

The Complexity of Preschool Children's Dramatic Play Behaviour and Play Styles in Australia: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

Dramatic play is recognised as an important source of learning and development for preschool children, yet there are increasing reports that the quality of dramatic play is declining. This paper aims to report on the findings of a mixed method study that examined the constructs of Australian preschool children's dramatic play behaviour. Video observations and the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) were used with 101 preschool children aged 4 to 6 years in selected early childhood educational settings in Melbourne, Australia. Findings reveal that the overall level of children's dramatic play behaviour was low. A typology of four play styles will be presented. Implications on educators' pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: dramatic play, imagination, assessment, preschool children

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The concept of play is a complicated phenomenon with multifaceted understandings. This in part stems from play encompassing a diverse range of activities that include but are not limited to construction, rough and tumble, drawing, dancing, running and role play (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010). In this paper, play is conceptually positioned within the realm of Vygotsky's theory of play (1978). Vygotsky emphasised that true play is an activity where the child creates an imaginary situation where meaning is transferred from one object or situation to another and the child takes on and acts out roles. The term "dramatic play" is used in this study to reflect common understandings of the activity that encompass these characteristics within the field of early childhood education and care.

Literature Review

The Constructs of Dramatic Play

At the preschool age of four to six years, dramatic play is a predominate activity of children's involvement (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Elkonin (2005) asserts that at this age dramatic play is a complex and innovative activity that includes the following six behaviours: (a) substituting the meaning of objects and actions; (b) role enactments where children undertake the persona of someone else to enact situations; (c) complex themes driven by pretend actions and events; (d) rich dialogue and narration to plan the play, label objects, or to tell a story; (e) collaboration with peers; and (f) play episodes that persist over several hours.

The substitution of objects is a crucial construct of children's dramatic play behaviour as it provides the child with a pivot to move into the imaginary world. In this action children are no longer concerned with the visual properties of the objects, but instead the meaning associated with it (Fleer, 2014). This provides children with the flexibility needed to carry out sequences of events and actions within the imaginary world (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). These sequences and events form a story that is enacted through actions and language. This will be referred to as a "play episode" in this paper.

The sequence of play episodes are carried out through the enactment of roles. This is

where children assume the persona of someone other than themselves and enact this through physical actions, affective behaviours and verbalisations. These actions are guided by rules that are implicit to the child's social context. For instance, the actions, dialogue and objects visible within a play episode of children playing mums and dads will be determined by their knowledge of the behaviours that are typically associated with these social roles. Harris (2000) highlights that the complexity of a play episode develops according to the amount of knowledge that a child has obtained relating to the consequences of their pretend action. At the preschool age of 4 – 6 years, children's play episodes should be innovative and contain diverse themes that are interconnected to represent their increasing development in cognitive (i.e., representational thought, self-regulation) and social skills (ie., perspective taking) (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). For this deep exploration of themes to occur, the play episode should persist over several hours (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Children's dialogue brings their roles to life and assist to extend the ideas within a play episode. This will occur from the child's position inside the role (e.g., "Mummy, when are we going to the shops?") or from a position outside the role (e.g., "Pretend that you asked me when we are going to the shops"). Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) refer to this as dual positioning, which involves advanced elements of language that consist of metacommunication and metacognition to socially collaborate for the purpose of the play episode.

Elkonin (2005) contends that the discussed elements of dramatic play define the behaviours of mature play. Mature is a form of activity that is "not repetitive or unimaginative, rather it is complex and contributes to children's learning and development" (Hujala, Helenius & Hyvonen, 2010, p. 93). Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) assert that at the preschool age of 4 to 6 years, children's play should involve all of these elements at a mature level to reflect their diverse experiences in innovative scenarios.

