

Article

Pretend Play: Children in Control of a Shifting Narrative

Lisa Kervin and Jessica Mantei *

Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Wollongong,
Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

* Correspondence: jessicam@uow.edu.au

Abstract: Imaginative play is an important part of childhood that provides insight not only into a child's ability to use language, but ultimately into their understandings of the world more broadly. Through play, children control the story as they shape an emerging narrative through words, gestures, movement, and use of play spaces. In this paper we deconstruct a single instance of imaginative play captured in the home corner of a preschool classroom. The unscripted play dialogue creates a shared and compelling narrative evident in the texts the children created and their ongoing and complex interactions. Microanalysis of this narrative provides a novel insight into the play scenarios children create, the resources they select for developing the play, and the ways they communicate. We focus on discourse, subjectivity, and power to analyse the scenario. The cultural and linguistic resources demonstrated by this group of four-year-old children through their play provides insight not only into their understanding and interpretation of activities conducive to the home corner but also into their emerging social identities.

Keywords: play; early childhood; imaginative play; language and literacy



Citation: Kervin, L.; Mantei, J.

Pretend Play: Children in Control of a Shifting Narrative. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 925. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120925>

Academic Editors: Kathleen Rushton and Robyn Ewing

Received: 31 October 2022

Accepted: 14 December 2022

Published: 15 December 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The importance of play is well understood. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [1] asserts that children have a right to engage and participate freely in play. Play, however, is complex. And there is no universal definition. In 1966, Vygotsky [2] identified play as a 'leading activity', that is, the predominant activity of a young child. Furthermore, Elkonin [3] observed that children in the preschool years not only *want* to play, but that play is also critical for development. There are many types of play, all of which offer opportunities for learning and growth as moments of serious intent, of playfulness, and of emerging literacy knowledge come together [4,5]. This paper adopts a post structuralist frame to examine the nature of imaginative play through Brooker and Ha's [6] lens of discourse, subjectivity, and power. Examined in this paper is a play scenario involving four children aged four years in a prior-to-school setting. We focus on the ways play afforded the development of a narrative that shifted in response to the actions and reactions of the children involved. The paper concludes with an invitation for educators to reflect on the design, facilitation, and time afforded for imaginative play in their own settings.

2. Review of Literature

While all types of play are understood to be powerful for children's learning and development, imaginative play is particularly acknowledged theoretically as a major influence for students' cognitive growth [4]. Indeed, Piaget [7] described imaginative play as one of the purest forms of symbolic thought for a child, and Vygotsky [8] argued that not only does children's imaginative play afford the inclusion of real-life experiences in that play, but that it is this movement between reality and imagination that sees them working at their highest cognitive capacity. Imaginative play frees children from the constraints

of reality, it gives them time to experiment and explore new possibilities, and it affords creative reconstructions of their lived experiences [8].

Children need time to play. Canning [9] promotes extended time for play as an important opportunity for children to “... explore, try out new things, and voice their opinions... a vehicle for nurturing their interest and... a platform for exploring curiosity and creativity” (p. 556). Indeed, it is those ‘new things’ that develop children’s awareness about the lives and experiences of others, presenting new ways to understand one’s own life and experiences to date. Play is present in every civilisation. It is diverse in nature, intrinsically driven and inextricably connected to human experience [10]. With extended time in imaginative play, children’s existing understandings are positioned alongside their peers’, and so, through imaginative play, they can explore the nature of their own worlds and the alignments and misalignments that exist. It is here, in imaginative play, that children can come to new ways of understanding the world that extend into the lives and experiences of those beyond their immediate home and community contexts.

Critical to play are the environments children encounter. Rich learning environments offer opportunities for extended interactions with artefacts and people, as well as time to explore and demonstrate their understandings and interpretations of their worlds. Storli and Hansen Sandseter [11] found the nature of play environments to be critical because they provide children with meaningful contexts, diversity of choices, and opportunities to follow their interests. In a play environment, children’s own lived experiences meet with the experiences and artefacts on offer, which impacts their ability to participate in play [5]. Given that the actual features of the environment for play are important for participation and also linked with concepts of wellbeing and inclusion [12], issues of access and equity emerge when a learning environment does or does not resonate with the existing experiences, knowledge, and practices a child brings to the space.

Children bring to their play their knowledge and understanding of experiences from home, their family, and their community [13]. Imaginative or pretend play typically emerges from children’s life experiences, making it meaningful in that the emerging narratives connect with their own lives [14]. However, the development of narratives is significant not only within the immediate settings of the play. Suggate, Schaughency, McAnally and Reese [15] found that imaginative play narratives develop early language and literacy skills, including comprehension, vocabulary, and language structures, hence supporting successful literacy trajectories well into the first years of formal school. In this paper we look to play as the creation of an imaginary situation where children take real experiences and use them as a stimulus for playful narratives [16]. We examine children’s play within the context of their peers and within a planned environment, and we consider the ways a narrative shifts and is shaped by the people, artefacts, and environment within which it occurs.

3. Theoretical Frame

A play scenario is a socially complex communicative act as children experiment with objects, interactions with others, and the ways they use their voices and bodies [17]. Essential to the play scenario is the cultural context within which the play takes place [14]. Play is supported in an environment offering diversity of choices while also connecting to children’s interests [11]. Post-structuralist theorists identify three main concepts to explain children’s acquisition of beliefs and behaviours: discourse, subjectivity, and power [6]. The concepts of discourse, subjectivity, and power are examined within a play context in this paper in an effort to understand the ways children’s stories shape and are shaped by the stories of others, by the resources on offer, and through the interactions that occur during the play scenario.

