An analysis of preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play

by

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In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University

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Abstract

This study examined the complexity of preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play. Dramatic play is recognised as an important source of learning and development for preschool children, yet there have been increasing reports that the complexity of the activity is declining. In the current study, factors of the physical environment, interactional environment and curriculum of four preschool centres in Melbourne, Australia, were investigated to examine their influence upon children’s involvement in dramatic play.

To identify the influence that factors of the classroom have upon children’s involvement in dramatic play, a mixed methods study was employed. Quantitative data were collected in the form observational rating scales that examined children’s behaviour in the activity of dramatic play and environmental procedures, as they naturally occurred in the classroom.

The dramatic play behaviour of 101 children aged 4- to 6-years was examined using the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play (SSEDSP). The SSEDSP, evaluated and rated the complexity of six elements of dramatic play behaviour; Imitative Role Play, Make Believe with Objects, Make Believe with Actions and Situations, Persistence in Role Play, Interaction and Verbal Communication. Moreover, the levels of children’s involvement in dramatic play was evaluated using the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC). The classroom environment was evaluated using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale –Revised (ECERS-R). The ECERS-R rated 31 items in the quality areas of; Space and furnishings, Language and reasoning, Activities, Interaction and Program structure. The results found that the centre’s level of quality was associated with the level of children’s involvement in and complexity of dramatic play.

Qualitative data in the form of video observations and field notes were collected to provide a more detailed description of children’s dramatic play behaviours, and the processes and procedures occurring within the classroom environment. Semi-structured interviews and dialogic reflective video interviews were conducted with the eight participating early childhood educators with the purpose to examine their views and knowledge relating to the activity of dramatic play.
Key findings revealed that the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour was of a moderate to low level. Moreover, the levels of children’s involvement in the activity was moderate. At these levels, children’s dramatic play is not occurring at an optimal level to support deep-level learning. Several factors of the classroom environment were found to influence the complexity of children’s dramatic play. Specifically, the study found educators have a crucial role to support children in the activity dramatic play. The findings have implications for early childhood pedagogy, professional learning and pre-service training.
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<td>ANOVA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence Interval</td>
<td>CI</td>
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<td>Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
<td>DEECD</td>
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Chapter 1 : Introduction

In this chapter, the reasons for conducting the current study are outlined. The purpose and aims of the study are described. In addition, the rationale and significance of the study are discussed. Finally, an outline of the thesis and its chapters are presented.

1.1 Statement of purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play. The study aimed to identify the factors of the classroom environment that influenced the dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences of a sample of preschool children the state of Victoria, Australia. In Victoria, preschool children are aged 4- to 6-years. The factors of classroom environment under focus include physical, curriculum and interactional provisions. Each factor has been assessed according to the quality of their provisions to children within their preschool classroom environment and their contribution to children’s involvement in dramatic play.

Play is a predominant feature of children’s lives. Universally, children take part in forms of play that are based on the social understanding of what it means to play in that particular community (Goncu & Gaskins, 2011). This has resulted in play becoming a complicated phenomenon with multifaceted meanings. Play as a concept can include a diverse range of activities that include, but are not limited to, construction, rough and tumble, drawing, dancing, running, exploration of objects and role play (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Most broadly, play can be described as a joyful, engaging experience where children evoke pleasure through imagination and a free flow of activity to increase knowledge and understanding (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010).

The joy that children experience in play is associated with a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that occurs through the release of energy and excitement. In play, a state of flow occurs through an interaction between peers or objects that allow children to become lost in a make-believe world without care for what is happening around them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The child’s state of flow is related to their level
of involvement in the activity. Laevers (1994) asserts that with deep level involvement, children are absorbed in an activity for their own sake and exert their skills to the utmost. This means that whilst being a source of joy, involvement in play is also an indication that children are learning (Laevers, 2000).

The importance of play is emphasised in Australia and internationally as being a source of learning (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Fleer, 2010a; Ministry of Education, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2006). Play is recognised as providing a dynamic context for which children experience "seeing, perceiving, experiencing, distinguishing or understanding something in a new and qualitatively different way and by relating to the surrounding world in the light of this new experience" (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2007, p. 53). Accordingly, the activity of play is often a central component of early childhood curriculum due to its ability to enrich learning dispositions and sustain learning through an activity that is led by the child (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Moyles, 2010).

The existing discussions of the relationship between play and learning encompass many forms of play activity (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2007, p. 53). However, Vygotsky (1978; 1997a) provides a specific definition of the elements that form the activity of play. These elements includes the child:

a) Creating an imaginary situation;

b) Enacting a role other than themselves;

c) Following a set of rules determined by those specific roles;

d) Substituting the meaning of objects and actions; and

e) Knowing that the imaginary world is not real.

Vygotsky (1978) advocates that this form of activity is pure play. Accordingly, he did not perceive other forms of activity that are often referred to as play (i.e., physical activity, construction and exploration) to be play. Such activities were referred to as non-play activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Play that encompasses the aforementioned elements is often referred to as dramatic play by early childhood professionals and
researchers (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Consequently, the term *dramatic play* is used in the current study to describe an activity that encompasses the elements of play proposed by Vygotsky.

According to Vygotsky (2004), dramatic play involves the creative “ability to combine elements to produce a structure, to combine the old in new ways” (p. 12). Vygotsky suggests that in dramatic play children are not reproducing events that they have seen or heard; rather, they are making creative re-workings of what they know about the world and the meaning that it has for the child. To combine these elements of knowledge, the child uses imagination, which provides a rich context for children’s learning and development of higher-order thinking. Higher-order thinking refers to the cognitive processes used in problem solving, reflective thinking, self-regulation, attention and perspective taking (Karpov, 2014). To assert his ideas of play and learning Vygotsky states:

...play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginary sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real life plans and volitation motives – all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development (1978, p. 552).

Vygotsky’s notion of the important role dramatic play has in children’s learning and development is supported in ongoing research. For instance, studies show that the quality of children’s dramatic play is associated with their cognitive functioning (Fleer, 2014; Morrissey, 2014) and the acquisition of academic skills such as literacy and maths (Fleer, 2014; Nicolopoulou, 2007; Roskos & Christie, 2001). Moreover, involvement in dramatic play has been associated with increased competencies in social skills (Kim, 2005), self-regulation (Berk & Winsler, 1995), problem solving (Sarama & Clements, 2009) and language skills (McCune, 1995; Stagnitti, 2007). Such findings strengthen the argument that dramatic play is a significant source of learning. Tough (2009) argues that

... a child’s ability to play creatively with other children was in fact a better gauge of her future academic success than any other indicator, including her vocabulary, her counting skills or her knowledge of the alphabet (Tough, 2009, p. 31).

Karpov (2014) suggests that involvement in dramatic play contributes to the development of symbolic representation, which involves the use of an object, picture,
action or sign to suggest an idea or action (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In dramatic play, children use symbolic representation to change the meaning of objects and actions to become something else (i.e., a child might use a carrot as a toothbrush). Children with well-developed skills in symbolic representation are able to manipulate events and objects in the mind, which assists in the cognitive processes of problem solving, mathematics, and literacy.

McCune – Nicholich (1981) suggests that symbolic representation assists children in other elements of dramatic play behavior as they become well-versed in the ability to decentre themselves or objects from reality. Similarly, Howe, Abuhatoum, and Chang-Kredl (2014) assert that a child’s ability to substitute an object as something else provides the foundations for other elements of dramatic play to occur, such as the enactment of roles. Like object substitution, the enactment of a role is a crucial element of children’s dramatic play (Karpov, 2005). Role enactments are important because they enhance the complexity of the play episode through actions, emotion, and language. Further research supports the importance of role enactments by showing that children who are involved in complex role enactments that are sustained for several hours are more likely to explore more complicated themes, use complex language, employ higher levels of social competency, and apply greater cognitive skills (Howe et al., 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009).

Accordingly, the activity of role enactment has a critical influence on children’s development of cognitive and social skills (Fleer, 2014). For example, to enact the role of someone else, children must adhere to a negotiated set of behaviors, which entails suppressing one’s internal desires in order to act within a shared experience (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). These agreed-upon rules are influenced by the child’s knowledge of events and people within their community and influence the behaviors of children in dramatic play, including their physical actions, language, and the detail of events within a play episode.

Karpov (2005) argues that the adherence to rules guiding a child’s role enactment supports the development of self-regulation. Self-regulation is associated with the child’s ability to respond and follow instructions, sustain attention, consider different perspectives, and think reflectively, which are all key processes of higher-
order thinking (Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013). In addition, role enactments require children to be co-operative, responsive and empathetic to the ideas of others (Lillard, 2011). The aforementioned skills associated with the elements of dramatic play behaviour are critical not only for children’s academic learning in school, but also for their lifelong participation in society.

Dramatic play provides a rich context for children to experience ‘holistic’ learning and development. This is a term used to describe a learning approach that combines multiple curriculum areas so that learning is more meaningful to the child as they draw upon their “knowledge, skills, dispositions, feelings and general competencies” (Arthur et al., 2015, p. 215). Karpov (2005) agrees that dramatic play is a holistic source of learning, arguing that it is through this activity that children can develop cognitive, social, emotional and physical dispositions, skills, and competencies that have a significant influence on children’s current and later learning and development.

In appreciation of the importance that dramatic play can have upon children’s learning and development, the current study aimed to examine the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play. In conducting this study, key factors of the classroom environment have been explored to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors that contribute to children’s involvement in dramatic play.

1.2 Statement of problem

Although dramatic play facilitates many types of learning, Elkonin (2005) argues that the activity will only provide children with an enriching learning experience when they are involved in it at a complex level. According to Elkonin (2005), by the preschool age of 3- to 6-years, children should have reached a complex level of dramatic play wherein they:

a) Engage in symbolic representation and symbolic actions to substitute the meaning of objects (i.e., using a carrot to represent a toothbrush),
b) Utilise language in long dialogues to create a pretend scenario that is planned and sustained,
c) Construct an elaborate play episodes with interwoven themes that can easily incorporate new ideas, people or objects,
d) Undertake complex role enactments where the persona of their character’s physical (i.e., actions, tone of voice, posture) and emotional (i.e., feelings, desires, motives) attributes are assumed, and
e) Sustain the play for several hours or days.

Reports of children’s dramatic play behaviour highlight that many preschool children are not involved in complex levels of dramatic play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004). For instance, within a Northern European context, Smirnova (2013) studied the complexity of children’s self-regulatory behaviours within their dramatic play episodes. This included assessing the time spent in a role enactment, the type of actions employed, the use of objects within the role, and communication with peers. It was found that the children aged 3-to 6-years displayed limited involvement in role enactments, and that their actions within their dramatic play episodes were both repetitive and centred around realistic objects. Similarly, Lu Soo Ai (2007) investigated the complexity of 36 Singaporean preschool children’s dramatic play behaviour. It was found that children’s role enactments were almost non-existent and play episodes were sustained for only a few minutes.

Bodrova et al. (2013) assert that this reported behaviour of children in dramatic play is becoming more prevalent and is typically expected of a child aged 2- to 3-years, not that of a pre-schooler. They assert concern for children’s later development, specifically learning associated with academic skills. This is because the level of dramatic play behaviour being examined in the preschool year does not involve the complex characteristics that Elkonin proposed to promote higher-order thinking (Bodrova et al., 2013). Smirnova (2013) suggests that the declining level of preschoolers’ dramatic play behaviour may have implications on their self-organisation, abstract thinking, communication skills, motivation and internal locus of control (i.e., the belief that one has control of their life).

The role of dramatic play as a context for learning has been explored and supported both nationally within the Australian context and internationally by policy makers, academics and educators (DEEWR, 2009; Grieshaber, 2016; Moyles, 2010;
Wood, 2014). Such debate has led to the premise that dramatic play is central to the construct of early childhood curriculum.

The context that play provides for children’s learning and development is well-positioned within Australian regulation and policy. In the National Quality Standard (NQS), Australia’s benchmark for quality practice in Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] (ACECQA, 2012), play is crucial to the underpinnings of an educational program. The NQS affirms that educators should understand the value of play for children’s learning. As such, an educational program should make provisions for children to explore their identity, academic concepts, social abilities and the world around them through play (ACECQA, 2012).

In addition to the NQS, the curriculum and pedagogical practice used in Australian ECEC settings is guided by The Early Years Learning Framework [EYLF] (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF was introduced in 2009 and officially implemented in January 2012. It aimed to provide educators with a common discourse of terminology and repertoire of pedagogies so as to regulate and improve professionalism and practice within the field.

Play-based learning is central to the EYLF, being advocated to provide “a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 3). Play-based learning is defined by Ebbeck, Yim and Lee (2013, p. 185) as “young learners constructing knowledge as they explore, experiment, discover and solve problems in playful and unique ways.” The EYLF emphasises that play-based curriculum facilitates rich opportunities for children to understand and contribute to their world through active exploration and involvement with people and objects to discover, create, improvise and imagine (DEEWR, 2009). Specifically, play is advocated as a context for which children can:

- Develop a sense of identity,
- Create connections with their community,
- Feel a sense of wellbeing,
- Develop learning dispositions, and
- Communicate their ideas through representation and exploration.
In the aforementioned documents, play as a concept is broadly defined. This places educators in a position where they are required to create their own understandings and construct their individual pedagogies accordingly. In doing so, educators are provided with a greater sense of agency to build a pedagogy of practice based on their own epistemologies, experience and culture (Moyles, 2010). However, in reality, coming to a shared understanding of play within the early childhood context has often been problematic. Nationally and internationally, research has shown that a large proportion of educators have limited theoretical understandings of play and weak philosophies regarding play and learning (Dockett, 2011; Howard & McInnes, 2010; McInnes, Howard, Miles & Crowley, 2011). This runs the risk of the relationship between play and learning becoming assumed, rather than soundly understood.

Specifically, understandings of dramatic play are commonly romanticised as being an activity of freedom, self-expression and interpretation of experience for the child (Dockett, 2011; Lindqvist, 2010). This can lead to dramatic play being viewed by educators as a child-led and -initiated activity, where children are able to make sense of the world around them, practice social skills and follow a natural, progressive pattern of development (Dockett, 2011). For this reason, educators are often hesitant to become actively involved with children in the activity, in fear that they may stifle the child’s natural learning process (Kemple, 1996).

The hesitance of educators to become involved in dramatic play may be associated with an era of developmentally appropriate practice, wherein studies have suggested that educators’ involvement in children’s classroom activities was associated with poor learning processes. This included children’s social engagement (File, 1994; Harper & McCluskey, 2003; Kontos & Keyes, 1999; Wilcox-Herzog & Kontos, 1998) and lower levels of higher-order thinking (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003). Although these studies were referring to the involvement of educators in roles where they directed children’s learning through structured styles of activities, educators began to view their role as facilitators of the physical environment and mediators of social skills (Aedo et al., 2009; Fleer, Tonyan; Mantilla & Rivalland, 2009). This is visible in educators’ pedagogies in dramatic play, where studies frequently report that educators view their role as enriching the environment, maintaining safe
environments, settling social disputes and refraining from becoming too involved in play episodes (Dockett, 2011; Kemple, 1996; Michalopoulou, 2001).

However, researchers are now advocating that educator involvement in children’s play is necessary to promote essential learning concepts, dispositions and processes. Specifically, the longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in the United Kingdom found that contexts that promote the highest levels of children’s involvement in dramatic play are those wherein there is a balance between child- and adult-initiated and -led interactions (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). The importance of educators’ involvement in children’s play has been similarly reported in further studies that have assessed classroom quality and children’s learning outcomes (Mashburn et al., 2008; Schwienhart et al., 2005). Moreover, Laevers (2005) asserts that a balance between child- and adult-initiated and -led interactions can enrich opportunities for learning dispositions associated with dramatic play, including flexibility, creativity and openness.

Specifically, studies assert that educator involvement in dramatic play is necessary to enhance children’s sustainment of role enactments and symbolic representational skills, which are essential in the development of social skills, cognitive dispositions and pre-academic skills (Edwards, Cutter-MacKenzie & Hunt, 2010; Fleer, 2011a; Hakkarainen, Bredikyte, Jakkula & Munter, 2013).

Given the current climate that surrounds pedagogies of play, Dockett (2011) calls for a reconceptualisation of play pedagogies to acknowledge the relationships between dramatic play, teaching and learning. Dockett comments that “advocates of play need to construct comprehensive and sophisticated understandings grounded in research as well as practice that reflect the relevant social and cultural ambiguities” (Dockett, 2011, p. 102).

Although the positive benefits of dramatic play are recognised by Australian educators (Dockett, 2011), literature suggests that without a strong theoretical understanding of dramatic play as a pedagogical tool, educators may face a challenging situation in their implementation of play pedagogies (Moyles, 2010; Nolan & Kilderry, 2010). For instance, research has shown that when educators succumb to
pressures of academic preparation, children’s involvement in dramatic play becomes viewed as a joyful activity that provides rest from learning (Howard & McInnes, 2010; Wood, 2014). Consequently, involvement in dramatic play becomes devalued, rather than promoted as a source of learning, further contributing to lessened adult involvement in children’s dramatic play. In contrast, Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002) argues that when educators have a developed a strong theoretical understanding of dramatic play, they are more likely to recognise and respond to the rich holistic learning that children are experiencing in the activity.

1.3 Significance of the study

So far, it has been emphasised that dramatic play is a significant activity for preschool children’s learning and development. However, dramatic play behaviour must be of a complex level in order to provide an optimal learning experience. Although dramatic play is a valued learning activity within Australian ECEC regulation and policy, it is relatively unknown whether educators have formed strong understandings of the importance of the activity for learning and of their pedagogical role to guide children towards more complex involvement in the activity. Their current understandings relating to dramatic play may have implications upon the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play behaviour.

In the following section, four justifications for this study are outlined.

1. The current study provides a much needed insight into the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play behaviour within the Australia ECEC context, where recent policy and regulation influencing curriculum and pedagogy have been implemented. Fleer (2009) highlights that in Australia, the play-based curriculum and societal expectations of preschool, in most cases, lend to the construction of a curriculum that maximises children’s social involvement with one another and promotes learning processes through play. This follows a long-standing tradition of child-initiated practice, where play is valued as a focus for learning.

The ECEC context in Australia differs from numerous studies conducted in international contexts that have suggested that the complexity of children’s dramatic play is declining. In the context of these previous studies, societal
expectations of preschool lend to preparation for academic skills and development (for instance, Lu Soo Ai, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Wood, 2014). Accordingly, in these contexts, time and space for play is reduced in favour of structured styles of learning activity. Whilst these studies provide an important insight into the critical centrality of dramatic play, the current study is crucial as there may be pedagogical practices, beliefs and issues specific to the Australian context which may influence dramatic play behaviour.

Indeed, Fenech, Sweller and Harrison (2010) stress that research is needed within the Australian context to examine the processes and outcomes of classroom practice. They emphasise that the current reliance upon international research is problematic as there is a lack of individuality that may be present in the Australian context. Moreover, the specifications of factors leading to best practice are broad and overlook the processes that specifically contribute to children’s learning.

2. The current study examines factors of classroom quality and their capacity to influence children’s dramatic play behaviour. In the context of the preschool classroom, involvement in dramatic play provides a rich learning experience (Vygotksy, 1978). Fleer (2014) suggests that by examining children’s dramatic play, one can gain insight into children’s conceptual awareness of a topic, social competency, communication skills and cognitive ability. These are both processes and outcomes of children’s learning. For this reason, Smirnova (2013) argues that the complexity of children’s dramatic play is a reflection of the quality of classroom pedagogies.

The relationship between classroom quality and dramatic play is explored in the current study, whereby the classroom environment is examined to find out how factors of the physical environment (i.e., physical arrangement of the classroom; availability of props), interactional environment (i.e., interactions between adults and children, children and children, and adults and adults), and curriculum (i.e., approaches to teaching, structure of daily schedule), influence children’s dramatic play behaviour. The findings of the current study provide an alternative insight into the implications of classroom practice and processes upon children’s dramatic play.
by examining their influence upon crucial play processes, which include their involvement and the elements associated with dramatic play.

Although child-initiated learning has been a tradition within Australian early childhood practice, there is some indication that the quality of teaching and learning pedagogies are not supportive of children’s higher-order thinking skills and conceptual understanding (Cloney, Page, Tayler & Church, 2013; Dockett, 2011). Specifically, Cloney et al. (2013) highlight that educators working in 250 Australian early education and care settings are not engaging in intentional interactions with children or providing feedback that encourages continued involvement in learning activities.

Bodrova and Leong (2007) remind us that dramatic play is an activity of higher-order thinking. Development of higher-order thinking provides children with learning processes that are crucial for school-based learning. Furthermore, Fleer (2014) asserts that dramatic play thrives from children’s conceptual understanding, as well as cognitive and social dispositions. This raises the concern that, if the quality of teaching and learning pedagogies are in question, then children may not be provided with the tools they need to be involved in complex levels of dramatic play.

3. This study provides a significant contribution to the field of early childhood that is comprehensive and dynamic through a mixed-methods research design. Findings from this mixed-method inquiry will provide clarity to the study of dramatic play and classroom learning environments, whereby the use of single methodologies in previous studies have led to conflicting recommendations for educators’ practice (Mawson, 2010; Maxwell, Mitchell & Evans, 2008; McLoyd, 1983; Petrakos & Howes, 1996; Shim, Herwig & Shelley, 2001; Trawick-Smith, 1990).

One reason for the current status of dramatic play literature is that there is a dominance of experimental research designs. Often, these designs overlook the natural process of dramatic play (McLoyd, 1983; Petrakos & Howe, 1996; Trawick-Smith, 1990). For instance, it is common that children be provided with a range of props and are observed as to how they use these props in an imaginative
sequence. However, this method may neglect the child’s social situation and conceptual experience with these objects.

Alternatively, the research design can be qualitatively driven, leading to a sample size that is ungeneralisable to the broader population, and limited in the ability to examine the relationship between practice, process and outcome (Mawson, 2010; Maxwell et al., 2008, Shim et al., 2001).

Recently, a number of authors in dramatic play literature have acknowledged the issues of this research and its correspondence to practice (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). Accordingly, it has been recommended that further research be conducted to specifically identify what and how factors of the classroom environment influence children’s dramatic play behaviours (Dockett, 2011; Kemple, 1996; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011). In response to this research gap, the current study has employed a mixed-method research design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, to examine how factors of the preschool classroom environment influence the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play.

4. The context of the study is aligned with national and international agendas for early childhood education and care. Neuroscience research has provided evidence that the first five years of a child’s life is the most important time for brain growth (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The quality of support, responsiveness and stimulation in a child’s environment in their early years is shown to have significant influences upon their lifelong learning and development.

At a global level, The Organisation for Economic Co-operations and Development [OECD] (2012) reports that 80% of children between the ages of 3- to 6-years participated in a formal ECEC curriculum. The most recent statistics of preschool attendance in Australia report that 72% of children aged 4- to 5-years attend a formal preschool program (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), with participation expected to further increase (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009). However, participation in ECEC alone is not an adequate predictor to ensure that a child is achieving the desired outcomes. Research emphasises that raising the quality of ECEC curriculum is the most important of all opportunities to
deliver benefit to the child’s life outcomes (Cloney et al., 2013; Mashburn et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2010).

In response to this research, the Australian Government engaged the nation in a reform of ECEC to improve children’s access to high quality programs. An aspect of the reform was to improve the learning opportunities available to children through positive adult-child interactions, physical learning environments, and play-based learning.

The focus of the current study aligns with the core elements of the NQS and EYLF. Whereby, policy and practitioner resources advise that the level of a child’s involvement in classroom activities can act as an indicator of their learning (ACECQA, 2012; DEEWR, 2009). The theory of involvement developed by Laevers (1994) advocates that the level of children’s involvement is an indicator of classroom quality. When children are deeply involved it shows that the provisions and practices within the classroom meet the intellectual, emotional and physical needs of the children in that particular classroom. Moreover, high levels of involvement indicate that children are engaged in a process of learning (Laevers, 2000).

Learning dispositions such as creativity, persistence, imagination, social relations and problem solving are core outcomes of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Each of these dispositions are also crucial for children’s involvement in complex dramatic play (Fleer, 2014). As such, assessment of children’s dramatic play behaviour enables insight into some key outcomes of an educational program. Further information relating to the research methodology is detailed in Chapter 3.

1.4. Research questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are preschool children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences?
2. What are preschool children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?
3. In what way (if any) does the classroom-environment influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?
4. In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?

The four research questions work together to provide a comprehensive analysis of children’s dramatic play behaviours. Research question 1 aimed to examine the current constructs of children’s dramatic play behaviour. Meanwhile, research question 2 aimed to examine if, and how involved children are in dramatic play. These two questions are interlinked with the research purpose to examine the complexity of children’s dramatic play.

Research question 3 aimed to examine what influence the classroom environment has upon children’s involvement in dramatic play. The purpose of research question 4 was to explore the perceptions that educators held about dramatic play. Recently, there have been many researchers that have suggested that the field of dramatic play research lacks the insight of how educators influence children’s play (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2013; Smirnova, 2013). In the current study, educators’ understandings and views of dramatic play were examined to find out what influence they have upon their own behaviour in children’s dramatic play, and how these understandings and views contributed to it.

1.5 Definition of terms

In order to ensure clear understanding of the terminology and concepts that are employed in the current study, the following definitions were used as the key terms of the study:

**Classroom environment:** encompasses the physical provisions, curriculum structure and interactions that occur within the indoor and outdoor physical environment of the classroom.

**Curriculum:** Refers to all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development (DEEWR, 2009).

**Educator:** Refers to all persons with an early childhood qualification that provides care and education for children.
Dramatic play: Refers to an activity of simultaneous mental operations including:

1. Engagement in symbolic representation and symbolic actions to substitute the meaning of objects (i.e., using a carrot to represent a toothbrush);
2. The use of language in long dialogues to create a pretend scenario that is planned and sustained;
3. Construction of an elaborate play episodes with interwoven themes that can easily incorporate new ideas, people or objects;
4. Involvement in complex roles enactments where the persona of their character’s physical (i.e., actions, tone of voice, posture) and emotional (i.e., feelings, desires, motives) attributes are assumed; and
5. Sustainment of the play episode for several hours or days (Elkonin, 2005).

Involvement: Involvement is the transaction of interaction between the child and their context. Children’s involvement is motivated by their interest in a specific activity, causing them to become completely absorbed in the activity. The definition of involvement as proposed by Laevers (1994) will be employed for this study:

> a quality of human activity, characterised by concentration and persistence, a high level of motivation, intense perceptions and experiencing of meaning, a strong flow of energy, a high degree of satisfaction and based on the exploratory drive and basic development of schemes” (Laevers, 1994, p. 1).

In this definition, involvement is conceptualised according to nine behavioural indicators and signals:

1. Concentration
2. Energy
3. Complexity and creativity
4. Facial expression and posture
5. Persistence
6. Precision
7. Reaction time
8. Verbal utterances
9. Satisfaction
**Make-believe with objects:** Substitution of the meaning of an object or action for something else.

**Pedagogy:** Refers to a set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

**Play:** Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine. When children play with other children they create social groups, test out ideas, challenge each other’s thinking and build new understandings (DEEWR, 2009). The definition provided by Hughes (2010) will be employed for the current study to distinguish activities of play:

a) The activity is internally motivated,

b) The child has freely chosen to participate in the activity,

c) The activity is pleasurable for the child,

d) The activity is non-literal, and

e) The child is actively engaged.

Play encompasses a large number of activities. Dramatic play will be the activity of focus in the current study (see Dramatic play).

**Play episode:** The verbalisations and actions of dramatic play that contribute to the development of situations and events.

**Play preference:** A pattern of behaviour that sees the child orientate towards specific classroom play spaces, objects and play partners.

**Play space:** A physical area within the classroom that is established for specific play activities as defined by objects, materials and furniture.

**Play style:** A pattern of behaviour that children demonstrate in the elements of dramatic play. This includes how the child relates to others socially, their flexibility to substitute objects, enact roles and also how they position within the play episode (i.e., inside or outside the play).

**Preschool children:** Refers to children aged 4- to 6- years who are in the year before school.
Role enactment: Undertaking the persona of a person (or animal) other than themselves and enacting this through physical actions, affective behaviours and verbalisations.

1.6 Overview of the study

The thesis is organised into six chapters. In Chapter 1 an introduction to the study has been presented, together with the aim, purpose, rationale and significance for conducting the study. Furthermore, the research questions and definition of terms have been identified.

In Chapter 2 a review of the literature that informed the study is provided. The theoretical framework of the study is presented. This will be followed by an outline of the factors that influence the development of dramatic play. A discussion of the influencing factors of the classroom environment is presented and the gaps within this literature are highlighted.

Chapter 3 presents the theory of pragmatism as the theoretical framework that guided the development of the research design. The methodological instruments, procedures and processes are outlined in relation to mixed-methods research. Moreover, the procedures of ethics and sample selection are discussed. The participants of the study are introduced.

Chapter 4 details the findings of data collected. The overall quantitative and qualitative findings are presented together to illustrate a holistic approach to the research questions.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings according to the interpretation of the analysis.

Chapter 6 discusses the study’s limitations, its implications on preschool education and educator training, and recommendations for further research. The chapter ends with an overall conclusion of the study.
Chapter 2 : Review of Literature

In this chapter, the literature that surrounds the significance of dramatic play in children’s learning and development in the preschool year is examined. The chapter begins with an outline of the theoretical framework of the study. This is followed by an examination of the development of dramatic play, where the possible factors that influence children’s involvement in the activity are considered. The final section of the chapter reviews literature related to the influence that classroom environmental factors have upon children’s dramatic play.

2.1 Theories and conceptualisations of play

The significance of play in children’s early learning and development is well emphasised. For example, the United Nations (1989) lists involvement in play as being a right of every child. Furthermore, Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2010) acknowledge the importance of play for children’s construction of self-awareness, stating that “…through play children are constructing an identity… who they are, what they know, what their joys and fears are” (p. 6). Similarly, Jennings writes that “play is a developmental activity through which human beings explore and discover” (1995, p. 3).

These ongoing conceptualisations of play underpin the central position that the activity holds within the ECEC curriculum. Play is a complex concept that consists of multifaceted views and wide-ranging theories. This is made visible in the literature though the following four perspectives:

a) Play is natural,
b) Play is therapeutic,
c) Play is developmental, and
d) Play is pleasurable.

Play is natural: The complexity of play dates back to the classical 19th century evolutionary theories proposed by Spencer, Groos and Hall (Smith, 2010). These theorists conceptualised play as having a prominent, but instinctive role in behaviour and development. Spencer (as cited in Smith, 2010) wrote that play provided children with only a release of energy. While this behaviour was instinctive, he did not see play
as providing any benefit for children’s development, as the activity was seen as aimless. However, Groos (as cited in Cohen, 1993) held more positive views of play for children’s development. In his idea of pre-exercise theory, the process of the play was perceived to be more important than the product. He identified that dramatic play promoted children’s self-development and language. The benefits of play were further explored by Hall (as cited in Smith, 2010), who saw play as a recapitalisation of activities that were historically important for the survival of the human race. Hall’s theory conceptualised play as being instinctive and having a therapeutic role for children’s development.

Although diverse and now considered largely outdated, the classical theories of play provided the foundations for later psychoanalytical, developmental and cultural-historical theories of play developed in the 20th century. These latter theories focused deeper on the connection between play and child development. This led to explanations of play that could be tested and explored through research.

Play is therapeutic: According to psychoanalytical theorists Freud, Erikson and Peller, play holds an important place in relation to children’s emotional development. Play within this theoretical position is conceptualised as providing children with an avenue to fulfil wishes and master traumatic events (Smith, 2010). Erikson (1950) believed that dramatic play allowed children to reproduce past experiences and explore solutions in the future. Peller (1954) supported Erikson’s ideas, writing that “play is an attempt to compensate for anxieties and deficiencies to obtain pleasure at a minimum risk of danger and irreversible consequences” (p. 180).

The foundations of psychoanalytical theory are used by play therapists to assist children’s resolutions of problems and trauma (Russ, 2004). Moreover, this theoretical perspective informs many educators’ understanding of play as a tool for the development of children’s self-esteem, social processes and social behaviours (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). For example, Vu, Han and Buell (2015) interviewed 30 preschool educators in the United States to examine how they perceived play. The benefits of play for social learning were discussed by the participants more than any other area of learning and development.
Play is developmental: The next wave of prominent theories of play followed the views of cognitive theorist Piaget. In Piaget’s (1962) theory of cognitive development, stages of play were explicitly classified into three hierarchical categories according to age; practice play (birth to 24 months), symbolic play (24 months to 7 years), and games with rules (7 years onwards). Piaget believed that practice play enabled the child to manipulate objects through exploratory actions in order to gain control over the environment. With increased control of the environment, children begin involvement in symbolic behaviours where they use actions and objects to represent something else (similar to dramatic play as defined in Chapter 1). The final category, games with rules, appears later as the child enters school and begins to co-ordinate play with peers using rules to govern games.

Piaget (cited in Smith, 2010) theorised that knowledge is created through a process of assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, the child maps new information with an existing schema. If this information does not fit with an existing schema the child accommodates this information to change or form new schemas. In this process of accommodation, new skills and concepts are learned. Smith (2010) asserts that Piaget perceived dramatic play to be the act of assimilation over accommodation, describing the activity as being the child’s process of interpreting an already lived experience. In speaking of his own daughter, Piaget states:

...the child clearly does not play (dramatically) like this in order to learn to wash or sleep. All that he is trying to do is to use freely his individual powers to reproduce his own actions for the pleasure of seeing himself and showing them off to others, in a word to express himself to assimilate without being hampered by the need to accommodate at the same time (1962, p. 181).

Smilansky (1968) expanded on Piaget’s original stages of play development to include constructive play in between practice play and symbolic play. Smilansky regarded constructive play as a legitimate stage whereby children are introduced to the pleasure of using play props in a creative way. This additional stage is in contrast to Piaget, who believed constructive play to inhabit a position between playful behaviour (symbolic) and work (Smith, 2010). Thus, it did not have a definitive stage. Smilansky describes constructive play to be the progression from the sporadic handling of objects in functional play to the formation of using objects according to a plan and goal.
A further argument to Piaget’s theories relates to the emphasis that Smilansky placed upon dramatic play for children’s learning and development. Whilst Piaget acknowledged that a progression of complexity in skill exists in children’s dramatic play, he did not hold dramatic play as having as much importance for children’s development. He believed that it was an imitative process allowing children to distort reality to fit their ego-centric needs (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). To Piaget, the increase of role enactments in the third and fourth year indicated the decentering of the self from the ego. Once this occurs it allows the child to enter higher forms of cognitive activity through the next stage of play: games with rules (Nicolopoulou, 1993).

In contrast, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) believe that dramatic play is an activity where children elicit higher forms of thinking. They argue that in dramatic play children’s behaviour is guided by rules that are informed by the theme of the play episode (i.e., visiting the doctor) and influence the subsequent role enactments that accompany it (i.e., how to act as a doctor or patient). Smilansky and Shefatya write that this makes dramatic play a more complex activity than Piaget thought, as it requires the child to adapt their behaviour according to the rules of the play episode and also work in coordination with their peers.

In order for the activity to be adaptive over assimilative, the child’s dramatic play behaviour needs to be of a specific level of complexity in order to support the emergence of new learning and development (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). This includes the behaviours of:

- **Role enactments** containing multiple ideas and the imitation of voices, gestures and posture to demonstrate the affective and physical characteristics of the role
- **Object substitution** to reflect actions carried out in a role/roles
- **Play episodes** that consist of interrelated events and situations
- **Persistence** within a role or roles for at least 10-minutes
- **Cooperative interactions** with peers to plan and carry out a play episode through action and verbalisation.
• **Verbalisations** that substitute actions and describe situations to develop and carry out extensive play episodes.

There have been a number of criticisms made of the limitations of the sequential nature of developmental theories. For example, Smith (2010) asserts that the stages of play suggested by Smilansky and Piaget omit rough and tumble, as well as language games. Moreover, although Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) acknowledge that constructive activities continue into adulthood, their theory of play stages is often criticised as it infers that constructive play is an indicator of immature play for older children. This is despite constructive play often involving elements of dramatic play (Reunamo, Lee, Wu, Wang, Mau & Lin, 2013; Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983; Takhvar & Smith, 1990). Accordingly, in more recent research, constructive play and dramatic play are viewed to be activities that developmentally co-exist (Fahey, 2012; Reunamo et al., 2013).

*Play is pleasurable:* In recent definitions of play, behaviours are typically used to categorise play from non-play. For example, Hughes (2010a) identified five elements of play including:

- a) The activity is internally motivated by the child's enjoyment of the activity,
- b) The child has freely chosen to participate in the activity,
- c) The activity is pleasurable for the child,
- d) The activity is non-literal, and
- e) The child is actively engaged.

Similar criteria have been advocated by Burghardt (2011), who identifies play as:

- a) Not fully functional in the role for survival,
- b) Spontaneous, intrinsic and pleasurable,
- c) Exaggerated and structurally organised,
- d) Repetitive, and
- e) Occurring when children are of optimal health.

It is apparent that within the views of Hughes (2010) and Burghardt (2011), play is seen as both joyful and intrinsically motivated by the child. Accordingly, children are more likely to receive an element of personal satisfaction from the activity, as their involvement is self-chosen, rather than instructed (Fahey, 2012). Notably, the
aforementioned explanations of ‘pleasurable play’ are broad, in that they do not narrow the concept of play towards a specific activity. This reflects the idea that there is no one definition to conceptualise the activity of play as it is a socially constructed experience (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010). The idea that play is a child-initiated activity where exploration and discovery occurs is drawn upon to inform the basis of play-based learning.

2.2 Play within cultural-historical theory

For the purpose of this study, Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory of play provides the theoretical foundations of the research. Vygotsky believed that children learn and develop according to the historical discourses and processes that influence the functioning of people within that community (Goncu & Gaskins, 2011). Cultural-historical theory places importance on the social construction of knowledge. This suggests that children’s social interactions with others and their experiences within the environment in which they are situated are integral to how and what knowledge is formed.

Vygotsky placed importance on the development of higher mental functions. These are complex mental tools that include, but are not limited to, memory, attention, perception, sign operations and self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1999). Vygotsky (1981) asserts that the development of higher mental functions occurs as a process of internalisation into the conscious. In the process of internalisation, functions “…appear between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category” (cited in Wertsch & Sohmer, 1985). Vygotsky’s ideas relating to internalisation suggest that higher mental functions are first experienced between people in a shared experience (interpsychological) where they become subconsciously stored and practised. The child will then mediate these functions in a process of interpretation according to his or her personal experiences and knowledge (intrapsychological). As the higher mental functions are interpreted, they become internalised, which brings them to the conscious and enables human behaviours to be deliberate and mediated. Therefore, when children internalise higher mental functions they can become practised in their everyday world.
Vygotsky (1967) did not present a biological stage based course of children’s development, rather he theorised that children’s development is continuous and motivated by their social situation. Vygotsky asserts that preschool children are motivated to play by a need to alleviate tension and fulfil wishes to achieve mastery in their social context. According to Vygotsky, the alleviation of tension and fulfilment of wishes makes dramatic play an activity of immense satisfaction for the child where they “rely on their own tendencies and motives without the support of the external world” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 51). This suggests that dramatic play provides a unique context wherein children create a new reality to understand an event or social situation as well as to fulfil emotional and cognitive needs and desires.

Vygotsky’s views strengthen the argument that the activity of play is an important source for learning and development in the preschool year. In particular, the theory of play as outlined by Vygotsky informs the current study. Vygotsky’s specific views relating to dramatic play, as well as a number of other central tenets of play that are fundamental to understanding the activity as it is perceived by cultural historical theorists are discussed in the preceding sections. These include:

a) Dramatic play;
b) Cultural tools;
c) The zone of proximal development, and
d) Play as a leading activity.

### 2.2.1 Dramatic play

Vygotsky expressed concern in relation to the broad nature in which previous theories defined play. These encompassing old ideas of play, which included activities of exploration and experimentation, did not fit into Vygotsky’s view of play. According to Vygotsky, play has a very clear definition that discriminates between the activity and non-play behaviour. ‘Pure play’, as Vygotsky (1998b) conceptualised, involves the activity of creating an imaginary situation, changing the properties of an object to become something else and enacting the role of someone else (Vygotsky, 1998). From now on, the activity of play that encompasses the attributes proposed by Vygotsky will be referred to as dramatic play.
Vygotsky’s definition of play suggests that the presence of an imaginary situation provides the basic condition for involvement in dramatic play (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1987) posits that imagination is a complex form of higher mental function that unifies several functions in a unique relationship:

This kind of complex activity (play), one that exceeds the boundaries of the processes that we habitually call functions, can be called a psychological system. The essential characteristics of this system are the inter-functional connections and relationships that dominate it (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 348).

An imaginary situation is created within a space existing between imagination and reality (Fleer, 2014). The imaginary situation sits between imagination and reality because although the child separates action and meaning from reality, the imaginary behaviour in dramatic play is always reflexive (Vygotsky, 1978). This suggests that the child knows that the imaginary situation is not real. An example of visible reflexivity in children’s dramatic play is when children perform actions and verbalisations from inside the play through an enacted role. For example, the child in the role of a mother may change the tone of their voice and perform physical actions that they assimilate with being a mother. At the same time, the same child communicates from outside the play episode as themselves in the real world, to manage the said play episode as occurring in the imaginary world. For example, the child may change the tone of their voice back to their normal tone and say to their peer, “Let’s pretend that we are going to the shops and we need to drive there”. The communication from outside of the play episode has implications upon what unfolds inside the play episode.

Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) refer to the idea of being positioned inside and outside of the play as double subjectivity. In the process of double subjectivity, the child is behaving in accordance to the situations relating in the play episode, whilst at the same time also working and responding to situations occurring concurrently in the real world that they are situated in. For example, Harris (2000) writes that in dramatic play a chair can become a horse, but if the horse needs to be moved to another location, the child will pick the chair up to move it – an action that is not usually conducted with a horse, but with a chair.
Extending on Vygotsky’s theory around play, Elkonin (2005) proposes the attributes of dramatic play consist of behaviours that involve simultaneous mental operations that include:

1. The creation of an imaginary situation;
2. Engagement in symbolic representation to substitute the meaning of objects and actions (i.e., using a carrot to represent a toothbrush or holding child holding a hand next to their ear to imitate speaking into a phone);
3. Use of language in long dialogues to create a pretend scenario that is planned and sustained;
4. Construction of an elaborate play episodes with interwoven themes that can easily incorporate new ideas, people or objects;
5. Complex roles enactments where the persona of their character’s physical (i.e., actions, tone of voice, posture) and emotional (i.e., feelings, desires, motives) attributes are assumed, and
6. Persistence in play episodes over several hours or days.

Children’s dramatic play can differ in its level of complexity (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Elkonin (2005) argues that all of the aforementioned behaviours need to be present in order for the child to be involved in what he termed ‘mature play’. This is a complex level of dramatic play which is “not repetitive or unimaginative, rather it is complex and contributes to children’s learning and development” (Hujala, Helenius & Hyvonen, 2010, p. 93). Bodrova and Leong (2007) present two levels of dramatic play that include mature and immature. They and others argue that by preschool age (4- to 6-years), children’s play should involve all of the behaviours presented by Elkonin to reflect their diverse experiences in innovative scenarios (Elkonin, 2005; Gmitrova, 2013; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

In contrast, children with immature play skills are likely to use lower levels of mental operations, including:

1. Repetition of simple imaginary actions,
2. Restrictedness to the everyday purposes of realistic props,
3. Language limited to the labelling of actions of roles,
iv. Less engagement in discussions or planning and more engagement in solitary and parallel play,

v. Higher likeliness to argue over objects and roles, and

vi. Less sustainment of play episodes.

(Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 145)

Lindqvist (1995) contests Elkonin’s view of mature and immature play behaviours arguing that it implies that children need adult intervention to correct their ideas and play skills. Rather, Lindqvist advocates that the adult’s pedagogical approach with children in play should foster their creative potential through joint participation, where both child and adult are involved in creative dialogue and action together.

In the current study, the term dramatic play was specifically selected over similar terms such as symbolic, pretend and role-play due to its functional attributes to incorporate all of the aforementioned elements (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Ariel, 2002; Harley, 2010). For instance, pretend play can be perceived as “putting forward a false appearance with an intention to mislead and deceive” (Ariel, 2002, p. 10). Children in dramatic play do not intend to mislead or deceive anyone; rather, they are involved in the activity for intrinsic purposes and pleasure.

Lindqvist argued the term role play implies that children are involved in imitative behaviour, and is suggestive of an activity that consists of an unsophisticated reproduction of movements. Vygotsky emphasised that dramatic play is “not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired” (2004, p. 11). Whilst children are drawing upon their knowledge of adult roles and experiences, their creative reworking of this knowledge within an enacted situation allows them to make conscious meaning of their emotions, thoughts and desires in a novel way. According to Vygotsky, pure play sees children not needing to rely upon the physical form of objects around them to play; rather, their creative mind should afford them endless opportunities (Hakkarainen, 2006). Specifically, Vygotsky states: “thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 96).

Finally, Vygotsky (1978) likened the concept of symbolic to be associated with system signs, such as algebra. For this reason, Vygotsky emphasised that play is not
symbolism, but is a method of meaning. Drawing upon the example of a child using a stick as a horse, he states:

A symbol is a sign, but the stick is not the sign of a horse. Properties of things are retained but their meaning is inverted, i.e. the idea becomes the central point ... the meaning of the word, the meaning of the thing, dominates and determines behaviour (1967, p. 13).

Accordingly, in play, the word ‘stick’ becomes a property of the object and language becomes the tool that combines thought and action (Lindqvist, 1995). The use of object substitution in dramatic play; this is where objects are invented or the form and function of an object is changed, provides children with a powerful tool to foster self-regulation and cognitive flexibility within a play episode (Berk & Meyes, 2013). Research shows that self-regulation and cognitive flexibility are crucial to the development of a complex play episode, as children are more able to free themselves from the physical environment in which they are situated. With cognitive flexibility, children can enter an imaginative world, where they are required to overcome their impulses so as to abide by social conventions contingent to the roles being followed (Bodrova, et al., 2013; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Consequently, dramatic play episodes that contain frequent and complex object substitutions are found to contain more complex themes, role enactments and verbal communication overall (Howe et al., 2014; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009).

There is reason to suggest that the complexity of children’s dramatic play is decreasing due to a growing dependence upon realistic objects (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smirnova, 2013). These are props that are a lifelike replica of objects (for e.g., plastic food). This will be examined in the current study, so as to explore how factors in the classroom environment are supporting children to be involved in complex episodes of dramatic play, including the elements of object substitution, role enactments, scene development, persistence, verbal communication and collaboration with peers.

2.2.2. Cultural tools

Vygotsky employed the use of the term tool to refer to symbolic systems used to communicate, think and create. He states that tools are culturally situated as they
“are created by societies over the course of human history and change with the form of society and the level of its cultural development” (1978, p. 7). Mastery of these tools enables children to acquire knowledge and skills that are needed for their participation in the everyday life of their social context.

In dramatic play, cultural tools take on a representational form in the roles and rules that children enact in accordance to the theme of their play (Bredikyte, 2010). For example, the actions, dialogue and objects visible within a play episode of children playing mums and dads will be determined by the behaviours that are typically associated with these social roles within the community that the child is situated.

Play is often described by researchers as being a pleasurable activity where children experience joy (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010; Hughes, 2010a). As a pleasurable activity, dramatic play enables children to be involved in an imaginary situation where they carry out procedures that they cannot do in real life. For instance, Fleer (2014) suggests that dramatic play is often driven by the child’s emotional desire to be involved in activities that they, as children, would not yet have done (e.g., driving a car or flying into space).

Whilst it may be true that dramatic play releases feelings of pleasure, Vygotsky (1978) believed that this pleasure becomes a paradox that is met with constraint. Specifically, Vygotsky explains that in relieving their desire to act in accordance to the adult roles within their social context, children “subordinate themselves to rules... renunciation of spontaneous impulsive action constitute the path to maximum pleasure in play” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 16). By subordinating themselves to rules, children experience pleasure within play by “controlling one’s own behaviour by creating appropriate situations and connections” through close enactment of the rules and roles of the society that they are representing (1997b, p. 211). Similarly, Elkonin (2005) suggests that whilst involved in dramatic play, children move closer to reality, rather than depart from it.

The work of Vygotsky (1978) and Elkonin (2005) suggests that dramatic play is more than a simple imitation of the children’s experienced observations. Children are carrying out the play episode according to their own motives and desires. Accordingly, the child’s behaviours are constituted by an affective element that meets within their
cognitive milieu to carry out actions that are in accordance with their own capability. It is in this process that Vygotsky theorised that, in dramatic play, the child can transcend the unconscious to the conscious, leading the child to learn and develop new understandings (Fleer, 2014).

In gaining more understanding of the world through experienced events, the child is able to embed the concepts learned through socially meaningful situations in their play. It is in dramatic play that the child will begin creating complex play episodes that reflect what they know about an event or topic. As such, children take on roles that are contingent to that theme and are related to the culture and community where the child is situated (Fleer, 2014).

### 2.2.3 The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised that children’s development of higher mental functions occur within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD represents the zone in which a child is able to perform a task on their own, and those that they can perform with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other. The child’s ability to perform a task on their own represent their level of actual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Meanwhile, tasks that are performed with assistance represent their “actual developmental learning tomorrow – that is what a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87).

According to Vygotsky (1978) a child in dramatic play acts “above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 102). Vygotsky suggests that because children in dramatic play act above their actual level of development, the activity becomes a ZPD in two ways. First, in dramatic play children free themselves from their immediate restraints and enter an alternative reality where objects can be substituted for something else. Vygotsky argues that object substitution is a complex task, as children can typically only represent the concrete meaning of objects and actions. However, in dramatic play the substituted object becomes a pivot to separate meaning or concept from the object itself (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, the act of object substitution aids children’s
recognition of using symbols to represent objects, guiding children’s acquisition of language.

The second reason that dramatic play acts as a ZPD is that the rules that the children follow whilst enacting a role would not typically be followed outside play (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky argues that through role enactments children internalise these rules, so that they become conscious to the child in everyday life. Vygotsky (1978) illustrates this idea through an example of two sisters enacting a role play of sisters. Although they are sisters in everyday life, they may not yet understand the concept of a sibling relationship. Accordingly, in the play episode created by the sisters, they can intertwine their own concept of sisters with the one recognised in their community and through play form a new concept of this relationship.

2.2.4 Play as a leading activity

Vygotsky argues that dramatic play specifically holds a predominate role for children’s development in the preschool year:

Action in the imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real life plans and volitional motives- all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

Leontiev (1981), a colleague of Vygotsky, expanded on this idea and proposed dramatic play to be the leading activity for development in the preschool year. A leading activity specifies the type of experience that will produce the most important changes in children’s cognitive and social-developmental achievement at a specific period of their life (Leontiev, 1981). It is not the only activity one is involved in during this period; however, it is the one that provides the most optimal opportunity for development. According to Leontiev, the developmental changes afforded by the leading activity prepare the child to transition into a new and higher level of development.

At the preschool age of 4- to 6-years, children are beginning to internalise their knowledge and mental functions of experiences, whereby their thoughts and consciousness are able to operate according to their own objectives (Fleer 2011b). Internalisation of mental functions allows the child to act independently of the physical world, which includes the ability to visualise absent objects, rather than needing to
physically manipulate them (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In this process of internalisation, children’s symbolic representational thought becomes conceptualised abstraction wherein children use the imaginative world to generalise their experiences through thought and action. It is through the accomplishment of internalisation that children will gain the emotional, social and cognitive readiness to move into the next period of development and learning:

The route from play to internal process during the school years - internal speech, internalization, logical memory, abstract thinking (without things, but with concepts) - this is the main developmental route. Whoever understands this connection, understands the main thing in the progress from the preschool to the school years (Vygotsky, 2005, p. 95).

Leontiev (1981) describes dramatic play as unique, as it is the only activity in which the motive of action is categorised by process rather than outcome. Accordingly, dramatic play is internally motivated, and the child may not be acutely aware of what the motive of the activity is. Leontiev explains that from approximately 3-years of age, the child develops the need to resolve a tension that is caused by the inability to carry out adult roles. Accordingly, the child is able to construct an imaginary world based upon the world of an adult. Vygotsky asserts that this enables the “unrealised tendencies to become realised” (1978, p. 93).

In summary, Vygotsky’s cultural-historical stance on the activity of dramatic play provides a perspective that is unique from the psychological and evolutionary developmental positions taken by researchers and theorists previously outlined (see section 2.1). Rather than seeing children’s play as a product of individual behaviour, cultural-historical theory sees children’s dramatic play as a social construct that is influenced by their experiences with people and situations. The ECEC classroom is an important social context in a child’s life. Accordingly, the current study aims to examine how children’s dramatic play is influenced within this critical context.

2.3 Experiential learning

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides the second foundation for the theoretical framework of the current study. ELT emphasizes that knowledge is formed through the transaction that a person experiences between their learning style and the physical and social environment in which they are placed (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). In
this transaction, it is believed that the dynamic nature of the learner’s internal needs (learning preferences, desires and motivations) are met with the external demands of the environment, including the physical setting, time allocated to tasks, and expectations set by those within the environment (teachers, leaders, and the community) (Kolb & Kolb, 2012).

Laevers (2003) agrees, explaining that experiential learning is founded by the process of one’s experience within their learning context. The process of experience is argued by Laevers to include children’s feelings, perceptions, meaning and ideas. The child’s experiential learning process is influenced by one’s preference for activities that match their motivational structure; that is, their responsiveness to elements within their environment as influenced by recently acquired schemes and experienced events (Laevers, 2003). Laevers (2003, p. 171) argues that when educators are intentionally focussed on the process of children’s experience, rather than the outcome, they are able to “set free the energy in the learner and make wonderful processes of development happen” through deep level learning. This is because the child is operating within their Zone of Proximal Development, where their mental processes are controlled and the full potential of their capabilities are being engaged (Laevers, 2003).