Dramatic Play as a Leading Activity for Preschool Children

Vygotsky (1978) emphasised dramatic play to be a predominate activity for children's development in the preschool year. He argued that dramatic play is a complex physical and mental activity where eclectic developmental skills and competencies are merged, allowing

a child to “act a head taller than his own” (p. 98). Vygotsky emphasised that play is “not simply a reproduction of what he (a child) has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired” (2004, p. 11). This means that play becomes an experience where the child is able to make conscious understandings of his/her ideas and knowledge of the social world. During this creative reworking, children can relieve tension and fulfil wishes to achieve mastery in their social context, i.e., an experience of immense satisfaction that affords complex cognitive tasks that usually not performed outside of play (Vygotsky, 1978).

Leontiev (1981) extended on these ideas, suggesting dramatic play to be a leading activity for learning and development during the preschool year. This means that dramatic play provides children with the optimal context for their transition into newer and higher levels of development such as the meta-cognitive skills of representational thinking and self-regulation, language, persistence and pro-social skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In order for dramatic play to provide an optimal context for learning and development, the construct of behaviours used by children in dramatic must be of a mature level (Elkonin, 2005).

The State of Dramatic Play

Some international studies suggest that children’s dramatic play is declining in complexity, innovation and occurrence (e.g., Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004). For instance, in the Northern European context, Smirnova (2013) reveals that children aged 3 to 6 years displayed limited involvement in role enactments, and that their actions within play episodes are imitative, repetitive and driven by the physical form and function of objects. Meanwhile, it has been highlighted that children in Singapore (Lu Soo Ai, 2007) and America (Miller & Almon, 2009) are unlikely to carry out a play episode for more than a couple of minutes. Bodrova, Germeroth and Leong (2013) assert that the dramatic play behaviour mentioned is typically observed of children aged 2 to 3 years and does not represent the mature characteristics associated with the leading activity. Involvement in dramatic play is supported by a child’s cognitive and social skills (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Accordingly, the prospect that the complexity

of children's dramatic play skills are declining in the preschool year, has raised the concern that other areas of children's development and learning may be at risk (Smirnova, 2013).

Assessment of Children's Dramatic Play Behaviour

The currently available dramatic play assessments are wide reaching. Generally, assessments of play that focus on the complexity of the activity evaluate up to six aspects of children's performance in a play episode: (a) undertake a role of someone else; (b) persist in that role; (c) substitute objects; (d) sequence and detail events; (e) collaborate with peers; and (f) language and communication (e.g., Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Stagnitti, 2009). The focus of such assessments is developed according to the existing definition of dramatic play and closely reflect the definition of mature play as outlined by Elkonin (2005) and Vygotsky (1978).

Although comprehensive, assessments of play may influence the inferences that are made about the complexity of children's dramatic play behaviour. Firstly, the selection of a play assessment is guided by the focus of the study. Bodrova et al. (2013) suggest that this may lead to important aspects of mature dramatic play being overlooked. They identify that in a series of studies that focus on the development of children's self-regulation (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004), the main focus of the assessment used was upon the complexity of children's role enactments. This included, the time spent in a role enactment; the type of actions and use of objects within the role; and the communication with peers. However, the use of metacommunication, important for the planning and execution of play episodes was given limited attention, which is an essential aspect of mature play (Bodrova et al, 2013). Meanwhile, studies which have examined children's use of meta-language within play episodes can focus on children's object substitution and peer collaboration, rather than their role enactments (Howe, Abuhatum, & Chang-Kredl, 2014; Leach, 2012).

Secondly, some available assessments of play were developed as a diagnostic tool (e.g., Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Stagnitti, 2009). They were designed to identify developmental deficiencies and to categorise children's dramatic play behaviour, in order to plan an appropriate intervention. These assessments are often performed in clinical settings,

where the peers, objects and time provided to children to play are controlled by the researcher and/or therapist (Howe et al., 2014; Stagnitti, 2009). In these situations children may not have had experience with the objects, or the concept of the theme provided, within their social world. Moreover, it is common for some assessments of play to be performed with the child outside of a social context with familiar and similarly aged peers (Stagnitti, 2009). Although, this fulfils the needs of these particular assessments, the ability to collaborate with peers within the imaginary world forms an essential component of mature play.