Discourse becomes visible when ways of speaking, producing, and interacting are realised in texts [18]. We take the view that ‘discourse’ encapsulates verbal language and other symbolic forms, such as gestures, sounds and the use of space, and the inclusion of artefacts either existing or created by the participants for specific purposes related to an

interaction. As such, we consider playful interaction as a text. Examining the discourses used during play provides a way to understand how children use language to interact and in ways that are influenced by family and extended social communities. Through the actions of talking and acting, these words and behaviours can be interpreted within a context of meaning [19]. Imaginative or pretend play scenarios are powerful contexts for literacy learning [20]. Through play, children develop rich knowledge and understanding of the ways language is used for dialogue and to develop story plots and build characters within the narrative that continue to impact literacy development into formal school settings [15].

While engaging in play contexts, children can use imagery and communication seamlessly [14]. While the play may emerge from particularly personal and cultural contexts and knowledge, children move in and out of the play frame as they explore meanings and symbols and their understandings of associated behaviours. Vygotsky [8] identifies that there is a “pivot” that enables a shift both into and within a playframe. This pivot is a mediating or symbolic device that prompts the play, which is shaped not only by the child’s personal explorations of their concept of the world but also by their interactions with people, artefacts, and the environment within which the play occurs. Multiple pivots may occur within a play interaction as children negotiate their stories in response to the stories and interactions of the others in the play.

Play leads to meaning making. Through dynamic processes play can change and unfold differently in different settings and with different children. Children can “play alone, with others and with their imaginations” [14] (p. 10) as they engage with solitary and social play contexts, with and without artefacts, and with and without others. There can be insiders and outsiders to the play, which encapsulates the rules of the play while at the same time serving to control the play [21]. Through ‘special forms of communication’ during play [22] children can change their role, the meanings attached to artefacts, and the overall meanings and purpose of the play itself. Through play, children create and manipulate actions, discourse, and artefacts to represent their experience of the world as it stands in that moment and as it changes in response to that play.

Subjectivity relates to the ways individuals make meaning in social contexts. For children, this meaning is generated as they experiment with different language structures and ways of being. A lens of subjectivity, then, affords an examination of a child’s ability to participate in a context through their use of “words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes” [23] (p. 42). Singer and Singer [24] argue that internal imagery, made possible through imaginative play, opens children to experiences that foster curiosity as they explore alternative situations and ways of being for themselves. During pretend play, children use language, gestures, and movement within a space to draw others into the play, to organise and demonstrate the use of artefacts, and to solve problems as the scenario unfolds.

Play is embodied as children use their bodies, as they manipulate materials to express themselves, and as they develop and redevelop characters and stories verbally and non-verbally across the play. Children act in roles during imaginative play. Their choice of artefacts to support a playful interaction (e.g., dress up costume, accessories) and their choices about language and movement are an expression of their knowledge about society’s rules for that role (e.g., a mum, the teacher) that guides the way the play unfolds. Play is a unique form of activity where the sequence of actions emerge from “an imagined template cast over the everyday” [19] (p. 141).

These everyday contexts, or ‘figured worlds’, are the “processes or traditions . . . [that] give us form” [19] (p. 41). Figured worlds are social encounters bound by time and space and one’s standing within the situation. They are socially organised and represent the expression of an individual’s identity. An individual’s figured world becomes visible through the actions and artefacts they take up. As such, they challenge humans as producers but also as social products themselves. Along with this challenge are connections to the gendered subjectivities of commercial markets [25]. The act of expressing one’s everyday

context through play offers a form of knowledge that may or may not be taken up by others, and that may lead to the development of new understandings and new meanings.

Power comes from control over language and the conventions of literacy as well as an understanding of the social contexts within which we participate. For children, linguistic and social proficiency affords power to be “critical and creative, problem posers and problem solvers, social analysts and social agents” now and into their futures [18] (p. 23). In a play environment, linguistic and social power influences the process and content of the play, and, depending on the power balance, the ways others can participate.

A focus on power offers a useful lens for identifying and explicating the ways children generate play narratives and privilege certain literacy practices over others. Imaginative play that utilises toys, props, and other materials will stimulate talk, interactions, and the development of play narratives between and among children [26]. It is important, then, to note that the set-up of a play space and the resources made available will influence that play in particular ways, and therefore to acknowledge the motivation, experiences, beliefs, and intentions of those that create the spaces for children to play as powerful influencers on the play that can occur. For example, literacy materials may encourage children to read or produce texts, props may generate re-enactments of familiar stories or experiences, and the size of a space may invite certain movements or actions over others. A home corner may encourage particular kinds of play that replicates particular roles and activities present in some homes and communities. But perhaps not all. Gender construction is complex, and therefore play scenarios that adopt normative gendered positions warrant attention [25].

