build trusting relationships with the participants, which contributes to gaining consent from teachers, children and their parents. Since most of the participants' family members and I are residents of this province, they regarded me as their "townswoman". My identity as the resident had become the opening topic for the conversations among teachers, children's family members and me when we met with each other in the kindergarten. I noticed that parents paid more attention to some of my personal details, for example, the location of my hometown, my original family home, my previous academic background and my future life plans. Despite I have introduced my background briefly in the ethical inform forms, it seemed that parents preferred to get to know me in person and for more detailed information when their time was available. Whilst these communications may not directly associate with this study, they advance the process of building connections with children's family members and gaining their trust more easily to some degree. Derived from the identity as a townswoman, this identity gave children's family members a sense of familiarity and trust that they felt reassured to allow their children to take part in the research with me for a rather long time. Consequently, my identity as an insider has contributed to the whole process of the participants' recruitment, as well as to sustaining parents' consent for this study. I was able to collect the consent forms from the parents in a short time and during the fieldwork, no parent requested to withdraw midway, which contributed to gaining ongoing consent from children's guardians to conduct the research smoothly. In addition, children's play, especially role play activities have reflected the local habits, cultures and customs that are embedded in the sociocultural contexts. My background knowledge of the local culture supported me in understanding and interpreting children's behaviours in play. Furthermore, as an insider in this study, I speak the same language as the participants, including Mandarin and the local dialect of the research site. Accordingly, I was able to better understand and communicate smoothly with the participants and the relevant people from this study.

### **3.8.2 An inbetweenener's reflections from personal research experience**

Hopkins (2007) suggested that personal research experience – for example, research training, previous research experience and philosophical beliefs – were also aspects of a person's positionality which can influence the ways the researcher conducts the research. While my personal identity enables me to position myself as an insider in this study, my experience of research has rendered me as a partial insider and a partial outsider. Arthur (2010) comments that a researcher's status as an insider or outsider may shift when the researcher responds to a given context or moment with different sociocultural and political values. I viewed myself as an insider due to my familiarity with kindergarten practices and professional teacher training programmes in China. This familiarity is based on my previous educational background and work experiences in Chinese early childhood educational contexts. However, my identity as an overseas PhD student has shaped my role as a researcher who is situated outside of the teachers' and children's lives in this kindergarten. Thus, in terms of my positionality, I view myself as an "inbetweenener" when I reflect upon how my personal research experience has influenced the research process in this study.

#### **3.8.2.1 Inbetweenener's reflexivity in the sampling process**

As a partial insider in this study, my previous work experience in the department of preschool education in a local university in China provided me with opportunities to visit kindergartens and the local educational bureau, as well as to build connections with the kindergarten headteachers and officers. Consequently, these experiences helped me with the process of accessing the research participants for this study.

#### **3.8.2.2 Inbetweenener's reflexivity in the filming process**



Being an outsider in the research might have influenced my process of filming the children's play activities. Positioning myself together with the participants in the same play contexts, my goal was to collect data which were associated with my research focus: teachers' roles in children's play. Siraj-Blatchford (2010a) suggests that a researcher's gaze will be influenced by her/his previous experience and knowledge. While I was positioning the camera in the play context, I was also doing some level of analysis in relation to the participants (Plowman and Stephen, 2008). I acknowledge that my analysis of the process of zooming in and out on the play contexts was based on my previous experience of kindergarten teachers' professional training and my familiarity with kindergarten practices. These experiences suggested that teachers' roles and pedagogical practices tended to be embedded in the teacher-child interactions in play. Consequently, I became aware of the subtle ways during the documenting process that I tended to zoom the lens on the participants' interactions that represent their reactions to and perspectives on teachers' roles. My video recordings may not constitute an objective and full-scale document of children's play activities due to the influence from my research interest and aims.

Edwards (2010) asserts that research in natural contexts cannot be completely neutral or value-free. During the phase of piloting research, when I was using the camera zoom to focus on teacher-child interactions in play, I realised that I might have been under-representing certain children in the play context who had interactions with the key children. In order not to ignore some children's behaviours in these visual materials, I took a reflexive approach during the filming process. I made a conscious effort to avoid zooming in on certain participants' behaviours too often, so that I was able to capture more play contexts and children who had engaged in the same play theme in my video materials. One of the disadvantages of this decision was that I might not be able to record some detailed actions of participants. Hence, I also used observation as a method during the filming process and documented my observations in a research journal in time to triangulate with and reflect upon the recorded materials. Correspondingly, when I had to use zoom to focus on certain aspects of play contexts,

I also made use of my observations to capture more of the children's actions and play contexts that the camera could not record. Reflecting upon this process, I found that my documenting techniques had improved as the study went on. Furthermore, I was able to do the research with the children in an ethical manner which aligned with my axiology in this study.

In addition, as an outsider who stayed with the participants in their play contexts to take videos of them, my presence might be considered as intrusive and cause the participants to act in ways that are different from their usual behaviours (Alder and Alder, 1992). However, reflecting upon my observations on and interactions with participants, these concerns did not emerge as very significant issues in this study. The participants, especially the children, accepted my presence and adapted quickly to being filmed. One possible explanation was that the children might have viewed my role as akin to their teachers who also observe and document children in their play activities. In fact, both children and teachers expressed their accepting attitudes towards my recording activity, and some of them built cooperative relationships with me during the course of this study.

### **3.8.2.3 Inbetweener's reflexivity in the dialogues with participants**

One of the advantages of being a partial insider in this study was the capacity for better communication with the participants during the interview process. Whilst I did not experience the exact same curriculum programme as the kindergarten teachers in this research, we shared similar professional knowledge related to the Chinese early childhood educational contexts. Therefore, I was able to understand their perspectives from an insider position with regards to the metaphors, professional terminology and policies that they mentioned in our interviews. Moreover, although I do not have the experience of employment as a teacher in kindergartens, my background in training as a qualified professional kindergarten teacher gave me the pedagogies and

techniques to listen to children's voices carefully and communicate with them respectfully.

However, my research experience has also brought some influences to my interactions with the participants during the interview processes which might have run counter to my philosophical beliefs in this study. While having conversations with children, some children demonstrated over-reactive behaviours which were clearly not consistent with their classroom discipline, such as screaming loudly at the screen, or sitting on the ground at inappropriate times. Even though I was aware that these examples of body language expressed children's perspectives on their play videos to a certain extent, I had to manage the children's behaviours for our conversations – for example, asking them to stay on their chairs, or stopping them from repeatedly imitating their behaviours that were visible on the video recordings. However, these are the situations that I wanted to avoid because I did not want to act like their teachers who set up rules for their daily routines to regulate and even control the children's behaviours. I realised that my previous training as a potential kindergarten teacher has challenged my beliefs about being open to and accepting of children's authentic and holistic voices in the research, including those non-verbal expressions which were not approved in the classroom. Not only had I reacted similarly to their teachers, which I had aimed to avoid doing, but with my interventions to manage behaviour, I might have amplified the authority in my role as a researcher which might have exacerbated the unbalanced power relationship between me and the children. Perhaps, when I chose to manage children's behaviours rather than to focus on observing and interpreting children's responses, I might have also missed opportunities to listen carefully to children's voice and co-construct the knowledge with them. Therefore, I acknowledge that my insider's positionality might also have brought disadvantages to this study.

#### **3.8.2.4 An inbetweeners' reflections on my relationships with the participants**

Flick (1988) described the researcher as a “professional stranger” (Flick, 1998, p. 59) who has to be accepted, familiar with the participants and keep a certain distance as well. Reflecting on my relationship with the teachers, I realised that I may not be a “stranger” to them as time went on, but my identity as a “professional” stayed. My academic background, being a current PhD student and having previously been a lecturer in a university made them subconsciously place me in a rather high status as the expert whom they could turn to for consulting. As the research unfolded, the teachers started to ask me some questions about their play activities. I did not reply to these enquiries directly because I was afraid my ideas would influence teachers’ future behaviour in the play activities, which would pose threats to the data validity. I realised this because the teacher positioned me as the “expert” in our relationships, the key point was to balance our relationship by improving teachers’ confidence and sense of identity and being honest and humble in our interaction. On the one hand, I emphasised that purpose of this study was not to evaluate but to understand their roles in the play activities. I assured them that the results were confidential and were not relevant to their evaluation. On the other hand, holding an honest and humble attitude was the key point. Not all teachers were convinced that I view them as experts in their field. I recalled sometimes the teachers also emphasised my identity as a doctoral student when I was confirming their abilities as a professional kindergarten teacher. At this point, my position as the “outsider” helped me balance this power relationship between the teachers and I. Instead of directly giving them my opinions, I explained to them that I was not able to give them a conclusion since I was new to their kindergarten practice. Thus, I used different arguments to make teachers not regard me as an evaluator of their daily work. During the whole process of interviewing the teachers, it was important to position myself in a non-judgmental role with teachers in order to make them feel safe and supported to speak their real opinions in our reflective dialogues. Here, the method of “non-judgemental questions and responses” (Cannold, 2001, p.187) was adopted to build rapport and trust relationships with the participants. The point was to make the participants feel heard, understood, validated, and replied non-judgementally during the interview process (Cannold, 2001).

Over time, the teachers seemed to have more trust in me and stopped to ask my opinions about their actions. Some of them had taken good use of the videos and interviews, which showed that they placed me in a more equal position in our relationship. For example, once a teacher asked me if I could share the episode that we just interviewed with her in order to write the weekly “observation and reflection record”. She explained that the case in that episode was more significant than the one she prepared earlier. Since her requirement was not against the ethical principles, I shared the episode with her. I benefit from this “collaborative move” (Attia and Edge, 2017, p.39) during the research process. Other than providing me with some inaccessible documents, for example, their kindergarten-based curriculum documents, some teachers became more supportive and active in this study as the study went by. Sometimes both the teacher and I had taken videos about the same play activity. Yet due to my distance from the children being further than the teachers’, the videos I provided were less clear in some scenes, compared to the videos that the teachers took. In this context, some teachers actively offered to share their own videos with me. Bettez (2015) describes the relationship between researchers and participants as a communion in qualitative research that researchers and participants build a meaningful connection in a spirit of shared equality, respect and humanity. As a researcher, I considered my relationship with the teachers had developed into a partnership during the research process that in some contexts, we were in a community of exploring and understanding children’s play activities.

Due to the unbalanced power relationship between children and adults, it is a challenge for researchers to position their roles in children’s world with the expectations to build an equal and respectful relationship with children. Nevertheless, I intended to build an equal relationship with the children, my identity as an adult means I had the power and ability as their teachers. The way they called me “Teacher Li” during the research had already meant that it was not possible for them to regard me as a pure researcher. In the first few weeks, sometimes children came to me for justice, complaining or

supporting them to get something that they could not reach, which were the roles that their teachers played. Hedegaard (2008) described the role of the researcher as a “balancing act” (p.204) between the situation of authority and the position of trust with children. With this in mind, I adopted some strategies to deal with these situations. When the children came to me to justify their play rules or seek assistance in their peer interactions, I took the advantage of my positionality as an outsider to remind them that I was not clear about the rules because I was new to their class. I also emphasised to them that I was not able to decide who was right because I was a researcher who came here to learn. During the research process, I made a conscious effort to conceptualise myself as an adult who did not have the power as their teachers in the classes. Sometimes the children came to me for help in the aspects of play materials. As long as my assistance would not influence my research process, nor bring changes to the children’s play, I chose to respond to them. I believed my support for the children also contributed to building a trusting relationship with them. In the situations where I had to refuse to offer my help to the children, I found that children either continued to solve their problems or went to their teachers.

While using the visual research methods to do the research with children, Quinones (2014) reflected upon her role as a researcher as follows:

The role of the researcher is very dynamic, it is not only about recording everyday life (visual path), but the researcher is in the everyday life of children not only as a spectator but also as a participant and member of the community. (p.120)

I resonate with this reflection when I considered my relationship with the children in this study. I believed my relationships with the children were associated with my daily documenting behaviour. This view was confirmed by my images from the children’s drawings which were made by some children from the first class. When teacher Alice showed me these drawings, I found that most children also drew a camera in their drawings when they drew an image of me. In particular, one of the children told teacher

Alice that “Teacher Li took photos every day and showed us the videos. I think Teacher Li is a good person, like a camerawoman.” The drawing below presents one of my images from the children’s perspectives.



**Figure 3.1 A drawing of my image in the first class**

### **3.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter aims to provide a rationale for the choice and use of methodology and methods. This research design conducted an ongoing dialogue by “telling and retelling of the same event from different perspectives” (Tobin et al., 1989, p.4), which enabled researchers to collect different perspectives about the same context. Both teachers and children are able to offer their insights into teachers’ roles when they are watching the same videotape. Guided by the research paradigm and ethical considerations discussed above, I believed the methods chosen were able to contribute to the aims of this study. In the next chapter, I focus on the data analysis process of this study.

## Chapter Four: Data analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the data analysis process. As emphasized in chapter three, the video recordings were not the main source of data, but cues to stimulate the interviews with the participants. These video recordings collected during the research process provided rich details for understanding children's play, and the play episodes contributed to depicting the play contexts in which the participants engaged. Hence, the data corpus in this study consisted of data gathered from the video recordings, interview transcripts with the participants, and research journals recorded from field notes and reflections during the research process. Considering the vast amount of complex data sources, the process of data selection and organization is initially explained. Then, the rationale for choosing the methods of analysis appropriate for the data and research questions of this study is provided. Finally, the stages of data analysis, including the coding process are described.

### 4.2 Data and Selection

At the start of the data analysis, data were collected of the four teachers and the key children in the same play episode with the corresponding teacher and then logged in separate folders respectively. During the course of this study, 22 hours 7 minutes of video recordings of children's play and 45 hours 24 minutes of video-cued conversations with the children and four teachers were collected. Table 4.1 displays the contributions from different groups of participants in two classes.

**Table 4.1 Duration of play episodes and video-stimulated interviews**

Teachers	Length of video	Length of video-stimulated interviews	Length of video-stimulated interviews with
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	recordings	with teachers	the children involved in the videos
Alice-Class No.1	7 hours and 34 minutes	12 hours 11 minutes	8 hours and 35 minutes
Bella-Class No.1	6 hours and 07 minutes	8 hours and 46 minutes	6 hours and 6 minutes
Claire-Class No.2	4 hours and 48 minutes	3 hours and 04 minutes	3 hours and 26 minutes
Daisy-Class No.2	3 hours and 38 minutes	2 hours and 17 minutes	59 minutes
Total	22 hours and 7 minutes	26 hours and 18 minutes	19 hours and 6 minutes

As displayed in the table above, there was unbalanced data collection between class one and class two, despite focusing the same amount of time in each class. Formal research was commenced in class two in April, during the midterm of second semester. Much of my research had been paused due to the midterm examinations provided by the kindergarten and the local Education Bureau. The kindergarten headteacher asked me not to come to the kindergarten during this period of time. Meanwhile, as one of the demonstration kindergartens in the area, other kindergartens would attend for school visits during the midterm. Consequently, the data collection in this study was affected by these continuous school visits and examinations. In May, data collection in class two was affected as some children were chosen for a rehearsal of the upcoming celebrations for international children's day on the first of June. Hence, there were less data collected from class two than class one.

In chapter three, the idea of "telling and retelling of the same event from different perspectives" (Tobin et al., 1989, p.4) was described as being at the heart of the research design for this study. This idea continues to inform the data analysis process

in this study. Consequently, the first basic criterion for selecting the data was if both the children and teachers had offered their perspectives on the same video recording. As noted in chapter three, some children chose not to take part in the interview sections. As a result, some play episodes, despite having captured meaningful contexts of children's play, were not chosen due to the absence of the children's perspectives. Similarly, the teachers' perspectives were not obtained when they were too busy to be interviewed.

The unbalanced data collected between class one and class two intensified after the first data selection had ended. This was particularly significant for the data collected in May, as some children were not in the classroom most of the time during this period. Considering the unbalanced data collection in these two classes, only data from class one was analysed in this study. It is important to note here that this approach was underpinned by the issue of data saturation (Bowen, 2008; Gentles et al., 2015; Bryman, 2016). As noted in chapter three, data saturation occurred when no new teachers' roles and opinions were obtained from the participants' perspectives. In reviewing the data from these two classes, data from class one were found to be sufficient to answer the research questions of this study. As noted by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), data analysis in qualitative research is a "back and forth process" (p.535). This was the case in this study. After the initial coding was concluded, I found that the teachers' roles in the role-play activities were richer than in other play activities, such as construction play and games with rules. Most teachers' roles were identified as observers and documenters in these two types of play activities. Hence, only the participants' perspectives on role-play activities are provided in this thesis with this decision being made based on sociocultural theories. Given that the definition of play in Vygotsky's theory only refers to make-believe play (Bodrova and Leong, 2015), it was considered to be more coherent to select data focused on role-play activities.

Thus, the data that underpinned this study were based on teachers' and children's perspectives on role-play activities in class one. As stated in chapter three, the sample

unit of this study was the teachers' roles in play. However, in some situations, the participants reported having more than one role in a play episode. Additionally, sometimes part of a play recording was edited into different play episodes due to length considerations. These situations brought challenges to identifying the sample units from the data, particularly the definition of "play" in which the teachers' roles were embedded. In a study focusing on exploring the teachers' roles during free play and the way children responded to teachers' behaviours within these roles, Gaviria-Loaiza et al. (2017) broke the videos of free play activities into different play events. Each play event consisted of a period that "started when the teacher assumed a specific role and ended when the teacher transitioned to a different role or if the play indicators were no longer present." (Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017, p. 7). Their approaches to dividing up videos into events were utilized in this study but vignettes were used to represent events. Furthermore, in the present study, the teachers' roles contained in the play vignettes were identified by the participants rather than the researcher. Sometimes, during the interviews the teachers expressed that they had changed their role in a play episode. Some of the children's commentaries on the teachers' behaviours also indicated that they had identified the teachers as playing a new role which was different from the play contexts a few minutes before. Accordingly, I broke the play episodes into vignettes based on the contents that emerged during the interviews with the participants. Each vignette presented the play contexts that captured the teachers' roles from both children's and teachers' perspectives. Denscombe (2010) asserts that in qualitative studies, researchers play the role of constructing the data. Despite the participants playing a dominant role in defining the sample unit, inevitably, I also engaged in this process to co-construct each play vignette with the participants. Table 4.2 displays the contributions of the participants in class one.

**Table 4.2 Duration of role-play episodes and qualified video-stimulated interviews**

Teachers	Length	of	Length of video-	Length	of	video-stimulated
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	video recordings	stimulated interviews with teachers	interviews with the children involved in the videos
Alice	4 hours and 8 minutes	8 hours 7 minutes	4 hours and 6 minutes
Bella	3 hours and 46 minutes	6 hours and 14 minutes	2 hours and 57 minutes
Total	7 hours and 54 minutes	14 hours and 21 minutes	7 hours and 3 minutes

### 4.3 Data Transcription and Translation

Since all the data were collected in Mandarin, I transcribed the audio-recorded interview data in the Chinese language. Meanwhile, I kept revisiting the corresponding videotapes and field notes of the interview transcripts during the transcribing process to establish a detailed and contextual account for later data analysis and translation. Twinn (1998) suggests that if the condition allows, the analysis of transcripts should be undertaken in the same language as is used in the interview. With this in mind, after I completed the data transcription, I deliberately coded and analysed the transcripts in Chinese. This decision was made in order to avoid the potential risk of distorting the meaning of transcribed data from one language to another (Polkinghorne, 2005). Compared to analysing the transcripts in the English language, I was able to protect the richness of the data and maintain the true meaning of the participants' voices by analysing the Chinese version of the transcripts.

I translated the transcribed data into English simultaneously while writing up this thesis. Esposito (2001) warned us not to underestimate the difficulties of translating the words and nuances of the participants into another language while doing cross-language research. The research validity might be threatened in the studies in which the

publication was in English yet both the participants and the researcher were non-English native language speakers (Van Nes et al., 2010). This is an issue of particular concern in this study because all the data were collected and transcribed in Chinese, yet the thesis was written in English. I have to admit that I encountered a lot of difficulties in translating the interview transcripts and dialogues between the participants from Chinese into English.

One of the main issues I met during the translation process was that not all concepts and words were translatable or even universal (Esposito, 2001; Jagosh and Boudreau, 2009). This occasion was significant when the children recreated or made up some phrases or words in our dialogues. As a native Chinese speaker, these words were also difficult for me to understand when the word structures were grammatically inappropriate or misused in the aspect of syntax. In order to face the challenge of this translation issue, I adopted some strategies during the interview and translation process. I agree with Esposito (2001) that the ideal data collection and analysis process is dynamic, flexible and concurrent. During the interview process, I always asked follow-up questions to children when I met some phrases or words that I did not understand. Based on the children's clarification, I then carefully selected the vocabulary and grammatical structure of the words for the best possible translation within my knowledge to keep the true meaning of the children's expressions. Esposito (2001) highlights the importance of considering individual situations and the cultural contexts that the language embodied in while translating the participants' statements. With this in mind, when translating the data, I made thorough consideration about the cultural meanings that both languages (Chinese and English) carried and evaluated the degree to which the words in these two different languages were equivalent. I took advantage of my positionality as an insider who shared the same sociocultural backgrounds with the participants to integrate the cultural interpretation of the participants' expressions into the translation process. For example, Table 4.3 shows a selected dialogue and the corresponding translations between the child Henry and me.

**Table 4.3: An example of the original and the corresponding translated transcripts**

Selected dialogues from the original transcripts	Selected dialogues from the translated transcripts
<p>Henry: 我觉得她很助人。</p> <p>Ling: “助人”是什么意思?</p> <p>Henry: 就是“助人”。</p> <p>Ling: 她做了什么让你觉得她很“助人”?</p> <p>Henry: 她帮我发现问题。</p>	<p>Henry: I thought she was very 助人 (zhuren).</p> <p>Ling: What was “助人” (zhuren) mean?</p> <p>Henry: Just “助人” (zhuren).</p> <p>Ling: What did she do that made you feel she was very “助人” (zhuren)?</p> <p>Henry: She helped me find problems.</p>

This selected transcript documented my discussion with Henry about the roles that teacher Alice played in the imaginative play activity, the kebab store. As was shown in the corresponding translated transcripts, I did not fully recognise and understand the word “助人” (zhuren) when I first heard this word from Henry. In the Chinese language, the pronunciation of this word, “zhuren”, could represent different vocabularies and different parts of the speech. Based on the contextual information that I gathered from our dialogues, I was able to interpret and understand the meaning of this word. Meanwhile, my Chinese cultural background also accelerated the progress of identifying the vocabulary that Henry referred to in his narratives. The word “助人” (zhuren) was the first half part of the Chinese four-character idiom “助人为乐”, which represents the meaning of taking pleasure in helping others. Whilst this vocabulary, “助人” (zhuren) is a verb in Chinese that is not universal to describe a person, I chose to adopt the meaning-based translation (Esposito, 2001) to translate it into the adjective “helpful”. Hence, I translated Henry’s first narrative as “I thought she was very helpful” in this thesis. Moreover, in order to respect Henry’s wording, I also presented the Chinese word and the corresponding Chinese phonetic alphabet together in the footnote to explain my translation choice. This decision was made due to my axiological standpoint of this study. Situated in the Childhood Studies paradigm, I

viewed children as competent who are able to speak out their voices through a hundred languages. My axiology put me in the position to not only respect children's diverse expressions during the data collection process but also present their voices in their own way as authentically as I could. Therefore, in order to keep the children's expressions as authentic and lively as possible, I deliberately translated the phrases or words that the children used into English literally. For example, the child Amy described teacher Alice as a "problematic customer" ("有问题的顾客") in the play context when the teacher kept pointing out and criticising the "food" and the "service" in the snack bar. Based on the teacher's behaviours in the play context, it might be more appropriate to translate Amy's comments to the teacher's role as a "picky customer". Yet I did not choose to use this word in the thesis. If I back-translated the word "picky" from English to Chinese, it was the word "挑剔的", an advanced vocabulary which was beyond the language competency of this four-year-old child Amy based on my observation during the research process. This decision I made went against Esposito's (2001) suggestion that translators should avoid word-for-word translations. But I did not want to lose children's unique expressions in the contexts where the phrases and words they chose were understandable but may not be accurate and natural when translated into the English-speaking context. In order to minimize the potential threats to the validity and trustworthiness of this study, I used footnotes to present children's original Chinese expressions. Moreover, as will be shown in the result chapter, I presented the selective dialogues between the children and me together with the corresponding play context which was demonstrated through still images and detailed descriptions. By doing so, I believe that despite some of the children's phrases and/or sentences might be against linguistic logic, the meanings that the children expressed were understandable with the support of the lively, detailed and authentic play contexts that these expressions were embedded in.

As I have illustrated above, the decisions that I made during the translation process varied between literal translation and meaning-based translation (Esposito, 2001). I was put in two conflicting positions that Shklarov (2007) described: "the neutral role of

a faithful translator versus the active role of a creative researcher” (p.533). I struggled with making the balance between keeping children’s authentic expressions and forming the translation of their language in an appropriate vocabulary and syntax. Yet I had to note that this challenging process also brought a positive side to my role as a researcher as it encouraged me to be critical and reflective during the translation process (Crane et, al., 2009).

#### **4.4 Rationale**

In line with the research aims and questions, the data analysis aimed to present the teachers’ roles from different perspectives. The aim was not to merely demonstrate the different roles identified by the participants, but also make visible the children’s theories of evaluating the teachers’ roles, and recognise the patterns of the teachers’ role positionings in play. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) have emphasized that data analysis should be able to “describe, classify, and connect” (p. 8), in order to develop new theories or meanings. With this in mind, thematic analysis was utilized in this study as an analytic method for grouping unstructured data into concepts and theories (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In qualitative research, the data are “multi-layered and open to a variety of interpretations.” (Cohen et al., 2011, p.535), which is the case in this study. In this study, in order to analyse each play vignette, the participants’ transcripts, video recordings, and research journals were triangulated to interpret and analyse the teachers’ roles. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that thematic analysis can provide flexible ways to interpret complex data, which is appropriate for the nature of the data in this study.

Patton (1990) indicates that thematic analysis should be used to align research questions to data. Due to the dynamic nature of digital video materials, the challenge in this research was triangulating the play episodes with other written data materials. To integrate these multiple data materials, Hedegaard’s (2008) three layers of



interpretation framework was employed to interpret the roles of the teachers as well as the dynamic play contexts they were situated in. Anchored in the cultural-historical approach, Hedegaard (2008) proposes three forms of interpretations for studying children's activities in their everyday lives: a common-sense interpretation, a situated practice interpretation, and a thematic interpretation. When using the three-layer framework to analyse digital video data, Fleer (2014) asserts that:

[a]ll three levels of interpretation occur concurrently, moving back and forth across the data, adding more and more visual layer to the analysis as the material is worked. (p.29)

Previous studies have used this three-layer of interpretation to analyse video data in relation to teachers' pedagogical positions in play activities (Devi et al., 2018, 2021) and family strategies in children's bilingual language development (Li, 2014). Given that teachers' roles are embedded in dynamic play contexts, the three-layer interpretation framework (Hedegaard, 2008) fits well with the nature of the data gathered. Consequently, while using thematic analysis to interpret and code the participants' transcripts, Hedegaard's (2008) three-layer interpretation framework was integrated into the analysis process. Each stage of data analysis is presented below.

## **4.5 Stages of Data Analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) propose six steps to implement thematic analysis: familiarising yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. However, they emphasise that these six phases are not fixed rules, and the analysis process is not linear. Thus, in this study, these steps were implemented flexibly when interpreting the data within Hedegaard's (2008) framework of interpretations.

#### 4.5.1 Common sense interpretation

According to Hedegaard (2008), a common-sense interpretation “does not demand explicit concepts, but some obvious relations stand out and the patterns in interaction can be seen” (p.58). This kind of interpretation focuses on activity settings in which the researcher does not engage (Hedegaard, 2008). In this study, the common-sense interpretation involved triangulating the materials from the data set, in order to form a detailed and holistic understanding of the play contexts in which teachers’ roles were situated. At this stage, data familiarization took place in which the data was actively read repeatedly (Braun and Clarke, 2006), including the play episode, research journals and the participants’ transcripts in relation to the play contexts. During this process, the focus was on examining whether the participants’ descriptions of the play contexts and scenarios were consistent with the observations from the video recordings and field notes. In some situations, inconsistency existed. When working with verbal data, some researchers highlight the importance of transcribing the data into written form for further analysis (Bird, 2005; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the focus of the analysis at this stage was on generating a common-sense interpretation, a brief description of the play vignette was recorded but with key points highlighted, such as the inconsistent narratives between the participants and children’s introductions to their interests. Table 4.4 shows an extract from the description of a play vignette with interpretations and comments.

**Table 4.4: An extract of a common-sense interpretation of a play vignette**

Snack Bar-2019.3.18	Teacher Alice; Children: Amy and John
At the beginning of the play, Teacher Alice told the children who played in the Snack Bar that she was going to be the chef. Then each child was told his/her role. Amy was the waitress who was responsible for ordering the food and delivering the takeaway. John was the waiter washing the dishes. He was also in charge of wiping the table. But as the play continued, Alice regarded John as her assistant who	

worked with her to prepare food. In the interview, Alice confirmed that John played the role of her assistant. The owner of this Snack Bar was Amy. But in my conversation with Amy, Amy said the owner was John. Yet, John mentioned that Teacher Alice was the owner, and he did not recognise himself as the chef's assistant. He explained that this work was assigned by Alice.

These brief summaries of the play vignettes were used to initially interpret the play contexts and scenarios in the vignette, and helped to provide a holistic understanding of the children's play and play contexts. These summaries provided the foundation for the next layer of situated practice interpretation.

Furthermore, in order to gain an overview of the children's role-play activities, I also organise the play episodes into different units according to the play theme they presented. In total, there are 57 play vignettes that have been used for analysis. Table 4.5 demonstrates the role-play themes of class one and the corresponding effective play vignettes generated from the play themes.