Collectively, an issue that is present within the design of some selected play assessment tools is that they emphasise what children *are not* doing, rather than what children *are* doing and *why*. Some researchers suggest that children's dramatic play behaviour is influenced by their preferences for certain objects and play spaces within the preschool classroom (Reunamo, Lee, Wang, Ruokonen, Nikkola & Malmstrom, 2014; Saracho, 1999). Saracho (1999) describes this as the child's cognitive style to process, acquire and arrange information within the environment. Two styles are presented by Saracho, wherein some children are involved in object substitution and display social interaction with others. Whereas, some children may prefer to manipulate objects and play alone. This can have been an influential factor on children's behaviour in dramatic play, however is often not considered. Provisions should be in place to ensure that there is opportunity for children to grow. Without the support from adults or peers to be involved in higher levels of play, the skill level of these children are more likely to remain low and their development remains unchallenged.

To move forward in the analysis of children's dramatic play, this study not only measured the level of complexity of children's dramatic play by using one of the widely used tools (e.g., Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990), but also explored characteristics that are driving their play activity. The term 'play style' is used in this paper to describe children's use of objects, preference of classroom play spaces and social qualities of children's dramatic play episodes.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) promotes a play based curriculum that is child led and adult guided. To enrich children's learning through play, educators are encouraged to draw upon a repertoire of pedagogies, including; flexibility, open ended environments, responsiveness and intentional teaching. Furthermore, importance is placed upon children's development of learning dispositions including; creativity, persistence, improvisation, imagination and problem solving (DEEWR, 2009). In theory, these aspects of early childhood curriculum in Australia are congruent with a climate that can provide children with optimal support for children's development of, and involvement in dramatic play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Since the implementation of the EYLF in 2009 there seems to be limited research on children's dramatic play in Australia. This study aims to examine the level of complexity and characteristic of children's dramatic play behaviour within selected Australian preschool classrooms by addressing the following two research questions:

1. What is the level of complexity of children's dramatic play behaviour?
2. What are children's dramatic play styles?

Methodology

Research Participants

A total of 101 children aged between 4 to 6 years participated in this study (mean age 5.1 years, 54 males and 47 females). The participating children were enrolled in four preschool classrooms located in different early childhood settings in Metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. The preschool classrooms were selected using randomised sampling and all children within the classrooms were invited to participate. Each classroom was led by a 4 year degree (Education) qualified teacher and assisted by an educator holding a Diploma of Children's Services (or equivalent). The findings presented are part of a larger research

project. The researchers gained ethics approval from the relevant committees prior to data collection.

All four preschool classrooms implemented a play-based curriculum that was informed by the EYLF. The daily schedule in each classroom was structured by child initiated, adult guided play activities in both indoor and outdoor environments. The EYLF adopts an integrated approach to learning and development, which means that children's involvement in dramatic play is not restricted to specific spaces in the classroom (DEEWR, 2009). Accordingly, the indoor and outdoor physical environment in all classrooms included play spaces where opportunities for dramatic play were provided through loose materials (e.g., pieces of fabric, blocks) and replica props (e.g., pieces of food, animal figurines). Previous research has highlighted that this provides children with a suitable physical context to promote dramatic play behaviour (Maxwell, Mitchell & Evans, 2008; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Quantitative data were collected by the researcher using the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio Dramatic play (SSEDSP) (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). The SSEDSP was selected for use in the present study as it is comprehensive and assimilative with definitions of dramatic play.

The SSEDSP instrument sought to observe and rate six elements of children's dramatic play (Table 1). This instrument was selected due to its focus upon a) role enactment; b) object substitution; c) make believe with actions and situations; d) persistence; e) social collaboration; and f) verbal communication. The interrelated elements, encompass the use of language to plan, direct and maintain the development of the play episode.