While planning for play and negotiating specific roles can support the development and nature of the play, this planning and negotiation is less important than the time when children are actually playing. Play is orchestrated and it develops as children make their play ‘rules’ explicit by giving directions (e.g., ‘you be the teacher’) or reframing to guide the story along a preferred track (e.g., No, you’re not the teacher, you’re the dad). Children respond to each other through the play with gestures, facial expressions, and the speed at which they act during the play [14]. The play progresses through the sharing of unwritten scripts, which are often developed together, reviewed, and modified as the play unfolds. The ever-changing activity of the play and the ways children interact within a space are more important than the play being marked by a beginning, middle, or end.

4. Methods

The paper draws on a data set collected within an Australian longitudinal multiple-method study of the literacy experiences of 150–200 students and their teachers and educators across educational settings [27]. The purpose of the broader study was to develop understandings about the ways educators and students experienced teaching and learning at particular points within and across school years. That is, the study was designed to generate findings about the nature of literacy learning across a single calendar year and across the years of school, and across educational settings (for example, transition from prior-to-school setting ‘preschool’, to the first year of formal schooling ‘Kindergarten’ [28,29]).

To address the complexity of the study, three geographical clusters representing social and cultural diversity within a single metropolitan area in NSW Australia were identified and labelled to reflect their locations: *Innecity Cluster*, *Beachside Cluster*, and *Portside Cluster*. Within each cluster, three educational settings were selected as research sites where it was known that learners tended to transition from one setting to the next across their schooling years. As such, each cluster comprised a prior-to-school setting, a primary/elementary school, and a secondary school. Following ethics approval (university and within pre/school systems), child, adolescent, and adult participants were recruited at each site, and members of the research team worked within and across the sites to develop important relationships that could lead to the gathering of rich data.

Data sources comprised documents related to policies and syllabus, observation of teaching and learning across the educational settings, semi structured interviews with teachers, educators, children and adolescents, and artefacts generated through the experi-

ences on offer. Consistency of data collection across clusters was ensured through initial analysis of documents key to the education field that afforded an understanding of the outcomes and content towards which teachers were mandated to work. In the case of this research, these documents comprised the Early Years Learning Framework [30], Australian Curriculum English F-10 [31], and the NSW Kindergarten to Year 10 English Syllabus [32]. From these understandings, common protocols for observations, gathering of artefacts, and semi structured interview questions were designed to guide data collection at each site.

While the broader project examined the nature of teaching and learning from early childhood to mid-adolescence and transition points within, this paper takes a close focus on a prior-to-school setting (referred to herein as ‘preschool’) within the *Innecity cluster*, the Central Business District of a regional city. Within this preschool site, the paper reports on an in depth analysis of a single play instance collected during free play.

The preschool was open from 7am to 6 pm and attended mainly by children whose parents lived in the suburbs but worked in the Central Business District, and so many children spent extended hours in the space. The preschool accepted children from 6 weeks to 5 years of age, with two rooms (the ‘baby room’ for those aged 6 weeks to 3 years and the ‘preschool room’ for those aged 4–5 years) and a shared outdoor space. Research was conducted in the ‘preschool room’ because these children were in transition into their first year of formal school, and hence fit with the focus of the broader study. Table 1 provides an overview of data collected in this setting.

Table 1. Data collected at the Innecity preschool setting.

Setting	Total Observations	Average Observations	Educator Interviews	Number and Age of Children	No. of Educators in the Room
Innecity cluster					
Innecity preschool	5 (artefacts were gathered here)	90 min	2	Up to 25 (3–5 years)	4–5

Specifically explored in this paper are the ways children in this setting were invited to play and the ways they creatively and imaginatively utilised the resources on offer to express their existing social identities as they developed new understandings about themselves and the world through their play. To do this, we draw upon a single instance of video-recorded play captured during the morning free play session. Free play is a carefully programmed period of 40 min where the children can move independently between inside and outside spaces and choose from a range of experiences (including on this day, sand play and bikes outside, the home corner, a drawing table, puzzles, block play, and cars with tracks inside). We draw from our video data to examine a single play scenario between four children in the home corner who have spontaneously gathered in the space. Focusing on a single instance in this way affords a micro level of analysis of the moment-to-moment interactions between and among the children, artefacts, and spaces within which they occurred [33,34]. Examined within the theoretical frame of discourse, subjectivity and power, microanalysis can offer opportunities to understand children’s actions and behaviours, and the ways, in this case, the preschool setting enables and/or constrains their emerging social identities.

For the purposes of this paper, an extended iterative microanalysis was used to understand this single instance of play. As a multimodal text, the play scenario was initially considered as a whole, that is, words and moving images combined as a single entity. Each mode was then separated for closer moment-by-moment [33] analysis so the linguistic interactions could be analysed in terms of the meanings made, and the moving images in terms of processes and interactions between and among the participants themselves and the physical resources in the space [33]. Analysis of the moving images also afforded a closer view of the gestural and spatial elements of the interactions as the clip was slowed down for closer viewing. The first iteration of analysis was inductive in an effort to ensure findings

were grounded in the data. Codes and categories identified through the inductive lens (e.g., asserting a place in the playspace, using resources to direct a preferred play scenario, and negotiating the lead) were then analysed deductively through the theoretical lens of the study. That is, the inductively emergent categories were considered in connection with the elements of *power*, *subjectivity*, and *discourse*.