**Table 4.5 The role-play themes and the effective play vignettes in Class One**

<b>Class One (2018.12.17-2019.3.18)</b>				
Role-play Theme	Numbers of Play vignettes	Date	Teacher	Key children
Hamburger Store	2	2018.12.20	Alice	Luck
	1	2019.1.9	Bella	Luke
	1	2019.1.18	Alice	Luke and Tom
	2	2019.2.28	Bella	Luke, Tom and Jill
Home corner	1	2018.12.18	Alice	Jerry and Jane
	1	2018.12.26	Bella	
	1	2019.3.7	Bella	Angel, Jane, Monica

	1	2019.2.25	Alice	Monica
	1	2019.3.12	Bella	Angel and Phebe
Hospital	1	2019.2.25	Bella	Monica
	3	2019.3.5	Bella	Monica, Lily, Bonnie
	3	2019.3.14	Bella	Monica, Lily, Bonnie
Fruit Juice Shop	1	2018.12.24	Alice	Mike and Jack
	1	2019.2.27	Alice	Mike
	4	2019.3.4	Alice	Mike, Jack and John
	2	2019.3.8	Alice	Mike
	1	2019.3.11	Alice	Mike and Lucy
Kebab Store	5	2019.2.26	Alice	Henry
	2	2019.3.6		
	2	2019.3.15		
Snack Bar	2	2019.2.25	Alice	Amy, Jerry, John
	3	2019.3.1		Amy, Tom
	2	2019.3.13		Amy, Luke
	5	2019.3.18		Amy, John, Alex
Bank	2	2019.3.21	Bella	Mike
	4	2019.3.25	Alice	Tom
Fire station	2	2019.3.4	Alice	David, Kelly and Alex
	2	2019.3.8		David and Kelly

## 4.5.2 Situated practice interpretation

At the situated practice interpretation level, Hedegaard (2008) describes that the ideal interpretation “transcends the single activity settings and links together observations taken across several activity settings within the same project” (p.58). Meanwhile, theoretical preconceptual understanding is used to identify the “dominant motives, patterns of interaction and problems.” (Hedegaard, 2008, p.58). Accordingly, I started to generate initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) from the data set. Initial codes were generated in relation to the teachers’ roles in play from the transcripts of the participants. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that the process of coding can be “data-driven” or “theory-driven” (p.18). When selecting the “theory-driven” approach, researchers code the data with the specific questions in mind that they expect to code around (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the research questions in this study, the “theory-driven” approach was used during the coding process. As noted above, this study not only aims to define teachers’ roles. While analysing the transcripts from the teachers’ interviews, their definitions of the roles in play were basically consistent with the roles proposed in the policies and policy-driven research, such as observers and supporters. In addition, they also provided rich perceptions about why they chose to play a certain role in play contexts. The teachers in this study were able to give clear definitions and descriptions of their roles and pedagogical practices in play vignette. Consequently, at the initial round of coding, I was able to generate the teachers’ perspectives that contributed to the theme of teachers’ roles from the teachers’ perspectives, which are presented in Table 4.6 below:

**Table 4.6 Coding list of the teachers’ roles and pedagogical practices**

Teachers’ definitions to their roles in play	Teachers’ pedagogical practices/ behaviours in play
Observer	Watch children’s play with no verbal or physical interactions with children

	Watch children's play and initiate/accept interactions with children
Documenter	Take photos or videos of children's play with no verbal or physical interactions with children
	Take photos or videos of children's play and initiate/accept interactions with children
supporter	Follow children's instructions to meet their request or solve their problems
	Offer children's help actively/Guide children through direct/indirect instructions
Guider	Have dialogues with children/Ask children questions
	Model one of roles in children's play
Director	Give direct instructions to children
Assessor	Have dialogues with children/Ask children questions
	Create conflict between children in order to understand children's perspectives on play
Play partner	Play with children to construct, expand play scenarios

In terms of the children, during the initial active reading and re-reading of the data set, I found that the children tended to identify the teachers' roles by describing the teachers' behaviours. Hence, when coding the children's transcripts, the roles proposed in the research literature were used to code the children's definitions of the teachers' roles. As to the children's response to the teacher's roles, based on the children's behaviours in the play episodes as well as their comments on the teachers' roles, several children's behaviours were identified such as ignoring teachers' questions, following teachers' instructions, and building on the play scenarios with teachers. A full example of initial coding of both children and teachers is included in Appendix eight.

### 4.5.3 Interpretation at a thematic level

Hedegaard (2008) states that at the thematic interpretation level, the focus was to find meaningful patterns that link to the research aims. This process is based on situated interpretation. Hence, at this stage, the themes were identified from these codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe a theme as “captur[ing] something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.” (p.10). Based on the research questions, two theses were identified: the factors to influence teachers’ role positionings and pedagogical choices, and the children’s evaluations of the roles of teachers in play.

The multiple factors that were generated from the data can be framed into a three-layer framework concerning the teachers’ decision-making in their roles and the pedagogical practices in multiple play contexts. These three layers are the personal, the institutional and the societal. This framework is presented as Table 4.7 below:

**Table 4.7 Thematic framework for the factors to influence teachers’ role positionings**

Personal Layer	Institutional Layer	The societal Layer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Children’s development level and abilities;</li> <li>● Children’s temperaments;</li> <li>● Children’s contextual needs and requirement;</li> <li>● Children’s interests;</li> <li>● Children’s funds of knowledge of the play theme;</li> <li>● Teachers’ professional knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Contextual conditions of play activities;</li> <li>● Development stages of play;</li> <li>● Kindergarten regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Policy documents;</li> <li>● Prevalent curriculum programmes</li> </ul>

The children's evaluations were generated from their perspectives on the teachers' roles as well as their responses to the teachers within these roles. Gaviria-Loaiza et al., (2017) identify three categories of children's responses to the teachers' roles in children's free play activities: ignore/reject behaviours, evaluative behaviours and acceptance behaviours. While reviewing the coding, the connection between children's comments about the teachers' roles and their responses to the teachers' roles was identified. Table 4.8 demonstrates three categories of children's responses to the roles of teachers when they gave positive evaluations of the teachers' roles.

**Table 4.8 Thematic framework for children's positive evaluation of teachers' roles**

Responses to teachers' roles in play	Teachers' roles from children's perspectives
<p><b>No response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No verbal or physical response to the teacher</li> </ul>	<p>Observers;</p> <p>Documenters;</p>
<p><b>Accept response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Follow teachers' instructions/guidance/suggestions;</li> <li>● Construct/expand play scenarios with teachers;</li> <li>● Cooperate with teachers' ideas/instructions/guidance</li> </ul>	<p>Play partners</p> <p>Supporters</p> <p>Enquiries</p>
<p><b>Initiate response:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Propose requests to teachers/ask teachers for help;</li> <li>● Invite the teacher to construct, expand, build up the play scenarios;</li> <li>● Share play situations with teachers;</li> <li>● Question teachers' ideas</li> </ul>	<p>Supporters</p> <p>Play partners</p> <p>Documenters</p> <p>Observers</p>

Correspondently, children's negative evaluations of teachers' roles were also identified through the coding process. It is worthy noticing that the children tended to accept the



teachers' roles even though gave negative evaluations of teachers' roles. This is presents in Table 4.9.

**Table 4.9 Thematic framework for children's negative evaluation of teachers' roles**

Responses to teachers' roles in play	Teachers' roles from children's perspectives
<b>Accept responses:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Follow teachers' instructions/ideas/suggestions</li> </ul>	Directors; Enquiries; Play partners;

In addition, while reviewing the themes of children's evaluations of teachers' roles, a third category of children's evaluations had been identified: the compound evaluation of teachers' roles. This is presented as Table 4.10 below:

**Table 4.10 Thematic framework for children's compound evaluation of teachers' roles**

Responses to teachers' roles in play	Teachers' roles from children's perspectives
Initiated responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Invite the teacher to construct, expand, and build up the play scenarios;</li> </ul>	Enquiries; Play partners
Accept responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Follow teachers' instructions/ideas/suggestions</li> </ul>	

## 4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter explains the process of selecting suitable data for analysis. The sample unit was clarified in order to demonstrate what constitutes a play vignette for data

analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen for data analysis. Considering the complex data in this study, Hedegaard's (2008) three layers framework was adapted to analyse the data. In the next chapter, the findings of this study are presented through the play vignettes, which contain both the children's and teachers' perspectives on the roles of teachers.

# Chapter five: Findings and Analysis

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a detailed account of the finding aiming to answer the research questions below:

1. What are teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play, and how do children respond to teachers within these roles?
2. Why do teachers choose certain roles and pedagogical practices in children's play?
3. What are children's perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?

The chapter presents the data from each teacher and the corresponding key children in turn. The discussion about teachers' roles is presented through different play themes that they participated in, in order to avoid repetitions of contextual information about the selected vignettes. Still images from the video material illustrate important play scenarios and interactions between the teacher and the children. Children's perspectives on play and teachers' roles are presented within the context of video-cued dialogues that they engaged in with me. The repeated key questions, e.g., "what role is the teacher playing?" are removed from the transcripts, in order to highlight children's voices. Within the discussion on each type of role, children's perspectives are placed at the forefront, following teachers' perspectives on their roles and pedagogical practices, aiming to provide a comprehensive analysis of the roles of teachers in different contexts of play. This structure also enables me to "tell and retell the same event from different perspectives." (Tobin et al., 1989, p. 4).

## 5.2 Teacher Bella's roles in children's play

Bella was the director of class number one, and she was in charge of all the classroom arrangements and teaching plans. She had worked in this kindergarten for two years. As a less experienced teacher, Bella needed to participate in many professional trainings and school visits which were arranged by the kindergarten and local educational departments. Bella complained that she did not have enough time to observe and go deeper into children's play. Due to time constraints, she would walk around to visit each play theme for a short period of time. Only one play theme, the hospital, was selected in this section, because Bella had been following this theme for a rather long period of time. Table 5.1 summarises Bella's roles within three selected episodes as well as children's definitions and responses to these roles.

**Table 5.1 Teacher's roles from the perspectives of Teacher Bella and children**

Teacher's roles from Bella's perspectives	Teacher's pedagogical practices	Teacher's roles from children's perspectives	Children's comments and responses to teachers' roles	Play theme- Episode- Vignette
Observer	Watch children's play with no verbal or physical interaction with children	Observer	<b>No response:</b> No verbal or physical response to the teacher	Hospital- Ep1
Documenter	Take photos or videos of children's play with no verbal or physical interaction with the children	Documenter	<b>No response:</b> No verbal or physical response to the teacher	Hospital- Ep1

Guider	Have dialogues with children/Ask children questions	Enquirer	<b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's instructions but do not willing to follow	Hospital- Ep2-V1
	Model one of the roles in children's play	Play partner	<b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's ideas and/or play actions	Hospital- Ep3-V1
Hospital- Ep3-V3				
Supporter	Offer children's help actively/Guide children through language	Enquirer	<b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's instructions but do not willing to follow	Hospital- Ep2-V1
				Hospital- Ep2-V2
Play partner	Play with children to construct, expand play scenarios	Play partner	<b>Accept response:</b> Construct/expand play scenarios with teachers	Hospital- Ep3-V1
Director	Give direct instructions to the children	Director	<b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's instructions but do not willing to follow	Hospital- Ep3-V2

## 5.2.1 Hospital



This theme emerged from an interaction between teacher Alice and two girls from Home Corner. When Alice found that a doll's "arm" was broken, she suggested these children bring the doll to the "hospital". While one child asked Alice "*where is the hospital?*", the other child went to the material room to find something to fix the doll. Alice did not continue to guide these two children as she was aware that Bella was going to start the theme Hospital that week. Bella mentioned that she was inspired by other teachers when they shared children's play in the Hospital in their weekly teaching and research meeting. She decided to introduce this new theme to children since they had a box of "hospital" props that these children used to play in their younger stage. Three episodes were chosen to present Bella's roles. The first episode presented the emergence of this play theme. Bella played roles as an observer and a documenter after she provided these children with a box of play props. In the second episode, two vignettes were presented to discuss the teacher's roles as a guide and a supporter. In the last episode, three vignettes were presented to show how Bella placed herself inside the imaginary play situations to play with children as a guide and a play partner, and outside the situation as a director.

## 5.2.2 The first episode in Hospital

### **5.2.2.1 The teacher's roles in the first episode: an observer and a documenter from both children's and teacher's perspectives**

This vignette took place when children returned back to their Home. Bella was already inside their house to show this box of props to other children. Monica (the girl in a pink coat) and Angela (the girl in a black sweater) started to use tools to work on the doll's arm. Bella watched their play for a while and then she started to record their play

without further intervention. She left this play theme after recording for around twenty minutes.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Monica
<p>Monica tried to fix the “arm” but failed.</p>  <p>Monica: I need other tools to fix it.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monica: She <b>watched</b> us play...then, she was <b>taking the videos</b>.</li> <li>2. Ling: Did you like teacher Bella taking videos at that time?</li> <li>3. Monica: I did.</li> <li>4. Ling: Why did she take videos?</li> <li>5. Monica: Because we were doing it well. She wanted to let other children see it...how we play.</li> </ol>
<p>Monica was busy using a plastic toy hammer to “fix” the broken arm. Then, she took away the syringe from Vicky (the girl wearing the nurse costume).</p>  <p>Monica: Let me do it. I have the same one at home.</p> <p>Monica gave an injection in the broken</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Ling: Did you like to fix the doll’s arm that day? Was it fun?</li> <li>7. Monica: I did!</li> <li>8. Ling: Why didn’t you ask teacher Bella for help? She seemed to be free.</li> <li>9. Monica: She was taking videos. (I) would have disturbed her.</li> <li>10. Ling: Would you have asked teacher Bella to help you? If she had said it was ok to disturb her?</li> <li>11. Monica: No. I could fix it. I also have a syringe at home. But (there are) some I don’t have.</li> </ol>

“arm”. Then she turned to the tool box to look for other tools.	
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Monica’s description of Bella’s behaviour suggested that she viewed the teacher as an **observer** and a **documenter** in this vignette (Line 1). These two roles were consistent with Bella’s definitions of her roles since her pedagogical practice was clear and significant in this context: she observed and documented children’s play from a certain distance with no interaction with children. Correspondently, Monica did not initiate any interaction with Bella during the whole process. She consciously cooperated with the teacher when the teacher was playing these two roles (Line 9). Monica showed positive feedback to the teacher’s pedagogical practice (Line 3). The way that Monica responded to Bella might also be associated with her interests in this context. She immersed herself in exploring the possibilities of different play materials even though she did not experience a successful outcome. Moreover, Monica’s responses, as captured in the second still image, as well as her argument (Line 11), suggested that she was a confident player due to her home play experience. Therefore, what Monica needed in this context was a space to exercise her agency to play with these new play materials that she was interested in (Line 11). Outside children’s play, Bella’s roles were able to meet and satisfy Monica’s needs and interests in this context. Her reflection upon in-the-moment pedagogical decisions was as follows:

**Hospital-Episode 1-Excerpt from the transcripts**

Bella: Their interests were really focusing on materials that day. They had not played with some of them, so they had the novelty...Actually, I really wanted to guide doctors and nurses to fix the broken arm...But I was afraid if I intervened in their play to guide them, yes, their play plot could develop in a rather rational way, but they might not be interested in my way. They WERE playing a bit against the reality of logic. But this might be because they did not have the experience, they were trying...



Ling: Could you intervene in their play to act as a modeller to support their experience in fixing the arm?

Bella: Yes, I think that was also ok. But I couldn't do this in the moment. I might support them after the play...I was thinking to give them some time, let them try to play first. If they did not play, they could not find the problem, neither could I find problems.

Bella identified but did not appreciate Monica's interest in play materials. Facing the conflict between children's interest and her expectations of their play actions, Bella chose to prioritize children's interest over a more mature play status due to children's limited knowledge of fixing a broken 'arm' as well as the current play stage, as this was the first time children were playing this theme. Whilst Bella expressed a strong intention to give guidance to children in this context, she chose to observe and document children's play without interaction. According to Bella, she planned to show children the video after the play.

*Bella: Because I think, the spoken word flies, I need to document it first. Then, later we can discuss together, just like you and me, in this form. I show these children, (asking) if there is any problem in the video/play.*

Bella's description of her later pedagogical practice suggested that she planned to adopt a video-cued reflexive dialogue with children. Her reason to document children's play was to prepare the material for her guidance after the play had ended. By documenting children's play, Bella was able to choose an appropriate timing for her guidance in order to respect children's interest in play. It is interesting to see that as a confident player, Monica believed Bella's intention was to acknowledge recognize her behaviour (Line 5). Yet Bella's perspectives suggested that Monica's assumption of the


modelling functions of the video Line 5) was a misunderstanding since Bella's intention was to discuss the problems she found in this play.

### **5.2.3 The second episode in Hospital**

This episode focuses on a discussion that emerged in the middle of the play because of the teacher's intervention. In this kindergarten, children were required to discuss the role assignment at the beginning of the play activity. Children often initiated their play by moving directly into the activity without this planning step, which is the play context that is presented in this episode. After observing children for a few minutes, Bella intervened to initiate a discussion with these children about their role assignment. During this process, Bella played and transferred the roles of the observer, supporter, guider and documenter. The discussions below focus on the roles of guider and supporter. Two vignettes are selected according to the discussion themes from different play contexts.

#### **5.2.3.1 The teacher's roles in vignette one: an enquirer from children's perspectives; a guider and a supporter from the teacher's perspectives**

This vignette presents the first discussion that was initiated by Bella. She engaged a group of children in a discussion about their role assignment. Bonnie's original idea to be a "doctor" was challenged by Bella since the other two girls wearing a doctor's costume also called themselves "doctors". In the process of discussion, Bonnie adjusted her role in this play due to the monitoring from her peers who already built their theory about using the corresponding symbolic costumes to assign roles. Hence, Bella's roles and pedagogical practice demonstrated how the teacher facilitated children's intersubjectivity in the aspect of negotiating roles in a group. The discussions also revealed Bonnie's comments about Bella's request to negotiate children's roles within the group community.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversation with Bonnie
<p>Bella: What role do you play in this Hospital?</p> <p>Bonnie (the girl with two braids wearing the pink jumper): Doctor.</p>  <p>Bella pointed at Vichy (the girl wearing the white coat and cap) and turned to Bonnie again.</p> <p>Bella: How about her?</p> <p>Bonnie did not reply.</p> <p>Bella: Were you a “doctor” because you said you were a “doctor”? How about other people? Did they ALL agree with you?</p> <p>Bonnie did not respond to Bella’s questions.</p> <p>Bella: Did you discuss what roles each of you were playing in Hospital?</p> <p>None of the children responded to Bella.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bonnie: Teacher Bella was <b>asking me questions</b>.</li> <li>2. Ling: Why did teacher Bella come in and ask you questions?</li> <li>3. Bonnie: I did not know.</li> </ol>
<p>Bella: Who is the “doctor”? Who is the “nurse” and who is the “patient”?</p>	

Phoebe (the girl in a yellow sweater) pointed at Vicky and Andrea (the girl wearing the white coat).



Phoebe: They are doctors. They wear coats.

Bella: You do not say. Let them.....You should all discuss together.

Bella: You all discuss together now.....which role do you want to play?



Bonnie: Monica (the girl wearing the pink coat and nurse cap), let me be the "nurse", ok?

Monica did not reply to Bonnie. She was buckling the knot. Seeing this, Bonnie did not ask again. Bella was watching these children without further intervention.

All children went to report their roles to Bella except Bonnie.

4. Ling: I remember you wanted to be the "doctor", right? Why did you want to be the "nurse" then?

5. Bonnie: Nurse was also good.

6. Ling: Why?

7. Bonnie: You could also use those (pointed at the tool boxes).

8. Ling: How about the "patient"? Did you like to be the 'patient'?

9. Bonnie: (shook her head). The "patient" could not use those. You just played and left.

10. Ling: Why did you ask Vicky if you could be the "nurse"?

11. Bonnie: Because she said I



Bella: How about Bonnie?

Vicky: She is the “patient”.

Bonnie replied to Bella in a very low voice which could barely be heard.

Bonnie: I am the “patient”.

Bella: Do all of them agree with you?

Bonnie: (turn to Vicky) Vicky, do you agree I play the “nurse”?

Vicky did not reply to Bonnie.

Bella: You need all the children to agree with you. Not only Vicky.

Bonnie stood beside Bella silently for a few seconds. Lily (the girl wearing a grey jumper) went to Bonnie and gently pulled Bonnie’s arm.

was the “patient”.

**12.** Ling: Do you think it was a good idea to ask everyone to agree with you being the “nurse”?

**13.** Bonnie: (thinks for a while) too many (people).

**14.** Ling: Why do you have to wear the coat to be the “doctor” and the “nurse”?

**15.** Bonnie: I do not know. There is only one pink coat. Monica took it first.

**18.** Ling: Why didn’t you ask teacher Bella for help?

**19.** Bonnie: She asked us to



Lily: You did not wear the coat.....like the coat that Vicky was wearing.

Bonnie did not respond to Lily.

Bella: What do you want to be? What role do you want to play?

Bonnie: I am not wearing the coat. I have to be the 'patient'.

discuss by ourselves.

20. Ling: What role was teacher Bella playing?

21. Bonnie: the **teacher**.

22. Ling: Did you like her being there?

23. Bonnie: Shook her head.

Monica, Vicky and Andrea were the first three children to play this theme. As experienced players, they have the awareness to find the corresponding costumes to represent their roles at the very beginning of the play. As a newcomer, Bonnie did not share this rule with her peers (Lines 14/15). Her preference of the roles as the “doctor” and “nurse” indicated that she chose the roles due to her interests in playing with materials (Lines 7/9). Bonnie’s interests had not been satisfied due to Bella’s intervention. Her description of Bella’s pedagogical practice suggested that she viewed Bella as an **enquirer** (Line 1). Whilst Bella’s questions and instructions emphasized the togetherness and wholeness of children’s discussion, Bonnie’s responses showed that she only negotiated alone with the individual child who was playing the role that she aimed to play. Bonnie’s perspectives on Bella’s request suggested that she held an evaluative response to Bella’s guidance as she viewed it as an extra task for her (Lines 12/13). At the end of this vignette, Bonnie compromised to choose the role that

she least wanted to play because of Bella's intervention, which might explain why Bonnie showed negative feedback to Bella's presence (Line 23).

Bella's pedagogical decision was made based on her observations. Her comments on children's play behaviour were presented below:

*Bella: They just started playing directly, just purely operating the props.....I know they were very interested in these materials.....If I had not intervened, they would have just continued to play with these materials without further development, no interactions, no play plots. There is no difference to the children from junior class.....We have told them repeatedly, you need to discuss your role first, what do I do, what do you do, what can we do later. Then you can go and do the things that your role is required to do.*

Bella was not satisfied with the children's behaviour as she found they mainly played with objects solitarily and/or parallelly without collaborating with each other, a less mature level of play (Elkonin, 1978) that she did not want children to remain in. Accordingly, whilst Bella identified Bonnie's interest was in play materials, she did not satisfy her on purpose. Her purpose was to increase the interactions between children and enrich play plots through play planning. Bella proposed two roles that she played in this context.

#### **Hospital-Episode 2-Vgnette 1- Excerpt from the transcripts**

Bella: ...I was guiding them to negotiate their role assignment in that moment. I am not sure about which role I was playing. I was a **guide** and I was also a **supporter**. Actually, I was just supporting their play by guiding them.

Ling: Could you be more specific about how you guided them?

Bella: I talked with them. Asked them questions and communicated with them. You see. They did not know how to communicate with each other. Not just Bonnie. She (Monica) did not reply to her question. Neither did Vicky. They did not have a collective awareness.

Ling: Why was it so important for them to develop a collective awareness?

Bella: I was trying to tell them that, you were in a group. You needed to know each other's roles. And you needed to consult with each other if you wanted to play a role.

Ling: Will this improve their play level that you mentioned just now?

Bella: I did not think about it at that time. I was thinking, I was hoping they could at least talk to each other and discuss their roles first.

Bella's depictions of her roles and pedagogical practices offer insights to the multi-dimensions of a teacher's role in the same context. These reflections also suggest the blurry boundary between the guide and supporter. Bella expected children to negotiate their play before stepping into the imaginary situation. According to Göncü (1993), this process contributes to establish meta-communication among children, an important element to build intersubjectivity within children's role play. To support children's negotiations, Bella first required children to follow the classroom rule of planning the play, then she adopted the pedagogical practice of questioning, aiming to involve every child in the negotiation process. The questions that Bella proposed to the children, especially to Bonnie, focused on monitoring Bonnie to gain approval for her role from the whole group. Moreover, her responses to Phoebe, as captured in the second still image, suggested that she was trying to cultivate children's collective awareness by avoiding interacting with individual children. It is likely that Bella valued the process of negotiation, rather than the outcomes of the children's discussion. Therefore, Bella viewed herself as a **guide** in this process, which intertwined with the role of the



**supporter** to facilitate the establishment of children’s intersubjectivity in this play context.

Bella’s comments to the children’s limited collective awareness in their negotiating process resonated with Bonnie’s perspectives of her request, as she did not see the necessity of collective discussion (Line 18). Whilst children may need support in how to negotiate with each other, Bella’s pedagogical practice contributes more to monitoring and reminding children of collective awareness, rather than stimulating children’s motivation to negotiate their ideas in a group. Furthermore, Bella did not get involved in the children’s negotiating process. Her interaction with Bonnie had shown little support to guide Bonnie about how to sustain her conversations with Monica and Vicky to argue for her choices. Therefore, Bonnie did not realize Bella’s support in this vignette (Line 19). The poor results of children’s negotiation pose an important point: the establishment of children’s collective awareness in their meta-communication might need external support.

### **5.2.3.2 The teacher’s roles in vignette two: an enquirer from children’s perspectives; a supporter from the teacher’s perspectives**

This vignette focuses on children’s discussions about whether the “nurse” should have a stethoscope. While Bella was watching the children’s play without intervention, her observation was interrupted by Lily who argued that there was an inconsistency between Monica’s role and the prop that she used. Accordingly, Bella delivered Lily’s opinions to Monica and discussed this issue with her. Monica’s responses and perspectives on Bella’s role present how children cope with the teacher’s authority in play. Bella’s pedagogical practice presents how the teacher acts as a mediator to support children’s working theories.

<b>Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage</b>	<b>Selected conversations with Monica</b>
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Bonnie: (pointing at Monica's box) Teacher, the nurse should not have the stethoscope.

Phoebe: the doctor has it.



Hearing this, Monica took out the stethoscope and started to play on her own.

Bella did not respond to them but continued to watch their play.

Lily (the girl in a grey jumper) stepped forward.

Lily: Let me tell you.....when I had a cold, I went to the hospital, I did not see that the nurse had a stethoscope.





Bella: Oh! Yes. So, you think the nurse should not have the stethoscope, right?

Lily: (Nods her head) Only the doctor has (the stethoscope).

Monica stood aside and looked at Bella and Lily. She stepped forward and took off the

1. Ling: Do you agree with her?
2. Monica: A bit. I already knew. It was just I felt (it) was pretty, I wanted it.
3. Ling: Why did you take it off?
4. Monica: Because Lily told teacher Bella that the "nurse" did not have the stethoscope.

<p>stethoscope.</p>	
<p>Bella: She just told me, the nurse does not use the stethoscope. Have you seen a nurse use a stethoscope?</p>	<p>5. Monica: Teacher Bella is talking to me. She is <b>asking me questions</b>.</p>
	<p>6. Ling: What role is she playing?</p>
<p>Monica: (Nods her head).</p>	<p>7. Monica: None. She is the <b>teacher</b> now. Later, she will be the patient. Pretend.</p>
<p>Bella: She said she has (seen one). (Bella talks to Lily)</p>	<p>8. Ling: Did you want to give the stethoscope back to the “doctor”?</p>
<p>Bella continued to talk to Monica. Seeing this, Lily left to play with other children.</p>	<p>9. Monica: No.</p>
<p>Bella: What does the nurse do in the hospital?</p>	<p>10. Ling: How did you feel at that time?</p>
<p>Monica: Give an injection</p>	<p>11. Monica: I felt not very happy.</p>
<p>Bella: And?</p>	<p>12. Ling: Then why did you return it to Vicky?</p>
<p>Monica: Give (you) medicine.</p>	<p>13. Monica: Teacher Bella asked me to. We need to listen to the teacher.</p>
<p>Bella: Does the nurse use a stethoscope?</p>	<p>14. Ling: Did you like teacher Bella being there at that time?</p>
<p>Monica: (no response)</p>	<p>15. Monica: Yes.</p>
<p>Bella: Why did you take this?</p>	<p>17. Ling: Why?</p>
<p>Hearing this, Monica gave the stethoscope back to the “doctor”. Then she went to play with other children.</p>	<p>16. Monica: Because we can play better.</p>
	<p>17. Ling: How? Do you mean after you gave the stethoscope back to the ‘doctor’, you played better? Is this what you mean?</p>
	<p>18. Monica: (Nods her head) Um.</p>
	<p>19. Ling: What if teacher Bella had not</p>

	<p>been there at that time, could you have had the stethoscope?</p> <p><b>20.</b> Monica: (shook her head) The nurse cannot have the stethoscope.</p>
<p>After a while, Monica went back. She took the stethoscope back and put it on her neck.</p>  <p>Bella: I am going to buy something to eat. Then I will be the patient, ok?</p>	<p>21. Ling: You took it back.</p> <p><b>22.</b> Monica: Yes. I wanted it. I thought this stethoscope was very beautiful.</p> <p>23. Ling: You just said you needed to listen to the teacher.</p> <p>24. Monica: (pauses for a few seconds) She did not say anything.</p> <p>25. Ling: So, teacher Bella agreed the nurse could use the stethoscope.</p> <p>26. Monica: Um (nods her head). I did not know.</p>

As presented in the first episode, Monica showed great interest in playing with these play props. In this vignette, her interest in play materials is sustained as she was so attracted by the appearance of the stethoscope that she was persistent in owning this prop (Lines 2/22). Monica's behaviour in this context suggested that she was testing the boundary of whether the teacher allowed her to own the stethoscope which was inconsistent with her role as a "nurse". She did not completely adjust her actions when her peers tried to regulate her stop her using the stethoscope. Monica completely conformed to the rule to return the stethoscope to the 'doctor' after Bella's intervention. Her description of Bella's pedagogical practice suggested that she viewed Bella as an **enquirer** (Lines 5/7). Monica realized her actions were against the real-life rule (Lines 2/20). She managed to control her desire of owning the stethoscope due to Bella's authority as a teacher (Lines 4/13). Whilst Monica's enjoyment in the play had been

sacrificed to some degree (Line 11), she gave positive feedback to the teacher's role (Line 15-18).

Bella's perspectives on Monica's behaviour, however, suggested that she was not trying to get involved in Monica's decision-making. Her reflection upon her in-the-moment pedagogical practice was as follows:

**Hospital-Episode 2-Vygnette 2- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Bella: ...I thought yes, it seemed to be like what she said. I agreed. So, I told her (Monica) about it. But I did not mean "you are wrong", not saying you were wrong. I wanted to let her consider it by herself, so I was not guiding her, I was **supporting** her...She said yes to my first question, it might be, she just wanted to have this stethoscope. So, I continued to ask her what did the nurse do specifically, and then she started to think...She did not say. But actually, she seemed to know the answer, you see, then she gave up.

Ling: Were you still a supporter at that moment?

Bella: Yes. As I said before, I did not say you were wrong. I just wanted to let her consider it by herself. Help her think.

Bella's commentary suggested that whilst she agreed with Lily's opinions, her intention was not to negate Monica's behaviour. Instead, Bella expected Monica to exercise her agency to justify Lily's opinion independently. Whilst Bella emphasized her neutral perspective on Monica's play actions, her responses to Monica's answers to her first question indicated that she still expected Monica to change her decision on the choice of play prop in a manner consistent with this role (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). As such, Bella chose to sustain a conversation with Monica when she found Monica's interest in owning the play prop that had a conflict with her expectation. In her later conversation with Monica, Bella's questions shed light on the work of a nurse in reality,

which helped Monica review her knowledge to associate the specific use of play props within the role she was imitating. Bella was convinced that she played the role of a **supporter** in this process, since she tried to weaken her voice in Monica's decision-making. Furthermore, Bella's perspective on Monica's behaviour was closely connected with her understanding of the rules in imaginative play. At the end of this vignette, Monica took back the stethoscope and wore it in front of Bella under the acquiescence of Bella. Her reflections on her pedagogical decision were as follows:

**Hospital-Episode 2-Vignette 2- Excerpt from the transcripts 2**

Bella: Actually, I did not give a fixed play rule to them. Because there is no need to completely imitate the reality in children's play...But actually, as long as your (children's) play was not against reality too much, I thought their (children's) behaviours could be all accepted.

Ling: Do you take any reference to measure the difference between reality and children's play?

Bella: Um, no. It might just be, it is dominated by myself.