The data collection period spanned over 4 months from July to November (1 month per classroom). In this time the researcher conducted the SSEDSP twice on each child: once indoor and once outdoor. This follows the rationale that dramatic play occurs in both physical contexts of the preschool environment (Cloward Drown, 2014; Maxwell, Mitchell & Evans, 2008). Moreover, the instrument has been used in previous research to capture

Table 1. *Constructs of the SSEDSP*

Elements of Play	Description
Imitative Role Play	The child undertakes a make believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalization
Make Believe with Objects	A toy, object, verbalisation or gesture is used to symbolise a make believe object
Make Believe with Actions and Situations	Verbalisations are substituted for actions and situations
Persistence in Role Play	The child persists in a play episode for at least five minutes. They may follow a series of acts or roles or stay within one related scene or roles
Interaction	The child directs an action or word to another child within the context of the play episode
Verbal Communication	Verbal communication related to the play episode

(Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990)

children's natural involvement in dramatic play in both indoor and outdoor classroom environments (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010; Cloward Drown, 2014). Data collection processes involved observing the same child twice within the one week. Observations of the child begun when it was identified that the child was involved in a play episode. Each application was conducted over a 30 minute period during scheduled free play timeslots. At five minute intervals, the quality of each element of dramatic play was rated on a four point Likert scale:

0 = the element is not present

1 = the element is present but to a limit degree

2 = the element is present to a moderate degree

3 = the element is present consistently and in many situations during the child's play

(Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990, p. 241).

A total of twelve 5 minute intervals were collected for each child. Following the directions of the SSEDSP manual, the sum score of each interval was calculated to determine the total score for the full 60 minute play period (Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990). A mean score range between 0 – 18 was possible (Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990).

Prior to data collection, the researcher conducted internal reliability checks of the use of the SSEDSP. Testing was conducted using six pairs of data. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Chronbachs alpha. An agreement of 0.88 was achieved which is deemed to be satisfactory (DeVellis, 2003).

Qualitative data were collected using video observations during scheduled times of free play over four days of the data collection period in each of the four classrooms. The researcher positioned a digital handheld video recorder on a tripod in a corner of the classroom on a wide angle to capture a large proportion of the room. In classrooms where indoor and outdoor play occurred concurrently, a second camera was positioned in the outdoor environment. The camera was moved between indoor and outdoor environments in classrooms where free play occurred in singular environments.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis of the data collected by the SSEDSP was undertaken with IBM SPSS version 22. This included testing of the range, mean, standard deviation. Testing was also conducted upon the data's normality, linearity, univariate outliers and homogeneity of variance. An alpha level of $\leq .05$ significance was employed for all statistical tests.

A total of 800 minutes of video data was entered into the software NVIVO and thematic coding (Kumar, 2011) was used to analyse children's play styles according to their preference of play space, actions with objects and social interactions.

Findings

Research Question 1: What is the Level of Complexity of Children's Dramatic Play Behaviour?

The mean of children's SSEDSP score was 7.26 (score of 0– 18 possible). This reveals that the complexity of children's dramatic play behaviour was of a low to moderate level; indicating children in this study were not involved in a mature level of dramatic play.

As Table 2 illustrates, children demonstrated the highest scores in the elements of interactions with others and verbal communication. These scores, although moderate overall, indicate that the basic foundations of socio dramatic play were present as children coordinated involvement and communication within the context of a shared play episode (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Table 2. *Summary of children's mean SSEDSP scores*

	Mean	Std Deviation	Min	Max
Imitative role play	1.03	0.62	0.00	2.50
Objects	1.29	0.74	0.80	2.75
Actions and situations	1.16	0.60	0.00	2.58
Persistence	1.09	0.65	0.00	2.42
Interaction	1.35	0.61	0.00	2.50
Communication	1.34	0.63	0.00	2.50
Total play score	7.26	3.85	0.80	15.25

The participating children displayed a moderate level of make believe with objects. This means that there were times when the children substituted the form and function of an object for something else, or used gestures and language to communicate the presence of an absent object (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). However, the development of children's play episodes were mostly dependent on the presence of realistic objects. Advancement to mature forms of dramatic play was challenged by low scores in role play, persistence and make believe with actions and situations. This indicates that although children were engaging in social interactions, their play episodes were making limited advancements beyond imitative actions and verbalisations within a repetitious make believe context. These results are similar to those in other research where the SSEDSP has been used, including in Singapore (Lu Soo Ai, 2007), the United States (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Cloward-Drown, 2014).