5. Findings: An Illustrative Case

Context for the play: The Innercity preschool has a 'home corner'. Set up in the corner of the preschool room's inside space, it is defined on two sides by the internal walls of the building. A third 'wall' is created using a low shelving unit and bamboo screen, and the structure defining the fourth side is a taller shelving unit extending partway, leaving an opening for access to the home corner. The internal floor is covered by a mat. A dining setting comprising a round table and four chairs and large plastic cubby house are prominent in the space. Stored on the low shelves are disposable cups, plates, cutlery, bowls, and so on for use at a table, while the higher shelves offer props and resources for play, e.g., dolls and hats. Dress-up costumes displayed on a short hat stand at the opening to the space include make-believe costumes such as fairy dresses, tutus, and pirate gear, as well as fashion accessories such as handbags and sunglasses.

Preparing for a party: Lee (all names are pseudonyms) stands at the entrance of the home corner wearing a red and gold princess dress pulled over the top of her clothes. She is holding a folded piece of paper and scissors, adding another fold to the paper and carefully cutting it in half. Lee has made two important 'tickets' that will be required from those wanting to enter the space. Figure 1 depicts Lee standing alone at the entrance to the home corner in the process of making the tickets. The home corner is empty, and Lee prepares to take up her planned play scenario in the space.



Figure 1. Lee makes tickets for the party.

As the play progresses, a second child (Alex) moves alongside wearing adult sunglasses and a large handbag over her shoulder. Taking her ticket, she pauses at the entrance, raises her fist, and mimes a knocking movement on a pretend door, calling loudly, "Ding!"

Ding! Knock! Knock!” A third child (Taylor) quickly enters the space and declares she is “Not ready yet.” She adds fairy wings to her costume, crosses the space, and enters the cubby house. Responding to Alex’s second “Ding! Ding! Knock! Knock!” Lee crosses the space and opens the door. However, Alex declines Lee’s gesture. She points to a space closer to herself, stating, “This is the door”. Lee obliges and opens the correct door, Alex crosses the threshold into the space, and Lee closes the ‘door’ behind her.

Looking after babies: Taylor emerges from the house, spinning around in the long pink fairy dress with large wings, and invites Alex to “play mums”. Reaching up to take a doll from the shelf, Taylor declares, “This is my baby.” Alex watches on, and then replicates her action. Lee, choosing not to participate, moves away from this play interaction. Together, Alex and Taylor are observed in role play, exchanging information about their babies, cuddling, rocking, and even burping them as part of the play. Perhaps they are mums, dads, grandparents, or babysitters taking up this caring role.

An intruder to the play: Without knocking, a fourth child (Drew) enters the space carrying some dress up sunglasses. Walking behind the unfolding scene, Drew approaches the table, picking up a hat from a pirate costume. Lee quickly moves to challenge this intruder. While no dialogue is exchanged, extended eye contact and a brief tussle for the pirate hat ensues. Despite the absence of words, Drew’s resolve is clear in his actions. He holds both his ground and the hat, and Lee eventually retreats. Figure 2 captures two narratives. On the left is the play between Alex, Taylor and their babies at the entrance to the cubby house. Captured on the right is the power tussle between Lee and Drew as they negotiate their places in the space and perhaps their roles in the play scenario.



Figure 2. Lee, Drew, and the pirate hat.

A superhero moment: Meanwhile, Taylor has put the baby to sleep in the house. Lee approaches the girls, standing close and drawing them in through talk. Table 2 is an excerpt from an exchange between Lee and Taylor while Alex and Drew watch on. Evident in the exchange in Table 2 (see also Figure 3 for a visual depiction) is the use of declarative language that appears to stake a claim to superiority (i.e., the possession of magical powers). Amplifying these claims are exaggerated hand and arm gestures, serious faces, and a leaning in that closes the space between the two girls.

Table 2. Exchange between Lee and Taylor. * Uppercase indicates emphasis in the talk.

Child	Statement	Gesture and Use of Space
Lee:	I've got powers.	Hands on hips, looking at both girls.
Taylor:	(steps forward between Lee and Alex) I* have powers.	Right arm lifted and hand splayed out at "I".
Lee:	I've got LOTS of powers.	Hands on hips, moves head in large arc left to right and extending the word "lots".
Taylor:	ME TOO! (emphatic)	Chin juttet towards Lee, and two larger arm gestures, emphasising each word.
Lee:	I've got THOUSANDS of powers.	Hands remain on hips, a head nod amplifying each word, "thousands" and "powers".
Taylor:	ME TOO!	Stamps a foot for each word.
Lee:	YOU have tiny powers.	Swings arms back and then forward, holding close to Taylor's face a narrowed thumb and forefinger on each hand to indicate a small amount.
Taylor:	I have HEAPS and HEAPS of fairy dust and powers.	Right arm repeatedly waving to demonstrate the volume of fairy dust, face moved closer to Lee, eyes wide (See Figure 3).
Alex:	(intervening, steps up to Lee) Waa! Waa! [mimics a baby crying] My baby needs a cuddle.	Steps close to Lee, holds the doll facing outwards with arms stretched out and moves it close to Lee's body. Lee takes and cuddles the doll

**Figure 3.** Display of fairy dust powers (note Drew and Alex, the onlookers).

Return to looking after the babies: Alex's interjection between the escalating dialogue appears to offer a resolution to the tussle, and Lee responds by cuddling the baby. Taylor also responds by retrieving her baby, but Lee declines the offer of a cuddle with this doll and takes a step away from the interaction. Alex and Taylor engage through individual and cooperative play to explore, imitate, and pretend as they act out familiar caring roles. Taylor declares, "My baby's name is called Lexi!"; coincidentally, Alex declares that hers is too. The interaction comes to a close, however, when Alex has her baby reach over to "smack" Taylor's, who responds with baby crying noises and she retreats to the cubby house. All the while, Drew watches on.