Bella's flexible perspectives on the rules in children's play explained why she adopted a loosening control to Monica's inconsistent actions with real-life logic. Her perspectives on the relationship between reality and children's play behaviour resonated with the paradoxical nature of imaginative play (Göncü et al., 2017). Bella admitted she played a dominant role to judge if children's imitating and imaginative behaviours are appropriate or not. From Vygotsky's perspective, play is contradictory since it is spontaneous and flexible on the one hand, and rule-governed on the other hand (Vygotsky, 1967). In this context, Bella's in-the-moment pedagogical decision swung between the boundary regarding which side of the play she was inclined to support: the enjoyable and intrinsically voluntary component of play which is emerged from children's interests and needs, or the rule-governed component of play which

contributes to the development of children's self-regulated and intentional behaviour (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). Bella's contradictory behaviour indicated that she seemed to take both sides into account. Her paradoxical pedagogical practice in this context prompted us to consider if the teacher has a clear and comprehensive understanding of the nature of children's play, and if she realizes what kind of play acts as the leading activity to support children's development, specifically, which aspects of development. While Monica tried to control her behaviour by rules that require her to postpone the desire to own a specific prop, Bella's later pedagogical practice may weaken Monica's self-regulated awareness and behaviour which were just being built through her previous support. Thus, Monica seemed to be confused about Bella's responses to her behaviour (Line 26).


#### **5.2.4 The third episode in Hospital**

This episode takes place after children play this theme a few times. In order to enrich the children's background knowledge about the process of seeing a doctor, Bella showed children a video about how adults register in the hospital in the real world. The concept of "ticket number" emerged in her later discussion with children about how to wait in line for their treatment rather than crowding around the "doctor" inside Hospital. The "ticket number" is the for seeing a doctor. This episode records a sustained play experience that Bella and the children co-constructed to implement the concept of "ticket number" in this theme. Three vignettes are chosen from this episode to present how Bella flexibly moves inside and outside of the imaginative play situation to play the roles of a guide, a play partner and a director.

##### **5.2.4.1 The teacher's role in vignette one: a play partner from children's perspectives; a guide and a play partner from the teacher's perspectives**

This vignette demonstrates how Bella steps inside children's imaginative play situation to implement the concept of "ticket number". Monica offers insights into how the child

identifies the teacher's dual positioning of being inside and outside the imaginative play context. Bella's pedagogical practice presents how the teacher takes an active role to support children's understanding of social rules. Her perspective also contributes to the differences between being a guide and a play partner in an imaginative play situation.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Monica
<p>Bella: Nurse, where are your ticket numbers?</p>  <p>Bonnie: We did not.....we.....in the material room.</p> <p>Bella: Then, go get them.</p>	<p>1. Monica: She wanted to see the doctor too.</p> <p>2. Ling: Was she playing with you at that time?</p> <p>3. Monica: No.</p> <p>4. Ling: What role was she playing at that time?</p> <p>5. Monica: she was the <b>teacher</b>. Later, she played the patient.</p> <p>6. Ling: When did she start to play the patient, can you tell me? You can ask me to stop.</p> <p>7. Monica: (Nods her head).</p>
<p>Bella: Doctor, where is my ticket number? I want to see the doctor. What is my number? You need to give me a ticket number. You ask me to see the doctor according to the number on the ticket. Otherwise, I do not know when is my turn to see the doctor.</p>	<p>8. Monica: Now she became a <b>patient</b>.</p> <p>9. Ling: Why? How do you know?</p> <p>10. Monica: Because she sat down on that chair. Because that chair was for the person (who was going) to be the patient.</p> <p>11. Ling: Was she playing with</p>





Bonnie (girl in a white coat): I have not got (the ticket number) yet.

Bella: You need to give me my ticket. Then I know when is my turn to see the doctor.

you?

12. Monica: Yes. She was asking them for the ticket number.

13. Ling: What do you think of using the ticket number? Do you think it is a good idea?

14. Monica: I do. Because (if) we have the ticket number, we can go inside one by one. Otherwise (if) we all go inside, they do not know which one to see first. They just see them randomly. Then I should be the first one, they just say it should be other people.

Monica turned to Bella.

Monica: (You) are the third one to see the doctor. I arrived first.



Bella: No. I see the doctor according to the ticket number she gives me.

15. Ling: I think you are right. You are the first one, Lily and Vicky are the second one. She should just be the third one to see the doctor.

16. Monica: No. Because doctors need to give her (ticket number first), their ticket numbers can decide (the sequence).

17. Ling: How do you know?

18. Monica: Teacher Bella said that.

While they were still waiting for Bonnie and Mary (the nurse) to bring the ticket numbers to them, Monica actively showed Bella her doll.

19. Ling: Did you need teacher Bella to do something else when you showed her your younger sister?



Monica: Teacher Bella, this is my baby.

Bella: Your baby. What happens to her?

Monica: Fever.

20. Monica: No. I just wanted her to look at it. We were playing with her. She was touching her head.

21. Ling: Did you like teacher Bella playing the patient with you at that time?

22. Monica: I did.

Monica identified Bella's dual positioning of being inside and outside of play in this vignette (Line 5). She made this judgment based on the teacher's actions and the symbolic meanings of play props in this context (Line 10). At the beginning of this vignette, Monica interpreted Bella's intention to play with them together in Hospital (Line 1). Yet she did not view Bella inside the imaginative play situation until she found Bella sitting down on the chair which was prepared for "patients". Therefore, Monica identified Bella as a **play partner** when she started sitting on the chair to play the role of one of them (Lines 8/10). Monica's commentary (Lines 12/20) suggested that she interpreted Bella's play actions with little educational intentions, which further confirmed her perspectives on Bella's role as a **play partner**. In the vignette, Monica actively responded to Bella's role. She engaged in the conversation between Bella and Bonnie to offer help by answering Bella's questions. Moreover, she proactively shared her imaginative play plot with Bella (Fleer and Peers, 2012). Bella once introduced that Monica had strong abilities in this class, but she used to play alone or in parallel with other children. Compared to her peers who were also waiting in line as patients, Monica showed more interest in interacting with the teacher as a play partner.

According to Bella, she planned to play the role of a patient on that day to see the implementation situation of ticket numbers. Bella's reflections on her roles and pedagogical practices are as follows:

### Hospital-Episode 3-Vignette 1- Excerpt from the transcripts 1

Bella: I was like a **guide**. I took part in their play, to model the behaviour of a patient...Otherwise, it was very difficult for them to implement the ticket number by themselves...When I sat down, I started to **guide** them, to ask them questions.

Ling: Didn't you show them a video about hospital registration and discuss it with them before?

Bella: Yes. But it seemed that they did not fully understand. They just watched for two to three minutes and then they lost interest that day...And they did not have too much experience with this. Parents do these things for them, they are patients when they go to the hospital...You see, they just sat over there before I took part in...only if I participated in their play, would they know how to play.

Bella confirmed that she was inside the children's imaginative play situation when she was sitting on the chair, which is in line with Monica's identification of the teacher's position in this context. Yet Bella defined herself as a **guide** rather than a play partner as she intended to show children how to use ticket numbers to wait in line. Bella's comments on her previous strategies suggested that she believes the teacher should take an active role in children's play when they are mediating an abstract concept in reality into the imaginative play situation, especially when children do not have sufficient funds of knowledge about this concept. Therefore, Bella was adopting a role-play pedagogy to model a patient who asked the doctor for ticket numbers (Qiu, 2008). Situating herself inside the play, as captured in the second still image, Bella had an opportunity to illustrate the method and rules of using ticket numbers through her conversation with Bonnie. Furthermore, whilst Monica responded to her inquiry with the correct answer, Bella contradicted Monica's judgment in order to emphasize the play rule, that the ticket number was the only symbol to decide the order of seeing the doctor. Bella's guidance received positive results since Monica firmly believed her rule

(Lines 15-18) and formed a clear understanding of the advantages of using ticket numbers for waiting in line (Line 14). Additionally, Monica gave positive feedback on Bella's role as a play partner in this context (Line 22).

In addition, when Bella made comments on Monica's interaction with her, as captured in the last vignette, she identified another role in this vignette.

### Hospital-Episode 3-Vignette 1- Excerpt from the transcripts 2

Bella: I did not know what to say to her. It was just like, (paused a few seconds) aimless interaction. But actually, children like this kind of interaction, more relaxing and pleasant. And we are more equal, like, both of us are **play partners**. They like the moment when you **play with** them, compared to (the moment) when you are being a teacher.


Ling: Why don't you play with them like this more often? As you said, they like it, and aren't pleasant feelings important in children's play?



Bella: These appear later. When their play is rather mature, (I) have more opportunities to play with them in a relaxing and pleasant status as you said...it depends on their play level.

Bella's commentary indicated that she viewed herself as a **play partner** in her interaction with Monica. She did not have an educational purpose in her cooperative responses to Monica's invitation. Bella's reflections on play partners suggested that teachers recognize the contribution of this role to the pleasant aspects of children's play, yet their decision-making on being the play partner is closely associated with children's play level. In the discussion chapter, Bella's perspectives on the play partner will be revisited together with other teachers' perspectives.

### 5.2.4.2 The teacher's roles in vignette two: a director from both children's and teacher's perspectives

This vignette focuses on Bella's instructions to Bonnie about how to make ticket numbers from the beginning to the end. Bella's pedagogical practice presents how the teacher positions herself outside the imaginative play frame in order to control the rhythm and the flow of play. Bonnie demonstrates how a child responds to making play props in the middle of a play.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Bonnie
<p>Bella: Tear it into pieces.</p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ling: What role was she playing at that time?</li> <li>2. Bonnie: (She) did not have a role. She was the <b>teacher</b>.</li> <li>3. Ling: Did you like her watching you write at that time?</li> <li>4. Bonnie: I did. I wanted to let her look at me. See, it was like this.</li> <li>5. Ling: Have you ever seen a ticket number before?</li> <li>6. Bonnie: Shook her head.</li> </ol>
<p>Bonnie was making ticket numbers.</p> <p>Bella: Doctor, do we have so many patients? Why do you write so many ticket numbers? You can continue when more patients come.</p> <p>Bonnie continued to tear the paper. But</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Bonnie: Teacher Bella <b>asked me to stop</b>.</li> <li>8. Ling: Did you want to stop?</li> <li>9. Bonnie: I wanted to write.</li> <li>10. Ling: Did you like making ticket numbers that day?</li> <li>11. Bonnie: Nods her head.</li> </ol>

<p>Bella stopped her.</p>  <p>Bella: Do not make so many ticket numbers. First you need to count how many people are waiting outside.</p>	<p>12. Bonnie: Teacher Bella <b>asked me to</b> count how many patients there were.</p> <p>13. Ling: Did you want to count?</p> <p>14. Bonnie: (shakes her head) I wanted to write.</p>
<p>Bonnie went outside to count the patients. Then she returned to the house to continue writing. Meanwhile, Mary (the nurse) went outside to distribute these ticket numbers as per Bella's request.</p> 	<p>15. Ling: They already had ticket numbers, why did you continue writing? Didn't you want to see the patients as soon as possible?</p> <p>16. Bonnie: I had almost finished. I finished these and then I just went to see patients.</p>

Bonnie identified Bella as outside their imaginary play situation without playing a role in Hospital (Line 2). Her descriptions of Bella's requests suggested that she viewed the teacher as a **director** since she was following her directions throughout the process of making ticket numbers (Lines 7/12). Bonnie's responses to the teacher's instructions and feedback on her role varied according to her needs and interests. On the one hand, Bonnie gave positive feedback to Bella's accompany since she needed to gain confirmation from Bella for her ticket number (Line 4). The ticket number is the outcome of children's imitation regarding the process of hospital registration in the

reality. Bonnie did not have a visualized concept of ticket numbers in her mind (Line 6). Bella's direction enabled her to transform an abstract everyday concept into an object, which contributed to Bonnie's interests and needs in this context. On the other hand, most of Bella's instructions had conflicts with Bonnie's interests in making ticket numbers (Lines 10/11). Bonnie showed strong interest in finishing making ticket numbers even though she was urged by Bella's instructions (Lines 7/12). She did not respond to Bella's rhetorical questions until Bella told her "*Do not make so many ticket numbers*". Bonnie was so persistent in finishing making the ticket numbers that whilst she compromised herself (Line 14) to follow Bella's instruction of counting the number of patients, she continued to write in the "hospital". During the course of my study, teachers rarely give direct instructions to children since most of the time, they tended to frame their instructions in the form of questioning. Bella's reflections on her pedagogical practice are as follows:

#### **Hospital-Episode 3-Vignette 2- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Bella: ...my role was like, a **director**. My intervention was very direct, direct instructions...Actually, she was quite focused on this...but she did not notice how many patients you had outside.

Ling: It seemed this was her interest in play.

Bella: Yes. But she wasted too much time...I was hoping they could see the patients as soon as possible. Other children were all waiting.

Bella confirmed she played the role of a **director** in this vignette. Her intention was to ask Bonnie to finish making ticket numbers so that other children could start to see "doctors". Bonnie's logic of play order (Line 16) suggested that she expected Bella and the "patients" to cooperate with her interests. Accordingly, Bonnie's interest in finishing ticket numbers conflicted with the needs of "patients". Whilst Bella identified Bonnie's


interest, she chose to prioritise the needs of the ‘patients’ over Bonnie’s since she shared the same contextual needs with children outside the “hospital”.

### 5.2.4.3 The teacher’s roles in vignette three: a play partner from children’s perspectives; a guider from the teacher’s perspectives

This vignette took place when Bella returned to children’s imaginative play situation to act as a patient. It presents and discusses Bella’s role and pedagogical decisions when she was facing chaos, uncertainty and children’s conflicts of interests and needs in a complex play situation. Monica and Lily offered their insights into the differences between teacher-play partners and peer-play partners.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Monica	Selected conversations with Lily
<p>Bella: Nurse, I also got sick. My feet hurt.</p> <p>Monica: What is your number?</p> <p>Bella: She has not given me the ticket number yet. (The nurse gives her a ticket number) Can the doctor start to see patients? We have waited for a long time.</p>  <p>Lily: I came with my elder sister.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monica: Teacher Bella sits down, again. She is a <b>patient</b> now.</li> <li>2. Ling: Do you like her to be a patient again?</li> <li>3. Monica: I like her playing patients more. It is more interesting if she can always be a patient.</li> <li>4. Ling: Did you want them to be quick?</li> <li>5. Monica: I did.</li> <li>6. Ling: Then, why</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lily: (She was) the <b>patient</b>. Her feet hurt.</li> <li>2. Ling: What did you want teacher Bella to do when you told her you came with your sister?</li> <li>3. Lily: I wanted her to hear me.</li> <li>4. Ling: Did you want them to be quick?</li> <li>5. Lily: I did. We had waited for a long time.</li> </ol>



<p>Because she has a fever. I am number two.</p> <p>Bella did not respond to Lily but continued to talk to children inside in a louder voice. Lily stopped talking to Bella.</p> <p>Bella: Doctors, nurses, we have waited for a very long time.</p>  <p>Lily: (Continued to talk to Bella) Because my elder sister has a fever.</p> <p>Bella did not respond to Lily. Bonnie went outside to talk to Monica.</p> <p>Bonnie: Number one. Number one.</p>	<p>didn't you ask them by yourself? You were also a patient.</p> <p>7. Monica: Because they were doctors. I was afraid doctors would scold me.</p> <p>8. Ling: Why could teacher Bella ask them to be quick?</p> <p>9. Monica: Because she is the teacher. She helped us to ask.</p> <p>10. Ling: But wasn't she sitting on the chair for patients? I remember you said this meant she was a patient.</p> <p>11. Monica: Yeah. She was playing (the role of) a 'patient'. But she is the teacher (who) gives us lessons.</p>	
<p>When Monica went to see the 'doctor', Bella turned to Lily.</p>		<p>6. Ling: Did you want to see a doctor that day?</p>



Bella: What is your number?

Lily: Two.

Their interaction was interrupted by a 'fire' issue because Monica found a sign of 'fire' inside the hospital. Three of them shifted her attention to Monica. Bella told Monica to ignore it.

Lily continued to talk to Bella while Bella was still focusing on Monica.





Lily: I think, I think, I think, (the elder sister) is with me. The elder sister should go inside together with mom.

Vicky: No, you should go inside

7. Lily: No. I was taking her to see the doctor.

8. Ling: Did she allow you to go inside with Vicky?

9. Lily: (paused for a few seconds) No. She did not say anything.

<p>one by one.</p>		
<p>Kelly went directly inside to see the doctor.</p> <p>Lily was very excited. She stood up and waved her hand toward Kelly.</p>  <p>Lily: Hey! Sit down! Quickly!</p> <p>Kelly looked at her but did not respond to Lily. Lily turned to Bella</p> <p>Lily: Teacher, she came in.</p> <p>Hearing this, Bella turned to Mary at once.</p>  <p>Bella: Nurse, she jumped the queue.</p>		<p>10. Ling: I thought doctors and nurses were managing the queue. Why did you tell teacher Bella? She was a patient, right?</p> <p>11. Lily: Yes. Because she is our teacher. We listen to her.</p>

<p>Kelly glanced at Bella and then left.</p>		
<p>Bella: A person went inside without a ticket number!</p>		

Both key children in this vignette viewed the teacher's role inside the imaginative play situation as a **play partner**. Monica continued to use the symbolic prop, chairs, to identify the teacher's role (M-Line 1). Furthermore, Monica expressed positive feedback on Bella's role as a play partner, compared to her role as a teacher (M-Line 3). Lily made her judgement on the teacher's role based on the teacher's self-introduction (L-Line 1). In line with children's perspectives, Bella also regarded herself inside children's imaginative play as a patient. Therefore, both the children's and the teacher's perspectives have reached the intersubjectivity regarding the position of the teacher's role in this context. Bella gave further descriptions of her roles and pedagogical practice. As she analysed:

*Bella: ...they were unfamiliar with this play theme. They had little experience in using ticket numbers in previous plays. So, adults still need to continuously **guide** them directly or indirectly, at least for now... They might not know how to move to the next step, they just sat like that. They needed a **guide** to guide them on what to do. So, I started to **guide** them when I sat down. But I was also playing with them, treating them like we were equal...*

Bella defined herself as a **guider** who played one of the roles in children's play for educational purposes. Compared to the context in the first vignette, in this vignette, children already had the key symbol and the ticket number with them. Yet Bella chose to return to the children's imaginative play situation to take an active role to play with these children. By adopting a role-play pedagogy, Bella managed to keep their play scenario moving as these children began to use ticket numbers to see the doctor. Her

comments on children's play status suggest that it is not enough for the teacher to only introduce a concept and the corresponding play material to children when children have poor funds of knowledge about their play theme. Bella's reflections on the roles of adults indicate that, under this situation, teachers have a key role in children's play to provide children with different forms of continuous support, if teachers intend to expand the play complexity and develop play level towards guiding children to use symbolic objects to imitate the reality. Bella's perspectives on teachers' roles resonated with children's responses in this vignette. Monica and Lily waited in line patiently for almost fifteen minutes without interacting with children inside the "hospital". Under this harmonious context, both of them showed a desire to see the doctor (M-Line 5; L-Line 5), yet neither of them spoke for themselves. Monica's explanation (M-Line 7) recognized the value of the teacher's role since her contextual needs had been satisfied by Bella due to Bella's identity as a teacher. Bella's authority in her role had also been identified by Lily when she found Kelly was cutting in line: she reported to Bella rather than turning to doctors or nurses for help. Lily's explanations (L-Line 11) indicated that she was taking advantage of Bella's authority to protect the play rules. From children's perspectives, Bella owned the highest power due to her identity as a teacher, which distinguished Bella's role from their peer play partners. Children's perspectives on Bella's role were in line with Bella's own understanding of her insider role.

**Hospital-Episode 3-Vignette 3-Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Bella: Even though I had the identity of one of the roles, I still had the most powerful role.

Ling: Do you think you can remove the power and authority within your role completely when you play with them?

Bella: I can. But even if I utterly separate myself from my authority, they cannot.

They still think you are a teacher, just a teacher (who) plays with us.

As presented in the first transcript, Bella suggested that she was trying to build an equal relationship with children in practising her role-play pedagogy. Her assumptions about children indicated that it might not be possible for teachers to place themselves in an equal position with children when they are acting as play partners inside imaginative play situations. Furthermore, as an insider in children's play, Bella's play actions benefitted children who shared the same needs and interests with her, yet neglected others. At the beginning of this vignette, Lily kept introducing her situation to Bella but Bella did not respond to her since her focus was on urging "doctors" to see the patients. When Bella finally shifted her attention to Lily to initiate an interaction with her, Bella's focus was on Lily's ticket number. Bella did not realize Lily's repeated narratives were not only sharing her ticket number with her but proposing an implied question to her: how many ticket numbers should I take if I was accompanying my sister to see a doctor? This was an important inquiry to Lily since her interest was in imitating an adult's behaviour that she was taking care of her sister. It's not she herself who wanted to see the doctor. Her exploration contributed to play complexity since she was constructing a different plot that the patient went to see the doctor with a companion. Lily's previous repeated statement was likely an implication that she hoped the teacher would confirm for her that she only needed one ticket number not two. Due to the teacher's neglect and the emergence of the unexpected "fire" issue, Lily's need and interest had not been satisfied by the teacher (L-Lines 3/7/9). Later in this episode, Lily did not have a chance to develop her own play plot as she and Vicky went inside the "hospital" one by one, following the rule that Bella emphasized in their play. Therefore, when Bella stepped inside the imaginative situation to play a role with guidance, her educational intention was so strong that she might not be able to notice other values which were beyond the scope of her expectations, especially when unexpected issues emerged to distract her attention.

The purpose of discussion here is not to criticize Bella's little response to Lily's needs and inquiry, but to present the complexity and uncertainty of the play context in which teachers find themselves. It is not easy for the teacher to identify and satisfy the needs and interests of different individual children who play together in the same context at the same time.

### 5.3 Teacher Alice's roles in children's play

Alice is the director of all the classes for children from 4 to 5 years old. She and Bella work together in class number one. At the time of the research, Alice had worked in this kindergarten for six years. Alice graduated from a top ten Normal university in China. She is confident about her professional knowledge but she also admitted her weaknesses in practice, since she did not have enough time to spend with children. Alice tended to choose one play theme to follow in children's play. Three play themes are selected in this section. Table 5.3 summarises Alice's roles within three selected episodes as well as children's definitions and responses to these roles.

**Table 5.3 The teacher's roles from the perspectives of teacher Alice and the children**

Teacher's roles from Bella's perspectives	Teacher's pedagogical practice and behaviours	Teacher's roles from children's perspectives	Children's comments and responses to teachers' roles	Play theme- Episode- Vignette
Observer	Watch children's play and initiate/accept interactions with children	Observer	<b>Initiated response:</b> Propose requests to teachers/ask teachers for help;	Kebab Store- Ep1

			Shared play situation with the teacher;	
Documenter	Take photos or videos of children's play with no verbal or physical interaction with the children	Documenter	<b>Initiated response:</b> Propose requests to teachers/ask teachers for help; Shared play situation with the teacher;	Kebab Store-Ep1
Guide	Model one of the roles in children's play	Play partner	<b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's instructions but do not willing to follow	Snack Bar-Ep1
Supporter	Give direct instructions to solve problems	Supporter	<b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's instructions	Kebab Store-V2
	Follow children's instructions to meet their request or solve their problems	Supporter	<b>Initiated response:</b> Propose requests to teachers/ask teachers for help;	Kebab Store-V4
Play partner	Play with children to	Play partner	<b>Initiated</b>	Fruit



	construct, expand play scenarios		<b>response:</b> Invite the teacher to construct, expand, build up the play scenarios;	Juice Shop- Ep1
Assessor	Have dialogues with children/Ask children questions	Enquirer	<b>Accept response:</b> Cooperate with teacher's ideas/instructions	Kebab Store-V1
	Create conflict between children in order to understand children's perspectives on play	Reminder	<b>Initiate response:</b> Question teacher's ideas  <b>Accept response:</b> Follow teacher's suggestion but do not approve	Kebab Store-V3

### 5.3.1 Fruit Juice Shop

The theme "fruit juice shop" started in the first semester and lasted until the second semester. Two key children, Mike and Jack were the "owner" and the "staff" of this store. Mike is the oldest child in this class and he has been recognized as the smartest child by both teacher and his peers. Alice mentioned that she did not pay too much attention to this play theme as she trusted the abilities of these two children. She would

watch children play for a few minutes or had short conversations with them during her visits. One episode is selected to illustrate the teacher's role as a play partner.

### 5.3.1.1 The teacher's role in the first episode: a play partner from both children's and teacher's perspectives

This vignette catches a moment when Alice was required by two children simultaneously when she was recording the play situation in the snack bar. Mike was inviting Alice to buy fruit juice from her while Lucy, a girl from Supermarket, was sharing the amount of money she earned with Alice. At that moment, Alice made a quick decision to ask Lucy to treat her to fruit juice from Mike. Accordingly, when Mike invited Alice to enter into his imaginative play situation, Alice also involved Lucy in this play context that she and Mike built together. Whilst three of them were in the same context, they held different views on the teacher's role. The discussion below focuses on the perspectives of Mike and Alice. During the course of my study, this was the only time that I observed and recorded how the teacher accepted children's invitations to enter their imaginative play situation. The actions and responses of Mike presented how children responded to a play partner who was given the privilege by themselves. His perspectives offered insights into how children evaluate the teacher's engagement as a play partner.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Mike
<p>Mike: Teacher Alice, would you like some juice? I have peach juice, banana juice and strawberry juice.</p> <p>Alice: Strawberry, please</p>	<p>1. Mike: She was a <b>customer</b>.</p> <p>2. Ling: Was she a customer when she was taking videos at that time?</p> <p>3. Mike: No. I had to invite her (to be a customer). Customers always come (to buy) by themselves.</p> <p>4. Ling: Then, why did this customer not</p>



Lucy: Teacher Alice, look.

Alice: Wow! You earned a lot!

Mike: Strawberry (juice) is eight RMB.

Alice patted Lucy when she was about to return to the supermarket.

Alice: Would you buy me a strawberry juice?

Lucy stopped half way and turned to Alice.

Lucy: (shakes her head) I don't want to.

Alice: I want to have a strawberry juice. Buy me a strawberry juice, will you?

Lucy nodded her head and went to the "fruit juice shop".

Alice: Thank you. (You) buy me a drink and I'll buy you one next time.

Mike was still standing nearby looking at Alice. Alice pointed at Lucy and told

come to buy by herself?


5. Mike: Because she was taking videos. She was busy, so she asked Lucy to (buy her one).

6. Ling: When other children played customers, could they also ask their peers to buy juice for them?

7. Mike: No! All children had to collect money".

8. Ling: How about teachers? Do you think she needed to collect money when she was playing with you?

9. Mike: She needed to collect (money). You couldn't pay for the juice without money. fetch money.

<p>him.</p> <p>Alice: She'll pay it for me.</p>	
<p>Mike: Small or medium or.....Let me ask teacher Alice.</p>  <p>Mike: Teacher Alice, teacher, do you want a small, medium or large size of juice?</p> <p>Alice looked down at Lucy and asked</p> <p>Alice: What size?</p> <p>Lucy: Small.</p> <p>Alice: (turned to Mike) Small.</p>	
<p>Lucy: I'll pay for her..</p> <p>Mike: Eight RMB.</p> <p>Lucy gave eleven RMB to Mike. Mike looked at it and pushed her hand back gently.</p>	<p>10. Ling: Why didn't you take her money?</p> <p>11. Mike: Because it was for teacher Alice.</p> <p>12. Ling: What if this juice was for Lucy? Would you have charged her?</p> <p>13. Mike: I would.</p>



Mike: This is eleven RMB. Forget it.  
(You) do not have to pay money.

Lucy took the juice and gave it to Alice.



Alice: Thank you.

Lucy gave the juice to Alice and went away immediately.

Alice: Wow! So sour! Lucy, this juice is very sour.

Hearing Alice calling her, Lucy went back to Alice. Alice returned the juice to her. Lucy went to the juice shop again.

14. Ling: What do you think of this customer? Do you like her?

15. Mike: Um, she did not play seriously.

16. Ling: How do you play seriously?

17. Mike: She needed to withdraw money. (She) could not not to withdraw money. (You) should be able to pay.

18. Mike: sour! (She) actually dared to say sour!

19. Ling: Was this the problem she found in your store?

20. Mike: No. She just thought it was not tasty. I knew! Because (I) did not add anything. Um, then, later, I am going to buy a bottle of milk, a big bottle of milk, also, adding some mineral water. It must be tastier!



Lucy: Mike, teacher Alice just said the juice was sour.

Mike: What?

Lucy: (She) said (it was) a bit sour. A bit sour.

Mike: Then, then.....where is the straw?

Mike's attention shifted to the straw. After Lucy found a straw for him, Mike did not respond to Lucy as he was in the middle of making deals with other children. Lucy had to wait in line for her next order.

Lucy: Can I have a strawberry juice?  
Strawberry.



Lucy took away the juice without giving money to Mike.

21. Ling: Did you like playing with her at that time?

22. Mike: I did!

23. Ling: Did you think she was playing seriously with you at that moment?

24. Mike: She had. Because she said (it) was very sour.

Mike did not identify the teacher's role from the teacher's behaviour or pedagogical practice. His clarification suggested that he made judgements on the teacher's position according to the teacher's engagement in his play scenario (Lines 2/3). Therefore, whilst Alice was documenting the other play theme, Mike recognized her role as a **play partner** since he had invited the teacher to play with him (Lines 1/3). Mike had a continuous interest in inviting Alice to buy juice from him. I had followed this play theme six times. For three times, Mike actively asked Alice to buy a drink from him but was rejected by her. In this vignette, Alice finally accepted his invitation, which suggested that Mike's need and interest were satisfied by the teacher in this context. Yet Mike was not satisfied with the way that Alice responded to him. His comments to Alice's play actions (Line 15) suggested that he expected the teacher to follow the rules in their imaginative play situation (Line 17) and to engage deeper in his play scenario (Lines 23/24). It is interesting to see that whilst Mike expected Alice to follow the play rules as other customers to collect "money" for her play, he also broke his own rules for Alice. Mike was very strict with each deal that he made with his peers. He always received money first from his customers before he made the juice for them. Moreover, Mike valued how much money he "earned" in this play since he often shared his earnings to teachers. In this vignette, however, Mike gave an exclusive privilege to his deal with Lucy since Lucy acted as an agent for Alice. Compared to his responses to other play partners, Mike actively broke his play rules due to Alice's identity as a teacher (Lines 10-13).

Alice's perspectives on her positions in imaginative play are consistent with Mike's identifications. Her perspectives on her roles are as follows:

**Fruit Juice Shop-Episode 1- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Alice: A **play partner**. We were completing a play about selling fruit juice in a fruit juice shop. I was playing a customer, to cooperate with his play.

Ling: Did you have any educational purposes when you were playing a play partner?

Alice: Just to satisfy his needs, his emotional needs. I did not have other purposes.

Ling: When you commented that the juice was a bit sour, were you proposing a problem that you found in his play?

Alice: No. I did not expect him to do anything. I just felt I could say something different at that time, not only said “yummy” all the time.

Alice's definition of her role was in line with Mike's perspective on her role. She interpreted Mike's continuous invitation as a way to look for emotional needs. Alice suggested that she did not have educational intentions in her feedback. However, Mike's response in our conversation indicated that he valued the teacher's comments about her 'drink'. Furthermore, he seemed to gain inspiration from Alice's feedback, which enable him to expand the play scenario (Line 20). In our previous interview, Alice showed a bit of regret about resisting Mike's invitation. This time, Alice mentioned that she was going to find an excuse to reject Mike's invitation until Lucy came to her.