Research Question 2: What Are Children's Play Styles?

Analysed field notes and video observations revealed that there four key styles of play that were influencing children's dramatic play behaviour. These styles were termed a) Mature Players; b) Role Players; c) Constructive Players; and d) Uninvolved Players. The individual characteristics of each style of play is presented in the next sections. The coding of these four play styles were compared with the SSEDSP scores. Table 3 outlines the mean range of SSEDSP scores that were characteristic of each of the four styles of play and the percentage of children with scores belonging to that style.

Table 3. *Range of SSEDSP score and frequency according to play style*

Style of play	Mean range SSEDSP score	Frequency (n = 101 chn)
Mature players	13.5 – 18	13%
Role players	9.1 – 13.4	25%
Constructive players	4.5 – 9	34%
Uninvolved players	0 – 4.4	28%

Table 4 divides the mean range scores of each of the six elements of the SSEDSP by play style. The data showed that there was a descending level of play behaviour in each element of dramatic play. However, four of the six elements of dramatic play had scores overlap. This indicates that each style of play is constructed by specific characteristics of action and motive.

Table 4. *Range of scores within play styles*

Mean range of scores between 0 - 3				
Subscale	Mature player	Role player	Constructive player	Uninvolved player
Role enactments	>2.0	1.3 – 2.0	0.7 – 1.2	< 0.7
Make believe w/ objects	>2.3	1.5 – 2.3	0.8 – 1.5	< 1.0
Action/scene	>2.1	1.4 – 2.1	0.8 – 1.5	< 0.8
Persistence	>2.1	1.3 – 2.0	0.7 – 1.2	< 0.7
Interaction	>2.2	1.6 – 2.0	0.9 – 1.6	< 1.2
Communication	>2.2	1.6 – 2.0	0.9 – 1.6	< 1.2

Mature players. Mature Players displayed all six elements of the SSEDSP (Table 5). Within this play style, children's play episodes displayed extensive exploration of a situation through a detailed series of two or more events to include multifaceted ideas and roles. Mature Players showed flexibility in their ability to separate meaning from the physical world through the use of gestures and "pretend" statements to communicate the presence of an absent object or that the meaning of an object had been changed (i.e., 'Pretend you were eating dinner, and this was the dogs bowl'). Moreover, children undertook the complete persona of a role. Scenario 1 illustrates Mature Players enacted the affective (feelings, motives and desires) and physical characteristics (posture and movement) of their chosen role.

Table 5. *Play behaviours of mature players*

Element of play	Description of behaviour
Imitative role play	Enactment of complete persona; - Affective characteristic: feelings, motives and desires - Physical characteristics: voice, posture and movement
Make believe with objects	Form and function of objects were substituted. High use of gestures to indicate an absent object
Actions and situations	Extensive exploration of a situation through a detailed series of two or more events
Persistence	20 minutes to several hours
Interactions	Ongoing collaborative process of planning, negotiating, reflecting and modifying
Verbal communication	Extensive use of meta-communication

Scenario 1:

Susan, Fiona and Vince are enacting the role of a cat family in the home corner. Susan is playing the mother cat and Fiona and Vince are her children.

Susan: (To Fiona) Just pretend that you are hungry.

Fiona: (To Susan) I'm hungry, and pretend you made me fish.

Susan: (picks up a plate and actions placing something on it. Places in front of Fiona) Now eat up your fish, it is dinner time.