Return to a party: The play continues as Lee leaves the baby play, once again returning to her original party narrative. She retrieves a pile of cups from the shelves and begins to arrange them around the edge of the table. She moves slightly away from the table and into the view of Alex and Taylor. She appears to be trying to attract their attention, looking towards them and using large sweeping arm movements to draw each cup from its stack and place it on the table. Alex and Taylor do not appear to notice, so she motions to Drew, asking if he would like one. Again without words, Drew nods, and while Lee continues with the cups, Drew joins the play by adding cutlery to the table.

A birthday party: Again, it is Alex who brings the narratives, and indeed these children, together. She initiates a new play scenario as seen in the exchange captured in Table 3 that combines the previously disparate narratives.

Table 3. A new play scenario.

Child	Language	Gestures and Use of Space
Alex:	(approaches Lee and Drew) It's my baby's birthday today! Are you celebrating my baby's birthday?	Holds the doll high and close for Lee to notice.
Lee:	(a pause, nods) Yes	Looks at Alex and the doll, briefly smiles and nods.
Alex:	Wow!! (turns to Taylor) It's my baby's birthday today.	Turns the doll back towards her face, smiling and jiggling it, and then turning it for Taylor to see.
Taylor:	Mine too! Mine too!	Taylor (with her baby retrieved from the house) replicates Alex's movement with her own and they move into the dining space ready for the party.

Drew and Lee continue to set the table. In this space, the children together now reenact events they may have experienced or heard about—getting dressed up to go out, caring for babies, organising gatherings, and sharing meals.

Unintended ending to the play: The play is drawn to a close with an invitation from an educator to the group of four to move outside to have morning tea. The play ends due to the available time, not due to the play narrative ending.

6. Discussion

Microanalysis of the illustrative example shared in this paper offers insights into the ways imaginative play offered these children opportunities to experiment with a familiar context, and at the same time explore complex concepts and relationships by drawing on their linguistic resources [15,23]. These children wanted to play [3] and they controlled the shifting narrative unmediated by any adult intervention. We return to the concepts of discourse, subjectivity, and power to explicate these children's actions and behaviours as an examination of the play scenario, and to identify new insights into the ways literacy shaped and was shaped by the play.

The children's independent and imaginative play in the home corner afforded opportunities for understanding social interactions and the development of important literacy skills through talk, gesture, movement, and use of the space [11]. To participate in the play context, these children activated the full extent of discourse including words, action, attitudes, gestures, glances, and body positions [5,23]. The play began as a seemingly straightforward verbal interaction [11] where Alex's announcement of her arrival at the home of a friend demonstrated her understanding of social boundaries. That is, she undertook the process of securing an invitation prior to entry and hence used the accepted etiquette of announcing herself before entering a space occupied by someone else. Lee's response also indicated her own understanding of these conventions as she welcomed Alex into the home corner. The children were in control of the imaginary situations and the language required in that situation, potentially informed by their own real life experiences [14,16].

However, the unscripted nature of the subsequent play, the volume of people in the space, their preferred narratives and ways of communicating, along with the diversity of resources on offer generated more complex and more demanding interactions. Making

meaning on the run, responding to and actively driving the subsequent discourse required considerably greater command of the language of negotiation and more sophisticated understanding about social interactions [11,17] as competing agendas emerged. These negotiations included listening to talk and inferring peers' meanings and intentions, reflecting on those inferences in connection with their own ways of talking and their preferred narratives for *this* time in *this* space. The shifts in play were quick and fluid—tickets and dressing up for an intended gathering was quickly altered to a scenario where babies needed care, and then the narrative shifted again when the table was set because the main players in the space pursued their own subjective views. These reframings in the play narrative were unscripted and developed as the play unfolded [14] due to the power shifting between and among different children. It was clear that different children used and developed [26] considerable linguistic resources to initiate changes at key points and to take the lead in the play. They were observed to deliberately and independently opt in and out as the play narrative changed. And further, they continued to promote their own subjectivities through redirections (sometimes verbal, but at other times gestural or through movement) designed to promote their preferred narratives.

Unmediated opportunities to learn about complex social and linguistic interactions [23] through play became evident as Taylor and Alex took up the dolls. Their talk and actions turned the narrative away from Lee and her preferred focus on tickets and parties, to parenting and care. This move disrupted Lee's control of the play and amplified Taylor and Alex's own connections and power [9]. However, Lee's efforts to challenge this new order by reentering the play prompted a new and more precarious interaction. Both dressed in fantasy costumes, Lee and Taylor's claims to the possession of increasingly strong and voluminous magical powers created something of a confrontation unseen in the previous narratives. Their unwritten script offers insights into their capacity to articulate and promote their view in different ways in a new kind of discourse [23] (see Table 2). For example, Lee's use of verbal intensifiers—'lots of' and 'thousands of' powers were countered by Taylor's grand and somewhat sharp gestures, verbal retorts, and prolonged stare, raising the stakes in this narrative. As the interaction escalated, Lee refocused her line of argument and instead of continuing to promote her own powers, diminished Taylor's as "tiny". Lee's switch in the nature of the discourse [23,26] was an apparent breach of the 'rules' of the interaction [14], and it appeared to provoke Alex into acting as a mediator to redirect the play. Her sophisticated move (pushing the doll into the space between Lee and Taylor, voicing her baby's distress through a crying sound, observing as the 'mother' that her baby needed Lee's attention) diverted Lee's attention from this competitive and increasingly adversarial interaction and invited her to return to the previous baby narrative. Her redirection brought the three girls together without anyone losing face, and it allowed the play to continue.