Accordingly, theorists of ELT posit that the quality of children’s learning experiences relates to the responsiveness of the social and physical aspects of the classroom learning environment to the child’s needs (Andreson, Boud & Cohen, 1995). Specifically, they suggest children’s learning is supported by the following factors:

a) A rich environment which encourages freedom of exploration,
b) Intrinsic motivation,
c) Activities based upon children’s interests and strengths;
d) Facilitation of learning from adults or peers, and

Laevers (2005) agrees that the learning environment holds an important role in supporting quality learning experiences. He specifically states that “when implementing experiential education, one starts where one stands, with the room, the
children, the material, the books and the methods and all the limitations linked to the actual situation” (2005 p. 8). Laevers also argues that, in order to promote deep-level learning, educators should position their pedagogical approach towards developing and responding to children’s:

a) **Knowledge**: The capacity to understand reality so as to make sense of the world.

b) **Skills**: The ability to do something or to act upon things in a physical or mental sense.

c) **Dispositions**:
   i. Curiosity, for lifelong learning and evoking intense concentration and involvement;
   ii. Imagination, emphasised for the ability to look at things with flexibility from different angles; and
   iii. Self-organisation, vital for the metacognitive ability to reproduce scenarios, reflect and develop in action.

d) **Characteristics**: Expression of one’s needs, feelings and values.

e) **Emotional health**: Connection with oneself, the community and nature. This leads to belonging, resilience, self-efficacy and self-confidence.

In ELT, the stimuli for children’s learning are based upon their previous experiences within their social contexts. Such a link suggests that having experience with the *real thing* is important. Laevers (1998) asserts that through real life experiences we can create a suitable context in which knowledge is created, as

> We learn to recognise the sound and the taste of things, the way light affects colours, the feel of all kinds of fabric, the temperature and weight of things. But not only are the properties stored in our minds; also stored are the relations between objects, the way they affect each other, physical and chemical reactions (Laevers, 1998, p. 74)

Kolb et al. (2001) present an experiential learning cycle of four stages, which depicts the process in which knowledge is formed. Specifically, Figure 2.1 visualises the four stages of this cycle to include a) concrete knowledge; b) reflection; c) abstract conceptualisation; and d) active experimentation.
The experiential learning cycle supports Vygotsky’s (1981) idea that knowledge is formed first through experience in one’s social situation, whereby ideas are stored subconsciously. Then, with further exploration of and with that experience, the child brings that knowledge to their conscious, where it is internalised and used in their everyday experiences. Similarly, Elkonin (2005) further explains that only when a situation has been socially experienced will the child be able to reflect, conceptualise and experiment with their knowledge. Koroleva (cited in Elkonin, 2005) illustrates the process of the learning cycle in an excursion to the zoo and the internalisation of the concepts learned through dramatic play activity. On the first visit, children experienced the zoo on an objective level, where they viewed the animals with their educator. On arrival back to the preschool, their dramatic play did not reflect anything they had seen; it was as though they had not been to the zoo. However on their second visit they interacted with the workers at the zoo starting from the bus driver, to the cashier, to the zoo keepers, to the cleaners and more. Back at the preschool they began large complex play episodes that contained role enactments reflective of the people they had met and the roles they have at the zoo. As such, displaying a process of abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation.

Experiential learning theory will be further explored in the next section where deep-level learning is discussed in relation to the concept of involvement.
2.4 The concept of involvement

The concept of involvement is the third theory that informs the theoretical framework of this study. The definition of involvement employed in the current study is based on Laevers’ (1994) reference to a quality of human activity: the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Involvement is described as the process of losing one’s self in an activity where the person experiences such intense energy, concentration and satisfaction that they do not think about anything else (Laevers, 1994).

Involvement is the result of interactions between the child and their environmental context, making it a process of the child’s experiential process. Laevers (1994, p. 162) proposes that involvement is recognised as the narrowing of one’s attention to concentrate and persist in one activity. This concentration and persistence is driven by one’s internal motivation, without thought given to what they will get out of it. When completely focused, one’s actions are deliberate and precise, with their attention sustained on the activity. In addition, Laevers writes: “...one is fascinated and implicated. There is no distance between person and activity, no calculation of the possible benefits” (1994, p. 162). In comparison, a person with low involvement will put less care into their actions and their eyes will wander around the room (Vig, 2007).

When experiencing deep involvement, there is an openness and complex cognitive response to the available stimuli that allows for abstract thinking where “worlds and ideas are felt more strongly and deeply” (Laevers, 1994, p. 162). The energy that is released and felt through this state of flow induces a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction. Laevers (1994) specifically categorises involvement according to the following series of indicators:

1. Concentration (i.e., attention directed towards the activity)
2. Energy (i.e., child is stimulated, at times exuberated and movements are controlled)
3. Complexity and creativity (i.e., the child brings something personal to the activity making it novel, rather than routine)
4. Intense facial expression and posture directed to the activity
5. Persistence
6. Precision (i.e., children pay attention to the detail of their actions)
7. Reaction time (i.e., children respond to new and interesting stimuli that are relevant to their activity)
8. Verbal utterances (i.e., children express their discoveries enthusiastically)
9. Satisfaction evident by quality of the above indicators.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explains that being in a state of flow allows a person to enter a new reality where they are performing at a higher level. Accordingly, Laevers (1994) emphasises that the state of flow that is experienced in deep-level involvement is especially predominant in children’s dramatic play. However, in order to experience a state of flow, the child’s activity must be within their ZPD. It is not possible for children to experience the same level of involvement when the activity is outside their ZPD, as they will feel either boredom or anxiety if the process is too easy or too difficult, respectively (Laevers, 1994).

Like dramatic play, involvement is motivated by the exploratory drive’s need to gain knowledge of reality. In the need to connect with reality, children are implicated by their intrinsic motivation (Laevers, 1994). This means that children are participating in activities for their own self, out of their interest of the activity and the need to master reality (Carlton & Winsler, 1998; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Children in this state are known as mastery learners as they look for challenge, while displaying persistence and enjoyment in their intent to control the environment by achieving a self-determined goal (Walsh & Gardner, 2005).

Involvement was selected in the current study over the similarly used concept of engagement due to its encompassing cognitive qualities. Engagement is defined in literature as “the amount of time children spend with the environment in a developmental and contextual way” (McWilliam & Casey, 2008, p. 4). As such, many studies where the measurement of children’s engagement is the key focus often record the child’s attention towards an activity or object (Blasco, Bailey & Burchinal, 1993); their presence within a play space (Hanley, Tiger, Ingarvasson & Cammilieri, 2009); or the amount of engagement compared to non-engagement (Holmes & Romeo, 2013; McWilliam & Bailey, 1995).
Studies that have examined engagement have provided some useful insights into children’s behavioural patterns within the classroom environment. However, they provide a somewhat narrow view of the qualities associated with the child’s dramatic play activity. For example, McWillam and Casey (2008) measured the complexity of children’s engagement in classroom play activity, including dramatic play as well as other play types. Children’s engagement was considered to be sophisticated if there was evidence of an element of make-believe, such as role enactments. However, literature on dramatic play behaviour shows that engagement in activities of make-believe do not necessarily indicate that the child is involved in an activity of complex focussed attention (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Smirnova, 2013).

Research that is focussed on the time spent or the complexity of action within an activity (Blasco et al., 1993; Holmes & Romeo, 2013; McWillam & Casey, 2008) often undervalues the intricacies of children’s involvement in complex dramatic play behaviour. Although research has shown that dramatic play is a frequent activity of preschool children’s interest (Holmes & Romeo, 2013; Ulich & Mayr, 2002), less is known about the complexity of cognitive qualities being shown in the process of undertaking activity associated with dramatic play. The concept of involvement can provide a much more comprehensive framework that examines the flow of energy associated with the activity (Laevers, 1994). By examining children’s involvement in dramatic play, a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of children’s behaviours within the activity can be gained. For this reason, in the current study, involvement has been selected over engagement, with the aim to extend the literature by providing an insight into how children are experiencing dramatic play in Australian preschool classrooms environments.

Cultural-historical theory and Experiential learning theory inform the key theoretical basis of this study. Whilst it has been suggested in this review of literature that each theory has interconnecting ideas, there has been limited research conducted that integrates their ideas to examine children’s involvement in dramatic play. Dramatic play, as a leading activity of children’s learning and development in the preschool year, should be a focal aspect of the preschool classroom. The pedagogical practices and decisions of the educator in relation to the curriculum and the physical environment have been discussed as having crucial implications for children’s
involvement in dramatic play. High levels of involvement are an important indicator that children are experiencing deep level learning. However, there has been limited research that examines this experiential process in relation to dramatic play.

The idea that children's involvement in complex dramatic play is influenced by factors of the classroom environment informs the conceptual framework of the study. Figure 2.2, visualises the relationship between children’s involvement in dramatic play and the interconnected experiential factors of curriculum, the physical environment, and interactions within the preschool classroom. These factors are a key focus of the current study.

![Figure 2.2: Conceptual framework](image)

2.5 The influence of dramatic play upon learning and development

The relationship between dramatic play, learning and development is well acknowledged. Specific to the Australian context, the EYLF commends dramatic play as a platform for children to develop crucial learning dispositions to support their ongoing learning (DEEWR, 2009). Internationally, Copple and Bredekamp (2009, p. 15) assert that “high level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social and emotional benefits”. Furthermore, Singer and Singer suggest that “make-believe play has particular advantages for certain kinds of learning that would be useful for the child and then for the adult that is emerging from the child” (1990, p. 197).
Specifically, Bergen and Coscia (2001) suggest that the benefits of dramatic play rest with its contributions to brain function. They assert that whilst involved in dramatic play, the child is engaging many areas of the brain at once due to their involvement in emotions, cognition, language and social interaction. This makes dramatic play an optimal activity of young children’s involvement.

Similarly, Singer (2006) argues that “it is clear... that children’s play yields numerous learning opportunities, creates conditions conducive to reading and to acquisition of basic school skills, and suggests broader potentialities” (2006, p. 256). Ongoing research supports this notion, illustrating the connections between involvement in dramatic play and gains in cognitive abilities (Karpov, 2005), self-regulation (Elias & Berk, 2002), language (Holmes, Romeo, Ciraola & Grushko, 2015; Reunamo et al., 2014), and social skills (Reunamo et al., 2014). Whilst each of these developmental areas will be looked at individually below, it can be argued that involvement in dramatic play offers children a source of holistic learning.

During involvement in dramatic play children integrate cognitive functions to form a composition of auditory and visual imagery used to create an imaginary world, substitute objects, enact a role, and communicate collaboratively in abstract with peers (Karpov, 2005). Bodrova and Leong (2007) argue that this is a sophisticated metacognitive function that involves the mental representation of symbols and images. Metacognition is a form of higher order functioning wherein one has active control over the processes of their learning. These are related to children’s executive function (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Executive function relates to the ability to self-regulate, reason, plan and organise tasks, problem-solve, and filter distractions (Elias & Berk, 2002). Karpov (2014) posits that dramatic play provides an optimal opportunity to develop metacognitive skills as the process of adhering to a set of social rules within an assigned role requires planning, prediction, execution and modification of their symbolic representations in action to sustain a play episode.

Elias and Berk (2002) examined the relationship between the dramatic play of 51 children aged 3- to 4-years and their skills in the higher order function of self-regulation. The results indicate that play is positively associated with self-regulatory skills only if the child has developed the ability to understand and respond to the
perspective of others. Ivanova (2000) in a similar study of 80 children aged 3- to 7-years provide an example of a play episode where a boy is enacting the role of a watch guard. The 4-year old, who would normally be restless during a whole class story time, was able to stand to attention for 10-minutes. Within this imaginary realm of enacting the role of the watchman, the boy needed to follow the rules of his role. As such, he needed to self-regulate his typical active inclinations by engaging in a level of metacognitive skill where he was able to maintain intentions, recognise and resolve problems, and predict the consequences of his action. All of these behaviours are associated with the self-control that is needed to satisfy the rules of an enacted role (Trawick-Smith, 1998; Epstein, 2003). Ivanova found that as the children’s dramatic play became more complex, the meta-cognitive skills became increasingly a part of their everyday activity.

Without the ability to take on the perspective of the watch guard, the boy would find it difficult to follow such stringent self-regulation. The skill of perspective-taking is essential for children’s involvement in the dramatic play behaviour of role enactment, and is associated with theory of the mind. Theory of the mind involves the metacognitive skill to comprehend one’s own mental states as well as those of others, including perspectives, motives, desires and emotions (Bartsch & Estes, 1996). Theory of the mind involves a representation of a representation, whereby one carries the understanding that a belief or knowledge is a representation (Smith, 2010). Theory of the mind has typically been measured using false belief tests, which aim to examine one’s understanding that another person may hold false belief (Smith, 2010).

Typically, theory of the mind is illustrated to emerge between 3- and 4-years. This is also when dramatic play strengthens in complexity, due to further increases in cognitive and social abilities (Smith, 2010). Involvement in dramatic play provides a suitable context for theory of the mind to further develop due to its representative qualities. For instance, role enactment enables children to literally put themselves in another person’s shoes whilst they take on the persona of someone else. Moreover, when involved in collaborative interactions with their peers, children require the ability to understand, reflect and respond to another person’s ideas.
Research has consistently found that children who perform higher on theory of the mind tests similarly display more complex skills in dramatic play (Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Hughes & Dunn, 1998; Lillard, 1993; Newton & Jenvey, 2011). This idea is further highlighted in research conducted by Astington and Jenkins (1995) who assessed a group of 3- to 5-year-olds’ understanding of false belief. The child participants were observed in groups of three and four. Joint proposals that stipulated involvement in collaborative dramatic play behaviour, and interactions that assigned roles, were associated with increased performance on false belief tests. Similarly, Schwebel, Rosen and Singer (1999) found that children who played collaboratively in dramatic play performed higher on false belief and mental state tests.

Nicolopoulou, McDowell and Brockmeyer (2006) highlight that dramatic play contains an element of storytelling, as children must use language to conceptualise the progression of the play episode. Within complex dramatic play, Garvey and colleagues (1977; 1984; 1990) claim that children’s use of language is an essential feature of children’s dramatic play to ensure the progression of a play episode. Language has multiple functions including:

a) Words and actions used to enact a role;

b) Instructive messages to advance the play episodes whilst in the role. For example: “First we need to put the cake in the oven and then we can decorate it”;

c) Messages to prompt co-players. For example: “have you turned the oven on yet sister?”;

d) Signals to signify pretend behaviour such as smiling, giggling or a rise in voice pitch;

e) Messages to prepare the play. For example: “I’ll be the mum and you can be my baby”, and

f) Specific messages of object or role transformation. For example: “This is the dog’s bed”.

The literature highlights that children who are more frequently involved in complex dramatic play are also those who demonstrate high levels of language ability (Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Howe et al., 2014; Newton & Jenvey, 2010; Reunamo et al.,
Moreover, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) also argue that children’s language abilities, including the complexity of vocabulary and the frequency of verbalisations, increased when children’s dramatic play behaviour improved.

The cognitive function of symbolic mental representations that children use in object substitution is also associated with the skills of phonetical coding. Phonetical coding is a cognitive skill that involves discriminating and manipulating the structure of language as evident from its meaning, and is linked to the development of literacy concepts (Roskos & Christie, 2001; Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 2011). Furthermore, in dramatic play children are constantly involved in acts that constitute the formation of early-literacy development. For example, Hall (1991) reflects upon a situation where children in a shop scene wrote out shopping lists, while another child in the role of a dad read the newspaper to his children. Through these actions, children were learning skills useful for their semantic, syntactic and pragmatic development.

Fleer (2011b) conceptualises a similar scenario in reference to mathematics, arguing that the action of wiping a table lays the foundations for the conscious awareness of surface and boundary. Meanwhile, Ginsburg (2006) recounts the anecdote of three children playing school where they applied skills of relative distance using language to describe their closeness or distance from the educator. In addition, the children demonstrated skills of relative magnitudes when they discussed the meaning of a lot by using arm gestures and abstract representations of the idea; for example, when one of the children said “that is a lot of pumpkins” as he stretched his arms (Ginsburg, 2006, p. 146).

The literature provides evidence that a relationship exists between dramatic play, learning, and development in the preschool years. However, in order for dramatic play to provide a context for learning in the preschool year, the children’s behaviour in the activity must be of a complex level (see section 2.2.1) (Elkonin, 2005; Smirnova, 2013). Accordingly, the current study aimed to investigate children’s involvement in dramatic play within their classroom environment to further understand the factors behind it. In the following section the development of dramatic play will be discussed.
2.6 The development of dramatic play

An ongoing interest in the activity of dramatic play has led to a plethora of research that has sought to examine and theorise its development. In the mid-20th century, a number of research studies were conducted using experimental designs to examine the relationship between dramatic play and cognitive functions (Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968). The turn of the century brought with it a contemporary approach to research, which has sought to examine dramatic play within the child’s social situation (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008). Previously in this chapter (Section 2.2.1), dramatic play was described in relation to six key elements. These elements have overlapping functions in the context of dramatic play behaviour, which for the purpose of this section are discussed according to three main constructs. These include: a) Make-believe with objects, b) Role enactment within a play episode, and c) Social collaboration and verbalisations. A discussion of each construct are presented in the following sections. The influence of children’s social situation, preferences, and play styles on their involvement in dramatic play are also explored.

2.6.1 Make-believe with objects

Make-believe with objects involves the act of substituting the meaning of an object or action for something else. This means that children are no longer concerned with the visual properties of the objects, but rather the meaning associated with it (Fleer, 2014). When children choose an object to represent something else, that object becomes a pivot which enables them to act in a form of abstract thought where they are separating the object or word from its meaning. Subsequently, the act of object substitution provides the child with a pivot to move into the imaginary world. Therefore, object substitution accounts for a large and crucial component of children’s dramatic play behaviour.

The first instances of object substitution emerge in the second year, most typically between 12 and 15 months (Belsky & Most, 1981; Lowe, 1975). In these first instances of object substitution, research has documented children involved in make-believe acts using a realistic object in a conventional way (Smith, 2010). For instance, a child may imitate drinking from an empty cup (Cohen, 1993) or imitate the
behaviours of sleeping using a pillow (Piaget, 1962). The child finds these actions to be pleasurable and are imitative of scenes from their daily life (Cohen, 1993). However, there are many arguments that maintain that as this behaviour is mostly imitative, it lacks imaginary context (Karpov, 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Vygotsky, 1998b).

Lezine (1973) argues that true object substitution, where actions are precise, organised and conducted within an imaginary context does not appear until approximately 18 months. Lezine observed that children’s behaviours with objects preceding this age were sporadic. Specifically, Lezine noted that children younger than 18 months would often drink from a cup and then begin banging it or brushing it with the comb they used to imitate brushing their own hair.

The findings of later research are consistent with Lezine’s that most children will begin changing the form and function of an object between 18- to 24-months (Fenson, Kagan, Kearsley & Zelazo, 1976; McCune-Nicolich, 1981; Jackowitz & Watson, 1980). It is further argued by other researchers that this behaviour with objects indicates the true emergence of dramatic play (Elkonin, 2005; Fleer, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). The ability to change the form and function of an object marks the emergence of decontextualisation (Fenson et al., 1976). This is a cognitive act of symbolic representational thought and involves the child’s ability to separate the meaning from objects and transform the current context of reality to that of an imaginary situations or event. In this process the child has less reliance upon realistic objects, and increasingly uses unstructured objects (Doswell, Lewis, Sylva and Boucher, 1994; Stagnitti, 2009).

Research shows that at first, the frequency of these substitutions is quite low, which are likely to be sporadic single actions (Fein, 1975; Fenson et al., 1976). For example, Ungerer, Zelazo, Kearsley and O’Leary (1981) report that at 18-months, object substitution accounted for 6% of children’s object use. Moreover, Vygotsky (1998b) highlights that children will use objects in a way that is imitative of their real life function, rather than changing their form and function. This behaviour reflects children’s developing ability to separate sensory and motor functions:

...a two year old left to himself, we see that the child is constantly active, constantly bustling, but he is active exclusively in the concrete situation, that is, he does only what surrounding things nudge him to do (p.263).
However, the frequency and complexity of children’s object substitutions increase with age and experience. At 26-months, object substitution accounts for 25% of children’s use of objects in dramatic play, which increases to 44% at 34-months (Ungerer et al., 1981). As children become less reliant upon objects to drive their play, they begin to use gestures to imitate an absent object. This is the most advanced form of object substitution and indicates that the child’s play is internally driven by their desires rather than physical objects (McCune-Nicolich, 1981). Overton and Jackson (1973) identified two types of absent object gestures. These included: a) using body parts to form the object, for example cupping one’s hands to form a cup; and b) gesturing holding the object, for example holding an imaginary cup by the handle.

Boyatzis and Watson (1993) examined the gestures of 3- to 5-year-olds in dramatic play. It was found that overall gestures using body parts were most prevalent. However there was an increase in gestures of imaginary objects at 4-years, and again at 5-years. Nielsen and Dissanayake (2000) conclude that the ability to gesture imaginary objects indicates metacognitive competence. Furthermore, Boyatzis and Watson conclude that children who revert to using body part gestures are still dependent upon physical objects to guide their play.

Object substitution is an important aspect of dramatic play as it often provides the axis to connect the real and the imaginary world. Uren and Stagnitti (2009) show that children who display poor skills in object substitution are more likely to be disconnected from their peers in dramatic play, and show difficulty constructing a sequence of actions within an episode. The study of 41 Australian children aged 5- to 7-years old highlights that when children have difficulty manipulating the meaning of objects, their involvement in further aspects of dramatic play is compromised.

The reviewed studies show that the complexity of how children use objects in the context of dramatic play progresses with the development of cognitive functions. Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) articulate this development as moving from the “present to the represented, from concrete to the imagined, from the literal to the symbolic, from objectively defined to subjectively created and from privately used to socially shared” (pp. 54-55). Similarly, Harris (2000) suggests that involvement in complex dramatic play is much more than imitative actions with realistic objects, as
children are implementing actions to signify a real event. Rather, when children are transforming the meaning of objects, they are drawing on their knowledge of the conceptual world to create an imaginary situation where deeper stories are developed through more sophisticated ideas.

2.6.2 Role enactments within a play episode

Role enactment involves the act of undertaking the persona of a person (or animal) other than themselves and enacting this through physical actions, affective behaviours and verbalisations (Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990). Role enactment begins to emerge when children can decentre themselves from the situation. This involves the child being able to enact schemes that are representative of others, such as using a phone, reading the paper, and also involve others in the play (McCune-Nicolich, 1981). These enacted schemes form the situations and events of a play episode. Lowe (1975) highlights that decentration emerges at approximately 21-months, wherein the child is likely to be observed feeding dolls or combing their hair (Jackowitz & Watson, 1980; McCune-Nicolich, 1981).

McCune-Nicolich (1981) theorises that the development of a play episode first occurs with the performance of singular movements within a singular event; for example, sipping from an empty cup and then passing it around the table of dolls for each to drink. Gowen (1995) refers to this stage as sequence story and it is where children are likely to be seen placing a cup on a plate, stirring in the cup with a spoon and then presenting this to a doll, peer or parent to drink. As children become more advanced at decontextualizing action from meaning, they are able to exert more control over the doll. Here the child combines two single action schemes together such as feeding the doll, bathing the doll and putting it to bed (McCune-Nicolich, 1981).

Manipulating toys as active agents is reported to become prevalent at approximately the same time object substitution emerges (Lezine, 1973, Largo & Howard, 1979). In this form of dramatic play, a child might manipulate a doll to perform acts such as driving a car or eating. As children’s symbolic representational skills advance, narrative becomes more prevalent and children begin to give dolls
emotions and attitudes (Wolf, Rygh & Altshuler, 1984). Moreover, children begin enacting a role themselves.

Elkonin (2005) asserts that at 3-years, children’s role enactment is concerned with objects and the actions that accompany them. For example, a child playing a shopkeeper is likely to be focused on scanning objects and taking money. As such, children are developing their role enactments by exploring the actions that accompany the roles. The rules associated with the roles are inherent, but not articulated (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

When the child begins enacting the activities of others, it illustrates that their schemes are becoming generalised and that a relationship between the body as self and bodies of others are becoming established (McCune-Nicolich, 1981). Enacting the role of someone else requires the child to maintain an element of awareness of the non-literal existence and reality (Nielsen & Dissanayake, 2000). Accordingly, the child is developing their understanding of dramatic play as a symbolic mental representation, an element of metacognitive development.

Fleer (2014) asserts that the creation of an imaginary situation is developed according to the conceptual knowledge that the child has obtained about their world. At the emergence of dramatic play, children’s imitative actions typically revolve around daily events experienced by the child, such as sleeping or eating. As children begin to decentre themselves from being the agent, studies have shown that these immature actions develop into mother- and father-themed roles that revolve around housekeeping (Forys & McCune-Nicolich, 1984). In contrast, studies of preschool-aged children report diverse roles such as those in adventure (space travel, cowboys) or community-based roles (policeman, firefighters) (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Youngblade & Dunn, 1995). Elkonin (2005) comments that the wider roles prevalent in preschool-aged children reflect their growing experiences within the world around them.

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. For instance, children may arrive, undo their seatbelts, open the car door and walk into the supermarket. Alternatively, they may be involved in a car
accident on the way. This suggests that in order for the story of a play episode to progress, the child must conceptually understand what can happen when they are driving their car to the shops. Fleer (2011b) illustrates a further example where a pair of children enacting roles within the theme of sleepovers were unable to progress the story, as one child had not yet experienced a sleepover in real life. It is for this reason that advocates of dramatic play assert the strong importance of providing children with real-life experiences to enrich their knowledge of the objective and social world (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Elkonin, 2005; Gmitrova, 2013).

Similarly, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) suggest that preschool children often differ in their ability to perform role enactments. Although they will enact roles from within the same theme, differences appear in how they enact that role and the level of persistence. Children with complex dramatic play skills are likely to focus on how to be the person, including the affective attributes of emotion, desire and motive. In contrast, children with skills that are less complex are more likely to focus on the things that the person does physically, such as role playing a mother and imitating making a cup of tea. Smilansky and Shefatya suggest that the play episodes of children with complex skills are likely to explore a theme in greater detail, leading the episode to be extended over a longer period of time.

2.6.3 Social collaboration and verbalisations

Throughout the third and fourth year of life, the child’s cognitive and social skills grow in complexity with greater experience of social events and situations. These advancements in development lead to an increase in children’s participation in dramatic play with peers, rather than on their own (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) refer to dramatic play episodes performed by two or more children as socio-dramatic play. Howes (2011) argues that in socio-dramatic play it is essential that

...each child understands the other to be a social actor and that the social actions between partners can be coordinated and communicated... social play could occur only as the child increasingly understood the role of the other, incorporated symbolic play and communicated shared meaning (Howes, 2011, pp. 233 - 34).
At its most simple form, socio-dramatic play emerges as cooperative social pretend play (Howes, 2011). This is where play is decentralised and children can be seen assimilating single-action schemes in a familiar script, such as a tea party. Both children are aware that the play is non-literal, and interact through simple make-believe communications, such as offering their peer an empty cup. At a complex level of socio-dramatic play, children’s play episodes are led by complex verbalisations that include planning, negotiation and modification (Fleer, 2014). Involvement in these verbalisations make the rules associated with the children’s role enactments explicit, which allow the play episode to persist and develop with the incorporation of more sophisticated ideas and object substitutions (Harris, 2000; Howe et al., 2014).

Howe et al. (2014) explain that when children’s language is complex, social interactions and object substitutions involved in the play episode become enriched. Their study, which examined the collaborative interactions between 70 siblings aged between 5- and 9-years, found that play episodes contained more object substitutions and complex scenes when children were able to make references to internal states (i.e., emotions, goals and motives) and communicate using adverbs. Children not equipped with this level of vocabulary and metacognition showed greater focus on the set up and manipulation of objects, rather than on the creation of a dramatic play episode. The complexity of language and its role in socio-dramatic play is further supported by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990), who show that children who displayed lower levels of verbalisations in their play also displayed less elaborate role enactments, object substitutions and persistence in a play episode.

Howe et al.’s (2014) findings along with others indicate the important role that language has in a child’s involvement in complex dramatic play (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Newton & Jenvey, 2011; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). The importance of language reflects Vygotsky’s idea that the development of imagination is linked with the development of language and social interactions. He states:

Speech frees the child from the immediate impression of the object. It gives the child the power to represent and think about an object that he has not seen … This provides him with the power to move with extraordinary freedom in the sphere of impressions, designating them with words (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 346).
Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) argue that complex play is sustained through children’s positioning of being inside and outside of the play. This requires involvement in communicative dialogue to enact a role from inside the play, and also to direct the roles of others from outside the play. In order to achieve this dual positioning, children socially collaborate using advanced elements of language, namely metacommunication and metacognition (Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Whitebread & O’Sullivan, 2012). According to Whitebread and O’Sullivan (2012), metaplay behaviours are used within complex dramatic play to:

a) Initiate ideas, for example “Billy, pretend you are driving to the shops”; 
b) Respond to an initiation “No, I’m taking the bus to the shops”; 
c) Build upon the idea of a peer “Yeah, and then the bus crashed”, and 
d) Construct a play setting either verbally or non-verbally for the purpose of the play.

These behaviours are important to children’s social collaboration within the play episode as they enable children to stringently organise and plan their dramatic play according to the rules they are following (Fleer, 2014). When children engage in more frequent meta-play behaviours to introduce new ideas and extend on the ideas of others, the play episode becomes more complex and sustained over a longer period of time (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

The complexity of children’s social collaboration is also contingent upon the child’s development of theory of the mind (see Section 2.5 for further description). Children who are involved in complex dramatic play that include complex role enactments and social collaboration need to have a developed understanding of perspective-taking, which is associated with the knowledge of how others feel and think (Kavanaugh, 2011). Dunn and colleagues offer a source of evidence in a series of studies that examine the relationship between theory of the mind and involvement in role enactment (Dunn, 2000; Dunn & Cutting, 1999; Youngblade & Dunn, 1995) and collaborative interactions (Cutting & Dunn, 2006).

Cutting and Dunn (1999) conducted a series of theory of the mind tests with 128 children aged 4-years. They found a positive relationship between skills in theory of the mind, emotional understanding, and the child’s ability to engage in collaborative
interactions with their peers in the planning and negotiation of script. Similarly, in a longitudinal study of 50 children aged 4- to 5-years, Hughes and Dunn (1998) found that children who performed highest in theory of the mind and emotional understanding tasks were more frequently observed to be engaged in conversations with their peers about their own or others’ mental states.

There is a large body of research that suggests that children experience a series of social and cognitive gains leading up to the fourth year, including increases in language, social competencies, and the cognitive ability to separate meaning from reality (Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Fleer, 2014; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Research suggests that these social and cognitive skills combine within an integrative system to influence one another in the context of dramatic play. So far this has been largely examined from a developmental perspective, informed by psychological developmental theories. However, research shows that children’s dramatic play behaviours can widely differ in complexity and content (Howe et al., 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). This suggests that further factors may influence children’s dramatic play. The next section will examine the current state of dramatic play in the preschool year, and discuss several bodies of literature associated with factors that influence children’s dramatic play.

2.7 The state of dramatic play in the preschool year

The reviewed literature on the development of skills associated with the elements of dramatic play suggests that by the preschool age of 4- to 6-years, children should be involved in complex dramatic play episodes that involve the use of complicated object substitutions, intricate role enactments and collaborative interactions with peers. Despite research consistently showing a progression of dramatic play development, recent international literature proposes that the complexity of preschool dramatic play behaviour is changing. In this change, researchers are suggesting that the complexity of dramatic play is decreasing (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Karpov, 2005; Smirnova, 2013).

Smirnova and Gudareva’s (2004) study of children aged 3- to 5-years in Northern Europe suggests that children’s actions are dependent on the form and function of an object and are also of an imitative, repetitive nature. The study, which replicated a
1940s study by Manuilenko (cited in Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004), examined children’s self-regulatory behaviours in dramatic play and non-play scenarios. In the original study, children were found to demonstrate complex self-regulatory behaviours in dramatic play, driven by the complexity of their role enactments and play episodes. However, more recently, Smirnova and Gudareva show that children of the same age showed lower levels of self-regulation in dramatic play. This was depicted by children showing less involvement in the activity as well as poor play episodes, which were imitative, repetitive and driven by the physical form and function of objects.

The dramatic play behaviours that Smirnova and Gudareva (2004) describe have been similarly observed as common play occurrences in further studies conducted in children’s preschool classrooms (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Ivanova Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Moreover, 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.

Reasons for the recent findings of dramatic play behaviour have been considered (Bodrova & Leong, 2010). Whilst it can be inferred that children’s activities may be changing in a digital age, many researchers assert that it is the quality of dramatic play that is declining (Johnson, Christie & Wardle 2005; Karpov, 2005). Smirnova (2013) suggests that the declining behaviour of children in dramatic play indicates children’s cognitive difficulty in substituting objects at a level that allows them to enter the imaginary realm. This includes the skills of symbolic representational thought and the executive function to self-organise. Stagnitti and colleagues support these suggestions, and also add that children who have difficulty playing at a complex level are more likely to have poorer social and linguistic abilities (McAloney & Stagnitti, 2009; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009).

Harris (2000) proposes that the development of a play episode is dependent upon the flexibility of the child’s cognitive skills. The greater the cognitive flexibility a child has, the deeper the stories he or she will develop by incorporating more sophisticated ideas (Harris, 2000). Specifically, children who are less flexible in representational thought are more likely to be bound to the structure of the reality of
objects. Similarly, Uren and Stagnitti (2009) found that flexibility in symbolic representational thought has significant implications on the complexity of children’s overall play behaviour. The study conducted with 41 Australian children aged 5- to 7-years old showed that children who displayed poor skills in object substitution were more likely to be disconnected in dramatic play with peers, and showed difficulty constructing a sequence of actions within an episode.

Smirnova and Gudareva (2004) further suggest that it becomes more difficult for children to enact a role when they have limited ability to substitute the meaning of objects. Role play is a particularly crucial component of complex dramatic play. However, it is also a much more developmentally complex action. Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) explain that object substitution is entirely performed from the outside of the play. However, role enactment requires pure detachment from reality as the child uses interactive communication to reveal their role. This requires a dual positioning, i.e. being inside and outside the play, in order to manage the relationship between reality and imagination. The complexity of the cognitive skills required for children’s involvement in role enactment is visible as it is often one of the lowest scoring elements of children’s dramatic play (Lu Soo Ai, 2007; Berkley & Mahoney, 2010; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004).

Research suggests that a greater emphasis on educational output is a contributing factor towards the changing state of children’s dramatic play (Almon & Miller, 2009; Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek & Singer, 2006; Wood, 2014). In the United States, Almon and Miller (2009) assert that it is common for children to have 30-minutes or less of child-initiated play time a day. This is in contrast to the 2- to 3-hours a day that they spend taking or preparing for tests. Pressure to perform academically is similarly experienced by teachers and children in the United Kingdom (Wood, 2014). Wood (2014) suggests that teachers strive to embed time for play in their curriculum; however, this becomes directed by adults, so that they can objectively assess children’s learning in accordance to outcomes.

In Singapore, the early childhood curriculum is similarly adult-directed due to pressures to prepare children academically. Lu Soo Ai (2007) assessed the complexity of 34 Singaporean children’s dramatic play using the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation
of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play, finding that children’s role enactment, actions with objects, verbalisations, collaboration with peers and the development of scenes within a play episode were poor.

Although early childhood education in Australia is framed by play-based learning, Campbell (2015) highlights that Australian preschool educators are feeling pressured by families to adopt structured styles of teaching. Campbell’s study, which investigated 115 Australian educators views towards teaching phonics in preschool, found that educators are being requested to adopt didactic methods of teaching, including worksheets, rote learning and homework.

Bodrova and Leong (2015), among others, argue that one of the largest factors leading to a decline in children’s dramatic play is limited adult understanding of the dynamic influence that dramatic play has upon learning and development (Almon & Miller, 2009; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). The idea that educators are unaware of the importance of children’s dramatic play skills is visible in Fleer’s (2015) study, wherein nine Australian preschool educators’ involvement in children’s dramatic play was observed. Fleer asserts that it was uncommon for teachers to be a play partner, i.e. involved in children’s dramatic play with the purpose to guide play skills. Rather, teachers were more likely to engage with children about outcome-driven content, including academic concepts.

Smilansky (1968) has illustrated the important role that teacher involvement can have in the development of children’s dramatic play skills. Smilansky examined the dramatic play of children aged between 3- and 6-years, from both middle and lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were found to demonstrate poor skills in the activity; however, children’s dramatic play increased in complexity and frequency when educators: a) modelled crucial play skills such as object substitution, role enactment and the development of scenes within a play episode, b) facilitated an enriched environment, and c) provided experiential activities within the community.

Recent research that has adopted Smilansky’s Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play has demonstrated that adults’ participation in dramatic play is still a strong factor in the development of complex play skills. In
Singapore, Lu Soo Ai (2007) examined the effects of an enriched environment and educator intervention on children’s dramatic play. In a pre-test, children aged 4- to 5-years showed poor role enactment within unsophisticated and repetitive play episodes that lacked persistence. Children’s play behaviour increased when the teachers provided an enriched classroom environment and mediated dramatic play skills from inside children’s dramatic play. Berkley and Mahoney (2010) show similar results, suggesting that teacher training should advocate for the importance of adult mediation in children’s dramatic play.

The aforementioned studies show the importance of adult participation in children’s dramatic play (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010; Lu Soo Ai, 2007; Smilansky, 1968); however, the research design of each involved adults enacting a directive role in children’s dramatic play to target key skills. To date, there have been limited studies that have examined educators’ natural participation in children’s dramatic play and the influence of different educator roles. The current study aims to address this gap by examining the complexity of children’s dramatic play and the influence of several aspects of the classroom environment, including the physical environmental provisions, the curriculum, and interactions.

Further research suggests that it is children’s motives that influence their involvement in dramatic play. Hedegaard and Fleer (2013) explain the concept of motive as the relationship between the child and the activity that their attention is directed towards. Research shows that children are typically motivated towards something that they will gain internal satisfaction from. As such, their motives can derive from their interests, skills, abilities and experiences. Research shows that children’s motive orientation towards dramatic play can become an issue when their skills and abilities are limited in developmental capacity (Eckhoff, 2011; Reunamo et al., 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). When children do not have the desire to seek satisfaction out of dramatic play, their motive can become directed to other interests, which can limit their experience in the activity.

A review of the literature has identified four key factors that can influence children’s motives in dramatic play. The four factors listed below are discussed in the sections following:
a) Play styles and preferences,
b) The child’s social situation,
c) Gender influences, and
d) Peer group dynamics.

2.7.1 Play styles and preferences

In the current study, play styles relate to a pattern of behaviour that children demonstrate in the elements of dramatic play. This includes how the child relates to others socially, their flexibility to substitute objects and also how they position themselves within the play episode (i.e., inside or outside the play). Meanwhile, play preferences refer to the play spaces and objects that children are orientated towards. The child’s cognitive style is viewed as being associated with the child’s style of dramatic play and their play preference. Saracho (1999) argues that a cognitive style relates to how the child processes, acquires and arranges information about the environment (Saracho, 1999). The child’s style of structuring information contributes to the transformation of information and reaction to circumstances. This leads to children developing preferences, attitudes and the ability to retain information as reflected in their behaviours and dispositions (Saracho, 1999; Wolf & Grollman, 1982).

A child’s cognitive style is shown to influence the child’s dramatic play behaviour. Saracho (1999) categorises children’s cognitive styles as being field-independent and field-dependent. Children who are field-independent have high analytical skills, wherein they are found to be reliant upon their own values and view objects as separate from the field. Behaviourally, field-independent children are reported to be autonomous, responsible and more likely to play alone (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977; Saracho & Spodek, 1981). Wolf and Grollman (1982), among others, have depicted children who display field-independent characteristics as likely to show preference for the construction and manipulation of objects, rather than be involved in dramatic play (Park, 2005; Howe, Petrakos, Rinaldi & LeFebvre, 2005).

In comparison, children who are categorised as being field-dependent are found to be more sensitive to the feelings of others; they operate on a conceptual field, and display attributes of leadership with their peers (Gardner & Wolf, 1983; Saracho, 1999;
Saracho & Spodek, 1981). Accordingly, children who are field-dependent are found to
display a higher preference for enacting the roles of others, substituting the meaning
of objects and creating play episodes from past and imagined situations. This depicts
a preference to seek satisfaction out of involvement in dramatic play (Park, 2005;
Saracho, 1999; Wolf & Grollman, 1982).

Wolf and Grollman (1982) propose that a child’s cognitive style is constant. This
was illustrated in a longitudinal study of four children between the ages of 18-months
to 4.5-years. The findings showed that children maintained similar approaches,
structures and contents in their dramatic play behaviour during the 3-year period of
the study. These findings suggest that some children may be more predisposed than
others with an imaginative disposition.

Smirnova and Ryabkova (2010) similarly suggest that dispositions can equip
children with skills to enter dramatic play. Rather than arguing that some children are
more imaginative than others, they suggest that the skills and processes acquired by
the child through their experiences, influence their play style. Specifically, they identify
that children can occupy three different positions in a play episode, which affects how
they undertake role enactments. This includes whether they are likely to enact an
alternative identity (i.e., take on the role of someone else), represent themselves
within an imagined situation (i.e., the child plays dramatically, however they play
themselves), or delegate a role to a toy (i.e., manipulate a doll as an active agent).

Katz (1995) asserts that dispositions refer to the way one responds to situations.
Dispositions define how something is performed by the qualities that are used within
the skill. Dispositions define competencies, but are also linked to the motivational
structure of a person (Katz, 1995). Katz believes that children are born with the
disposition to be curious and creative, however these must be strengthened by their
experience within their environment in order for them to be used and applied.
Bertram and Pascal (2002) highlight that dispositions are environmentally sensitive,
which suggests that children’s experiences with adults and peers can assist to acquire,
support or weaken dispositions. The provision of open-ended environments and
sensitivity to children’s emotions are emphasised to support the acquirement of
dispositions (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). On the contrary, over-emphasis on educational achievement can undermine their development (Katz, 1995).

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) values the development of children’s learning dispositions, defining them as “enduring habits of mind and actions, and tendencies to respond in characteristic ways to situations” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 10). The EYLF advocates for the provocation of learning dispositions including creativity, persistence, improvisation, imagination and problem solving (DEEWR, 2009). Educators are encouraged by the EYLF to support the development of children’s dispositions by providing open-ended opportunities to learn and construct responsive relationships.

The term creativity is often used interchangeably with imagination in discourse relating to dramatic play (Reunamo et al., 2014; Russ, 2003; Vygotsky, 2004). Vygotsky (2004) describes creativity as the mental function to recover elements of a previous experience and transform them to develop new behaviours and schemes. According to Vygotsky, creativity is informed by imagination and has a crucial role in human development:

Imagination, as the basis of all creative activity...absolutely everything around us that was created by the hand of man, the entire world of human culture, as distinct from the world of nature, all this is the product of human imagination and of creation based on this imagination (2004, pp. 9-10).

In dramatic play, creativity is manifested in the child’s ability to create an imaginary world and re-work their previous experiences to inform a new reality that “conforms to his own needs and desires” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 11). However, children need to have acquired a creative disposition. Eckhoff (2011) emphasises that educators acknowledge some children are more creative than others. The 115 educators in Eckhoff’s study perceived creativity to be associated with intelligence. Moreover, creativity was believed to be influenced by the child’s personality, the provision of a flexible environment and open-ended activities.

Reunamo et al. (2014) similarly examined teachers’ perceptions of 380 children’s creativity in Finland. Children’s engagement was also examined to record their actions, objects of attention, nearest peer, educator involvement and child’s physical activity. Children who were perceived by teachers to demonstrate more
creativity in their dramatic play were most often observed to be involved in the activity. These children were also perceived by their educators to demonstrate higher social skills, language skills, cognitive abilities, confidence, independence, willpower and concentration. Overall, children who scored higher in creativity showed a play style where the constructs of dramatic play including role enactments and object substitution were considered to be complex.

Collectively, the literature reviewed provides an insightful view into the play styles and preferences that influence children’s dramatic play behaviour. However, the literature is largely limited by a methodology that adopts a time spent in or object of attention approach to play spaces and object preferences (Reunamo et al., 2014; Saracho, 1995; Ulich & Mayr, 2002). In reality, touching or orientating towards an object does not necessarily mean that the child is involved, nor does it show how the child is using this object. Accordingly, a superficial view of children’s dramatic play styles and preferences may be gained.

To move forward in the analysis of children’s dramatic play, the current study provides a deeper examination of children’s dramatic play by investigating the complexity of dramatic play behaviour, the level of involvement, and the characteristics that are driving their play activity. The current study aims to understand the experiential process and influences upon children’s dramatic play within the context of the preschool classroom environment.

2.7.2 The child’s social situation

So far the reviewed literature on dramatic play development has proposed that the activity of dramatic play follows a natural path of development. However, there are many arguments that raise issues with this particular paradigm. One major issue that is consistently raised is that the social and cultural contexts of children are ignored in traditional developmental studies (Fleer, 2014; Gaskins, Haight & Lancy, 2007; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). It is also suggested that traditional developmental studies provide a transparent perspective on the development of dramatic play that does not explain the mechanisms that lead from one change to another (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010).
The prevalent issues within the literature have resulted in less being known about the external influences upon children’s involvement in dramatic play. This includes how children learn to play, and what motivates them towards the activity. On the other hand, they have led to a romanticised perspective of dramatic play being a naturally developing activity and a world that belongs to the child. McInnes et al. (2011) suggest that a romanticised perspective towards dramatic play has become a problem in contemporary classrooms as educators are no longer understanding and valuing the value of dramatic play. In the current study, the views and behaviours of educators regarding dramatic play, and the findings will provide a valuable insight into the theoretical underpinnings connecting educators’ knowledge into practice.

Vygotsky (2004) states that the motivation to play “arises from the needs that were created before [the child] and rest on capacities that also exist outside of him” (2004, p. 30). There is growing evidence to support the argument of dramatic play developing within a social and cultural domain. Whilst it has been shown that children living in various cultural locations are involved in dramatic play, the complexity of dramatic play also varies (Goncu, Jain & Tuermer, 2007). Gaskins et al. (2007) among others indicate that the difference in the complexity of dramatic play behaviour is reflective of the differing beliefs across individual cultures and communities. This includes the value of dramatic play for learning, views of child development and the adult role (Gaskins et al., 2007; Goncu et al., 2007; Tudge, Brown & Frietas, 2011).

In westernised societies, dramatic play is largely valued as enjoyable and an aid for children’s development (Goncu et al., 2007). Accordingly, preschools have mostly been structured in a way that maximises children’s opportunities to play, including the allocation of time and space (Elkind, 2007; Fleer, 2011a; Goncu et al., 2007). In many contexts children are provided with small replica toys of real life objects used in adult life (Goncu et al., 2007). Moreover, adults are more likely to guide children’s involvement in dramatic behaviour (Elkind, 2007). In this notion, the activity of dramatic play of young children is supported by the physical and social conditions within which the child is situated.

In contrast, Gaskins et al. (2007) discuss how children living in Liberian and Yucatec Mayan villages are expected to take on child-minding of their younger sibling
from middle childhood. It is also common for adults to expect children to contribute to the work of the village. Whilst there is little to no adult participation in the children’s dramatic play, there are opportunities to play. Like children in western communities, the theme of dramatic play is formed around adult roles; however, it looks quite different, with the older sibling likely to direct the actions and speech of their younger charges. The children have a small number of objects that have been handmade and their actions with objects are much less complex than those of westernised children (Gaskins 2000).

Wide-ranging research has examined the association between children’s experiences within their social environment and their involvement in dramatic play (Bornstein, 2007; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013; Lillard, 2007; Morrissey, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Within a cultural historical framework, Hedegaard and Fleer (2013) show that children develop a motive to participate in dramatic play based on the amount of exposure they have in the activity. The case study of two Australian families show that children display greater involvement in dramatic play at home and at their early childhood centre when the family encouraged children’s joint involvement with adults in imaginary episodes, including object substitution and role enactments.

Children who did not experience joint involvement in dramatic play with adult family members recorded little to no involvement in dramatic play in the home and at their early childhood centre over a 12-month period. These findings suggest that the motive to play dramatically is socially constructed. These findings are supported by further literature (Aurelli & Colecchia, 1996; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, Baumwell & Damast, 1996).

A further body of research, which examines mother-child play episodes, consistently show that preschool children demonstrate more frequent and complex dramatic play when their mothers actively participate with them in dramatic play during infancy and toddlerhood. Morrissey (2014) documented examples of children using abstract objects within an imaginary context from as early as eight months. The study examined 21 mother-child dyads over three observational sessions between the child’s ages of 8- to 17-months. By the third session, the 17-month-old child’s dramatic play behaviour was at a level generally expected of a 2-year old. The findings show
that mothers’ interactions with children in dramatic play scaffold higher levels of cognitive function.

Bornstein (2007) suggests that when in collaboration with their mothers, children are playing for a longer period of time than they do on their own, which is conducive to more complex dramatic play. Mothers are also more likely to interact with their children at a capacity that is slightly higher than that of the child; a scaffolding practice consistently associated with increases in child skills (Morrissey, 2014).

Whilst these studies illustrate that the complexity of children’s dramatic play increases with exposure to social situations that enhance opportunities to play, these findings are not exhaustive. Many of these studies have focussed their attention on the time spent in dramatic play. There has also been much focus on the influence of the mothers’ interactions. These findings have made significant contributions to what we know about the relationship between early experience and the development of dramatic play. However, there is much less known about how the educator within the classroom environment influences children’s involvement in dramatic play. Clearly, further research is warranted in the preschool classroom environment, where children can mediate their understandings of situations experienced in the everyday world (Fleer, 2011b). Through greater understanding of how the educators facilitate children’s involvement in dramatic play, more can be known about why children’s dramatic play is reported to be declining and how to move forward in the reconceptualization of pedagogies to support involvement in the activity.

Eckhoff (2011) highlights that educators recognise that they have a role to support the development of children’s creativity through a pedagogy that enables flexibility, choice and a positive climate. Alongside this argument, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) believe that children require assistance from the environment around them to learn how to play. They suggest that children with poorer styles of dramatic play have the mental processes available; they just do not know how to apply this in dramatic play.

In Smilansky’s (1968) study, she describes the complexity of children’s dramatic play according to four levels; a) no dramatic play; b) dramatic play only; b) poor socio-
dramatic play and d) good socio-dramatic play. Overall, it was found that of the 140 children aged 3- to 6-years studied in the pre-test, 70% were involved in no dramatic play at all. However, children’s dramatic play behaviour and participation in dramatic play increased significantly when the educator:

a) Provided social experiences within the community,
b) Constructed a play space to mirror this experience, and
c) Co-participated with the children to model language, object substitutions, roles and themes.

Similar results have been found in more recent studies that follow teaching procedures alike to Smilanky’s intervention (Gmitrova, 2013; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Hujala et al., 2010; Lu Soo Ai, 2007).

In Australia, the classroom environment has a major role in the lives of the preschool children, with most spending at least 15-hours a week in an education and care setting. However, many studies examine the activity of the learner, without an analysis of the environment surrounding the activity (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). As such, the current study explores the possible factors of the classroom environment that contribute to the complexity of children’s dramatic play. This will provide a much-needed analysis of how the preschool classroom contributes and responds to the behaviours, preferences and play styles of children’s dramatic play.

2.7.3 Gender influences

Gender is not a key focus of this study; however, there are arguments within the literature to suggest it plays a role in children’s dramatic play behaviour. The influence that gender has upon children’s dramatic play is reported, and several studies have made connections between gender and the complexity of children’s dramatic play (Hanley et al., 2009; Saracho, 1995; Ulich & Mayr, 2002). Consistently, research has found that girls are likely to demonstrate a greater involvement in classroom play spaces that are designed for dramatic play through the provision of objects aimed to elicit make-believe (Hanley et al., 2009; Saracho, 1995; Ulich & Mayr, 2002). Girls also display a higher frequency and level of dramatic play behaviour (McLoyd, 1983; Newton & Jenvey, 2011; Reunamo et al., 2014). Some suggest that the dramatic play
behaviour of girls is influenced by their higher likeliness to plan or describe their play (Gmitrova, Podhajecka & Gmitrov, 2009) and be involved in pro-social skills, including sharing or offering help (Hagglund, 1994).

In contrast, boys are reported to display a greater involvement in construction, manipulative and active play (Hagglund, 1994; Laevers & Verboven, 2000). It has been suggested that the play space preference of boys derives from their inclination for active forms of dramatic play where they are able to construct, run and play rough and tumble (Hagglund, 1994; Laevers & Verboven, 2005). This is reflected in the themes of boys’ dramatic play, which often relate to occupations, superheroes and transportation (Gmitrova et al., 2009) — typically more active subjects.

Differences in gender-related preferences may have an influence on the opportunities that children have to develop skills and competencies needed for their involvement in complex dramatic play. For instance, many studies suggest that an indoor environment can restrict boys’ involvement in dramatic play (McLoyd, 1983; Roger & Evans, 2007) because indoor play is generally expected by educators to consist of passive activities. Rather, the theme of boys’ dramatic play often leads to more exuberant activity. Hagglund (1994) suggest that educators often reprimand boys for their actions within an activity. Meanwhile, girls are helped to engage in more pro-social behaviours. Therefore, the language of educators scaffolds girls to think internally about their state of mind, and boys to think about their involvement in an activity.