Susan: (Fiona actions eating from the plate with her mouth) Pretend you didn't like it

Fiona: Yeah because I am the bad cat.

Susan: (changes voice) Daughter, I told you to eat your fish.

Fiona: Meows (Turns body around from plate, sits up in a cat posture).

Susan: Daughter, you can go to bed. Come on Brother we are going to the park (Places rope in Vince's mouth).

Fiona: Moves to corner of the play space and sits meowing with sad facial expression and body posture (Occasionally licks paws).

The complexity of this role enactment was associated with children displaying frequent instances of collaborative interactions that extended each other's ideas using pretend talk (Pretend I/Pretend you) and meta-communicative dialogue to describe their own and others states of mind (e.g., hunger). Employment of these communication styles led to the development of more complex themes that were driven by children's own intentions, rather than being bound to the physical world around them. A play episode persisted over an

entire 2 hours free play period, and could also extend into a later period of free play; that same day or the following day. This indicated that children received immense satisfaction during the play. The flexibility of Mature Players to separate the meaning of objects, led children to show no preference over play spaces for dramatic play activity. They were observed to enter the imaginary world with or without the support of props designed to stimulate dramatic play (i.e., thematic play spaces and realistic props).

Role players. Role Players displayed ongoing involvement in dramatic play, indicating that they also received satisfaction out of the activity. Their involvement in dramatic play was primarily in the dramatic play space and the outdoor playground. These play spaces often provided children with a suggested theme to begin a play episode through the presence of realistic props. In this play style (Table 6), children often used gestures to communicate the presence of an absent object, indicating some flexibility in their representational thought. Role Players used ‘pretend’ talk to communicate the meaning of these actions to their peers. However, their play episodes consisted of role enactments that were limited to the physical characteristics of movements, voice and actions.

Table 6. *Play behaviours of role players*

Element of play	Description of behaviour
Imitative role play	Enactment of physical characteristics (voice, posture and movement)
Make believe with objects	Form and function of objects are substituted. Some use of gestures to indicate an absent object
Actions and situations	Repetitive exploration of one or two events within a situation
Persistence	10 and 20 minutes
Interactions	Some collaborative processes of planning, negotiating, reflecting and modifying
Verbal communication	Descriptive communication to convey actions

Scenario 2 shows that dramatic play behaviour of role players was associated with the frequent use of communicative dialogue that described ones physical actions and play scenarios. This is rather than the meta-communicative dialogue seen by ‘Mature Players’.

Scenario 2:

In Classroom One, A group of three boys; Michael, Nathan, Jason and Cullum are playing cops and robbers outdoors.

Nathan: (To Michael) Now I caught you and you went to jail.

Michael: (stops running)

Nathan: (To Michael, changes voice to become deeper) I got you now, you are going to jail.

Handcuff him (To Cullum).

Cullum: (To Michael) Come on let's go in the jail. (Places in the tunnel) Now stay there.

Michael: Pretend I escaped from jail (Runs out of jail).

Nathan: Quick catch him.

The children begin running around the yard. Jason and Andy are running after one another silently. Nathan, Michael and Cullum engage in some shooting but are mostly chasing. After 7 minutes, Nathan speaks into a pretend phone as though speaking to another police officer and tries to pull them back into the game. The sequence previously played out begins again.

Role Players' play episodes commonly consist of repetitious events within a single faceted situation. For instance, the cops and robbers script in Scenario 2 above was observed over a period of ten minutes. Whilst the children persisted with the storyline, there were large periods of non-involvement in the play episode as illustrated by a greater interest in chase. When the children returned, the same storyline was repeated, thus never evolving.

Constructive players. "Constructive Players" usually displayed a higher level of dramatic play in play spaces designed for constructive play (i.e., block corner, sandpit). Scenario 3 shows that Constructive Players spend time constructing a scene and projecting a role onto a toy to play out a story. Accordingly, these play spaces provide children of this play style with a more suitable means to fulfil this preference. They also allowed them to interact more collaboratively, substitute the meaning of objects and give a role to a unanimous or realistic object.