While these instances of talk give us insight into the play, so too do their movements and gestures, reminding us of the embodied nature of the experience. The children used their bodies and the resources available to develop characters and stories, and to direct the play. Lee's non verbal exchange with Drew offers an important example for thinking about gestural and spatial literacies as powerful ways to communicate and propel the agenda. Through their play, the children gave insights into their subjective knowledge, their understanding of the social context, and their linguistic capacities to respond to the situation [5,15] as they enacted creative responses, solved problems, and shifted the direction of the play [18] independently of any adult facilitation.

Play can provide a way for children to appropriate, objectify, communicate, and develop their understanding of cultural practices within a social setting. The ways each child moved and engaged within the space demonstrated something of their internal imagery [24] about the nature of their participation in the home corner narrative on this day. Dressed in their preferred costumes and with selected props (albeit from the resources made available by their educators [16,28]), the children were seen to develop parallel narratives connected to the home corner context and aligned with their own imaginations

and preferences for play topics—the possession of magic powers, caring for babies, planning for parties. Bringing the narratives together was complex and required considerable problem solving and careful use of language and other communicative skills for resolutions to be achieved. The children independently created their own imagined and quite complex scenarios within the home corner, an everyday space [19].

The observed play scene was an example of a ‘figured world’ [19]. As the first child in the space, Lee had set her own scene. In solitary play, she appeared confident and comfortable in her princess costume, spinning and prancing around, flattening the dress across her body, and paying close attention to the decorative details (lace, gold trim). The tickets she created aligned with her plan for a party, and the arrival of a friend presented the opportunity to enact the admission process. Lee drew upon the regularities she knew from everyday life and developed a sequence of known expectations (e.g., dress and tickets) as to how these may play out in her scenario [5,19]. However, the multiple episodes that unfolded throughout the play were not intended for everyone [18].

Taylor appeared similarly committed to her character. As a fairy and then as a parent, her interactions with the doll drew out her understandings about what it is to care for a baby as she took on the talk of a carer and the voice of her baby [15]. For Taylor’s story, the plastic cubby house represented an important prop. For example, she retreated to the house and reappeared with the intention of welcoming a new guest. In her caring role, she put the baby to bed in the house and retrieved it for specific purposes, such as giving cuddles and attending a party. The house appeared to offer new perspectives in play where absence is part of the narrative. Taylor usually controlled her presence in the space through verbal announcements of her intentions. Potentially, this voluntary removal of herself from the immediate context also provided space to reframe the play when she observed it taking a direction misaligned with her preferences, for example, leaving when Lee went to set the table. Evident in the play are examples of independent and intricate forms of verbal and non verbal communication [22] that enable children to explicate their role, empower artefacts, and then direct the play.

Alex and Drew appeared more fluid in their intentions. Rather than driving specific episodes and interactions, they were observed to respond to the unfolding episodes within the play narrative. However, the ways they each interacted in the space were quite different. Alex’s use of the doll provided her with access to the play and an opportunity to introduce her own interpretation of ‘home’ through words, actions, and movement in the space (for example, baby’s birthday, see Table 3). As Lee and Taylor’s exchange about power escalated, Alex spontaneously resolved the potential conflict by redirecting and inviting Lee into the baby narrative. Conversely, Drew, an observer to much of the play, appeared unable to access the narrative. He did not follow the unwritten (yet understood by the other three players) conventions for entering the space, e.g., miming knocking on the door or taking up the party of play narratives. Moreover, his choice of costume disrupted the narrative already underway when he entered the scene. Drew played a passive role throughout the changing narrative until Lee invited him to help set the table, a return to the party theme. Potentially, Lee’s invitation to Drew stemmed from the apparent lack of interest from Taylor and Alex, leaving her with few options. Either way, there are insiders and outsiders to the play [21]. The insiders, in this case, Lee, Alex, and Taylor, independently determine the rules and control the play [18], while those on the outside must seek an entry point or wait to be included. For those with limited or misaligned social, cultural, and linguistic resources, achieving inclusion can be precarious, as was observed in Drew’s choice of costume and subsequent behaviours.

The children had high levels of control over the nature of the play in the space, but little influence over its design as a ‘home corner’ [16]. The home corner—a ubiquitous feature of prior-to-school settings—was planned and established in this case by the educators. Traditionally, home corners are designed with the intent of replicating a familiar context within which children may engage in imaginative play. In the play scenario reported here, the children’s decisions about what to use, what to change, and what to create for their

play enabled the generation of their own meanings and interpretations of 'home' [16,21]. For example, Lee's creation of written tickets was an important design feature of the play. As artefacts, they presented particular possibilities for the play, but they were also demonstrations of her cultural understandings and literacy practices [18]. Associations such as the ones observed in this play scene and across different spaces and activities within their environment more broadly represent their unique social positions and dispositions [19], thereby offering opportunities for educators to frame spaces in ways that can respond to individual children's linguistic and social needs, interests, and strengths.