*Alice: ...I didn't want to depress his motivation. But meanwhile, I did not want to buy in person. Lucy happened to come to me. So, I felt I had an opportunity to take advantage of her.*

Alice's reflection upon her decision-making suggested that the uncertainty of children's play can also bring opportunities for the teacher. This context will be revisited in the discussion chapter to analyse the complex issues that teachers have to face when they make pedagogical decisions at the moment.



### 5.3.2 Kebab Store

The theme “kebab store” originated in construction play activities. Henry used a set of plastic materials to build a “car”. He then turned this “car” into a “kebab store” and began to play this theme in role-play activities.

Still image in the recorded footage	Description of the still image
	While Henry, the boy in a red jumper, was building a “kebab car”, he also asked Alice to help him write down the names of the “kebab” in the corresponding Chinese characters according to his description.

In the second semester, I recorded this play theme three times. The first episode was chosen in this section to illustrate Alice’s roles because it presented significant characteristics of the teacher’s roles within the initial stage of children’s play: Teachers acted as a documenter throughout children’s play with brief interactions that were initiated by children or by teachers themselves. Alice recorded Henry’s play for nearly twenty-five minutes then she was required by the other teacher. Whilst Henry remained involved throughout the play as the owner of a “kebab store”, other children moved in and out of the play acting as customers. The imaginary situations that Henry created with his peers provided different play contexts for Alice to get involved in Henry’s play during her ongoing video recording process. Hence, this episode was edited into four vignettes based on the “deals” between Henry and his customers (the first three vignettes) as well as the interaction between Henry and Alice (the last vignette). In these four vignettes, Alice mainly played the roles of an assessor and a supporter who adopted different pedagogical practices in different play contexts. I will first present these two roles within the demonstration of these four vignettes. Then, I will discuss

Alice’s role as a continuous documenter intensively at the end of this section in order to avoid the unnecessary repetition of both children’s and teachers’ perspectives. It is anticipated that since the reader has become familiar with many aspects and details of these four vignettes, the final discussion about this role is intended to demonstrate an integrated image of a documenter in this episode.

On that day, Alice and I stood on each side of Henry to take videos of him. We shared the videos after the play and some footage below include screenshots from Alice’s videos as they better present the play context viewed from her side.

**5.3.2.1 The teacher’s roles in the first vignette: an enquirer from children’s perspectives; an assessor from the teacher’s perspectives**

This vignette recorded the second deal that Henry made with his peers, Billy (the boy with a red helmet) and Luke (the boy in a blue jumper). Henry was selling one kebab for one RMB. But he charged ten RMB for two kebabs after making deals with his peers. This vignette presented the process of how Henry built his working theories by using his existing understanding of the community and engaging with his peers to “create a framework for making sense of new experiences and ideas.” (Hedges and Jones, 2012, p,36-37). Alice was taking videos of them with no intervention until the end.

<b>Stills and selected dialogues from recorded footage</b>	<b>Selected conversations with Henry</b>
<p>Billy: I want to buy these (picked two kebabs). Henry: ...Two for five RMB.</p> <p>Billy passed him ten RMB. Luke stepped forward and gave Henry ten RMB first.</p>	<p>1. Ling: You told Billy five RMB for two at that time. (I play back the video).</p> <p>2. Henry: Yeah...then I charged him ten RMB...later I sold two kebabs for ten RMB.</p>

Luke: I want to buy two kebabs.

Luke left with Billy after Henry gave him the kebabs. Henry looked very happy as he laughed and turned to Alice to show her the money.



Henry: Teacher, ten RMB, I have sold two kebabs. Let them choose by themselves. Ten RMB for two (kebabs)!

Alice: You just said one for one RMB, right.

Henry; Right.

Alice: Then ten RMB can only buy two kebabs, right?

Henry: Right.

Alice stopped for a few seconds and then she continued.

Alice: Then, this time, I buy one kebab. Next time, I'll come to buy another one. How much money in total?

Henry: (Thinks for a few seconds) Two RMB in total.

Alice: In that case, she (I) only spends two RMB

3. Henry: She was **asking** me, how much.

4. Ling: Did you know why she asked you at that time?

5. Henry: Because she did not know. She just came here.

6. Henry: She was still **asking**. I already knew (the calculation). When I was in junior class.

7. Ling: How about her? Was it because she did not know how to calculate the money?

for two kebabs. Why did you charge them ten RMB for two kebabs when (they) bought them at the same time.



Henry: (thinks for a few seconds and replies in a rather low voice) Because I usually need more than twenty RMB to buy things.

Alice: What?

Henry: Every time I go to the supermarket, I need to spend more than twenty RMB.

Alice: Yeah...

Henry: I certainly needed (to charge) ten RMB (raise his voice). What would I do if (I did) not charge ten RMB?

Billy came back.

Billy: You need to give me the change.

Henry: Why? You already took away the food. (You) never get change (when) you buy things in the supermarket.

8. Henry: She knew. She was asking (me) other questions. We were chatting.

9. Ling: Did you like chatting with her when you were playing?

Henry: I did!

10. Ling: Do you think she was disturbing you? She kept asking you questions at that time.

11. Henry: No. No other people came to buy. I liked talking with her.

12. Ling: Do you think teacher Alice agreed with your price? Two kebabs for ten RMB?

13. Henry: Yeah.

14. Ling: Do you think teacher Alice agreed with you, or agreed with Billy?

15. Henry: with Me!

16. Ling: How do you know?

17. Henry: She did not say. She did not ask me.



Billy: Give me the change. Give me the change.

Henry: Why? You already took away the food.

Billy waited for a few seconds then he ran away.

Henry actively initiated a shared sustained imaginary conversation with Alice (Fleer and Peers, 2012). His description of Alice's pedagogical practice suggested he viewed Alice as an **enquirer** during their interaction. Furthermore, Henry did not identify any educational purpose of Alice's questions as he interpreted their conversation as normal small talk (Lines 5/8). Henry showed a cooperative response and positive perspective of Alice's role, which may can be related to the thoughtful and sensitive pedagogical practice that Alice conducted during the play (Lines 10/11). The timing of Alice's intervention did not interrupt Henry's play. Furthermore, Alice did not evaluate Henry's rules negatively. Her reflection upon her pedagogical practice was as follows:

#### **Kebab Store-Episode 1-Vignette 1- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Alice: At that time, I was a bit confused about why he charged them that way. So, I asked him a few questions, like **assessing** him. Just to understand his thinking.

Ling: What kind of thinking?

Alice: I wanted to see if he did not know how to calculate, or if he actually wanted to charge them more money than he was supposed to. I needed to confirm this with

him. Um, you could only ask him directly, because you could not understand this by purely observing him.

Alice's description of her pedagogical practice indicated that she viewed herself as an **assessor** who proposed questions to examine Henry's ability to do mathematical calculations and understand his rules for making deals. It was likely that Henry also viewed Alice as assessing him as he was aware that Alice also knew the answers to these questions (Line 8). Moreover, Alice's reflection on the weakness of being a pure observer resonated with Fleer and Peer's (2012) proposal that teachers need to be interested observers in children's play. The enquiry-conversations between teachers and children support the explanation and validation of play.

In addition, Alice's pedagogical decision was associated with her perspective on Henry's working theories. Henry constructed his theories in making prices and deals, that is, a) the customers did not get change once they had got the food, b) one kebab was only priced as one RMB, but two kebabs were charged ten RMB. Whilst these theories were not consistent with real-life logic to some degree, Alice chose to not intervene in this context. Her comments on Henry's working theories are presented below:

*Alice: ...I think it is not all about the issue of mathematical calculation. It is actually about how he sets the price and make deals. So, I thought it had little value to continue to intervene at that moment. Because actually, you could not say he was making an obvious mistake about academic knowledge. It was more like a reflection of the naivete<sup>3</sup> in children's play. This is something about the characteristics of children's play. I think it is allowed for him to play in his own way for some time.*


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<sup>3</sup> The Chinese word that Alice used is “童趣”, which refers to the innocent, unsophistication and interesting characteristics in the childhood.

Alice viewed Henry's working theories as a reflection of the naivete in children's play rather than a problem in which she needed to intervene. Since Alice appreciated the characteristics of children's play in this context, she chose to leave space between reality and children's working theory for children to exercise their agency in play.

### 5.3.2.2 The teacher's roles in the second vignette: a supporter from both children's and teacher's perspectives

In this vignette, a problem about the play material unexpectedly emerged. The money that Amy paid for her kebabs was different in size with the one of her peers'. Henry found this and reported it to Alice. Henry's perspective on Alice's role presents how the child values the teacher's authority in play. Alice's pedagogical practice contributes to how the teacher directs children's problem-solving process in order to maintain the play flow.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Henry
 <p>Henry: Is this money ours?          Alice: Yes.          Henry: It seems a bit bigger.          Alice: Hey, it seems to be.          Henry: We do not have such big (money). She</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ling: Why did you turn to teacher Alice?</li> <li>2. Henry: Because she could <b>help me solve the problem.</b></li> <li>3. Ling: Could you solve it by yourself?</li> <li>4. Henry: Yeah. I also knew what to do.</li> <li>5. Ling: What would you do if teacher Alice was not there?</li> <li>6. Henry: I would take a look at it, just one time. Then I would just throw it away, to the cupboard in</li> </ol>

<p>took it from the snack store.</p> <p>Alice: Don't you have one RMB in your box? Take it to compare with this one.</p>	<p>the snack store.</p> <p>7. Ling: I see. Then why didn't you just do it?</p> <p>8. Henry: Teacher Alice was there I wanted to let her look at it, let her check if this money was ours. Because I found it, let her know.</p>
 <p>Henry: Then, is this one bigger?</p> <p>Alice: So, this is not the money from our bank.</p> <p>Henry: This is not the money from our bank. Our money is not this big at all.</p> <p>Alice: You tell her, Amy, you got the wrong money. This is fake money.</p> <p>Henry: (pointed to his box) This is real money.</p> <p>Alice: You return it to Amy later.</p> <p>Henry: No response.</p>	<p>9: Ling: What did you think of her help? Did you like it?</p> <p>10. Henry: I did. Good. I thought it was good.</p>

Henry identified Alice as a **supporter** who was able to help him solve the problem (Line 2). In the vignette, the first question proposed by Henry seemed to have been put rhetorically. His follow-up responses suggested that he had already made a hypothesis about this question based on his observation of the size of the money before Alice had noticed it. Accordingly, when Henry actively asked Alice for help, he



intended to gain confirmation for his hypothesis from the teacher (Line 8). Henry's behaviour resonated with one of the findings from Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson's (2009) study that children involve teachers in their play to search for confirmation about whether they are on the right track with the activity or the task they are dealing with. In this context, Henry's case extends this finding, which indicates that even though the child is capable of solving the problem independently (Lines 4/6), he/she still looks for support from the teacher in order to gain competency in play. It is suggested that this might be the value of teacher's presence as a supporter from a children's stance. In addition, Henry's behaviour, as captured at the end of the vignette, suggested that his attention to this problem might be his fleeting interest rather than a continued interest that motivated him to explore further: Henry did not take back the money because he immediately devoted himself to a new deal when Alice was still making suggestions to him. Moreover, Henry's attitude to this problem is also reflected in the easy solution that he proposed in our conversation (Line 6). On the contrary, Alice gave clear instructions to teach Henry how to solve this issue, which was not common during the course of my observation of Alice in children's play. Her reflections on her role and the pedagogical practice were as followed.

**Kebab Store-Episode 1-Vignette 2- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Ling: I often hear you ask children "what do you want to do" or "then, what do you do" when they come to you to report their problems. But this time you intervened.

Alice: Right. I will make judgments according to the situation at that moment. This can be an opportunity to train his independent-problem solving ability. But I do not think this problem can develop further experience of them. There is no need to unfold it. If I kept letting him consider how to solve this problem, he was capable of doing so. He can wander like this for the rest of the playtime. I did not want him to be distracted by other things. So, I **directly** told him what to do. I did not think it was necessary to break his play flow because of this problem.

Ling: Why?

Alice: Because only when he continued to sell kebabs, he was able to have opportunities to interact with different children. In this case, he would gain new experiences. This is possible only when you continue in flow play condition.

Ling: How do you define your role in this context?

Alice: A **supporter**. Because he came to me for help.

Alice defined herself as a **supporter** who gave direct instructions to the child in order to help him solve the problem. Alice's reflections on her judgment of the play context suggest that her pedagogical decision was based on her evaluation of the educational values of this unexpected event. Instead of cultivating children's problem-solving ability and agency through this problem, Alice chose to prioritize the play flow in order to create more opportunities for Henry to interact with his peers. From Alice's perspective, children's development happens within children's peer interaction, which resonated with social-cultural perspectives of a child's development (Fleer and Veresov, 2018; Bodrova and Leong, 2003). Accordingly, her role as a supporter not only helped Henry solve the problem, but also extended the possibilities for Henry to gain more development in play through interacting with different children.

Alice's assumptions about the results of a different pedagogical practice suggest that an individual child's characteristic is an important factor for her to consider when she is making in-the-moment decisions in play contexts. Her insider comments to Henry's ability suggested she viewed Henry as a competent agent in play, which was the confirmation that Henry tried to gain from her. Yet due to Henry's easily distracted character, Alice chose to sacrifice Henry's agency to some degree by using a direct way to help him solve this problem. It is interesting to notice that Alice's solution was


more complicated than Henry's. In our interview, when Alice heard Henry's solution (Line 6), her feedback was as follows:


*Alice: I did not know his solution was so simple (laughs). It is quite common that children act differently when the teacher is not there. At that time, I was thinking about helping him solve this problem first so that he could continue to sell kebabs. Um, (pauses for a few seconds), perhaps, he might have unnecessary conflicts with Amy, or might not. It was hard to anticipate. But since I was there, I needed to make sure he could play smoothly.*

Alice's comment poses an important point: when the teacher is facing an unexpected event that emerged in the middle of the play, due to the uncertain nature of children's behaviour in play, she might also take a risk to position her role within the tension between allowing children to exercise their agency and maintaining the play flow. In this context, Alice decisively chose to take control over Henry's actions to face the uncertainty in children's play, in order to reduce the chances of distracting Henry's attention and to keep his current play interests. Whilst Alice's direct instructions might take up some space for Henry to exercise his agency, her pedagogical practice was thoughtful and strategic: she not only guided Henry to verify his hypothesis but also introduced the concept of "fake money" to explain to Henry within the imaginary framework. Henry's cooperative responses in the vignette and his positive perspectives (Line 11) on her solution indicated that he was satisfied with Alice's direct instructions and her role in this context. Moreover, her perspectives on this problem resonated with Henry's attitude correspondingly: neither of them had the interest to spend too much time on this problem. This shared intention led to intersubjectivity in play between the teacher and the child, resulting in Henry's acceptance and recognition of the teacher's role in this context.

### 5.3.2.3 The teacher's roles in the third vignette: a reminder from children's perspectives; an assessor from the teacher's perspectives

This vignette focuses on Henry's the other working theory in relation to making deals without giving changes. In the first vignette, as captured in the last still image, Henry and Billy have not reached to the same prolepsis (Göncü, 1998) in relation to giving changes. Yet he was able to apply his working theory successfully that in the end, Billy gave up his request. Alice analysed that to Billy, her existence and non-intervention behaviour might imply that the teacher also agreed with Henry, which was in harmony with Henry's interpretation to Alice's behaviour in that moment (vignette 1, Lines 15-17). As such, Henry continued to adopt this theory when Jerry gave him five RMB to buy one kebab. This time, Alice intervened by reminding Jerry about the changes that he supposed to receive from Henry.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Henry
<p>Henry: One RMB.</p> <p>Jerry: (take the money from the pocket) I have five RMB.</p> <p>Jerry took the kebab away after he gave the "money" to Henry. Alice called him loudly while he was leaving.</p>  <p>Alice: Jerry, did he give change to you?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ling: What was teacher Alice doing?</li> <li>2. Henry: She was <b>reminding</b> me. Remind me to give changes.</li> <li>3. Ling: Why teacher Alice asked him to come to you? Why she did not directly tell you to give change?</li> <li>4. Henry: I don't know.</li> <li>5. Ling: Do you think you need to give the change to Jerry?</li> <li>6. Henry: No! He already took away the things. I still needed to give him money! Wasn't he taking other people's money? This was not what</li> </ol>

<p>Jerry: I gave him money.</p> <p>Alice: Did HE give change to you?</p> <p>Henry: Why (I) gave change to him? He already took away the things. Supermarket did not give changes.</p>	<p>he earned! I already earned the money. But I then gave it back to him. He did not earn this by himself.</p> <p>7. Ling: I saw you also told these to teacher Alice at that time. Why didn't she say something or do something?</p> <p>8. Henry: She thought I needed to (give changes to Jerry).</p>
<p>Jerry: Did you give me the change? I gave you five RMB. Five minus...</p> <p>Jerry's calculation was interrupted by Henry as he picked the money from the box and gave it to Jerry.</p>  <p>Henry: Ten. Gave you ten RMB.</p> <p>Jerry: Ha? (Jerry looked like a bit surprise. He turned the "money" around to check the denomination), Oh, ten RMB, ok.</p>	<p>7. Ling: Did you want to give change to him?</p> <p>8. Henry: (shaking his head) I did not want to in my mind. Because I gave him ten RMB, too much.</p> <p>9. Ling: Then why did you still give him money.</p> <p>10. Henry: Teacher Alice reminded me to.</p> <p>11. Ling: What would happen if you do not listen to teacher Alice's reminder?</p> <p>12. Henry: Then I only gave him five RMB.</p> <p>13. Ling: I mean can you not give him any money?</p> <p>14. Henry: I did not. I gave it to him in the end.</p>

Henry interpreted Alice's behaviour was to remind him to give change to Jerry, which indicated Alice was acting as a **reminder** to him in this context (Line 3). Although Jerry was the one that Alice focuses on, Henry received this signal to directly argue with

Alice by taking the reference of his own experience in the 'supermarket' to support his working theory. It seemed that he interpreted Alice's no-respond behaviour as a disagreement to his theory (Lines 7/8). Compared to Henry's behaviour in the first vignette, Henry directly compromised to give changes to Jerry rather than argued with him as he did with Billy. Henry suggested that he compromised due to Alice's intervention (Line 10). Moreover, Henry showed his regret of giving too much money back to Jerry (Line 9). Deep in Henry's theory, he did not connect the amount of change to the mathematical operation. It is likely that Henry made the decisions regarding to the amount of change under the influence of teacher's authority (Lines 11-14). Henry did not actually modify his working theory in relation to giving changes through his deal with Jerry, which was evident in his strong argument in our conversation (Line 6). Whist Henry questioned Alice's idea, he still followed Alice's suggestion in this context. However, Alice did not get involved into their interaction after she engaged these two children into the process of solving this conflict. Moreover, the results of children's interaction showed that neither of them had fully understood how to give changes in the manner consistent with the real-life logic. Her reflection upon her pedagogical decision was as follows:

**Kebab Store-Episode 1-Vignette 3- Excerpt from the transcripts**

Alice: I still wanted to **assess** them, like an **assessor**, I think. Because actually, I still wanted to let Henry understand, you need to make deals according to the price you made. He did not understand the concept of giving changes. I was hoping he and Jerry could create some cognitive conflicts. Because this boy, Jerry, his ability is a bit stronger than previous children, and Henry too. So, I tried, it was like, helping me make judgments at that time. If they had conflicts, this meant they have developed into a certain level, then I would guide them further. But it seemed that he was 'bribed' by Henry (laugh).

Ling: Can you be more specific about what kind of development level?

Alice: Um, the first is their basic mathematical operational ability. It is too difficult for Henry, to do the operation within the one-digit number...Then you need to have the concept of giving changes. So far, they do not have a clear understanding about what are the denominations of the money mean to them when they are making deals. It is beyond their experience.

Similar to the first vignette, Alice continued to describe herself was an **assessor** in this context. Compared to her pedagogical practice in the first vignette, this time, Alice did not interact with Henry to assess his perspectives in person. Instead, after she sustained the interaction between Henry and Jerry, Alice stepped outside the play frame to observe and record children's play. Her comments to Jerry's ability suggested that she viewed Jerry as one of the "more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86) who might create a conflict in their interaction to challenge Henry's working theory. She seemed to expect that in the process of solving the conflict with Jerry, Henry's ability of making deals could move to the potential level of development which his perception of giving changes was consistent with the real-life logic. Hence, it is suggested that Alice's approach facilitated Henry to create the ZPD for himself in the process of collaboration with Jerry. Although the result of children's interaction did not meet Alice's expectation, this pedagogical practice enabled her to assess and identify these children's current state of development regarding to the mathematical calculation ability and the knowledge in relation to giving changes. Her pedagogical practice resonated with Vygotsky's perspectives on assessing a child's zone of proximal development through interaction or collaboration (Chaiklin, 2003). Furthermore, Alice mentioned that these assessments enabled her to make decisions on her next pedagogical practice: continuing to observe and record children's play. From Vygotsky's perspectives, the appropriate pedagogical interventions should be based on "diagnostic procedures grounded in an explanatory understanding of a child's current state of development." (Chaiklin, 2003, p.51). In this context, Alice chose not to intervene in that moment, since both children's abilities were less developed to

support their imitation to a mature play. In addition, Alice also mentioned that the flow of play was another reason why she chose to only be an assessor in this context.

*Alice: ...But actually, like Henry, most children in our class only have the concept of the combination and separation of numbers...They have little knowledge about calculations...It is too difficult to require them to make deals according to the right calculation. So, I just tried, I did nothing more. Especially learning the mathematical knowledge, it is rather difficult to learn how to do the addition and subtraction operation in play. I can, for example, stop them and ask them to learn together, how to calculate, make deals. But he is in the middle of his play. In that case, I just disturbed his play, the flow of play was affected. He would not be happy, then his learning motivation might be very low, especially learning this difficult knowledge...I might use a collective teaching activity to solve these issues later.*


In this context, Henry's deal-making involves the knowledge in relation to the addition-subtraction arithmetic operation under ten, which is beyond the current development level of most children regarding to the mathematical calculation. In fact, according to the Early Learning and Development Guideline Age 3-6 (MOE, 2012a), only children aged 5-6 years old are supposed to reach to this level of mathematical calculation abilities. Accordingly, the teacher was facing a tension that on the one hand, she was expecting a matured play level that children's play actions and theories of making-deals were more consistent with the real-life logic (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). Moreover, the teacher was aware that to reach this goal, higher calculation abilities are required which are beyond children's current development level as well as the age-related development goals that regulated in the policy documents. In this context, Alice chose to give up her intention of improving children's play level to only be an assessor, even though some of Henry's peers, like Billy and Jerry, had shown their potential and interests in moving to a more mature play status. She made this decision not only due to the consideration of over-required calculation abilities, but also because of her emphasis to the flow of play. From Alice's perspectives, the flow of play contributed to





pleasure emotions that children experience in play, which is associated with children's learning motivation. Her assumptions about the results of getting involved in children's play suggested that, it might not be suitable for the children to learn some knowledge within the imaginative play situation when children's current development level cannot support them to move to a higher play level. A conflict might emerge between the flow of play and children's motivation of learning the relevant knowledge. Furthermore, Alice's proposal to the collective teaching activity suggested that this form of activity might be more suitable to the academic learning in some situation. This vignette offers an example that from teacher's perspectives, not all the imaginative play is suitable for knowledge learning. In the discussion chapter, this proposal will be revisited to discuss the dilemma she faced when the idea of learning through play is dominant in Chinese kindergarten practice, as well as the flexible roles she chose to play in order to cope with this situation.

#### **5.3.2.4 The teacher's roles in the fourth vignette: a supporter from both children's and the teacher's perspectives**

This vignette revolves around a problem that emerged at the end of this episode. Henry did not have more kebabs to sell because his previous customers had not returned kebabs to him. He came up with the idea of using his previous "milk car", a blue paperboard "car" to collect the kebabs from his peers. Because the blue paperboard "car" is more stable than the current "kebab car", Henry wants to drag it to each play theme, carrying the box. Henry asks Alice to fetch this "car" for him from the material room. Whilst this is a simple request, Henry's responses and perspectives demonstrate how the child understands and interacts with the teacher's role within an equal teacher-child relationship. Alice's reflections on her pedagogical practice contribute to the reasons why the teacher is willing to give unconditional support to meet the child's request in an uncertain context of play. Additionally, Alice offers her insights into regarding the teacher as a resource in children's play.

Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage	Selected conversations with Monica
<p>Henry: Teacher, teacher, they have not sent back the kebabs yet.</p>  <p>Alice: Um, what can you do now? Do you want them to send back immediately?</p> <p>Henry: Yes. I want to change the 'milk car' into the "kebab car".</p> <p>Alice: Um, oh, ok.</p> <p>Henry: Teacher, can you help me bring the 'milk car' here? I want to change it.</p> <p>Alice: Change it how?</p> <p>Henry: It is just, (holds up his menu) I want to stick this on (it).</p> <p>Alice: Oh, wait a second. I'll fetch it for you.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Henry: I asked teacher Alice to <b>help</b> me fetch the 'milk car'.</li> <li>2. Ling: Why didn't you fetch it by yourself?</li> <li>3. Henry: What if someone comes, they will touch my things.</li> <li>4. Ling: What if teacher Alice did not agree to help you?</li> <li>5. Henry: No. The teacher should help children.</li> <li>6. Ling: I see. (Rewinding the video to the moments when Henry raised his voice to speak to Alice again) What did you want her to do at that time?</li> <li>7. Henry: Nothing. I just told her, let her know.</li> <li>8. Ling: Did you want her to come up with a different idea to help you take back your kebabs?</li> <li>9. Henry: No. I had an idea.</li> </ol>
<p>Alice asks the teacher assistant to fetch the "milk car" for Henry. After Henry receives his "milk car", he puts his box on the 'milk car' and drags it to each play theme to collect the kebabs from the children who previously bought the kebabs from him.</p>	

 <p>Henry: (I) am coming to collect the kebabs.</p>	
<p>Henry drags this car to his original place. He uses a Chenille stem to connect the “milk car” and the “kebab car”.</p>  <p>Then he drags both of these ‘cars’ to move to the centre of the aisle, where he re-opens his “kebab store”.</p>	<p>10. Ling: How did you come up with this idea?</p> <p>11. Henry: I just thought of it. I found a Chenille stem on the ground.</p>

In this vignette, Henry proposed a simple request to Alice to ask her to fetch the blue paperboard ‘car’ for him. The teacher’s role as a **supporter** is clearly identified by Henry since he actively asked Alice for help (Line 1). It is unusual to see this kind of request during my study, since the children in this class rarely ask the teachers to help them with issues that they can solve by themselves. Furthermore, as I have mentioned in the second vignette, Alice has a professional belief in cultivating children’s independent problem-solving abilities in play. Yet in this vignette, Alice chose to follow Henry’s instructions to cooperate with him to solve the problem. Alice’s reflection upon her in-the-moment response was as follows:

#### **Kebab Store-Episode 1-Vignette 4- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Alice: ...Normally I do not directly give them solutions. We pay attention to cultivating children's independent problem-solving abilities...Henry's ability is rather strong in our class, especially, he is more creative than most of the children in the class. So, I thought he was capable of solving this by himself. I just gave him a hand, like a **supporter**. Actually, at that time, I did not know how he was going to do it, or why he thought of the "milk car".

Ling: But you still did what he asked you to do.

Alice: Yeah. As long as their requests are reasonable. Because at that time, I thought he was worried about leaving his "car" alone.

Alice's definition of her role is consistent with Henry's identification of the teacher's role in this context. Whilst Alice confirmed her help to Henry in the process of solving the problem, she believed her support did not engage in the core idea of how to solve the problem that Henry met, since she did not understand Henry's intention in making this request. Alice's reflections above suggest that she adopts flexible roles and pedagogical practices to cultivate children's independent problem-solving abilities. Her pedagogical decision-making was based on the individual child's ability and her own judgments of the child's request. Alice's existing knowledge of Henry framed Henry as a competent player who can solve this problem independently. Her comments on Henry's abilities resonated with Henry's perspectives (Lines 6-9) that his intention was not to ask the teacher to solve this problem for him at the beginning of this vignette. As captured in the first vignette, Henry came up with the idea of using the "milk car" to collect the kebabs by himself. Due to her trust in Henry's abilities, Alice was willing to meet Henry's request when she could not anticipate the child's behaviour as well as the results of her decisions. Whilst Alice did not understand Henry's intention, her insights into the in-the-moment context suggested that she was able to identify Henry's

contextual needs (Line 3). The request that Henry presented enabled him to solve the dilemma that he was facing at that moment: he wanted to leave his play site to fetch his blue “car” yet he also wanted to stay with his play materials at that same time. Therefore, Alice regarded Henry’s request as a reasonable one that she was willing to support, even though this request is capable of Henry to complete by himself.

Not only that, but while watching the video, Alice expressed her appreciation for this simple request that Henry proposed to her. Her commentary was as follows:

**Kebab Store-Episode 1-Vignette 4- Excerpt from the transcripts 2**

Alice: ...Now I think this is smart. He was able to use the strategy to allocate the resource around him legitimately according to his needs.

Ling: The resource?

Alice: Yeah. Me. I once told them a story...everyone is your resource. And asking the teacher for help is the same as turning to children for help. I was hoping to be regarded as an equal resource to their peers.

Alice confirmed Henry’s ability to make use of the teacher’s existence in play proactively as the resource to help him solve the dilemma that he was facing at that moment. From Alice’s perspective, Henry’s request indicates that he has built up the consciousness of equality between the teacher and his peers when he needs help. Alice believes her previous guidance has contributed to Henry’s ability to optimize the role of the teacher in this context. Alice’s reflections upon her previous guidance might explain why Henry gave a convincing perspective on the teacher’s role (Line 5) regarding supporting children’s play.

### 5.3.2.5 The teacher's roles in the episode: an observer and a documenter from both children's and the teacher's perspectives

From the beginning to the end of the episode, Alice is watching and taking videos of Henry's play continuously when she is also acting in the roles discussed above. She defines herself as an **observer** and a **documenter** throughout the whole episode, which resonates with Henry's descriptions of her corresponding pedagogical practice in our conversation, for example, "she was watching" and "she was taking videos". Hence, Henry's identifications of the teachers' roles are consistent with the teacher's perspectives. The findings below will discuss these two roles in turn.

#### The teacher's role as an observer

Henry mainly contributes his perspectives on the teacher's role of an observer in the first and the second vignettes of this episode. His comments on Alice's continuous observing pedagogical practice are presented below:

#### **Vignette 1 Excerpt from the conversation about the first still image.**

1. Henry: She came to **look at** my kebab car. She was **watching**.
2. Ling: Do you know why she came to watch you at that time?
3. Henry: (Pausing for a few seconds) I don't know. (Pausing for a few seconds) She often looks at here and then she looks at there.

Henry is not clear about the intention of being observed by Alice (Line 3). Yet his depiction of Alice's behaviour indicates that the child views the teachers' observation behaviour as a regular practice in play. Furthermore, Henry gives his perceptions of the teachers' patterns of observing the children's play: they move from one play theme to the other during the period of free play activity. This poses an interesting question: what are the children's perspectives on the teachers' ongoing observation of their play? Henry's comments to Alice in the second vignette give insights into this question.

**Vignette 2 Excerpt from the conversation about the first still image.**

1. Ling: Do you like teacher Alice watching your play?
2. Henry: I do. I like her standing nearby. Otherwise, I can't ask her a question if I want to.
3. Ling: I see.
4. Henry: It is very inconvenient to look for her.