Scenario 3

In Classroom One, Jayde and Kyle are building a castle with blocks and using two cars to represent a king and queen.

Jayde: (Imitating an animal figurine walking) Oh, we need a chair for the king.

Kyle: Yes, this can be the chair.

Jayde: (Moves figurine to sit on the chair and begins placing other figurines inside) They can all go inside and the king sits on the chair.

Kyle: The King and Queen can go to jail. These are the jail bars (points to a stripy block).

Jayde: Okay, there is a little window here they can look from.

Kyle: (puts two blocks up changes voice) You are trapped in jail.

Jayde: (unresponsive as she continues building)

Interactions pause. Jayde continues building and Kyle is manipulating objects to make interactions with one another without any verbal communication.

Kyle: (Picks up block and bounces along carpet) I'm the police, stay in there.

Jayde: This is the king and queens bedroom. They can sleep here while the Police guard the baddies in jail (Places cars in bedroom and continues building).

Kyle: (picks up lion sitting on floor close by) They're free, let's free the jail man in there. (Changes voice) Please let us out let us out.

When the play of Constructive Players was not positioned within a constructive play space, the level of their dramatic play according to the SSEDSP was observed to be much lower (Table 7). The development of their play episodes were limited by a dependence upon realistic objects. As such, children were likely to use an object according to its physical form and function. Moreover, role enactments typically consisted of imitative actions where the child exclaimed their role: "I am the mother" and followed with an enactment of single actions within a single theme (i.e., pouring a substance from a jug into

Table 7. *Play behaviours of a constructive player*

Element of play	Description of behaviour
Imitative role play	Imitative actions Frequent projections of a role onto a toy
Make believe with objects	Dependent upon realistic objects Likely to construct a prop or scene out of blocks/ manipulative props
Actions and situations	Repetitive exploration of one or two events within a situation
Persistence	5 to 20 minutes
Interactions	Sporadic. Social play is often parallel or associative
Verbal communication	Some descriptive communication to convey actions

a cup, stirring and offering to a non-participating peer or adult). It was common for these actions to be repeated. Overall the persistence of these children in role enactments was seldom sustained longer than five minutes. However, play episodes carried out within a constructive play space could be sustained for an entire 2 hour period of free play.

Uninvolved players. “Uninvolved Players” showed limited/no involvement in dramatic play (Table 8). Any involvement in dramatic play displayed a preference for realistic play objects. Meanwhile, role enactments consisted of single actions and with no declarative statements to define a role. For instance, in Classroom Two, Charlie (a child participant) was regularly observed pouring a substance from a jug into a cup, stirring and offering to a non-participating peer or adult.

Table 8. *Play behaviours of an uninvolved player*

Element of play	Description of behaviour
Imitative role play	Singular imitative actions
Make believe with objects	Dependent upon realistic objects
Actions and situations	Repetitive exploration of one event within a situation
Persistence	2 to 5 minutes
Interactions	Sporadic. Social play is often parallel or associative
Verbal communication	Some descriptive communication to convey actions

Discussion and Conclusion

The Constructs of Children's Dramatic Play Behaviour

Findings of the current study showed that approximately two thirds of the participating 101 preschool children displayed a low to moderate level of dramatic play behaviour. This is in much contrast to the complex and innovative level of dramatic play that Elkonin (2005) depicted to occur in the preschool year. Findings also revealed that children's play episodes are typically short lived, repetitive and lacked of details. Specifically, children's dramatic

play displayed an absence of role enactments, limited persistence of a play episode and actions that revolved around the availability of realistic objects.