The very naming of a space the 'home corner' positions it and the artefacts within as a representation of life at home. But whose home? The space itself, and the artefacts or resources within, invite (and potentially exclude) specific kinds of narratives [21,26] and even people. Whether the space indeed reflected these children's home lives is, of course, unknown. Also unknown is any specific rationale informing the educators' development of the space and their intentions for its use [16]. Nonetheless, these children subjectively took up the available toys, props, and other artefacts. Individually and together, they negotiated the moment-to-moment [34] transactions between their own experiences and practices of home and the offerings within the space. Also informing these transactions could be observed representations of home, perhaps seen on television, in the media, or in stories shared, or configured constructions of gender [25]. Regardless of their origins, these negotiations stimulated talk and interaction between and among children, which, in the absence of adult intervention, led to powerful and complex episodes within the play narrative.

It cannot be assumed that the cultural makeup of a community will remain static over time, nor that the lives, language, and experiences of the children will be aligned with the lives, languages, and experiences of their educators [5,6]. It is important, therefore, that educators review what they know about the children attending their settings and reflect not only on their 'home corner' but on all experiences on offer. We encourage educators to examine their own beliefs about language and learning through play [5], the ways these beliefs are reflected in the experiences they design, and whether there is more to do in terms of meeting the needs of *these* children at *this* time. Questions to guide this review could include: What are the social and cultural backgrounds of the children in our setting? What have we observed about the ways our learners interact with their families and peers? How might the design of our spaces reflect what we have learned?

The instance of imaginative play shared here demonstrates children's capacities to access (or not) the opportunities on offer, and the ways those capacities led to being empowered (or not) in a space [9,18]. Having access to a space involves more than physical entry [18,19]. It is about understanding the particular subjectivities of the context and the ways of connecting through language, movement, and gesture. It is about having proficiency in the unique discourses for participation, and it is through this knowledge that opportunities are presented for play—for directing and participating, for setting and following 'rules', and for developing important knowledge about being part of society. Since all children have the right to participate in play [1], we encourage educators to invite children as co-designers of play spaces: What are the spaces children want as part of their experience? Where would they be located and how would they work? What resources and materials would they choose or reject? What can we learn from how they play in the space?

7. Conclusions

Play is the leading activity of the child [2], and opportunities for children to direct their own imaginative play narratives are vital in preschool settings and for supporting their development in the years subsequent. However, the environments within which children play are key for exploring the nature of their own worlds [13,14], for developing a sense of inclusion [12], and to make discoveries about the worlds of others [11]. New in this paper is the deconstruction and microanalysis of an imaginative play scenario according to concepts of discourse, subjectivity, and power to understand the nature of

the play itself. The discourse evident in this piece of data demonstrates a range of ways language (spoken, gestural, and spatial) [5] is used to achieve different and often complex purposes. Also evident are the different understandings and motivations of the children as stories unfolded within the space through the utilisation of props, gestures, vocabulary, and language structures (alongside complex relationships) to direct and engage in the play [14]. Furthermore, aspects of power and the shifting of power [18] emerged as the children negotiated a space, props, and each other to achieve their aims and shift the play in different ways. The children each used cultural and linguistic resources to demonstrate their emerging social identities.

Observations of play reported in the literature and shared in this paper reveal much about the subjective nature of play and issues of access and power evidenced through language [15,20] and other semiotic systems (movement, gestures, and so on). While it is clear that children continue to develop language and literacy proficiencies during independent imaginative play [8], the need is also clear for planned and intentional teaching through more structured play scenarios. Educators are uniquely positioned to support children to develop the meaning-making skills and strategies that increase a child's repertoires for accessing social settings in their immediate lives and into their futures [18,28]. This paper presents important considerations for educators as they examine and reflect upon their knowledge of play in connection with their understanding of the children they work with to design, facilitate, and provide time for imaginative play that generates rich interactions in their own settings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, L.K.; methodology, L.K. and J.M.; formal analysis, J.M. and L.K.; data curation, J.M. and L.K.; writing—original draft preparation, L.K. and J.M.; writing—review and editing, J.M. and L.K.; minor manuscript revisions, J.M.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: University of Wollongong and the Australian Government (formerly DEEWR) through the *Transforming Literacy Outcomes (TRANSLIT)* project. (\$400,000 2014–2017).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the NHMRC *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007; 2018) and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee) of the University of Wollongong (HE15/010 on 17/03/2015).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from the parents/carers of participants all involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: This work was supported by the University of Wollongong and the Australian Government (formerly DEEWR) through the *Transforming Literacy Outcomes (TRANSLIT)* project. (\$400,000 2014–2017). Investigators: Jones, P.T., Chen, H., Derewianka, B., Freebody, P., Kervin, L., McKenzie, B., Mantei, J., Matruglio, E., Mehorter, B., Rutherford Vale, E. & Turbill, J. Technical assistance provided by Josef English, Adele Beck, Helen Lewis, Trish Weekes, Lily Klasson, Lydia Zhang.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. United Nations Human Rights. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. 2020. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (accessed on 11 October 2022).
2. Vygotsky, L.S. Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child. *Vopr. Psikhologii* **1966**, *12*, 62–76. [CrossRef]
3. Elkonin, D.B. To the problem of periodization of mental development in childhood. *Vopr. Psikhologii* **1971**, *4*, 39–51.
4. Bruner, J.S. Nature and uses of immaturity. *Am. Psych.* **1972**, *27*, 687–708. [CrossRef]
5. Roskos, K.A.; Christie, J.F. *Play and Literacy in Early Childhood: Research from Multiple Perspectives*; Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers: New York, NY, USA, 2000.
6. Brooker, E.; Ha, S. The cooking teacher: Investigating gender stereotypes in a Korean kindergarten. *Early Years* **2005**, *25*, 17–30. [CrossRef]
7. Piaget, J. *Imitation Childhood*; Norton: New York, NY, USA, 1962.
8. Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1978.