The aforementioned argument suggests that differences in the play behaviour between genders may be influenced by external factors within the classroom environment. Leuven and Verboven (2000) provide some support for this idea, in a study that examined gender play styles. It was found that children’s dramatic play behaviour was far less marginalised between genders when the centre practiced high-quality interactions with children. This included the prevalence of positive relationships, stronger wellbeing and a positive emotional climate.
2.7.4 Peer group dynamics

During the preschool year, children gain satisfaction out of their relationships with peers. Through these relationships, children are able to become aware of themselves belonging to a group, and also of their agency within that group (Lofdahl, 2010). Cosaro (2005) suggests that children’s social behaviour is constructed by a peer culture whereby one understands the status of themselves and others within the preschool. A peer culture is created through a “set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Cosaro, 2005, p. 110). Lofdahl (2010) explains that through this peer culture, children learn who they should socialise with, who leads the play, and how they should interact with other peers.

The dynamic of peer groups can provide the potential for children with poorer dramatic play behaviours to develop more complex play behaviours. For instance, Kowalski, Wyver, Masselos and de Lacey (2005) examined 48 toddlers, aged between 17- to 31-months, involved in dramatic play with preschool-aged children. Younger children were found to be engaged in significantly more complex dramatic play when playing in groups with their older counterparts. Specifically, dyad play (two member group) provided the most optimal peer group experience. The reason that dyad play is suggested to increase the complexity of younger children’s dramatic play is because the joint attention and involvement between two people enable a child’s dramatic play skills to be greatly scaffolded by the more experienced peer (Howe et al., 2014; Kowalski et al., 2005).

Kowalski et al. (2005) further showed that when the toddlers became part of a bigger group, they demonstrated more complex play episodes then they would on their own, however their object substitution were not as well supported. It should be noted that this study was conducted in a free-play environment where toddlers and preschool children share the outdoor playground on a daily basis. For the purpose of observation, the children were paired with regular play partners for the purpose of observation. This is important to consider, as the dynamics of peer relations can be highly political in the selection and inclusions of dramatic play members. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010), among others assert that gender, developmental ability,
experiential knowledge and overall popularity within the broader group, can be influencing factors to how peer groups operate (Rogers & Evans, 2008).

Although peer groups can provide children with a dynamic context in which to develop essential play skills, it is consistently reported that children are more likely to form peer groups with those who have similar play styles and preferences to themselves (Howes, 2011; Lofdahl, 2010; Reunamo et al., 2014). In Reunamo et al.’s (2014) study of children’s creativity, the findings highlight that the most creative children were likely to pair up more frequently with one another than with non-creative children. In these peer groups children displayed higher levels of social collaboration, as well as skills relating to cognition and more complex language.

In line with this premise, Howe et al. (2005) highlight that the ability to contribute collaboratively to a peer group is vital to a child’s participation in complex social dramatic play. The findings show that dyads functioned more successfully as a group when they were able to extend on the ideas of one another, and describe their actions/enactments through internal state language. Dyads who used language that directed or ordered the play behaviour of their partners were found to display less complex dramatic play overall.

Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) agree, showing that children who display poorer dramatic play behaviour are more likely to be involved in language that directs or manages their peers. Further research shows this to be limiting to the development of a play episode, as the dramatic play is more likely to end abruptly if their peer disagrees with their ideas (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Howe et al., 2014).

Research also suggests that the function of peer groups is related to the children having similar social experiences (Fleer, 2009). Literature shows that when a peer does not conform to the expectations of other peer members, they can often be excluded (Lofdahl, 2010). This can either be through rejection of ones attempt to join a group, or more subtle exclusion through the assignment of an inanimate role, such as a dead person or firewood (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Lofdahl & Hagglund, 2007).

Collectively, the literature shows that children who are less creative are more likely to be situated in a classroom environment where they, as members of the peer culture, display less involvement in classroom activities, are less active in dramatic play
and their peers are also less creative (McInnes et al., 2011; Reunamo et al., 2013). Whilst it is typical for a group of children to have different play styles, preferences and skills, it is arguable that provisions should be in place to ensure that there is opportunity for all children to grow. Without the support from educators or peers to be involved in higher levels of dramatic play, children’s skills may be more likely to remain low and their development unchallenged.

The literature reviewed has provided an insightful view into the dynamics of peer groups. Whilst it is suggested that children will often pair up with peers of a similar play style, interests and skill level, there is much less known how the classroom environment influences peer group dynamics. Lofdahl (2010) specifically highlights that further research is needed to examine the educators’ role and the underpinning curriculum. Similarly, Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) argue that research that pays attention to the educator in the context of children’s dramatic play is needed. Specifically, Lofdahl (2010) asserts that it is important to consider the educators, as they are considered to be factors that contribute to the overall peer culture. By examining dramatic play as an outcome of the classroom environment, the current study aims to provide an insightful view into the factors that contribute to the socialisation of dramatic play.

Collectively, children’s dramatic play has been presented as a complex and dynamic activity that might be influenced by many internal and external factors. The reviewed literature provides an interesting insight into the diverse factors that influence children’s dramatic play behaviour. However, it also raises the question of whether child development is a biological predisposition, or constructed through the child’s social experiences. Whilst the answer to this question is yet to be reached, there is much evidence to suggest the social situation has a crucial role in developing dispositions that foster creativity and imagination (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013; Morrissey, 2014; Reunamo et al., 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). It is visible that the classroom environment has a significance place in a child’s social situation. However, it is also clear that more research is warranted to examine how complex dramatic play is being facilitated by factors in the classroom learning environment. The current study, which uses a mixed methods approach to examine dramatic play as it occurs naturally within the preschool environment, aims to examine these factors so
as to provide insight into influences upon children’s dramatic play within the classroom environment. These factors are examined further in the final section of Chapter 2.

2.8 Dramatic play within the classroom environment

In the previous section, the influences upon the development of children’s dramatic play behaviours have been discussed. In this section, the literature is examined in accordance to the quality of the classroom environment and its subsequent influence upon children’s involvement in dramatic play.

In Australia, the amount of time children spend in ECEC is increasing (ABS, 2011). Whilst children spend an average of 15-hours a week, 16% of children spend 30-hours or more in at least one form of education and care (ABS, 2011). The rate of ECEC attendance suggests that a child’s experiences within their ECEC setting has a large role in their learning and development, therefore placing importance upon the quality of ECEC practices and processes.

ECEC practices and processes vary in accordance to mediating variables and mechanisms that exist within the overall setting. These can include, but is not limited to, classroom dynamics, leadership styles, community expectations and curriculum aims (Arthur et al., 2015). Collectively, these factors can influence the quality of interactions between adults and children/children and children/adults and adults, the physical arrangement of the classroom, and a classroom’s curriculum structure (Mashburn et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2010), which are all contributing factors to the child’s learning experience.

Quality in ECEC is complex and dynamic without a global definition. Moreover, quality depends on contextual factors such as cultural and social situations, making it difficult to agree on a universal definition (Ishimine, Taylor & Bennet, 2010). Nevertheless, it is widely accepted in research that there are two dimensions of classroom quality: structural and process. These are contributing factors in children’s present and ongoing learning and development (Ishimine et al., 2010; OECD, 2006; Zaslow, Martinez-Beck, Tout & Halle, 2011).
Structural quality can be described as the physical aspects of ECEC settings, such as space, objects, furniture, staff-to-child ratio, class size and teacher qualification (Ishimine et al., 2010; OECD, 2012). These structural aspects of quality are “independent from human interaction between individuals, measuring the presence or absence of objects, equipment and documents, without assessing the processes of how or why they are there” (Cassidy et al., 2005, p. 511).

Research has consistently found structural quality to be associated with the overall quality of the classroom and are contributing factors in children’s learning outcomes. In the United States, Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford and Howes (2002) studied children in 553 centres, reporting teacher qualification to be associated with higher levels of classroom quality and children performing better in language tests. Mashburn et al. (2008) reports similar findings, adding that lowered adult-child ratios and class size are also contributing factors to higher classroom quality and children’s language skills. Moreover, a study of 877 children aged 4- to 6-years in Holland found that children’s involvement in dramatic play was more prevalent in classrooms where classes contained 16 children or less (Berkhout, Bakkers & Hoekman, 2013).

The importance of high structural quality is further illustrated by Sylva et al. (2004; 2010), whose Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study determined that higher staff qualifications and lower adult-to-child ratios to be associated with children’s pre-reading skills and social development at age 5-years.

Further bodies of literature suggest that classroom quality is not associated with class size or adult-child ratios, but rather with the effectiveness of the curriculum structure, educator interactions and the provision of activities (Planta et al., 2005). The above factors relate to process quality, or the human interactions and experiences that occur within the setting (Cassidy et al., 2005). Process quality is complex and encompasses many factors. As such, for the purpose of the current study, this has been separated into two aspects so as to ensure that each can be examined comprehensively:

a) Interactional quality: Interactions with children, staff and families, and

b) Curriculum quality: Pedagogical decisions and actions educators make in their curriculum (Cassidy, et al., 2005; OECD, 2006).
Collectively, strong relationships have been found between process quality and child outcomes. Sylva et al. (2004; 2010) show that pedagogy that involves children in challenging play through flexible, open ended, warm and responsive interactions is linked to better cognitive outcomes. Further findings show that educators were more likely to engage in enriching forms of interactions when they had sound knowledge of child development, and a thorough understanding of the theory underpinning their curriculum (Sylva et al., 2004; 2010). Further studies similarly highlight the connection between adult-child interaction, curriculum and children’s outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2002; Mashburn et al., 2008). Importantly, these findings show that process quality is higher when structural quality is high, inferring that both factors of quality work cohesively together.

A review of the literature uncovered five factors associated with structural, interactional and program quality that are suggested to have an influence upon children’s involvement in dramatic play. The factors listed below are examined in the following sections:

a) The physical environment;
b) The curriculum;
c) Educators interactions with children;
d) The social –emotional climate; and
e) Educators’ views and knowledge.

The section concludes with a summary of the literature to consider the direction for the current study.

2.8.1 The influence of the physical environment on children’s dramatic play

In dramatic play children construct new worlds by using the spaces and objects that are made available to them. Accordingly, the provision of the physical classroom environment is an important factor for educators’ consideration. Lewin (1931) postulates that properties of physical objects have a psychological effect on children’s behaviour, affording them opportunities to grasp, climb or manipulate. Therefore, objects are perceived in relation to the self, rather than their objective use. This
implies that children’s dramatic play is not stimulated by the qualities of the environment, but instead by the affordances that it offers.

Drawing upon the idea of affordances, Gibson (1977) proposes a theory to describe the potential experiences or opportunities for action that are offered to the individual by environmental objects. The theory of affordances parts from the traditional assessment of the physical characteristic of environmental objects such as size, texture, substance and colour (Gibson, 1977). Rather, Gibson acknowledges that there is an interrelationship between the individual and the environment (Gibson, 1977). Accordingly, the way that an individual constructs functional meaning of objects and landscapes is dependent upon their perceptions and experiences of the world. In this sense, whilst a tree might afford the opportunity to climb to one child, it may afford the opportunity to hide to another.

Affordances have a specific relevance for children’s dramatic play as children use objects as a pivot to enter the imaginary world (Vygotksy, 1978). Therefore, the initial creation and later development of a play episode may be influenced by the properties of objects available to them. This is supported by a plethora of research that illustrates how the quality of affordances provided by the spatial organisation of dramatic play spaces and the availability of objects are associated with the frequency and complexity of children’s dramatic play (Michalopoulou, 2001; Petrakos & Howe, 1996; Trawick-Smith, 1990).

A play space is an area within the classroom that is structured by objects to promote a specific type of activity (Curtis & Carter, 2014). It is common for preschool classrooms in Western contexts to provide play spaces that are representative of several play types. These can include, but are not limited to, construction, manipulative, active, and craft play (Laevers, 2003). Play spaces for dramatic play are also a predominant classroom area. Despite a play space promoting specific types of activity, involvement in dramatic play is spontaneous and can occur in any space if permitted by the educator (Fahey, 2012; Mawson, 2010). Documented examples are provided of dramatic play occurring in the playground (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010); sandpit (Fjortoft, 2004; Stephenson, 2009); construction play space (Fahey, 2012) and table activities encouraging exploratory play (Hedegaard, 2012).
As discussed in Section 2.7.1, children can show preferences for certain dramatic play spaces according to their play style; however, this is often not considered in dramatic play assessments that focus only on activity in the dramatic play space, or observations of children in a laboratory setting. In examining children’s play styles and preference of classroom play spaces in the current study, more can be learned about how to support children’s dramatic play skills within the whole classroom.

The spatial organisation of dramatic play spaces can provide a significant foundation for children’s creative mimesis when intentionally prepared with objects that invite involvement in dramatic play. Dodge and Frost (1986) investigated preschool children’s dramatic play within a variety of physical environments to examine how objects afford opportunities for dramatic play. Play spaces were organised with objects that were either realistic (i.e., arranged with life like props), ambiguous (i.e., arranged with objects that have no clear purpose) or a combination of both. Dodge and Frost found that the highest amount of complex dramatic play occurred within dramatic play spaces containing realistic objects thematically designed around housekeeping. There was much less dramatic play observed in dramatic play spaces offering ambiguous objects. Furthermore, complex play episodes were found to emerge when realistic looking figurines (i.e., animals or people) were offered in combination with ambiguous objects (i.e., blocks). Observations showed children used the figurine as a stimulus to enter the imaginary world; meanwhile, the blocks afforded endless possibilities to support the development of their play episode.

Dodge and Frost’s (1986) findings relating to the spatial environment suggest that play spaces that are arranged with realistic objects and are accompanied by ambiguous objects provide children with an effective foundation to afford complex dramatic play. The influence of the arrangement of objects upon children’s dramatic play has been examined in further studies. For instance, McGhee, Ethridge and Benz (1983) show that children aged 2.5-to 5-years demonstrate more frequent dramatic play with ambiguous objects, but these behaviours are sustained for a longer period of time when they are used in conjunction with realistic objects. Meanwhile, Trawick-Smith (1990) reveals that, when offered both realistic and ambiguous objects, preschool children would rather play with realistic objects in their play episodes than ambiguous objects.
Whilst these studies suggest that realistic objects provide children with greater affordances for dramatic play, this is not exhaustive. The reviewed studies were performed in controlled research environments, wherein children were given a restricted time to play and pre-scripted objects that may or may not be familiar to the participating children. This is important to consider, as Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) contend that if children are not familiar with the properties of an object, they will spend time exploring the function of the object through manipulative actions before they are able to use it in a representation. In addition, it is unknown if children in former studies (Dodge & Frost, 1986; McGhee et al., 1983; McLoyd, 1983) were paired in groups with well-known peers.

The design of previous research is an important consideration as research conducted in children’s natural classroom environment has found ambiguous objects to afford complex dramatic play. For instance, Bagley and Klass (1997) used Smilansky’s Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play to assess children’s play behaviour in dramatic play spaces that contained realistic objects revolving around housekeeping, and play spaces that offered a combination of realistic and ambiguous objects. Children reported more complex uses of objects and play episodes, as well as greater persistence in dramatic play spaces that offered ambiguous objects.

Mawson (2010) agrees that the complexity of children’s dramatic play increases in play spaces where a greater amount of ambiguous objects are provided. The study, which employed the use of naturalistic observation, compared the play of children in two different centres. It was found that children were more frequently involved in dramatic play in the centre where play spaces provided ambiguous objects. Moreover, this dramatic play contained more complex themes and language. In the centre where play spaces were organised with realistic objects, children’s play episodes were contained to the theme created by the physical environment, eliciting routine play episodes that lacked complex levels of skill.

It is clear that, collectively, these findings present dichotomous ideas about the influence that the spatial arrangements of objects within a play space have upon children’s dramatic play. Aside from the objective knowledge that children are...
involved in a more complex process of thinking when they are including ambiguous objects into their dramatic play, research often neglects that children’s object use may be influenced by experiential factors. For instance, it is possible that children who are more regularly exposed to ambiguous objects have developed a greater cognitive flexibility to use them in dramatic play. Fleer (2010a) also emphasises that children need clear conceptual knowledge about the theme of the play in order to construct rules or roles associated with the concept. Therefore, the arrangement of objects should reflect the social experiences of children within that classroom.

The results of children displaying a higher complexity of dramatic play behaviour within ambiguously arranged play spaces, may also reflect children having more time to play in the studies that employed naturalistic observations, than children in studies conducted in controlled environments. For instance, Howe et al. (2014) investigated 70 sibling dyads aged between 5- to 9-years in dramatic play. Children’s object substitutions were examined, and language was coded according to the level of cooperative and metalanguage used to develop the play episode. Their findings illustrate that all children began a play episode with reliance upon realistic objects; yet, once the children had time to explore the objects provided and establish a play episode, the complexity of object substitutions and collaborative language increased.

Howe et al.’s (2014) findings also indicate that children’s preferences for realistic objects may provide an insight into the style of children’s dramatic play behaviour and the complexity of their skills. Children who engaged in more frequent metacommunicative statements, demonstrated more complex language and were less bound by the properties of realistic objects, and thus they demonstrated a greater amount of object substitutions with ambiguous objects. Collectively, the increased use of object substitutions and ‘pretend’ talk, appeared to contribute to more sustained play episodes, as well as multifaceted themes and role enactments. These findings are mirrored in further studies (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Therefore, whilst it is important to consider children’s skills, attention also needs to be focussed towards the affordances of the classroom and children’s individual experiences.
To understand the affordances that the physical environment provides for dramatic play, further research that examines the theme and organisation of a play space itself is needed. Play spaces that are designed around housekeeping roles are a common space for dramatic play in early childhood indoor classrooms. As such, the dramatic play area is often known as the *home corner* among early childhood educators in Australia. The popularity of the home corner may reflect the development of children’s role enactments. Section 2.6.2 highlighted that the theme of children’s dramatic play during its emergence often revolves around daily events experienced by the child, such as sleeping or eating (Piaget, 1962). Therefore, when children begin to decentre themselves to become the active agent, it is common for them to have a preference for mother- and father-themed roles revolving around housekeeping (Forys & McCune-Nicolich, 1984; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

The literature shows that housekeeping roles are a prevailing theme for children whilst they are developing their play skills. However, by 4- to 6-years, studies report diverse roles, such as adventure (space travel, cowboys) or community-based ones (policeman, firefighters) become more prevalent (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Youngblade & Dunn, 1995). This indicates that by preschool, children have gained a thorough understanding of housekeeping roles and will require a greater presence of novel play spaces to complement their growing conceptualisations of social experiences (Howe, Moller, Chambers & Petrakos, 1993). Therefore, contrary to the home corners’ popularity, research indicates that it may be unchallenging for the dramatic play of children aged 4- to 6-years (Bagley and Klass, 1997; Howe et al., 1993).

Additional issues have arisen with the excessive provision of a home corner. Children with more active play preferences, particularly boys, are found to show higher involvement in themes related to superheroes, police or firefighting (McLoyd, 1983; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). As roles within these themes typically entail more active movements, the structure of having an enclosed space with realistic objects may limit some children’s involvement in dramatic play (Oncu & Umek, 2010). Moreover, Roger and Evans (2008) suggest that children with more active play preferences are further limited by indoor play spaces, as educators are more likely to deter their involvement in the activity when noise levels and movements surpass their
expectations. Accordingly, it has been found that some children are significantly more involved in dramatic play outdoors (Oncu & Umek, 2010).

These findings suggest that the outdoor setting is an equally important environment for children to be involved in dramatic play, as it provides a less restrictive space (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). However, like the indoor, the outdoor environment should also afford rich provisions to entice and support children’s involvement in an imaginary situation. Martensson et al. (2009) highlight that children are more likely to be involved in dramatic play when they are in an outdoor environment with vegetation. The presence of trees, uneven surfaces and loose natural items has been positively associated with the enrichment of children’s dramatic play behaviour (Cloward Drown, 2014; Fjortoft, 2001, 2004; Taylor, Wiley, Kuo & Sullivan, 1998).

The provision and arrangement of outdoor play spaces is often found to be outside the educators’ pedagogical radar (Shim et al., 2001; Wooley & Lowe, 2012). Woolley and Lowe (2012) report that many outdoor environments have turned to fixed equipment, faux grass and little opportunity for children to interact with nature. These manufactured playgrounds are suggested to have an adverse effect on children’s dramatic play as it limits their access to loose objects, vegetation and changing topology, all of which stimulate children’s imagination and social interaction (Fjortoft, 2001; 2004).

In the United Kingdom, Maxwell et al. (2008) observed children aged 3- to 5-years in dramatic play with loose parts (i.e., small ambiguous objects, natural foliage). Using an observational method similar to Rubin’s (2001) play scale, it was found that children used large blocks and fabric to build enclosures such as trains, zoos and castles. These were later used as props for their dramatic play episodes. Moreover, children demonstrated greater persistence and collaborative interactions in their dramatic play when there were enclosed spaces to play, such as a house or playground.

Cloward Drown (2014) report similar findings in a United Kingdom study comparing children’s dramatic play in natural versus manufactured playgrounds. The Smilansky Play Scale of the Evaluation of Play and Socio-dramatic play (Smilansky &
Shefatya, 1990) was employed to assess the complexity of children’s dramatic play. It was found that there was a higher frequency of dramatic play in natural outdoor environments, especially if the setting was designed with loose parts, enclosures and areas for children’s construction. This was in contrast to poorer levels of dramatic play displayed by children in the manufactured environment, where a plastic playground and no loose parts were provided.

Maynard and Waters (2007) highlight that educators often hold concerns about outdoor play, including safety, weather and supervision. This leads to the participating educators spending more time monitoring children’s outdoor play, rather than being involved with children in sustained shared thinking. Shin et al. (2001), suggest that this complacent behaviour of educators reflects a view whereby outdoor play holds less value for educational learning. They report on a small-scale observational study of educators’ role in the outdoor environment, whereby educators reported to view activity in the outdoor environment as a break from structured teaching time. Moreover, it was found that the outdoor environment was rarely altered (Shim et al., 2001).

The physical environment has an important role in children’s involvement. However, a clear understanding is needed of how the social and physical aspects of the classroom work together to enable children’s dramatic play. This includes the examination of a classrooms use of a ‘converged learning approach’. The researcher developed this term for the purpose of the current study to depict times where the indoor and outdoor play areas are conjoined and children have a choice to play in indoor or outdoor play spaces. Currently in Australia many classrooms are adopting a converged curriculum. Accordingly, research is timely to examine the influence these curriculums have upon children’s dramatic play, and how educators are supporting children’s play style through the physical environment.

2.8.2 Curriculum influences upon dramatic play behaviour

In Australia, the EYLF describes early childhood curriculum to encompass “all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment, designed to foster children’s learning and development”
The curriculum frames the amount of time children have for free play, how the classroom environment is constructed, and the educational priorities and goals. Collectively, these factors may influence the teaching pedagogies that educators adopt.

Curriculum is shaped by the communities’ needs and expectations (McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2013). In Australia, learning through play is a traditional and expected approach to preschool curriculum. As such, most early childhood curriculum is framed by play-based learning, defined by Ebbeck et al. (2013, p. 185) as “young learners constructing knowledge as they explore, experiment, discover and solve problems in dramatic playful and unique ways.” This suggests that play-based curriculum is child-centred and learning is constructed actively.

Chung and Walsh (2000) interrogate the meaning of child-centred, asking: “of what is the child the centre?” (p. 229). They report that in contemporary early childhood literature there are several meanings associated with child-centred learning, including learning based on child’s interests, involving children in decisions relating to their own learning, developmentally appropriate learning, and the development of individual children. Any one or more of these factors may underpin the educators’ own conceptions of dramatic play-based curriculum, supporting their goals, visions and understanding of children. As such, there is no one way that play-based curriculum is practiced.

Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2010) assert that an effective approach to play-based learning employs “a planned intervention by a skilled educator who is concerned with promoting educational goals that are aimed at realising a child’s potential” (2010, p. 23). Australia’s EYLF does not prescribe the curriculum content that is to be delivered. Rather, it emphasises that a play-based curriculum should provide opportunities for children’s learning dispositions, learning processes, developmental competencies and attitudes towards the self and world, to flourish within the context of children’s ideas and interests (DEEWR, 2009).

The EYLF allows educators the ability to structure their curriculum according to the values, cultures and philosophies of the community in which the early childhood centre is situated. This provides many benefits that include the development of shared
learning goals for children and families (Arthur et al., 2015), a factor that the EPPE project emphasises as contributing to higher classroom quality (Sylva et al., 2004). However, the quality of play-based curriculum has been questioned, as educators are reported to face a barrage of dichotomies that include (but are not limited to): fear of interrupting children’s self-discovery, fulfilling family’s expectations to be ready for school, and their accountability to meet learning outcomes (Wood, 2014). Trawick-Smith’s (2012) categorises three common approaches, described in detail below, that inform play-based learning (Figure 2.3).

Trawick-Smith (2012) writes that curriculum led by a *trust in play* approach is structured by extended periods of time for *free play* and open-ended experiences to encourage child-led and -initiated activity. Teachers favouring this approach often value constructivist theories of learning and development, viewing their role as observers, watchers and facilitators (Dockett, 2011), whilst children *catch* academic concepts in dramatic play through independent discovery (Trawick-Smith, 2012).

The *laissez-faire* nature of curriculum entrenched in the trust-in-play approach can be problematic, as adults are less likely to engage with children in meaningful interactions that extend their thinking (Stephen, 2010; Wood, 2010). Moreover, educators may make superficial interpretations of children’s interests, leading to poorly informed pedagogical decision-making (Hedges, 2010). Sylva et al. (2004; 2010) report that curriculum approaches that are too far left on the continuum of play-based learning are associated with lower levels of overall classroom quality and poorer learning outcomes. Rather, the findings of the EPPE study emphasise that a balance between adult- and child-initiated activities and interactions is best (Sylva et al., 2010).

Notably, too much free play has implications upon children’s overall involvement within classroom activities. Singer et al. (2014) examined the involvement
of 163 children aged between 2- and 3-years’ in classroom activities. It was found that children demonstrated lower involvement in classroom activities when they had too much choice of activities and objects. Stephen (2010) infers this may have undesirable consequences for children’s learning dispositions and processes. Her study investigating 16 educators’ pedagogy in relation to children’s technology use during free play found children demonstrate less persistence in their play activities when the educator removes themselves from children’s free play (Stephen, 2010). This was particularly so when children failed to complete or understand an activity, suggesting children display less problem solving when they are not guided by an educator. Consequently, the amount of sustained involvement within the environment was significantly reduced.

Carlton and Winsler (1998) obtained similar findings, wherein preschool children’s behaviours were observed to be repetitive and unfocussed, as well as expressing less positive emotion when educators refrained from becoming directly involved in children’s dramatic play. On this notion, Wood (2014) comments that children at times need structure in the form of adult guidance, in order to sustain a focussed attention on one activity.

Collectively, this body of research suggests that curricula following a laissez-faire approach are found to be less favourable for children’s sustained involvement, ability to solve problems, and persistence when faced with challenges (Stephen, 2010; Wood, 2014). Importantly, this may have punitive effects on the development of creative learning dispositions that are contingent on complex styles of dramatic play behaviour. If children are displaying low levels of sustained involvement and social problem solving in dramatic play, they may be faced with limited opportunities to develop crucial cognitive and social processes (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

In contrast, teachers may segregate play and learning through a learn and teach in play approach, wherein play spaces are created to specifically reinforce academic concepts (Trawick-Smith, 2012). This approach is associated with structured styles of teaching that limit child choice and maximise adult direction. Johnson (2014) asserts that interactions and activities that occur within this approach are most often not contingent with children’s dramatic play preferences and styles. As such, educators’
interactions are more likely to disrupt the child’s learning than facilitate it. Accordingly, curricula that adopt approaches on the far right of the continuum of dramatic play-based learning, children are found to have lower levels of involvement (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003; Laevers, 1994). In addition, educators are more likely to record higher levels of punitive interactions with children and lower levels of positive relationships (Gmitrova, 2013; Jeffrey & Craft, 2004).

Trawick-Smith (2012) suggests that curriculum that facilitates play is a more effective approach to enrich children’s involvement and learning in the preschool classroom. In a facilitate play approach, educators value child-centred learning, however see a role for themselves to guide children’s learning through joint involvement in sustained activities. Educators adopting this approach are more likely to value social constructivist theories associated with children’s learning (Dockett, 2011) and structure their curriculum through a balance between child- and adult-initiated interactions and activities (Trawick-Smith, 2012). Stephen (2010) supports a facilitate play curriculum approach, finding that in classrooms where educators were involved with children in shared learning in a joint activity, children’s involvement was higher and the development of learning dispositions was supported.

The EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2010) supports the contention that a balance between adult- and child-initiated learning is an effective curriculum approach. The findings from a study of 3000 children from 141 early childhood centres in the United Kingdom illustrate that responsiveness to children’s ideas and the involvement of children in sustained shared thinking in joint activities were associated with higher classroom quality and better child outcomes. The pedagogical approach associated with the facilitate in play approach was found to be reflective of educators having sounder knowledge of curriculum and learning theories (Sylva et al., 2010). These findings are supported by further large-scale studies, which found that children’s learning outcomes were higher in classrooms where educators engaged in interactions to guide children to extend their thinking (Mashburn et al., 2008; Schwienhart et al., 2005).

Sustained shared thinking enables a context where educators can guide children’s exploration and knowledge of the properties of objects and the laws of
nature (Arthur et al., 2015). With this greater knowledge of their world, children are provided with enriched opportunities to extend their roles enactments, situations with a play episode and vocabulary (Fleer, 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Moreover, the interactions occurring through positive relationships between educators and children are providing a positive opportunity for children to learn interpersonal skills (Laevens, 1998). These are crucial for the understanding of one’s self and others, so as to learn and practice interactions between people in the social context.

Wood (2014) problematizes the concept of play-based learning to identify the difficulties faced by educators in its implementation. She identifies that educators face a dichotomy in their practice wherein they strive to incorporate play-based pedagogies but are also pressured to meet outcomes aligned with quality standards, accountability and performance. Wood argues that educators are implementing structured play times so that they can objectively assess children’s learning in accordance to outcomes, rather than undertaking a subjective assessment of children’s socially constructed knowledge.

Lu Soo Ai (2007) reports a similar issue in Singaporean preschool classrooms. Although dramatic play is considered to be a significant avenue for children’s learning in the Singaporean learning framework, Lu Soo Ai reports the activity to be under-used. This may be due to the fact that there is a community emphasis on maths, literacy and scientific learning. Subsequently, analysis of the children’s dramatic play indicated that their dramatic play behaviour was of a poor level; specifically their role enactment, play episode development and persistence. When educators transformed their curriculum towards an approach where children were provided with more time to play and experiential learning activities (i.e., excursions, thematic classroom experiences), and where educators interacted with children in dramatic play to scaffold their play skills, children’s dramatic play behaviour increased.

Further research has suggested that accountability to document learning and development (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009), over-emphasis on the development of academic learning outcomes (Singer, 2006), and forgotten understandings of the importance of dramatic play itself have contributed to an over-application of trust in play approaches. Van Oers (2013) argues that this may be the
result of the lack of an explanatory definition of dramatic play, including conflicting recommendations for the position of the adults and a misunderstanding of what playful learning is. Similarly, Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson (2009), reporting on the findings of observations conducted in eight Swedish preschools, suggest that educators often miss opportunities to bridge the gap between dramatic play and learning. This is predominately due to interactions that do not challenge children to enter higher forms of thinking, ignorance of children’s invitations to play, and a desire to protect children’s dramatic play as a child-centred activity.

It is clear that play-based curriculum is complex and is influenced by a dynamic interplay of social and political systems. Nonetheless, the curriculum approach has the potential to influence children’s dramatic play behaviour. Since the development of the EYLF, there has been limited research that has evaluated the status of play-based learning within the Australian context. Given the issues that have been highlighted in many approaches to a play-based curriculum, it is timely to examine the current practices and processes to support children’s involvement in dramatic play in the curriculum.

In order for dramatic play to develop at a complex level, curriculum must influence the development of creative dispositions that include flexibility, imagination and curiosity (Craft, 2000). In conducting an examination into the influence Australian early childhood curriculum has upon children’s dramatic play, the current study provides an insight into how Australian preschools are providing opportunities for children to develop these dispositions.

2.8.3 The influence of educator interactions upon children’s dramatic play

Research often shows that educators consider dramatic play to be a naturally developing activity of self-expression (Dockett, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Moyles, 2010). Consequently, educators are hesitant to become involved in the activity, fearing that they will disturb children’s natural learning process. However, debate exists among educators and researchers as to what the adult’s role in dramatic play entails (van Oers, 2013). Despite common beliefs, educator involvement has been shown to enrich children’s dramatic play, allowing them to enact deeper roles, sustain
the episode over longer periods of time, and follow complex themes (Gmitrova, 2013; Lindqvist, 2010; Stanton-Chapman, 2014).

In contrast, other studies recommend that an educator’s role in dramatic play is to enrich and maintain the safety of the environment. They should refrain from intruding in dramatic play (Paley, 2004). This view is supported by studies that report educator involvement in dramatic play is associated with lower levels of social engagement (File, 1994; Harper & McCluskey, 2003; Wilcox-Herzog & Kontos, 1998) and lower levels of higher-order thinking (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003).

Collectively, the literature examining educators’ involvement in dramatic play is problematic. Despite educators’ prevailing conceptions that their involvement in dramatic play is harmful to children’s creativity (Dockett, 2011; Kemple, 1996; McInnes et al., 2011), many studies have actually found that adult involvement is necessary for the development of complex play behaviour (Gmitrova, 2013; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

For instance, Hakkarainen et al. (2013) report that in order to effectively support the development of children’s dramatic play behaviour, there is a requirement for educators to adopt a role and enter into the play episode as a co-player with an invested emotional involvement. Hakkarainen and colleagues showed that children became involved in more complex dramatic play behaviour when educators positioned themselves pedagogically inside the play to assist children in co-constructing the play episode, create dramatic tension through new roles and events, and support children to sustain a coherent plot and introduce a new character or event.

Smilansky (1968; 1990) conducted a series of studies that examined children’s dramatic play, leading to the development of dramatic play interventions aimed to promote the development of complex dramatic play behaviour. Smilansky’s play interventions involved increasing the child’s experiences of the social world through excursions and investigations of roles within the community. Furthermore, educators supported the development of children’s play episodes by taking on a directive role inside the play. Smilansky and Shefatya state:
We believe that the natural process of child growth and a passive environment are not sufficient to give children the necessary boost...children will not make progress in dramatic play simply by being provided facilities and an encouraging atmosphere (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990, p. 142).

This pedagogy is still valued in some contemporary classrooms and proponents of dramatic play. For instance, Hujala et al. (2010) outline that effective play pedagogies involve a process of a) Orientation; b) Playing; and c) Elaboration. In Hujala et al.’s (2010) example with the theme of weather, the educator introduces the children to a topic. At the time of introduction, the educator provides children with a foundation of knowledge about weather-watching and the importance of weather for plants and people using multiple learning platforms (i.e., discussion, research, observation or short films on weather). Children are provided with opportunities to explore their knowledge of weather through dramatic play (for example, themes of weather forecasting, or explorers). The educators may facilitate the physical arrangement of space and objects, and guide children to a related role. Finally, in the third stage, the educators and children evaluate the experiential process to reflect on the learning that has been occurred. The positive increase in the complexity of dramatic play behaviour using this model are visible in further empirical studies (Gmitrova et al., 2013; 2009; 2003).

Most recently, Gmitrova (2013) observed the relationship between educators pedagogical positioning in dramatic play and the children’s subsequent play behaviours. Significant differences were found in children’s role enactment, persistence and designation of a new dramatic play theme within a play episode when the educators: a) coupled the dramatic play area to the content discussed in group time; b) modelled roles and play episodes upon the initial commencement of a dramatic play space; and c) released control of the play space to the children once they were familiar with it.

Though these pedagogies of dramatic play appear to be effective for the development of children’s dramatic play, they contain an element of adult centredness and require ongoing time, pedagogical value and understanding of dramatic play skills. Notably, Moyles (2010) highlights that these are often the reasons why educators refrain from being involved in children’s dramatic play. Furthermore, Wood (2014) asserts that there is an increasing emphasis upon dramatic play being a
platform to meet academic learning outcomes, which is problematic for play pedagogies.

Wood’s concerns are supported by Fleer (2015), who analysed the pedagogical positioning of nine Australian educators towards children’s dramatic play. She found that educators would often narrate or prompt children’s involvement in dramatic play from outside a play episode. It was rare for educators to be involved inside the play collectively with the children. On the occasions when they were, their intent focussed on building children’s conceptual knowledge of maths, literacy or science, revolving around the theme. Very few educators focussed their attention towards the complexity of the dramatic play itself.

Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk and Singer (2009) adopt the term playful learning to describe a pedagogy of dramatic play where educators guide children’s learning through pleasurable and spontaneous activities to support the whole child. Their use of the word playful implies that educators should embed elements of pretend into their pedagogical responses to children’s learning. Furthermore, the use of the word guide implies that educators have an active role in supporting children’s learning in dramatic play. Fleer (2011b) asserts that in employing playful learning strategies educators interact with children using techniques that evoke involvement in representational thinking by combining imagination and reality through multiple aspects of the curriculum.

Drawing upon dramatic play as a leading activity for children’s learning and development, Fleer (2011b) suggests that educators can integrate imagination into scientific-, mathematic- and literacy-focussed interactions by prompting children to construct, draw or role play their understandings. By following Fleer’s (2011b) framework, children are able to develop dispositions associated with dramatic play by giving new meaning to objects through the movement of being inside and outside of reality, and by playing with roles to understand societal rules.

Moyles (2010) presents the term playful pedagogies to involve a combination of strategies to support children’s learning in dramatic play. These include:

- Pure play: Play that is owned and controlled by the child for their own purposes. The educators’ role is to provide resources and interact if invited.
- **Playful learning:** Experiences that can be child or adult initiated, which involve children’s in dramatic playful ways. The educators’ role is to participate, identify curriculum and learning intentions within the play and assess the learning occurring.

- **Playful teaching:** Experiences that are educator initiated and involve children’s pleasure in activities that open ended, imaginative and active. The educators’ role is to intentionally plan and present tasks in a meaningful way to support the learning that the educator wants to see.

Moyles stresses that playful pedagogies is not static; rather, the educator should recognise and respond to the opportunities whereby each strategy can be used, and its subsequent fit with the learning style of the child.

In Australia, play-based curriculum and societal expectations of preschool in most cases lend to the classroom being designed in a way that maximises children’s social involvement with one another and promotes motives for dramatic play through the provision of open-ended activities and objects (Fleer, 2009). However, school readiness is an issue that is gaining increased attention, as instances have been reported of educators feeling pressured to prepare children academically for school (Campbell, 2015). This means educators may be faced with a dichotomy between providing opportunities for dramatic play and aligning their teaching goals towards academic skills and knowledge, leaving little room for children’s dramatic play skills (Wood, 2014).

Without a conceptualisation of dramatic play pedagogy within the local context, this may create a situation like the one seen in the United Kingdom, United States, Asia and Europe, where educators report feeling a pressure to implement structured teaching, despite the significance being placed upon play within learning frameworks (Wood, 2014). Howard and McInnes (2010) suggest this can lead to learning in dramatic play becoming devalued, in favour of more structured styles of experiences where learning is seen as being more visible.

The current study sought to examine this problematic context of dramatic play from multiple angles and perspectives. Although there has been a significant amount of research conducted to examine educators’ view of dramatic play, less is known
about how this translates into children’s dramatic play behaviour. The current study aimed to make this relationship visible so as to make recommendations for play pedagogies that are based upon pragmatic findings.

2.8.4 The influence of the social-emotional climate on children’s dramatic play

Social and emotional climate refers to the “intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which children learn” (Amborse, Bridges, Dipietro, Lovett & Norman, 2010, p. 6). In preschool classrooms, climate is determined by an array of factors that include educator-children interaction, the tone educators set in their interactions and expectations, acceptance of diversity, the size of the classroom, number of children, child-child interactions, adult-child interactions, and the range of perspectives represented in the activities of the classroom environment (Howes, 2000).

The social and emotional climate of a classroom can contribute to children’s behaviour and social competence within that environment. For instance, Howes (2000) reports that in early childhood centres where the educator modelled dispositions to solve social problems, the children were more likely to resolve conflicts themselves. Moreover, the children’s involvement in activities was sustained for longer periods of time. In contrast, children were more likely to require the help of the educator in early childhood centres where the educators reacted harshly to children’s behaviour through redirection, termination of activity or interruption to manage noise.

The influence of educator interactions upon a classroom’s social-emotional climate is supported by McInnes et al. (2013), in a study that examined how adult-child interactions affect children’s perceptions of educator presence. The authors assert that in centres where the interactions of educators encouraged choice and control through sustained shared thinking, the children were more likely to perceive the educators as playful. On the other hand, in centres where children perceived educators to be a disruption to their play, there was a higher frequency of what Jones and Reynolds (1992) refer to as mediating. A mediator is concerned with facilitating a physical environment for play, managing routines and maintaining a safe environment.
Essentially, they value the child-centeredness of dramatic play, and will intervene only to protect it; an approach that educators are commonly found to employ in dramatic play (Dockett, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009).

Interestingly, this pedagogy creates a paradox wherein educators intend to provide children with openness and flexibility, but they actually are more likely to instil a number of rules that implicitly have the opposite effect (van Oers, 2013). These include social expectations of how children should interact with one another and also technical rules of how objects and equipment can be used (van Oers, 2013). McInnes et al. (2013) comment that this can create a culture within the classroom that influences a poorer social-emotional climate, as educators are more likely to interact punitively with children to uphold their behavioural expectations.

Dramatic play can often be the target of meditative behaviours as involvement in the activity tends to induce over excitement, social disagreements and physical activity. Moreover, if children are not guided in techniques of problem solving and conflict resolution, the development of dramatic play episodes and persistence in role enactments may be limited (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Therefore, pedagogies that are associated with the maintenance of a positive social-emotional climate are important for supporting children’s involvement in dramatic play (Howes, 2000; McInnes et al., 2013).

Rinaldi (2006) suggests that a positive social and emotional climate is supported by a pedagogy of listening, which goes beyond observing only what we see. It enables learning to be made visible by seeing, hearing and feeling what a child is thinking. Listening as a pedagogical practice values the co-construction of knowledge through collaborative dialogue (Rinaldi, 2006). Craft (2000) argues that interactions of this nature enable an effective platform for children to explore the world of behaviour, feelings and values. Within the context of experiential education, Laevers (2005) asserts that a pedagogy of listening is important for one’s level of interpersonal relations and the understanding of social phenomena. Specifically, the practice is the understanding of the psychological, cognitive, motivational/emotional and behavioural functioning of oneself and others and of the interactions between people.
embedded in a social context. As such, a valuable context for skills essential for complex dramatic play is fostered.

Play-based learning provides the context for this to occur. However, the noted conceptions surrounding free play (section 2.8.2) may be contributing to a pedagogy that is not effective practice for children’s involvement in dramatic play. Research is required within the Australian context to examine the translation of the pedagogies outlined in the EYLF to that implemented in practice. Research of this nature is crucial in order to understand the degree to which dramatic play is supported within the classroom environment. Dockett (2011) highlights that many Australian educators romanticise play as being child-initiated and -led. As a result, many educators may be placing too much focus on the physical environment, and too little on their own involvement in children’s dramatic play and exploration (Meade, 2007). The current study sought to further examine educators’ play pedagogies to make inferences about children’s observed behaviour in dramatic play.

2.8.5 Educators’ views and knowledge relating to dramatic play

The concept of views or beliefs is associated and often used interchangeably with one’s perceptions, values, attitudes and personal theories (Brownlee, Berthelsen & Boulton-Lewis, 2004; Raths, 2001). Views are developed according to one’s personal and practical experience. This experience assumes how one makes meaning of a situation and is reflected in their practice (Chakravarthi, 2009). It has been found that educators’ perceived meaning of dramatic play and learning is constructed by their experience with play as children (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010), their professional training (Jung & Jin, 2014) and professional experiences (Moyles, 2010). Subsequently, these developed perceptions of dramatic play are likely to influence their decisions and behaviour towards the way educators facilitate and interact with dramatic play in their classroom environment.

McInnes et al. (2011) found that educators who hold a strong belief system about dramatic play and the influence on learning have a clearer understanding of theory underpinning the activity, and the development of skills that support children’s involvement. Accordingly, McInnes et al. suggest that educators are more aware of
how to implement strategies that promote children’s learning through co-constructing knowledge and open questioning. In considering this knowledge, Nolan and Kilderry (2010) suggest that importance is placed on teacher education to interrogate pre-service teachers’ past experiences through reflection and to situate their practice within a theoretical position/s. By debunking their beliefs within multiple theoretical frameworks, educators are encouraged to think more critically about their practice to inform a deeper understanding of their world view (Nolan & Kilderry, 2010).

Dramatic play for the most part is viewed by early childhood educators as being important for children’s learning (Dockett, 2011; Howard, 2010; Jung & Jin, 2014). Despite these understandings, a breadth of studies indicates that many educators lack theoretical knowledge of dramatic play development and socially contextual factors that influence children’s overall behaviour in dramatic play (Dockett, 2011; Howard, 2010; McInnes et al., 2011). Although seen as an important activity, educators’ interactions with children in dramatic play are superficial and do not challenge or extend on children’s thinking (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). Dockett (2011) suggests that this practice stems from beliefs derived from developmental theory, wherein the activity is perceived as child-led, fun, intrinsically motivated, free-flowing and associated with social, emotional and sometimes cognitive development.

Dockett (2011) confirms that developmental theory is a prevalent theoretical framework that many educators in Australia position themselves in. The findings from Dockett’s study of 20 educators working in preschool and primary settings reveal that there was an overall discourse among the participants that valued constructivist ways of teaching as informed by developmental theory, including resourcing the environment and trust in play approaches to curriculum. Howard (2010) suggests that beliefs constructed by developmental theory are associated with weaker philosophies and understandings of play and child development. In Howard’s study, half of the 26 participants revealed that they were unsure how to provide a play-based curriculum when children did not know how to play.

The EYLF challenges educators to think past developmental theories, and to consider wider discourses, including cultural-historical, post-modern and critical theories. By considering this range of theoretical perspectives, educators are
encouraged to work within a paradigm where they work with children to co-construct knowledge (Jordan, 2009) and are responsive to children’s lifeworld, rather than the child’s developmental needs (Nolan & Kilderry, 2010). Research suggests that when educators can embrace wider views and understandings of teaching and learning, they show more intention in their interactions with children (Dockett, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011). Moreover, the children are involved in higher-order thinking by partaking in a community of learning (Jordan, 2009).

As it is proposed that the over romanticisation of dramatic play within teacher training, policy documents and text books have left educators directionless (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014), it is timely to examine how educators are constructing their philosophies and enacting play pedagogies. The findings of the current study will examine these constructs to provide recommendations for the future development of teacher training and professional development programs.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, the theoretical knowledge that underpins dramatic play has been examined. The development of dramatic play has been explored to consider the findings from previous research suggesting that play does not naturally occur, but that “play complexity builds as a result of the engagement between the child’s physiological functioning and the social and material conditions afforded in the child’s environment” (Fleer, 2014, p.2).

The review of literature has identified that there is a need for further research to be conducted that examines children’s involvement in dramatic play. The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence that physical, interactional and curriculum factors of the classroom environment have upon children’s dramatic play behaviour. Vygotsky’s theory of dramatic play underpins the theoretical position of this study. The advantage of incorporating a cultural historical approach in this study is that it allows the research questions to be examined from multiple viewpoints, so as to gain a holistic understanding of the thesis. Accordingly, the study places a specific focus upon children’s dramatic play behaviour and the translation of educators’ beliefs, knowledge and views into their pedagogical framing of dramatic play into the
curriculum, their interactions and the physical environment. The current study sought to answer the following four research questions:

5. What are preschool children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences?
6. What are preschool children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?
7. In what way (if any) does the classroom environment influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?
8. In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?

Research questions 1 and 2 intend to identify the complexity of children’s dramatic play by evaluating their involvement levels and dramatic play behaviours. Meanwhile, Questions 3 and 4 endeavour to gain an understanding of the factors within the classroom that may contribute to the children’s involvement in dramatic play.

In the next chapter the methodology will be presented. This will detail the theoretical framework that guided the development of the research design and the research tools. The processes and procedures of this mixed-methods study will be outlined.
Chapter 3 : Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine what factors of the preschool classroom environment influence children’s involvement in dramatic play. In this chapter the processes and procedures of the research methodology are outlined. The chapter comprises of five main sections:

a) Theoretical framework (see section 3.1);
b) Research design (see section 3.2);
c) Research processes and procedures (see section 3.3);
d) Research instruments (see section 3.4); and
e) Data analysis (see section 3.5).

3.1 Theoretical framework

The methodological design of the current study is theoretically framed by the theory of pragmatism. Pragmatism is derived from the Greek word *pragma*, meaning action. Pragmatists believe that ideas generated by human thought are connected to action (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Accordingly, ideas become instruments in the course of action, rather than ideals, leading to reality being ever-changing. In this view, it is believed that experiences are constructed through thought, rather than external influences.

Pragmatism became introduced as a philosophical concept in the late 19th century through the early work of Charles Sanders Pierce. Pierce (1955) argued that for knowledge to be meaningful it must be able to be applied to reality. Biesta and Burbules (2003) assert that Pierce argued that a close link between knowledge (ideas) and action exists. Specifically, Pierce argues that “different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise” (1955, p. 29).

George Mead provided further contributions to the development of pragmatism through the concept of *what is real is happening now* (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Mead (cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) proposed that knowledge is related to the world in which one has experienced. Moreover, knowledge is created through action within experience. Mead believed that the most effective way to study the
experiences of individuals was through observations of their conduct and social processes. Accordingly, Mead suggested that observations of an individual’s social actions provided the best way to examine the reality that is experienced by those within a social context.

Biesta (2009) suggests that the most influential work contributing towards the development of the theory of pragmatism was John Dewey. Dewey (1922) places great importance upon knowledge being constructed through the interactions that occur between humans and their environment. Dewey advocates that “the interaction between elements of human nature and the environment, nature and social” (1922, p. 9) allow humans the ability to adapt their processes to a continuously changing environment. This idea of Dewey’s suggests that knowledge is created through humans’ experiences, or doings (Dewey, 1922). Dewey states:

The human organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surrounding. As a consequence the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffer, the consequences of its own behaviour (Dewey, 1920, p. 129).

Dewey’s (1922) proposal that knowledge is constructed through experience infers that truth is found through the transaction between the objective and subjective world. Objectivity assumes the perspective that truth is found in the accurate depiction of things in the world (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In contrast, subjectivity lies in the perspective that knowledge is a human construction and therefore is ultimately of the mind (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Alternatively, Dewey proposes that knowledge can be intersubjective. This stance views the world as holding a shared responsibility by living and acting together (Greene & Hall, 2010). Accordingly, objects of knowledge (ideas) can become instruments for action according to the possibilities that the idea can induce. Therefore, inquiry need not be restricted to the “domains of means, techniques and instrument, but also include the domain of ends, purposes and values” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 108).

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) discuss that the idea of intersubjectivity proposed by Dewey can enable a research paradigm that pursues the purpose of seeking truth. Termed as pragmatism (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), the paradigm promotes a focus
upon the consequences, or outcomes of the research. Accordingly, importance is placed on the research questions rather than the methods used, and the paradigm permits multiple methods of data collection to be employed (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Morgan (2014) asserts that pragmatism still requires a systematic approach to inquiry. He suggests that for research to remain meaningful, a five-step process should be followed to resolve an identified problem through reflection and action. In this five-step process (Figure 3.1), the researcher: 1) recognises a problem, 2) examines the factors that are influencing the problem, 3) suggests a solution to the identified problem, 4) examines the likely effects that the solution will have on the research process and outcomes, and 5) decides on the action to be taken. Throughout this process, the researcher reflects on their actions and beliefs in an integrated manner to inform the thought and action process. This process, as it is applicable to the current study, is outlined in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Process of enquiry of the current study

Adapted from: Morgan, D. L. (2014). Pragmatism as a paradigm for social research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, XX(X), p.4

Typically, research has seen a dichotomy between research that is objective and subjective. Objective research is most commonly associated with positivist researchers whose philosophical stances assumes that knowledge is independent from the knower and that there is a single reality where research is not affected by values, time and context (Biesta, 2009). Positivists believe that truth can be found in knowledge through a process of deduction. In this method of deduction, the researcher is enabled to construe knowledge using rigorously planned methods to confirm or disprove a theory, allowing generalised predictions to be made (Black
A positivist approach perceives that knowledge is discoverable only though empirical means of sensory experience and observation (Mukherji & Albon, 2011).

A positivist reality is constructed by fundamental laws, which remain invisible. It is not until those events, appearances or experiences have been experimentally observed that the laws that caused it can be deduced (Biesta, 2009). Studies conducted according to a positivist paradigm typically use quantitative research methods. Punch (2009) suggests that the application of quantitative methods provides a logical process to conceptualise variables in order to explore the existing relationships between them.

In contrast to the positivist approach, interpretivists believe there is more than one truth. Knowledge, according to interpretivists, is construed through shared meanings within a cultural framework (Hughes, 2010b). As such, interpretivists assume a subjective reality that requires understanding of the social world in order to represent it as a theory of human behaviour (Hughes, 2010b). Knowledge according to interpretivists is framed as the understanding of how people create and maintain their social worlds (Punch, 2009). To understand this knowledge the researcher has to become a member of the environment where the research is conducted, so as to be able to grasp the intentions, motives, beliefs or desires of human action (Schwandt, 2000).