Henry's positive feedback to the observer (Line 2) is closely associated with his contextual need of interacting with the teacher during his play activity. As the object of the teacher's observation, he has little agency to control the length of the teacher's observation. While Alice is adopting an ongoing observing practice, Henry is able to ask the teacher for help at any moment due to the teacher's sustained accompanying by the side of him (Line 4). Accordingly, Henry values the accompanying functions of the observer that Alice plays in this episode. He views the teacher's existence as a company in his play, which constructs a rather equal teacher-child relationship under the gaze of Alice. As illustrated in the second and the fourth vignette, Henry takes an active role in responding to the teacher's role of an observer. He initiates his interactions with the teacher in an easy manner and he has little concerns about disturbing the teacher's ongoing observation and videotaping. Therefore, Henry benefits from Alice's role as an ongoing observer in his play.

According to Alice, she made her pedagogical decision before the play started. Her reflections on the role of an observer are as follow:

*Alice: He is very used to being watched and recorded by the teacher in play. So, I don't think he will behave differently because of my existence. And I try not to bring any influence his play...I wanted to observe and record this play theme that day because it was his first time using this "car" to sell kebabs. This is mainly for my own purpose.*

*Alice: ...because this was at the initial stage of children's play. There are many issues that exist.*

Alice's perspectives suggest that her pedagogical decision-making is influenced by the development stage of this play theme. From her perspective, at the initial stage of children's play, the priority of the teacher's role is to identify the problems that existed in children's play. Alice's reflections on her role choice resonate with Henry's unclear understanding of the intention of the teacher's pedagogical practice, suggesting that children are commonly in the passive positions to be chosen by the teachers to observe in the context of play. Alice views her observation as a normalised behaviour that she does not realize her role also means providing the companion that the child needs in the play context. Hence, Alice's ongoing observation of Henry's play is for her own educational purpose, rather than to accompany with Henry to meet his contextual needs of interacting with the teacher at any moment.

### **The teachers' roles of a documenter**

While watching the first and the fourth vignettes, Henry offers his insights into the functions of videotapes as well as his understanding of the purpose of the teacher taking videos of children's play. In the first vignette, Henry actively shows Alice the ten RMB that he receives from Luke while Alice is taking the video of him. It seems that Henry expects Alice to record his actions on the videotapes. The conversation that emerges in that moment is presented below:

#### **Vignette 1 Excerpt from the conversation about the first still image**

1. Henry: She **recorded** it, my money, ten RMB!
2. Ling: Why did she take videos of your play at that time?
3. Henry: To show it to other children.



4. Ling: Why does teacher Alice want to show your play to other children?
5. Henry: To teach them how to play. Because some children want to play this store (theme), but they do not know how to do it.
6. Ling: So, the teachers use the videos to teach children how to play, am I right?
7. Henry: (Nods his head) To let them watch.....show them videos. The boss in that store can also teach. The boss also knows (how to play), (he/she) can teach too.
8. Ling: Do you want other children to watch this video?
9. Henry: I do.
10. Ling: Did you like her taking videos at that time?
11. Henry: I did.

Henry's interpretations of Alice's documenting practice (Lines 3/7) are the reflection upon his experience regarding the pre/after-play discussions that are arranged by the teachers. The teachers in this kindergarten commonly adopt the video-cue dialogues with the children to discuss the problems and solutions in play, give recognition to the children's play behaviour, introduce new play materials and play themes, and share different themes of play situations with the whole class of children. His depictions of the use of video recordings indicate that Henry identifies the modelling function of video recordings as well as the purpose of the teacher's pedagogical practice (Lines 4-5). Henry gives positive feedback to the teacher's role of a documenter (Line 11) since this role can meet his needs and interests of modelling the play to other peers (Lines 8-9) through the lens of Alice's video recordings. It is worth of noticing that Henry also proposes the leader of a play theme can play the modelling role to teach other children how to play. This poses an interesting question: what are the children's perspectives on the differences between learning from their peers and modelling through video recordings? In the fourth vignette, while Henry is commenting on Alice's continuous behaviour of documenting his play, he also reveals the advantages of using videos as a modelling tool to support children's play.


**Vignette 4 Excerpt from the conversation about the third still image**

1. Henry: .....I like watching other children play. Other children also like it. Because I cannot see the supermarket.
2. Ling: You wanted to see the supermarket at that time?
3. Henry: Because (children from) the supermarket cannot see me. I cannot see the supermarket either.
4. Ling: Why do you want to see the supermarket? Do you want to learn how to play the supermarket?
5. Henry: No. I just want to watch the supermarket. I know how to play the supermarket. I bought things in the supermarket. You did not take videos of me that day.

Henry shows his interest in getting to know the play situation from another theme (Lines 1/5). However, as the owner of the kebab store, Henry needs to spend most of the playtime in his theme. His comments on the video recordings indicate the advantages of video recordings: they extend the possibilities for the children to understand other children's play by breaking the restriction of time and space (Lines 1-3). Henry's perspectives suggest that compared to the method of learning from more knowledgeable peers in person, modelling through video recordings also contributes to meeting the needs of children who are curious about other play themes. Therefore, this might be another reason why Henry accepts the pedagogy of video-cue dialogues and recognizes the teacher's role as a documenter.

In addition, Henry also views the video recordings as a recognition to his behaviour in play. In the fourth vignette, when Henry dragged his new "car" into the centre of the aisle, he actively shared his excitement and updates with Alice. His commentary was presented below.

<b>Stills and selected dialogues from the</b>	<b>Selected conversations with Henry</b>
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recorded footage	
 <p>Henry: Wow! Teacher! Look!</p> <p>Alice: Wow!</p> <p>Henry: Teacher, I received four kebabs. Look at my hand, four.</p> <p>Alice: Nod her head.</p> <p>Henry: I'll bring the kebab car outside. To sell them. There are more people here. In the centre.</p> <p>Alice: (Continues to record without replying to him).</p>	<p>1. Henry: <b>Taking videos.</b> You are also taking videos. (Pauses for a few seconds) Because she wants to praise me. (She) thinks my 'car' is very good.</p>

Henry is satisfied with the new vehicle that he created. His assumption about Alice's behaviour suggests that he believes Alice is going to commend his idea with the videos for his peers (Line 1). However, the fact is, Alice did not have the chance to show the videos that she recorded that day to the children since she was fully occupied with another teaching plan during the week. This result leads to the discussion about Alice's thoughts on her continuous video recording pedagogical practice, which are presented below:

**Kebab Store-Episode 1- Excerpt from the transcripts**

Alice: ...This is mainly for my own purpose. I might use it later to show it to the class, or I might not. I just recorded it first. I might also use it for the task...Actually, these

children have already regarded this as a normalised behaviour.

Ling: Do you think children's behaviour will be different when you record their play?

Alice: Um, usually not. He was used to the teacher standing somewhere and watching or recording his play.

Whilst from the child's perspective, the video recordings represent multiple meanings to them, the teacher's interpretation of the use of videos reveals that the teacher might not have a fixed purpose for using these recordings. Alice's in-the-moment pedagogical practice contributes more to her own professional development or later pedagogy. The task that she mentioned is related to teachers' professional training. The kindergarten requires each teacher to provide at least ten minutes of videos about children's play to the director every month as the source for the discussion in the kindergarten's teaching and research meetings. Her attitudes to the video recordings suggest that she is preparing many potential materials for the vide-cue dialogues with children. As a result, a gap might exist in children's expectations of the video and teachers' choice of videos in reality. It is suggested that teachers are in the dominant positions to control the modelling functions of video recordings. This idea will be revisited in the discussion chapter since the documenter and the video-cue dialogue pedagogy are significant and prevalent in current Chinese kindergarten practice. Furthermore, Alice's insider perspectives on Henry's response to her documenting behaviour suggest her role as a documenter has little influence on children's play, which might be the reason why she chose to record Henry's play for a rather long period from a close distance.

### 5.3.3 Snack Bar

The “snack bar” is a kind of small restaurant that provides many different types of local food, such as dumplings and steamed buns. This theme emerged from the Home Corner and Fire Station. A ‘firefighter’ went to Home Corner to look for food because he was hungry. Teacher Bella noticed his behaviour. In the after-play discussion section, she and the children came up with the idea of opening a “snack bar”. This theme is taken over by Alice. One episode is selected in this section to present Alice’s roles when she was inside the imaginary play situations to play with other children.

### **5.3.3.1 The teacher’s roles in the first episode: a play partner from children’s perspectives; a guider from the teacher’s perspectives**

This episode demonstrates how Alice places herself inside the imaginative play context to guide children’s play according to her own imagination about managing a snack bar. Her reflections explain in what context the teacher needs to actively exercise her agency as a moving force to guide children’s play to develop into a mature play status. Amy offers her insights into the differences between a teacher-customer and other customers played by her peers. Furthermore, both Amy and Alice contribute their perspectives to the dual identities of the teacher’s role when the teacher acts as an insider in children’s play. Additionally, this vignette reveals the complexity of teachers’ roles in children’s play. On the surface, the teacher’s role reaches the intersubjectivity regarding to her position in the imaginative play situation from the perspectives of both the child and the teacher. Yet the teacher’s actions in this context do not meet the child’s interests and needs in play.

<b>Stills and selected dialogues from the recorded footage</b>	<b>Selected conversations with Amy</b>
Alice: Boss, give me the menu. Luke (the boy in a white shirt) and Jill (the girl in a black sweater): The menu!	1. Amy: We did not have a menu before. 2. Ling: Yeah? How did they order the

Alice: What can we eat? Where is the menu?

Amy: (the girl in a purple jumper) No menu.

Alice: Why? Then, how do we order?

Amy stood aside with no response



Jill: Go make one.

Alice: How can we order food without a menu?

Amy left. She went to the material room to make the menu.

food in the past?

3. Amy: I just asked them, what do you need? I asked them, I gave them the food.

4. Ling: What role did teacher Alice play?

5. Amy: She was a **customer**. She was here to play with us.

Tim: Have vegetables.



Alice: How can you hold vegetables with your hand? I don't want to eat unsanitary food! (Tim left) ...I am so hungry. How can you not have a menu? I am so hungry.

6. Ling: Did you like making the menu?

7. Amy: No. I made it for teacher Alice. She said we did not have a menu. So, I went to make one. But I did not like making (the menu). But I can only make one. Because, they all have menus in the places where you eat.

8. Ling: When you were playing the snack store at that time, did you think your store should be like a real snack store?

9. Amy: Could be different. This was

Jerry (the boy inside the “store”) brought a plate of food that Amy just made for Alice. Then he went back to the “store”.



Alice: Jerry, why do you give me the meal?  
I have not ordered yet! I do not want to eat this.

Jill pushed the plate away.

not a real one.

Alice: Which one is the dumplings?



Amy served a bowl of dumplings to Alice and then stood aside.

10. Amy: My mom often brought me to her kitchen. The food we cooked did not have hair in it. My mom and I did not have this kind of customers.

11. Ling: What kind?

12. Amy: The problematic customer<sup>4</sup>.

13. Ling: Did you like this kind of customer?

14. Amy: No.

15. Ling: What were the differences between this kind of customer (points at Alice) and other customers, like

<sup>4</sup> Amy’s original reply in Chinese was “有问题的顾客”, which described teacher Alice as a picky customer in this play context. However, in Chinese language, the word “picky” (挑剔的) is an advanced vocabulary. Based on my observation on Amy, she did not use this word in the kindergarten. Rather, Amy also used the word “有问题的” to described teacher Alice in other dialogues. Hence, I adopted a way of literal translation in this context to translate the adjective “有问题的” into “problematic”.



Alice: Oh! There is hair in it! Boss!

Amy picked up the hair and put it in the bowl.

Alice: This is the first time. I'll let you off. Next time I will complain! Why did you use your hand? It is unsanitary.

Staying with Luke and Jill for a few minutes, Alice left.

Alice: I am full. I have to go.

Jerry (the boy in a blue jumper) used a scissor to hold an "egg" and put it on Jill's plate. But Jill took it away.

Jerry: (asked the second time) You don't want a colorful egg? This is a colorful egg!



Jill: I do not want it. No!

Luke and Jill?

**16.** Amy: They never said there was hair, there wasn't a menu.

**17.** Ling: Did you like teacher Alice playing the customer with you at that time?

**18.** Amy: No. I did not want her to come.

**19.** Amy: (They) could not serve the table randomly (without orders. Because it was not the buffet. We played ordering the food that day. If this was the buffet, (they) could serve the table s randomly.

**20.** Ling: Which did you prefer? Playing the buffet or ordering food?

**21.** Amy: Um, playing the buffet was more interesting. Not too tiring. I did not need to make the menu.

**22.** Ling: Then, why didn't you tell teacher Alice you wanted to play the



<p>Luke: We do not want to eat it! We did not order! (Shouted out loudly)</p>	<p>buffet? You were the boss, right?          Couldn't you decide what to play?          23. Amy: Yes. But teachers are our elders.          24. Ling: So?          25. Amy: We should listen to her.          26. Ling: In that case, was she still playing a customer? Or did she become a teacher?          27. Amy: She was. She was not the teacher. She was a customer. The teacher could also play the customer.          A customer and a teacher.</p>
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Amy's identification of Alice's role suggested that she viewed the teacher as a **play partner** (Line 5) in this imaginary play context. She gave significant negative evaluations to the role that Alice played (Line 14) since Alice was troubling her with problems that she hadn't met when she was playing with her mother (Line 10) and her peers (Line 16). Whilst Amy did not enjoy playing with Alice (Line 18), her responses to this "picky customer" (Line 12) were compliant with little argument and conflicts emerged in their interactions. Amy's perspectives on the menu (Line 7) indicated that her cooperative response to Alice's request was a compromise to the teacher's authority. Amy showed her capability of illustrating and arguing her theories of playing the "buffet" in our interview (Lines 1/3/19). Yet in the episode, she took direct actions to follow Alice's request without further explanation. The way that Amy responded to Alice suggested that, as the owner of this store, Amy's agency in play was restricted by the role that Alice played due to Alice's identity as a teacher. Amy seemed to step out of the imaginary play frame to consider the power relationship between Alice and herself while both of them were still playing the role within the imaginative play frame (Lines 22-27). Thus, Amy recognized Alice's identity as a play partner and a teacher

simultaneously in this context. Amy's identification of the dual identities of the teacher's role (Line 27) resonated with Alice's own interpretation of her role. Her reflections on playing the role of a customer are presented below.

#### **Snack Bar-Episode 1- Excerpt from the transcripts 1**

Alice: ...I was thinking to get involved in their play, to enter their play in the identity as a **customer**. I was like, a person who set challenges for them. Because my requirement to them was, you needed to have a menu. Otherwise, I could not order a meal....And I acted like I was very hungry on purpose, to urge them to solve this problem for me. So, actually, I was **guiding** them to see the menu issue in the *manner of performance*.


Ling: So, you were not purely playing with them as a customer.

Alice: No...*It was like, my indirect guidance to show them how to be customers. Actually, even though I recognized myself as a **customer**, in their eyes, I was still a **teacher**. A customer and a teacher at the same time. A teacher-customer.*

Alice's recognition of the dual identities of her role aligns with Amy's perspectives of the teacher's role in this play context (Line 27). Whilst Alice's insider role as a customer is confirmed by both children and the teacher, this role means different things to each of them. Amy viewed Alice as a play partner who was characterized by the teacher's authority. She regarded Alice's persistence in the menu as picky behaviour, rather than identifying it as a play action with an educational purpose. Amy's perspectives suggested that Alice's identity as a teacher was attached to the role that she played. On the contrary, Alice's reflections on her role suggested that her subjectiveness as a teacher was more dominant since she intervened in children's play with specific and preplanned educational purposes. Her descriptions of her practice, for example, "*in the manner of performance*" and "*indirect guidance*", suggested that she adopted a strategy of internal intervention (Hua, 2015) that teachers play one of the roles of

children's play in order to give instructions on children's behaviour. This pedagogical practice also resonates with the role-play pedagogy in a play world approach in an Indonesian play-based programme (Utami, Fler and Li, 2020), where teachers are inside the play to guide the play scenario. Therefore, Alice's perspective on her role indicates that she played the role of a **guide** in this context while her insider role of a customer was an inevitable result of her pedagogical practice.

According to Alice, the purpose of her pedagogical practice was to motivate and guide children to use menus in their snack bar. In previous play activities, Alice tried to guide children to use menus from outside the play frame but no child responded to her suggestions. The still image below shows how children ordered food in the snack bar in their previous play.

<p>A still image from the recorded footage in a previous play episode of Snack Bar</p> 	<p>Basically, all children in the snack bar participated in preparing the food. They put food on plates and then placed the plates on a table. Different children adopted different ways to present food. Most children used one plate for one type of food. Amy liked to combine multiple foods in one plate. Customers either took a whole plate of food away, or picked a certain type of food from the plate and took it away. Amy named this play model as the "buffet".</p>
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This time, Alice chose to guide children within the play scenario, which she seldom used during the course of my study. Three selected transcripts explain why Alice chose to intervene in children's play as a guide.

*Alice: I was ready Because they played like this for a while, their play was chaos, and it is unsanitary to display food like this.....They did not realise this problem themselves. **So, they need an external force to tell them, you need to have this (the menu) in your snack bar.***

*Alice: I think they transferred their past experience into the snack bar.....So, I feel that, there was no development. This play seemed to go smoothly, but there were no conflicts between children. Without conflicts, they couldn't have the opportunity to find and solve problems in their play.....**But, from the teacher's point of view, I will think what development have I contributed to these children in this play? Isn't the meaning of the teacher's existence to let them live new experience?** In today's play activity, they were able to play continuously..... As it is now, their play is unlike the real life. They were completing a kind of play in their imagination.*

*Alice: .....But if you are simulating real life, you are supposed to have a menu. It is a part of the play.*

Firstly, Alice was not satisfied with the children's previous play status as she viewed their way of serving customers with their old play rules. She expected children's play to develop into a mature status which is more consistent with real-life logic. Her emphasis on the real aspects of imaginative play is also reflected in her comments on the sanitary issue of children's previous play. It seemed that Alice regarded the children's snack bar as a real one when she was evaluating this imaginative play context. In the reality, menus are essential symbols of snack bars, which explained why, from Alice's perspective, children's previous play was problematic. Alice mentioned that she had given children a period of time to keep their play rules, expecting they could realize and solve this issue by themselves. Yet the harmonious contextual conditions in children's previous plays were not able to create conflicts for children to find problems that Alice expected them to notice. Therefore, Alice participated in this play context as a moving force to create conflicts with children by

herself. Her dramatic actions as a picky and hungry customer created purposeful conflicts in the scenario and set challenges for these children, which made the menu issue more dominant to them. As mentioned above, Alice seldom initiates and leads children's play in imaginary situations. Alice's reflections on her pedagogical decision-making indicated that it takes a teacher some time to have thoughtful considerations and multiple tries before she decides to engage in children's imaginative play. This decision is also associated with Alice's beliefs about teachers' roles. The bold sentences suggested Alice's beliefs about exercising teachers' agency in children's play to stimulate their development.

Secondly, Alice believes that when children were using menus in play, interactions between staff and customers potentially offer opportunities to stimulate children's development. As she analysed below:

*Alice: .....First, your communicational contents become diversified, including discussing recipes and setting prices of the dishes and how to greet and serve the customers which is the communication about social language and behavior. Then, you need to have the concept of one-to-one serves. For example, if he orders vegetables, you just cook vegetables. You need to be able to cope with the customer's request. You can serve other food, randomly.*

Alice reveals how the implementation of menus contributed to children's development in language, social culture and mathematical areas. In order to guide children to achieve these educational values in play, Alice created a "teacher-centred imagination" (Utami, Fler and Li, 2020, p.406), where the teacher's imagination to how to order food with menus in the snack bar becomes the centre of play. Clearly, Amy's individual imagination about playing this theme did not connect with Alice's own imagination regarding how to play in Snack Bar. Amy showed little interest in making menus (Line 7), nor was she interested in implementing menus in the snack bar (Line 21). Her knowledge of the real snack bar (Line 7) as well as her perspectives on imaginative

play (Line 9) suggested that it was her choice not to play Snack Bar in a way which is consistent with reality. Amy's interest in playing the "buffet" might be associated with her interest in displaying the food. The still image below was a moment when Amy was displaying the plate.



According to the dialogue between Amy's mother and Alice, when Amy was playing the "kitchen" with her mother at home, Amy paid very much attention to displaying the food when she "cooked noodles" for her mother. It is likely that Amy is bridging this interest from home to kindergarten. As I captured at the beginning of this play, Amy displayed each plate of food with thoughtful consideration. Amy's theory of playing the "buffet" was associated with her interests in recipe design and food combination. Additionally, Amy's way of playing the buffet represents her ways of communicating with other children, which enables both customers and herself to experience freedom and exercise agency in a play about food choices. The way she used to manage Snack Bar expressed her inquires to the world, regarding "How can I make and communicate meaning?" and "How can I express my creativity?" (Hedges and Cooper, 2016, p.312). These real questions, from Hedges and Cooper's (2016) perspectives, are the fundamental source of children's interests. Hence, playing the "buffet" is likely Amy's fundamental interest which should be noticed and valued by the teacher.

Alice did not identify Amy's play interests, nor did she recognize them since she was not satisfied with the children's previous play rules. Whilst both Amy and Alice viewed

the teacher's role as inside the imaginative play situation, the teacher's actions in this context did not meet Amy's interests and needs in play. Fler (2010) argued that:

...[w]hat is needed in play-based programs is a conceptual and a contextual intersubjectivity between the children and the teacher. When teachers wish to use play as a pedagogical tool for exploring or introducing particular concepts, then it becomes important for the teacher to first consider the everyday concepts that children have developed or are currently imitating through their play (e.g., administering medicines) and to think about the scientific concepts they want to introduce... (p.15).

Fler's arguments focus on teaching and learning scientific concepts through play pedagogy, yet the conceptual and contextual intersubjectivity between the children and the teacher is important in rethinking the teacher's roles in children's play from both teacher's and children's perspectives. In this episode, the everyday concept that Alice tried to introduce did not attain a level of intersubjectivity with Amy's fundamental inquiry interests. By situating herself inside the play, Alice expands the play plot, increasing the play's complexity and creating a new play theme together with the children. But the problem is, when her involvement is too strong, her pedagogical practice is likely to restrict children's agency and interest in the play and the construction of their working theories concerning the play theme.

## **5.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter managed to bridge both children's and teachers' perspectives on the roles of teachers in play. The findings show that in some contexts, the children's identifications of the teachers' roles were consistent with the teachers' own definitions of their roles in play. But in other contexts, inconsistency existed between the two perspectives. Table 5.4 and Table 5.5 display the situations of intersubjectivities

between children's perspectives and teachers' perspectives in relation to the teachers' role identifications.

**Table 5.4 Consistent role definitions from children and teacher**

Teachers' roles in play	Children's evaluations to teachers' roles	Teacher-Play Theme-Episode-Vignette
Observer	positive	Bella-Hospital-Ep1
		Alice-Kebab-Ep1
Documenter	positive	Bella-Hospital-Ep1
		Alice-Kebab-Ep1
Play partner	positive	Bella-Hospital-Ep3-V1
	compound	Alice-Fruit juice-Ep1
Director	negative	Bella-Hospital-Ep3-V2
		Alice-Kebab-Ep1-V2
Supporter	positive	Alice-Kebab-Ep1-V4

**Table 5.5 Inconsistent role definitions from children and teachers**

Teachers' perspectives on their roles	Children's perspectives on teachers' roles	Children's evaluations to teachers' roles	Teacher-Play Theme-Episode-Vignette
Guider	Enquirer	negative	Bella-Hospital-Ep2-V1
	Play partner	positive	Bella-Hospital-Ep3-V1
		positive	Bella-Hospital-Ep3-V3
		negative	Alice-Snack-Ep1
Supporter	Enquirer	negative	Bella-Hospital-Ep2-V1
Assessor	Enquirer	positive	Alice-Kebab-Ep1-V1
	Reminder	No reply	Alice-Kebab-Ep1-V3



These two tables indicate that except the roles of observers, documenters and directors, other types of roles, such as guiders and supporters, these roles were identified differently due to the different contexts of play that the participants engaged in. However, children's evaluations on these roles indicated that children's perspectives on a certain type of role were not fixed. Thus, in the next chapter, the discussion will focus on exploring children's perspectives on teachers' play in the aspects of their evaluations. Additionally, teachers' perspectives on their role positionings will also be addressed.

## Chapter six: Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore the roles of teachers in children's imaginative play from both children's and the teachers' perspectives, in order to reconsider the teachers' roles in Chinese kindergarten play practices. In chapter five, I have demonstrated multiple types of teachers' roles and the corresponding pedagogical practices in different imaginative play contexts by bridging the perspectives between the teachers and children together. The findings indicated that in some contexts of play, children's identifications of the roles of teachers were consistent with the teachers' own definitions of their roles, whereas, in some contexts, the perspectives of the teachers and children did not achieve intersubjectivity in the roles of teachers with regards to the aspects of identifications, expectations and evaluations. Furthermore, children's feedback and evaluations of certain types of teachers' roles were not fixed but varied due to the teachers' pedagogical practice and different contexts of play. Basically, the five sub-research questions of this study have been addressed in the previous chapter. They are presented as follows:

1. What are teachers' perspectives on their roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play, and what are children's identifications to the teachers' roles within the corresponding play contexts?
2. What are children's interests and needs in different contexts of play and how do teachers understand these needs and interests within the corresponding play contexts?
3. Why do teachers choose certain roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?

4. How do children respond to teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?

5. What are children's perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?

Wood (2010b) suggests that it is important to understand play in educational settings from both perspectives: the "outside-in" perspectives that "privileges adults' plans for play, and their interpretations of play and educational outcomes" (p.11), as well as the 'inside-out' perspectives which "privileges children's cultural practice, meanings and purposes" (p.11). In this chapter, I will move the discussions to examine the teachers' roles in light of the perspectives from different groups of participants, the children and the teachers, in order to analyse and reconsider the roles of teachers from the cultures embedded within these two perspectives. Moreover, in this study, the contexts of play that teachers' roles are situated in have been culturally framed into the "educational play" framework and embedded in the broader sociocultural contexts of Chinese early childhood education. Therefore, the discussion will shed the light on the challenges that kindergarten teachers face when they are balancing different cultures in children's play in kindergarten practices.

## **6.2 Children's perspectives on the roles of the teachers in the different play contexts**

In chapter five, the discourse on the children's perspectives mainly focuses on their identifications and definitions of the roles of the teachers in different play contexts. The findings emerge seven types of the teachers' roles from the children's perspectives: the observes, documenters, enquires, reminders, supporters, play partners and directors. These results support the findings of other studies in this area from the children's perspectives, which show that teachers play the roles of observing children,

controlling the rules of the play situation, regulating children's behaviours (Einarsdóttir, 2014b), confirming the children's competencies (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015), providing assistance and materials in play situations, supporting the children's social interactions, participating in children's play and playful actions (Einarsdóttir, 2014b; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). These findings are more concerned with answering the question of "what have the teachers **done for children** within these roles in their play contexts", yet few results discuss what these teachers' roles **mean to children** when children are interacting with these roles that they identify. Within these limited studies, despite some of the children's perspectives have discussed their preference of the teachers' roles in educational settings (Hutchings et al., 2008; Kragh-Müller and Isbell, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2014b), these discourses focus on teachers' personal traits and behaviours. Few of them have shed the light on children's feedback and evaluations of teachers' roles and their pedagogical practices in play. I suggest that this part of children's perspectives is crucial if we want to take an integrated account to understand the complexity of the teachers' roles in play from children's perspectives. Therefore, the sections below will discuss the children's perspectives in relation to their feedback and evaluations of the teachers' pedagogical practices and roles in play.

### 6.2.1 Children's evaluations of the teachers' roles

In Vygotsky's and neo-Vygotskian sociocultural theory, some researchers have connected the teachers' scaffolding in play with the needs of individual children of a certain developmental level and in a certain play context (Trawick-Smith, 1994;1998; Bodrova and Leong, 2006; Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot, 2011). In Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot's (2011) study, they examine the effect of teachers' intervention and intervention strategies through the goodness of fit situations between children's needs and the guidance teachers provide in play. In agreement with the rationale of Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot's (2011) study, this study indicates that children's evaluations of

teachers' roles are closely associated with whether there is a good match between children's needs in a certain play context and the pedagogical positions of the teachers' roles. In this study, most children who are presented in the vignettes have offered their feedback on the teachers' roles, except Henry from Kebab Store who has not expressed specific comments on the teacher's role of a reminder in the third vignette. Additionally, Lily from Hospital directly replied "I don't know" when I asked her if she liked the "patient" that the teacher played in the last vignette of the third episode. While examining the rest of the children's feedback, the most significant finding to emerge from the analysis is that the children's feedback on the teachers' roles is closely associated with whether their needs, interests and agency in play have been met, satisfied and respected by the teachers' roles and pedagogical practice at that moment.

In a study of children's perspectives on the roles of Icelandic preschool teachers, Einarsdóttir (2014b) highlights the positive and negative aspects of preschool teachers from the children's perspectives. Building on the frame of her study, this study presents data showing the positive, negative and compound aspects of the teachers' roles from the children's perspectives. These three feedback categories are analysed thematically through the children's comments and responses to the teachers' pedagogical practices and behaviours in different play contexts.

### **6.2.2 The children's positive evaluations of the teachers' roles**

This study indicates that children give positive feedback and evaluations on the roles of teachers when the teachers' educational intentions in play and children's needs and interests in play have achieved a certain degree of intersubjectivity. The data from this study show that the children give positive feedback to the teachers' roles of the play partner, supporter, observer, documenter and enquirer.

#### **Observer**

The children's perspectives in this study show that they welcome the teachers to observe their play, even when the teachers' bodily positions are in close proximity to the children's play. In an Icelandic study (Einarsdóttir, 2014b), it has been suggested that some children feel they have been controlled by the teachers under their frequent observations. This perspective on the roles of observers does not appear in this study. The data show that most children are immersed in their own play without interaction with the teachers. They interpret the teachers' frequent or sustained observations as teachers' regular visits, which have been evidenced in the perspectives of Henry from Kebab Store. From sociocultural perspectives, children's understandings and views are contextualized by the social, cultural and historical contexts (Graue and Walsh, 1998; Warming, 2005). Since the idea of observing children without interfering with their play has been broadly promoted and implemented in current Chinese kindergarten practice, the children's perspectives on the roles of observers can also be regarded as a resonance with this prevalent pedagogical practice. Furthermore, the data from this study indicate that when the children are under sustained observation by the teachers, their agency has not been constrained by the teachers' existence. Instead, they express a sense of relaxation to initiate interactions with the teachers according to their contextual needs. This is significant in Henry's perspectives on the teachers' sustained observation in Kebab Store. The child gives positive feedback to the accompanying teacher who is observing him for a long period of time. He seems to consider it important that the teachers are available to approach him when he needs their support anytime during the role-play activity. These results are consistent with an Icelandic study which finds young children (under three years old) view it as important for the teachers to be in physical proximity positions to them in their play situations so that they can get sufficient responses and assistance from the teachers (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Therefore, this study adds up the advantage of being a sustained observer from the children's perspectives, which highlights the in-time responses and convenient assistance that children emphasize to the roles of teachers in play.