As similar to some relevant studies (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004; Smirnova, 2013), the constructs of dramatic play behaviour in the current study were repetitive and imitative. Previous study suggested that children's imaginative and creative dispositions are in a state of decline due to lessened opportunities to play (Bodrova et al, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009). However, children in Australia are provided with a national curriculum that aims to provide long periods of uninterrupted play, open ended activity and child-centred learning; affording vast opportunity to play dramatically. The consistent findings between previous studies and the current research may indicate that the issue partly rests in the way that play is being assessed.

The SSEDSP was selected for the purpose of assessing children's dramatic play in the present study is comprehensive and assimilative with definitions of dramatic play. However, like other methods of play assessment (Howe et al., 2014; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004; Stagnitti, 2009) the SSEDSP focusses on the child's play behaviour within a period of time by himself/herself only. This means that so long as the child is provided with long periods of uninterrupted time and open ended play spaces within a child centred curriculum, it is expected that he/she should be able to enter the imaginary world without guidance from an adult or more mature peer/s. This premise is supported by Bodrova et al. (2013) who assert that new assessments of play that include an adult's role in children's dramatic play is needed.

Fleer (2015) suggests examining educators' involvement in children's dramatic play through a typology of pedagogical positioning. The typology examines the proximity of the educator to the child's play and the intent of the educator's activity in comparison to the child's. Whilst, Fleer's study found that Australian educators seldom positioned themselves inside children's play episodes, the influence on children's dramatic play behaviour was outside the scope of her study. However, findings of the current study suggest that children require the guidance of educators during their development of play episodes, so as to guide them towards crucial cognitive and social skills required for the creative reworking of experiences.

Play Styles Offer an Important Insight into Children's Dramatic Play

Some assessments of play can be limiting as they neglect the individualistic elements of the activity that are contingent to a child. Accordingly, this limitation can lead to differences in dramatic play behaviour being seen as developmental deficiencies. However, the analysis of children's play styles as used in the current study provides an unconventional way that children's play can be examined so as to gain a deeper understanding of the reason of occurrence and the importance the activity for the child. Similar to Saracho's (1999) findings, this study found that some children show a greater level of representational ability in their dramatic play. However, the findings of the current study extend on this idea of play styles to show that some children require certain features within the physical environment to stimulate their involvement in the activity of dramatic play.

This is visible when examining the behaviour of "Constructive Players" whose proximal level of skill and interest revolved around realistic objects and functional imitative actions to create scenes rather than act them out. This type of player received greater satisfaction and qualitative benefit out of playing dramatically in the play spaces that encouraged construction. These children, when assessed by the SSEDSP in other play spaces of the classroom, performed poorly. However, they could play at a mature level when the play space and objects fulfilled their preferences. Meanwhile, 'Role Players' and 'Mature Players' who have greater representational abilities, appeared to be driven by social and affective desires. As such, their involvement in dramatic play was afforded greater orientation in the context of the classroom environment as they were more flexible in representations. Moreover, they gained satisfaction from the collaborative process involved in the process of the play episode.

Understanding play styles enhances educators' planning and implementation of pedagogies that are of a good fit with children's play style. As children of different play styles were found to show preferences in their choice of play spaces, objects and actions associated with the process of their dramatic play, this is of important consideration. It would be useful to undertake research with educators using the typology of play styles presented in this paper so as to examine its use in assisting educators' pedagogical decision

making associated with children's learning and development in dramatic play.

The findings of the current study were limited to children within four Australian preschool classrooms. Therefore, the findings may not be representative of children's play behaviour within the wider context of Australian preschool classrooms. Nonetheless, the findings have provided a unique perspective of children's dramatic play in the Australian early childhood educational context. Despite the national curriculum (EYLF) in Australia emphasis on the learning dispositions of creativity, imagination and persistence, the constructs of selected children's dramatic play behaviour in the present study were low. It is proposed that current methods of assessing children's dramatic play may be limiting one's understanding of the importance of the activity for the child. It is recommended that further research can be conducted to investigate the empirical connections between educators' pedagogical positioning, and children's dramatic play behaviour.

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