Interpretivist worldviews are commonly associated with qualitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher aims to understand the social world by observing the lived experiences of the participants or a particular context and interpret the meaning brought to them (Thomas, 2003). When used in mixed-methods research, qualitative data provides the ability for researchers to elucidate the meaning of quantitative data by providing an interpretative description of the anomalies (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

Each of these worldviews (i.e., positivist and interpretivist) provides an individual approach to pursue a research problem. However, these approaches alone can at times be restrictive when the problem at hand requires a paradigm that: a) seeks relationships between groups or variables, and b) shows the complexity of the
situation by illustrating the perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this instance, pragmatism offers an alternative approach, where two research methods can be conducted together with the purpose to communicate shared understandings and present implications. That is, knowledge is obtained and modified through the mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods to solve problems and study the consequences (Greene & Hall, 2010). Accordingly, the ability to mix methods provides a possible alternative to the restrictive use of one methodological approach in the construction of knowledge.

The current study aims to examine the classroom environmental factors that influence the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play. The classroom environment contains multiple pedagogical layers, including the physical environment (i.e., physical arrangement of the classroom; availability of props), interactional environment (i.e., interactions between adults and children, children and children, and adults and adults), and curriculum (i.e., approaches to teaching; structure of daily schedule) that may have implications upon children’s dramatic play.

Fenech et al. (2011) and Elliot (2006) suggest that research which has examined practice and pedagogy in ECEC is flawed and limited, due to an overwhelming amount of qualitative research. Moreover, others advocate that research is needed to specifically identify what and how factors of the classroom environment influence children’s dramatic play behaviour (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011). In order to address the current research limitations, a research design is needed that is able to compare variables and also delve into the complexity of the classroom milieu. Accordingly, a pragmatic paradigm provides the most suitable foundation for the research inquiry of the current study.

By employing a pragmatic approach, the researcher is able to address the current gaps in the literature through a study that is comprehensive in design and methods, within the real-life context of children’s dramatic play in the classroom environment. As the Australian ECEC context is framed by play-based learning, the current study provides an insightful and relevant context in which to examine the factors of classroom pedagogy and practice that influence children’s dramatic play.
The next three sections describe how a pragmatic approach is employed in the current study, including justifications for the research design, research questions and research purposes.

3.2 Research design

The current study employed a methodological approach that was framed by a mixed-methods design. Mixed methods is seen as providing an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon by combining qualitative and quantitative methods into the one study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In combining these methods, the researcher is able to employ an approach that draws upon the strengths of each method to complement the inherent weaknesses of using just one approach (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009).

In the current study, a comprehensive approach has been followed. Hesse-Biber (2010) asserts that in a comprehensive approach “methodology provides a theoretical perspective that links a research problem with a particular method or methods” (p. 11). Within this notion, methodology is understood as being the relationship between the theory that frames a study and the research problem at hand. Accordingly, the research method becomes a tool to meet the needs of the research purpose and questions.

Specifically, Figure 3.2 illustrates how the comprehensive approach was applied in the current study and how it relates to the research purpose. Moreover, the figure shows that the theory of pragmatism informs the methodology and research questions adopted in the current study, with the purpose of establishing an intersubjective procedure to carry out the research process. Hesse-Biber (2010) propose that the decision making process involved in the comprehensive approach may be influenced by methodological persuasions, including: a) the literature review; b) researcher’s values and experiences; and/or c) economic constraint (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The next three sub-sections will consider the methodological persuasions of the current study through a discussion of the research purpose, research questions and research methods.
3.2.1 Research purpose

The aim of the current study was to examine the complexity of preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play. The review of literature presented in Chapter 2 suggests that children’s involvement in complex dramatic play is decreasing (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Smirnova, 2013). Researchers have suggested that this may be the implication of reduced educator involvement in children’s dramatic play, as well as a reduced time for dramatic play, and an increase in structured learning activities (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Smirnova, 2013; Wood, 2014).

Currently, many studies where the complexity of dramatic play is the focus have employed an experimental research design (Howe et al., 2014; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). While experimental research has provided crucial information of an objective nature, it has limited the ability to provide an in-depth understanding of the environmental elements which may have contributed to this evaluation. For instance, studies that have investigated children’s dramatic play
behaviour when they are presented a prescribed collection of play objects may discriminate against the amount of experience and conceptual knowledge that the child has of that object (Fenson et al., 1976; Jackowitz & Watson, 1980; Stagnitti, 2009). Moreover, dramatic play often occurs within a social context with peers; however, many studies examine children in dramatic play as a solitary activity, or with children that they may be unfamiliar with (Trawick-Smith, 1990). Studies of the aforementioned nature may have provided knowledge that is deductive and predictive to the development of play, but may have ignored the subjective context in which the child is placed.

In contrast, there is a wide collection of studies that have considered educators’ perspectives of dramatic play using a purely qualitative research design (Ashiabi, 2007; Fleer, 2015; McCormick, Noonan & Heck, 1998; Sarama & Clements, 2009). Whilst the subjective nature of qualitative research has offered the current knowledge base a detailed analysis of educators’ understanding and practice in relation to children’s dramatic play, a reliance upon qualitative research methods has resulted in less being known about how educators understanding and practice is translated into children’s involvement in dramatic play and the complexity of behaviour within the activity. Accordingly, Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) argue that it is difficult for the knowledge generated by qualitative research to be generalised past the context in which it has been realised.

Dramatic play is often romanticised as a natural activity, yet many experimental research designs do not approach the activity in a natural way. Furthermore, many qualitative designs isolate the activity away from classroom processes. Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) postulate that in light of decreasing levels of involvement in complex dramatic play, research needs to examine how the educator is facilitating provisions for dramatic play to occur within the classroom environment and develop in complexity. The premise that more comprehensive research is needed suggests that to properly understand children’s involvement in play, we cannot separate the activity from the context in which it occurs. Accordingly, the current study aimed to examine children’s dramatic play as an interaction between the classroom environment and the child’s activity.
Laevers (1994) argues that the level of children’s involvement in classroom activities is both a representation of the quality of classroom processes and a complex cognitive process which indicates that the child is involved in deep-level learning. Measuring involvement goes further than examining the amount of time spent or the focus of a child’s attention, which is a focus of many previous studies (McWilliam & Casey, 2005; Reunamo et al., 2014). Rather, involvement examines the complexity of a child’s activity through the presence of cognitive and behavioural physical indicators (see Section 3.4.1). Accordingly, with a focus on involvement, the current study aimed to provide a deeper analysis of children’s dramatic play behaviour.

3.2.2 Research questions

The current study sought to answer the following four research questions:

1. What are preschool children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences?
2. What are preschool children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?
3. In what way (if any) does the classroom environment influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?
4. In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?

Research questions 1 and 2 intend to identify the complexity of children’s dramatic play by evaluating their involvement levels and behaviours associated with the activity. Meanwhile, questions 3 and 4 endeavour to gain an understanding of the factors within the classroom that may contribute to the children’s involvement in play.

3.2.3 Research methods

Given the gaps identified in the review of the literature on dramatic play research (see Section 3.2.1), a mixed-methods approach was considered necessary to gain a comprehensive insight into the research questions. The adoption of a mixed-methods design was also considered integral to the current study, as the problem of inquiry is complex, consisting of six key multifaceted, interactional elements: a)
Dramatic play behaviour; b) Involvement; c) The physical classroom; d) The curriculum; e) The interactional environment; and f) Educator’s beliefs and values.

The aforementioned elements were selected based on the review of literature, which has proposed that the complexity of dramatic play is declining despite limited concrete evidence to show the reasons why. A coordinated method using a quantitative strand that employed empirical observations to deduce logical reasoning was needed to examine the levels of children’s dramatic play and involvement (Mukherji & Albon, 2011). In quantitative research, the researcher has the ability to aggregate large sets of data to provide large coverage of a situation. Data is measured and analysed to find explanations using numbers, which can be generalised to other contexts (Thomas, 2003). In this study, quantitative data was required for three purposes:

a) To discover the level of children’s involvement in dramatic play,
b) To examine the level of children’s play behaviour, and
c) To evaluate the attributes of a quality environment.

A relationship is shown between one’s level of involvement and the complexity of action one exerts within an activity (i.e., dramatic play) (Laevers, 1994). As a child’s level of involvement is considered to be an indicator of classroom quality and the process of children’s learning, ‘involvement’ and ‘dramatic play’ are both dependent variables in the current study.

The independent variables in this study consist of the physical environment, the curriculum and interactional environment. These variables were selected as a focus of inquiry as they are defined as the key aspects of classroom quality (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005). It was decided that a qualitative strand was needed to examine the influence that educators’ own values, knowledge and behaviour have upon children’s dramatic play. A qualitative strand would provide a rich narrative of the practices and teaching discourses within the individual classrooms. Moreover, the employment of qualitative data would provide an opportunity to gain a richer insight into the complexities of children’s play behaviour. Consequently, interviews and video observations were adopted so as to offer the possibility of co-constructing knowledge.
with the participant to provide an in-depth inquiry into the contexts of a phenomenon (Hatch, 2006).

There is no one design that is associated with mixed-methods research. Specifically, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) outline four designs, including:

a) Convergent parallel design: Quantitative and qualitative strands are concurrently, but independently collected and analysed during the same phase of the research process. The data sets are merged together to make interpretations through comparisons and relations of data analysis;

b) Sequential design: The study begins with the collection and analysis of one strand. The findings are used to develop the implementation of the secondary strand. The analysis of both strands are brought together for interpretation;

c) Embedded design: A traditional quantitative or qualitative design that inserts a secondary strand of data to enhance the overall design of the study. This can be conducted concurrently with the primary data source, or independently. Both sources of data are interpreted together; and

d) Multiphase design: Combines sequential and concurrent studies in one design. The multiphase design might be employed as a means to gather the perspectives of participants in study one. These findings might inform the development of a research instrument that is tested in a subsequent study. These findings might, in turn, inform a third study where methods are mixed to implement an assess success an intervention.

The current study employs a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Within this design, the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative strands occur simultaneously. Equal weight is placed on each strand of data (quantitative and qualitative), which are collected and analysed independently, but concurrently. The results of each strand are merged together to compare and contrast the findings so that detailed interpretations can be made. The converged approach consists of four phases within the research process.

In Phase 1 of a converged parallel approach, the sample is selected (see Section 3.3.1). The research design of the current study adopts a case study model. Case
studies are often employed in research where the aim is to examine a phenomenon in
detail, in order to understand the occurring characteristics (Vasconcelos, 2010). Further description of case study is provided by Stake (1995):

...A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case...A case study is the
study of a particularly and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its

In the current study, a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2009) was employed
where each individual centre was a case. This means that each case study shares the
same research questions, however the data of each case is collected, analysed and
reported independently (Yin, 2009). Mukherji and Albon (2011) suggest that often the
purpose of using multiple case studies is to find information that is generalisable to a
wider population. This makes the value of the case study more robust, and intrinsic to
a unique situation.

In the current study, a multiple case study approach enabled a more compelling
strategy to compare and contrast the contexts of the individual centres, which allowed
the researcher to learn the specific factors that may have contributed to the children’s
dramatic play behaviours. Yin (2009) discusses that in adopting multiple case studies,
the researcher is able to interpret the similarities and differences within the results of
each case. This is appropriate to the current study, where the purpose is to examine
how factors within the individual classroom influences children’s dramatic play
behaviour.

In Phase 2 and 3 of the current study, the data was collected and analysed
separately. In the quantitative strand of the research, the data was collected and
analysed using four sources of data (see Section 3.4.1). These data identify the levels
of children’s involvement and their dramatic play behaviours, and contribute to
understanding what a productive classroom for dramatic play looks like. Meanwhile
the qualitative strand aimed to explore and explain elements of children’s play, as well
as examine the factors of the classroom (educator, environment and curriculum) that
influenced the levels presented in the quantitative data.

In Phase 4, these two strands of data were pulled together to make
interpretations through a process of comparison and contrast. In merging these two
data sets, a process of triangulation occurs. Triangulation is the process in which multiple methodologies are combined within the same study to explain or expand on the results using various data sources (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). When two data sets are combined they allow for richer interpretations, as the strength of one method can assist the weaknesses of another.

In the current study, qualitative data assisted in clarifying, describing and validating quantitative findings. Meanwhile, quantitative data was able to both validate and enhance the ability to generalise qualitative findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This can provide a complementary and comprehensive answer to the research questions. Hesse-Biber (2010) describes this as a process of cross-checking the results of each data set. Consequently the various data sets can be examined for consistency to increase the reliability of results.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2008) contend that in order to maintain the quality of mixed-methods research, a researcher must be aware of the purpose of its employment. They provide seven common purposes for which mixed methods may be employed, six of which are applicable this study (i.e., complementarity, completeness, expansion, compensation, diversity and confirmation) wherein a convergence parallel design has been employed (Table 3.1). The seventh reason (i.e., developmental) is applicable to sequential designs and as such was not considered to be relevant to the current study.

Table 3.1: Reasons for using a convergence parallel mixed-methods design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To gain a complimentary view of the research problem</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To strengthen the research by obtaining a complete view of the research problem in a comprehensive manner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To utilise the strengths and compensate for weaknesses of each methods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To compare and contrast the findings in order to obtain divergent findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To confirm the credibility of findings from one strand using an explanatory approach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To expand explanation of the findings through different lenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In using a convergence parallel design, the researcher aimed to blend quantitative and qualitative methods so as to provide a more complete view of the problem than what one method would achieve on its own (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). Central to this notion is the ability to combine methods so as to complement the strengths and weaknesses of the methods involved. This enables the researcher to interpret and explain the findings from multiple axes, making it possible to compare and contrast the findings. Therefore, the researcher is able to strengthen the completeness of the findings.

In summary, this study will conduct a multiple case study within a convergence parallel design. This design fits the research purposes and questions where a mixed method inquiry is needed. In addition a detailed exploration of each case will offer a comprehensive understanding of the differing classroom contexts to deduce which factors of the classroom environment contribute to the quality and quantity of children’s dramatic play. The following sections outlines the processes and procedures of the study, including the selection of participants, the ethical procedures and pilot testing.

3.3. Research processes and procedures

This section outlines how the participants were selected. The ethical concerns and procedures are also discussed.

3.3.1 Sample selection

In the state of Victoria, Australia, preschool curriculums for children are offered in two types of settings. The first, Long Day Care (LDC), provides children with a full day of education and care. Traditionally, LDC has been perceived as providing children with care whilst their families are at work. However, in recent times, the educational value of LDC is increasing (COAG, 2009). Since January 2013, LDC in Victoria have provided a Government-funded preschool curriculum for 15-hours a week, with the employment of a 4-year degree-qualified early childhood teacher. This is to provide all children of age 4- to 6-years with equal access to quality education and care in the year before school.
Sessional preschool accounts for the second type of setting that offers children education and care by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher. Sessional preschools also provide children with 15-hours of education and care a week, but children typically attend these settings in shorter sessions than what they would in a LDC. In comparison to a LDC, the sessional preschool, has traditionally been perceived as providing children with an educational curriculum in the year prior to school. Sessional preschools are operated by members of the local community, whereas LDC can be operated as a private for-profit business, a non-for profit organisation, or (like sessional preschools) it can be run by the local community. Recent movements in ECEC policy that have aimed to improve the quality of ECEC now hold both LDC and sessional preschool as accountable for quality assessment (COAG, 2009). As such, it was important for the current study that a sample of early childhood centres from each type of setting was examined.

In Victoria, the most recent statistic shows that there are approximately 2,007 early childhood centres that offer a preschool curriculum for children aged between 4- to 6-years (ABS, 2011). In 2011, LDC accounted for 843 of these curriculums, while sessional preschools accounted for 1,165 (ABS, 2011). Securing a representative sample was an important process of this study. This means that the sample needed to reflect the constructs of the population (Greenfield, 2002). The primary criteria for the selection of centres were as follows: a) the centres were within a 5km radius of Deakin University, Burwood; b) the centres were located within an area of middle level socio-economic status; and c) the participating centres provided a Government-funded preschool curriculum. There were 140 centres (long day care and sessional preschool) that met these criteria. The centres were pooled together to construct the sampling frame.

As the researcher intended to make inferences based on the examination of a sample that was likely to be representative of the population, randomised sampling is argued to be the most suitable method of sampling style (Black, 1999). As the current study aimed to collect data from two different types of ECEC (LDC and sessional preschools), stratified random sampling was employed as it was considered to be more suitable (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 2006). Stratified random sampling
involves dividing the sampling frame into groups according to a selection criterion and selecting a sample at random from each group (Collins et al., 2006).

In using this stratified random sampling scheme the researcher divided the sampling frame into separate groups (1. long day care and 2. sessional preschool). Based on the Australian government database (i.e., MyChild), there were 73 long day care centre and 67 sessional preschools within the 5km radius of Burwood, Victoria, within the research period of 2013. The researcher then randomly selected two centres from each group to maintain equal distribution within the sample, which formed the overall sample of four centres (i.e., 2 long day care and 2 sessional preschools) (As shown in Figure 3.3).

![Figure 3.3: Selection of centres within 5km and final sample in the current study](image)

Conditional to the multiple case study design, each centre was a ‘case’. According to Collins (2010) a sample of four provides a sufficient sample size for a case study design. These four centres consisted of eight educator participants and 101 children. The educators were asked to participate in a series of interviews to elicit responses relating to their understandings and beliefs towards dramatic play (see Section 3.4.2). Meanwhile, the data collected from the 101 children would be used to find the complexity of dramatic play behaviour and also their levels of involvement in the activity (see Section 3.4.1).

Collins (2010) provides a guideline for the suggested number of participants required for a sample size to be representative of the population. Table 3.2 shows that the sample size of participants recruited for each aspect of the current study (case
study, interview, and correlational research) corresponds with the sample size Collins suggests.

**Table 3.2: Representative sample size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research method</th>
<th>Suggested</th>
<th>Current study’s sample</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>3– 5 participants</td>
<td>4 centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>6 – 9 participants</td>
<td>8 educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlational</td>
<td>64 - 84 participants</td>
<td>101 children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participating centres were located in the eastern suburbs of Metropolitan Melbourne. Table 3.3 and Table 3.4 provide a summary of the demographic factors of the centres studied.

**Table 3.3: Centre information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre no.</th>
<th>Centre type</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>Mean Age (months)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 1</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 2</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 3</td>
<td>Sessional</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 4</td>
<td>Sessional</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>101</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.4: Educators’ demographic information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre no.</th>
<th>No. of Teachers</th>
<th>No. of Assistants</th>
<th>Qualification Teacher</th>
<th>Assistant</th>
<th>Years of experience Teacher</th>
<th>Assistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 1</td>
<td>1 (Jessica)</td>
<td>1 (Irene)</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td>Cert. III</td>
<td>5 – 10</td>
<td>Under 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 2</td>
<td>1 (Caitlin)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>Under 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 3</td>
<td>1 (Annette)</td>
<td>1 (Grace)</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>11 – 15</td>
<td>11 – 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 4</td>
<td>1 (Naomi)</td>
<td>2 (Lauren) (Susan)</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Over 15</td>
<td>Over 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Centre 1 operated as a privately owned LDC. The centre was open for 12-hours a day, 5-days a week. The centre consisted of four rooms that provided education and care for children between birth and 6 years. The rooms were separated into age groups of infancy (birth to 18-months), toddlerhood (18-months to 3-years), pre-kindergarten (3- to 4-years) and preschool (4- to 6-years). Each room consisted of permanent educators. As Table 3.4 highlights, a 4-year Bachelor Degree-qualified teacher (Jessica) and an assistant (Irene) currently holding a 1-year Certificate III were positioned in the preschool room. There were also educators hired as support staff, with a purpose of
covering lunch breaks and Jessica’s 4 hours of educational planning time a week. Accordingly, it was common for educators other than the degree-qualified teacher to be involved in the day-to-day events (i.e., routines, planned and unplanned experiences) of the preschool classroom.

The educators in Centre 1 worked on a rotating roster, which allowed them to work a differently timed shift each week. The degree-qualified teacher performed the role of the educational leader for the centre. This role identifies an individual as the expert of educational planning and leadership within the centre (ACECQA, 2013). The role requires duties to be carried out within the centre that maintain and improve educational practice. As such, the teacher was provided with time each week to leave the preschool room and undertake such duty. This time varied from 2-hours to a full 8-hour day. However, the 15-hours of contact time with the children in 1-week remained.

Centre 2 was also a privately owned centre. In this centre there were three rooms. These included: a) infant (birth to 2-years); b) toddlerhood (2- to 3.5-years) and preschool (3.5- to 6-years). The degree-qualified teacher (Caitlin) worked in the preschool room, however she shared the role of centre director and also was in the role of the educational leader. As such, the contact time spent with the children each week varied according to the demands of the centre. On the days of Caitlin’s absence a member of the support staff would fulfil teaching duties within the classroom (i.e., routines, planned and unplanned experiences). This staff member varied on a day-to-day-basis, however the children were familiar with the educator.

Centres 3 and 4 both operated as a sessional preschool. In both centre types, the children were aged between 4- to 6-years. The educators in Centre 3 consisted of one degree-qualified teacher (Annette) and an assistant who held a 2-year Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care (Grace). In contrast, the educators in Centre 4 consisted of one degree-qualified teacher (Naomi) and two assistants who held a 2-year Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care (Lauren and Susan). Both centres were run by a parent committee.
Centre 3 provided children with three preschool sessions of 5-hours a week. There was just one kindergarten group running at this particular centre. In Centre 4, there were similarly three preschool sessions of 5-hours a week. However, there were three groups of children. These groups were integrated so that each group saw each other on at least one occasion each week. For example on Monday group one and two were integrated into one session, on Wednesday group one were integrated with group three and on Thursday group two were integrated with group three. In both of these centres, the educators were in direct contact with the children throughout the 5-hour sessions, which meant that no support staff were needed. The teachers conducted up to 10-hours of educational planning a week. This was conducted outside the 5-hour preschool session.

In each of the four centres, the sample of participants took part in identical data collection techniques. Moreover, the same data analysis procedures were performed for each case. The data collection and analysis occurred in a convergence parallel research design wherein qualitative and quantitative strands were implemented concurrently and carried equal weight. This research design, combined with the purpose of the study being to examine and compare/contrast the factors of the classroom environment that influence children’s dramatic play behaviour, permitted stratified random sampling to be an appropriate choice (Collins et al., 2006). If the sampling scheme were to purposefully select centres according to specific element criteria (i.e., philosophy, curriculum or pre-determined educator/child behaviour) then the study would be limited in the ability to make generalisations as the children’s play behaviours may not be representative of the broader population.

3.3.2. Ethical considerations

During the course of the study, the researcher made a number of ethical judgements to ensure moral procedures were followed. In this section, these decisions are discussed in regards to research with teachers, research with children and research with parents. Conducting research in an ethical manner requires the researcher to be constantly aware of the potential risks associated with the project (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). This may involve the privacy of participants’ identity, the
probability and severity of distress, harm or humiliation caused to participants, coercion to participate and being fully informed on the nature of the research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Mukherji & Albon, 2011). In any research, ethics should be the “primary consideration of the researcher” (Creswell, 2008, p. 13). However, in research with children, ethics is particularly important as they are considered vulnerable to exploitation.

The Deakin University Ethics Committee sanctioned the research (HAE-13-026) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development gave approval before potential centres were approached (Appendices A & B). However, maintaining ethical standards is much more than meeting the formal requirements of governing agencies. It is about the personal responsibility of being mindful towards making contextual moral judgements in a systematic way (Coady, 2010).

Maintaining honesty and respect with participants is crucial to the research process, which means that informed consent is crucial to ethical research (Coady, 2010). Plain Language Statements (PLS) were distributed to the participating directors, the educators and the families of the children in each classroom (Appendix C). Each participant group were provided with a unique PLS that detailed the research purpose, rationale, procedures and their individual participation requirements. Descriptions were also provided about the dissemination of results and storage of data. With this knowledge, the participants gave informed consent, stating their understanding and agreement with these details. All participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research. Moreover, each group of participants had their own set of information provided to them in the recruitment, according to the level of their involvement. This is outlined in the sections below.

**Centre Director:** The contact details of all Victorian centres are publically listed on the Australian Government (2013) website ‘MyChild’. After the centres were classified and grouped as a LDC or sessional preschool, the researcher randomly selected centres to contact. The directors or co-ordinators of each centre were initially contacted by phone to invite their interest in participating. A Plain Language Statement (PLS) was emailed to the director. The researcher contacted the director by
phone 2-days after the PLS had been emailed, to confirm their interest. A meeting was arranged to individually meet with the educators of the preschool classroom of the centre to further explain the project and outline the data collection techniques. Throughout the data collection period, the director was kept informed of the researcher’s presence, and times were negotiated well in advance if the researcher needed to remove the educators from their classroom to conduct the interviews privately. A summary of the results was sent by email to the director concluding the project, if requested.

**Educators:** It was important that educators did not feel coerced to participate by their centre director. Therefore, the researcher arranged with the director to visit the centre so as to individually invite the educators working in the preschool classroom of the centre to participate. In the meeting, conducted without the director present, the research purpose and data collection techniques were outlined. The educator received a PLS and consent form. 2-days following the meeting, the educators were contacted by phone to confirm their interest to participate.

Mukherji and Albon (2011) write that research presence can be time-consuming and place pressure upon educators. To reduce this risk, the researcher kept the educators informed of the data to be collected each day so that any possible disruptions to the curriculum could be considered in advance. A convenient time to conduct the interviews was negotiated with the educator. Concluding the project, a summary of results was sent by email to the educators if requested.

**Families:** Informed third party consent was obtained from the families of the children of each centre. The researcher sent a PLS home with each child of the preschool classroom inviting their families to consent to participate. Families were given the opportunity to request their child’s face be blurred in video observations. If families had not returned the consent forms after two reminders, their children’s faces were blurred and no quantitative data were collected on these children.

**Children:** Research with children can sometimes become a limitation to a study as observations can be disrupted when children are not familiar with being watched or know the researcher (Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007). For this reason, the researcher
visited the classroom for two to three days prior to collecting the data to develop relationships with the children, staff and families. The aim was to become a member of the classroom, so that all other members would be aware that the researcher was there to conduct research (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). This time provided the opportunity for the children to become familiar with having the researcher in the room. In this time, the researcher engaged verbally with most families about the project and answered any concerns.

The purpose of the researcher’s presence in the classroom was explained to children at the beginning of the data collection. The children involved in the project were 4- to 6-years old, making them able to verbalise or show physical cues to alert the researcher on their willingness to be involved. Specifically, the researcher looked for physical cues, such as avoiding being observed, or anxious behaviours, such as constantly checking if the researcher was watching during their play. If at any stage a child said or displayed cues that they did not wish to be observed, the researcher respected their apprehension. On the days of video observation, the children were given the opportunity to explore the uses of the camera, to learn how it would be used and what it would be used for (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

**Maintaining the privacy of educators:** The use of video observation created ethical issues concerning the privacy of the educator participants, as it was likely that footage collected for the dialogic reflective interview could contain multiple staff members. Consequently this could pose a professional risk to the participants if the behaviour of a team member were negatively viewed by others. Accordingly, a professional judgement was made by the researcher to present footage in the dialogic reflective interviews that was relevant only to the individual participant. The purpose of this decision was to ensure that the participant’s level of professionalism would not be critiqued by their colleagues. Each centre was provided the opportunity to keep the footage to use as a professional instrument within their centre if desired.

**The effect of the researcher on the classroom:** Research often has the potential to disrupt normal classroom experiences. For example, Van Oers (2003) illustrates that children’s behaviour could change when they are in the presence of a video camera.
In addition, Coady (2010) outlines that children may become anxious or exuberant when there is a stranger watching them play. Also, the presence of a researcher has the potential to change an educator’s own practice when they know they are being watched (Greig et al., 2007). A further dilemma occurs to the disruption of the learning experience, when educators need to be taken out of the classroom for interviews. The following strategies aimed to minimise the researcher’s effect on the classroom:

- Positioning the video recorder out of the way of classroom activities and traffic,
- Providing an appropriate space between the researcher’s position and the children’s play when observing them,
- Partaking in an orientation week in each classroom prior to collecting data to build a rapport with the staff, the children and families,
- Allowing children time to use the cameras,
- Negotiating convenient times with the director and the educators to conduct the interviews, and
- Keeping the interviews within the allocated time period.

In summary, the current study employed stratified random sampling to recruit the participation of four preschool classrooms in four early childhood centres. In total, the sample for the current study consists of 101 children and eight educators. A number of strategies were put in place to ensure ethical research practice was maintained. In the next section, the research instruments will be presented.

3.4 Research instruments

Data collection occurred between July and December 2013. Each centre was observed for approximately 4-weeks. This section outlines the research instruments and their purpose in the overall study.

3.4.1 Quantitative data

Quantitative data were collected using four instruments. These included:

1. Smilansky’s Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play (SSEDSP).
2. Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC).
4. Engagement Check II (EC-II).

Instruments 1 to 3 are rating scales. Bentzen (2009) describes rating scales as a quantitative measurement tool where the aim is to determine the quality of an individual’s performance in specific areas. Rating scales were a legitimate choice of method in the current study wherein the intention was to examine the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour, level of involvement, and quality of the classroom environment. The fourth quantitative instrument adopted the procedure of time sampling to determine the frequency of children’s involvement in dramatic play. This enabled the researcher to gain understanding of the quantity of children’s dramatic play and also examine if there were any patterns relating to children’s dramatic play behaviours and preferences (Martin, 2010).

Maintaining reliability and validity throughout the research procedures was of importance to the researcher. Reliability refers to the extent to which an instrument produces data that remains consistent and stable (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Most commonly, reliability of quantitative instruments is determined through tests of:

a) Inter-rater reliability: The level of agreement between the scores of two or more raters who are scoring the same characteristics, and

b) Internal consistency reliability: The extent to which the items within a scale produce similar results.

Both of these reliability tests are conducted through reliability coefficients: Pearson’s correlation coefficient and/or Cronbach’s alpha. Pearson’s correlation coefficient, represented by $r$, measures the percent of agreement. A score between –0.1 (weak negative relationship) and +1.00 (strong positive relationship) can be achieved (DeVellis, 2003). In order to be considered satisfactory, $r$ should be above 80%. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is represented by $k$ and ranges between 0 to 1.0. In order to be considered satisfactory, $k$ should be above 0.70 (DeVellis, 2003). The reliability of each instrument will be discussed in the individual sub-sections for each instrument.
Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) assert that the validity of quantitative research refers to the extent to which the data is a true representation of the constructs that are being measured. When selecting the instruments for the study, the researcher examined several sources of evidence to ensure validity was maintained. Specifically, Table 3.5 shows that each research instrument adopted in the current study upheld:

a) Content validity: The extent to which an instrument is representative of the domain that it aims to measure,

b) Construct validity: The extent to which an instrument measures what it intends to measure, and

c) Criterion-related validity: The extent to which the results of an instrument correlate with the findings of another instrument.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research instrument</th>
<th>Content validity</th>
<th>Construct validity</th>
<th>Criterion validity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

A pilot test was conducted by the researcher to test the reliability of the administration of each research instrument prior to data collection. The test was conducted by the researcher and her principal supervisor in one sessional preschool.
close to the University. Both observers were lecturers in Early Childhood Education. The director and educators of the centre were informed of the purpose of the study.

In the pilot test, Smilansky’s Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play (SSEDSP) and Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC) were performed twice on one child aged between 4- to 5-years; once in the indoor environment and once in the outdoor environment. The child, who was randomly selected by the researcher, was observed for a total of 60-minutes. The EC-II was conducted in the sandpit and playground of the outdoor play space. These areas were selected on the basis of the large amount of activity occurring in these play spaces at the time of observation. In total there were 16 children that were observed. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (ECERS-R) was conducted over a 4-hour period, as recommended by the instrument guidelines (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005).

Notes were made during this pilot session in regards to the effectiveness of procedures being followed. A review of these notes determined:

1. Due to the amount of activity occurring within the classroom environment at once, an observation schedule was needed so as to logically and equally observe the children of focus,
2. When conducting the EC-II, children would be considered as being involved in dramatic play if they showed behaviours of a) imitating a role; b) substituting objects and actions and; c) playing within an imaginary world, and
3. The ECERS-R would be conducted over the course of one 7-hour day to provide a more comprehensive implementation of the instrument.

All four of the instruments required observations to be conducted within the preschool classroom of the centres studied. Observations of children were conducted over the course of approximately 6-hours during times of programmed free play. Each day the researcher focused on observing five individual children. As early childhood centres often run curriculums where children can play indoor or outdoor at their leisure, the children were placed in an observational order so as to ensure that each
child was observed equally. Each instrument required unique information to be collected. This will be specifically detailed in the sections below.

### 3.4.1.1 Smilansky’s Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play (SSEDSP)

The Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play (SSEDSP) (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) was adopted to assess the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviours. The instrument was employed as it provides a comprehensive analysis of children’s dramatic play that is relevant for the purpose of answering the research questions. Initially developed as a diagnostic tool, the instrument has been established as both valid and reliable to assess the dramatic and socio-dramatic play of children aged 3- to 8-years (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

The SSEDSP assesses the complexity of six elements of children’s dramatic play, including: a) Imitative role play; b) Make-believe with objects; c) Make-believe with actions and situations; d) Persistence in role play; e) Interactions; and f) Verbal communication (see Table 3.6). These six elements of the SSEDSP correspond with the definition of complex dramatic play employed in the current study (see Section 2.2.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Play</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative Role Play</td>
<td>The child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with Objects</td>
<td>A toy, object, verbalisation or gesture is used to symbolise a make-believe object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with Actions and Situations</td>
<td>Verbalisations are substituted for actions and situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence in Role Play</td>
<td>The child persists in a play episode for at least 5-minutes. They may follow a series of acts or roles or stay within one related scene or role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>The child directs an action or word to another child within the context of the play episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Communication</td>
<td>Verbal communication related to the play episode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each element is considered equally as important; however, to be involved in complex social play, the last two elements must be present. The complexity of the dramatic play is determined by the extent to which each element is performed.
(Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). This is assessed according to a 4-point Likert scale where:

- $0 = \text{the element is not present}$
- $1 = \text{the element is present but to a limit degree}$
- $2 = \text{the element is present to a moderate degree}$
- $3 = \text{the element is present consistently and in many situations during the child’s play}$ (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990, p. 241).

The instrument was conducted on each child individually twice, once indoor and once outdoor. This follows the rationale that dramatic play occurs in both physical contexts of the classroom environment (Cloward Drown, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2008). Moreover, the instrument has been used in previous research to capture children’s natural involvement in dramatic play in both indoor and outdoor classroom environments (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010; Cloward Drown, 2014). Each application was conducted over a 30-minute period during times the curriculum offered free play. At 5-minute intervals, a score of 0 to 3 was assigned to each of the six elements to represent the level of children’s dramatic play behaviours. Notes were taken to record the type of role the child was playing, the objects children were using, and the verbal dialogue. A total of six 5-minute intervals were collected. The sum score of each interval was calculated to determine the total score for the full 30-minute play period. A mean score range between 0 – 18 was possible.

The SSEDSP was selected by the researcher over other instruments that similarly measure children’s dramatic play due to its equal focus on the six key elements of play behaviour. In comparison, other instruments can limit the focus on one or two elements such as child’s object substitution, role play, verbal communication or social interactions (Howe et al., 2014; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Although still comprehensive, the current study aimed to gather a holistic understanding of children’s dramatic play. The development of the SSEDSP was based on the existing definition of socio-dramatic play (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Smilansky’s initial research (1968) examined children aged between 3- and 6-years, from both middle and lower socioeconomic
status (Section 2.7.1). Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) describe that the validity of the scale is evident in numerous studies which have adopted the instrument to measure the relationships between children’s socio-dramatic skills and child characteristics (see for example Taler, cited in Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Furthermore, the predictive validity of the scale is demonstrated in studies that have found a positive relationship between children’s socio dramatic play and reading scores (Smilansky & Feldman, cited in Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) and social adjustment (Taler, cited in Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

The cross-situational consistency of the scale was assessed in further studies that tested the reliability of the scale when used in structured or normal preschool settings (Smilansky & Feldman; Soiberg, as cited in Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Cross-situational consistency refers to the extent to which the instrument produces the same results in different contexts. The authors report a correlated score of 0.87. Since these studies, the instrument has been re-evaluated and recommended for use in research by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) on the grounds of its usefulness as a tool to facilitate research and educators’ practice.

Pilot testing of the SSEDSP was conducted using six pairs of data to ensure the reliability of the researcher in administering the instrument. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Chronbachs alpha. An agreement of 0.88 was achieved for the total play score. This result matches the inter-rater reliability of the scale established by Griffing (as cited in Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990, p. 253).

### 3.4.1.2 Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC)

The LIS-YC (Laevers, 1994) was adopted to examine the level of children’s involvement in dramatic play. The LIS-YC involves assessing the presence of the nine signals of involvement that are observable of the child during play, including: concentration; energy; creativity; facial expression and posture; persistence; precision; reaction time; verbal utterances/language, and satisfaction. The involvement scale was purposely chosen by the researcher to meet the current study’s purpose for two main reasons:
a) It examines the level (complexity) of children’s involvement in preschool classroom, and
b) It is conducted using time sampling, which examines the quantity of play occurring.

The instrument was appropriate to use in the isolation of dramatic play activities for the following three reasons:

a) During play children enter a state of flow which stimulates the level of energy, concentration, joy and precision that they experience in an activity (Laevers, 1994; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2007),
b) When playing dramatically, children are involved in an element of creativity through the power of their imagination (Bodrova, 2008), and
c) Language directs children’s dramatic play, especially in preschool (Vygotsky, 1978).

The scale adopts a Likert scale rating, where a score of low, medium or high is awarded to each of the nine indicators of involvement. For each observation, an aggregated score of 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 was assigned. Table 3.7 outlines the indicators of involvement associated with each score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement Rating</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No activity (1)</td>
<td>No concentration, the child’s actions are aimless and there are little signs of exploration or mental activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently interrupted activity (2)</td>
<td>The child is often distracted, limiting the level of concentration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More or less maintained activity (3)</td>
<td>The child is busy, but attention is artificial and the child is using limited capabilities with little imagination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity with intense moments (4)</td>
<td>The child is involved, however they are not always present to their full extent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustained intense activity (5)</td>
<td>The child is completely involved in an activity and is completely absorbed in it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aggregated score was calculated using the following framework:

- A rating of 1 was given when all nine indicators were scored as low
- A rating of 2 was given when half of the indicators were scored as low and half were scored as medium,
- A rating of 3 was given when all of the indicators were scored as medium,
- A rating of 4 was given when half of the indicators were scored as medium and half were scored as high, and
- A rating of 5 was given when all nine indicators were scored as high.

The scale was conducted over a 6-hour period each day until all children were observed. In this process, five children were observed each day. Every child was observed six times in 2-minute intervals over two consecutive days during scheduled periods of free play. A total average score of each child’s involvement in dramatic play was determined by calculating the sum of all observations and dividing by the number of observations. A mean score between 1 to 5 was possible.

Laevers (1994) tested the inter-rater reliability of the scale in a study that observed three children over a total of 20-hours. A score of 0.85 was achieved between the two observers (Laevers, 1994). Pilot testing of the LIS-YC within the current study involved two sets of data and yielded a total inter-rater reliability score of 0.91.

3.4.1.3 Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R)

The ECERS-R (Harms et al., 2005) was employed to measure the global quality of the classroom environment. The scale is comprehensive, consisting of 43 items across seven subscales including:

1. Space and furnishings
2. Personal care**
3. Language and reasoning
4. Activities
5. Interaction
5 of the subscales were adopted for the current study. The 31 items included in the subscales adopted are outlined in Table 3.8. These scales were employed because the comprising items were considered the most appropriate for the study’s purpose. This included factors specific to physical, curriculum and interactional quality. Subscales Personal care and Parents and staff were omitted due to initial literature searches showing no relevance of a) Hygiene and nutrition, and b) Administration to the focus of the current study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Subscale Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space and Furnishings</td>
<td>1) Indoor space; 2) Furniture for routine care; 3) Play and learning; 4) Furnishings for relaxation and comfort; 5) Room for arrangement and play; 6) Space for privacy; 7) Child related display; 8) Space for gross motor play; 9) Gross motor equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and reasoning</td>
<td>10) Books and pictures; 11) Encouraging children to communicate; 12) Using language to develop reasoning skills; 13) informal use of language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the 31 items of the scale comprises of descriptions under the quality levels of 1 = Inadequate; 3 = Minimal; 5 = Good; and 7 = Excellent. When scoring an item, the researcher begun by reading the description under quality level 1 (Inadequate) and progressed upwards until an indicator was not met. The items of each sub-scale were aggregated to calculate the mean score for the individual scales. A total overall rating of the classroom within each centre was derived from an average of the total of each subscale.
The scale was implemented in the first week of data collection in each centre, over the course of 7-hours. This was to accommodate the scale’s provision of activities for a “substantial period of the day”. This is defined as being a third of the time children are in attendance (Harms et al., 2005). Observation for a full day allowed the researcher to be familiar with the routines and provisions of the curriculum to make appropriate judgements. A time was arranged with the teacher the day after implementing the instrument to ask questions about the indicators that were not observed. All questions were selected from the ECERS-R, with the purpose to decide if a higher rating was possible.

The ECERS-R has been established as being both valid and reliable in the context of examining constructs of quality in preschool classrooms (Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997; Whitebook, Phillips & Howes, 1990). The ECERS-R is a revised edition of the original ECERS published in 1980, which is strong in content, construct and predictive validity. The ECERS-R used in this study holds the same theoretical and conceptual constructs as the original, as well as retaining the same definition of environment. In addition, the ECERS-R maintains the same scoring approach and administration. As such, Harms et al. (2005) conclude the validity of the instrument is maintained. Administration of the ECERS-R in the large-scale EPPE study also validates the revisions of the instrument (Sylva et al., 2010).

Harms et al. (2005) outline the results of inter-rater reliability testing conducted in 21 American classrooms. The percentage of agreement across all 470 indicators was 86.1%. Agreement of 48% was scored for exact agreement at an item level, and 71% for agreement within one point. The correlations between the two observers for the entire scale were 0.91 (Pearson) and 0.86 (Spearman). Tests for the internal consistency at a subscale scale level provided a score range of 0.71 to 0.88 at a subscale level, and 0.92 for the entire scale.

In the current study, the total inter-rater reliability score using one set of data ECERS-R was 0.96. This result is satisfactory (DeVilles, 2003).
3.4.1.4 Engagement Check II (EC-II)

The EC-II (McWilliam & Casey, 2008) was used to evaluate the percentage of children involved in dramatic play at a given time. The purpose of using the EC-II was to establish the amount of dramatic play that occurs in the classroom environment and the areas of the environment where it is most frequent. This was of importance to the researcher as it provided further data to compare and contrast ways in which the classroom environment facilitates children’s involvement in dramatic play and also allowed its patterns of behaviour to be analysed. Dramatic play occurs in varying shapes and forms, making it likely that in a typical preschool classroom multiple dramatic experiences along with other activities will be occurring at once (Ashiabi, 2007). Therefore, the EC-II complemented the LIS-YC by enabling the researcher to detail the number of children in the class involved in dramatic play activities at one time at varying points of the day. This provided valuable insights into the patterns influencing children’s involvement in dramatic play.

Children’s involvement in dramatic play was identified if their focused attention was involved in:

a) Undertaking a role within a make-believe scenario,

b) Substituting objects or actions, and

c) Verbal or non-verbal interactions relating to a play episode.

(Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990)

Upon recommendation from the authors of the Engagement Scale II (McWilliam & Casey, 2008), the scale was implemented four times, in five play spaces of the classroom environment. These included: the construction space, the sand pit, the dramatic play space, the playground, and table areas during times of programmed free play. These areas were chosen as they were consistent in each of the four centres. Moreover, these play spaces are consistently reported in the literature to be associated with children’s involvement in dramatic play (Curtis & Carter, 2014; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). The pilot test also confirmed that these were play spaces where dramatic play was most predominant.

The EC-II was implemented using the following procedures:
1. The learning centre was scanned for 15-second intervals for a total of 60 times.

2. During each interval, the learning centre was scanned once to count the number of children present.

3. The centre was scanned a second time to count the number of children who were not involved in dramatic play.

4. The researcher calculated the number of children involved in dramatic play by subtracting the number of non-involved children from those who were recorded as present in the learning centre.

5. The percentage of children involved in dramatic play at each interval was calculated by dividing the number of engaged children by the number of those present.

6. The overall average percentage of children involved in dramatic play is derived by calculating the sum of the percentages of children engaged at each interval and dividing this number by the total number of intervals.

The development of the EC-II was based on the existing definition of engagement from the previous works of the authors (McWilliam & Bailey, 1992). The scoring and administration of the scale is an adaption of the Planned Activity Check (Risley & Cataldo, 1973) and testing of the Engagement Check II against this scale has found internal validity (Ridley et al., 2000). The reliability of the instrument was tested in 45 observations, finding an inter-rater reliability rating of 0.97 from 45 observation sessions (Ridley et al., 2000). In the current study, inter-rater reliability of the Engagement Check II was established using Pearson’s correlation coefficient with 60 sets of data. Agreement of 0.93 was established.

3.4.2 Qualitative data

In this section the instruments and procedures implemented to collect the qualitative data are discussed. Qualitative data was collected using four methods: a) Semi structured interviews; b) Video observations; c) Dialogic reflective interviews; and d) Field notes.
The researcher conducted a pilot test of all qualitative instruments in one preschool classroom close to the University. Testing of the instruments led to three adjustments in the adopted procedures. Initially, the audio input of the video observations was captured through the video recorder’s microphone. However, the audio using this method was of poor quality due to classroom noise. As such, it was determined that a second microphone was needed. A second pilot session with a shotgun microphone proved to be more suitable.

A dialogic reflective interview was conducted with one educator from the centre of focus using two 3-minute video clips captured in the pilot test. The aim of the dialogic reflective interview was to gain insight into the process of the educators’ pedagogical decision making and gather further understanding of the theoretical perspectives guiding this process. The participants were asked to view the video footage in the interview without any prior screening. The participants’ focus was towards their appearance and the noise level of the room, making it difficult for them to critically reflect on the video data. Consequently, the researcher re-tested the procedures whereby the participants were provided with the video data before the interview. This proved to be an effective procedure to assist the participant’s critical reflection.

The semi-structured interview was also pilot-tested with two educators within the same centre. The questions were understood by the two participants, but the researcher observed that they became nervous when answering the first two questions. Accordingly, the interview schedule was re-structured to provide less threatening questions at the beginning, which allowed the participants to gain confidence before asking the more complex questions (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

3.4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted with each educator to gain an insight of the contextual elements surrounding the research questions. The interviews were aimed to gather educators’ views and knowledge about children’s dramatic play. This was relevant for the following two research questions:
1. In what way (if any) does the classroom-environment influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?

2. In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?

Interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to understand the experiences the educators had with dramatic play, as well as their understandings and views relating to the activity. Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate over other forms of interviewing as they provide the researcher with the ability to remain focussed on a planned topic, whilst at the same time allowing the researcher flexibility to probe for further detail (Mukherji & Albon, 2011). Brinkmann (2013, pp. 21-25) contends that in semi-structured interviews knowledge is produced in a four-step model:

1. **Purpose**: The interview is framed and staged with the aim to produce knowledge of a planned topic through a formal but reflexive discussion,

2. **Description**: Knowledge is produced through questions that aim to understand the participant’s experiences of events and situations,

3. **Life world**: The participants own description of their experiences allow the researcher to develop a meaningful understanding of their knowledge from different perspectives, and

4. **Interpretation**: The researcher can analyse the description of the participant’s life world through careful analysis either during the interview or after.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview schedule with 13 open-ended questions (See Appendix D). Each participant was prompted with these same questions. The questions were developed in accordance to three main themes: a) views of children’s dramatic play and learning, b) knowledge of children’s dramatic play, and c) experiences with in children’s dramatic play. Given that discussing one’s own worldviews can be a difficult task (Moyle, Adams & Musgrove, 2002), each educator received a copy of the interview schedule prior to the interview. This follows Roulston’s (2010) suggestion that researchers may be able to elicit richer narratives if participants feel prepared for the questions being asked in the interview.
The interview schedule was followed as a guide; however, the educators were prompted for further detail on their descriptions or accounts if it was needed.

The interviews were conducted in a comfortable, but private room in the participant’s workplace at a time convenient to both the centre director and the educator. The interviews were approximately 30-minutes in length. Each interview was audio recorded with the participants’ permission and transcribed for later analysis.

3.4.2.2 Video observation

Video observation provides a rich and powerful source of data (Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 2010), whereby the researcher has the opportunity to collect detailed events that can be viewed numerous times. In this process, the researcher may observe finer details of an experience that might not have otherwise been noticed (Walsh et al., 2006). Although the video observations were useful in the data analysis stage, their main function was to be an instrument of reflection with the educator participants in a dialogic reflective interview. Subsequently, the video observations were employed as a stimulus, so that the educators’ responses to the images, rather than the images themselves, constituted the core data of the study (Tobin, Hseuh & Castaellanos, 2009). During the analysis stage, the video observations were used as a further instrument to examine children’s dramatic play behaviour.

The video observations occurred during programmed free play over 4-days in each of the four classrooms. The researcher positioned a Sony Zoom Handy 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 similarly positioned in the outdoor environment. By nature, early childhood classrooms are noisy and this is a limiting factor of video observations (Greig et al., 2007). For this reason, the camera collected audio using two inputs; the internal microphone and a shotgun microphone which was placed in main play areas that the internal microphone was unable to reach. Heath et al. (2010) recommend using a shotgun microphone in classroom situations as they direct the recording to specific classroom areas and mask out background noise.
After recording, the footage was transferred onto the researcher’s computer. The researcher viewed the footage, and any data that was not relevant to the study was removed. To be relevant, the footage needed to include scenes which focused on children’s dramatic play. The video data was reviewed a second time to purposefully filter the material that would be appropriate to use in the educator’s dialogic reflective interviews. Evidence of the following contributed to the decision-making in this process:

- Educators’ participation in children’s play,
- Setting up a dramatic play environment,
- Educators’ discussions about children’s dramatic play
- Educators’ extending children’s play, and
- Educators’ pedagogical decision making.

Adobe Premier Elements 11 was used by the researcher to cut larger footage into 2- to 3-minute excerpts, which were to be played back to educators in the individual interviews.

### 3.4.2.3 Dialogic reflective interview

Dialogic reflective interviews aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the educator’s practice (Powell, 2005). Dialogic reflective interviews make deeper analysis possible because in the process of reflecting on video stimuli the participant is able to develop an enhanced awareness of their own professional identity, their practice and impact they have on the children’s learning (Moyles et al., 2002, p. 464). As such, the researcher is able to produce rich knowledge they might not uncover through other interview styles.

A week prior to the dialogic reflection, the participating educators were provided with a package to prepare them for the interview. The package included a USB containing a copy of four 2- to 3-minute video clips and a reflective questioning framework to assist their critical thinking. The reflective questioning framework, based on the work of Moyles and colleagues (2002, 2003), and contained a list of reflective prompts in four themes: a) purpose of interaction, b) content/subject, c) teaching philosophy and practice, and d) critical analysis.
Roulston (2010) asserts that often in dialogic reflective interviewing, the participant will watch themselves for the first time and be concerned about superficial elements such as the way they look or sound, which prevents them from thinking deeply about the interactions or actions which are taking place. As such, the participants were asked to watch the video prior to the interview, and choose two clips they wanted to critically reflect on in the interview. This process allowed the educator to participate in the interview prepared, and feel that they had professional control over the experience.

The reflective interviews were conducted 2- to 3-days after the semi-structured interview. This enabled the researcher to draw comparisons between the videos, and the knowledge and views the educators discussed in the preceding semi-structured interview. Accordingly, the dialogic reflective interviews aimed to collectively:

- Discover the educator’s personal knowledge and theories about children’s learning and dramatic play,
- Investigate the connections between the educator’s professional knowledge and professional practice,
- Assist the educators to think critically about their involvement in children’s play, and
- Develop a framework of effective pedagogical practice in relation to children’s dramatic play in the preschool classroom.

Each educator participated in the dialogic reflection interview at a convenient time away from the children and their colleagues. A group reflection was initially desired to provoke greater professional learning and deeper conversations (Roulston, 2010). However, as the educators were reflecting upon their own practice, views and knowledge it was considered to be an ethical issue that educators may feel arbitrated by their colleagues. Therefore, all interviews were conducted individually.

During the interview, the researcher and participant watched the nominated clips together. The researcher facilitated the reflective discussion using prompts from the reflective framework. The interviews were audio-recorded and were no longer than 40-minutes.
3.4.2.4 Field notes

Field notes were taken by the researcher throughout the entire data collection process. The notes were used as a complement to the data collected in all research questions with the purpose to explain specific events as they occur, describe interactions between adults and children/children and children/adults and adults, or record changes to the physical environment. The process of keeping field notes followed the recommendations of Denzin and Lincoln (2000), who advocated to take regular notes, write everything down (important at the time or not), and analyse any notes frequently (p. 656). The researcher developed a field note form which recorded:

- The date and time of the observation,
- Who was involved in the interaction/action,
- What happened, and
- The outcome of the interaction/action.

In summary, qualitative data was collected using four instruments. Collectively the instruments elicited data which explored educator’s views, knowledge and behaviour relating to children’s dramatic play. The next section will outline the validity and reliability of this data.

3.4.3 Validity and reliability of qualitative data

The validity and reliability of qualitative data is concerned with its accuracy and credibility (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Two procedures were followed to ensure validity of the results. First, during data analysis, the multiple data sources (i.e., interviews, field notes, video observations and quantitative data) were triangulated to cross-check the validity of the results (Leedy & Ormond, 2013). In this process, the findings from each data source were cross-checked with other sources of data to ensure that consistency was maintained in the interpretations being made. Second, the interpretation of the data was cross-checked by the researcher’s supervisors to ensure valid conclusions were made.