## **Documenter**

The data from this study indicate that the children give positive feedback to the teachers' roles as documenters. They not only show their appreciation for this role in our conversations, but also cooperate with the teachers when they are taking videos of their play. As illustrated in the first episode of the Hospital, Monica expresses her consciousness of protecting the teacher from being disturbed when Bella is documenting their play. One of the reasons for children's appreciation of teachers' roles as documenters may be because they viewed the teachers' documenting behaviour as a confirmation of their competencies in play. All the children in our conversations believed that the teachers documented their play because they behave or play well in that moment. Another possible reason for children's recognition of teachers' documenting roles may be associated with children's expectations of getting to know more about other children's play situations. This study finds that the children express a strong interest and curiosity in understanding other peers' play themes. In return, children from this study also expressed a sense of ownership of their own play that they seemed to enjoy sharing their play situations with other peers to inform them about how to play in their play theme. This is significantly evidenced in Henry's awareness of how he might be able to take advantage of videos to get to know the situations in the Supermarket while he was occupied in his Kebab Store. Additionally, Henry also assumed that he might be able to teach his peers how to play in his Kebab Store through teachers' video recordings of his play situations. It is a bit surprising that children from this study seem to be well aware of taking advantage of using visual methods to support their own purpose in play. Their perspectives on video recordings might be influenced by the teachers' pedagogy practices of using videos to discuss children's play with them collectively after their free play activities ended. The topics of their discussions mainly focus on making comments on the children's play behaviours, discussing the problems that emerge from children's play situations and sharing new materials, themes or plots with the whole class of children. Hence, video recordings

act as mediators to facilitate shared understandings between children from different play themes whose play rules and working theories might be different from each other. These practices may explain why children from this study interpreted video recordings acting as the modelling vehicles for educational purposes, as well as the recognition of their behaviours in play. Consequently, the children from this study hold positive perspectives on the roles of documenters because they assume that the teachers are preparing the videos for their after-play sharing sections.

Documenting children's play has been a prevalent pedagogical practice in current Chinese kindergartens. So far, few studies have shed the light on children's perspectives on being documented by the teachers during their play activities, despite the video-cued interview technique has been broadly implemented in children's activities in kindergartens and teachers' research and training seminars in current Chinese ECE contexts (Meng, 2007; Cheng, 2019b; Xu et al., 2021; Yan, 2022). As the objects of teachers' documentation, this study offers their insight into what the video recordings mean to these children and how the children utilise these documents to create intersubjectivity with their peers from different play themes. However, it is important to notice that, the teachers are in control of choosing which video to be shared with these children. Neither Monica nor Henry had got chance to view their play recordings because the teachers had selected other children's play videos to discuss with the class that day. Hence, children's needs and interests in sharing and communicating their play through videos in their collective sharing section may not be met and satisfied. This view will be revisited at the end of this chapter.

### **Supporter**

The data from this study are harmonious with an Icelandic study which finds that children liked their preschool teachers when the teachers gave them help and assistance in preschool activities (Einarsdóttir, 2014b). In the Kebab Store episode, Henry actively turned to Alice for help twice in relation to providing materials and



gaining confirmation from the teachers about his assumptions and solutions to tasks that he was dealing with at that time. It was interesting to see that in the fourth vignette, Henry's requests of asking the teacher to bring the material for him were also easy to be done by himself. Yet he was able to gain the teacher's support without further questioning this request, which was why Henry was satisfied with the teacher's role as a supporter. Hence, this study highlights the importance of providing support to children that fit their needs in play contexts. As will be discussed later in this section, in some contexts, teachers provided support to children according to their own intentions rather than children's contextual needs, resulting in children's negative feedback on teachers' roles.

### **Enquirer**

The children in this study define the teachers' roles as enquirers based on the teachers' pedagogical practice of asking children questions and having conversations with them in play contexts. The data from this study suggests that children give positive feedback to the teachers' roles of an enquirer in the context when children themselves need to communicate with the teachers in the middle of their play activities. As illustrated in the first vignette of the Kebab Store, Henry actively shared the money he earned with Alice. He interpreted the teacher's responses as a confirmation of his competencies in making deals in play. Accordingly, Henry expressed his enjoyment of having conversations with the teacher. Studies show that from children's perspectives, it is important for them to be recognised and confirmed as competent individuals by their teachers regarding their competencies, their persona and ideas in play and other educational activities (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Therefore, the data reveal the positive aspect of being an enquirer in children's play when the children need to share the imaginative experience with the teachers and acknowledge their competencies from the teachers in play. However, it is worth noticing that Henry's positive evaluations of teachers' roles of enquirer were based on the results of their conversations that he was still able to make deals with his

peers according to his own rules. Whilst Alice was trying to invoke disequilibrium in Henry's mind to challenge his theory, she still allowed Henry to play according to his working theory of making a deal. Hence, this study indicates that children's positive feedback to an enquirer depends on if their agency, interests and needs in play have been limited or not after having conversations with the teachers.

### **Play partner**

Pálmadóttir and Einaradóttir (2015) find that young children like to invite their teachers to participate in their play and playful actions because it seems important for the children to share the joy of play and expand their experience in play with preschool teachers. Consistent with the literature, this study demonstrates that some children show strong interest in playing with the teachers and that they actively invite the teachers to enter their imaginative play situations, for example, Mike and Monica. Accordingly, this study shows that the children give positive feedback to some play partners who are acted by their teachers. They not only express their enjoyment and recognition of the teachers' roles in our conversations but also cooperate, build up and expand the play scenario with the teachers in the context of play. As illustrated in the third episode of the Hospital, more interactions emerge from Monica when the teacher acts as a "patient" to play with them. In this context, the teachers' active engagement in their imaginative play situations enriches the playfulness of play and the complexity of play scenarios, both of which might take more time to achieve from the interactions between peers who are in the same context. Furthermore, in Pálmadóttir and Einaradóttir's (2015) study, they find that children experience positive feelings in play when teachers express the emotional closeness to children's world in their interactions. Consistent with their findings, in the first vignette of episode three, Monica expresses emotional pleasure and contentment when Bella shows a caring tone and close gestures in her responses to Monica. Therefore, this study also highlights the importance of teachers' emotional engagement in their playful actions and active

responses to children's interactions if they expect to receive positive feedback on their roles as play partners from children's perspectives.

In addition, this study has revealed the dual identities embedded in the teachers' roles of play partners from the children's perspectives. When the teachers are inside of children's imaginative play situations, their authority as teachers enables them to become the most powerful roles in the children's minds. Therefore, when the children are in need of gaining authority and confirmation from the teachers, they benefit from and give positive feedback to the roles of teachers. Specifically, the teachers' authority in the imaginative play contexts contributes to protecting and maintaining the play rules. Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2009) find that children involve teachers in their play and learning in order to make them aware that someone has broken the rules. The data from this study build on this finding to suggest that children inform the teacher about the rule breaker in imaginative play situations because they expect the teacher's authority can regulate the misbehaviours of their peers. As illustrated in the third episode of the Hospital, Lily reported to Bella that Kelly was cutting in line when she found Kelly did not leave the "hospital" after her first alert. Therefore, this study suggests that the children are able to actively take advantage of the teachers' authority to help them achieve their goals in play.

Moreover, this study finds that in some contexts, even when children have not initiated interactions with the teachers, they also benefit from the teachers' active engagement in imaginative play situations. In the third episode of the Hospital, Monica was playing her role to fit into the expected status of a "patient" according to her understanding of the relationship between doctors and patients in her mind (Corsaro, 1985). That is, whilst Monica was eager to see the "doctor", she expressed her fear of being scolded by the "doctors" if she urges them to start seeing the "patients". In a context like this, Bella's play actions of urging "doctors" met Monica and other children's needs and interests in advancing the play scenarios, even though these children did not request Bella for help. Consequently, this study indicates that when the children share the

same intentions and contextual interests with the teachers, they are able to benefit from the authority of the teachers' roles, especially when the children themselves do not have enough power to achieve their goals. Correspondently, the teachers' roles as play partners received positive feedback from children since they help children achieve their intentions.

### **6.2.3 The children's negative evaluations of the teachers' roles**

The data from this study suggest that the children have a negative experience with the teachers' roles of directors, enquirers and play partners in contexts when their needs and interests in play have not been respected and met by the teachers. Accordingly, they express negative feedback about these roles.

#### **Directors**

The children in this study make negative comments on the teachers' roles when they are required to follow the instructions from the teachers to do the things that they do not want to in play contexts. In this context, the children's perspectives indicate that they view the teachers as directors whom they are not fond of. As illustrated in Bonnie's perspective that she is not satisfied with Bella since her interest in making play materials has been interrupted by the teacher several times. This finding is consistent with Einarsdóttir's (2014b) study that children do not like their teachers when the choices that they can make in preschool have been restricted and controlled by teachers.

#### **Enquirers**

The data from this study suggest that the children give negative feedback to the teachers' role of an enquirer when their agency, interests or working theories have

been restricted after having conversations with the teachers. This finding accords with children's perspectives on the positive aspects of enquirers, which indicates that children's control of their play situations is closely associated with children's feedback on their interaction with the teachers. This is evidenced in Bonnie's perspectives on the teacher when she had to give up playing the role of "doctor" after Bella questioned her choice and engaged a whole group of children to discuss and re-assign their roles in Hospital. In Einarsdóttir's (2014b) study, children give negative comments on preschool teachers' roles of controllers and rulers because teachers did not allow them to make decisions in their choice time. This study suggests that the teachers' control of children's play might be made through conducting conversations with children during play activities. Despite the teachers do not directly demand children to change their play behaviours, the data from this study indicate that children are able to understand teachers' intentions behind their questions. Under the pressure from teachers' authority, the children from this study tend to follow teachers' instructions or imply in play. Hence, this study indicates that whilst children show acceptive or even cooperative responses to the questions that teachers propose to them, they give negative evaluations of teachers' roles.

### **Play partners**

Whilst children in this study show great passion for playing with the teachers, they give negative feedback on the teachers' roles of the play partner when their interests or working theories have been ignored, negated and marginalised in imaginative situations due to the teachers' involvement. This is significant in the first episode of the Snack Bar. Amy does not share a similar imagination with the teacher regarding how to serve the "customers". Her imaginary power has been limited since her own rules and internal logic of running a "buffet" in play have been marginalised after the teacher's involvement. Research shows that children do not like their teachers when the teachers do not allow them to make choices by themselves (Einarsdóttir, 2014b), which is evidenced in Amy's comments on the teacher as she describes Alice as a

“problematic customer”. Paradoxically, the child still shows willingness to cooperate and follow the teacher’s play rules. The findings seem to be consistent with the research findings which indicate that young children seem to “accept to a great extent the role that the educators played in making decisions concerning their play situations” (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015, p.1491). One possible explanation for Amy’s paradoxical responses is due to the teacher’s dual identities with the play partners they played. Whilst teachers played roles which were less powerful than children’s roles in imaginative play situations, the authority within teachers’ identity still made them be the most powerful person from children’s perspectives. This is evidenced in Amy’s descriptions that she named the teacher as an “elder” in our conversation, which suggests her respect and obedience attitude to the teacher. Therefore, this study highlights how implicit and explicit power relations within the classroom influence what happens in play, especially in children’s perspectives on teachers’ roles in play. When teachers position themselves inside imaginative play situations, their explicit power relations with children still have significant influences on children’s responses to their roles as play partners.

#### 6.2.4 The children’s compound evaluations of the teachers’ roles

The data from this study show that the children give both positive and negative feedback to the teacher when she is playing the same role in the same context. A possible explanation for this compound feedback might be that the children’s needs in play are changeable and multiple. As a result, the teachers’ roles and pedagogical practices may meet one or some of the children’s needs in one moment, while missing them in other moments due to the dynamic and improvisational nature of play. This assumption is supported in the data concerning children’s perspectives on the teachers’ roles of the **play partner** in their imaginative play situations. The data suggest that on the one hand, children enjoy sharing and building playfulness with the teachers who play one of the roles in their play. On the other hand, when the teachers’

educational intentions have conflicts with the children's interests and contextual needs in play, the authority within the teacher-play partner enables the teachers to prioritise their intentions over the children's, which restricts the children's agency in play. Hence, children start to experience the negative aspects of the teachers' roles. Moreover, the data from this study find that some children, while they give positive feedback on the teachers' roles of play partners, they also express their disappointment with the teachers' roles when they feel the teachers have not taken their participation in the imaginative play situations seriously. As illustrated in the second episode from the Fruit Juice Store, Mike was so happy for finally realizing his interests in playing with Alice that he was willing to break the rules that he valued for Alice: giving privileges to this play partner to send her a fruit juice for free. Paradoxically, Mike also gave negative comments about the "customer" that Alice played because he expected her to follow the rules to fetch the "money" before buying juice from him. Furthermore, it is interesting to see that while Alice gave negative feedback to his "strawberry juice", Mike did not show negative feelings to her comments either. Instead, Mike confirmed Alice's role as play partner since he viewed Alice was engaging in his play seriously. These results corroborate the findings of the previous work on children's perspectives on the roles of the teachers, which suggest that it is very important for children to see their teachers be emotionally engaged and playfully involved in their actions when they interact with the children play (Goouch, 2008; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). Fler and Peers (2012) believe that it is very important for the teacher to engage their emotions in children's play to expand the imaginary situation. When the teacher resonates their feeling with the children simultaneously, their imaginary conversations get expanded. The children's perspectives demonstrated in this study build up these perspectives, which indicate that teachers' active roles in the imaginative play situations not only improve the quality of children's play, but also contribute to conceptualising their positive roles in play from children's perspectives

In summary, the data indicate that the children's perspectives on the teachers' roles in play are multi-dimensional, complex and in some contexts, contradictory. By the

present results, a previous study indicates that children's contradictory perspectives on preschool teachers' roles depend on the contexts, the degree of teachers' control, and other factors in educational settings (Einarsdóttir, 2014b). The data from this study are supportive of Einarsdóttir (2014b)'s findings concerning the varied factors that may lead to the contradictory and multiple perspectives of the teacher's roles in the children's minds. But this study also suggests that despite the changeable circumstances in children's play, the key factor is children's needs in the contexts of play when examining the teachers' roles from children's perspectives. That is, what do children need to gain from teachers' roles in their play contexts if teachers expect to receive positive evaluations from children's perspectives? This question is closely associated with rethinking teachers' roles from children's perspectives, which will be discussed in the section below.

### **6.2.5 Children's perspectives on their needs in play**

Conceptualising in the educational framework, play has been given high expectations to facilitate children's learning and development. However, while exploring what play means for children from sociocultural perspectives, play may be concerned with agency, power, status, identity and control which may be uncomfortable for teachers to recognise (Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Wood, 2014b). This suggests that children may expect to gain other supports in play that may have been excluded, ignored or marginalised by teachers. Accordingly, it is important to rethink teachers' roles through the lens of children's needs in play if we want to listen to children's voices seriously and carefully. In looking more closely at children's feedback and evaluations to teachers' roles, their perspectives contribute to providing an integrated account of what kind of needs they expect to gain from the teachers in play. Through thematic analysis, the data from this study show that children's need for the teachers' roles in play contexts relate to five aspects: emotional needs, autonomous needs, authoritative needs, assisted needs and communicative needs.



### **Assisted needs**

The data from this study indicate that the children show their need to gain assistance and materials from the teachers in play contexts. These results are consistent with other studies which find that children need teachers' support in order to help them solve conflicts with their peers (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015), as well as to provide assistance in play situations and with play materials when they cannot deal with the situations on their own (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014b; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015).

### **Autonomous needs**

The findings from this study show that children have the need to exercise their agency to implement their interests, working theories and ideas in play. The reflections on children's agency in this study seem to resonate with the conceptualisation of agency proposed by Wood (2014b), which states that by combining the sociocultural and post-structural theories, children's agency "is an expression of individual identities and peer cultures, interests and self-interests and a testing ground for whose freedom, power and control can be exercised" (Wood, 2014b, p.16). Furthermore, this study suggests that while children are exercising their agency and imaginary power in play, the choices they make are associated with their funds of knowledge, interests and working theories. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the children's play interests from the families, communities and cultures where their knowledge is embedded (Hedges and Cooper, 2016). Yet the data in this study have managed to identify some of the children's interests in play by triangulating the different sources of information, including the children's own narratives, comments and opinions to the play videos, the teachers' introductions to the children and my observations on the play.

### **Emotional needs**

This study is consistent with studies which show that children often want their teachers to participate in their play and playful actions to share the joy of play with them (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015). It seems that children purely enjoy the pleasure of playing with the teachers, which suggests that they are expressing their needs in cultivating emotional well-being in play. In addition, the data suggest that children also express their emotional needs in gaining confirmation of their competence from the teacher, including their ideas, actions and theories in play. This is in harmony with many studies, in which the children sought teachers' recognition to confirm their competencies, their persona and ideas in play and other educational activities (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2015).

### **Authoritative needs**

This study corroborates the findings of the previous work, which suggests that children view teachers as trustworthy and authoritative adults whom they can turn to when they need to gain assistance, approval, information and confirmation from the teachers in their play and learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2009). The data show that children implicitly and explicitly express or have their needs to utilise the teachers' power and authority in order to achieve their intentions and goals in play.

### **Communicative needs**

The children in this study show their passion for sharing their imaginative play situations with the teachers and their peers. Meanwhile, some of the children also express strong curiosity about the play contexts from other play themes. In addition, the data show that children often share and update their play situations with the teachers, which suggests their need to communicate with the teachers.

The demonstrations above have categorised children's needs in play separately. Yet it is important to notice that some of these needs are interrelated with each. For example, children might express their emotional needs and communicative needs at the same time when they are sharing and updating their imaginary play situations with the teachers. Additionally, children's autonomous needs may intertwine with their emotional needs when their interest has been satisfied in the play contexts. However, sometimes conflicts exist between children's different needs in play. This is significant in Monica's paradoxical perspectives and actions about if the "nurse" can use a stethoscope in the third episode of the Hospital. Whilst Monica shows great interest in the play material (a pink stethoscope), she also values the recognition for her competencies in play from the teachers, and even from the whole kindergarten. Monica was aware that she could not use the stethoscope if she follows the teacher's suggestions. Consequently, there was a conflict between Monica's need of gaining emotional confirmation for her play and the need of satisfying her activity-based play interest (Hedges, 2010). To conclude, this study suggests that children's needs in play are multiple, interrelated and complex. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this study to further explore children's needs in play, the depictions and analysis of children's needs in play are demonstrated above.

#### **6.2.6 Rethinking teachers' roles: What kind of teachers' roles can meet children's needs in play?**

In the traditional view of teachers' roles and pedagogy positionings in early childhood settings, teachers are suggested to position themselves externally to children's play in order not to interfere with children and their play activities (Wood, 2014a; Fleer, 2015; Devi et al., 2018). Studies have documented how children's role-play activities have been interrupted due to teachers' inappropriate interventions when they intend to give instructions or controls in children's play (Rogers and Evans, 2008). As a result,

research shows that teachers tend to play the roles of onlookers and observers in order to have little interaction with children in the context of play (Devi et al., 2021; 2018; Fleer, 2015). This perspective on teachers' pedagogical positions is also prevalent in current Chinese early childhood education, especially in the Anji approach. The kindergartens that adopt the Anji approach suggest the teachers follow the principles of getting involved in children's play minimally to protect children's autonomy in play (Cheng, 2019b). A number of studies have observed and criticized that in Chinese kindergartens, teachers have no intervention in children's play contexts since they are focusing on observing and documenting children's play (Li and Ma, 2014; Li, 2019; Li, 2020; Zhang and Zhou, 2021). Meanwhile, many studies also criticised that when teachers intervene in play, their high-control behaviours in children's play limit the development of children's creativity and autonomy (Li, 2019; Zhang and Zhou, 2021) and restrict the spirit of play (Huang, 2003, 2016; Wu and Yue, 2022). While discussing these debates, Wood (2010b) asserts that:

A key distinction is that the more frequently adults observe and engage in play where children control the activity, the easier it becomes for them to encourage playfulness in activities that are more structured. However, this requires integrated rather than mixed or dichotomized pedagogical approaches. (p.16)

In line with this perspective, this study highlights the importance of children's control in play when examining teachers' pedagogical practices and role positionings in play activities. Furthermore, this study suggests that since children's needs in play are characterised by multiple, complex and comprehensive features, a more integrated teacher's role has emerged, required from children's perspectives. However, this makes particular demands on teachers' professional abilities about controlling their power in interactions with children. That is, the ability to know when to step ahead or inside the imaginative play situations to make use of their authority and competencies to support children's play according to their needs and interests; and when to weaken

their power and control within their roles to allow children exercise their agency in play, or even to step outside the play frame to continue their observations or documentations.

### **6.3 Teachers' perspectives on their roles and pedagogical practices in the different play contexts**

The discourse above has tried to present teachers' roles from children's perspectives in a dialectic manner that the children's feedback and evaluations are not fixed to one certain role of the teacher, or a certain degree of intervention in play regarding teachers' pedagogical practices. Their perspectives vary according to if the teachers respect and met their multiple needs in play. Since children's perspectives have been greatly valued by early childhood educators, why the teachers do not choose to be the "good" teachers in the children's minds who will receive positive feedback on their roles and cooperative response to their practices in children's play? Therefore, the discourses will now move to discuss and present the teachers' decision-making in their roles and pedagogical practice in the context of play from an 'outside-in' lens, in order to understand why the teachers choose a certain role in children's play from their own perspectives.

#### **6.3.1 Teachers' definitions and categorisations of their roles in play contexts**

In chapter five, the data from this study has identified seven types of the teachers' roles from the teachers' own reflections upon their pedagogical practices in the corresponding videotapes: observers, documenters, supporters, guiders, assessors, directors and play partners. Most of these roles broadly support the work of other studies in this area which find teachers' roles being inside of children's imaginative play as play partners, and outside of imaginative play frame as observers, onlookers, supporters, guiders and directors (Qiu, 2008; Li and Ma, 2014; Hua, 2015; Fleer, 2015;

Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017; Devi et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2019; Devi et al., 2021). However, the data from this study have not identified the teachers' roles as material providers, the prevalent role which has been identified and proposed by most studies internationally (Qiu and Wang, 2013; Hua, 2015; Devi et al., 2018). A possible explanation for this might be that most of the video data that the teachers and the children chose to watch are the documentation of in-the-moment play contexts. As such, the children already finish the step of fetching the play materials from the material room.

In addition, the data from this study also show that as the subject of "teachers' roles", the teachers themselves have different interpretations, complex understandings and uncertain feelings about their roles in the context of play, which highlight the complexity of teachers' roles in play. For example, Bella gives a compound definition, a supporter and a guide in the first vignette of the second episode from the hospital play theme. These compound definitions of teachers' roles might be resonated with Hua's (2015) descriptions of teachers' roles of supporters, which suggest teachers guide children with open-ended questions. Thus, it seems reasonable that Bella also defined herself as a guide together with the role of a supporter. The focus here is not to discuss a clearer definition to be proposed by educators, but to suggest that a teacher's role may be integrated and comprehensive that different roles intertwined together in one play context.

The discussion above demonstrates a complex and integrated image of the teachers' roles through their identifications and definitions of their roles in this study. In the next section, the discussion focuses on the factors that influence the teacher's in-the-moment decision-making about their roles and pedagogical practices.

## **6.3.2 The factors to influence the teachers' role positionings and pedagogical practices**

Situated in the sociocultural-historical paradigm, the data from this study have illuminated three interrelated layers of influence concerning the teachers' decision-making in their roles and the pedagogical practices in multiple play contexts. These three layers are the personal, the institutional and the societal.

### **6.3.2.1 Personal layer**

The personal layer includes factors relating to the children and teachers themselves. The data from this study indicate that these two types of factors are connected. The teachers' judgments on the child-related factors are derived from their own professional knowledge, which is the most dominant teacher-related factor in the personal layer.

#### **Children**

This study shows that children's development levels and abilities are significant factors for teachers to consider when deciding their role positionings. For example, in the third vignette of Kebab Store, Alice chose not to intervene further in the children's play when she learned that Henry's and Jerry's mathematical calculation abilities had not reached the required developmental level to support them to make deals and give change to each other with correct calculation. Additionally, in the episode of Fruit Juice Shop, Alice acknowledged that she seldom responded to Mike's invitations to play with him because she knew Mike had very strong abilities in this area. Moreover, the data from this study suggest that when teachers made decisions in play, they not only paid attention to children's development levels but they also considered children's temperaments (Downer et al., 2010) when selecting pedagogical practice in play. As

presented in the second vignette of Kebab Store, Alice explained that she chose to give direct instruction to help Henry solve his problem because she knew Henry tended to be easily distracted. Hence, this study is consistent with a Chinese study which found that children's characteristics influence teachers' pedagogical interaction in kindergarten activities (Huang et al., 2019). In addition, this study indicates that children's funds of knowledge are another kind of personal factor which influences teachers' role positionings in play. As noted in the literature review chapter, the concept of "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2005) is not yet common (or even introduced) in Chinese ECE contexts. However, the teachers in this study did pay attention to the children's background knowledge and previous real-life experience in relation to the role-play theme that they were engaged in. The data indicate that the teachers chose to take control of the play when they found that the children's knowledge or experience of the play theme was insufficient to support the children to create, sustain or expand the play scenarios. As shown in the third episode of the Hospital, Bella actively stepped inside the children's imaginative play scenario in order to guide them how to use the ticket numbers to wait in line to see the doctors, because she was aware that the children lacked real-life experience of registering and waiting to see doctors in the hospital. Hence, in this study, the teachers tended to play the roles of guiders in order to enrich the children's funds of knowledge.

The last children-linked factor in the personal layer is children's needs and interests in play. The data from this study suggest that the teachers' perspectives on children's needs and interests have affected their role positionings. For example, the participating teachers tended not to recognise children's interests in play materials. They associated these interests with children's solitary and parallel play behaviour (Elkonin, 1978), which the teachers did not find satisfactory in terms of development goals. It was noted that the teachers' perspectives on children's needs and interests in play are influenced by the way teachers identify them. In this study, teachers' identification of children's needs and interests was derived from their professional knowledge, which will be discussed below.



## Teachers

The data show that teachers' professional knowledge is the key factor influencing their decision-making in play. Specifically, in this study, teachers' professional knowledge about children's learning and development, play interests and play theories affected their choices about pedagogical practices. As noted in the literature review chapter, ever since the curriculum reforms of the late 20th century, early childhood education in China has absorbed many educational theories from the Western world (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Zhu and Zhang, 2008). In particular, the educational theories of Piaget and Vygotsky have significant influence on Chinese early childhood education from the 1980s curriculum reform to the present (Zhu and Zhang, 2008). Congruent with the literature, the data in this study show that the teachers seem to fall into multiple camps of theory when they are making decisions on their roles and pedagogies. The participating teachers' perspectives on children's play, learning and development, as well as teachers' roles in play, have been framed with Piaget's theories and Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian theories. The teachers in this study held the perspective that children develop through peer interactions. For example, in the second episode of Hospital, Bella's perspectives highlight her emphasis on children's interactions in play because she believed only in this way could the children develop their communication abilities and expand the play scenarios in this process. In addition, the theory about mature play status from post-Vygotsky theories (Bodrova and Leong, 2015) is also significant when the teachers explain their decisions in play.

As to children's play interests, the data from this study indicate that the teachers tended to take a psychological perspective to infer children's interests that they believed the children were interested in the play themes and activities that they chose to take part in (Cremin and Slatter, 2004; Neitzel et al., 2016). Accordingly, during our interviews, the teachers were confident that most children's interests had been met in play activities since they encouraged and allowed children to propose and choose the play

themes and activities according to their own will. Furthermore, the data from this study indicate that the teachers viewed children interested in play through the play scenarios that they chose to engage and develop. For example, Alice believed that Amy was interested in her proposal of making a menu because Amy chose to carry out her suggestions and unfold the scenario of using menus to order food actively. Consequently, the teachers' perspectives on children's play had influenced their identifications to children's interests in play. However, using children's choice as a sole indicator of their interests may not be able to identify children's deeper interests accurately (Hedges and Cooper, 2016; Birbili, 2019). This issue will be revisited in the last section of this chapter.

### **6.3.2.2 The institutional layer**

Factors in the institutional layer include the contextual conditions of play activities, development stages of play, and kindergarten regulations.

The contextual conditions of play activities refer to the conditions within the in-the-moment context of play activity. This factor is associated with the dynamic, improvisational, complex, and uncertain nature of play. As demonstrated in the third episode of the Hospital, due to the unexpected interruption from the Fire Station, Bella failed to support Lily in response to her question about how many tickets she needed to take if she was accompanying her sister to see a doctor. However, it is interesting to note that in some contexts, children can benefit from the uncertainty in play. This was particularly evident in the Fruit Juice Shop episode where Alice confessed that if Lucy had not been near her in that moment, she would have continued to reject Mike's invitation to buy a juice from him. Hence, the study indicates that the contextual conditions of play activities have influenced the teachers' in-the-moment choices of pedagogical practices and role positionings.

Moreover, the data from this study show that the development stages of play are an important factor influencing teachers in their decisions on roles and pedagogical practices. Unlike the play stages proposed in classic established theory such as Piaget (1962), the development stages from the teachers' perspectives in this study refer to the period of play that has been carried out as a play theme in the classroom. The teachers' role positionings in the study had a close relationship with the development stages of the play contexts that they were situated in. The teachers' views were that many issues and problems in children's play tended to emerge strongly at the initial play stage. Accordingly, the teachers adopted the position of minimal or no intervention within their pedagogical practices in order to better observe and understand the problems, yielding insights which would guide them later. This position is clearly evident in the first episode of Hospital and Kebab Store: given it was the children's first time playing these themes, the teachers decided to curb their interventions even though they were not fully satisfied with the children's play in that moment. Correspondingly, the data suggest that the later stage of a play episode is a more appropriate time for the teacher to get involved with the children as a play partner, since the play by this stage has developed to the level that little guidance is needed from the teacher. Therefore, this study reveals how the teachers decided their pedagogical positions in play based on their experience and perspectives on the characteristics and status of play in different development stages.

In addition, the study indicates that kindergartens' requirements also influence teachers' pedagogical choices in play. Here, "requirements" mainly refer to the task of documenting at least ten minutes of video recordings of children's play each month. According to the participating teachers, the kindergarten leaders assign this task with multiple purposes in mind, including teacher training and kindergarten-based research. In the study, the teachers tended to mention this required task when they explained their decisions to be a documenter in the children's play.

### 6.3.2.3 The societal layer

The factors in the societal layer are the development goals imposed by policy documents and the curriculum programmes that prevail in current Chinese ECE contexts – for example, the Anji approach.

Some policy documents have specified the academic learning areas in kindergarten curricula (MOE, 2001), together with age-related learning and development goals in each learning area (MOE, 2012a) and associated criteria in teachers' professional standards (MOE, 2012b). It was somewhat surprising in this study that the teachers' perspectives and pedagogical practices in play indicated that they do not put too much emphasis on the children's development in academic learning areas. Whilst they firmly agreed with the principle of learning through play, their focus was on cultivating the children's 'approach to learning' through role-play activities. The term "approach to learning" is an important concept put forward in the official Learning and development guidelines for children aged 3-6 years old (MOE, 2012a). Yan (2021) suggests that this concept resonates with the notion of "learning disposition" in the Western context. The data from the present study indicate that the teachers expected the children to identify problems proactively, solve problems independently and actively seek help from the teachers when they met problems that they could not solve without support. The participating teachers interpreted these abilities as being part of the "approach to learning". As evidenced in the episode of 'kebab store', Alice chose not to teach Henry how to make correct calculations for making deals with his peers. Rather, in the Snack Bar, Alice cited the value of communication skills that children can learn and develop through the play scenarios emerging from ordering food with menus. Thus, she chose to forcefully intervene in children's play to guide them to use the menu to order the food.