9. Canning, N. Implementing an Empowerment Framework: The Significance for Children's Play Environments and Reflective Practice. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 556–573. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
10. Kourti, A.; Stavridou, A.; Panagouli, E.; Psaltopoulou, T.; Tsolia, M.; Sergeantanis, T.N.; Tsitsika, A. Play behaviours in Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A review of the literature. *Children* **2021**, *8*, 706–724. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
11. Storli, R.; Hansen Sandseter, E.B. Children's play, well-being and involvement: How children play indoors and outdoors in Norwegian early childhood education and care institutions. *Int. J. Play* **2019**, *8*, 65–78. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
12. Huntsman, L. *Determinants of Quality in Child Care: A Review of Research Evidence*; Centre for Parenting and Research, Department of Education: Ashfield, NSW, Australia, 2008.
13. Keung, C.; Cheung, A. Towards holistic supporting of play-based learning implementation in Kindergartens: A mixed method study. *Early Child. Educ. J.* **2019**, *47*, 627–640. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Fromberg, D.P. *Play and Meaning in Early Childhood Education*; Allyn and Bacon: Boston, MA, USA, 2002.
15. Suggate, S.; Schaughency, E.; McAnally, H.; Reese, E. From infancy to adolescence: The longitudinal links between vocabulary, early literacy skills, oral narrative, and reading comprehension. *Cog. Dev.* **2018**, *47*, 82–95. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
16. Devi, A.; Fleer, M.; Li, L. 'We set up a small world': Preschool teachers' involvement in children's imaginative play. *Int. J. Early Years Educ.* **2018**, *26*, 295–311. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
17. Corsaro, W.A. *We're Friends, Right?: Inside Kids' Culture*; Joseph Henry Press: Washington, DC, USA, 2003.
18. Janks, H. *Literacy and Power*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2010.
19. Holland, D.; Lachicotte, W.; Skinner, D.; Cain, C. *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1998.
20. Beecher, B.; Arthur, L. *Play and Literacy in Children's Worlds*; Primary English Teaching Association: Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2001.
21. Fleer, M. *Early Learning and Development: Cultural-Historical Concepts in Play*; Cambridge University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2010.
22. Kravtsov, G.G.; Kravtsova, E.E. Play in the L.S. Vygotsky's Nonclassical Psychology. *J. Russ. East Eur. Psych.* **2010**, *48*, 25–41. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
23. Gee, J. *Social Linguistics and Literacies*; Falmer Press: London, UK, 1990.
24. Singer, D.G.; Singer, J.L. *Imagination and Play in the Electronic Age*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2009.
25. Marsh, J.; Bishop, J.C. *Changing Play: Play, Media and Commercial Culture From the 1950s to The Present Day*; Open University Press: Berkshire, UK, 2013.
26. McDonagh, J.; McDonagh, S. Learning to talk, talking to learn. In *Desirable Literacies: Approaches to Language & Literacy in the Early Years*; Marsh, J., Hallet, E., Eds.; UKLA/SAGE: London, UK, 2008; pp. 1–17.
27. Jones, P.; Matruggio, E.; Edwards-Groves, C. (Eds.) *Transition and Continuity in School Literacy Development*; Bloomsbury Publishing: London, UK, 2022.
28. Kervin, L.; Mantei, J. Transition from preschool to school: Spaces, time, interactions, and resources. In *Transition and Continuity in School Literacy Development*; Jones, P., Matruggio, E., Edwards-Groves, C., Eds.; Bloomsbury Publishing: London, UK, 2022.
29. Mantei, J.; Kervin, L. Examining literacy demands for children during teacher-led episodes of reading aloud across the transition from Preschool to Kindergarten. *Aust. J. Lang. Lit.* **2018**, *41*, 82–93.
30. Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*; Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, ACT, Australia, 2008. Available online: <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/2632> (accessed on 15 August 2020).
31. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). *Foundation to Year 10 Curriculum*; Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, ACT, Australia, 2014. Available online: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/curriculum/f-10> (accessed on 10 March 2015).
32. NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). *English K-10 Syllabus and Support Materials*; NESA: Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2012. Available online: <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/k-10/learning-areas/english-year-10/english-k-10> (accessed on 10 March 2015).
33. Leander, K.M. 'This is our freedom bus going home right now': Producing and hybridizing space-time contexts in pedagogical discourse. *J. Lit. Res.* **2001**, *33*, 637–679. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
34. Lefstein, A. Changing classroom practice through the English National Literacy Strategy: A micro-interactional perspective. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* **2008**, *45*, 701–737. [\[CrossRef\]](#)