In summary, this section has presented the research instruments that were employed in the current study. The process of data analysis and interpretation will be outlined in the next section.
3.5 Data analysis

Insofar, Chapter 3 has outlined the procedures associated with sample selection and data collection. As discussed in Section 3.2.3, a converged parallel design informed the phases undertaken in the research process. Figure 3.4 provides a summary of the four phases of data collection and analysis that involve simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data within four preschool classrooms. Data were analysed in two stages. In the first stage (Phase 3) quantitative and qualitative data was analysed separately. In the second stage (Phase 4), the findings of each data strand were combined to compare and contrast, for the purpose of making interpretations.

Prior to the analysis of data, each strand was prepared. This involved inputting quantitative data into IBM SPSS version 22. The data was cleaned to ensure that there were no errors. Participants with missing data were examined. A total of five children did not have an SSIDSP score for outdoor play. These children were excluded from any statistical analysis that required this missing data.

Descriptive analysis of the data was undertaken as a preliminary examination of all data sets. 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 ≤ .05 significance was employed for all statistical tests. Significant levels are reported at two decimal places.
Preparation of qualitative data involved transcribing the semi-structured interviews and dialogic reflective interviews. These transcriptions, along with the field notes and video data, were transferred into NVivo Version 10. Content analysis was performed on this data following a four-step process outlined in Kumar (2011). First, the researcher read the transcriptions and identified the main themes based upon the literature review. Codes/Nodes were assigned to these themes. Through a process of data reduction, the participant’s responses were further classified into sub-themes according to the focus of the research question. These are outlined in more detail in the following sections.

3.4.1 Research question 1

Descriptive analysis was performed on the SSEDSP data to examine the levels of children’s dramatic play behaviour. Additional descriptive analysis was performed on the data collected by the EC-II to examine the frequencies of children’s involvement in dramatic play to explore if any patterns of play space preferences existed.

Further testing of the data included an independent sample t-test to examine if there were any gender differences in children’s dramatic play scores. An independent sample t-test compares the mean scores of two different groups of participants (Crawley, 2015). These findings are used to show the probability that the two sets of scores (girls or boys) are representative of the same population (Pallant, 2010). The effect size of each test was calculated using eta squared:

$$\eta^2 = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + (N_1 + N_2 - 2)}$$

Pallant (2010) outlines that eta squared provides the magnitude of the differences between the two groups. To interpret these results, the framework provided by Cohen (1988) was employed:

- Small effect: 0.01 – .05
- Moderate effect: 0.06 – 0.13
- Large effect: Above 0.14
Qualitative analysis of field notes and 687-minutes of video observations was conducted to examine the possible patterns in children’s dramatic play behaviour that may be influenced by children’s play style and preferences. Specifically, children’s preferences for play spaces, interactions with peers, their flexibility to substitute objects and also how they positioned themselves in accordance to the play episode (i.e., inside or outside the play) were examined and coded. Four play styles of dramatic play behaviour were revealed and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

To further investigate the behavioural patterns of children’s dramatic play, content analysis of field notes and 687-minutes of video observations were conducted on four children from each centre. The focus of the content analysis was to examine how children’s play styles influenced children’s social behaviours within peer groups and the subsequent influence this had upon the complexity of dramatic play of the peer group. The four children of each centre were selected based upon their play style; as revealed in the previous stage of analysis. One child from each play style was selected at random in each centre to examine their interactions in dramatic play in closer detail. An even number of males and females was maintained.

The video data was coded for the frequency of verbalisations that a) introduced a play theme, b) responded to a peer’s introduction of play theme, c) advanced the development of the play episode, and d) disrupted the play. Body language was also included with the rationale that the energy and direction of focus exerted would contribute to the maintenance of peer play.

The aforementioned coding scheme (See Table 3.9) is based upon previous work that examines peer interactions in dramatic play (Garvey, 1990; Goncu, 1993; Howe et al., 2005, 2014). The rationale for its use in the current study was to examine the influence that children’s play style has upon the complexity of dramatic play within a social context.
Table 3.9: Coding scheme for children’s collaborative interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Verbalisation</th>
<th>Type of Verbalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to a play theme</td>
<td>Verbalisation of action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbalisation of role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestion of play scenario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Object substitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response:</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal/nonverbal reaction to peers’ introduction</td>
<td>Ignore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode Development:</td>
<td>Extension of idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies used to advance the play episode</td>
<td>Build on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Language</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Broken attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unresponsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptions to play</td>
<td>Unrelated statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unavailable prop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unresolvable differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Departure of peer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5.2 Research question 2

The data collected by the LIS-YC, was analysed descriptively to test the range, mean and standard deviation relating to children’s level of involvement. A total of two statistical tests were then employed to further examine the data. Firstly, an independent t-test was employed to examine if there were any gender or age differences that may influence children’s LIS-YC scores. Finally, the relationship between children’s levels of involvement and their play behaviour was examined. As the LIS-YC and SSEDSP data were continuous variables, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was the most appropriate (Pallant, 2010). Crawley (2015) discusses that a Pearson’s correlation coefficient test measures the strength of the relationship between two variables by measuring how they vary together and how they co-vary (covariance). It is the process of standardising the covariance (Field, 2013) and is represented by $r$. The value of $r$ ranges between -1 and +1. A negative $r$ value represents a negative correlation; a positive $r$ value represents a positive relationship.
Cohen (1988) recommends the following guidelines for interpreting the $r$ value:

- Weak relationship: $-/+ 0.01$ to $0.29$
- Moderate relationship: $-/+ 0.30$ to $0.49$
- Strong relationship: $-/+ 0.50$ to $1.0$

### 3.5.3 Research question 3

Descriptive analysis was performed on the ECERS-R data to examine the similarities and differences between each centre across each of the five subscales. The results of the descriptive analysis was then compared with the mean scores of the LIS-YC and SSEDSP. A one-way between group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed with the LIS-YC data to examine the similarities and differences of children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play between the four centres. An ANOVA is used to compare the mean scores between three or more independent samples (Pallant, 2010). The findings are used to show the variance between different groups, where there is variability within each sample (Crawley, 2015). This is denoted by the F ratio. In the current study, the centres’ independent mean scores of the LIS-YC were the focus of comparison. As such, the dependent variable was the total LIS-YC score, and the independent variable was the centre. As involvement is suggested to be an indicator of classroom quality, making comparisons between the data of the LIS-YC (involvement) and the ECERS-R (Classroom quality) was crucial. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted upon the data’s normality, linearity, univariate outliers and homogeneity of variance with no serious violations recorded.

A significant F-ratio shows that the population of means are equal; however, a post-hoc test is needed to show which of the groups differ (Pallant, 2010). Field (2013) outlines that post-hoc tests use a specific criteria to compare the means of all combinations of pairs of groups. The current study adopted the Tuckey HSD test as it allowed the researcher to determine what significant differences existed between the four centres.
An ANOVA was also performed with the SSEDSP data to examine the similarities and differences that existed among the sample of children’s dramatic play behaviours between the four centres. The dependent variables were the six elements of the SSEDSP and the independent variable was the individual centre. The Tukey HSD was employed as a post-hoc test as it allowed the researcher to examine what significant difference existed between the elements of children’s dramatic play behaviour. Therefore, the researcher was able to make a closer comparison of the difference in children’s play behaviour between the four centres. The findings of the ANOVA and post-hoc tests were compared with the findings of the ECERS-R. This allowed the researcher to explore the possible influences that elements of the classroom environment had upon children’s involvement in dramatic play.

Field notes and video observations were analysed using thematic analysis to cross check the inferences made by the findings of the ECERS-R and the influence classroom environmental factors may have upon children’s involvement and dramatic play behaviour. Content analysis is the process of examining the contents of material to identify patterns or themes (Leedy & Ormond, 2013). Specifically, Table 3.10 outlines the three steps that were used to analyse the content of data for research question 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of focus were defined</td>
<td>• The influence of space and furnishing upon play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Features of the curriculum structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The influence of adult-child interactions upon play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The influence of child-child interactions upon play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material is broken down</td>
<td>Video data is broken into 1- to-2-minute intervals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>Each material is examined and coded at instances of each characteristic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Leedy & Ormand, 2011)

3.5.4 Research question 4

Research question 4 involved purely qualitative analysis. Cataloguing was conducted upon video data (Heath et al., 2010). This involved removing footage if the activity did not involve dramatic play or if the footage involved children who the
researcher did not have permission to film. Data was reduced to 1- to 2-minute intervals. Content analysis was adopted to examine interview transcriptions and video data according to:

a) Educators presence,

b) The type of activity,

c) The purpose of the interaction, and

d) The outcome upon children’s play.

These themes emerged from the literature review, which showed that educators have several roles in children’s dramatic play (Fleer, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014); nevertheless, there have been limited studies that evaluate how these interactions influence children’s dramatic play. Interview data was analysed according to a map of the themes and sub-themes, which are presented in Table 3.11. This included the core themes of a) educators’ teaching philosophy and pedagogy; b) educators’ understandings of the relationship between play and learning; c) the educators’ views of their role in children’s play; and d) educators views of the barriers affecting their behaviour in children’s play.

Table 3.11: Coding scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching philosophy and pedagogy</td>
<td>Children learn through exploration and discovery</td>
<td>Learning occurs through interactions between peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between play and learning</td>
<td>Play is the discovery and exploration of previously experienced events</td>
<td>Play promotes social and emotional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the educator</td>
<td>• Educator behaviour</td>
<td>Educator as Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aim of the behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observed outcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social pressures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
independently. Each data strand was brought together in the second phase so as to compare and contrast the findings for the purposes of cross-checking and data enrichment. This process will be further evident in Chapter 4, where the findings are presented.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the methodologies employed in the current study have been outlined. The pragmatic approach has been described as the theoretical perspective adopted to underpin the research. The research design was discussed in accordance with the purpose of the study, the research questions and the rationale for conducting mixed-methods research. This was followed with a description of the processes used to select the sample and maintain ethical procedures. The research instruments and data analysis procedures have been outlined. In the next chapter, the findings of each research question will be presented.
Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, the findings are presented according to the four research questions that guided this study. Table 4.1 presents the four research questions and the corresponding research instruments that were employed to undertake the inquiry process. Specifically, the instruments include a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools, which fulfils the purpose of a mixed methods study. For a more detailed description relating to the research methods, please see Chapter 3.

### Table 4.1: Summary of research methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Research instruments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What are preschool children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences? | Smilansky scale for the evaluation of dramatic and socio-dramatic play (SSEDSP)  
   Engagement check II (EC-II)  
   Field notes and video observations                                               |
| 2. What are preschool children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?          | Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC)            |
| 3. In what way (if any) do factors of the classroom-environment influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play? | Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R)  
   SSEDSP  
   LIS-YC  
   Field notes and video observations  
   Semi-structured interviews                                                     |
| 4. In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play? | Field notes and video observations  
   Semi-structured interviews  
   Dialogic reflective interview                                                   |

As outlined in Chapter 3, the data were collected in four preschool classrooms in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. There were 101 child participants aged between 4- and 6-years. In addition, there were eight participating educators. The results for each research question are presented in the proceeding sections.

4.1 Findings addressing RQ1: What are preschool children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences?

The Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play (SSEDSP) (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) was adopted to examine children’s dramatic play behaviour. The SSEDSP examined children’s dramatic play behaviour according to six elements, which are described in Table 4.2.
Table 4.2: Constructs of the SSEDSP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Play</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative Role Play</td>
<td>The child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with Objects</td>
<td>A toy, object, verbalisation or gesture is used to symbolise a make-believe object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with Actions and Situations</td>
<td>Verbalisations are substituted for actions and situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence in Role Play</td>
<td>The child persists in a play episode for at least 5-minutes. They may follow a series of acts or roles or stay within one related scene or role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>The child directs an action or word to another child within the context of the play episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Communication</td>
<td>Verbal communication related to the play episode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990)

Each child was observed twice for 30-minutes (once indoors, once outdoors). At 5-minute intervals, the children received an individual score between 0 (minimal) and 3 (elaborate) for each of the six elements of dramatic play. These scores were aggregated to determine the mean of each child’s total play score. A score between 0 and 18 was possible. Three main findings emerged:

i. The level of children’s dramatic play behaviour is low (4.1.1),

ii. Children’s dramatic play is influenced by their individual play styles and preferences (4.1.2), and

iii. Dramatic play behaviour is related to the social behaviours of peer groups (4.1.3).

Each of these findings are presented in the next three subsections.

4.1.1 The level of children’s dramatic play behaviour

Preliminary inspection of the data revealed that the mean level of children’s dramatic play behaviour is moderately low (M = 7.26). At this level, the SSEDSP considers children to be involved in dramatic play, however the complexity of all six elements of children’s play is limited (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Accordingly, a moderately low level of dramatic play behaviour suggests that, overall, children in the current study were not involved in complex dramatic play.

Table 4.3 presents a summary of the mean SSEDSP scores at two levels: a) the mean score of each of the six elements of the SSEDSP (0 – 3 possible), and b) the total
mean score of the SSEDSP (0 – 18 possible). Specifically, the table illustrates that SSEDSP elements ‘interactions with others’ (M = 1.35) and ‘verbal communication’ (M = 1.34) were the highest scoring elements of children’s dramatic play. However, these scores are considered moderate overall (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). According to the SSEDSP, there was an element of reciprocal role play between the participating children through verbal and nonverbal communication, however these interactions were not complex (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Table 4.3: Mean levels of children’s SSEDSP scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of the SSEDSP</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative role play(^1)</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with objects</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and situations</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with others</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total play score(^2)</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>15.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)Elements of play are scored between 0 - 3
\(^2\) Total play score between 0 – 18

The children displayed a moderate level of make-believe with objects (M = 1.29) which indicates that the children were involved in some instances where they substituted the form and function of an object for something else, or used gestures and language to communicate the presence of an absent object. Although moderately present, many children within the study displayed a dependency on realistic objects to stimulate their play.

The remaining three elements of children’s dramatic play behaviour (i.e., imitative role play, actions and situations, and persistence) did not support a high complexity of dramatic play activity. Specifically, children’s imitative role play and persistence were of a low level of complexity. Although there was some evidence of children enacting a role, there was little elaboration past the announcement of a role and one to two actions with an object related to that role. For example, a child announcing that they are a mum cooking food for their child, and preparing a plate of food using realistic food, placing in the oven and serving to a peer close by (who may or may not be an active member of the play episode).
Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) assert that the presence of role enactment is the defining element for dramatic play to exist as it provides children with an imaginary context to propel their interactions, actions and movements. Subsequently, the low level of imitative role play demonstrated by children may have affected the development of their actions and situations within a play episode, as children were less equipped with an imaginative context to carry out supporting events and actions.

**4.1.2 Children’s dramatic play styles and preferences**

Analysis of the SSEDSP data revealed specific patterns of play space preference, social interaction and use of objects, which appeared to influence the constructs of children’s dramatic play. To further examine the constructs of children’s dramatic play behaviour, field notes and video observations were analysed according to children’s preferences for play spaces, interactions with peers, their flexibility to substitute objects and enact roles, and also how they positioned themselves in accordance to the play episode (i.e., inside or outside the play). The purpose of this analysis was to examine if there were constant patterns in children’s play behaviour that may represent specific styles of dramatic play. The concept of ‘play style’ in the current study refers to a specific set of categorical attributes and dispositions of children’s play behaviour.

Constant patterns of dramatic play behaviour were found in this analysis and four key play styles emerged. These four play styles have been categorised in the following typology according to the specific patterns of dramatic play behaviours, play space preferences and social behaviours that were consistently observed:

a) Mature Players;

b) Role Players;

c) Constructive Players and;

d) Uninvolved Players.

The distribution of children’s play styles among the 101 participating children included: Mature Players ($n = 13$); Role Players ($n = 25$); Constructive Players ($n = 35$); and Uninvolved Players ($n = 28$). In order to substantiate the constancy of the patterns
of behaviour associated with each play style, the dramatic play of children in each play style was compared with their mean SSEDSP scores. Below the mean range of SSEDSP scores for each play style is presented:

a) Mature players (M = 12 – 18),

b) Role players (M = 9 – 13),

c) Constructive players (M = 4 – 11.5), and

d) Uninvolved players (M = 0 – 4.4).

*Mature Players* were observed to demonstrate the most complex behaviour in all six elements of the SSEDSP. Furthermore, field notes indicate that Mature Players displayed the most frequent incidences of involvement in the activity of dramatic play. Table 4.4 provides an outline of the constructs of Mature Players’ dramatic play. Specifically, in Table 4.4, a description of the play style’s behaviour according to the six elements of the SSEDSP is described. Furthermore, the range of mean SSEDSP scores for each element of the SSEDSP (score between 0 – 3 possible) is provided to further illustrate Mature Players’ pattern of dramatic play behaviour. The range of mean SSEDSP scores of a Mature Player suggests that their dramatic play ranges from a moderate to highly complex level (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

### Table 4.4: Play behaviours of Mature Players

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of play</th>
<th>Description of child behaviour</th>
<th>Range of SSEDSP scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative role play</td>
<td>Enactment of complete persona of role; Affective characteristic: feelings, motives and desires, and Physical characteristics: voice, posture and movement</td>
<td>&gt;2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with objects</td>
<td>Form and function of objects are substituted. High use of gestures to indicate an absent object</td>
<td>&gt;2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and situations</td>
<td>Extensive exploration of a situation through a detailed series of two or more events</td>
<td>&gt;2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>20-minutes to several hours</td>
<td>&gt;2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Ongoing collaborative process of planning, negotiating, reflecting and modifying</td>
<td>&gt;2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Extensive use of meta-communication</td>
<td>&gt;2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The play episodes of Mature Players were highly imaginative, displaying an extensive exploration of a situation through a detailed sequence of two or more events, comprehensive actions and multifaceted roles. A play episode also persisted over several hours. For example, Mature Players may begin a play episode enacting the roles of mum and dad. They may pretend to get into a car and drive to a friend’s house, using actions and verbalisations to put on a seatbelt and steer the car. However on the way they might verbalise that they are being followed and negotiate for a player to change roles to become a ‘baddie’. As the play episode progresses the children might go to the police, where again children need to change roles to enact an exchange with the police and the play episode might end with the baddie being put in jail.

In the example above, children 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 this is a car, and we were driving to our friends house’). As children showed frequent involvement in object substitutions, they had no specific preferences for objects as they were able to invent an object from their actions or pick up surrounding objects to fulfil their desired needs.

Role enactments were a central aspect of Mature Players’ dramatic play. The complete persona of a child’s character was considered by the players involved. As shown in Vignette 4.1, in enacting the complete persona of a role, the child made reference to the affective attributes (feelings, motives and desires) of their character. For example, Fiona, in the role of a cat, says that she is hungry and then refuses to eat the food presented to her because she does not like it. The Mature Player will also enact the physical attributes (posture and movement) of their chosen role. For example, in Vignette 4.1, the children change the tone of their voice to reflect the character that they are playing. Furthermore, Fiona enacts the posture and behavioural movements of a cat when she sits up straight and licks her paws. The enactment of the affective and physical attributes of a role may have had a further influence on the development of events within a play episode as the acknowledgement of the emotions, desires and physical attributes of a role allowed children to delve more deeply into a situation. Mature Player’s would commonly act
with dual positioning in the play episode. Vignette 4.1, illustrates this to include being inside the play episode to carry out actions and verbalisations associated with their character, and also acting from outside the play episode to manage the processes that were occurring in the play episode.

**Vignette 4.1. Mature Players**

In Centre 4, Susan, Fiona and Peter are enacting the role of a cat family in the home corner. Susan is playing the mother cat and Fiona and Peter are her children.

Susan: Just pretend that you are hungry *(talking to Fiona)*

Fiona: *(talking to Susan, changes voice to become higher pitched)* I’m hungry.

*(Changes voice to become normal)* Pretend you made me fish

Susan: *(picks up a plate and actions placing something on it. Changes voice to become higher pitched)* Now eat up your fish, it is dinner time.

*(Fiona places head down and pretends to take a bite)*

Susan: Pretend you didn’t like it *(in her normal voice)*

Fiona: Yeah because I am the bad cat *(in her normal voice)*

Susan: *(Changes voice to become high pitched)* Daughter, I told you to eat your fish

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

Susan: *(Maintains high pitched voice)* Daughter you can go to bed. Come on Brother we are going to the park *(Places rope in Peter’s mouth)*

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

Communication was an integral aspect of Mature Players’ role enactments. Frequent instances of collaborative interactions were observed to extend each other’s ideas using meta-communicative dialogue in pretend talk *(Pretend I/Pretend you)* and to describe their own and others mental states *(e.g., hunger)*. Children also changed the tone of their voice to communicate whether an interaction was occurring outside or inside the play. For example, in Vignette 4.1, Susan and Fiona use their normal voices to make a suggestion to their peer about their role. This suggests that this communication is occurring outside the play episode as they are narrating what is to happen inside the episode *(Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010)*. However, when they are speaking as their character they change their voice, which communicates to their peer that they are no longer themselves and are back inside the play episode.
As Vignette 4.1 showed, children would typically step outside the play to manage the direction of the play episode. This includes introducing a new event or role, building upon this idea, and narrating the actions of themselves or others. Once the direction of the play episode had been negotiated, the children stepped back inside their role to act out the agreed upon event. Employment of these communication styles may have 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.

Role Players displayed frequent involvement in dramatic play. The constructs of Role Players’ dramatic play is considered to be moderately complex according to their scores in the six elements of the SSEDSP. Table 4.5 presents a description of the behaviours of Role Players in dramatic play according to the six elements of the SSEDSP. The range of their mean SSEDSP scores outlined in Table 4.5 shows that, for the most part, the level of children’s dramatic play behaviour is of a lesser range than a Mature Player. However there is a slight overlap of scores in the elements of interactions and verbal communication, showing that the dramatic play of a Role Player has a moderate amount of collaborative interaction and communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of play</th>
<th>Description of behaviour</th>
<th>Range of SSEDSP score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative role play</td>
<td>Enactment of physical characteristics (voice, posture and movement)</td>
<td>1.3 – 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with objects</td>
<td>Form and function of objects are substituted. Some use of gestures to indicate an absent object</td>
<td>1.5 – 2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and situations</td>
<td>Repetitive exploration of one or two events within a situation</td>
<td>1.4 – 2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>10- and 20-minutes</td>
<td>1.3 – 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Some collaborative processes of planning, negotiating, reflecting and modifying</td>
<td>1.6 – 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Descriptive communication to convey actions</td>
<td>1.6 – 2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Role enactments had a visible presence within the play behaviour of Role Players. However, in comparison to Mature Players, the dramatic play of Role Players tended to focus on the physical attributes of their character only. This appeared to affect the development of a play episode, where events were often repetitious and contained lesser detail through action and language, compared with the behaviours
of the Mature Players. For instance, the cops and robbers presented below in Vignette 4.2 occurred over the space of 15-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 the chase. When the children returned, the same storyline was repeated, which meant that there was limited progression in the complexity of the roles being enacted and the sequencing of the play episode as the detail of events remained the same each time it was repeated.

Vignette 4.2. Role Players

In Centre 1, a group of three boys; Michael, Harry, Hester and Nate are playing cops and robbers outdoors.

Harry: (Running, making shooting actions and noises) Pretend I caught you and you went to jail (Speaking to Michael) (Michael stops running. Nate follows)

Harry: (Changes voice to become deeper) I got you now, you are going to jail. (Speaking to Nate) Handcuff him

Nate: (Pulls Michael’s hands behind his back, gestures tying them up and pushes him towards the playground) Come on let’s go in the jail (Places in the tunnel, gestures closing an absent door and locking it). Now stay there.

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

Harry: Quick, catch him!

Children are running around the yard. Hester and Nate are running after one another silently. Michael and Harry engage in some shooting but are mostly chasing. Harry, retains the posture and voice of his character. He speaks into a pretend phone as though speaking to another police officer and tries to pull them back into the game.

Harry: (To Michael) Pretend you are the good guy now

Nate: And I’m the bad guy

Harry: Hester, you are the bad guy with me

Hester: Okay, I’ll need a gun (leaves play episode to find appropriate object)

Role Players appeared to be skilled in the act of object substitution, displaying a frequent amount of gestures to indicate an absent object. The extent of their flexibility is shown in Vignette 4.2, where the development of the play episode occurs according to the children’s intentions, rather than being driven by the objects available within their physical environment. This is also evident in Vignette 4.3 where realistic objects are used within the context of a themed dramatic play space. Although there are less
object substitutions, the children’s actions with objects are driven by the intent of the story, rather than the purpose of the object.

In both vignettes (4.2 & 4.3), the children assumed the movements, voice and actions that are assimilated with their role. However, there were less occurrences of enactments associated with the characters’ affective attributes (emotions, desires, motives), as was seen clearly in the play of Mature Players. Consequently, the dialogue of Role Players, consisted of much less mental-state talk (Howe et al., 2014), as they were less inclined to describe the feelings of themselves or others. Similarly to Mature Players, Role Players’ pretend statements were employed to manage, plan, enact and negotiate the direction of the play episode from outside the play. For example, in Vignette 4.3, Katrina steps out of her role as a patient to make the suggestion to her peer that there were spiders in her stomach. In the same Vignette, the children are seen to step outside of their role again when they swap roles and negotiate what will be wrong with the new patient in the next scenario. Both Vignette 4.2 and 4.3 show that there is less exploration of the detail within an event; rather, the children preferred to swap roles.

**Vignette 4.3. Role Players**

In Centre 1, Billie and Katrina, are playing doctors.

**Billie:** (To Katrina, the patient). Come in and lie down. *(Katrina lays down)*
**Billie:** Why are you sick?
**Katrina:** My stomach hurts
**Billie:** Okay let me have a look. *(Picks up stethoscope and places on stomach).*
**Katrina:** Pretend that there were spiders inside me
**Billie:** Yes there are spiders, I will need to operate. *(Picks up surgical knife and imitates cutting open stomach. She picks up a bottle and pretends to sprinkle something into the open wound. She picks up the knife and imitates stitching her back up).*
**Billie:** You are all better now, but you will need to take some medicine.
**Katrina:** Now let’s pretend that you are sick
**Billie:** Yeah, pretend that I had a baby

**Constructive Players** displayed less involvement in dramatic play than the former two play styles. The development of their play episodes was guided by a dependence upon realistic objects, which meant that Constructive Players would often interrupt their involvement in a play episode to find or create a prop. As the term suggests,
Constructive Players appeared to gain greater satisfaction out of the construction of a scene, or a prop, rather than the enactment of a role. For example, in Vignette 4.2 Hester abandoned the play episode to build a gun made from blocks once he knew he was going to be the bad guy. The gun he constructed kept breaking which caused intermittent distraction from the play episode in order to fix it. The scene developed without his involvement; however, he displayed deep level involvement in the activity of building the gun — more involvement than he did when enacting a role within the play episode.

Table 4.6 provides a description of the specific behaviours of Constructive Players in dramatic play according to the six elements of the SSEDSP. Furthermore, the range of Constructive Players’ mean SSEDSP scores outlined in Table 4.6 shows that for the most part, the level of their dramatic play behaviour in all six elements is of a wider range than a Role Player and Mature Player.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of play</th>
<th>Description of behaviour</th>
<th>Range of SSEDSP score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative role play</td>
<td>Imitative actions</td>
<td>0.7 – 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent projections of a role onto a toy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with objects</td>
<td>Dependent upon realistic objects</td>
<td>0.8 – 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likely to construct a prop or scene out of blocks/ manipulative objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and situations</td>
<td>Repetitive exploration of one or two events within a situation</td>
<td>0.8 – 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>5- to 20-minutes</td>
<td>0.7 – 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Sporadic. Social play is often parallel or associative</td>
<td>0.9 – 2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Some descriptive communication to convey actions</td>
<td>0.9 – 2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was uncommon for Constructive Players to embody the role of someone else. When Constructive Players did enact a role, it was common for them to exclaim their role (e.g., “I am the mother”) and follow with an enactment of single actions within a single theme, for example pouring a substance from a jug into a cup, stirring, and offering to a non-participating peer or adult. These actions were imitative, rather than imaginative, and were likely to be repeated. Overall, the persistence of Constructive Players in this type of play episode was seldom sustained longer than 5-minutes.
Analysis of video observations showed that Constructive Players were involved in more complex dramatic play within constructive play spaces, such as the block corners or the sandpit. When playing within such play spaces, the Constructive Players were observed to display a higher level of collaborative language with their peers and also create more complex play episodes, when compared to their dramatic play in more open spaces such as the dramatic space or playground. As illustrated in Vignette 4.4, it was common for Constructive Players to spend time constructing a scene out of blocks and project a role onto a toy to play out a story. This role play behaviour, was associated with a higher likeliness to narrate the actions of a role from outside the play episode.

Vignette 4.4. Constructive Players

In Centre 1, Jayde and Kyle are building a castle with blocks and using two cars to represent a king and queen.

Jayde: Oh and we need a chair for the king
Kyle: Yes, this can be the chair
Jayde: 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
Jayde: Okay and 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)
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)

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

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.
Jayde: (Changes voice and picks up another animal) I will let you out!

As the interaction between Jayde and Kyle in Vignette 4.4 shows, some Constructive Players became resistant to go along with ideas that were communicated from inside the role. This often led to the play episode ending, or the children breaking away into parallel play to seek their own satisfaction out of the same activity using different processes.
**Uninvolved Players** were seldom observed to be involved in dramatic play. Field notes of these players reveal that they had a preference for playing at exploratory play areas, where they would be involved in non-play activities (see section 2.2 for definition). They were also frequently involved in solitary play. Any involvement in dramatic play was of a functional nature, wherein a preference for realistic objects was observed, enactments consisted of single imitative actions, and there were no declarative statements to define a role. For example, in Centre 2, Toby was regularly observed pouring a substance from a jug into a cup, stirring and offering to a non-participating peer or adult. The specific constructs of Uninvolved Players’ behaviour in dramatic play is described in Table 4.7 according to the six elements of the SSEDSP. The range of Uninvolved Players’ mean SSEDSP scores outlined in Table 4.7 shows that the level of their dramatic play behaviour in all six elements is of a narrower range than of the previously discussed play styles.

**Table 4.7: Play behaviours of Uninvolved Players**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of play</th>
<th>Description of behaviour</th>
<th>Mean SSEDSP score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative role play</td>
<td>Singular imitative actions</td>
<td>&lt;0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe with objects</td>
<td>Dependent upon realistic objects</td>
<td>&lt;1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and situations</td>
<td>Repetitive exploration of one events within a situation</td>
<td>&lt;0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>2- to 5-minutes</td>
<td>&lt;0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Sporadic. Social play is often parallel or associative</td>
<td>&lt;1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Some descriptive communication to convey actions</td>
<td>&lt;1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.1.2.1 Children’s preference of play space**

The play space preferences that specific play styles had to play dramatically in were examined using the data collected by the Engagement Check II (EC-II) and the SSEDSP. First, descriptive analysis was conducted using the EC-II data so as to compare the mean frequency of children’s involvement within five play spaces of the four centres:

i. Dramatic play space,
ii. Constructive play space,
iii. Exploratory play space,
iv. Playground*, and

v. Sandpit.*

* refers to outdoor play space

Overall, dramatic play was found to be most frequent in the dramatic play (n = 26%), construction space (n = 21%), and playground (n = 37%).

Further descriptive analysis was undertaken using the data collected by the SSEDSP, to investigate whether the child’s style of play influenced their preference of play space. The findings showed that Mature Players and Role Players displayed the most frequent involvement in dramatic play within play spaces that afforded provocative objects for dramatic play, including ambiguous and realistic objects. An example was the dramatic play space, where a theme was set by educators for dramatic play behaviour through the presence of realistic objects and supported by loose ambiguous props such as small blocks, boxes and fabric. Specifically, their preferences were towards the dramatic play space, construction play space and outdoor playground.

In contrast, the involvement of Constructive and Uninvolved Players’ was more frequent in play spaces where they could create or manipulate objects, including the construction area and sandpit. Figure 4.1 provides a visualisation of the frequency that each play style was observed within the five play spaces of a) exploratory space; b) sandpit; c) constructive space; d) playground; and e) dramatic play space.

![Figure 4.1: Frequency of dramatic play according to play space](image-url)
An independent t-test was conducted to examine if there were any gender differences that may influence children’s dramatic play behaviour. There were no significant differences found between boys and girls in relation to the complexity of dramatic play behaviour. However, the findings revealed differences relating to the preferences that boys and girls displayed for certain play spaces. Specifically, Table 4.8 shows that girls demonstrated more frequent dramatic play within the dramatic play space (40%) compared with boys (n = 13%). In comparison, boys demonstrated a higher frequency of dramatic play within the construction area (n = 33% compared to 6% females). In addition, boys were found to display a higher frequency of dramatic play within the sandpit (n = 14%) when compared with girls (n = 5%).

**Table 4.8: Comparison of play space preferences by gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play Space</th>
<th>Boys n (%)</th>
<th>Girls n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>37 (6%)</td>
<td>52 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandpit</td>
<td>80 (14%)</td>
<td>28 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>192 (33%)</td>
<td>33 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>190 (33%)</td>
<td>182 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
<td>81 (13%)</td>
<td>198 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>580</strong></td>
<td><strong>493</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates total number of 5-minute observations recorded

**4.1.2 The relationship between dramatic play behaviour and the social composition of peer groups**

Further scrutiny of children’s SSEDSP scores and play styles showed additional patterns of children’s play behaviours. These patterns suggested that the complexity of children’s dramatic play was related to the composition of play styles involved in the peer group members participating in a play episode. To further investigate this pattern, content analysis of field notes and 687-minutes of video observations were conducted. The focus of the content analysis was to examine how children’s play styles was related to how children interacted within a peer group, and the subsequent influence this had upon the dramatic play behaviour of the peer group. The content analysis examined the social behaviours present within children’s dramatic play. This included the amount of collaborative activity, including: a) introducing an idea; b)
responding to an idea; c) interactions that contributed to the development of a play episode; d) body language; and e) disruptions to the play. Furthermore, field notes and the data of the SSEDSP were examined.

The findings of this content analysis revealed five key patterns of social behaviour within children’s dramatic play. These social behaviours were contingent upon the composition of children’s play styles within the peer group. Emerging from the data, the five social behaviours have been categorised and termed: a) Actor/director play; b) Town planner play; c) Ground Hog play; d) Silent partner play; and e) Novice play. Table 4.9 provides a summary of the play styles that comprise the composition of each social behaviour, and also describes the typical dramatic play behaviour associative of each category.

Table 4.9: Social behaviours related to composition of play styles in a peer group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social behaviour</th>
<th>Group members</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actor/director</strong></td>
<td>Mature and Role Players</td>
<td>Play consists of complex roles, multifaceted scenes that are methodical and intertwined. High level of interaction using meta-communication. High amount of object substitutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town planner</strong></td>
<td>Mature and/or Role Player with a Constructive Player</td>
<td>Both players spend a large amount of time planning for the play. High use of narrative and object substitution. Roles are assigned, however they are seldom carried out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ground Hog</strong></td>
<td>Mix of players</td>
<td>Mature player leads the play. Some negotiation among higher levels players in role assignment. Medium level role development. Scenes are methodical, but repetitious and undeveloped. Involvement is overall sporadic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Silent Partner</strong></td>
<td>Two or more Mature and one Constructive Players</td>
<td>Mature players assign the roles and lead the development of script. Scenes are methodical and intertwined. The constructive player’s involvement is sporadic and often non-verbal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Novice</strong></td>
<td>Uninvolved and Constructive Players</td>
<td>Players may declare their role. Methodical enactment of actions associated with a single scene. Repetitious and mostly non-verbal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The development of play episodes relating to these five social behaviours were examined more closely through analysis of the frequency of collaborative activity displayed. The findings presented in Table 4.10 summarise the total number of instances a collaborative activity occurred and the percentage of instances a type of interaction within a collaborative activity occurred, associated with the five social behaviours. Specifically, this table illustrates that the most frequent occurrences of collaborative interaction that introduced and built upon an idea were situated in peer groups where there was a higher presence of mature players (Actor/Director & Silent partner play). This reflects the composition of Mature and Role Players in the peer group, who scored a moderate to high level in the elements of interaction and verbal communication in the SSEDSP.

### Table 4.10: Characteristics of children’s social interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Scheme</th>
<th>Actor/Director</th>
<th>Town Planner</th>
<th>Ground Hog</th>
<th>Silent Partner</th>
<th>Novice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>n = 88(^1)</td>
<td>N = 36</td>
<td>n = 46</td>
<td>n = 58</td>
<td>n = 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbalisation of action</td>
<td>24 (27%)(^2)</td>
<td>12 (33%)</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
<td>15 (26%)</td>
<td>11 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbalisation of role</td>
<td>32 (36%)</td>
<td>10 (28%)</td>
<td>11 (24%)</td>
<td>20 (34%)</td>
<td>7 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>24 (27%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19 (41%)</td>
<td>17 (29%)</td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object substitution</td>
<td>8 (9%)</td>
<td>14 (39%)</td>
<td>10 (22%)</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response:</strong></td>
<td>n = 88</td>
<td>n = 36</td>
<td>n = 46</td>
<td>n = 58</td>
<td>n = 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>60 (68%)</td>
<td>18 (50%)</td>
<td>20 (43%)</td>
<td>39 (67%)</td>
<td>13 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>20 (23%)</td>
<td>12 (33%)</td>
<td>15 (33%)</td>
<td>12 (21%)</td>
<td>10 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>8 (9%)</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
<td>11 (24%)</td>
<td>7 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Episode Development:</strong></td>
<td>n = 156</td>
<td>n = 56</td>
<td>n = 91</td>
<td>n = 118</td>
<td>n = 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension of idea</td>
<td>69 (44%)</td>
<td>21 (38%)</td>
<td>12 (13%)</td>
<td>52 (44%)</td>
<td>10 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build on</td>
<td>21 (13%)</td>
<td>7 (13%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>10 (9%)</td>
<td>8 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>34 (22%)</td>
<td>21 (38%)</td>
<td>40 (44%)</td>
<td>30 (25%)</td>
<td>18 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>20 (13%)</td>
<td>7 (13%)</td>
<td>13 (14%)</td>
<td>14 (12%)</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>12 (7%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22 (24%)</td>
<td>12 (10%)</td>
<td>5 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body Language</strong></td>
<td>n = 96</td>
<td>n = 81</td>
<td>n = 84</td>
<td>n = 72</td>
<td>n = 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>57 (59%)</td>
<td>29 (36%)</td>
<td>21 (25%)</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>21 (22%)</td>
<td>18 (22%)</td>
<td>30 (36%)</td>
<td>33 (46%)</td>
<td>25 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken attention</td>
<td>16 (17%)</td>
<td>23 (28%)</td>
<td>27 (32%)</td>
<td>16 (22%)</td>
<td>22 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresponsive</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>11 (14%)</td>
<td>9 (11%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>11 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disruptions to play</strong></td>
<td>n = 22</td>
<td>n = 32</td>
<td>n = 40</td>
<td>n = 17</td>
<td>n = 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelated statements</td>
<td>15 (68%)</td>
<td>7 (21%)</td>
<td>8 (20%)</td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
<td>20 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresolved differences</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>19 (59%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (12%)</td>
<td>5 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departure of peer</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (30%)</td>
<td>4 (24%)</td>
<td>18 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator interruption</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelated activity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>20 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13 (22%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)The total number of instances a collaborative activity is observed

\(^2\)The percentage of instances a type of interaction within a collaborative activity occurred.
In social behaviours, where the composition of peer group members contained a higher number of Constructive and Uninvolved Players (Town planner, Ground hog & Novice), the children displayed the highest number of disruptions to their play, which appeared to directly impact on the overall development of their play episodes. A description of each social behaviour are discussed in further detail in the sections below.

**Actor/Director play** occurred between dyads (two children) and small groups (three to five children) consisting of Mature Players, and one to two Role Players. This was the most complex form of social behaviour. The specific behaviour of actor/director play is characterised by:

i. **Imitative role play and persistence**: Children played in assigned roles that were sustained for the duration of their play episodes. The involved children displayed a high level of energy (n = 59%) observable by their constant focus, quick reaction time and persistence in the activity for over 5-minutes.

ii. **Make-believe with objects**: Children displayed complex object substitutions where the form and function of the object was changed. For example, Vignette 4.5 shows Billie using a carrot as a syringe and then a knife. If no objects were present, gestures were used to communicate the presences of an absent object.

iii. **Make-believe with actions and situations**: Play episodes involved multifaceted themes, enacted through detailed sequences of two or more events. For example, in Vignette 4.5, a child playing doctors introduced the theme of family into the play episode by suggesting that she and a peer become sisters. The complex development of play behaviour in Actor/director play appeared to be driven by a high number of verbalisations that: a) introduced new elements (n = 88) and b) extended upon the idea of their peer/s (n = 44%).
Vignette 4.5. Actor/Director play

| Theme: Doctors | Centre: One |
| Children: Billie, Madeleine, Jessica and Savannah |

Jessica: I know, let’s play doctors (to her peers)
Madeleine: Yes, and I was sick
Billie: Okay, but let’s be animal doctors
Jessica: Cat doctors
Savannah: Yes, and I was the good cat
Madeleine: You are always the good cat
Savannah: Well we can both be good cats, and we can be sister cats
Jessica: And I’ll be mum and pretend you were sick in the tummy
Billie: Okay (changes voice to become higher) Come in, let me see your tummy
Jessica: (Changes voice to become higher) Come on darlings (to Madeleine and Savannah) climb onto the bench
Savannah: Pretend I didn’t want to
Billie: Yeah, and then I gave you some milk (Turns to stovetop and pretends to fill a bowl with milk from the tap)
Savannah: And that made my tummy better (Takes the milk and actions licking up the milk)
Madeleine: But mine still hurt
Billie: (Changes voice to become higher) Let me take your temperature (places a carrot into child’s mouth). You are 100! You are very sick. I’ll need to cut open your stomach
Madeleine: Pretend you put me to sleep
Jessica: (Changes voice to become higher) It’s okay darling, this will make you better
Billie: Yes, this medicine will put you to sleep (hands Madeleine a small cup, Madeleine drinks and closes her eyes). Okay, I’ll need to cut open her stomach (makes a hand movement over stomach)
Savannah: Pretend that I’m the nurse and I help you
Billie: (Changes voice to become higher) Nurse, hand me the bandage

iv. Interaction and verbal communication: The complexity of children’s play episodes was reflective of the highly collaborative behaviour of children’s interactions. Children involved in actor/director play displayed the highest number of interactions that advanced the development of a play episode (n = 156). The most frequent strategies that were used to advance the development of a play episode were extensions of a peer’s idea (n = 44%) and descriptive language (n = 22%). Verbalisations that built upon one’s own ideas (n = 11%) and negotiated (n = 11%) aspects involved in the play episode were also evident. Vignette 4.5 shows that the use of ‘pretend I/you’ language were often used to simultaneously accept the idea of a peer, and also to extend upon it. In the process of the collaborative interaction,
the children positioned themselves outside the play to plan and negotiate the roles, sequence the events in the role play and to negotiate what they and their peer’s character would say/act out.

Children in Actor/Director play experienced the most disruptions to their play due to statements that were unrelated to the play episode (n = 26%). For example, in Centre 3 a group of three Mature Players flying a rocket ship paused their play episode to discuss the prints on their underwear when a member of the peer group’s dress was blown up by the wind. This comment was unrelated to their play episode and caused the development of the episode to stop for a period of 5-minutes.

**Town planner play** occurred in dyads of two children, comprised of one Constructive Player and one Mature or Role Player. Accordingly, the composition of members involved in town planner play enabled Constructive Players to be paired with a child whose play style was more complex than their own. The one-on-one interaction between children in this type of play appeared to enhance the play behaviour of Constructive Players to a more complex level than what they would typically display when playing on their own, or with other Constructive Players. Specifically, analysis of video observations and the SSEDSP data found that Constructive Players displayed greater use of collaborative interactions to develop a more detailed sequence of events and also show more complex involvement in the persistence of role enactments when involved in Town planner play (Vignette 4.6). The common characteristics found in town planner play includes:

1. **Imitative role play and persistence**: The play episode would often begin through joint constructive play in the construction or sandpit and then develop into an imaginary situation. This typically occurred when the Role Player delegated a role to a toy (see Vignette 4.6). This invitation was often accepted by the Constructive Player (n = 68%). Role enactments in Town planner play usually occurred through the narration of a sequence of events that is projected on or through a toy, rather than children taking on a role themselves. The narration of a role in most cases involved interactions occurring outside the play episode. For example at the beginning of Vignette 4.6,
Pheobe and John are describing the actions and behaviours of their toys. The interaction between players often broke down when the Role Player became more attuned towards role enactments that occur from a position inside the play. This is visible in Vignette 4.6 when Phoebe stops responding to John when he says that the party is about to start. This was related to a higher number of introductions of ideas that was ignored (n = 31%) or rejected (n = 17%) by a member of the peer group.

Vignette 4.6. Town Planner play

**Theme:** Family/Farm

**Centre:** Two

**Children:** Phoebe (Constructive Player) and John (Role Player)

Pheobe and John have spent some time constructing with blocks. They have decided that this will be a farm.

Phoebe: This can be the mum *(Picks up a cow figurine)*

John: And they live in this house

Phoebe: Pretend that there is a baby and they were having a party

John: Yeah for the baby’s birthday

Phoebe: *(Changes voice)* It’s my birthday mummy *(points figurine towards the bigger cow)*

John: Yes baby, we are having a party and all your friends will come over. *(He picks up a toy phone sitting next to him)*. Bring Bring. Hello, we are having a party, do you want to come? Okay Bye.

Phoebe: We need to make food for the party

John: Yes, let’s get some food

*Phoebe and John move to the home corner.*

Phoebe: I’ll make the cake. You get the cups and plates *(Phoebe pretends to pour things into a bowl. She stirs it using a spoon and places it into the oven)*

John: The party is nearly ready, we have to go back

Phoebe: Ping. I’m doing the cake.

John: Pretend that it is ready

Phoebe: *(Pulls cake out of the oven)*. I need to decorate it *(Begins icing using a knife)*

John has returned to the farm. He is manipulating an interaction between the two figurines in between adding blocks to the fence. 5-minutes pass and Pheobe is remains in the kitchen icing.

John: The party starts soon

Phoebe is concentrating deeply and does not respond to John. John returns to the farm and continues previous activity.
ii. **Make-believe with objects:** Children in Town planner play would often attribute places and situations to certain objects. Objects commonly led the development of the play, with realistic objects taking predominance over ambiguous ones. Even if an object was not available, the children built one that looked similar.

iii. **Make-believe with actions and situations:** The development of a play episode revolved around the construction of an object or situation. Accordingly, children in Town Planner Play displayed the most frequent use of verbalisations that introduced a change or extension to the play episode through an object substitution (n = 39%). For example, in Vignette 4. 6 different shaped blocks were used to symbolise a room of a house.

iv. **Interaction and verbal communication:** Interactions between the children in Town planner play were of a collaborative level. Vignette 4.6 shows a common interactional style wherein descriptive language was used to plan the development of a play episode (n = 38%). Children showed a moderate frequency of extending upon the ideas of one another (n = 38%). However, negotiations that built on one’s own ideas are less evident (n = 13%). Accordingly, involvement in role enactments was often not persistent. This was found to create tension between the participating children as the primary focus of attention of the two players was different. Therefore, disruptions to the play caused by unresolved differences were the most frequent in Town planner play (n = 59%) in comparison to other social behaviours.

*Silent partner play* was present within larger peer groups of three or more players that consisted of two or more Mature Players and one Constructive Player. In the composition of this peer group, Mature Players became less responsive to the needs of the Constructive Players than they were in dyad play. Accordingly, the social situation of the peer group appeared to become a much more difficult situation for Constructive Players to participate in.
Vignette 4.7. Silent Partner play

Theme: Space travel  
Centre: Three

Children: Meagan, Harriet (Experienced) and Julie (Developing)

Meagan, Harriet and Julie have turned a tall A-Frame into a rocket ship. They have been preparing for take-off.

**Meagan:** We are ready for take off! Oh we forgot to put this on (a hula hoop, representing the moon)

**Harriet:** Where? Where boss, Where is it going? *(Julie follows Harriet towards the moon)*

**Meagan:** Ohh umm right here *(shows Harriet).* Okay let’s go in our space ship!!

Julie sees Harriet climbing in from the side and moves over to do the same.

**Meagan:** Mine is at the top, I’m the captain

**Julie:** Where is mine?

**Harriet:** Yours is next to mine

**Meagan:** Get ready for take off

**All:** 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Blast off!!! *(Harriet makes whooshing sound and moves A-Frame from side to side. Meagan and Julie join in.)*

**Harriet:** Everyone take your hats off *(Julie reaches for her hat)*

**Meagan:** Noo it’s not a hat it’s a space hat for outer space.

**Harriet:** We have to take them off inside the ship and then put them on when we go outside.

**Meagan:** We have arrived at the moon. So leave them on.

**Harriet:** We are in fairy land and it is always sunny, but sometimes it’s cloudy but then it gets sunny. In the morning it is cloudy but then it gets hot.

**Meagan:** It is so beautiful

**Julie:** Yeah, it’s beautiful

**Meagan:** And no one dies here. Before we go out we have to put on our space clothes. Put your hats on.

One by one they start leaving the ship. Julie and Harriet run to the swings. Meagan runs to the shed

**Meagan:** Guys we can find space suit in here. *(Julie and Harriet, run over to meet her)*

**Harriet:** Yeah, we need capes *(Julie picks up the pink sparkly cloth)*

**Meagan:** This one is mine *(snatches quickly)*

**Julie:** What one is mine then?

**Meagan:** This one is yours *(hands her a different piece of cloth).* Okay everyone we are about to step on the moon, put your space suits on carefully!

Silent partner play (Vignette 4.7) is characterised by:

i. **Imitative role play and persistence:** Mature Players were likely to take the lead of the play episodes, displaying similar characteristics to that displayed in Actor/director play. In taking this lead, Mature Players often assigned the
Constructive Player a passive role within the context of the overall play episode (e.g., a pet, friend or brother). The Constructive Player often accepted this role (n = 67%). Vignette 4.7 shows that verbalisations or actions from Constructive Players were seldom present unless they were spoken to directly. The body language of Constructive Players suggested interest in the play episode (n = 50%), observable by their persistence to remain involved within a play episode by following their peers and imitating their actions. However children involved in Silent partner play also showed one of the highest frequencies of broken attention (n = 29%) when compared with the social behaviours of other play groups.

ii. **Make-believe with objects:** Mature Players were frequently involved in object substitutions. In contrast, the Constructive Player showed preference for a replica object if they knew one was available. For example in Centre 1, it was observed that whilst imitating the role of an ambulance, one child spent 5-minutes attempting to put on the costume, rather than continuing without it. With this amount of time out of the play episode, there was no need for the ambulance by the time he arrived. However, as Vignette 4.7 shows, Constructive Players were sometimes observed to imitate the actions that their peers made to replicate a missing object, which indicates that Silent partner Play can provide Constructive Players with guidance towards more complex levels of play behaviour.

iii. **Make-believe with actions and situations:** Many play episodes of Silent partner play involved scenes that were multifaceted, such as playing mums and dads in a play episode of cats visiting the vet. However, play episodes were led mostly by the Mature Players. Contingent to their passive role, a Constructive Player was not observed to contribute to verbalisations that introduced a new element to the play episode.

iv. **Interaction and verbal communication:** Interactions between the Mature Players in Silent player play were of a collaborative level. Commonly used interactions to advance the development of the play episode included extensions of ideas (44%) and descriptive language (n = 25%). This is similar to the behaviour displayed in
Actor/director play and are most commonly performed by the Mature Player. There was a higher level of directive interaction (n = 10%) displayed in Silent partner play, when compared to actor director play. This is representative of the Constructive Player being directed towards certain actions and roles by the Mature Players.

**Ground hog play** occurred in peer groups of 3 or more children with a higher ratio of Constructive and Role Players compared to Mature Players. The social behaviour is termed ‘ground hog’ as it is common for the play episode to be repetitious, undeveloped and sporadic. The play episode is led by the more experienced player (Mature Player if any or else the Role player). However, combined with the dramatic play behaviours of the Constructive Player, a lower level of collaborative interactions, less verbal interactions and lesser likelihood for the play to be persistent is evident. The elements of ground hog play include:

i. **Imitative role play and persistence:** Ground hog play is typically initiated by a leader (Mature Player if any or else the Role player) upon arriving in the selected play space. The involved children planned what roles would be involved in the play episode through a series of declarations. The leader either accepted or rejected this declaration. Ground hog play displayed the highest frequency of responses that rejected an idea (n = 33%). If a child’s idea was rejected, the leader would propose another role be carried out. This was usually accepted by the involved players. Although roles were assigned, they were not persistent. It was common for a secondary activity such as construction or chase to take precedence (See Vignette 4.8). When this happened, it was common for the Mature Player to remind his/her peers of the focus of the play episode, through the declaration of a new character.

ii. **Make-believe with actions and objects:** Imitation of absent objects was common among children in Ground hog play. Sometimes the Constructive Player appeared to find this aspect of the play challenging. In this case, they were observed to leave the play to make a prop, or became a passive player who watched the play unfold.

iii. **Actions and situations:** The play episode of Ground hog play comprises of one situation that is repeated multiple times. As Vignette 4.8 shows, the play episode is
interrupted by large periods of unrelated activity (n = 50%) and the departure of a peer (n = 30%).