In addition, the study indicates that the factors influencing teachers' choices of pedagogical positions in play are also addressed in the current sociocultural

educational context in China. As noted in the literature review chapter, in ECE in China, the role of observers has been highlighted by scholars and educators as the most important and dominant role in children's play in both research and practice (Qiu, 2008; Li et al., 2018; Cheng, 2019b; Li, 2021). In particular, the data from this study indicate that the Anji approach has profound influence on teachers' pedagogical positions in play. The Anji approach highlights the importance of observing and documenting children during the play activities as well as conducting meaningful dialogues with children after the play activities end (Cheng, 2019b). Despite the fact that the teachers in this study did not directly discuss Anji play during their interviews, it was apparent that they tended to position themselves as observers and documenters in play. The teachers also adopted video-cued dialogues with children collectively after the conclusion of play activities. One explanation for the alignment with Anji play could be the official state recognition and praise for Anji. The Chinese Ministry of Education has commended Anji play and the Chinese government has given Anji a national education award (Cheng, 2019b). Additionally, the kindergarten headteacher mentioned that they had organised several teacher trainings to introduce and discuss the Anji approach with the kindergarten teachers. Hence, the findings suggest that there has been a strong reliance on the Anji approach to inform teachers' role positionings in play.

### **6.3.3 Analysing the relationship between multiple factors to influence the teachers' role positionings and pedagogical practices**

This study has identified multiple factors that influence teachers' decision-making on their roles and pedagogical practices in play. It has linked these factors to three interrelated layers of influence – personal, institutional and societal. As professional kindergarten teachers, their professional knowledge is embedded in the Chinese sociocultural educational context. Consequently, teachers' personal factors are interrelated with the factors in the societal layer. As shown in this study, children's personal factors that influenced teachers' choices on their role positionings are

consistent with official policy and guidance on teachers' roles in play. Moreover, the institutional factors are also related to the societal factors. For example, the kindergarten's requirements that staff document children's play activities were linked to the Anji approach. In my first visit to meet the kindergarten headteacher, she mentioned that the task of documenting children's play was inspired by the catchphrase in Anji play proposed by Ms. Cheng: "hands down, mouth shut, ears and eyes open to hear and see the child". (Coffino and Bailey, 2019, p6). The headteacher expected that making video recordings of children's play would help the teachers to better control their interventions in play and step back to focus on effective observation of the play.

Hedges (2012) asserts that teachers' choices of pedagogical practices are informed both by their funds of knowledge and their professional knowledge. Teachers' funds of knowledge are conceptualised with three components: family-based, centre-based and community-based knowledge (Hedges, 2012). Although this study did not explore teachers' family-based funds of knowledge, the emerging data resonated with Hedges' (2012) assertion that teachers' decisions on pedagogical positions were informed by their professional knowledge and other factors arising from the institutional and societal contexts.

## **6.4 Rethinking teachers' roles from the tensions in which they are situated**

The teachers in this study demonstrated that multiple integrated factors informed their pedagogical practices and role positionings in play. These factors are consistent with the guidance for teachers' decision-making in their pedagogical positions in play that is regulated and proposed in the Chinese policies, research field and most textbooks of preschool play education (Qiu, 2008; Lei, 2012; MOE, 2012a, b; Hua, 2015; Yang, 2013). However, the data from this study also show that conflicts existed between

some factors that set the teachers in the tension of making in-the-moment decisions in their roles and pedagogical practices in play. In some contexts, the tensions were explicitly presented by the teachers' inconsistent behaviours in their interactions with the children in play. Sometimes the tensions were implicitly embedded in the teachers' reflections on considering which factors to prioritise in their pedagogical decision-making during our interviews. Furthermore, recalling previous discussions about children's evaluations of teachers' roles, the study's findings are that in some contexts, children feel that their needs and interests in play have not been met by the teachers. However, the study also find that teachers do consider children's personal factors when they make decisions on their pedagogical positions. The disparity between children's and teachers' perspectives suggests that either the teachers do not identify children's needs and interests in play with accuracy, or they are facing challenges or barriers in meeting those needs and interests. These two possibilities are discussed below.

#### **6.4.1 Tensions from misunderstanding children's perspectives on play**

As noted in the section on the children's personal factors, the teachers in this study tended to adopt a psychological perspective on children's interests. By inferring children's interests from the choices they made in classroom activities, teachers risk ignoring the dynamic nature of interests that are derived from the children's households, community and society (Hedges, et al., 2011). Taking a sociocultural perspective, Hedges and Cooper (2016) interpreted children's interests as "representing their inquiries that arise from their funds of knowledge" (p.318). It was clearly evident in Snack Bar that Amy's interest in playing "buffet" was emerging from her fundamental inquiry interests (Hedges, 2010) of displaying plates. This interest also arose from the funds of knowledge she had already constructed with her mother when playing "kitchen" at home (Hedges et al., 2011). Due to the complex and dynamic nature of children's interests (Hedges and Cooper, 2016), it may be challenging for teachers to identify

these interests in classroom play activities. Chesworth (2016) suggests that in order to understand the interests that children bring to classroom play from their funds of knowledge, there must be opportunities created to engage children, their families and teachers themselves in meaningful dialogue. However, this study suggests that such meaningful dialogue is not easy to achieve due to the teacher-child ratio in Chinese kindergarten classes. As evidenced in Amy's cases, the teacher did not create opportunities to initiate dialogue with Amy about her play experience in relation to Snack Bar, nor did Amy actively share her home play experience with the teacher. Consequently, the teachers may miss the opportunities to identify children's real interests in play.

#### **6.4.2 Tensions from the gap between reality and play provisions**

In children's play, the teachers in this study have demonstrated their flexible roles and multiple pedagogical practices as proposed in the policy and research contexts. Although playful pedagogy has been validated as a key characteristic of effective practices in early childhood education, the implementation of play provision remains a challenge for kindergarten teachers when they position their roles in practice. This study suggests that the ideal and comprehensive specification of play and teachers' roles that are set out in Chinese education policy documents might have conflicts with the reality of contextual conditions and practices in kindergartens.

Until 2022, it has been more than ten years since the Chinese government published the significant document: "Suggestions to develop preschool education from the Chinese State Council" (MOE, 2010). This document stipulates clearly that preschool education must follow the principles of children's mental and physical development. Moreover, this document also suggested that preschool education should treat play as the foundational activity; teaching through play should pay attention to individual differences and cater for all groups of children (MOE, 2010). Hou and Luo (2022)



assert that this document indicates that the idea of “child-centred” education has informed kindergarten curriculum reform in the last decade, has been strengthened through later educational policies and research, and has been implemented in kindergarten practices. Returning to the policy document Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards (Trial) (MOE, 2012b), the policymakers state that teachers should “provide play conditions that meet children’s needs and interests, characteristics of age, and development goals” (MOE, 2012b, p.5) as one of the basic requirements for examining teachers’ professional ability regarding “supporting and instructing the play activity” (MOE, 2012b, p.5-6). It is suggested that these professional standards have formulated ideal role for teachers who are expected to adopt a “child-centred” position in their play pedagogies which consider all aspects of children regarding their needs, interests, age characteristics and development goals. However, studies have shown that from the children’s own perspectives, they might need or want to develop interests which are sparked in their own funds of knowledge. Sometimes these interests may not be acceptable to adults, but they can actually satisfy the children’s needs and support their development (Chesworth, 2016; Hill and Wood, 2019). Consistent with those findings, the present study suggests that in some contexts, children’s authentic needs and interests might not be in line with development goals, especially the age-related learning and development goals prescribed in policy documents. Therefore, these three aspects: children’s needs and interests; characteristics of age; and development goals stated in the policy (MOE, 2012b) might not be in harmony within a play condition. This indicates that in some situations, teachers need to decide which aspect of children’s play they choose to prioritise. The process of making decisions on roles and pedagogical practices might bring about tensions for teachers.

In addition, the idea of paying attention to individual children’s differences, as proposed in educational policy documents (MOE, 2012a, b), also brings tension to teachers’ role positioning in play. The data from this study show that children expect the teachers to provide individualised support to meet their needs and interests in play. However, due

to the high child-teacher ratio in Chinese kindergartens, it is difficult for the teachers to be available for each child in play. This problem applies especially to aspects of children's emotional needs. Teachers seldom prioritise those needs because they do not have enough time to devote themselves to play with children. This finding is consistent with the study by Li and Yuan (2019) who find that even though teachers express their willingness to incorporate children's views on free play activities into their pedagogies, they cannot respond to all the children's perspectives due to the reality of kindergarten life. Teachers are occupied by multiple other tasks in the kindergarten, for example, decorating the environment and doing research of their own. In a Chinese study that explored kindergarten teachers' time management, Yang (2014) found that the teachers were fully occupied with onerous paperwork, school visits, assessments, research tasks and communications with the parents. Therefore, in practice, these heavy demands and tasks leave little time and opportunity for the teachers to focus on and interact with each individual child (Li and Yuan, 2019).

#### **6.4.3 Tensions from underrating the complexity of play**

Wood (2019) suggests that in practice, the complexities of play and its relationship with curriculum and pedagogy do not match perfectly the concept of "educational play" within the international early childhood education framework. In current Chinese early education settings, the value of play has been placed so high by educators and scholars that it is regarded as a lifestyle of children (Liu, 2013; Li and Ma, 2014), and the basic activity and the state of existence of children (Liu, 2013). However, children's relationships with play and children's relationships with play in educational settings are not the same thing. From a cultural-historical theoretical perspective, Fleer (2010) reminded us that:

Considering play as the leading activity in the development of young children is different to thinking about play as the 'child's world' or the 'child's work'. A cultural-

historical study foregrounds the motives, needs and interests of children alongside of the cultural contexts which privilege and value specific practices. (p.14)

As evidenced in this study, children expressed multiple needs in play, some of which may not be recognised or identified by the teachers. However, the teachers in the study expressed complex feelings about some of children's needs in play. Whilst teachers valued the pleasure and autonomy that children experience in play, they were also uncertain about children being purely free, happy and relaxed in play. They questioned their own values and agency as kindergarten teachers when they found that the children's play level was below their expectations. This issue was dominant when the teachers noticed that children were immersing in play with materials without developing plots or storylines. Whilst children's feelings of pleasure helped to sustain their continued play, some teachers became anxious and worried during or after the play activity. It was suggested that such tensions are linked to the opinion that play should be focused on advancing children's development and learning outcomes (Wragg, 2013). The teachers in this study were subconsciously driven by the official guidelines and research on play provisions that as professional kindergarten teachers, it is their responsibility to guide the play to a mature level as well as to promote children's development and academic learning through play activities (MOE, 2012; Liu, 2013; Zhang and Zhou, 2021). The data from this study suggest that the teachers' perspectives on play seem to focus narrowly on educational play.

Furthermore, as illustrated in chapter two, since the curriculum reform, Chinese traditional ECE has been influenced and modified by Western educational theories and recent modern Chinese educationists abroad. Consequently, traditional culture, communist culture and Western culture have combined to shape early childhood education in China since the 1980s (Wang and Spodek, 2000). Zhu and Wang (2005) describe contemporary Chinese ECE as reflecting a hybrid of threads from these cultures that sometimes one cultural thread may have conflicts with another. This might explain why the teachers' perspectives and practices of their pedagogical positions

were contradictory in play. Qiu (2011) pointed out that some teachers' understandings of the multiple play theories were fragmented and lacked systematic explorations. As a result, they gave contradictory guidance to children in play. To be more specific, Qiu (2011) found that some teachers only held one theory to inform their pedagogy in play. While some teachers might adopt multiple play theories to their pedagogical practices in play, they formed some contradictory or contrary perspectives in their interpretations of these theories (Qiu, 2011). For example, in the second episode of Hospital, Bella showed contradictory responses to the issue of the stethoscope. In Hospital, Bella's role positionings were closely associated with her educational intentions of supporting the children's play level to be more mature. Accordingly, she expected the children's play actions to be more consistent with real-life logic. However, from a sociocultural perspective, she seemed to not recognise that for preschoolers, play is the leading activity due to its important role in developing children's self-regulation and cognition (Elkonin, 1977). The fragmented understanding of play may also be influenced by the ambiguous definitions of "play activities" that are proposed in policy documents. As I have discussed in chapter two, Qiu and Gao (2021) clarified that the concept of "play" did not equal the concept of "play activity". The data from this study show that in general, teachers valued the pleasure and autonomy that children experience in play. As children's pleasure felt sustained in their continued play, some of them became anxious and worried, during or after the play activity. Because they were subconsciously driven by the requirement to improve the quality of play, guide the play to the next level, or implement the learning and developmental goals through the play activity. Consequently, these misinterpretations may set the teachers in the tension of the play-pedagogy relationship.

## **6.5 The balancing act? The patterns of the teachers' role positioning**

Whilst these three layers are interrelated together, why in some contexts, or even moments, a certain theory is more dominant than the other? This poses some sub-questions which are important to reconsider the teachers' roles from this study: Have the teachers identified what children need them to do in play? If they do, why do they choose to meet the children's needs and interests in some play contexts while neglect them in others? When placing children's needs in play together with the results of teachers' decision-making on their roles in children's play, four situations are presented.

The first situation is the teachers had identified and met children's needs and interest in play. A major part of data from this study show that teachers choose to meet children's needs in play when they had identified them. However, the teachers' perspectives indicated that in some contexts of play, they met children's needs under the premise that children's needs had no conflicts with their educational intentions in that moment. That is, only when the teachers find that they do not need to provide further guidance or supports to the children in play, will they decide to meet children's needs that they had identified. This is significantly demonstrated in the teachers' perspectives and responses to children's emotional and communicative needs in play. The data suggest that the teachers are aware that the children enjoy playing with them and they also highlight the importance of ensuring the pleasant play experience for the children in play. However, the data reveal that even though the teachers have identified children's needs in building the playfulness and pleasant experience with them, they only choose to respond and cooperate with children when children's play level are matured enough to meet their expectations. In addition, this study shows that the teachers also met children's needs when they shared the same intentions and interests with the children in that moment. This is significant in the third episode of hospital play theme that both Bella and other children who play the roles of "patients" all expected to start seeing the 'doctors' as soon as possible. Hence, Bella's play actions of urging the "doctors" to open the "hospital" had met children's needs and interest in promoting the play scenarios in that context. It is worthwhile to find that in some contexts, the

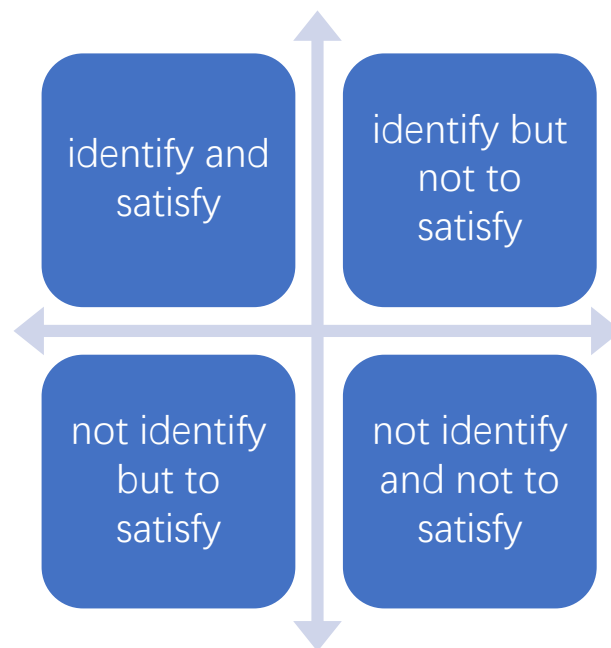
teachers have identified and met children's needs in play, yet they do not appreciate or recognised them. As presented in the findings, in some play contexts, the teachers did not recognise children's interests or the working theories that they identified: the children's play actions were not aligned with the teachers' expectations and imaginations about play.

The second situation is the teachers have identified children's needs in play but choose not to meet their needs. The data from this study show that in some contexts, the teachers are able to identify the children's needs and interests in play, yet they choose not to engage the children's perspectives in play. One of the reasons is that conflicts exist between the teachers' professional knowledge and the children's needs and interests in play. Furthermore, the data from the teachers' perspectives suggest that they view the children are experiencing assimilation when the children are playing with the materials to experience a certain action or plot repeatedly. The data suggest that the teachers' perspectives on the children's repeated play actions are consistent with Piaget's theories that play is pure assimilation when children's repeated play behaviour is purely for their "functional pleasure" (Piaget, 1962, p.89). That is, the teachers agree that children have a pleasant experience through their repetitive behaviours. However, even though the teachers have identified that the children's interests are in the play materials, they do not recognise or approve of children's too much-repeated behaviour in playing with materials if the children do not create new play plots.

The third situation is the teachers have not identified children's needs in play but managed to meet children's needs. This study finds that in some contexts, despite the children's needs having been met by the teachers' pedagogical practices, the teachers' perspectives suggest that they have not noticed and identified children's needs, or their behaviours are not made for the children. This is significantly evidenced in Kebab Store where Alice gave a clear indication that she observed and took videos of children's play mainly for her own educational purpose. The teacher's choices for these two roles are influenced by the factors in the personal and institutional layers. She held

professional beliefs that children's initial play stage required more observations in order to prepare for her later guidance. In addition, the ongoing documenting practice also enables her to finish the task of providing at least ten minutes video recordings of children's play each month. As I have noted in the last sections of children's perspectives, children in this study tended to give positive evaluations of teachers' roles of documenters and observers in play because these two roles are able to meet their multiple aspects of needs in play.

The last situation is that the teachers neither identify nor meet the children's needs in play. The data from this study find that in some contexts, the teachers have not met children's needs in play because they might misunderstand children's interests in play. In this situation, the teachers tend to face the tensions that have been discussed in the last section. Figure 6.1 presents a pattern of these four situations.



**Figure 6.1 A pattern of the teachers' role positionings in play**

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, teachers' roles have been examined and reconsidered through a double subjectivity lens both perspectives of the children and the teachers have been discussed. The children's voices, contextualised by their play actions and responses, co-constructed their perspectives on the teachers' roles in the imaginative play contexts. The children's positive feedbacks on the teachers' roles highlight the importance of achieving a certain intersubjectivity between the teachers' educational intentions and the children's needs and interests in play. However, this study shows that some of children's needs and interests in play may not be easily identified, respected or met by the teachers in current Chinese ECE contexts. Furthermore, the teachers' comments, explanations and reflections on their roles, together with their pedagogical practices in play, constitute teachers' perspectives which demonstrated four patterns of decision-making regarding their role positionings. This study suggests that in some situations, the teachers are facing tensions and dilemmas, in the decision-makings of their roles since they are pulled by different voices in their minds but at the same time, they are also struggling to balance these multiple perspectives. Finally, by bridging children's and teachers' perspectives together, more complex and comprehensive teachers' roles in play have been depicted based on the perspectives of the children, the teachers and the researcher.



## **Chapter seven: Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter will first present a summary of what this study has contributed to the understanding of teachers' roles in kindergarten play activities in the Chinese ECE context, followed by a discussion of the implications for kindergarten practice, teachers' professional development and policy evaluation. Next, suggestions for future research will be outlined. In the final section, the chapter will address some reflections on the study of teachers' roles in play.

### **7.2 Main findings**

This study has examined kindergarten teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in imaginative play contexts, from the perspectives of children as well as the teachers. It contributes to the growing literature in the field of preschool teachers' professionalism where children's voices have been taken seriously. By placing the children at the centre of this study, the thesis has brought children's voices to the forefront regarding the questions of what they need from teachers during play and how they prefer to gain support from teachers in play contexts. It is crucial to reconsider teachers' roles from children's perspectives if educators in ECE want to truly value and engage children's views on play in educational settings, in order to advance the quality of play and teachers' professional roles. As such, this thesis identifies the factors of importance for children, from their perspectives, especially their feedback and evaluations for certain roles of teachers and pedagogical practices in play. The study indicates that the defining feature of children's perspectives on the teachers' roles is the matter of whether a certain degree of intersubjectivity has been achieved between the teachers' educational intentions and the children's needs and interests in the context of play. So far, very few studies have explored children's needs in play by doing research with

children. The present study draws on the body of knowledge which identified five aspects of children's needs in play, and contributes to that knowledge by associating the five aspects with children's evaluations and expectations of teachers' roles and pedagogical practices. From the teachers' perspectives, this study has illuminated three interrelated layers of influence concerning the teachers' pedagogical decisions in play: the personal, the institutional and the societal. The multiple factors that are addressed in these three layers reveal the tensions and complexities that teachers face in positioning their roles in children's play.

### **7.3 Implications of the research**

There has been an ongoing debate about when and how to intervene in children's play in Chinese kindergarten practices. A range of studies indicate that teachers should consider the appropriate timing for intervention in children's play, and intervene with moderation (Qiu et al., 2013; Wan and Liu, 2013; Zhang and Zhou, 2021). Recent years have seen the Anji approach become prevalent in Chinese ECE contexts. One of the principles informing Anji pedagogies – “to relinquish maximally as well as to intervene minimally” (Cheng, 2019b, p.14) – has brought further questions about the timing of teachers' interventions in children's play and their degree of participation. While analysing this principle, Hua (2021) set out her reflections on the challenge of finding the right balance when making decisions on the degree of intervention in children's play activities:

The experts who do not work in kindergartens often use the term “in good timing” and “appropriate” to inform the teachers' pedagogy in practice - on the one hand, teachers cannot miss the timing of intervention that they need to play teachers' roles in guidance; on the other hand, teachers cannot over-intervene to avoid interfering children's initiative behaviours. However, when teachers balance the degrees of interventions by themselves...experts either criticise teachers for over-

intervening or for over-indulging children in play. But no one has been able to give a benchmark about the degree of intervention.... (p.26)

Reflecting upon my interviews with the teachers in this study, I find Hua's (2021) commentary deeply resonant. It precisely captures the dilemmas that the teachers face in their in-the-moment decision making on pedagogical practices in play activities. Whilst researchers and educators have proposed substantial guidance for the timing and strategies of interventions, the issue of what are "appropriate interventions" is still an open and salient question for teachers choosing pedagogical practices in play (Li, 2019; Guo and Zhang, 2107). In considering children's perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in play, this study provides a different lens on teachers' intervention approaches. The study shows that children's positive evaluations of teachers' roles and pedagogical practices are contingent on whether their needs in play and teachers' interventions have achieved a certain degree of intersubjectivity. Furthermore, the study reveals that the degree of teachers' intervention may not be the critical factor for evaluation from the children's perspectives. The findings showed that in some contexts of play, the children expected to have some direct instructions or a high degree of participation from the teachers. The children evaluated these teachers' interventions positively even though the teachers engaged in their play in a large degree. Consequently, one of the implications emerging from the findings is that the intersubjectivity between children's needs and teachers' pedagogical practices may provide a different benchmark for examining and evaluating teachers' interventions in play. This means that instead of arguing that teachers should adopt certain strategies, timings and degrees of interventions in play, they should consider children's needs, interests and agency in play as the point of departure for teachers and educators to evaluate the quality of play interventions and pedagogical practices.

Correspondingly, while this study puts children's perspectives at the forefront in the evaluation of teachers' roles, there are further implications for theorising play pedagogy in kindergarten practice. To explore children's needs as the basis of a

potential critical factor for teachers' interventions in play, this study framed five aspects of children's needs – autonomous needs, authoritative needs, assisted needs, communicative needs and emotional needs. As has been noted, these five aspects of children's needs are interrelated, which highlights the importance of taking an integrated and dialectic perspective to examine play pedagogy used by teachers. Hence, the study calls for an integrated pedagogy in play practice. Wood (2010b) has proposed a model of integrated pedagogical approaches to enable teachers to meet children's interests in play by moving flexibly within two pedagogical zones: the adult-initiated activities and the child-initiated activities. Both types of activities have “contrasting but complementary forms of adult and child involvements, co-constructive engagement, and pedagogical strategies” (Wood, 2010b, p.20). In a similar vein, Colliver (2012) suggests blending the “child- and educator-initiated activities” together into “co-directed activities’ (p.17). Hence, the findings of the present study imply that taking children's perspectives as the departure point for an integrated play pedagogical approach will not only result in enhancing children's experiences of interacting with teachers in play, but also in minimising the possible dichotomies between regulated curriculum goals and children's own goals in play activities (Wood, 2010a).

Finally, the findings of this study have shed light on teachers' professional development. This recalls Hua's (2021) argument that I stated in my discussion of the first implication arising from the study. Hua (2021) suggests that teachers should not get tangled up with the questions of whether and how they should intervene in play. Instead, Hua (2021) asserts that:

[t]he key point is, teachers should make a self-reflection upon the results of children's play behaviours in the situations of intervening or not intervening in play, or make a discussion in the collective teaching and research meeting. (p.26)

This suggestion implies attitudes of openness and inclusiveness in viewing teachers' appropriate or inappropriate interventions in play, which resonates with the

implications of the present study with regard to supporting teachers' professional development. In analysing teachers' role positioning in children's play, the study has illuminated a pattern of teachers' in-the-moment decision-making on their roles and pedagogical practices. I depicted four situations of the teachers' role positionings by connecting children's needs in play with teachers' decision-making in their pedagogical practices: identify and meet children's needs; identify but not meet children's needs; not identify and not meet children's needs; not identify but meet children's needs. This pattern contributes to supporting teachers' reflections on the timing and strategies of their interventions in play. As noted in the discussion chapter, in some contexts, teachers misinterpreted children's needs and interests in play, whereas in other contexts, teachers did identify those needs and interests but they chose to prioritise the development and learning outcomes over the children's perspectives. Hence, the study implies that this pattern has opened up a space for the teachers to reflect on the interventions in different contexts of play. By doing so, teachers are able to be more clear about which factors have limited their intervention, or which factors they choose to prioritise and which they choose to sacrifice in their pedagogical decisions.

## **7.4 Recommendations for future research**

First, this study has focused on the roles of teachers from children's perspectives. The study has recognised that children's needs, interests and agency in play are important factors influencing their perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices. Whilst this study has examined children's needs in play from the children's perspectives, there is room for exploring and systemising children's needs in play using a sociocultural theory framework. For example, how are children's needs in play associated with their funds of knowledge, interests and working theories? What are the relationships between children's needs in play and the qualities of play? A focus on these questions would enable practitioners and researchers to better understand

why children express certain aspects of needs in play to teachers who present in that moment of play context.

Second, this research in a Chinese context indicates that teachers' interpretations of the concept of children's interests tended to fall into the psychological camp: they associated children's interests with their choices and frequencies of activities that they take part in. However, in international contexts, the concept of children's interests has been theorised systematically and addressed in multiple paradigms, for example, sociocultural theories, or new materialist perspectives (Hedges and Cooper, 2016; Chesworth, 2019). Given that the term "children's interests" has been widely used in Chinese contexts, it would be worthwhile to undertake further research in China which studies children's interests from different perspectives, particularly in the sociocultural theoretical paradigm.

Third, the teachers' perspectives in this study have demonstrated multiple theoretical paradigms and curriculum approaches in which their professional knowledge and pedagogical practices were situated. Some of these approaches and practices were informed by Western contexts whereas some were from Chinese local contexts. In the globalised climate of the ECE research field, it would be meaningful to undertake similar research involving scholars and practitioners from other cultural backgrounds to offer their perspectives on Chinese teachers' professional beliefs in relation to play and teachers' roles in play. For example, how do researchers from different sociocultural educational backgrounds interpret and understand Chinese teachers' pedagogical practices in play and professional rationales for their role positionings? Additionally, what are their perspectives on children's perceptions and responses to teachers' roles in Chinese kindergarten play activities? This proposal may be similar to the cross-cultural research conducted by Tobin et al. (1989) in preschools in China, the United States and Japan. Yet the present study suggests that in any future research along those lines, the research methods may need to be modified for the purpose of gathering children's perspectives in an ethical manner.

Fourth, Warming (2005) suggests that it is important to take the perspectives of children seriously and to act upon their contributions. By exploring children's views on teachers' roles, this study has led to the understanding of how and what children expect their teachers to do when the teachers position their roles in play. However, I did not proceed further to engage the teachers to work together to respond to the actions on children's expectations of teachers' roles as expressed in this study. Nor did I give feedback to the children for discussions with them about their teachers' role positionings, for example, why their teachers chose not to meet their needs and expectations in play in some situations. These steps were beyond the scope of this study and reflect limitations of the research. As I have discussed in chapter three, the axiology of this study highlights the importance of not being tokenistic when using participatory methods to do research with children. During the course of this study, I made efforts to listen to children's voices carefully. However, I acknowledge that children in this study might also have been subject to tokenism to a certain degree in that they "may be consulted but their views have no discernible impact on decisions" (Tisdall, 2015, p.382) on their teachers' role positionings during the research process and after the study ended. Lundy (2018) argues that children should not be regarded as one-off "smash and grabs" where "decision-makers come in, collate their views and disappear back to their offices" (p.340). In a similar vein, I believe it is the responsibility of early childhood researchers to open up a space which not only brings children's perspectives to the forefront, but also provides opportunities to engage children's voices seriously in the decision-making process in kindergarten practice. Consequently, in future research it would be worthwhile to undertake action studies in to work with teachers and kindergartens to ensure meaningful engagement with children's views in practice. For example, researchers could obtain children's views to inform teachers' pedagogical practices in play and to examine the quality of play or children's development in play based on this "inside-out" pedagogical guidance.

## **7.5 Final review of exploring teachers' roles in this study**

My original motivation to start the study was to listen carefully and seriously to children's voices, understand their perspectives, and perhaps, act upon children's perspectives in the future to inform, examine and evaluate teachers' roles in children's play activities in ECE practices and policy contexts. During the course of the study, I had to acknowledge that the teachers' perspectives gradually raise more considerations than I expected they would before I started doing this research. Despite they are adults who have more power than children, I realized that they can also be in vulnerable positions in kindergarten play practices when they are trying to fit multiple perspectives into children's play. This does not mean that I am reducing my emphasis on children's perspectives. Rather, my stance is to highlight the importance of developing intersubjectivity between children and teachers. Hence, as an early childhood researcher, I view this as my responsibility to bridge multiple voices on the roles of teachers in play, in order to take an authentic and dialectic account to reconsider teachers' roles in educational play contexts.



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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Ethical approval confirmation



Downloaded: 03/06/2019

Approved: 03/12/2018

Jialing Li

Registration number: 170125127

School of Education

Programme: Full-time Doctorate Program in the School of Education

Dear Jialing

**PROJECT TITLE:** Rethinking the roles of teachers in the context of kindergarten play:  
listening to childrens and teachers perspectives in China

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 022985

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 03/12/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 022985 (dated 26/11/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1051403 version 1 (17/09/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1051402 version 1 (17/09/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1051401 version 2 (26/11/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1053581 version 1 (26/11/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1053584 version 1 (26/11/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1053583 version 1 (26/11/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1053582 version 1 (26/11/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1051404 version 1 (17/09/2018).
- Participant consent form 1051407 version 1 (17/09/2018).
- Participant consent form 1051405 version 1 (17/09/2018).

Participant consent form 1053585 version 1 (26/11/2018).

Participant consent form 1051408 version 1 (17/09/2018).

Participant consent form 1051406 version 1 (17/09/2018).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

Review the number of videos the children will discuss with you, suggest once a day not twice. Discuss with your supervisor a reasonable number of hours for the teacher participation - daily for an hour is too much. Suggest considering periodic select review of cases either weekly or fortnightly. It seems like a lot of data to collect and analyse. Do you really need to vide the children twice a day or is once enough?

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt

Ethics Administrator

School of Education

## **Appendix 2: Kindergarten headteacher's information sheet and consent form**

### **Information sheet for kindergarten headteachers**

#### **Research Project Title:**

Rethinking the roles of teachers in the context of kindergarten play: listening to children's and teachers' perspectives in China.

Dear headteacher!