### Vignette 4.8. Ground Hog play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme:</th>
<th>Superheros</th>
<th>Centre:</th>
<th>Four</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children:</td>
<td>Henry (Moderate), Toby (Experienced), Jimmy (constructive), Derek (Moderate)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four children are playing a superhero game outdoors. Roles of ninja turtles and Captain America have been assigned.

**Toby:** Are you ready for the biggest bang for your life? *(Makes shooting noises as his imitates the action of shooting with this hands).* Ready for the ice block one? *(More shooting noises and actions).*

Derek and Jimmy dodge the blasts and seek shelter.

**Toby:** Pretend that you become ice now *(Toby, Henry and Derek freeze)*. Haha you’re locked in ice.

**Henry:** We’re not done yet!

Children make shooting noises at one another and run around the yard for five minutes silently.

**Toby:** What if I turn into a real dragon? *(Henry and Toby continue shooting)*. Pretend that I am a dragon *(Makes a movement to represent the transformation into a dragon).* I’m going to turn into a real dragon.

**Jimmy:** Try and shoot me.

**Toby:** But I am a dragon. Roarrr.

**Henry:** Quick lets go.

**Jimmy:** You are not as strong as me dragon *(Makes shooting noises)*.

**Toby:** Pretend I am breathing fire at you. Roarrr.

**Derek:** Run!

Children begin running across the playground in a game of chase for 3-minutes.

**Toby:** Roarrr *(fire gesture)*

**Jimmy:** That doesn’t hurt me.

**Toby:** But I’m the dragon. Pretend you get hurt.

**Jimmy:** *(Laughs and continues running)*

### iv. Interaction and verbal communication:

Communication in Ground hog play displays a predominance of descriptive language (n = 47%). There is a much higher frequency of interactions that direct peers (n = 24%), with far less occurrences of interactions that extend (n = 13%) and negotiate the development of a play episodes (n = 13%) when compared to other social behaviours.
**Novice Play** occurred between two or more Constructive Players and Uninvolved Players (Vignette 4.9). There was little presence of role enactments and the play episode consisted of single actions within a simple theme among the composition of these peer groups.

**Vignette 4.9. Novice play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Doctors</th>
<th>Centre: Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children: Wendy and Catherina (both Uninvolved Players)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children are imitating doctors in the home corner within the role of a cat.

**Wendy:** Sit, I said sit
**Catherina:** (Trying to put a rubber glove on, does not respond)
**Wendy:** No cat, sit
**Catherina:** I got a hurt here so I had to put the glove on (*Wendy does not respond*).
  Meow meow

Both children pause the episode for 3-minutes whilst trying to put on a rubber glove.

**Wendy:** Cat, let me see your sore.
**Catherina:** Meow (*holds up hand*)
**Wendy:** You need some medicine on it (*picks up a syringe and holds against hand*).
  Now you need a bandage
**Catherina:** Meow
**Wendy:** Now you be the doctor and I’ll be the cat
**Catherina:** Okay.

Novice play displayed the least number of interactions that introduced a change or new element to the play episode (n = 27). This type of social behaviour also displayed the lowest number of interactions that advanced the development of the play (n = 47). The frequency of interactions that built upon one’s own idea was the most frequent among the members of peer groups involved in Novice play. Children in novice play were the most likely to ignore an idea introduced by a peer. They also displayed the highest frequency of broken attention (n = 37%) and body language that was unresponsive to the play episode (n = 18%).
4.1.3 Summary of findings for research question 1

In summary, the findings for research question 1 highlighted that the average level of children’s play behaviour is moderate to low. Specifically, children’s role enactments, persistence and actions, and situations within a play episode were of low level of complexity according to the SSEDSP (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). In contrast, children’s social interactions, verbal communication and object substitutions were of a moderate level of complexity. Overall, children’s play behaviours indicated that a large majority of the children studied have a preference for realistic objects, have limited involvement in role enactments, and participation in social play is moderate.

Children’s dramatic play was examined in further detail, where four styles of play emerged from the data. These play styles (Mature Players, Role Players, Constructive Players and Uninvolved Players) were developed according to the patterns of dramatic play behaviour. A child’s play style was found to influence the complexity of their dramatic play and their preferences of play spaces for dramatic play within the classroom.

The social behaviours occurring in children’s dramatic play were found to be related to the composition of play styles within the peer group involved in the play episode. Specially, five social behaviours emerged as being related to the complexity of children’s dramatic play, and were termed as a) Actor/director play, b) Town planner play, c) Follow play, d) Ground hog play, and e) Novice play. These five social behaviours have been described according to the frequency and type of collaborative interactions that occurred within each. Children equipped with more complex play skills (Mature Players, Role Players), were likely to lead the behaviours and decisions of their peers within a play episode (i.e., Ground hog, Silent partner play). Moreover, when the motives of activity associated with children’s play style did not match (i.e., Town planner, Ground hog, Silent partner), the complexity of play episodes was reduced overall.
4.2 Findings addressing RQ2: What are children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?

Children’s involvement in dramatic play was examined using The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (LIS-YC) (Laevers, 1994). Each child was observed over the course of 2-days, with individual observations being conducted in 2-minute intervals to examine the presence of the nine signals of involvement. These included: concentration, energy, complexity and creativity, facial expression and posture, persistence, precision, reaction time, verbal utterance and satisfaction. Children’s involvement levels were scored between 1 (no activity) and 5 (sustained intense activity). The following two findings emerged:

i. Children displayed a moderate level of involvement in dramatic play (4.2.1), and

ii. There is a positive relationship between children’s level of involvement and their dramatic play behaviour (4.2.2).

These findings are presented in the individual sub-sections below.

4.2.1 The level of children’s involvement in dramatic play

The overall mean score of the LIS-YC (M = 3.51, SD = 0.68) demonstrates that the children in this study were involved in dramatic play at a moderate level. Specifically, the characteristics of children’s involvement, as outlined in Table 4.11, illustrate that the children displayed moderate to high concentration and facial expression in the activity of dramatic play. However, the children were only involved at a routine level overall, with the indicators of creativity, persistence, precision and satisfaction in their activity scoring moderately. Laevers (1994) highlights that at a moderate level, involvement is superficial and consists of routine actions without real dedication to the activity.
Table 4.11. Levels of children’s involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal language</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the LIS-YC scores between boys and girl. There was no significant difference between scores for boys (M = 3.53, SD = 0.76) and girls (M = 3.50, SD = 0.61; t (101) = -2.44, p = .808, two-tailed). Moreover there was no magnitude of differences between the means (mean difference = -0.33, 95% CI: -0.31 - 0.24) (eta squared = 0.0005). These findings indicate that gender did not influence children’s involvement in dramatic play.

4.2.2 The relationship between children’s level of involvement and their dramatic play behaviour

The relationship between the children’s levels of involvement (as measured by the LIS-YC) and their dramatic play behaviour (as measured by the SSEDSP) was examined using Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a strong, positive correlation between the two variables (r = .683, n = 101, p = 0.005) with high levels of child involvement associated with high levels of child dramatic play behaviour. The strength of the correlation has been interpreted using Cohen’s (1988) guidelines, whereby a relationship is considered strong if r is between 0.50 to 1.0.

These findings can be linked with the style of children’s dramatic play as presented in the findings of research question 1, where it was presented that children of a Mature and Role Player style were likely to demonstrate a higher level of energy through their actions and verbal language, as well as creativity and persistence in their play episodes. These characteristics of involvement were also true of Constructive Players, when they were playing dramatically within a constructive play space. In
contrast, when Constructive Players were not within a play space that encouraged constructive activity, their attention to the activity was broken, and less persistence, creativity and energy were displayed. Similarly, Uninvolved Players displayed less frequent involvement in dramatic play overall, and their activity was categorised by routine actions, limited concentration and episodes that were short-lived (Laevers, 1994).

To further investigate the relationship between child involvement and dramatic play behaviour, Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient was employed to examine the relationship between the nine indicators of involvement and the total SSEDSP score. These findings are presented in Table 4.12. All nine indicators of the involvement scale are shown to have a large correlation with the total SSEDSP score. The largest correlation was between verbal communication and the total SSEDSP score, \( r = .803, n = 101, p = 0.005 \). This finding indicates that verbal communication was found to have the greatest relationship with children’s dramatic play behaviour.

**Table 4.12. Pearson product-moment correlations between child involvement and play behaviour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of involvement</th>
<th>Relationship with SSEDSP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Concentration</td>
<td>.64*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Energy</td>
<td>.62*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Creativity</td>
<td>.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Expression</td>
<td>.64*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Persistence</td>
<td>.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Precision</td>
<td>.64*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Reaction time</td>
<td>.67*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Language</td>
<td>.80*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.68*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \( p < .005 \) (2 – tailed)

The findings of research question 1 support the finding that verbal communication has an important role in the complexity of children’s dramatic play. Specifically, it was revealed that social behaviours that contained higher frequencies of interactions where new play elements were introduced and the ideas of peers were extended upon led to higher levels of persistence in role enactments, creativity in the development of situations within the play, and overall, higher levels of energy.
4.2.3 Summary of findings for research question 2

In summary, the findings of research question 2 highlight that the level of children’s involvement in dramatic play was moderate. At a moderate level, the children were involved in routine actions and displayed moderate levels of creativity, motivation and satisfaction in their play. Children’s involvement in dramatic play was found to be positively associated with the complexity of their dramatic play behaviour. These findings will be further explained in the presentation of findings for research questions 3 and 4.

4.3 Findings addressing RQ3: In what way (if any), do factors of the classroom environment influence children’s involvement in dramatic play?

The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) was conducted in each centre over the course of a 7-hour working day or equivalent. In each centre, five of the ECERS-R subscales were assessed, including: a) Space and furnishings; b) Language and reasoning; c) Activities; d) Interactions and e) Program structure. Each subscale was awarded a score from 1 (Inadequate) to 7 (Excellent). The scores of each sub-scale were aggregated to provide each centre with an overall score.

The findings presented in Table 4.13 provide a comparison of the ECERS-R scores of each centre. Table 4.13 illustrates that the scores ranged between minimal and excellent. Centre 3 received the highest score with a rating of excellent. A good rating was scored by Centre 1 and 4. In contrast, a score between minimal and good was recorded in Centre 2. The results will be presented according to the themes that emerged from the data and the influence they had on children’s involvement in dramatic play.
Table 4.13. Comparison of ECERS-R scores by centre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECERS-R Sub-scales</th>
<th>Centre 1</th>
<th>Centre 2</th>
<th>Centre 3</th>
<th>Centre 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space and furnishings</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and reasoning</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program structure</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.69</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.55</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.27</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.1 Children’s level of involvement and the level of classroom quality

Laevers (1994) suggests that the level of children’s involvement indicates the level of classroom quality. In order to determine if classroom quality influenced children’s involvement in dramatic play in the current study, a one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the differences of children’s involvement in dramatic play between the four centres. The dependent variable was the total LIS-YC score and the independent variable was the centre.

The findings indicated that a significant difference existed, with $F(3, 101) = 2.939, p = .037$. A post-hoc comparisons using the Tucky HSD test was conducted to determine which centres were significantly different from each other. The findings indicated that the mean score of Centre 2 for the measurement of children’s involvement ($M = 3.28, SD = 0.33$) was significantly different from Centre 4 ($M = 3.71, SD = 0.74$). A medium effect size of 0.83 using eta squared was found. There were no significant differences between any comparable pairings that involved Centre 1 ($M = 3.34, SD = 0.83$) and Centre 3 ($M = 3.69, SD = 0.58$). However Centre 3 was reaching significance when compared with Centre 2. With no significant differences occurring between Centres 1, 3 and 4, the findings suggest that children in these three centres displayed similar levels of involvement. This may be a reflection of the ECERS-R scores for these three centres, as each received rating ranging from good to excellent (Figure 4.2).
In contrast, the levels of involvement of children in Centres 2 and 4 were significantly different, indicating that there may be factors within the environment of these two centres that have influenced a difference in children’s involvement in dramatic play. This will be explored further in section 4.3.2.

The data from the EC-II was examined using descriptive analysis to compare the mean frequency of children’s involvement within the play spaces of the four centres (Table 4.14). As previously noted, the findings highlight that dramatic play was found to occur most frequently in the dramatic play, construction and outdoor playground play spaces. However, further analysis revealed that children’s preferences of play spaces for dramatic play was also contingent on contexts of the classroom environment.

*Indicates significant difference at p < .05

Figure 4.2. LIS-YC and ECERS-R scores

Table 4.14. Frequency of dramatic play by play space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table area</th>
<th>Centre 1 %</th>
<th>Centre 2 %</th>
<th>Centre 3 %</th>
<th>Centre 4 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>12.86</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>5.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
<td>27.08</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>34.64</td>
<td>70.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play ground</td>
<td>54.94</td>
<td>36.43</td>
<td>73.05</td>
<td>54.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandpit</td>
<td>28.78</td>
<td>18.26</td>
<td>53.04</td>
<td>50.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19.26</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>6.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total          | 24.59      | 15.15      | 37.49      | 37.58      |
For example, in Centre 4, dramatic play was most frequent in the construction play space (n = 70.37%). However, in Centre 2 the construction play space recorded a minimal amount of dramatic play (n = 5.45%). Further analysis of field notes and the ECERS-R data suggests that the frequency of dramatic play and preference for play space may be related to environmental factors. For instance, in Centre 4, the children were provided with a large play space for constructive play, inclusive of several types of blocks and supportive objects (See Appendix E). The educators encouraged children’s dramatic play within this space by providing new objects to support the theme of their play and providing a storage area for children to keep their constructions for later free play periods. In contrast, the constructive play space in Centre 2 was smaller. Moreover, the educators often intervened in children’s dramatic play within the constructive area to redirect their activity elsewhere as they deemed their behaviour to be too noisy or active.

Furthermore, the frequency of dramatic play in Centre 3 indicates that children showed a preference for dramatic play activity in the dramatic play space (n = 70.05%). Similarly to the constructive play space in Centre 4, further analysis of field notes and the ECERS-R data suggests that the physical arrangement of the dramatic play space of Centre 3 may have been encouraging for children’s dramatic play behaviour. Appendix E shows the play space to consist of novel themes that were based on children’s interests, as well as balanced objects (i.e., realistic vs. ambiguous). The play space was enclosed by shelving and separated from other play spaces and doors, which reduced the amount of traffic entering the area.

The physical arrangement of the dramatic play space in Centre 3 was in contrast to Centre 1 and 4, where the dramatic play space was placed next to a door leading into the outdoor environment. This caused an increase of traffic entering and exiting the area. Moreover, the dramatic play space in Centres 2 and 4 were positioned next to the reading area, which similarly increased the amount of traffic moving through the play space. These factors, and others found to influence children’s involvement in dramatic play within the play spaces of individual centres, will be considered in Section 4.3.2.
4.3.2 Differences in the complexity of dramatic play behaviour between the four centres

An ANOVA was performed to explore the similarities and differences of children’s dramatic play behaviours between the four centres. The purpose was to examine the linkages between the centres’ ECERS-R scores and the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour. The dependent variable was the SSSEDSP scores and the independent variable was the centre. The findings show that a significant difference existed among the four centres relating to the overall SSSEDSP scores at $p < .05$ level: $F (3, 94) = 3.828, p = .012$. A medium to large effect was calculated using eta squared (0.11). A post-hoc test was conducted using a Tuckey HSD test to examine which centres were significantly different. The findings indicated that the mean score for Centre 2 ($M = 5.07, SD = 2.60$) was significantly different from Centre 3 ($M = 8.13, SD = 3.42$) and Centre 4 ($M = 7.99, SD = 4.33$). There were no significant differences involving comparisons made with Centre 1 ($M = 7.20, SD = 3.79$).

Post-hoc comparisons using the Tuckey test revealed further significant differences relating to the individual elements of the SSSEDSP. These findings include significant differences between the mean scores of:

- Imitative role play in Centre 2 ($M = 0.61, SD = 0.39$) when compared with Centre 3 ($M = 1.22, SD = 0.63$) and Centre 4 ($M = 1.31, SD = 0.62$),
- Actions and situations in Centre 2 ($M = 0.83, SD = 0.48$) when compared with Centre 4 ($M = 1.29, SD = 0.59$),
- Persistence in Centre 2 ($M = 0.63, SD = 0.49$) when compared with Centre 4 ($M = 1.30, SD = 0.61$), and
- Verbal communication in Centre 2 ($M = 1.09, SD = 0.76$) when compared with Centre 3 ($M = 1.66, SD = 0.59$).

Table 4.15 provides a summary of the above findings; an asterisk is used to illustrate where the significant differences of the six elements of the SSSEDSP exist. With no significant differences being found between Centres 1, 3 and 4, the findings indicate that children within these three centres have a similar range and mean of dramatic play behaviour.
Table 4.15. Comparison of mean SSEDSP scores by centre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play elements</th>
<th>Centre 1</th>
<th>Centre 2</th>
<th>Centre 3</th>
<th>Centre 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitative role play</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.61*</td>
<td>1.22*</td>
<td>1.31*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and situations</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.83*</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.63*</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.09*</td>
<td>1.66*</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7.20</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td>7.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates significant difference at p > .05
1 Each play elements scored between 0 – 3
2 Total score between 0 – 18 possible

In contrast, Centre 2, when compared with 3 and 4, obtained significant differences in several elements of the SSEDSP. There were no significant differences found relating to the play elements ‘make-believe with objects’ and ‘interactions’ across all four centres.

The finding that there are significant differences in children’s SSEDSP scores between Centres 2, 3 and 4 can be related to the ECERS-R scores. For instance, Centre 3 was rated 'excellent' by the ECERS-R, indicating a high level of global environmental quality. Centre 3 also recorded the highest overall SSEDSP scores, indicating children displayed the highest level of dramatic play. In contrast, Centre 2 recorded the lowest scores in both the ECERS-R and the SSEDSP, indicating a lower level of global environmental quality and dramatic play behaviour.

The SSEDSP was performed on each child twice, once indoors and once outdoors. To further examine children’s dramatic play behaviour within the classroom environment, the data sets of children’s indoor and outdoor play were separated and analysed individually. A between-group ANOVA was performed with children’s indoor SSEDSP scores. The dependent variable was the SSEDSP scores and the independent variable was the centre. The findings show that a significant difference existed between the four centres at a p < .05 level: F (3, 101) = 3.487, p = .019. The effect size using eta squared indicated a medium effect (0.97). A post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) was performed to examine which centres were significantly different. The findings
indicated that the mean score for Centre 2 (M = 5.18, SD = 3.06) was significantly different from Centre 3 (M = 9.18, SD = 3.44).

An additional post-hoc test was conducted using the Tuckey HSD test to examine the differences in the scores of the six elements of the SSEDSP between each centre. The findings (represented in Figure 4.3) show significant differences between the mean scores of:

- Imitative role play in Centre 2 (M = 0.64, SD = 0.52) when compared with Centre 1 (M = 1.24, SD = 0.75), Centre 3 (M = 1.48, SD = 0.68) and Centre 4 (M = 1.25, SD = 0.82),
- Make-believe with objects in Centre 2 (M = 1.02, SD = 0.59) when compared with Centre 3 (M = 2.02, SD = 2.23),
- Actions and situations in Centre 2 (M = 0.78, SD = 0.59) when compared with Centre 1 (M = 1.35, SD = 0.82) and Centre 3 (M = 1.34, SD = 0.79), and
- Persistence in role play in Centre 2 (M = 0.66, SD = 0.58) when compared with Centre 1 (M = 1.38, SD = 0.88) and Centre 3 (M = 1.35, SD = 0.77).

![Figure 4.3. Comparison of children’s dramatic play behaviour within the indoor environment](image)

**Figure 4.3. Comparison of children’s dramatic play behaviour within the indoor environment**

Overall, children in Centre 3 displayed the most complex dramatic play behaviours during indoor free play periods when compared with centres 1, 2 and 4. There were no significant differences found in any comparisons made between Centres 1, 3 and 4, which indicates that the children’s indoor dramatic play were of a similar mean and range between these three classrooms. In contrast, there were multiple significant differences recorded with Centres 1, 3 and 4 when compared with
Centre 2. The largest differences involve children’s imitative role play, make-believe with objects, actions and situations, and persistence in role play.

A between-group ANOVA was conducted on the SSEDSP scores recorded during children’s outdoor play. No significant differences were found in relation to children’s outdoor dramatic play behaviour between the four centres. However, there are notable differences evident in children’s mean SSEDSP scores that are still worthy of discussion. The results indicate that Centre 4 demonstrated the most complex dramatic play in the outdoor environment (M = 8.72) when compared with Centre 1 (M = 6.71), Centre 2 (M = 5.04) and Centre 3 (M = 7.08).

Figure 4.4 provides a visual comparison of children’s outdoor dramatic play behaviour according to the six elements of the SSEDSP between the four centres. In all four centres, the children displayed moderate social interactions and verbal communication. Children in Centres 1, 2 and 3 demonstrated low levels of persistence, imitative role play, make-believe with objects and actions and situations. In contrast, children in Centre 4 showed an overall moderate level of dramatic play behaviour in all six elements of the SSEDSP.

![Figure 4.4. Comparison of children's dramatic play behaviour within the outdoor environment](image)

Whilst there were not significant differences relating to children’s outdoor dramatic play, the range and mean scores of children’s dramatic play behaviour indicate that there are possible differences within the centres’ outdoor environments that have influenced the elements of children’s dramatic play. Overall, children’s
dramatic play behaviour was found to be more complex in the indoor environment. This is with the exception of Centre 4, which recorded a higher SSEDSP score outdoors. Figure 4.5 illustrates that in Centre 1 and Centre 3 there are vast differences in children’s dramatic play behaviour between the centre’s indoor and outdoor play environments.

![Figure 4.5: Comparison of indoor and outdoor dramatic play behaviours assessed by the SSEDSP](image)

The data collected by the ECERS-R and field notes have been re-analysed to examine how three factors (outlined in section 3.5.3) within the classroom environment influenced children’s dramatic play. These three factors include:

i. Physical environment (see subsection 4.3.3),
ii. Interactional quality (see subsection 4.3.4), and
iii. Curriculum (see subsection 4.3.5).

### 4.3.3. The influence of the physical environment on dramatic play behaviour

There were three factors of the physical environment that were found to influence children’s involvement in dramatic play. These included:

i. Clearly defined play spaces with open and accessible objects
ii. The position of play spaces, and
iii. Mobility of objects.
Clearly defined play spaces with open and accessible objects were associated with children in the current study demonstrating more frequent and complex dramatic play. Defined play spaces were present within the indoor environment of Centres 1, 3 and 4. The educators arranged the furniture to create play spaces of a small (two to three children) and large (six to eight children) size. These spaces were pre-set with an arrangement of objects to create a play space, defined for a specific learning purpose. However, the resources provided within the play spaces contained a mixture of realistic and ambiguous objects which provided children with enough flexibility to lead their own activity through exploration and imagination (Appendix E). The resources were stored openly on shelving, hooks and hangers. Although the space was structured according to an educator’s planned intention to stimulate learning, it was also often contingent with the children’s known interest.

For example, in Centre 1, the educator had been reading ‘The Faraway Tree’ with the children. The children had started making references to the book in their dramatic play and parents also reported the children talking about the book at home. In response, the educator decorated a tree in the outdoor area as the tree from the book. She purposefully decorated the tree and placed a tea set and pieces of fabric in the area to encourage children to re-enact their interpretations of the book. Her intention was for children to enhance their literacy and meaning-making skills through storytelling, however she enabled flexibility within the physical space so that children could initiate their own activity.

The physical environment of the indoor environment in Centre 2 contained open spaces to allow larger group play (six to eight children children). The positioning of furniture created spaces that were blended together wherein multiple groups of children were frequently observed to be involved in different activities in the one space. This often created overcrowding as well as conflicts over objects and space, therefore leading to a greater amount of interruptions to children’s involvement in dramatic play. In addition, objects were not pre-arranged, instead being stored in containers on rows of closed shelving. Accordingly, there was much greater ambiguity in relation to the intention of the space within the overall classroom.
The significant differences reported in children’s dramatic play behaviour in Centre 2, when compared with Centres 1, 3 and 4 (see Section 4.3.2), suggest that this amorphous approach to the spatial arrangement of the physical environment can have an undesirable impact upon children’s involvement in dramatic play. Although children had more choice in Centre 2, this seemed to impede their dramatic play, rather than provoke it, as there were greater periods of non-involvement and lower levels of complexity of dramatic play behaviour observed within this centre. In addition, children experienced more disruptions to their dramatic play, making it difficult for children to sustain their persistence.

The arrangement of thematic objects provided to children within play spaces were also found to influence children’s involvement in and the complexity of dramatic play behaviour. For instance, the data from the EC-II (see Section 4.3.1) indicate that children showed a higher preference to play dramatically within the dramatic play space of Centres 1 (n = 54.94%), 3 (n = 73.05%) and 4 (n = 54.65%), where the theme of objects in the play space was updated on a regular basis to reflect the current experiences and interests of the children.

The researcher spent on average 4-weeks in each centre. During the 4-weeks spent in Centre 3, a doctor’s area was created to facilitate a recent experience of visiting the local hospital for an excursion. After 3-weeks, the educator noticed that children were spending less time in this play space and the children said that they were now bored of the doctors theme. Therefore, this changed into a school as children began to visit their primary school orientation program and became increasingly more interested in the concept of school.

Similarly, in Centre 4 a shoe shop was facilitated in response to some children buying new shoes. After 2-weeks, objects were added to change this theme into a post office to facilitate children’s letter writing to Santa in the lead-up to Christmas. Likewise, in Centre 1, a doctor’s area to facilitate children’s recent immunisations was established. This was modified into a vet surgery 1-week later, after children began to undertake the role of cats and dogs following an incursion relating to safe pet handling. These novel dramatic play spaces within centres 1, 3 & 4 appeared to provoke more complex role enactments and complex scenarios than just mum and dad, which
Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) among others (Howes et al., 1993) assert is vital for the development of preschool children’s play skills.

In contrast, the dramatic play space in Centre 2 was maintained without change throughout the 4-week period of data collection. Children in this centre showed a lesser preference to play dramatically within this classroom area (n = 36.43%). Moreover, the objects provided to children were centred on a housekeeping/family theme, which Smilanksy and Shefatya (1990) propose is more purposeful for 2- to 3-year-old children. Overall, the children’s play style consisted of predominantly uninvolved and constructive behaviours, in that children were unlikely to persist in their role enactments and also showed a reliance upon the form and function of physical objects. Children in Centre 2 were also more likely to be involved in ‘ground hog’ and ‘silent player’ social behaviours. Accordingly, children’s dramatic play behaviours in Centre 2 suggest that objects can dampen the complexity of children’s dramatic play when they are no longer stimulating children’s development.

The further influence of objects upon children’s involvement in and complexity of dramatic play behaviour is visible within the dramatic play of children in the outdoor playground. The data of the EC-II showed that children showed a higher preference for involvement in dramatic play in the outdoor playground of Centre 3 (n = 53.04%) and Centre 4 (n = 54.65%). This is in comparison with Centre 1 (n = 28.78) and 2 (n = 18.26). The outdoor playground in Centres 3 and 4 were designed with the provision of natural surroundings that provided children with enclosed pockets and loose objects created by trees, scrubs or man-made provisions. This included in Centre 3 a home corner positioned in an enclosed area surrounded by shrubs and trees, as well as a water tray with cars and boats. The environment was intentionally designed by the educators to provide opportunities to evoke curiosity and wonder through the provision of objects and open ended play areas:

...we are intentional with everything we do, even with that cubby house we said it needed three walls so that it would evoke curiosity, wonder and imagination (Annette, Centre 3).

In Centre 4, children demonstrated the most complex dramatic play behaviour within an outdoor environment (see Section 4.3.2). The educators used an arrangement of realistic and ambiguous objects to create defined play spaces. A
construction area was provided with fluorescent vests, road signs and shovels. Dinosaurs were provided under a shaded tree that was scattered with loose natural props, and cooking objects were provided in a cubby house. Susan from Centre 4 comments that educators can foster opportunities for dramatic play using simple and cost efficient strategies:

...there are many ways to dress things up to make them more interesting, I mean even if it is just a piece of fabric stuck over one of the A frames, you immediately have a tent and then children bring the picnic set over to have a tea party, or the cars or lizards (Susan, Centre 4)

In line with the provisions of unstructured objects, the educators acknowledged the importance of facilitating affordances to engage children’s creative mimesis. Annette (Centre 3) described the physical environment as being a stage that should enrich play. She discusses that the objects can sometimes discourage children’s play if they are not yet developmentally ready to use them. Therefore she intentionally introduces new objects to children throughout the year according to the children’s developmental ability:

... In the beginning of the year the capes are fine, but the tails and ears are hard to put on so I don’t put them out yet unless you want to sit there and dress everyone because otherwise you are setting the child up to fail and for frustration (Annette, Centre 3)

In contrast, the outdoor playground in Centre 1 and Centre 2 consisted of large open areas that were not broken into specific defined spaces. The objects also appeared to be limiting the children’s dramatic play in these play spaces (see Appendix E). Trees were rare, and the topology consisted of artificial grass. Children’s involvement in dramatic play within the outdoor playground of these two centres was found to be less frequent, as measured by the EC-II (Centre 1, n = 28.78; Centre 2, n = 18.25%). Moreover, the dramatic play of children as measured by the SSEDSP in Centre 1 was less complex outdoors (M = 6.72) compared to what the same children displayed indoors (M = 8.15) where play spaces were defined and contained more objects. Jessica from Centre 1 reflects on the influence that having limited objects and undefined spaces within the outdoor environment has on children’s dramatic play:

...Outside it (play) is more disjointed, I don’t know if it is the lack of objects I don’t know a lot more just kind of sitting around talking, whereas inside they (children)
move objects around and they are more active in a physical sense with objects and other peers and things as opposed with inside (Jessica, Centre 1)

Jessica’s comment acknowledges children’s dramatic play as lacking purpose. Her comments also reflect the higher prevalence of children found to be involved in the repetitious ‘ground hog’ and solitary ‘novice’ social behaviours within these environments. Similarly, Caitlin (Centre 2) deliberated that she should be more involved in children’s play outdoors. Specifically, she acknowledges that the children should be provided with more objects and the ability to take greater risks so as to extend their dramatic play behaviour.

The position of play spaces was found to be a further physical environmental factor to influence children’s involvement in dramatic play. There was a higher likeliness that the play elements of imitative role play, persistence, and actions and situations would be complex when active and passive play spaces were separated. An active play space is one in which encourages animated, and sometimes noisier play. In an indoor environment these play spaces may include the dramatic or constructive play area (Paptheodorou, 2010). Outdoors, an active play space may include large open spaces and playground equipment. A passive space is one that encourages quiet inactive play, which may include the book corner or table areas. Outdoors, educators may provide sheltered pockets away from the main playground. Items relating to the space and furnishings sub-scale of the ECERS-R suggest that the separation and enforcement of active and passive play spaces are contributing factors to the quality of a classroom environment (Harms et al., 2005).

In Centres 1, 2 and 4, the positioning of passive play spaces was next to or inside the active play spaces. Caitlin from Centre 2 commented that she arranged the book corner next to the dramatic play space to create a homely feel, and also to encourage the use of books in children’s dramatic play. However, as seen in Vignette 4.10, observation of children’s activity in these play spaces indicated that children experienced increased noise levels, overcrowding and arguments among peers due to the multiple types of play activities occurring at once. As such, when passive and active play spaces were placed side by side, there was a greater frequency of educator interactions that interrupted children’s play to mediate the level of noise and redirect challenging behaviours.
Vignette 4.10. Collision of active and passive play spaces

In Centre 4, Harriet and Aria are reading a book on the couch. Beside them, in the home corner, Susie and Liana are playing house. Liana becomes sick and they want to use the couch as the hospital bed. They ask Harriet and Aria to move over, however they don’t want to. Instead Liana lies across them, in an attempt to move them away. An argument begins and the teacher intervenes asking all children to come with her to the craft table.

In contrast, passive and active play spaces were clearly separated in Centre 3. The children were able to move objects, such as books, from one area to another if they wanted to use them in their dramatic play, which they did regularly. Children’s dramatic play behaviour in Centre 3 was the most complex overall, specifically in the indoor environment (see Section 4.3.2). Explicitly, the children’s indoor dramatic play behaviour indicates that these children were more able to persist in complex roles, and construct complex play episodes through executed planning and collaboration. Observations of children’s dramatic play in Centre 3 records that there was less mediating behaviour from the educator, which suggests that the arrangement of play spaces contributed to the children’s ability to persist in their involvement in dramatic play.

The importance of providing and separating active and passive play spaces was further evident within the outdoor environment of Centre 4, where passive play spaces were created by utilising sheltered areas created by trees and shrubs. The educators provided figurines and objects under trees and scrubs to provoke dramatic play. In this centre, children displayed the most complex dramatic play behaviour in the outdoor environment, when compared with the other three centres.

In Centres 1 and 2, where there was no defined provisions for passive play outdoors, children’s play was found to be less persistent, play episodes were less complex and involvement in the activity according to the EC-II was low (see Section 4.3.2). There was also a higher amount of interactions from educators and children that interrupted children’s dramatic play, influenced by the increased number of activities occurring within a single play space.

Mobility of objects influences children’s involvement in play. Children were found to display more complex dramatic play behaviour in the elements of imitative role play, actions and situations, and persistence when they were able to move the
objects from one play space to another within their learning environment. Mobility of objects was most prevalent within Centres 1 and 3. For instance, in Centre 1, children often gathered food from the home corner to take on a picnic in another play space of the classroom. Similarly, in Centre 3, the children often represented the different corners of the classroom as the house of the individual characters in their play episode.

Jessica from Centre 1 conceptualises that the rationale for the pedagogy of mobility is to support the development of children’s play episodes:

...they (children) obviously don’t want to be in that particular area of the room. They do not visualise their playing to be in that area or with those resources. If there is something that they want and it is not in that area and it is in a different area why should we stop their play from continuing? (Jessica, Centre 1)

In Centres 1 and 3, where mobility of objects occurred, children’s play behaviour was higher in all six elements of the SSEDS P (Section 4.3.2). This suggests that the flexibility provided to the children by this pedagogical style may support the development of children’s play episodes.

In Centres 2 and 4, some educators would request that resources be contained to their original area. In enacting these preferences, the educators interrupted children’s play episodes to prohibit the movement of objects. Accordingly, in this scenario, the children appeared to be less able to develop their play, as mediation of this kind often prevented the children from persisting in their dramatic play.

4.3.4 The influence of interactional quality on dramatic play behaviour

The level of interactional quality was considered in relation to the social dimensions of the environment. The guidelines of the ECERS-R were employed to assess:

a) The frequency of interactions within play activities,

b) The tone of the interaction: The percentage of positive versus negative interactions, and

c) The reason for the interaction: facilitating play, comforting, sustained shared thinking, disciplining, and resolving conflicts.

Inspection of the ECERS-R data and field notes showed that the educators were applying either an active interactional style or a passive interactional style. An active
interactional style characterised those educators who showed involvement with children during periods of free play. Table 4.16 displays examples of the indicators of an active interactional style, whereby educators acted or interacted with children to advance their play activity. The indicators of an active interactional style specifically include educators: a) talking to children about ideas relating to their play, b) helping children facilitate resources, c) modelling positive social interactions, d) engaging children in sustained shared interactions, and e) involving children in conflict resolution.

**Table 4.16. Active interactional style in children’s free play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Educators talk to children about ideas related to their play</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversation between Grace (educator) and Josie (child) in Centre 3:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace: ‘What story are you playing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie: ‘We are flying to Planet Saturn’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace: ‘Oh yes, which planet is Saturn. It has the...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie: ‘Rings around it!’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace: ‘How are you flying to Saturn?’</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Educators help to facilitate resources for play</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversation between Grace (educator) and children in Centre 3:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace: ‘What could you use as your planets?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie: ‘I know a hula hoop! Can we please help us get one?’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace: ‘Yes, let’s go to the shed’</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Educators model and construct positive social interactions with peers</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre 1, conversation between Jessica (educator) and Billy (child):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Billy: ‘I am the baddy and you (to peer, Hester) are the goody. Here wear this.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica: ‘Billy, what do you think Hester might want to wear?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy: ‘Umm, Hester what do you want to wear?’</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Educators ask questions and add information to extend children’s ideas</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversation between Isabel (educator) and Johny (child) in Centre 4:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johny: ‘Did you know I found all these bugs?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel: ‘Wow, that is a lot of bugs! What kind of bug do you think they are?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johny: ‘Umm I don’t know, a beetle?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel: ‘They do look like a beetle. Why do they look like a beetle?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johny: ‘Because they have this hard shell’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel: ‘Ahh they do. These are called a cicada. These are their shells which they shed when they come out of hiding. Why might they do that?’</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Educators actively involve children in solving conflicts</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversation between Jessica (educator), Kyle and Dan (children) in Centre 1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle: ‘He is taking all the blocks and then threw one at my head’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica: ‘Dan, why did you do that?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan: ‘I need them for my space ship and it flew from my hand when it was flying’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica: ‘So what might you need to say to Kyle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan: ‘Sorry Kyle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica: ‘How can we share these blocks so that Kyle has some too?’</td>
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</table>
Interactional quality was found to be higher when educators employed an active interactional style. This included a higher frequency of interactions with children for the purpose of co-constructing conceptual knowledge through sustained shared thinking and modelling of the development of social competencies. Moreover, this was found to support a positive emotional climate within the classroom. Marotz suggests that a positive emotional climate is associated with “more receptive, responsive teachers who are warm, nurturing and sensitive to their (children’s) needs” (2015, p. 25). This was observable in the current study by children displaying greater involvement in classroom activities, including dramatic play.

In contrast, a passive interactional style consisted of supervisory behaviours, rather than being directly involved in children’s play activities. Specifically, key indicators of passive interactional behaviours involved educators placing a focus of their role in the classroom to a) monitor children’s safety, b) manage children’s behaviour, c) redirect children to other activities, and d) value children as independent learners. Examples of each indicator have been provided in Table 4.17 in the form of an observed interaction between an educator and child/s or a behaviour of educators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.17. Passive interactional style in children’s free play</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monitor the safety of children’s use of resources in play</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin (Centre 2): ‘Harry, sit up on that chair properly, it is not used for lying on’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maintain control over children’s behaviour through a top down interactional style</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi (Centre 4): ‘Billy, you are not speaking to your friends nicely, so you can come and do a drawing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Redirect children to other activities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin (Centre 2): ‘Harry, you are not using those chairs properly, come and sit at the art table with me please’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appear to value children as independent learners</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand back and watch children’s play rather than participate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Passive interactional styles were associated with a higher frequency of interactions that mediated children’s play in order to:

a) Exert control over how children could use equipment,

b) Redirect children to different play areas, and
c) Express concern over the level of noise.

An example, provided in Vignette 4.11, presents a common behaviour of a passive interactional style, whereby the educator stands away from the children’s activity watching over them. She does not appear to be concerned of the content of the children’s play; rather, she is focussed on their safety. By mediating children’s play for the aforementioned purposes, the educators were less likely to acknowledge the significance of the intention behind children’s actions. Therefore, educators’ interactions associated with a passive style was more likely to de-value the context of the children’s play by sending the message that the children were misbehaving.

**Vignette 4.11. Passive interactional style**

Outdoors in Centre 2, three children are involved in a fire-fighting play episode. They were using bikes as fire trucks and racing around the yard quickly to put out their next fire. Meanwhile, four children are in the sandpit cooking. The educator is standing in the corner of the yard watching the children. ‘Slow down’ she calls whilst remaining in her position.

When educators used a passive interactional style, the children were observed to display more uninvolved behaviours, including aimless wondering and disruptive behaviours of running and arguing. There was also a higher volume of classroom noise and more negative child – child interactions.

A further example shown in Vignette 4.12 and 4.13 depicts a common approach of a passive interactional style, where educators stop children’s dramatic play episodes and redirect their involvement to another activity when children’s noise level rises. Since dramatic play is typically an active style of play that does exert a larger level of noise, frequent educator interactions of this nature are not supportive of children’s involvement in the activity. Accordingly, when centres employed a passive interactional style, there was a greater presence of immature dramatic play, including higher frequencies of novice, silent partner and ground hog play social behaviours. This was particularly evident in Centre 2, where the lowest level of interactional quality was recorded (ECERS- R Interaction Subscale, M = 3.20).
Vignette 4.12. Influence of passive interactional style on children’s dramatic play

In Centre 4, three boys are playing in the post office which is located next to the home corner. They have been delivering parcels as mailmen to the family living at the nearby house. The educator (Isabel) notices and tells the children that they cannot take the post boxes into the home corner and needed to take them back. She walks away. The children stop their play and begin throwing the boxes at one another. Thomas comments whilst laughing, “Isabel is going to go bananas when she sees this, she will go bananas!”

Vignette 4.13. Influence of passive interactional style on children’s dramatic play

In Centre 2, three boys were enacting the characters of TV show Ben 10 in the construction play space. No other children were playing in there, however the boys were jumping around and making loud sound effects for their actions. The educator notices and asks them to please use the play space for building. She begins modelling the construction of a house, telling them that they need to sit down and choose an activity.

The influence of interactional quality upon children’s dramatic play can be made further visible when the indoor and outdoor environments are compared. In Centres 1 and 3, children’s SSEDSP scores were highest within the indoor environment. Both of these centres also recorded the highest levels of interactional quality according to the ECERS-R (Centre 1, M = 6.20; Centre 3, M = 6.27). Field notes indicate that this level of interactional quality was maintained indoors over the course of data collection. However, outdoors, passive interactional styles were more frequent. This meant that educators in centre 1 and 3 were less likely to extend on children’s ideas through sustained shared thinking, the provision of new objects and/or model social relationships during periods of outdoor free play. This appears to have contributed to a decline in the complexity of children’s dramatic play outdoors.

In Centre 1, Jessica indicated that this was an ongoing issue within her centre. However in Centre 3, over the course of the 4-week period of data collection, the educators were occupied in completing end-of-year souvenirs with the children. Accordingly, the educator occupying the outdoor environment was engaged in a small group activity – reducing her presence in children’s broader activities. Annette reflects in the dialogic reflective interview:
...I found this (video) interesting because I would usually become involved at moments like these (ground hog play behaviours). Because my attention is directed towards the tea-towels I was unaware of this play. I don’t like doing the tea-towels, but the parents expect it (Annette, Centre 3).

4.3.5. The influence of the curriculum on dramatic play behaviour

Employment of the ECERS-R examined how the curriculum provided opportunities for open-ended play in both indoor and outdoor activities. The ECERS-R also examined the extent to which educators provided opportunities for learning through play in nine curriculum areas of:

a) Art
b) Manipulative activities
c) Music/Movement
d) Blocks
e) Sand/Water
f) Nature/Science
g) Math/number
h) Technology
i) Dramatic Play

All four of the centres studied were led by a play-based curriculum. This was underpinned by a child-initiated, adult guided approach encouraged by the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Within this approach there were two main variations towards how the curriculum was implemented. In Centres 1, 3 and 4, there was a closer balance between child and educator initiated interactions and activities. These three centres achieved an ECERS-R score considered to be in good range (M = 5.00 - 6.00) in the sub-scales of activities and program structure. This indicates that the classroom environment consisted of several play spaces covering a wide range of curriculum areas. It also indicates that the educators used intentional and spontaneous opportunities to extend upon children’s conceptual knowledge, in the areas of arts, maths, literacy and science. In these three centres, educators planned and implemented small and large group adult-guided activities to enrich learning in a broader range of curriculum areas. Furthermore, the educators were more likely to demonstrate active interactional styles during periods of free play. As such, centres that scored highly on this indicator also displayed higher levels of interactional quality.

In Centre 2, the ECERS-R score for activities and program structure were considered to be of a minimal level (M = 3.00 – 4.00). The curriculum was led almost wholly by child-initiated activity. Accordingly, children were provided with large blocks
of free play where they would independently explore the activities and objects provided by the educator, a reflection of the passive interactional style predominant in this centre. At the time of data collection, there were limited adult-guided small and large group activities implemented in this centre. Collectively, this contributed to minimal scores in all nine curriculum areas assessed by the ECERS-R.

The influence of these curriculum approaches upon children’s dramatic play will be explained according to two findings:

i. Dramatic play is positively influenced by an integrated curriculum, and

ii. Dramatic play is positively influenced by a converged curriculum.

**Dramatic play is positively influenced by an integrated curriculum:** An integrated curriculum refers to occasions when two or more curriculum areas (e.g., literacy, maths, science, dramatic play) or developmental areas (e.g., social, emotional, cognition) are interwoven within play to promote a holistic learning approach (Arthur et al, 2015). For instance, in Centre 1, Jessica was often observed to become a participant in children’s dramatic play so as to incorporate aspects of literacy into the play episode. In contrast, in Centres 3 and 4, the educators reflected on their involvement in dramatic play so as to purposefully strengthen children’s social competencies. In each of these scenarios, the educators integrate areas of learning together with representational thought.

In Centres 3 and 4, the educators integrated a curriculum theme through the provision of objects across multiple play spaces. For instance, in Centre 3, many children were having their 4-year-old immunisations. To facilitate children’s knowledge of this experience, the theme of the dramatic play space was converted into a hospital. Over the course of two weeks the educators became involved in children’s dramatic play to foster the knowledge of roles and scenes associated with going to the doctors. The educators made links with the terminology and concepts explored in books, relating to the human body and a recent excursion to the local hospital. Throughout the experience, the educators reflected with the children about their conceptual knowledge relating to hospitals through discussions led by open-ended questions. During this time, the frequency of children’s involvement in dramatic
play remained constant, but their play episodes were observed to increase in the complexity of persistent role enactments, elaborateness of scenarios, and verbalisations. This was particularly observed within the indoor dramatic play space, which has been reported as displaying the most complex dramatic play behaviour (Section 4.3.1).

In Centre 4, a similar approach was followed during an unusually high season of cicadas that occurred during the period of data collection. In response to children’s curiosity, educators set up an interest area relating to insects, including books and artefacts. The interest extended to the art table where children were provoked by educators to create bug catchers. Outside the educators provided magnifying glasses and a desk, which provoked the children to create a bug museum. This reflected their visit to the insect exhibition at the local museum 1-week earlier, where they had examined several bug species. Throughout this process, the educators in Centre 4 undertook a passive interactional style. While they facilitated opportunities for children to explore, they did not often become involved themselves. Although the theme of insects became present in children’s dramatic play episodes, it was not as constant or complex as was seen in the dramatic play of children Centre 3, where the educators had guided the children towards a specific role relating to doctors. This may suggest that an active interactional style/integrated curriculum approach is a more effective influence upon children’s dramatic play.

In Centre 2 there were far less defined play spaces available compared with the other centres. Moreover, educators’ prevailing passive interactional style appeared to limit the amount of intentional and spontaneous teaching opportunities that occurred. School readiness was a much more significant focus for the educators in this centre, which appeared to place the development of academic concepts at the forefront of the curriculum. The educators prioritised learning as best occurring through play activities where core curriculum areas of maths and literacy were clearly visible. For instance, table activities frequently included a focus on alphabet and numbers.

Limited interactions with children in their play activities segregated the curriculum areas and conceptual learning away from the cognitive and social developmental skills associated with dramatic play. Caitlin discussed that her limited
interactions with children in dramatic play was associated with her value of children being independent constructors of knowledge. For example, Caitlin discussed that excursions are sometimes adopted to extend children’s knowledge of an observed interest. However, she identified that she would rarely extend on this experience with the children in dramatic play, as she preferred that the children explore their new knowledge in dramatic play by themselves. Caitlin of Centre 2 comments:

…I think the fact that we have been on the excursion to the firehouse I would allow them to lead the play… I think that they learn best with each other. I might ask what else can we add? (Caitlin, Centre 2)

Figure 4.6 conceptualises the aforementioned curriculum approaches in a continuum of the influence that they can have upon children’s dramatic play. As discussed, the combination of an active interactional style and an integrated curriculum has the most positive influence upon children’s dramatic play. A passive interactional style within an integrated curriculum provides children with a positive foundation to encourage creative dispositions associated with dramatic play, but limited guidance from educators can prevent children from developing complex play episodes.

![Figure 4.6. Range of interactional style and curriculum approach in the current study](image)

Finally, a passive interactional style within a segregated curriculum was found to have the least amount of influence upon children’s involvement in and complexity of dramatic play. In Centre 2, where a passive/segregated approach was common, the children’s frequency and complexity of dramatic play remained constant throughout the time of data collection. As the centre recorded the lowest scores in the SSEDSP score and involvement scale (Section 4.3.1), it was common to observe children repeatedly enacting the same roles of an imitative nature, within similar themed scenes and a moderate level of object substitution.
Dramatic play is positively influenced by a converged curriculum. A converged curriculum involves the integration of indoor and outdoor play spaces. In a converged curriculum, the educators leave the doors between the indoor and outdoor play spaces open, allowing children to have a greater choice of play spaces. A converged curriculum was adopted in Centres 1 and 3. It was found that children who attended these centres displayed greater persistence, social interactions and verbal communication in their dramatic play behaviour when playing in the indoor environment (Section 4.3.1).

The application of a converged curriculum was not found to have an influence upon children’s dramatic play behaviour in the outdoor environment. This could be associated with the educators of Centre 3 displaying less interactions with children outdoors at the time of data collection (Section 4.3.4) and the quality of physical affordances within the outdoor environment of Centre 1 being low (Section 4.3.3).

In speaking of her application of the converged curriculum, Annette from Centre 3 comments that since implementing the curriculum, children appeared to be more settled. She also commented that the children’s dramatic play has become sustained for longer periods of time, as their play is no longer interrupted so as to transition between scheduled indoor and outdoor activities. She has observed that the children have begun resourcing their own objects which has extended the levels of persistence in and complexity of their play episodes. Co-educator Grace reflects on a video of a group of children making space helmets for their rocket storyline:

... it (creating objects) has probably evolved from when part way through the year, that’s when we started the indoor/outdoor play (converged curriculum). I think it is accessibility that they can be inside and they can be out and it is their choice throughout the day (Grace, Centre 3)

In Centre 1, Jessica sees the value of having a converged curriculum. However she is finding the learning between indoor and outdoor dichotomous, as she has always seen the indoor environment as providing children with more opportunities for learning. She comments that many children prefer playing outdoors, where she believes less quality dramatic play and overall learning occurs:
I am struggling in a way because I am so used to having everyone inside and now with the doors open the children want to all play outside so they aren’t doing a lot of indoor play (Jessica, Centre 1)

There are, however, possible valid reasons for centres not implementing a converged curriculum. In Centre 2, there is only one educator present, which requires indoor and outdoor play to be scheduled at individual times to ensure supervisory requirements are maintained. In contrast, in Centre 4, a converged curriculum is not implemented as Naomi believes that segregating indoor and outdoor play encourages children to try more things and play with a wider range of peers:

I have tried indoor/outdoor play. However I didn’t like it. The same children were always playing at the same activities with the same friends. When I keep indoor and outdoor play separate, the children mingle with different children, and engage in a wider range of activities. To me they have more opportunity for learning (Naomi, Centre 4)

Despite Naomi’s contention, it was observed that the social and emotional climate of the classroom environment was much calmer during periods of free play in Centres 1 and 3, as the indoor play space was less noisy and crowded. In addition, the educators were more frequently observed to be involved in the children’s dramatic play in centres that adopted a converged curriculum. In comparison, the observations of periods of indoor free play in Centres 2 and 4 were often high in noise and energy levels, which led to a chaotic social and emotional climate, wherein a greater amount of disruptive behaviour was observed. Often play spaces were overcrowded and facilitated multiple groups of children involved in different forms of play activities within the same area. This was consistent with children’s dramatic play being sustained for shorter periods, as there were more interruptions from their peers, and meditation of the educator to regain passive behaviour.

4.3.6 Summary of findings for research question 3

In summary, the findings of research question 3 indicate that there are factors of the physical, interactional and curriculum classroom environment that influence children’s involvement in and complexity of dramatic play. The physical environment was found to foster enriched affordances for children’s dramatic play when it was arranged with defined play spaces that contained a balance of realistic and ambiguous
objects presented openly on shelving, hooks and hangers. The arrangement of objects was an important factor found to influence children’s dramatic play, with a balance of realistic and ambiguous objects within novel play spaces appearing most beneficial.

Maintaining a positive social and emotional climate was highlighted as an important factor of children’s persistence in dramatic play. The organisation of the physical classroom and implementation of a converged curriculum was found to prevent overcrowding in children’s play spaces, reduce the amount of disruptions to children’s dramatic play, and increase the complexity of their dramatic play behaviour.

Finally, the importance of educator involvement for dramatic play was highlighted. Children demonstrated complex dramatic play behaviours when the educators practiced active interactional styles during free play, including engagement in sustained shared thinking, facilitating play resources, and guiding social interactions. Conducted within an integrated curriculum, educators’ interactions during children’s free play provided a rich foundation for children to enhance their dramatic play as they obtained greater conceptual awareness of roles and situations, as well as increased social skills.

4.4 Findings addressing RQ4: In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence children’s involvement in dramatic play?

In this section, the results relating to educators’ personal knowledge and views about dramatic play are presented. This data were collected using semi-structured interviews and a dialogic reflective video interview with each of the eight participating educators. Field notes were also collected during the data collection process to examine educators’ behaviour in relation to children’s dramatic play.

Four key findings emerged from the data in relation to the influence of educators’ knowledge and views upon children’s involvement in dramatic play. These included:

i. Educators’ teaching philosophy influenced the classroom quality (see subsection 4.4.1),
i. Educators’ knowledge and views towards dramatic play and learning influenced the pedagogical positioning of dramatic play within the classroom environment (see subsection 4.4.2),

ii. Educators’ role in dramatic play influenced children’s dramatic play behaviour (see subsection 4.4.3), and

iii. Educators experienced barriers to dramatic play (see subsection 4.4.4).

These are each discussed in the sections below.

4.4.1 The influence of educators’ teaching philosophy towards children’s learning on classroom quality

The participating educators’ identified that their teaching philosophy was guided by the knowledge that children learn through exploration and discovery. In line with this philosophy, the educators perceived *involvement* to be an indicator that children are learning. This is illustrated in the following comments by two of the educators:

...well in my setting here [learning] looks like an adult can walk in and the children can look up, notice and then get back to what they are doing because they are all engaged they are all involved. Even if they are in conflict they are learning (Annette, Centre 3).

...I think [learning] is about the state of the room and how settled the children are. I think if children are engaged in the learning, they are settled, they are focused, there is less of the running around the room, there is less of the behavioural issues (Caitlin, Centre 2)

Figure 4.7 deconstructs the interaction between the knowledge views and behaviours assumed by the participating educators. It shows that despite all educators holding the knowledge that children’s learning and development is contingent on their involvement in exploration and discovery of classroom activities, there were two differing views relating to the role of the educator in children’s learning process. These views included: a) Learning is constructed by children, and b) Learning is co-constructed by children and adults. Each view was found to have an influence upon the pedagogical behaviours that educators adopted within the classroom. The behaviours represented in Figure 4.7 reflect those identified as influencing children’s dramatic play in Section 4.3. A detachment between educators’ views and practice represents a conflict in what the educator thought they were practicing versus what they were observed to practice.
The sections below will discuss the connection between educators’ views and behaviour in more detail.

*Learning is constructed by children* was a prevalent view of Caitlin in Centre 2 and Susan in Centre 4. Valuing child-initiated learning, the educators saw themselves as having an important role in facilitating children’s opportunity for social interaction between peers.

…I think they (children) experience more effective learning from each other, more when they are hands on. When it is me leading the play they (children) are focussing on specific skills but they (children) are not getting the most out of it because they are not involved in it (Caitlin, Centre 2)

In Centre 4, Susan comments that “educators need to have faith” in children as “creative beings” to learn and develop without the influence of structure (i.e., adult involvement in children’s play). Susan acknowledged that adults offer children guidance through their selection of objects and facilitation of play spaces to steer
children’s learning. However, she reiterates that children’s learning occurs best through independent exploration:

I feel that the children learn by exploring naturally as they want to extend themselves. The educators are here and there adding resources for them that are guiding them with but you are also allowing that freedom to develop and grow (Susan, Centre 4)

The views of Susan and Caitlin are positioned within a constructivist stance that values independent learning. Arthur et al. (2015) discuss that a constructivist stance follows the views of Piaget, who argued children to be actively involved in the construction of meaning. ‘Constructivists’ emphasise the importance of allowing children to make discoveries themselves and the facilitation of opportunities for self-discovery to occur within the curriculum (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2005). The participating educators who employed this view were more likely to adopt a passive interactional approach during periods of children’s free play. The findings presented in section 4.3.3 revealed a higher prevalence of passive interactions are associated with children’ demonstrating lower levels of involvement in dramatic play, and the latter being lower in complexity overall.

In Centre 1, 3 and 4, educators viewed learning as a process of co-construction between children, peers and adults. In Centre 3, Annette and Grace shared their philosophy that children’s learning occurs best through a social context which includes the joint involvement between children and educators. In this view it is believed that the educators and children co-construct the learning process through their interactions with each other. Grace asserts that in this process children can both learn from and teach adults.

...Just being interactive with them (children)... like sometimes you (the educator) take things from the children and then other times the children will take whatever you are giving them so that is what I see my role as (Grace, Centre 3)

...The children need time, to not be rushed, to be guided and encouraged to follow me at times and at other times to teach me (Grace, Centre 3)

Jessica and Irene from Centre 1 concur that educator-child interactions hold a strong role in children’s learning. Jessica explains that her interactions aim to help children to believe in themselves so as to become confident learners:
...I spend time with them... to help them believe in their own capabilities and when I do push them that extra step I see how grateful and excited they are in their own achievements (Jessica, Centre 1)

In contrast, Irene values her participation in children’s play activities foremost to build relationships. However she also views her interactions as an important mechanism for guiding children towards new concepts:

...I mostly interact with them (children) so that they feel comfortable. So just letting the children know that they have someone to talk to if they have an issue and just listening to them and getting down to their level... But I also like to expand on what they’ve (children) talked about or show them how to do something, so taking them to the next step so that they are learning too. (Irene, Centre 1)

The importance of educator interactions in children’s play were mirrored by Naomi and Lauren in Centre 4:

I think that we (educators) do need to provide children with guidance in their activities, just to make their learning more meaningful (Naomi, Centre 4)

I am glad that I got involved in the children’s play here (referring to video). I don’t think that they would have been involved as long if I had not have got involved and asked those questions. Our interaction also guided me towards where the children perhaps needed a little more help socially (Lauren, Centre 4)

In contrast to the constructivist stance where child-initiated and directed play was valued, the educators who employed a co-constructive pedagogical approach were more likely to adopt an active interactional approach (Section 4.3.4). Vialle et al. (2005) assert that a co-constructive pedagogical approach is associated with Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical theory. In Vygotsky’s theory, cooperative dialogues between children and other members of their community are considered crucial for children’s acquisition of thinking and behaviour. This view of learning has influenced a pedagogical approach where educators adopt teaching approaches that indirectly guide children’s learning and also view children as active constructors of knowledge (Vialle et al., 2005). The findings (Section 4.3.3) revealed that centres with a higher prevalence of active interactions between educators and children influenced a positive social and emotional climate, supporting higher scores relating to classroom quality, higher levels of involvement in dramatic play, and more complex dramatic play behaviour.
Sometimes, the educators’ beliefs did not coincide with their observed and known pedagogy in all classroom environments. Specifically, at the time of data collection, educators in Centres 1 and 3 displayed a higher frequency of passive interactions in the outdoor learning environment than what was observed indoors. In addition, the physical outdoor learning environment in Centre 1 was less equipped with objects and space to accommodate children’s involvement in dramatic play. The differences in children’s dramatic play behaviour between the indoor and outdoor play spaces in these two centres support the important role that a physical environment and active educator involvement has upon children’s involvement in dramatic play.

Many educators showed difficulty talking about the philosophical underpinnings of their behaviour. In particular, Irene (Centre 1), Caitlin (Centre 2) and Susan (Centre 4) spoke openly about their views towards their teaching and children’s learning, however could not make connections with its theoretical underpinnings. These educators spoke much less about the complexities attached to teaching and learning through dramatic play. Nonetheless, they agreed with the inferences made.

4.4.2 The influence of educators’ views towards dramatic play upon the pedagogical positioning of dramatic play within the classroom environment

The participating educators were asked to identify and discuss their views and knowledge of the role of dramatic play for children’s learning. All of the educators agreed that dramatic play is a medium through which children can explore the events of a previously experienced situation. There was also widespread agreement that dramatic play was beneficial for children’s social skills. However, there were varying views of the overall importance of dramatic play for children’s learning and development.

Figure 4.8 deconstructs the interaction between the knowledge, views and behaviours assumed by the participating educators in relation to the activity of dramatic play. Specifically, Figure 4.8 shows that despite all educators holding the knowledge that children play dramatically to make sense of their previous experiences, there were several views relating to what role dramatic play served in the process of children’s learning. One view that asserted that children learn through play upheld differing perspectives,
including that included a) Play provides a holistic learning opportunity, and b) Play promotes social and emotional learning. In contrast, a second view maintained the perspective that children needed to have a developed skill set in order to learn through play. This view did not perceive dramatic play to hold importance in the process of school readiness. Each view was found to have an influence upon the pedagogical behaviours that educators adopted within the classroom. The behaviours represented in Figure 4.8 reflect those identified as influencing children’s dramatic play in section 4.3. The sections below will discuss the connection between educators’ views and behaviour in more detail.

**Figure 4.8. Relationship between educators’ views, knowledge and behaviour**

*Children learn through dramatic play:* Seven of the eight participating educators viewed dramatic play as a platform where children can be themselves within a child-directed activity. Aligned with this view, dramatic play was perceived to provide a special context for children’s learning as it was one of the few activities where they were not bound by structure imposed by the adult, which affords them more freedom to create and explore the world around them at their own pace:

...When children get to primary school I worry they aren’t allowed to have that time to think and create. I think children learn so much more by being able to relax and play and create and just be themselves (Susan, Centre 4)
In Centres 1 and 4, dramatic play was specifically valued for its role in the promotion of children’s social and emotional learning. The educators acknowledged the social skills involved in complex dramatic play and also the construction of identity through the enactment of different people within the community:

...when I observe children’s dramatic play I am always drawn to the social aspects of their development. You know the way they interact with each other and take on pretend roles (Jessica, Centre 1)

The educators acknowledged dramatic play as being an important platform for the social and emotional domains of learning; however, some educator’s views insinuated a divide between dramatic play and further aspects of learning and development, including cognitive skills and academic concepts. Naomi reflects:

...Socially it (dramatic play) gives children a good medium to socialise and make friends, and also for them to make sense of their world, but I think there is a place for structured activities (Naomi, Centre 4)

Similarly, Irene (Centre 1) views the learning experienced by children in dramatic play to be precarious. She reflects that she would be more likely to initiate interactions with children in the construction and table areas as she feels that in these areas she has more opportunity to ask questions in relation to the activity. It is in this transaction with children that she feels that she is teaching. In contrast, she felt that in dramatic play children are just playing. She reflects upon this assumption when watching an interaction between her and the children in the block corner:

...They’re (the children) asking a lot of questions in this one, whereas the last one (video reflection of children in dramatic play space) was just play basically. In this one they are asking questions and I am answering them so I feel that they are learning more (Irene, Centre 1)

As can be seen in vignette 4.14, Irene’s interactions in the video shown to her illustrates little acknowledgement of the content of the children’s constructive style of play. Rather, she sees the children’s involvement in the constructive play space as an opportunity to teach maths.
In contrast to the view that dramatic play is valuable for aspects of social and emotional learning only, Annette and Grace (Centre 3), as well as Lauren (Centre 4) upheld a more comprehensive view of the interrelationship between children’s involvement dramatic play and learning. They discussed that dramatic play was a platform for children to experience complex involvement in higher order thinking. According to Annette, dramatic play affords children with an enriching experience for their learning because the social and communicative elements of the activity stimulate the children’s cognitive thinking to a greater degree. In this experience the children experience cognitive growth in academic concepts and self-awareness:

...In dramatic play their (children’s) language is of a high level of thinking and they are pushing themselves and they are taking it further you know... There are so many skills to polish up before you are in the formal school setting and dramatic play involves numeracy, literacy, science (Annette, Centre 3).

Grace and Lauren agree, commenting that dramatic play encompasses multiple areas of the curriculum:

There are so many concepts in all realms of the curriculum that they are doing in each of those stories like you know you have your sciences that come into it and you know they are experimenting to see if it works or doesn’t work, what they can do so that it does work (Grace, Centre 3)

Dramatic play seems like an all-encompassing activity for children’s learning. This morning for instance... in the post office, the children were writing letters, whilst communicating with one another in co-operative play (Lauren, Centre 4)

Children need a developed skill set to participate in dramatic play: In Centre 2, Caitlin believed that in order to learn through dramatic play, children needed a developed skill set to participate

If they (children) have the social skills developed then yes play can teach them a lot... but I think if a child doesn’t have those skills and doesn’t have that level of skill then they need support elsewhere to get ready for school (Caitlin, Centre 2)
Caitlin appeared to hold getting children school-ready as highly important. She therefore viewed the development of academic skills as a high priority. She acknowledged that the immature level of some children’s play in her centre was not contributing to their learning and development, and expressed uncertainty about whether the play episodes that she observed could get children ready for school:

...I’ve got a couple of children going to school next year who I don’t think are ready and I don’t think their dramatic play is going to be the part that gets them ready for school... I see the ones who revert back to being a baby or crawling around the floor being a dog and there is nothing wrong with that but when you are getting them school ready I don’t know how those skills and that dramatic play will benefit them (Caitlin, Centre 2)

Despite Caitlin acknowledging that children’s dramatic play skills were of a low level of complexity, she would seldom become involved in children’s dramatic play. During free play, it was common for Caitlin to be occupied with children at the craft table, where she conversed with them about their creations while she completed quality assurance paperwork. Accordingly, any interaction with children in relation to dramatic play was initiated by the child and was not further extended by the educator.

At the time of data collection, the children had recently visited a firehouse and were regularly undertaking the role of firemen in their dramatic play. In discussing her role in facilitating children’s development of role she says:

...because we have been on the excursion they have that knowledge of climbing up ladders, having hoses and the boots and the hats and they bring in a lot of that knowledge into the play anyway firehouse so I would probably would allow them to lead the play... You can tell the children who have taken that on board and that is what I look for and that is my position in children’s play (Caitlin, Centre 2).

Her behaviour reflects her understanding of dramatic play being an activity of children’s self-expression and view of the world. She values children’s self-exploration within a play episode without having the adult structure the objects, or imposing the learning content in the other play spaces of the room.

4.4.3 The influence of the educators’ role upon children’s dramatic play behaviour

Field notes documenting educators’ involvement in children’s dramatic play and 300-minutes of video observations were analysed according to the role educators
employed in children’s dramatic play episodes. As outlined in Table 4.18, three prevailing roles emerged, including: a) Participant, b) Facilitator, and c) Monitor. Table 4.18 identifies the frequency of each role according to the observations. The aims and outcomes of the educators’ behaviour associated with these roles are presented. Moreover, connections are made with their overall views and knowledge of learning and play.

Table 4.18. Educators’ roles in children’s dramatic play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role and frequency</th>
<th>Educator Behaviour</th>
<th>Aim of behaviour</th>
<th>Observed Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant (n = 15%)</td>
<td>Enacts a role within children’s play</td>
<td>Teach academic concepts</td>
<td>Children’s role and play episode are extended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leads the progression of script</td>
<td>Extend knowledge of social roles and situations</td>
<td>Concepts are not always transferable to children’s immediate knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interactions occur only in the dramatic play space</td>
<td>Assist children to be accepted into a developed story</td>
<td>Not all children receive guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator (n = 23%)</td>
<td>Interactions are non-directive from outside the play</td>
<td>Support the story of the play episode</td>
<td>Children lead the play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective questioning related to children’s play episode and behaviour</td>
<td>Guide children’s ideas</td>
<td>All children receive supportive interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledge involvement in dramatic play in all classroom play spaces</td>
<td>Extend children’s conceptual thinking</td>
<td>Greater culture of ‘play’ embedded in centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor (n = 62%)</td>
<td>Facilitates the physical environment</td>
<td>Maintain safe environment</td>
<td>Children lead the play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interacts to mediate behaviour only</td>
<td>Support children’s self-expression</td>
<td>Greater amount of educator and child interruptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Less guidance to develop dramatic play behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The role of a ‘participant’ in dramatic play consisted of educators having direct involvement in the children’s dramatic play episodes by assuming a role and leading children to actions and events. This was the least observed role that educators employed (n = 15%). This reflects the educators’ assertion that a participatory role takes the lead of the dramatic play episode away from the children. According to the
educators, by them participating in children’s dramatic play, the play episode is no longer an activity of children’s self-expression and an exploration of children’s own experiences:

I think that it is the child’s activity. If I become involved then I will interrupt the meaning that children are making of themselves and their experiences (Naomi, Centre 4)

In contrast, Jessica (Centre 1) did value dramatic play as a tool to teach the academic concepts that she viewed to be valuable for school readiness, which was the goal for her curriculum at time of data collection. She believed that she had a role to direct children’s play so that she could make certain concepts visible. She comments:

...I do tend to direct a lot. Only because I want to use it as a chance to teach them...I think it is just to extend children’s knowledge about different areas or themes. To extend their language, their creativity and knowledge (Jessica, Centre 1)

... I think that dramatic play can be used by the educator to teach many concepts. Science for example, we could become the role of scientists to conduct an experiment. Most children relate well to dramatic play (Jessica, Centre 1)

Jessica’s role appeared to have positive implications upon the later construction of children’s play episodes. The new concepts introduced to children through Jessica’s participation guided the development of children’s later play episodes (Vignette 4.15).

Vignette 4.15. Role of a participant in children’s dramatic play

Jessica observed that two children were swapping the role of a doctor and patient for the third time in 7-minutes. The children’s language and events within the play episode contained basic knowledge of the situation. Jessica asked the children if she could play with them and became the doctor. She directed the children through a more detailed episode that included roles of the doctor, patient, receptionist and nurse. The story was inclusive of signing in at reception upon arrival to the doctors, waiting in the waiting room and then seeing the doctor. Later in the day, these roles became prevalent within the girls’ play. Their episode has consisted of a greater number of sequences that lasted longer and included multiple roles.

Jessica’s co-educator, Irene, also enjoyed becoming involved in children’s dramatic play as a participant. Irene’s interactions were energetic, which was absorbed by the children and attracted a number of children to join her in the play episode. The intention of Irene’s participation was directed towards building relationships with children rather than guiding their conceptual knowledge. She did not enter the play with a purpose, other than to “just have fun with the children”. This
reflects her uncertainty of dramatic play being valuable for children’s conceptual awareness (Section 4.4.2).

Two limitations of the role of participation were noted in the analysis of observations. First, when the educators left the play episode, the children’s involvement also ended. Jessica commented that she had observed this to occur, reflecting that she sometimes introduces concepts that are at times too advanced for children to do on their own:

I think if I walked away they would have lost it. They become unengaged because they need that adult there constantly talk to them and reassure them as they have not yet grasped that knowledge (Jessica, Centre 1)

Second, the educators often became the focus of the children’s involvement; in other words, the children held one-on-one interactions with the educator, instead of interacting collaboratively with one another. For instance, when playing doctors, Jessica became the patient to four different doctors who worked on her independently (Vignette 4.16).

**Vignette 4.16. Role of a participant in children’s dramatic play**

Jessica (enacting a patient) was sitting in the waiting room chatting to the other patients. She gets called into the doctors’ room by the child enacting the role of the doctor. Jessica tells the doctor that she has a sore tummy, to which the doctor responses that she needs to cut her open to have a look. When other children in the classroom notice that Jessica is in the dramatic play space, they approach to observe. Four children begin picking up objects and performing their own procedures on Jessica. Suddenly she has a broken arm, worms in her stomach and a baby.

Jessica noticed this social behaviour of children in the dialogic reflective interview, where Jessica was asked to reflect on moments of her involvement in children’s dramatic play. She commented that she often ignored certain children, even though they were playing key roles:

Oh no, I am concerned about supporting Joanna in the role of the doctor, and I forgot about poor Susie sitting there as the patient. I don’t talk to her once! (Jessica, Centre 1)

Other participating educators, Susan (Centre 4) and Annette (Centre 3), were hesitant to become directly involved in children’s dramatic play. However, they acknowledged that there were certain times when a participant role was needed. Both
educators expressed that they would become involved in children’s play episodes when the dramatic play space assumed a new theme. This was because children may have needed guidance to develop conceptual knowledge of the roles related to that theme. Grace and Annette also became involved to help support children’s social interactions or the inclusion of shy children.

Susan explains that, upon setting up a new dramatic play space, she watches the children’s play episodes so as to know where the children need support in their roles. She will then enter the children’s play episode as a participant to enrich their knowledge of the concepts that are involved in the theme being explored:

...You do sort of need to be there to steady them, particularly in the beginning I want them to realise that it is all set up this way and there is a flow in the play (Susan, Centre 4)

Annette (Centre 3) comments that a participative role allows her to support children’s social collaboration. However, she prefers to play a passive role, so as to not over impose upon the children’s ideas. The field notes document that when she was invited to be a patient in a doctor’s play episode led by two boys, she employed the use of questions or comments that aimed to provoke children’s thought about their role or actions. This assisted the children to extend the roles and story within the play episode, while also supporting their perspective-taking skills through collaborative dialogue.

The findings show that the participative role can have positive implications upon elements of children’s dramatic play behaviour by modelling important aspects of role enactments, sequencing of events within play episodes, vocabulary for verbal communication and also social interactions. There were, however, some limitations in the educators’ interactions within the participative role. For instance, it was uncommon to see educators modelling the use of ambiguous objects. In fact, the educators were more likely to source a replica object, than represent an object as something else. Moreover, discussion with the educators in the interviews indicated that the educators valued the presence of replica objects over ambiguous ones in their dramatic play spaces:

Before setting up the theme of the dramatic play space, I will visit the local op shop to ensure that the children have access to real life objects (Jessica, Centre 1)
Children like to play with adult things. I bought them a new afternoon tea set\(^1\) last week and the girls have been visiting that table all week (Susan, Centre 4).

A second limitation of the participative role was that it was observed almost wholly in the dramatic play space. The implications of this behaviour meant that several children were without direct guidance in their dramatic play as they seldom played in the dramatic play space. This is an important consideration for further discussion as the findings of children’s play styles and preferences demonstrate that it is the children whose dramatic play occurred most frequently in the construction, playground and sandpit play spaces that displayed the least complex dramatic play behaviour (Section 4.1.2).

The role of a facilitator involved a transaction of intentionally employed interactions initiated by the educator to extend children’s play episodes from outside the play. A facilitating role was most prevalent by educators in Centre 3 and 4. In these centres, the educators did not like to be actively involved in children’s play, however they viewed the context of dramatic play to be a valuable source of holistic learning. Accordingly, their interactions aimed to increase children’s reflective thinking so as to make the elements of children’s play episodes more conscious to the child:

...We say what story you are playing, we don’t say what are you doing? The language is about reflecting sequence back to us and then is there anything you need to make this story different or missing from your story (Annette and Grace, Centre 3)

The facilitating role was also used by educators in Centres 3 and 4 to prompt children involved in other play activities to enter an imaginary realm. Lauren comments:

Dramatic play brings children into a space that they can explore and build upon their knowledge of the world. I believe that (dramatic play) provides a high level of learning, so I try to prompt them to use their imagination when I see that they are not fully engaged in an activity to their full potential (Lauren, Centre 4)

Lauren’s comment illuminates her views towards the important context that dramatic play provides for children’s learning. As such, she sees the facilitative role as a useful strategy to encourage deeper level thinking in children’s play activities.

\(^1\) Set included cups, sauces, cutlery and slices of cake.
Vignette 4.17 shows that this can be effective towards increasing the complexity of children’s involvement in play.

**Vignette 4.17. Role of a facilitator in children's dramatic play**

Children are in the digging patch. They are each wearing fluoro workers vests and appear to be digging. No interactions are occurring among them.

Lauren: This looking like a big road that you are working on! When will it be ready?  
David: In 60 days  
Lauren: 60 days!? What if people need to get to their houses?  
Jimmy: I know, I will hold up the sign (Picks up sign and begins telling surrounding children that they can’t go through)  
Lauren: What might you need to build the road?  
Patrick: I don’t know  
David: I know, we need some concrete  
Lauren: Ahh yes, where might you find some concrete?  
Patrick: I can get some (Runs over to the sandpit and fills a truck up with sand. He pushes it back). Beep beep beep (changes voice to become deeper) big delivery coming through.

The play episode continues and is sustained between the children for the next 40-minutes.

Annette asserts that the facilitating role allows her to discern if there are any undeveloped concepts that are preventing the continuation of the play. As Vignette 4.18 illustrates, if Annette notices that children are having difficulties progressing in their play episodes, she will adopt subtle suggestions to assist the story. Specifically, these strategies involved her guiding children to make connections between their actions and their conceptual knowledge of the theme.

**Vignette 4.18. Role of a facilitator in children's dramatic play**

A group of children have been visiting space every day for a week without having landed. One day their space ship tipped over after a particularly long flight. Grace noticed as she was watching from afar. “Oh have you landed?” she asked. “Yes” replied Harriet, “Come on, let’s go see the moon!” She declared as they all clambered out of the tower. “What might you need to wear on your head to breathe in space?” Grace asks. The girls reply that they will need space helmets. The teacher inquisitively asks where they might find one, to which a child replies “I know, let’s make one!” After they complete their helmets at the art table, the children show the teacher who then says, “Great now you can safely explore the moon, I cannot come with you today perhaps you can take photos for me and show me when you come home”. She gives the children some pencils and a notebook to draw their adventure and the children spend the afternoon exploring the moon.
Moreover, Annette’s (Centre 3) strategy of asking children what story they are playing can employ a similar aim and outcome. For instance, prior to the scenario presented in Vignette 4.19, Harry, Nathan and Christian had not considered how they were going to use their rocket. Annette’s interaction prompted them to extend their constructive play activity into an imaginary realm that allowed the learning experience to continue.

Vignette 4.19. Role of a facilitator in children’s dramatic play

Harry, Nathan and Christian (children) have constructed a rocket ship using an A-Frame and blankets. Annette notices that they have stopped building and have moved to the A-Frame next to them where some girls are playing house. They have begun to tease them and tension between the two groups are rising.

Annette: This is a big rocket ship boys. Can you tell me what story you are playing?
Harry: We are going to fly to China
Annette: That’s going to be a long flight. Who is going to be the pilot?
Nathan: I am the pilot
Christian: And I am the co-pilot
Nathan: Yeah we are both pilots. Come on, let’s get ready for take off
Annette: Harry, are you a passenger visiting China?
Harry: No, I am the rocket mechanic
Annette: Oh, have you checked to make sure that the rocket is safe before take-off?
Christian: Yeah, but pretend that you needed to fix the kick back because the rocket didn’t start

Educators in Centres 3 and 4 who adopted a facilitating role were found to be more likely to acknowledge and support children’s dramatic play within a wider variety of play spaces. Thus, more children were being supported in their development of dramatic play skills. This appeared to influence their dramatic play behaviour, as in these two centres children displayed higher levels of role enactments, persistence in their involvement and more complex play episodes.

A monitoring role was characterised by passive interactional styles of behaviour that aimed to maximise children’s ownership of the play episode. This role was the most frequently observed across all centres, and interactions initiated by educators often occurred only to maintain safety and behavioural expectations. The predominance of this role further exposes the prevailing view of some educators that adult involvement can have a negative impact on the children’s dramatic play. Naomi of Centre 4 explains:
...I do feel that it (play) changes if the adult gets involved and even the way that they (children) speak to each other, they know that you are there and some are more aware than others (Naomi, Centre 4).

Due to the supervisory nature of this particular role, monitoring behaviour was consistent with a passive style of interaction. Moreover, despite providing children with more space and freedom to play uninterrupted, higher frequencies of uninvolved or disruptive dramatic play behaviours of children were recorded when this role was most frequent. Educators considered the influence that the monitoring role had upon children’s dramatic play in the dialogic reflective interview. Many commented on the lack of observable quality in children’s involvement in and complexity of dramatic play behaviour when they employed a monitoring role. For instance, Jessica and Irene are actively involved in children’s dramatic play indoors (SSEDSP M = 8.15), however they are more likely to monitor children’s dramatic play outdoors (SSEDSP M = 6.72). The difference in their play behaviour is noticeable:

...Outside they (children) just have bursts of energy making their play really disjointed and they change and flicker. You know they will be on the bikes and then they will be in the gravel and then the next minute they will be engaged in superheros but you then ‘ohh someone is in the sand pit I will just start digging’ and then they will be back to superheros, whereas inside they are constantly engaged in that dramatic play (Jessica, Centre 1)

In contrast, Susan admits that in her centre (Centre 4), the educators are less likely to be involved in children’s dramatic play indoors. Comparatively, Centre 4 was the only centre to have recorded lower scores in the complexity of dramatic play behaviour indoors (SSEDSP M = 7.56) than outdoors (SSEDSP M = 8.27). Susan comments on a group of children playing in the dramatic play space:

There is not a lot of quality play going on. Children are all doing their own thing and they are going too hard and too fast and there are too many people and it is too noisy (Susan, Centre 4)

Naomi (Centre 4) also identifies a decline in the complexity of children’s dramatic play when educators are preoccupied. She acknowledges that involvement from an educator to guide children’s dramatic play would be helpful to maintain children’s focus of attention to assist their progression in their play episode.

Centre 2 displayed the highest employment of the monitoring role. Caitlin asserted a strong resistance towards becoming involved in children’s dramatic play, as
she believed children received the most out of dramatic play from their involvement with their peers. On this viewpoint, Caitlin states:

I suppose you (educator) sit back a bit in children’s dramatic play and allow it to happen...you look and think, if they are playing well, they are interacting well and they have got it going on, why would I step in, and is my involvement going to upset the balance and change the way that they are learning? (Caitlin, Centre 2).

In Centre 2, the children displayed the lowest level of complexity of dramatic play behaviour (SSESDSP M = 5.07) and involvement in dramatic play (LIS-YC M = 3.28). Caitlin reflects on her role to admit that she needs to become more involved in children’s dramatic play. She notices that she is often preoccupied while children are playing, especially outdoors, and that she should be prompting them with ideas to further extend their dramatic play:

...I was preoccupied in what was going on around me and I suppose it is difficult outside because you are trying to make sure all of the children are safe, but my focus was taken, in the sandpit I was so distracted (Caitlin, Centre 2)

4.4.4 Barriers that influence educators’ role towards children’s dramatic play

The participating educators identified and discussed some potential barriers that they considered to hinder their behaviour in children’s play. These include:

i. Parent expectations,
ii. Staffing arrangements, and
iii. Administration.

Parent expectations: The educators in Centre 2 and 3 identified that there are a number of parents of children who place undue pressure upon the educators to conduct structured activities. Specifically, Caitlin and Annette report that incorporating parent’s educational expectations can take them away from children’ play as they may need to be involved with children in activities that follow more structured styles of learning.

Caitlin (Centre 2) asserted that in her centre many families viewed dramatic play as being limiting to children’s academic learning and development in the year before school. She discusses that the parents of children in her classroom want to see their children learning literacy and numeracy concepts. She identified that school readiness
is a priority in her curriculum from term two. In practice, Caitlin spends much time involved in planning and implementing experiences for children’s academic development. She acknowledges that this may influence the amount of time and value that she places on children’s involvement in dramatic play.

In Centre 3, Annette discusses that the parents’ value children’s dramatic play. However, they expect to see their children involved in end-of-year concerts and receive holiday keepsakes, such as plates, t-shirts or tea towels. Consequently, Annette spends large blocks of time implementing these structured activities, which takes her away from responding to and interacting with children in dramatic play. As discussed in section 4.3.2, this was occurring during the period of data collection and appeared to have implications upon children’s dramatic play behaviour in the outdoor environment.

**Staffing arrangements:** The teachers in Centre 1 and 2 identify that working in a large team environment of a long day care can have implications on their involvement in children’s dramatic play. Jessica and Caitlin both held leadership responsibilities within their centre, and held the sole responsibility for the curriculum development of the classroom. Accordingly, they were both removed from the classroom for up to 2-days a week to perform the duties required of these roles.

Jessica from Centre 1 reports that she struggles to facilitate and sustain planned dramatic play experiences when she is removed from the classroom so often. She feels as though her interactions lack intention and purpose as they become on the spur of the moment rather than planned. She finds this frustrating, as she acknowledges that dramatic play incorporates multiple curriculum areas. If she had the time she would like to show more involvement in children’s play episodes to guide concepts of academic learning. She comments:

I look at the children at my old centre and their play was so much richer. They would spend days involved in the one theme. However whenever I try to encourage that of children here, I need to go on lunch, or planning, or work in the office. There is just too much inconsistency (Jessica, Centre 1)

For instance, at the time of data collection, Jessica was reading the *Magic Faraway Tree* (Blyton, 1943) with the children daily. She would encourage children to reflect upon each chapter through drawings. Jessica would engage children in
discussion about the drawings to guide them to make connections between the book and their reflection. Outdoors, Jessica created a ‘magic faraway tree’ with the children by decorating the tree with glistening objects. However, the theme did not transfer to children’s dramatic play and she did not finish the book. Jessica reflected on this experience:

...I wanted to bring [the book] outside so that they could imitate what we were reading that day...but I’m not talking about what we had read in the book so far, what are the characters we might see or what characters they might be. I remember feeling under pressure to finish it quickly because I was going to be going on lunch soon. So it ended up just being me tying up things, that’s purely what I’m doing (Jessica, Centre 1)

Jessica acknowledged that there was a lack of intention and purpose in the initial creation of the tree, which influenced the children’s subsequent lack of dramatic play. Jessica told the children that she was making a faraway tree but there were no further interactions during the activity that connected children with the book and the tree. Rather, she says that she was concerned about how long it was taking. Jessica discusses that if her colleagues had greater knowledge of the learning and development that occurred in dramatic play, than the activity would have a greater position in her curriculum as she would feel more confident about them taking over her teaching duties while she is out of the room. She acknowledges that they do not value dramatic play as a method of learning, nor understand the importance of an enriching environment:

...I think it is the team you work with as well and if people don’t have similar teaching philosophies or understandings of learning, I think a lot of people don’t have that. My philosophy is that when I set it up it has to be engaging for the children to want to come and explore, whereas some people are happy to just put a container on the table and that’s setting up an experience (Jessica, Centre 1)

Jessica’s experience with her colleagues appears to be an influencing factor upon the provision of the outdoor play space:

..I don’t think that outside gets a lot of dramatic play and a lot of people don’t realise that as well the learning that is inside, learning should also be outside. Those areas inside should be replicated outside (Jessica, Centre 1)

Caitlin experienced similar difficulties as the kindergarten teacher, co-director and educational leader at her Centre. During the time of data collection Caitlin gave
some responsibility of the classroom activities to a casual staff member, employed to cover the responsibilities of educators when they are removed from a room for lunch or planning. However, reflecting back, Caitlin acknowledged that the particular educator had a much different view and knowledge of child development and learning then her own. She states:

...Her philosophy is that if she comes into the room the children always have to be doing something, and dramatic play to her is not doing something....There was lots of cleaning and she didn’t like mess. She is very structurally focussed in what she presents to the children (Caitlin, Centre 2)

Administration: Educators in Centre 1 and 2 reported feeling limited by the amount of time they can spend being involved in children’s dramatic play due to the amount of paper work that they need to complete. Periods of free play were often used as a time to complete documentation of children’s learning or quality assurance paperwork by the educators in these centres. Consequently, this strategy influenced a higher frequency of passive interaction styles and roles of monitoring dramatic play. Caitlin comments that she just simply does not have time to actively participate in children’s play, but will participate passively “if the children have a coffee and offer me a drink.” She does reflect that this is an issue in which she needs to address through more effective time management:

...It is hard because I am on my own with 15 children and it is very hard to become involved in the dramatic play, I mean I must admit that if I am doing something with another group my focus is on them. I don’t think, reflecting on my own practices that I become involved enough in their dramatic play. So for me I need to be a little bit more organised and a little bit more time managed (Caitlin, Centre 2)

Jessica discussed that since the introduction of the EYLF she has found it difficult to conform pedagogically to the changes. She says that it has taken time to find a ‘happy medium’ between her philosophy and the requirements of EYLF. For example, she comments that her activities and curriculum have always been adult structured. However she is now starting to see the value in flexible pedagogies, including having a converged curriculum and allowing the children to resource objects from multiple areas of the room.

In summary, the findings of research question 4 indicate that are an array of knowledge and views that contribute to educators’ behaviour in children’s dramatic
play. The findings indicate that educators have an important role in guiding children’s
dramatic play. However, the educators need to value the activity for children’s
learning and development. When educators valued the importance of dramatic play
for children’s learning and development, they were more likely to view themselves as
a participant or facilitator within children’s play episodes, which was associated with
children displaying more complex involvement in dramatic play. Educators face a
number of barriers that prevent them from instilling a playful practice within their
pedagogy, including parent expectations, staffing arrangements and administration.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings of data analysis have been presented. The findings
highlight that the overall behaviour of children’s play is low. Moreover, children’s
involvement in the activity of dramatic play is of a moderate level. Children’s dramatic
play was found to be influenced by factors within the physical environment, the
curriculum, and educators’ interactions. The educators’ knowledge and views relating
to children’s play, learning and development were found to have associations with
how dramatic play was positioned within the classroom environment.

Further interpretation of these findings and their implications are discussed in
Chapters 5 and 6.
Chapter 5 : Discussion

In this chapter, the findings presented in Chapter 4 are discussed according to the four research questions that guided this study:

1. What are preschool children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences?
2. What are preschool children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?
3. In what way (if any) does the classroom-environment influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?
4. In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence preschool children’s involvement in dramatic play?

5.1 Discussion of RQ1: What are children’s dramatic play behaviours, styles and preferences?

Dramatic play is widely acknowledged and supported throughout the literature as being a critical activity for children’s learning and development in the preschool year (Fleer, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). However, in order for children to acquire skills and knowledge through dramatic play, the constructs of their dramatic play behaviour must be of a complex level (Elkonin, 2005). Complex dramatic play is denoted by Elkonin (2005) as an activity that involves a combination of complex simultaneous mental operations that include:

a) The creation of an imaginary situation,
b) Engagement in symbolic representation to substitute the meaning of objects and actions,
c) Use of language in long dialogues to create a pretend scenario that is planned and sustained,
d) Construction of an elaborate play episodes with interwoven themes that can easily incorporate new ideas, people or objects,
e) Complex roles enactments where the persona of a character’s physical and affective attributes are assumed, and
f) Persistence in dramatic play episodes over several hours or days.
The current study examined the complexity of 101 preschool children’s dramatic play. The Smilansky Scale for Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play (SSEDSP) (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) was adopted to examine the following constructs of dramatic play behaviour: a) Imitative role play, b) Make-believe with objects, b) Actions and situations, d) Persistence in role play, e) Interactions, and f) Verbal communication. According to Smilansky and Shefatya (1990), dramatic play in the preschool year should involve complex roles enactments, multifaceted themes, highly abstract actions with objects, and sustained collaborative interactions with peers. The elements of the SSEDSP reflect Elkonin’s description of complex dramatic play.

In this study, three findings were revealed in relation to children’s dramatic play behaviour, styles and preferences:

i. The level of children’s dramatic play behaviour was low (5.1.1),

ii. Children’s dramatic play was influenced by their individual play styles and preferences (5.1.2), and

iii. Dramatic play behaviour was related to the social behaviours of peer groups (5.1.3).

**5.1.1 The level of children’s dramatic play behaviour**

The findings of the current study revealed that children’s dramatic play was of a moderate to low level as measured by the SSEDSP. At the preschool age of 4-to 6-years, Elkonin (2005) emphasises that children’s dramatic play should be complex and highly imaginative to reflect their development of complex representational thought, higher order thinking and rich social skills (Elkonin, 2005; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Elkonin’s description of dramatic play is in contrast to the dramatic play behaviour observed of children in the current study, where the findings revealed children’s dramatic play episodes to be typically short lived, repetitive and lacking detail. Specifically, children’s dramatic play displayed an absence of role enactments, limited persistence in a play episode and actions that revolved around the availability of realistic objects.

The elements of children’s dramatic play behaviour found in the current study reflect recent studies that have similarly reported preschool children’s dramatic play
behaviour to be repetitive and imitative (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smirnova, 2013; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004). These previous works have suggested that children’s imaginative and creative dispositions are in a state of decline due to lessened opportunities to play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Smirnova, 2013). However, children within Australia are provided with a curriculum that provides long periods of uninterrupted play, open-ended activity and child-centred learning, affording vast opportunities to play dramatically. Therefore, the findings suggest that there may be pedagogical and societal factors that are influencing children’s development of dramatic play skills. These factors will be explored in later sections of this chapter (Section 5.3). Firstly, the developmental factors that may be contributing to children’s behaviour in dramatic play are examined.

Research suggests that between the ages of 4- to 6-years, meta-cognitive skills develop at a mature level and support children’s involvement in complex dramatic play (Bodrova 2008; Karpov, 2005). Given the age of children in the current study, it is possible that the low levels of dramatic play behaviour was influenced by underdeveloped meta-cognitive skills. Meta-cognition (discussed in Section 2.5), involves the multifaceted development of personal, social-emotional and cognitive competencies to self-regulate, acknowledge different viewpoints, and apply a range of strategies in learning (Karpov, 2014). Bodrova and Leong (2007) argue that meta-cognitive involves the mental representation of symbols and images. Moreover, children use metacognitive skills to plan, predict, execute and modify their symbolic representations in action to sustain a play episode (Elias & Berk, 2002).

Symbolic representational thought is an aspect of meta-cognition that drives multiple elements of dramatic play behaviour, including children’s object substitution, creating of imaginary situations and role enactments (Karpov, 2014). The findings of Russ (2004) highlight that children who have developed strong skills in symbolic representational thought are able to view things from multiple perspectives, enabling more flexibility in their dramatic play. With highly developed representational thought, children are able to perform more complex object substitutions as they are more equipped to view a situation from several angles. Although, representation thought was not directly measured in the current study, the cognitive flexibility enabled by symbolic representational thought is visible. Children who demonstrated
the most complex object substitutions were more likely to display complex role enactments that followed a complex sequence of scenes, actions and dialogue. For example, children who scored highly in the SSEDSP element of ‘make-believe with objects’ were more likely to receive higher scores in ‘imitative role play’, ‘persistence’ and ‘make-believe with actions and situations’. Moreover, children with highly developed skills in object substitution and role enactments were also more successful in the sustainment of collaborative interactions with peers through meta-communicative talk.

Further findings from the current study highlight that for a majority of children object substitution and role enactments appeared to be a difficult task. An overall reliance upon realistic objects seemed to prevent children from advancing their dramatic play behaviour past simple imitative actions with objects within a single schemed play episode. These findings, measured by the SSEDSP, suggest that children who appeared to be limited in cognitive flexibility, visible by their dependence upon realistic objects were less able to break free from the physical world and elaborate on their role enactments.

Elkonin (2005) argues that the element of role enactment is a crucial component of complex dramatic play as it provides children with a context to propel their interactions, actions and movement through scenes of an imaginary situation. The complexity of role enactments can be influenced by meta-cognition, as children are required to self-organise themselves through planning, reflection and modification in action so as to maintain the rules associated with their role. Accordingly, in the current study, the findings as measured by the SSEDSP showed that when children scored highly on the element of ‘imitative role play’, the actions and situations, language and persistence in a play episode were also more likely to be of a complex level. However, the findings showed that the SSEDSP element of ‘imitative role play’ was of a minimal level overall. Consequently, children’s inability to elaborate on their role enactments appeared to have been an influencing factor upon the persistence and simplicity of their play episodes.

Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) assert that children’s role enactments reflect their understanding of the mental states of others, i.e. one’s attitudes, feelings, intents
and knowledge. As discussed by Kavanaugh (2011), the ability to understand the mental states of others is an important meta-cognitive function of children’s involvement in complex dramatic play, specifically for the element of role enactments and social collaboration (see Section 2.5). Similarly, in the current study, observations showed that children’s consideration of mental states was an attribute of complex dramatic play episodes. Specifically, dramatic play measured by the SSEDSP showed that play episodes scored highly in all six elements when children understood, responded to and reflected upon the ideas of their own, their character’s, and their peers’ mental states. The use of this complex communication appeared to provide a satisfying experience for the child, observable by their increased persistence and energy within the play episode.

The findings suggest that language provided a crucial connection between the child’s knowledge of mental states and the development of their role within the play episode. For example, observations showed that when children engaged in meta-communicative dialogue that made references to belief states (Pretend I/Pretend you) and internal states (emotions, desire and goals), their play episodes were more complex in all elements of the SSEDSP. Howe et al. (2014) similarly assert that meta-communication has a specific role in the development of a play episode, as its use enables children to communicate critical information, including the place, time and frequency that an action occurs. The current study’s findings also support Stagnitti and colleagues (2000; 2007; 2009) who found that children who displayed higher involvement in meta-communicative dialogue were able to explore the events and situations within a play episode in more detail, as they could extend upon the ideas of their peers.

The communicative dialogue of the majority of children in the current study consisted of descriptions of the physical aspects of their actions. This suggests that language was of an external state, appearing to be related towards the routine and administrative elements of the play. The external state of language is visible in children’s enactment of the physical characteristics of their roles, rather than the internal mental state. The knowledge of another’s physical characteristics enabled children to enter a role enactment; however the children were less likely to explore deep meaning attributed to a theme. Accordingly, children’s role enactments were
commonly observed to be imitative and repetitive of a single event (i.e., visiting the doctor), rather than innovative and fluid. Therefore the simplicity of children’s role enactments in the current study may indicate that the children needed further support in their meta-cognitive ability to understand and respond to the perspectives of others.

Further explanations for the complexity of children’s dramatic play exist. In Section 5.1.3, the influence of the composition of dramatic play styles within peer groups are explored. In addition, section 5.3 examines the context for which the classroom environment influenced children’s dramatic play skills.

5.1.2 Children’s dramatic play styles and preferences

The findings revealed four styles of dramatic play that were prevalent across the sample of children studied. These included i) Mature players, ii) Role Players, iii) Constructive Players, and iv) Uninvolved Players (see Section 4.1.2). These four play styles, were developed by the researcher according to the prevalent patterns of dramatic play behaviour observed in the sample of children in the current study. Alternative typologies of play styles have been proposed in previous research, however these often employ a hierarchical method to measure the complexity of children’s dramatic play, or creativity. For example, in Smilansky’s (1968) research, the style of children’s dramatic play was categorised according to the presence of role enactments. Outlined in Section 2.7, Smilansky’s study employed a hierarchical method to categorise the complexity of dramatic play according to four levels: a) no dramatic play, b) dramatic play only, b) poor socio-dramatic play, and d) good socio-dramatic play. Used as a diagnostic tool, Smilansky’s styles of play aimed to highlight what children could not do so as to provide them with play intervention.

The findings of the current study can resonate with Smilansky’s research, as the elements of children’s dramatic play styles suggest a level of dramatic play ability. However, to better interpret children’s style of dramatic play, the typology developed and employed in the current study aimed to examine the intention of children’s actions in the play episode and source of satisfaction for the child in the activity. Accordingly, the typology employed in the current study provides an alternative way
to examine children’s dramatic play behaviour by acknowledging the creative abilities of individual children. The typology used in the current study provides a unique perspective that may assist educators’ provisions for dramatic play in the classroom and guide their documentation of children’s learning in the activity.

Further typologies of dramatic play styles have been considered in the literature and thought to be contingent to children’s cognitive style (Wolf & Grollman, 1982). As was discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.7.1) Wolf and Grollman (1982) divide children’s dramatic play in two categories: those who are creative and collaborative, and those who are analytical, independent and observant (i.e., who look for patterns and details). These interpretations of children’s dramatic play are widely acknowledged within the field of ECE (Eckhoff, 2011; Reunamo et al., 2014; Saracho, 1999; 2002). Moreover, the findings can be similarly compared with Wolf and Grollman’s (1982) ideas, whereby Mature and Role players appear to be social, flexible and imaginative. In contrast, Constructive and Uninvolved players are autonomous and functional, preferring to create scenes rather than act them out. However, these would be narrow interpretations of the children’s dramatic play and would disregard the creative abilities of individual children. To better interpret children’s style of dramatic play, the typology developed and employed in the current study extends upon the current ideas of play styles to show that some children require certain features within the physical environment to stimulate and support their involvement in the activity.

Smirnova and Ryabkova (2010) suggest that the position of the player within a play episode offers a suitable framework to observe children’s dramatic play behaviour. Smirnova and Ryabkova identify that the child can occupy three different positions in a play episode. This includes the “I” (themselves), the “other” (an alternative identity), and the “ego” (delegation of a role to a toy). In the context of the current study, it was evident that Mature and Role Players were driven by their portrayal of the “other”. Accordingly, their creative mimesis may be compelled by the satisfaction gained from the interpersonal processes involved in role enactments. As Mature and Role Player styles showed greater flexibility in the separation of thought from objects, they were afforded with increased opportunities for the occurrence of dramatic play in the classroom environment, which led to more frequent and well-sustained instance of dramatic play. For example, the findings as measured by the
Engagement Check II (EC-II) in the current study, showed that Mature and Role Players were likely to play dramatically in open-ended play spaces such as the dramatic play space, and playground.

In contrast, the dramatic play behaviour of Constructive Players appeared to be compelled by a greater presence of intrapersonal characteristics and a greater attachment to the reality of objects. Consequently, findings suggest that Constructive Players receive a greater satisfaction out of playing dramatically in the construction play spaces, where they are able to assert their logical style of thinking. Therefore, rather than portraying other identities from inside the play, Constructive Players are more likely to delegate a role to a toy and develop a sequence of events by directing from outside the episode. In contrast, Uninvolved Players showed far less satisfaction out of their involvement in dramatic play, observable by their lack of energy, persistence and energy in the activity. Due to the imitative nature of their dramatic play behaviour, the children were unlikely to position themselves inside the play or out. This may be reflective of the children having limited experience to develop metacognitive skills associated with involvement in the imaginary world. As such, one of the implications of the current study is related to the need for educators to increase the opportunities for children to develop meta-cognitive skills, including representational thought, self-organisation and perspective taking within the physical environment, interactive environment and curriculum.

The style and preferences of a child's play behaviour are influenced by what lies before them, both physically and socially (Vygotsky, 1978). Understanding children's dramatic play styles and preferences may have an important role in how educators can position themselves at an appropriate level to both facilitate and support children within a play episode. The detailed typology of dramatic play behaviours employed in the current study can be used by educators to plan and implement teaching strategies that can empower children's creativity by responding to their known interests, strengths and preferences.
5.1.3 The relationship between dramatic play behaviour and the social composition of peer groups

The findings of the current study revealed that dramatic play behaviour is influenced by the composition of dramatic play styles within peer groups. A scheme of five social behaviours was developed from the findings according to emerging patterns within the data. The social behaviours were categorised as: a) Actor/director, b) Town planner, c) Ground hog, d) Silent partner, and e) Novice (see section 4.1.3). These social behaviours have connotations of the opportunities and challenges children face when they are involved in dramatic play with peers who have differing play styles to their own. The affordances that dramatic play holds for the social and cognitive development of children are often highlighted and romanticised by both educators and researchers (Howe et al., 2005, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2005; Lillard, 2011). For instance, many educators assert that they prefer to remain uninvolved in children’s dramatic play because they do not want to disrupt the learning that is occurring through the social interactions between children.

The findings of the current study in some ways reflect the romanticised ideas of the opportunities dramatic play has for children’s cognitive and social skills. For instance, the findings revealed that Role and Constructive Players displayed more complex dramatic play behaviour when involved in play episodes with a more skilled player (i.e., Mature Player). In pairing up with a more skilled player in a joint play episode, children were provided with a suitable context to collectively explore more complex concepts about the world around them through multifaceted situations and roles, than they would on their own. This is in line with Vygotsky’s theory of the ZPD and children’s involvement in dramatic play. He writes:

Play is the resource of development and creates the ZPD. Action in the Imaginary field, in the imagined situation, building of voluntary intention, the construction of life plan, motives of willing - all of this emerges in dramatic play (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 75).

Here, Vygotsky postulates that through involvement in dramatic play, children are able to practice cognitive skills crucial for the development of higher order functions. Others agree that involvement in dramatic play provides a powerful context for the development of children’s cognitive, social and everyday concepts to become conscious and practiced (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Fleer, 2009).
When considered conceptually, these findings and ideas about dramatic play can present an idealistic impression that dramatic play initiated and directed solely by the child provides children with a stimulating experience where cognitive and social skills are “caught in dramatic play” (Johnson, 2014). However, Vygotsky’s conceptualisation of the relationship between the ZPD and dramatic play refers to dramatic play behaviours performed at a complex level. While the findings show that children can be involved in more complex play skills when collaborating with a more expert peer, this was not the case in the social behaviour of all peer groups.

For instance, the findings suggest that when children did not share collective intentions or have a similar positioning in the play episode as their peer/s, their behaviour in dramatic play was less coordinated, which led to unsophisticated explorations of themes and roles. For example, Constructive Players appeared to find it challenging to enact a role from inside the play episode. Rather, they seemed to seek satisfaction from their involvement in dramatic play from their actions and substitutions with objects. In contrast, sustained involvement in a play episode with a Constructive Player appeared unchallenging for Mature and Role Players. Mature and Role Players appeared to seek satisfaction through the representation of concepts in role enactment that are performed from a dual positioning – inside and outside the play. Accordingly, children involved in the social behaviour ‘Town planner play’ appeared to experience a high number of disruptions to the play episode because they did not share collective intentions or positioning in the dramatic play.

Similarly to the findings of the current study, Kowalski et al. (2005) found that toddlers can display more advanced dramatic play behaviours when they are paired with a preschool-aged peer (a more mature player). This is because the older peer adjusted their style of dramatic play to meet the needs of their younger peer. However, when the toddlers participated in group play with pre-schoolers, the older children were less likely to adapt their dramatic play behaviour. Accordingly, the younger children were less supported, which led to higher frequencies of disruptions to the natural flow and development of a play episode. Similar types of social behaviour were found in the current study (Ground hog and Follower play) and were shown to have implications upon children being able to keep up with the progression of roles enactments, object use and themes relating to the play episode. The
difference between Kowalski et al.’s study and the current study is that the current explored the social behaviours of children of a similar age – an age which research argues that children should be able to engage with peers in dramatic play at a complex level (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Elkonin, 2005). The findings of the current study are important because they highlight that many social behaviours experienced by children were not providing an enriching experience where they may have encountered deep level learning and the establishment of positive peer relationships. Persistent involvement in peer groups where children are made to feel like an active participant are important for children’s development of positive self-identity in the preschool year (Kostelnik, Soderman, Whiren, Rupiper & Gregory, 2015). Accordingly, the findings of the current study, which show that many children are not participating as an active member of peer groups in dramatic play, has implications upon how educators are supporting children socially in the preschool classroom.