My name is Jialing Li. I am a PhD student in the School of Education, at the University of Sheffield (UK). I would like to invite your kindergarten to take part in a research project. Before you decide to give permission allow me to conduct this research in the kindergarten, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You are welcome to contact me anytime and my contact information has been listed below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to involve your kindergarten in this project. Thank you for reading this.

#### **1. What is the project's purpose?**

This project is my personal PhD study from the School of Education, the University of Sheffield (UK). The duration of collecting the data for this project will be 4-5 months. The purpose of this research is to explore the roles of teachers in the context of play from both teachers' and children's perspectives. I will use video recordings of play as prompts for teachers and children to reflect upon selected episodes of everyday play. By bringing these two perspectives together, the project will present and reflect upon

what play and the roles of teachers in the contexts of play mean to children in kindergarten.

## **2. Why have I been chosen?**

The participants in this project are children aged 4-5 years old and their teachers. You have been asked to provide permission for involving this kindergarten in this project. Your kindergarten has met the criteria of being the case for this project: the Chinese public paradigm kindergarten. I am seeking consent for every public paradigm kindergarten in your district but there will be only one kindergarten to conduct this project.

## **3. Do I have to take part?**

It is voluntary for you to make decisions on involving the kindergarten in the research. This is my own PhD research and there are no potential interests with the government. So please feel free to make your decision. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). You can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

## **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

This project will last for 4-5 months in the kindergarten. I will spend two months and two weeks in each of the class. Before the formal research, I need to get the assent from teachers, parents and children, which will take two weeks in each class. After gaining the consent from you, I will send the information sheet and consent form to the teachers who teach children aged 4-5 years old in your kindergarten. If both two teachers in the same class agree to take part in this project, I will then send the information sheet and the consent form to the parents in their class. Next, I will

introduce and explain this project to children whose parents agree them to take part in this project and ask if they personally would like to be involved in this project. After these steps, I will confirm the children who are willing to be participants of this project. And during this time, I will be in the class to become familiar with the teachers, the children, the daily routines and the classroom environment.

The formal research in each class will last for two months, five days a week. Everyday I will carry the camera to make videos of the children and their peers during two periods of the free play time: morning and afternoon. During each period of free play time, I will take the video for 30 minutes. I will avoid taking the video of the children who have not consented to this project. In addition, those private and potentially negative situations (toileting/changing clothes/inappropriate or anti-social behaviour) will also be avoided during the videotaping time. Both teachers and the children can also request that I avoid, or stop filming particular episodes of play. Then I will have a 5 minutes conversation with the children to ask which parts of their play activities that they would like to talk about. So I will be able to select the episodes to prepare for the later conversation with children. The conversation with children will be conducted at noon before/after lunch time and at the end of the school day. I will watch the selected episodes with the children and their peers for 10-15 minutes and discuss with them for about 15 minutes. The whole process will be no more than 30 minutes. We will talk about what is happening in the play, including the children's perspectives of their interactions with teachers.

It is flexible for children to choose the timing for the conversation according to their willingness of the day. As to the interview with teachers, it should take no more than 30 minutes and could be at the end of the working day, during the evening or the weekend, depending on their convenience. During the interview, I would like to discuss the same set of episodes with the teachers. I would like us talk about their perspective on teachers role during the episodes of play. No sensitive or critical questions will be asked during the interview. In total, including the time for watching the episodes, the

teachers will need to contribute their time for about 30-60 minutes. In addition, the audio recorder will be used during the interview with the teachers and the conversation with children. And the teachers and children will be informed that they have the right to refuse to answer any question and terminate the interview at any time during the research process.

#### **5. What do I have to do?**

The participants of this project are the children and teachers. You will not be required to have any direct involvement. However, before you decide whether to involve the kindergarten in this project, you could also read the information sheets for teachers, parents and children.

#### **6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Generally speaking, there will be little risk in this study. You might feel uncomfortable about the use of video in the kindergarten environment. The recordings will be stored securely in my laptop (password protected) and beyond the kindergarten will only be viewed by me and my supervisor. The study will require kindergarten teachers and the children to contribute their time, but I will negotiate the timing so that the research will not affect teachers' working routine or the children's daily life in kindergarten. Some children need to stay in the kindergarten for maximum 30 minutes after their class ends. In that case, I will inform their parents ahead by phone so that they can arrange their time to pick up their children from the kindergarten. I will be sensitive to the children's condition and emotion. Both teachers and the children can stop their involvement in the study at any time.

#### **7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this project will be able to understand children's needs and interests in the contexts of play. And based on that, it is hoped that this project is able to present what kinds of supports that children want or do not want to gain from teachers in the contexts of play.

#### **8. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

Normally the project will not stop earlier than expected. However, if this is the case, I will explain to the teachers and children. I will also send a written letter to the parents to explain the reasons.

#### **9. What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel something goes wrong, you could first ask me to stop the project at anytime without any reason. Then if you want to make a complaint about the project, you could contact my supervisor Dr. Liz Chesworth through email ([e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk)). My supervisor will handle your complaint and I will follow the further instruction from my supervisor. If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you could contact the Head of Ethic Review Panel of the School of Education, Dr. David Hyatt by email ([d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk)).

#### **10. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that I collect from the kindergarten and the participants during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The kindergarten and the participants will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. The University of Sheffield (UK) will be responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.



**11. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

You will not be recorded. However, the children and teachers who agree to take part in this project will be videotaped and my interview with them will be recorded. The audio recordings of both teachers and children will be used only for data analysis. Some screenshots from the videos may be used for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. But the facial images of the children and the teachers in the screenshots will be pixelated. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. All the information that I collect will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to me and my supervisor. The videotapes and the interview recordings will be stored for 4 years (from 2018-2022) until I receive my PhD degree. Then all the audio recordings will be destroyed but the transcripts of the interview will be kept.

**12. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The videotapes and audio recordings will be used for writing the thesis, which will be finished in the next 3 years. In addition, these data may also be used for the derived products of this project, including the papers, conference report or other publications, which are likely to be published in next 10 years. And you will be informed where the results are published and get a copy if you would like to. In addition, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research. In that case, you will also be informed before the research start.

**13. Who is organizing and funding the research?**

I am organizing this project and it is a self-funded project.

**14. Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This research has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

### **15. Contact for further information**

You are welcome to contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. You can contact me through my phone 13559877016 or my email [jli157@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jli157@sheffield.ac.uk). And the email address for my supervisor is [e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk).

Finally, thank you for reading this. Could you please make your decision in 2 weeks? If you agree to give permission to conduct this project in your kindergarten, you will be given a copy of the information sheet to keep. And you also need to sign the consent form.

Thank you for your time.

Jialing Li

School of Education

The University of Sheffield

## Consent form for the kindergarten headteacher

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Taking Part in the Project</b>		
I have read and fully understood the project information sheet dated____ (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my decision of involving the kindergarten in the research is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to involve the kindergarten into the research and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to give permission to the researcher to conduct the research in this kindergarten. I understand that taking part in the project will involve both children and teachers in this kindergarten in the research. I understand that the participation of teachers and children in this study is voluntary. I understand that children's parents will also be informed. And I understand that teachers, children and their parents (legal guardians) will all be fully explained of the project information sheet dated_____.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that both children and teachers will be videotaped during their free play time in this kindergarten. I understand and agree that teachers and children will be	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

interviewed separately about their perspectives on the roles of teachers in the context of play.		
<b>How my information will be used during and after the project</b>		
I understand my personal details such as my name, phone number, address and email address etc. will be confidential to people outside the project. I understand the information of this kindergarten such as the names, addresses etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project and appeared in any derived products of this research, including the thesis, conference report or publications.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that the images of children's face do not need to be pixelate and concealed during the process of data analysis if the researcher agrees to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I give permission for the interview transcripts that are collected in this kindergarten to be deposited by the researcher so it can be used for future research and learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that the videotapes and the interview records will be destroyed once the researcher has achieved the PhD degree.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers</b>		

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Name of participant:

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher:

Signature

Date

## **Appendix 3: Kindergarten teachers' information sheet and consent form**

### **Information sheet for kindergarten teachers**

#### **Research Project Title:**

Rethinking the roles of teachers in the context of kindergarten play: listening to children's and teachers' perspectives in China.

Dear teacher!

My name is Jialing Li. I am a PhD student in the School of Education, the University of Sheffield (UK). I would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Before you decide to participate in this project, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You are welcome to contact me anytime and my contact information has been listed below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this project. Thank you for reading this.

#### **1. What is the project's purpose?**

This project is my personal PhD study from the School of Education, the University of Sheffield (UK). The duration of collecting the data for this project will be 4-5 months. The purpose of this research is to explore the roles of teachers in the context of play from both teachers' and children's perspectives. I will use video recordings of play as prompts for teachers and children to reflect upon selected episodes of everyday play. By bringing these two perspectives together, the project will present and reflect upon

what play and the roles of teachers in the contexts of play mean to children in the kindergarten.

## **2. Why have I been chosen?**

The participants in this project are children aged 4-5 year old and their teachers. You have been asked to take part in this project because you meet the criteria of being the participants of this project: the teacher who works in a Chinese public paradigm kindergarten and teaches children aged 4-5 years old. In total, four teachers from two classes in the same kindergarten will be involved in this project. Right now I am seeking consent to every teacher who teaches children aged 4-5 year old in the public paradigm kindergartens in your district. But there will be only one kindergarten to be chosen to conduct this project.

## **3. Do I have to take part?**

It is voluntary for you to take part in this project. This is my own PhD research and there is no potential interests with the government and the kindergarten. So please feel free to make your decision. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). You can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

## **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

This project will last for 4-5 months in the kindergarten. I will spend two months and two weeks in each of the class. Before the formal research, I need to get the assent from both parents and children, which will take two weeks in each class. If both you and your partner agree to take part in this project, I will send the information sheet and the consent form to the parents of children in your class. Then I will introduce and

explain this project to children whose parents agree to take part in this project and ask if they personally would like to be involved in this project. After these steps, I will confirm the children who are willing to be participants of this project. And during this time, I will be in the class to become familiar with you, the children, the daily routines and the classroom environment.

The formal research in each class will last for two months, five days a week. Everyday I will carry the camera to make videos of the children and their peers during two periods of the free play time: morning and afternoon. During each period of free play time, I will take the video for 30 minutes. I will avoid take the video of the children who have not consented to this project. In addition, those private and potential negative situations (toileting/changing clothes/inappropriate or anti-social behaviour) will also be avoided during the videotaping time. You and the children can also request that I avoid, or stop filming particular episodes of play. Then I will have a 5 minutes' conversation with the children to ask which parts of their play activities that they would like to talk about. So I will be able to select the episodes to prepare for the later conversation with children. The conversation with children will be conducted at noon before/after the lunch time and at the end of the school day. I will watch the selected episodes with the children and their peers for 10-15 minutes and discuss with them for about 15 minutes. The whole process will be no more than 30 minutes. We will talk about what is happening in the play, including the children's perspectives of their interactions with teachers. The flow chart of research with children is listed below.

It is flexible for children to choose the timing for the conversation according to their willingness of the day. As to the interview with you, it should take no more than 30 minutes and could be at the end of the working day, during the evening or the weekend, depending on your convenience. I would like to discuss the same set of episodes with you. During the discussion, I would like us to talk about your perspective on your role during the episodes of play. No sensitive or critical questions will be asked during the interview. In total, including the time for watching the episodes, you will need to



contribute your time for about 30-60 minutes. In addition, the audio recorder will be used during the interview with you and the conversation with children.

#### **5. What do I have to do?**

There will be no lifestyle restrictions for you while you are involved in this project. All you need is to spend no more than 1 hour to participate in this project every weekday. You have the right to refuse to answer any question and terminate the interview at any time during the research process. You and the children can also request that I avoid, or stop filming particular episodes of play.

#### **6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Generally speaking, there will be little risk in this study. You might feel uncomfortable about the use of video in the kindergarten environment. The recordings will be stored securely in my laptop (password protected) and beyond the kindergarten will only be viewed by me and my supervisor. The study will require you and the children to contribute your time, but I will negotiate the timing so that the research will not affect your working routine or children's daily life in kindergarten. Some children need to stay in the kindergarten for maximum of 30 minutes after their class ends. In that case, I will inform their parents ahead by phone so that they can arrange their time to pick up their children from the kindergarten. I will be sensitive to the children's condition and emotion. You and the children can stop your involvement in the study at any time.

#### **7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this project will be able to understand children's needs and interests in the context of play. And based on that, it is hoped that this project is able to present

what kinds of supports that children want or do not want to gain from you in the contexts of play.

**8. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

Normally the project will not stop earlier than expected. However, if this is the case, I will explain to you and children. I will also send a written letter to the parents to explain the reasons.

**9. What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel something goes wrong, you could first ask me to stop the project at anytime without any reason. Then if you want to make a complaint about the project, you could contact my supervisor Dr. Liz Chesworth through email (e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk). My supervisor will handle your complaint and I will follow the further instruction from my supervisor. If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you could contact the Head of Ethic Review Panel of the School of Education, Dr. David Hyatt by email (d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk).

**10. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that I collect from the kindergarten and the participants during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The kindergarten and the participants will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. You can choose the pseudonyms for yourself and all the information that is collected from you will not only be confidential to the public, but also be confidential to the children, colleagues, parents and kindergarten headteachers. The University of Sheffield (UK) will be responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

**11. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

You will be videotaped and your interview with me will be recorded. The audio recordings of both you and children will be used only for data analysis. Some screenshots from the videos may be used for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. But the facial images of the children and the teachers in the screenshots will be pixelated. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. All the information that I collect will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to me and my supervisor. The videotapes and the interview recordings will be stored for 4 years (from 2018-2022) until I receive my PhD degree. Then all the audio recordings will be destroyed but the transcripts of the interview will be kept.

#### **12. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The videotapes and audio recordings will be used for writing the thesis, which will be finished in the next 3 years. In addition, these data may also be used for the derived products of this project, including the papers, conference report or other publications, which are likely to be published in next 10 years. And you will be informed where the results are published and get a copy if you would like to. In addition, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research. In that case, you will also be informed before the research start.

#### **13. Who is organizing and funding the research?**

I am organizing this project and it is a self-funded project.

#### **14. Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This research has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the

application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

### **15. Contact for further information**

You are welcome to contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. You can contact me through my phone 13559877016 or my email [jli157@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jli157@sheffield.ac.uk). And the email address for my supervisor is [e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk).

Finally, thank you for reading this. Could you please make your decision in 2 weeks? If you agree to take part in this project, you will be given a copy of the information sheet to keep. And you also need to sign the consent form.

Thank you for your time.

Jialing Li

School of Education

The University of Sheffield

## Consent form for the kindergarten teachers

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Taking Part in the Project</b>		
I have read and fully understood the project information sheet dated__ (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in this research. I understand that taking part in this study will include being videotaped with children during the free play time in this kindergarten. I understand that I will view the videotapes together with the researcher and have an interview with the researcher. I understand and agree that the camera and the recording pen will be used in this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I do not have to answer all the questions if I do not want to. And I understand that I can stop at any time during the research process.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>How my information will be used during and after the project</b>		
I understand my personal details such as my name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project and appeared in any derived products of this research, including the thesis, conference report or publications.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that the videotapes and the interview records will be destroyed once the researcher has achieved the PhD degree.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I give permission for the interview transcripts that are collected in this kindergarten to be deposited by the researcher so it can be used for future research and learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that all of my perspectives will be confidential to people outside the project, especially to the kindergarten headteachers and parents. I understand and agree that I can not access to children's perspectives that collected during the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that I will provide a final consent for the use of data I provided for the research project after reading the transcripts and making any amendments I wish to make to the transcripts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers</b>		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant:

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher:

Signature

Date

## **Appendix 4: Parents' information sheet and consent form**

### **Information sheet for parents/Guardian**

#### **Research Project Title:**

Rethinking the roles of teachers in the context of kindergarten play: listening to children's and teachers' perspectives in China.

#### **Dear parents/guardian!**

My name is Jialing Li. I am a PhD student in the School of Education, the University of Sheffield (UK). I would like to invite your children to take part in a research project. Before you decide to give permission to allow your children to be involved in this project, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You are welcome to contact me anytime and my contact information has been listed below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish your children to be involved in this project. Thank you for reading this.

#### **1. What is the project's purpose?**

This project is my personal PhD study from the School of Education, the University of Sheffield (UK). The duration of collecting the data for this project will be 4-5 months. The purpose of this research is to explore the roles of teachers in the context of play from both teachers' and children's perspectives. In kindergarten education, play is the basic activity and has great value in supporting children's development. So teachers' roles in play are very important. While teachers are following the instructions from the government documents to play their roles in the context of play, children's perspectives should also be considered in order to better understand children's interests and meet their needs during the play activities. Accordingly, listening to children's voice about the roles of teachers is very crucial in the kindergarten education. Thus, in this project,

I will use video recordings of play as prompts for teachers and children to reflect upon selected episodes of everyday play. By bringing these two perspectives together, the project will present and reflect upon what play and the roles of teachers in the contexts of play mean to children in the kindergarten.

## **2. Why have I been chosen?**

The participants in this project are the children aged 4-5 years old and their teachers. And the participants should be from a Chinese public paradigm kindergarten. You have been asked to provide permission for your child to take part in this project because your child is aged 4-5 years old and studies in a Chinese public paradigm kindergarten. In total, **two** classes from the same kindergarten will be involved in this project. And there will be only one kindergarten to be chosen to conduct this project. **At this stage I could not provide an exact number of children to be involved in this project.** Right now I am seeking consent to every family whose child studies in this class to take part in this project. **Children who both themselves and their parents agree to take part in this project will be chosen to be the participants.**

## **3. Do I have to take part?**

It is voluntary for you to decide whether or not to involve your child into this project. This is my own PhD research and there is no potential interests with the government and the kindergarten. So please feel free to make your decision. If you do decide to provide permission to allow your child to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). **In addition, a child-friendly information sheet and consent form will be provided to your child. And I will explain to the children so that they have fully understood the information sheet before they sign the consent form.** Both you and your child can withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You and your child do not have to give a reason.



#### **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

This project will last for **4-5 months** in the kindergarten. I will spend two months and two weeks in each of the class. Before the formal research, I need to be in the class to finally confirm the participants and become familiar with the children, the daily routines and the classroom environment, which will take me about two weeks. So, once you agree to provide permission to allow your child to take part, I will then introduce and explain this project to your child and ask if they personally would like to be involved in this project. They will be informed that they could discuss this with you. If your child agree to take part in this research, he/she will be given a consent form and could sign the form with the help with you or the teacher.

The formal research in each class will last for two months, five days a week. Everyday I will carry the camera to make videos of the children and their peers during two periods of the free play time: morning and afternoon. During each period of free play time, I will take the video for **30** minutes. I will avoid take the video of the children who have not consented to this project. In addition, those private and potential negative situations (toileting/changing clothes/inappropriate or anti-social behaviour) will also be avoided during the videotaping time. The children can also request that I avoid, or stop filming particular episodes of play. Then I will have a **5** minutes' conversation with the children to ask which parts of their play activities that they would like to talk about. So I will be able to select the episodes to prepare for the later conversation with the children. The conversation with children will be conducted at noon before/after lunch time and at the end of the school day. I will watch the selected episodes with the children and their peers for **10-15** minutes and discuss with them for about **15** minutes. The whole process will be no more than **30** minutes. We will talk about what is happening in the play, including the children's perspectives of their interactions with teachers. **Your child will be informed that he/she has the right to refuse to answer any question and terminate the interview at any time during the research process. Although**

**this project will be conducted every weekday, your child will not be involved in the research every day. I will take turn to do the research with the voluntary children in your child's class. In addition, it is flexible for children to choose the timing for the conversation according to their willingness of the day.**

Then, I would like to discuss the same set of episodes with the teachers for about 30 minutes. I would like us talk about their perspective on teachers role during the episodes of play. No sensitive or critical questions will be asked during the interview. In addition, the audio recorder will be used during the interview with the teachers and the conversation with children.

#### **5. What do I have to do?**

The participants of this project are the children and teachers. You will not be required to have any direct involvement. There will be no lifestyle restrictions for both you and your child.

#### **6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Generally speaking, there will be little risk in this study. You might feel uncomfortable about the use of video of your child. The recordings will be stored securely in my laptop (password protected) and beyond the kindergarten will only be viewed by me and my supervisor. The study will require kindergarten teachers and the children to contribute their time, but I will negotiate the timing so that the research will not affect teachers' working routine or the children's daily life in kindergarten. Some children need to stay in the kindergarten for maximum **of 30 minutes** after their class ends. In that case, I will inform you ahead by phone so that you can arrange your time to pick up your child from the kindergarten. But this will not happen everyday to your child. And I will be sensitive to the children's condition and emotion. Children will be informed that they can stop their involvement in the study at any time.

## **7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this project will be able to understand your child's needs and interests in the context of play. And based on that, it is hoped that this project is able to present what kinds of support that your child wants or does not want to gain from the teachers in the contexts of play. **In addition, your child will feel empowered that his/her opinions have been highly regarded by the adults.**

## **8. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

Normally the project will not stop earlier than expected. However, if this is the case, I will explain to the children. I will also send a written letter to you to explain the reasons.

## **9. What if something goes wrong?**

If you feel something goes wrong, you could first ask me to stop the project at anytime without any reason. Then if you want to make a complaint about the project, you could contact my supervisor Dr. Liz Chesworth through email ([e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk)). My supervisor will handle your complaint and I will follow the further instruction from my supervisor. If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you could contact the Head of Ethic Review Panel of the School of Education, Dr. David Hyatt by email ([d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk)).

## **10. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that I collect from the kindergarten and your child during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The kindergarten and your child will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. Children can choose the

pseudonyms for themselves and all the information that collects from your child will not only be confidential to the public, but also be confidential to the kindergarten teachers and headteachers. The University of Sheffield (UK) will be responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

#### **11. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

You child will be videotaped and his/her conversation with me will be recorded. **The original facial images of your child will not be concealed because they are important cues for the interview.** However, the audio recordings will be used only for data analysis. Some screenshots from the videos may be used for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. But the facial images of the children and the teachers in the screenshots will be pixelated. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. All the information that I collect will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to me and my supervisor. The videotapes and the interview recordings will be stored for 4 years (from 2018-2022) until I receive my PhD degree. Then all the audio recordings will be destroyed but the transcripts of the interview will be kept.

#### **12. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The videotapes and audio recordings will be uses for writing the thesis, which will be finished in the next **3** years. In addition, these data may also be used for the derived products of this projects, including the papers, conference report or other publications, which are likely to be published in next **10** years. And you and your child will be informed where the results are published and get a copy if you would like to. In addition, the data collected during the course of the project might be used for additional or subsequent research. In that case, you will also be informed before the research start.

### **13. Who is organizing and funding the research?**

I am organizing this project and it is a self-funded project.

### **14. Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This research has been ethically approved via the School of Education department's ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

### **15. Contact for further information**

You are welcome to contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. You can contact me through my phone **13559877016** or my email **jli157@sheffield.ac.uk**. And the email address for my supervisor is **e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk**.

Finally, thank you for reading this. Could you please make your decision in **2 weeks**? And if you agree to give permission to allow your child to take part in this project, you will be given a copy of the information sheet to keep. And you also need to sign the consent form.

Thank you for your time.

Jialing Li

School of Education

The University of Sheffield

## Consent form for parents (legal guardians)

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
<b>Taking Part in the Project</b>		
I have read and fully understood the project information sheet dated _____ (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I give permission for my child's participation in this research. I understand that my child will be videotaped during the free play time in the kindergarten. I understand that my child will have a conversation with the researcher based on these videotapes. I understand and agree to use the camera and the recording pen for my child.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand this research is not a test or evaluation of the development of my child.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my child will be fully explained about the information sheet with the age-appropriate language before he/she makes the decision on participating into the research. I understand my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my child from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want my child to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>How my information will be used during and after the project</b>		
I understand and agree my child's personal details such name, family background or other identifiable information will be anonymised before the analysis and in any derived products of this research, including the thesis, conference report or publications.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I understand and agree that the videotapes and the interview records will be destroyed once the researcher has achieved the PhD degree. I give permission for the interview transcripts that are collected in this kindergarten to be deposited by the researcher so it can be used for future research and learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any data collected from my child will be confidential to people outside the research, including the teachers and headteachers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use the data of my child in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that the images of child's face do not need to be pixelate and concealed during the process of data analysis if the researcher agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers</b>		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

## Appendix 5: Children's information sheet and consent form

### Slides from the information PowerPoint for children

Hi! Everyone!

My name is Jialing Li. Over the next few weeks, I will be in your class.

I am very interested in your free play activities! So, I am doing research with you! That means, I have many questions about your play activities, I hope you could help me!

Would you like to help me with some questions about your play?

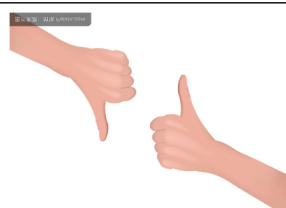
Let me introduce how am I going to ask you questions about play first. Then you can decide if you want to help me with my questions, ok?



Do you know what is this?

I would like to use this camera to take videos of your play activities.

I won't start filming until you allow me to.



What if you don't want me to take videos when you are playing?

Don't worry! That is OK.

You can give me a special sign to tell me if I can film at any moment!

Do you want to choose another sign?





When you finished the play activities, I would like to watch the film with you and your friend in the video. Then we will talk about what is happening and what you are doing in the film.

Do you know what is this? It is ok if you don't want to see the videos and talk with me, or help me with my questions



I would like to watch the film with your teachers, too. I think they could help me understand what and why they are doing in the film.

But I will not tell your teacher what we had talked earlier.

And no one except me and my teacher can watch the videos.

If you allow me to take the film of your play activities and agree to have a conversation with me, then you need to finish this form with the smile/sad face ( 😊 😞 ) and write your name in this form.

If later you want to change your mind, it is ok. You can tell me, or ask your parents or teacher to tell me at any time.

Before you are going to make the decision, do you have any questions for me?

Thank you!

## Consent form for children

### Consent form for children



1. Has Jialing explained her plan to you? 😊 😞



2. Did you allow Jialing to ask questions? 😊 😞

3. Do you understand what you and Jialing are going to do? 😊 😞

4. Do you want to help Jialing with her plan? 😊 😞



5. Do you allow Jialing to take video of you when you are playing? 😊 😞



6. Do you know you can stop helping Jialing at any time? 😊 😞

Please write your name here:

Thank you!

## Appendix 6: Semi-structure interview questions for children

Research sub-questions	Adapted questions for children
What are children's identifications of the teachers' roles within the corresponding play contexts?	<p>What roles was the teacher playing in this video? / at this moment?</p> <p>What was the teacher doing?</p>
What are children's interests and needs in different contexts of play?	<p>Do you like the play in this video? Why?</p> <p>Did you want to/ like to do this in the video? / at this moment?</p> <p>If not, what did you want to/ like to do in the video? /at this moment?</p> <p>What is the most interesting thing about this play?</p> <p>Was there anything that you wanted to play at that time but you had not in this video?</p>
How do children respond to teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?	<p>What were you doing in the video? / at this moment?</p> <p>Why did you do this?</p> <p>Did you want to do this for the teacher?</p>
What are children's perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different	<p>Why did the teacher do this in the video/ at this moment?</p> <p>Do you want/like what the teacher did in this video?</p>

contexts of play?	<p>Why?</p> <p>If not, what did you want the teacher to do at this moment?</p> <p>Do you like the role that the teacher played in the video/ at this moment?</p> <p>Was there anything that you wanted the teacher to do/play, but she had not done in this video?</p>
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## Appendix 7: Semi-structure interview questions for teachers

Research sub-questions	Extended questions for teachers
<p>What are teachers' perspectives on their roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?</p>	<p>What role did you play in this episode? / at this moment?</p> <p>Did you adopt any pedagogy in this episode? / at this moment?</p> <p>What did you intend to do in this episode? / at this moment?</p>
<p>Why do teachers choose certain roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?</p>	<p>Why did you choose to play this role in this episode? / at this moment?</p> <p>What were you thinking about at that moment?</p> <p>Did you achieve your intention in this play context?</p> <p>What was the most significant reason for you to decide to play this role/ act in this way?</p> <p>What do you think of the results of your pedagogies/behaviours in this episode?</p>
<p>How do teachers understand these needs and interests within the corresponding play contexts?</p>	<p>What were the children's interests in this play episode?</p> <p>Why do you think that the children were interested in this at that moment? How do you know?</p> <p>What do you think of the children's play interests in this</p>

	<p>episode?</p> <p>Why did the children act in this way?</p> <p>Do you think you had met children's interests in the episode? /in that moment?</p>
<p>What are children's perspectives on teachers' roles and pedagogical practices in different contexts of play?</p>	<p>Do you think the children liked your roles in the episode? Why?</p> <p>Do you think the children wanted you to be with them in that context of play? Why?</p> <p>Do you think the children like your idea?</p>

## Appendix 8: Examples of coded transcripts

### Children’s perspective: extract from Monica’s perspectives of the first episode in Hospital

Codes presented in red indicate children’s perspectives that contributed to the theme: identification of teachers’ roles. Codes presented in green indicate children’s perspectives that contributed to the theme: evaluations of teachers’ roles and pedagogical practices.

Transcript	Coding
<p>Monica: Oh! This! This is the “hospital”. I was fixing the doll’s “arm”. It was difficult because it was broken.</p> <p>Ling: I see. How about teacher Bella? What was she doing?</p> <p>Monica: She watched us play...then, she was taking the videos.</p> <p>Ling: Did you like teacher Bella taking videos at that time?</p> <p>Monica: I did. Vicky was ready, we then fixed the “arms” together.</p> <p>Monica: I changed another tool. That did not work</p>	<p>Describes the play context and children’s play actions.</p> <p><b>Describes/identify the teachers’ behaviours/pedagogical practices.</b></p> <p><b>Evaluates the teachers’ behaviours/pedagogical practices.</b></p> <p>Introduces peers.</p> <p>Describes the play contexts and children’s play actions</p>

**Teacher’s perspective: extract from Bella’s perspectives of the first vignette in the second episode in Hospital**

Codes presented in red indicate the teacher’s perspectives that contributed to the theme: definition of teachers’ roles. Codes presented in green indicate the teacher’s perspectives that contributed to the theme: teachers’ pedagogical practices. Codes presented in green indicate the teacher’s perspectives that contributed to the theme: factors to influence the teacher’s role positionings and pedagogical choice.

Transcripts from Hospital-Episode 2-Vgnette 1	Coding
<p>Bella: Oh, this, um, I was guiding them to negotiate their role assignment in that moment. I am not sure about which role I was playing. I was a <b>guide</b> and I was also a <b>supporter</b>. Actually, I was just supporting their play by guiding them. I am not very sure. I feel that sometimes these two roles are alike. You are guiding, then of course, you are supporting (laugh).</p>	<p>Defines teachers’ roles Complex roles Have problems to define teacher’s roles</p>
<p>Ling: Could you be more specific about how you guided them?</p>	<p>Describes the pedagogical practices</p>
<p>Bella: I talked with them. Asked them questions and communicated with them. You see. They did not know how to communicate with each other. Not just Bonnie. She (Monica) did not reply to her question. Neither did Vicky. They did not have a collective awareness.</p>	<p>Factors to influence the teachers’ role positionings and pedagogical decisions</p>
<p>Ling: Why was it so important for them to develop a</p>	



<p>collective awareness?</p> <p>Bella: I was trying to tell them that, you were in a group. You needed to know each other's roles. And you needed to consult with each other if you wanted to play a role.</p>	<p>Factors to influence the teachers' role positionings and pedagogical decisions</p>
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