The observations of children’s social behaviours as presented in the findings of the current study support Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the ZPD, whereby children will only act at a level higher than their own if the assistance of others is aimed at a level that is within their current ZPD, and slightly higher than their actual level of behaviour. Whilst it is a complex activity for children to adjust their level of behaviour to that of their dramatic play partner, this may not have occurred regularly enough in the current study, where the average level of complexity of dramatic play behaviour in the classroom was low. Specifically, the findings of the current study suggests that when children are unable to adjust the complexity of their dramatic play behaviour to meet the need of their dramatic play partner/s, it is less likely that the play episode will be an enriching experience. Accordingly, this may have had implications upon the amount of deep-level involvement that children experience, of which is associated with complex dramatic play.

In the current study, the average level of children’s dramatic play was moderate to low. This is a frequent finding in recent times (see Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Smirnova, 2013). The findings of the current study offer a unique perspective whereby a thorough examination of children’s dramatic play has been investigated on a personal (i.e., the individual) and interpersonal level (i.e., peer groups) to argue that children’s play episodes are influenced by their styles of play.
The findings have implications upon how educators observe and respond to children’s dramatic play. With a deeper acknowledgement of the intention of children’s activity, their positioning within the play episode and the social tensions experienced in dramatic play, educators can respond in an appropriate way to support the individual child’s needs.

5.2 Discussion of RQ2: What are children’s levels of involvement in dramatic play?

Research question 2 sought to investigate the level and frequency of children’s involvement in dramatic play. The children’s level of involvement was examined using the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (Laevers, 1994). Moreover, the frequency of children’s involvement in dramatic play was examined using the Engagement Check II (McWilliam & Casey, 2005). Two findings were revealed in relation to the level of children’s involvement in dramatic play:

i. Children displayed a moderate level of involvement in dramatic play (5.2.1),

ii. There was a positive relationship between children’s level of involvement, and their dramatic play behaviour (5.2.2).

These are discussed collectively below.

Dramatic play is often reported within the literature as an activity that engrosses the highest amount of child involvement when compared to other classroom activities (Kontos, 1999). The findings of the current study support the literature’s stance that involvement in dramatic play is a high occurring activity in preschool classrooms. However, the level of involvement of children in the current study was moderate. Children who were categorised as playing at a moderate level were observed as being continuously busy, but they demonstrated limited energy, motivation and imagination within their dramatic play (Laevers, 1994). For example, children involved at a moderate level in dramatic play showed repetitious story lines, broken attention within the play episode and fragmented persistence in role enactments.

Studies of children’s involvement in the classroom have mostly focussed on the measurement of children’s behavioural indicators, such as presence within a play space and the amount of involvement compared to non-involvement (Hanley et al.,
In this literature, the timeframe of observations was much shorter than that of the current study, varying between 5- to 15-seconds, and observations were performed much closer together (between 15 to 90-seconds). In contrast to earlier studies, the current study has examined children’s involvement using longer intervals of 2-minutes spread across 2-days.

From a statistical independence view, short time samples used in previously studies can provide an effective method of observation (Greenfield, 2002). However, as Krasnor and Pepler (1980) argue, the measurement of behaviour within short time samples may lead to observations being scored superficially. Further inspection of the methods used in literature reveal that those studies that adopt shorter methods of time sampling often focus observations of child involvement on preferences of play activity according to the time spent in a play space, orientation towards objects, gender differences in play preferences and the influence of educator presence (Hanley et al., 2009; Holmes & Romeo, 2013; Singer et al., 2014). This appears to have provided a narrow view of child involvement, because consideration may not have been given to the deeper cognitive features of involvement, such as the amount of energy, creativity, sustained attention and precision of a child’s activity. Moreover, the method of short time sampling may not have given consideration to the type of activity children are involved in within a particular play space. Accordingly, whilst children may have been recorded to be involved in dramatic play because of their presence within a dramatic play space, the measures employed may not have captured the complexity of the child’s activity.

In contrast to the earlier studies, the longer period of observation employed by the LIS-YC in the current study allowed for a greater depth of involvement to be examined. The LIS-YC measured the presence of nine indicators (Laevers, 1994) of the child’s internal processes, to provide a greater depth into understanding the complexity of the child’s mental activity and the satisfaction they have gained from that activity. For example, rather than examining the time spent in a play space, the LIS-YC highlights how the time was spent in relation to the level of concentration, creativity with objects, and the complexity of action through the child’s precision. Observation of these behavioural indicators showed the cognitive reaction and
processes that the child experienced through their activity within dramatic play. In contrast, previous studies may show that children are present in a play activity for a period of time, however the complexity of the child’s activity is not measured. While the current study supports the findings of previous that dramatic play is an activity that attracts frequent involvement of preschool children, the employment of the LIS-YC has provided a deeper analysis into the complexity of children’s activity in the activity.

The deeper analysis afforded by the LIS-YC showed that at a moderate level of involvement, the children of the current study displayed some degree of persistence in their dramatic play. However, the overall indicators of their behaviour demonstrated limited creativity, energy and precision in their action. These indicators reflect the repetitive and simplistic nature of children’s dramatic play episodes. The findings indicate that there was a positive relationship between children’s levels of involvement and their dramatic play behaviour. Specifically, the findings suggest that the latter has the strongest relationship with children’s verbal communication. Overall, this finding supports existing literature that highlights the importance of verbal communication, specifically collaborative interactions, on the complexity of children’s dramatic play (Howe et al., 2014; Hughes & Dunn, 1998; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). However, as the discussion in research question 1 suggests, many children in the current study displayed a moderate level of verbal communication in their play episodes, a further reflection of the low level of complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour.

Laevers (1994) emphasises that to be involved, the experience must be proximal to the child’s developmental level; any experience that is too easy or too difficult will not arouse involvement. Carr and Claxton (2002, p. 19) refer to this as the “learning power that is indexed by the nature and extent of the ZPD that the child is capable of generating through scaffolded interaction”. In the current study, children’s experience of involvement in dramatic play was influenced by the social behaviours of a peer group. For example in the social behaviours of Active/director and Town planner play, children were more likely to enter a state of high absorption in the activity. This is noticeable by the direction of their posture and interactions towards the objects and peers within the scenario. The progression of these social behaviours was dependent
upon intersubjectivity, wherein the children operated within agreed ways of cooperation.

Fleer (2014) asserts that intersubjectivity is crucial in maintaining social dramatic play as children work collaboratively in the development of the play episode to adhere to the rules of their roles. Fleer suggests that intersubjectivity requires members of a peer group to engage in verbal communication and also have similar conceptual knowledge of the situation being played. The findings of the current study, agree with Fleer’s findings, and also suggest that intersubjectivity, requires the members of a peer group to be involved in the activity for the same motivations, and gain equal satisfaction from the activity; evident by their sustained concentration and energy. For example, in Town Planner play, intersubjectivity appeared to become lost when children were no longer participating in the activity for the same purposes. While Constructive Players appeared to source satisfaction out of the creation of an imaginary situation, Mature Players appeared to source satisfaction out of enacting this situation through role play; an element of dramatic play that appeared to be outside of Constructive Players’ ZPD. When this intersubjectivity was lost, or did not exist, verbal communication reduced, and as did their levels of involvement. For instance, children’s attention became short-lived indicating they did not experience satisfaction from the activity. In addition their behaviour contained routine actions driven by limited creativity and precision of action. These indicators of involvement in dramatic play were common among the children studied, suggesting that intersubjectivity was limited.

At a moderate level of involvement, it is unlikely that children are experiencing deep-level thinking. This is associated with the child’s meta-cognitive capability to make choices, reproduce scenarios, reflect and develop in action, all of which are crucial to children’s involvement in complex dramatic play (Laevers, 2005). Given the level of involvement in and associated level of complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour, the findings of the current study have implications upon the provisions available in the classroom environment to foster children’s dramatic play.
5.3 Discussion of RQ3: In what way (if any), do factors of the classroom environment influence children’s involvement in dramatic play?

Research question 3 aimed to examine how the quality of the classroom environment influenced children’s involvement in dramatic play. The ECERS-R (Harms et al., 2005) was adopted to examine the influence that aspects of physical, curriculum and interactional quality had upon children’s involvement in dramatic play. Analysis of children’s SSEDSP scores was used to compare the behaviour and styles of children’s dramatic play between the four centres. This made it possible to examine the relationship between factors of the classroom environment and dramatic play behaviour.

The findings showed that significant differences existed in relation to the elements of children’s dramatic play behaviour and involvement between the four centres. Specifically, the findings revealed that there was a significant difference in the levels of involvement and complexity of dramatic play behaviour of children in Centre 2 compared to Centres 3 and 4. According to Laevers (2003), involvement is an indicator of classroom quality. Within Experiential Education (EXE), the measurement of involvement using the LIS-YC is adopted to examine the quality of the child’s learning process (see Section 2.3). Laevers emphasises that measurement of involvement provides an insight into the amount of positive personal, social, emotional and cognitive development that is taking place within the classroom. Therefore, the differences in involvement levels recorded between the centres of the current study indicate that there are factors within the classroom environment that are influencing children’s activity in dramatic play.

There have been a number of studies that have found a positive relationship between children’s involvement and classroom quality (Laevers, 1997; Nabuco & Prates, 2003; Raspa et al., 2001). However, these studies do not identify the specific activities of children’s involvement, which is important when analysing and planning for the child’s future learning in any classroom context. In the current study, children’s involvement in dramatic play was measured and the findings showed that involvement in the activity was higher in classrooms that scored higher in global classroom quality,
as measured by the ECERS-R. Specifically, the findings suggest that children’s involvement in dramatic play is higher when the physical classroom is structured by defined play spaces, but also flexible through the arrangement of open-ended props. In addition, an emergent curriculum that progresses with children’s interest and experiences in the real world, and educators’ involvement in sustained shared thinking were also important factors that contributed to children’s involvement in dramatic play.

The aforementioned indicators of classroom quality and their implications upon children’s learning outcomes have been similarly found in several other cultural contexts, including the United Kingdom (Sylva et al., 2010); United States (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2005); the Netherlands (Laevers, 1994, 2003); and Australia (Cloney et al., 2013). The findings of the current study relating specifically to children’s involvement in dramatic play provide a new consideration to this field of literature as the activity is considered to involve higher-order thinking, including aspects of meta-cognition (Elkonin, 2005; Laevers & Verboven, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Since higher-order thinking is associated with the process of children’s learning, it can be suggested that the centres where the complexity and level of involvement in dramatic play are higher, are providing greater opportunities to encourage the development of these cognitive functions of children.

Given that the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour varied significantly between the participating centres of the current study, the findings suggest that there are factors within the classroom environment that influence children’s behaviour in the activity. Specifically, the discussion of results of the previous research questions have suggested that the provisions of the physical environment, interactional environment and the curriculum may not be adequately supporting children to develop crucial cognitive and social skills that are associated with complex dramatic play. In the sections following, children’s dramatic play will be discussed in relation to how it is pedagogically framed within the classroom environment of the current study. Pedagogical framing consists of the behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy that construct the climate of the classroom environment (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). This influences how children think and learn. The
findings relating to the influence of pedagogical framing on children’s dramatic play will be discussed in relation to three main themes:

i. Dramatic play is influenced by factors of the physical environment,

ii. Children’s involvement in dramatic play is influenced by curriculum structure, and

iii. Children’s involvement in dramatic play is influenced by interactional quality.

5.3.1 The influence of the physical environment on dramatic play behaviour

The physical space of a classroom environment provides children with an arena that inspires interest, imagination and wonder about the world around them. The findings of the current study demonstrated that factors of the physical classroom can afford children with an arousing environment for complex dramatic play. This was true of the following three provisions:

a. Clearly defined play spaces that are open and accessible,

b. Well positioned play spaces, and

c. Mobility of props.

The findings associated with each of these factors will be discussed individually in the sub-sections below.

Clearly defined play spaces with open and accessible objects facilitates an area for children that has an intended purpose for play and learning, as planned by the educator. Defined play spaces are created by the positioning of furniture and objects to present a space that is visible to children, but also enclosed enough to be protected from other play spaces. Curtis and Carter (2014) explain that defined spaces create mystery, which evokes creativity and curiosity. These dispositions were also reflected in children’s dramatic play in the current study, wherein complex dramatic play behaviour was most frequently observed in centres where defined play spaces were most prevalent.

Specifically, the findings of the current study indicates that accessibility of objects stored openly on shelving, hooks or hangers was an important factor in the aesthetical arrangement of defined play spaces. Similarly, Pascal and Bertram (2003) assert the importance of accessible objects, finding that children displayed less
frequent uninvolved behaviours, such as aimless wandering and disruptive behaviours, when the classroom stored objects openly on shelving and tables. In contrast, the current study specifically highlights that the aesthetic arrangement of objects appeared to provide children with a foundation to initiate their interest in dramatic play through a pre-arranged theme (i.e. doctors; housekeeping; farms) and further sustain their creative mimesis through ambiguous loose objects that were easily accessible – supporting a higher level of involvement in the activity.

Flexibility in the assortment of objects through a balance of realistic and ambiguous props was necessary for the children of the current study. Educators will often spend large amounts on buying realistic toys such as replica dolls and real housekeeping objects. The current study, as well as other literature, suggest that these types of replica objects are useful to provide children with a predisposed idea for roles and themes (Petrakos & Howe, 1996). However, in the current study, children’s use of realistic objects alone appeared to only encourage imitative actions, limiting the amount of symbolic representational thought occurring through object substitutions and role enactments. An implication from the current study is that in order to support children’s involvement in complex forms of dramatic play, objects should encourage flexible thinking, and challenge cognitive skills. Accordingly, the findings suggest that realistic objects should be met with a balance of ambiguous objects.

The implications of providing a balance of realistic and ambiguous objects upon children’s dramatic play is consistent with findings from a number of exploratory studies (Howe et al., 2014; McLoyd, 1983; Petrakos & Howe, 1996; Trawick-Smith, 1990). Unlike the current study, these previous studies were experimentally designed and did not observe children within a natural environmental setting, such as their preschool classroom. Alternatively, the children in these previous studies were observed in play spaces designed by the researcher either in a laboratory setting, or an area in their early childhood setting that was away from the natural flow of activity. These research methods may have denied the natural progression of child-initiated dramatic play as it occurs within a preschool classroom with familiar peers and objects. In contrast, Mawson (2010) and others (Maxwell et al., 2008; Shim et al., 2001) who did observe children within their natural classroom environment, found that preschool children displayed more complex dramatic play behaviour (specifically social
collaboration) when play spaces were arranged with ambiguous objects. The researcher agrees that the provision of ambiguous objects has the potential to influence complex dramatic play behaviour. However, the findings of the current study also suggest that the level of children’s representational and social skills are factors that influence how they respond to the props provided in the physical environment.

For instance, the analysis of dramatic play behaviour displayed by Mature and Role Players in the group of 101 children observed across four centres in the current study suggests that children’s ability to consciously detach physical objects from reality afforded them less dependency on realistic objects. The flexibility afforded to children through this detachment from the physical world appeared to provide greater possibilities in relation to children’s role enactments and development of scenarios within a play episode. Harris (2000) argues that more possibilities are afforded to children who have cognitive flexibility because they are able to draw on their knowledge and engagement in complex cognitive skills to create an imaginary world where they are not bound to the restrictions of reality. Accordingly, similarly to Mawson’s (2010) findings, Mature and Role Players were likely to thrive in the presence of ambiguous objects. However, the provision of some realistic objects was of importance to Constructive and Uninvolved Players, who were more reliant on them to support their representations.

The supporting role of realistic objects for the dramatic play of Constructive and Uninvolved Players was further visible by the distinct difference in the complexity of dramatic play behaviour between indoor and outdoor classroom environments. Specifically, the findings measured by the LIS-YC showed that a large proportion of children in the current study displayed higher levels of involvement in dramatic play indoors, where they were often provided with defined play areas arranged with both realistic and ambiguous objects. When the same children moved outdoors, in a much more ambiguously designed environment, they were more inclined to display lower levels of involvement and less complex dramatic play behaviour overall.

Specifically, these findings of the current study suggest that there is no ‘one size fits all’ recommendation that can be made for the provision of dramatic play spaces. Rather, the physical environment should be designed according to children’s
developmental needs within the context of the individual classroom. An important factor for educators to consider is that dramatic play is not isolated to the dramatic play space but can be fostered throughout other play spaces. The findings of the current study showed that involvement in dramatic play occurred in several play spaces of the classroom environment and that some children preferred play spaces external to the dramatic play space for their dramatic play activity, where they exhibited more complex levels of play. Therefore, these findings suggest that it is important that the physical environment is supporting children’s involvement in dramatic play from multiple play spaces. Specifically, the findings of the current study highlight that while the presence of realistic props may be necessary for some children, ambiguous objects are still a crucial factor in the design of any play space so as to challenge children’s learning and development.

In addition, the complexity of a dramatic play theme afforded by the objects presented within a play space (i.e., doctors, housekeeping; farms) needs to be considered by educators carefully. Vignettes of children’s dramatic play episodes in Chapter 4 illustrated that the theme of children’s dramatic play was centred on animals and roles of people within the community such as doctors and teachers. The findings showed that when play spaces were responsive to these novel experiences and interests of children, the complexity of children’s dramatic play increased. However, when play spaces were centred around housekeeping roles, children recorded a lower level of involvement and complexity of dramatic play behaviour. Given that children of preschool age are experiencing increased involvement within their community (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) the theme of objects for dramatic play in classroom play spaces should reflect this knowledge. Specifically, the findings of the current study suggest that the provision of a stable housekeeping corner in the preschool classroom environment is not a challenging enough experience to provoke higher forms of dramatic play behaviour.

The position of play spaces was found to be a further influencing factor of children’s involvement in complex dramatic play. Specifically, the most optimal play spaces to support children’s involvement in dramatic play were those where active and passive play spaces were kept separate. For example the findings showed that children displayed more persistence in their dramatic play episodes when the book
corner (a passive space) and dramatic play space (an active space) were not integrated in the same area of the classroom. Gibson (1977) explains that the arrangement of space and objects provides children with affordances to manipulate an environment to suit the needs of their play. Affordances have a particularly important role in children’s dramatic play wherein play spaces become new worlds, and objects are given new meaning (Harris, 2000; Lillard, 1993).

Three of the centres within the current study were observed to have positioned the book corner next to the dramatic play space, with the educators’ intention being to promote literacy within children’s play. However, analysis of children’s involvement indicates that this spatial arrangement is not beneficial for children’s dramatic play as an increased amount of differentiating activity of children within a single play space appeared to instigate disruption to children’s play episodes. By using Gibson’s (1977) framework, it appeared that the positioning of couches next to the dramatic play corner afforded children multiple possibilities for their play episodes, not limited to driving a car or creating a bed for a sick patient. However, in the process of being highly involved, the child pretending to drive a car may not consider the needs of a child who is sitting on the couch reading a book, or the pile of books left on the couch by the child before them. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the child’s behaviour within their imaginary world may create a conflict between the educator’s expectations of how children should use the objects and furniture within the play space, and the affordances that the furniture arrangement affords children in dramatic play.

As consequence of the arising conflicts created by active and passive play spaces being arranged close together, the findings indicate that there was a higher frequency of disruptive behaviours between peers and negative interactions from the educator, which stopped children’s dramatic play. These findings suggest that the position of physical space should be considered carefully by the educator. Intentionally placing one or two books, notepads, money or measuring devices in a space to be used as props for the development of academic concepts was found to provide a much more efficient environment for the sustainment of children’s involvement in dramatic play.

The findings suggest that educators can further support children to carry out sustained play episodes by enabling a mobility of props. In dramatic play, children
construct an imaginary world that is abstractly no longer a classroom; rather, it is a fictional realm to represent a conscious enactment of their conceptual understanding of their lived experiences. Ebrahim (2011) writes that children’s role enactments are driven by their intention to achieve an overall goal. The fulfilment of these goals means that children become highly involved as they move towards satisfying their intention. In the current study, children in the pursuit of satisfaction were observed to move their dramatic play episode around the classroom to fulfil the scenario being played out. In this action guided by high levels of involvement, children were open to the stimuli provided within the environment around them. Accordingly, objects and furniture were observed to be used in ways that were not aligned with educators’ expectation.

Flexibility on behalf of the educator within the physical environment, for example by permitting the mobility of props, appeared to support children’s persistence in dramatic play episodes. Persistence in a dramatic play episode is important, as the complexity of role enactments, object substitution and verbal communication increase as the play episode develops (Howe et al., 2014; Stagnitti, 2009). Through involvement in dramatic play behaviour that is of an increased level of complexity, children may enter a ZPD in the activity, where they will experience higher levels of learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, flexible pedagogies that support the sustainment of children’s dramatic play are important.

In summary, the findings of the current study position the physical environment of the classroom as a scaffold for children’s dramatic play skills. Primarily, the findings indicate the necessity to pedagogically frame dramatic play within a physical learning environment by embedding opportunities to exert and develop the dispositions of imagination, flexibility, creativity and curiosity. The findings of the current study suggest that educators can support these dispositions in the physical classroom environment by ensuring that play spaces are well defined, strategically positioned, yet open and flexible.

The pedagogical positioning of dramatic play in the classroom environment is further considered in the following two sections.
5.3.2 The influence of interactional quality on dramatic play behaviour

For the purpose of this study, interactional quality consisted of the relational factors of ECEC practice. These factors not only facilitate children’s learning, but also set the social emotional climate within the learning environment. Interactional quality was found to be highest in centres where educators were involved in active interactions with children during periods of free play to:

- Engage with children in sustained shared thinking,
- Facilitate resources for play,
- Model positive social interactions, and
- Treat adults and children with mutual respect.

In the current study, children were found to display more complex dramatic play behaviour in centres where educators were involved in a greater presence of active interactions with children. Through active interactions, educators were more likely to engage with children in sustained shared thinking. Craft (2000) asserts that through sustained shared thinking, educators are more likely to be flexible towards children’s ideas, imagination and curiosity, and model creative thinking through open-ended questioning and shared problem solving. An example in the current study was an educator co-constructing meaning with children about space travellers exploring space through a process of joint inquiry. In this example of sustained shared thinking, an educator noticed that children were unsure how to proceed in their play episode once they had landed in space. Accordingly, she and the children explored the topic of space travel together. Later she guided children to think in abstract thought by prompting them to build their own space helmets so that they could leave their space ship after landing and draw pictures of their journey through space. In doing so, the educators guided children towards representing their knowledge symbolically, a skill that is associated with children’s meta-cognitive thought (see Section 5.1.1). It is likely that in the centres where active interactions were practiced, children received greater guidance from educators to develop creative and imaginative learning dispositions and skills.

Although the use of active interactions were found to have positive influences upon children’s dramatic play through the modelling of important dispositions and
skills for the activity, many of the educators in the current study consciously removed themselves away from children’s play activities. Specifically, the educators denoted that children’s learning in periods of free play is enhanced through their freedom of self-expression and independent exploration. Accordingly, a passive interactional approach was preferred by educators in many of the centres studied, minimising the amount of sustained shared thinking. The prevalence of passive interactional styles has been similarly highlighted as a preferred pedagogical approach in several other studies (Fleer, 2015; McInnes et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008). These previous studies have suggested that in adopting a passive interactional approach, educators may actually limit children’s choice and impose more control over children’s activity. As such, educators may be less flexible in responding to children’s ideas (Craft, 2000), children may see educators as being less playful (McInnes et al., 2013), and the relationship between educators and children may be negatively affected (Howes, 2000).

These other studies do not examine the influence that a passive interactional approach has upon children’s involvement in and the complexity of dramatic play; an activity that is often romanticised as flourishing in the absence of the educator’s involvement (Dockett, 2011; Kemple, 1996). Similarly to the works of the previous literature, the educators of the current study who practiced passive interactional styles engaged in more frequent interactions that managed and controlled children’s activities. For instance, educators were more likely to abruptly end a conflict or activity perceived to be a behavioural disruption, rather than assisting children to continue in the play constructively. Accordingly, the influence that the approach had upon dramatic play was obstructive, rather than supportive.

In contrast to previous studies, the educators in the current study were prompted to discuss their pedagogical reasons for employing a passive interactional style. Specifically, the educators rationalised that they aimed to provoke children’s creativity through what they perceived to enhance their flexibility, freedom of independent exploration and social skills. However, as the findings indicated, the employment of an active interactional style was in actual fact more likely to provoke children’s flexibility in play, increase the depth of children’s explorations through sustained shared thinking, and model important social skills, persistence and problem
solving. Accordingly, the group of children in the current study showed that they may be provided with more opportunity to develop strong dispositions and dramatic play skills when educators show flexibility towards their ideas and curiosity.

Findings showed that pedagogy involving active interactional approaches required educators to listen to children so as to guide their activity in a beneficial way. Such an approach (pedagogy of listening) was also highlighted in research by Rinaldi (2006), who showed that children’s creativity was fostered and high-level thinking encouraged when educators followed and supported the lead of the child’s curiosity. Active interactional approaches in the current study showed that by listening to children, educators can notice and positively guide curiosities, conceptual understandings and social complexities and that are emerging in children’s dramatic play. As was visible in the example of the joint inquiry into space travel, educators can provide children with crucial support for their involvement in complex play.

5.3.3 The influence of the curriculum on dramatic play behaviour

The curriculum of all four centres was informed by play-based learning. This was not a surprise given the focus of the EYLF is to guide educators to implement a play-based curriculum by adopting a repertoire of playful teaching and learning strategies (DEEWR, 2009). There were two main variations of play-based learning implemented within the current study. Both are explored in the following paragraphs, which discuss how dramatic play can be pedagogically framed in the curriculum as a leading activity (see Section 2.2) for children’s learning. This is specifically discussed according to the findings that dramatic play is positively influenced by integrated and converged curricula.

An integrated curriculum is the holistic approach of weaving curriculum areas and developmental competencies into one or across several play spaces (Arthur et al., 2015). For instance, in the previous section, the example of the joint inquiry of space travel between educators and children, combined the learning areas of science (i.e., space travel and exploration), creative arts (i.e., construction of a space helmet), literacy (i.e., representation of their adventure through drawings), learning processes (i.e., persistence, problem solving) and learning dispositions (i.e., imagination and
creativity) to name a few. In this example, the methods of holistic teaching through an integrated curriculum appeared to be an influential factor upon children’s involvement in and complexity of their later dramatic play as it provided children with more experiential stimuli to draw into their dramatic play episode.

Smilansky (1968) agrees that the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour increased when children were exposed to a wider range of experiential learning activities. This included having wider experiences in social aspects of the community, and guided practice in representational skills to enact the roles and actions experienced. More recent literature also shows that the complexity of children’s dramatic play is higher when the curriculum blends inquiry-based learning experiences with representation through the imaginative world (Fleer, 2014; Gmitrova, 2013; Lindqvist, 2010).

Specifically, the findings of the current study suggest that a curriculum that encourages children to explore real-life happenings in the world around them through a combination of adult- and child-led inquiry is an effective pedagogy to strengthen the content of children’s role enactments and situations within a play episode. Such findings can be supported by Fleer (2011b) who asserts that that educators should foreground imagination as a leading activity for children’s learning in the curriculum through a pedagogical discourse that intentionally weaves the acquisition of academic concepts through the child’s imaginary world. By using this pedagogy, the educator draws upon the familiar, but cognitively powerful process of moving in and out of reality to construct the meaning of concrete props through representation – a common experience used in learning of mathematics, science and literacy (Fleer, 2011b).

The current study highlights two ways in which Fleer’s (2011b) pedagogy of conceptual learning was practiced. The first was that the educator maintained an active interactional style within the curriculum, so as to co-construct conceptual knowledge with children and guide them towards making connection with prior experiences. In this approach, the educators engaged in inquiry based learning with the children, but also maintained distance at times to allow children to construct their own meaning from their experience. An example in the current study was visible in
the inquiry of space travel. The educator reflected that she intentionally did not participate with children in their expedition to space as she wanted to observe the meaning that children had made from their inquiry. Instead she asked them to record their experience so as to provide the children with an axis for them to make connections to their joint inquiry of space, and to also act as a point of reflection when they returned. In this example and others similar, where an active approach within an interactive curriculum that valued conceptual learning was employed, children’s involvement in dramatic play was higher and their dramatic play episodes were more complex in detail, persistence, collaboration and role enactments.

In contrast, the second approach of play-based curriculum provided opportunities within the physical environment for children to engage in self-directed learning. In this approach, a passive interactional approach was maintained in favour of children’s self-exploration. An example outlined in the findings (Section 4.3.5) was in Centre 4, where children were exploring bugs and the educators responded to this interest through the creative arts (constructing bug catchers) and science (a visit to the museum and the provision of magnifying glasses). In this experience, children’s involvement in dramatic play was maintained, however the transfer of knowledge into their dramatic play was not visible. Accordingly, the findings indicate that whilst physical play spaces can prompt children to explore concepts and also enter the imaginary field through flexibility, time and space, children’s role enactments and exploration of situations within a play episode were less complex when educators assumed passive interactional styles. As such, an important implication deriving from the findings of the current study is that educators have an integral role to pedagogical position dramatic play within the curriculum through a holistic teaching approach that encourages representational thought through dialogue that encourages involvement in the imaginative world, joint-inquiry based learning opportunities and a flexible physical environment.

A converged curriculum integrates the indoor and outdoor environments to provide a larger classroom environment with a greater variety of dramatic play spaces to choose from. In the current study, centres that merged the indoor and outdoor classroom environments were found to support children’s higher levels of involvement as measured by the LIS-YC and persistence in dramatic play as measured...
by the SSEDSP, specifically in the indoor environment. The findings suggest that the employment of a converged curriculum influenced greater persistence of children’s dramatic play because children were able to disperse into a larger environment, which lessened the amount of overcrowding within the indoor environment. Accordingly, children experienced fewer disruptions from their peers in their dramatic play, affording more time to construct their dramatic play episode, which was associated with increased complexity in object substitution, situation development and roles enactments. As is noted by Rogers and Evans (2007) dramatic play needs space in order to create complex play episodes. Moreover, children need time for play episodes to develop (Howe et al., 2014). The influence of the converged curriculum upon children’s dramatic play in the current study have shown that the factors of time and space are often connected, as children experienced more disruptions to their dramatic play when the play spaces are overcrowded. This limits the time they have to persist in their dramatic play episodes.

The converged curriculum appears to be a responsive and flexible pedagogy that provides a goodness of fit with the child’s individual play style and preferences. For example, Mature and Role Players who may like to engage in play episodes of a more active nature, such as superheros, may do so outside, where they are more able to run, shout and climb. The plight of children who enjoy involvement in play episodes that entail more active and louder dramatic play behaviours (e.g., superhero play) has been considered in previous literature. Specifically, indoor dramatic play is discussed to be a disadvantage to those children that are more interested in dramatic play episodes with active play themes (Parsons & Howe, 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008). These authors of previous literature have made recommendations to create more spaces for dramatic play outdoors and to include more opportunity for outdoor dramatic play within their curriculum (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010; Parsons & Howe, 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008).

The interesting finding that became apparent within the current study is that even if more time and space is provided for children to play in the outdoors space, if this was not implemented within a converged approach, children’s indoor dramatic play experienced the same amount of disruptions. For example, there were some children within the current study that did not appear to enjoy outdoor play due to
their preference for quiet, enclosed play spaces. Moreover, the educators’ decision to transition from indoor to outdoor play or vice versa caused children’s existing dramatic play to be interrupted. Before changing environments, children were required to stop, sometimes without warning to pack up and line up. Rogers and Evans (2008) highlight that children who have immature dramatic play skills find it challenging to continue a play episode within a new environment or return to it later. Consequently, for children identified in this study as a Constructive and Uninvolved Players, being asked to change environments was enough to terminate the play. Accordingly, the converged curriculum may provide a more influential pedagogy for dramatic play as children can move between environments at their own pace, transport objects at their leisure to support their play episodes and integrate multiple play spaces together. Therefore, the implementation of a converged curriculum appeared to establish an environment that was more responsive and flexible to the interests and strengths of children with differing play styles and preferences.

The findings suggest that a further factor associated with the influence of the converged curriculum on children’s dramatic play within the indoor environment rests with increased educator-child interactions. As similarly found in Berkhout et al. (2013), when the educators in the current study had fewer children under their immediate supervision, they were more likely to engage in active interactional styles to extend upon the children’s knowledge of roles and events within a play episode, and to increase collaborative interaction among peers. Given that the findings in Section 4.3.5 outlined some possible barriers occurring in the centres where a converged approach was practiced, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to examine the influence of the curriculum approach upon children’s outdoor dramatic play.

In summary, the findings suggest that children’s dramatic play is influenced by several factors of the classroom environment. Figure 5.1 begins to illustrate a model for a pedagogy of dramatic play that has been developed according to the findings of the current study. The use of the term pedagogical framing within this model refers to a dynamic system created within the classroom environment between physical, interactional and curriculum provisions. Specifically, the model illustrates how dramatic play can be pedagogical framed within the classroom environment through
a) flexibility, b) defined play spaces, c) a pedagogy of listening, and d) sustained shared thinking.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 5.1. Pedagogical framing**

The model for a pedagogy of dramatic play draws upon the findings that suggest children’s involvement in complex dramatic play can be enhanced through pedagogical factors that include:

a) Physical provisions for play that are clearly defined, open and accessible,  
b) Flexibility to allow for creativity and imagination to develop,  
c) Opportunities to engage in dramatic playful dialogue with adults and peers through a process of co-constructed learning, and  
d) A positive social and emotional climate.

A pedagogy of listening complements these factors by enforcing a classroom that is sensitive and responsive to the developmental and learning needs of children within the context of the individual classroom. Together, the aforementioned factors may provide a positive climate for dispositions and skills associated with complex dramatic play to develop.

The findings presented in relation to children’s dramatic play behaviour indicate that there is a need for educators to provide more pedagogical support through their active involvement with children in the curriculum, including the activity of dramatic play. This is further examined within the discussion of research question 4.

5.4 Discussion of RQ4: In what way do educators’ knowledge and views influence children’s involvement in dramatic play?

The findings of the previous research question presented a number of ways that educators can pedagogically frame dramatic play within their classroom. These
findings relating to the influence of the classroom environment upon dramatic play have highlighted that educators’ pedagogical behaviours involved in the establishing physical play spaces, the classroom’s emotional climate, and the structure of the curriculum guide children’s involvement in the activity. Research question 4 aimed to extend upon these findings by examining how educators’ knowledge and views influenced their behaviour towards dramatic play. These findings are discussed according to the following three themes that emerged in the findings:

i. Educators’ teaching philosophy influenced the classroom quality (see 5.4.1),

ii. Children’s involvement in dramatic play is influenced by educators knowledge of and roles in children’s dramatic play (See 5.4.2), and

iii. There are barriers influencing educators’ behaviour towards children’s dramatic play (See 5.4.3).

5.4.1 The influence of educators’ teaching philosophy on classroom quality

The findings of research question 4 highlighted that educators who viewed their role as a co-constructor of children’s learning were more likely to facilitate a flexible, responsive and physically more enriching classroom environment. For example, as a co-constructor educators were more likely to build upon children’s ideas to form further learning activities, the curriculum progressed with the emergence of children’s interests and knowledge, and positive social behaviours were modelled through increased educator-child interactions. Children’s dramatic play behaviours were more complex in centres where educators maintained a prevailing view of themselves as a co-constructor. These findings suggest that educator-guided pedagogies are more effective to pedagogically frame dramatic play within the classroom environment.

The interviews with the participating educators in the current study revealed that educators who worked within a philosophy that valued their role as a co-constructor were more likely to reflect critically on their role in children’s dramatic play. In their reflective process, they identified the possible challenges children were facing in their pursuit to be involved in dramatic play, considered the complexities of their own involvement in children’s dramatic play, and acknowledged its role as a pivot for holistic learning and development. This may be associated with the educators
showing a greater amount of engagement with their colleagues in continuous professional dialogue regarding their teaching approaches during periods of free play. Moyles et al. (2002) explain that this type of reflective discourse increases educators’ confidence in their own pedagogy, as they develop a stronger understanding of the contexts and complexities involved in learning through play.

Moyles et al. (2002) led a team of educators to become more confident in their ability to defend and discuss their pedagogies of dramatic play through reflections using stimulated video recall. In the current study, the dialogic reflective interviews revealed the uncertainty that educators face when talking about the theoretical foundations of their philosophy. This is consistent with Moyles, Hargreaves, Merry, Patterson and Estarte-Sarries (2003) experience that educators will often speak with confidence about children’s behaviour and what they do in practice, but will avoid discussion about their professional skills and knowledge of the practice. McInnes et al. (2011) suggest that educators who have difficulty making connections with the theory behind their practice and children’s dramatic play activity have weaker philosophies overall. The educators in McInnes et al.’s (2011) study reported to experience more challenges to their play pedagogies when they did not appear to understand the theoretical underpinnings of their philosophy.

In the current study, participating educators who assimilated their teaching philosophy with constructivist pedagogies, were more likely to enact passive interactional approaches, which has been discussed in research question 4 as less supportive for children’ dramatic play. The educators who were most likely to assimilate with this philosophy and behaviour were those that have been in the field for over 15-years. Dockett (2011) explains that the traditional theoretical knowledge instilled in educators’ initial training asserted a view of children’s learning and development as being ‘natural and free’. Therefore, educators often interpret this to mean that children’s dramatic play is best facilitated through passive interactional approaches. However, the dramatic play behaviour of children in the current study suggest that the view of dramatic play skills being ‘natural and free’ is problematic, as children may not be developing essential skills necessary for complex dramatic play.
In addition, children in the current study from centres that demonstrated a particularly high presence of passive interactional styles were less involved in classroom activities, leading to a greater amount of behavioural disruptions. Stephen (2010) explains that this is often a problematic effect of passive interactional styles, as children are not equipped with the dispositions and skills needed to persist and challenge their progress in an activity. In the current study, the use of passive interactional styles promoted a higher amount of reprimands, and an overall sense of decreased purposefulness in the construction of the classroom environment for dramatic play. Although the educators may have had specific intentions to support their pedagogical behaviour, the findings suggest that this practice is not desirable for children’s dramatic play.

5.4.2 The influence of educators’ knowledge of and roles in children’s dramatic play

The educators of the current study displayed and discussed a number of roles for themselves in children’s dramatic play. These included the roles of a participant, facilitator and monitor (see Section 4.4.3). Overall a monitoring role was found to be the most favoured role, which may reflect educators’ employment of passive interactional styles and view of dramatic play being a child-led activity. For this reason it was common for educators to facilitate the physical play space for dramatic play, and intervene only for the purposes of responding to disruptive behaviour and resolving conflicts.

The passive behaviour associated with a monitoring role is consistent with the findings of further studies (Dockett, 2011; Fleer, 2015; Lu Soo Ai, 2007; McInnes et al., 2013). The favouring of the monitoring role in the current study and others, was associated with educators viewing their involvement in children’s dramatic play to be a possible imposition to the progression of the play episode; a perception that is commonly reported in further research (Miller & Almon, 2009; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Wood, 2010). In addition, the current study suggests that educators’ involvement in a mediating role is associated with their knowledge of the learning that can be gained in the activity. Although dramatic play was perceived by educators as being a useful medium for children to build social and emotional skills, there was a general
uncertainty about the role of dramatic play for further areas of learning and development. Howard and McInnes (2010) explain that pedagogies of dramatic play are often problematic because educators can be challenged by what they know and practice. This means that although they are aware of the importance of dramatic play, there are often more pressing matters within the curriculum that require their attention. Accordingly, as seen in the current study, the social domain becomes easily romanticised as the central purpose of dramatic play. Despite educators contentions to become involved in children’s dramatic play, the findings of the current study propose that educators’ involvement in dramatic play can assist children to progress in their play episodes by guiding children towards new roles and situations.

Although previous research has suggested that educators’ views, knowledge and roles in dramatic play may have implications upon the complexity of children’s dramatic play (Dockett, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Wood, 2014), this view has previously been largely unconfirmed. This is because the research methods in previous literature have not examined the influence of educators’ views upon the dramatic play behaviour of children in their classroom. In contrast, the findings of the current study show that in centres where educators’ maintained a complacent view of the high level of cognitive and academic learning that occurs within dramatic play, educators were less likely to: a) observe children’s learning in the activity, b) respond to the children’s interests and ideas present within their play episodes, c) maintain flexible pedagogies (i.e., mobility of props, convergent curriculum and pedagogy of listening) that has been discussed to support the dispositions of creativity and imagination, and d) become an active participant in children’s dramatic play. Accordingly, children’s involvement in and complexity of dramatic play was lower in centres where a predominant uncertainty of how to act in dramatic play and what the role of dramatic play was for learning, existed. This raises concern, as the findings suggest that the level of children’s dramatic play skills may be an indicator of undeveloped meta-cognitive skills. Alongside recent reports also indicating a decline in children’s academic awareness of mathematical and literacy concepts (a further area of learning associated with children’s meta-cognitive skills; Cohrssen, Tayler & Cloney, 2015), it is suggested that a reconceptualization of dramatic play pedagogies is needed.
The findings of the current study that educators who viewed academic skills and preparation of abilities for school to be segregated from dramatic play, suggest that this perception changes their behaviour in relation to the activity to become unsupportive to children’s involvement. However, interactions with children in dramatic play have been shown in the current study to be crucial to the complexity of the activity, including elements associated with meta-cognition such as object substitution and role enactments. Specifically, the findings showed that the roles of a participant and facilitator provided an effective framework for play pedagogies that were supportive for children’s involvement in dramatic play. In both of these active roles, play pedagogies occurred within the realm of the imaginary field, with the aim to teach academic concepts (learning in dramatic play), and also to improve children’s involvement in dramatic play (learning to play) by:

a) Giving objects new meaning;

b) Conceptualising roles and rules; and

c) Moving in and out of play.

Moyles (2010) labels this as a process of playful teaching, whereby the educator acknowledges the child’s innate joy in playful learning, and uses strategies that respond to their instinct to play. Accordingly, in the process of playful teaching, the educator positions their interactions with children in a shared imaginary world, where they are able to target planned learning goals, whilst modelling key elements of complex dramatic play. Developed according to the findings of the current study, Figure 5.2 provides a model of playful pedagogies that can support children’s involvement in dramatic play. This Figure builds upon the model of pedagogies of play previously presented (see Section 5.3.2). Specifically, the physical field refers to the aspects of the physical environment, interactional environment and curriculum that were found to influence involvement in complex dramatic play. In contrast, the imaginary field refers to the active interactions that educators can have with children in dramatic play to guide the progression of the play episode. Each component of the model is discussed below.
Figure 5.2. Pedagogy of dramatic play

Playful learning: Findings show that by adopting facilitative and participative roles, educators are able to guide children towards establishing a play episode by assisting with the crucial skills of planning, negotiation and collaboration. Bodrova and Leong (2007) highlight that children with underdeveloped metacognitive skills can find it difficult to co-ordinate the roles and stories within their dramatic play. However, such skills are imperative for the sustenance and development of dramatic play episodes (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

In the current study, subtle prompts on behalf of the educator were found to guide the development of dramatic play from outside the play episode. For example, open-ended questions such as ‘What will you do when you get to China?’; ‘How will you get there?’ or ‘who will be the pilot?’ were found to encourage the children to think further about their current activity to consider the roles and rules involved. Moreover, by using the phrase ‘What story are you playing?’ the educator was able to provoke children’s involvement in representational thought. The findings suggest that prompting children to relay the purpose of their activity may afford them the opportunity to enter a deeper level of involvement and show greater coherence in the social interactions with their peers. For instance, the children may realise that they are digging a hole to China, not building a river.

The participative role of the aforementioned interactions offer educators an alternative approach to their interactions with children in dramatic play as they can be
performed from outside the play episode. A common finding in dramatic play literature is that educators favour passive interactional approaches in relation to the activity so as to support child-directed learning (Dockett, 2011; McInnes et al, 2011). However, the findings of this study, suggest that by using subtle prompts to assist children’s dramatic play from outside the play episode, educators are able to prompt and model key elements of complex dramatic play. This includes, as seen in the examples of questioning above, initiating, planning and reflecting on the actions and rules of the imaginary situation (self-management), making connections with prior learning experiences and assisting with collaborative interaction.

Educators’ involvement in children’s dramatic play can also provide guidance in the development of representational thought by role modelling object substitution. Object substitution forms a rich aspect of representational thought (Karpov, 2005). As the findings of the current study suggest, children’s flexibility in object substitution was important in the construction of a play episode as it allowed children to control their role and actions according to the intentions of the imaginary situation, leading to more persistent play episodes. However, in the current study, children appeared to be dependent upon realistic props. The findings showed that many educators were often likely to search for and use realistic objects in their dramatic play with children, rather than model the use of make-believe props. For example, rather than pretending to bandage a child’s leg, the educator would go to the storeroom to retrieve a bandage from the first aide box. Accordingly, object substitution may be an element of dramatic play that is not well modelled in the interactions between educators and children. There was also limited discussion of object substitution on behalf of educators in the interviews conducted. Collectively, this may suggest educators’ limited knowledge of the cognitive processes involved in dramatic play. In order to increase the use of representational thought in dramatic play, it is recommended that playful learning strategies involve educators intentionally focussing on the substitution of objects and actions with children in the classroom.

*Playful teaching* refers to a pedagogical approach employed by the educator to guide children’s conceptual awareness within a shared imaginary field. In the current study, there was evidence to suggest that educators were able to guide children’s dramatic play episodes towards more complex events and roles through the dialogue
of facilitative and participatory roles. Performed inside or outside of the play episode, educators can enhance children’s conceptual knowledge of the social context being explored by introducing new ideas, building upon children’s ideas, or extending existing concepts. Moreover, the introduction of new roles and props can be used as a tool to subtly weave literacy and numeracy concepts into the play episode. For example, educators might guide children to undertake the act of writing in their role enactment or modelling the exchange of money. In centres of the current study where this most often occurred, children’s dramatic play was found to be more complex in the representation of events and social interactions.

According to Fleer (2011b), shared involvement with children in the imaginary field provokes children’s use of higher cognitive functions. The reason is that imagination and consciousness can be viewed as interrelated concepts that work together to support children’s learning and development. In the current study, the shared involvement between educators and children in dramatic play showed that children were able to be holistically supported in (but not limited to) learning areas of science, literacy, cognition, social development, as well as learning dispositions (i.e., imagination, creativity, persistence) and learning processes (i.e., problem solving). Shared involvement in the imaginary field involves children in abstract thinking around cognitive concepts, within a representation of socially mediated events (Fleer, 2011b). This appears to be related to the process whereby the unconscious becomes conscious (Fleer, 2014). By employing such playful pedagogy in the current study, the educators were able to guide children towards what they want the child to learn through involvement in an innately pleasurable activity for the child.

For instance, in the current study by modelling the role of reception staff working at a hospital, the educator was firstly bringing children into an imaginary world. This then allowed the educator to introduce a platform from which literacy could be practiced by modelling the task of writing down the patient’s personal details and symptoms. Hedegaard and Chaiklin (2005) describe this as a double move, as educators are extending upon traditional sustained shared thinking, and interacting with children within an imaginary field. In the interaction above, the educator was not only providing a context in which literacy skills can be practiced, but she was also adding to the children’s conceptual knowledge about visiting the doctor. Accordingly,
the cognitive elements involved in this interaction can provide a rich context for children to conceptualise their knowledge of the world and academic concepts through higher forms of thinking.

The pedagogical practices involved in this model of playful pedagogies developed from the findings of this study, suggest that in guiding the development of a play episode, educators do not need to impose on children’s dramatic play through methods of direct participation. However, it is clear that thorough understandings of dramatic play need to be developed by educators so that they can identify the needs of children in dramatic play. Educators in the current study were eager to engage with children in learning about academic concepts. However these ideals of what a teacher should do often detracted the children away from a well-developed story, where complex social, every day and academic concepts were being explored (Rogers & Evans, 2008). McInnes et al. (2013) assert that this behaviour devalues the children’s learning process. Furthermore, it creates a climate that does not support the formation of relationships or creativity (Craft, 2000; McInnes et al., 2013).

Finally, playful pedagogies are recommended as a whole classroom approach. An issue arising from the findings that needs to be addressed is the lack of interactions that draw children into the imaginary field occurring outside of the dramatic play space. This presented a challenge for current pedagogies of dramatic play, as many children were found to play dramatically in spaces outside of the dramatic play space. Accordingly, many children may be receiving limited educator guidance in the development of social and cognitive skills necessary to participate in complex dramatic play behaviour.

5.4.3 The barriers influencing educators’ knowledge views and behaviours

The participants of the current study have acknowledged that that they could do more to pedagogically guide children’s involvement in dramatic play. This comes as the findings show that rather than acting as a participant or facilitator of dramatic play, some educators are acting more like supervisors. Although the educators reflect that they would like to show more involvement in the children’s dramatic play, they
identified three barriers that prevented them from doing so. These included parent expectations, staffing arrangements and administration.

Educators of westernised societies are increasingly reporting to feel pressure from parents within their centres to include academically focussed activities into their curriculum (Campbell, 2015; Wood, 2014). Moreover, there is an increasing preference for outcome-based measurements placing significance upon developing academic competencies such as mathematics and literacy in the early years (Almon & Miller, 2009; Fleer, 2011a; Hedges, 2014). Although the EYLF does not advocate for the use of such measurements, the educators within the current study cited feeling an increasing pressure from families to prepare children academically for school.

Nationally and internationally this has been a reoccurring issue within recent literature (Campbell, 2015; Golinkoff et al., 2006). Findings presented by Campbell (2015) show that Australian educators are feeling pressure from parents to conduct school-like lessons within their curriculum to teach children phonetics. This is despite their knowledge and views that children will learn phonetics best through song, stories and dramatic play. Similar comments were made by educators within the current study. Arthur et al. (2015) assert that being mindful of school readiness is useful for children’s later involvement in academic activities, however the community needs to be made aware that young children learn differently from those in school. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to have a clear professional understanding of playful learning and teaching strategies that enhance exploration and imagination. This suggests that in order to maintain the integrity of play-based learning, educators require a stronger theoretical knowledge of play pedagogies.

The educators of the current study also identified that they have limited time to implement planned teaching and learning pedagogies in children’s dramatic play due to the staffing arrangements and quality assurance paperwork in their centre. This was specifically an issue in the long day care centres, wherein educators had a greater commitment to fit their teaching schedule into the routine of the overall centre. Due to this restraint, the educators cite wanting to distribute some of the responsibilities of the curriculum implementation onto their co-educators. However, there is concern
that the professional knowledge of their colleagues in relation to play pedagogies may be a barrier to the provision of enriching opportunities for children’s dramatic play.

Time and collegiality was less of an issue in sessional preschools where the educators worked consistently within a team. However, in long day care, educators seemed to only acknowledge their day-to-day commitments within the space of their own classroom. It therefore appears that effective leadership may be the factor influencing the educators’ collegiality. The effectiveness of quality ECEC relies upon a collaborative approach with other staff in the centre (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). However, Rodd (2012) highlights that ECEC is often plagued by lower levels of professional leadership due to legal, economic and administrative responsibilities.

Inclusion of staff within the whole centre in collective decision-making is positively associated with a higher level of process quality (Luff & Webster, 2014; Dennis & O’Conner, 2013). This is due to educators having a clear vision with regards to pedagogy and curriculum. However, as Wood (2014) highlights, when educators themselves are not confident in their theoretical knowledge of play-based learning, it is challenging for them to motivate a culture of professional growth in dramatic play pedagogies within their professional setting.

In summary, the findings of research question 4 indicate the knowledge, views and behaviours of educators in relation to dramatic play influences how the activity is pedagogical positioned within the classroom environment. Overall, the educators appeared to have some knowledge of the influence that dramatic play has for children’s learning. However, their knowledge of the development and benefits of dramatic play for children’s learning appeared limited. This led to a substantial use of passive interactional styles.

In play-based curriculum, educators should adopt pedagogical strategies to involve children to think about concepts through the imaginative field that is contextual to dramatic play so as to engage children’s higher-order thinking. The model of dramatic play pedagogies presented here extends on most current recommendations of dramatic play pedagogies as it encourages educators to see the occurrence of dramatic play from wider play spaces within the classroom environment. This draws upon Fleer’s (2011b) assertion that in the early years,
imagination and consciousness should be viewed as interrelated concepts that work together as important components to support children’s learning and development. However, as the current study shows, the success of pedagogies of dramatic play is contingent upon the educators’ theoretical understanding and value of dramatic play for learning. The implications from these findings will be presented in the following chapter.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings of the four research questions have been interpreted and discussed. The findings of children’s involvement in dramatic play suggest that children need to be further supported in their skills of representational thought and social cognition. By drawing children’s attention to the imaginary field, educators can support dramatic play skills and increase the satisfaction that children receive from the activity. Several factors of the classroom environment have been discussed to influence the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play. Notably it has been revealed that the physical environment, curriculum and educator interactions work collectively to pedagogically frame rich opportunities for dramatic play within the classroom.

In the next chapter, the implications and limitations of the current study will be discussed. Moreover, the final conclusions of the study will be presented.
Chapter 6 : Conclusion

This study has examined the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play. The study involved observations of children aged between 4- to 6-years within four preschool centres in Melbourne, Australia. The current study also examined the factors of the classroom environment that influenced the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour and their levels of involvement in the activity. The scope of this study has been to provide a deeper understanding of the occurrence of children’s involvement in dramatic play with regards to the provisions available within the physical environment, the interactional environment and the curriculum.

In this chapter, the conclusions made from the study’s findings are presented. The implications of the study are discussed. In addition, the study’s limitations are presented with some suggestions for future research.

6.1 Implications

The findings have highlighted that the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour in the current study was moderate to low. Moreover, the children demonstrated only a moderate level of involvement in the activity. According to Vygotsky (1978), the activity of dramatic play provides children with the most optimal learning experience for the development of higher order thinking in the preschool year. However, children’s dramatic play behaviour must be complex in order for this learning to occur (Elkonin, 2005). In the current study, the level of complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour as measured by the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play suggests that children were not experiencing the activity at the optimal level to drive learning, as proposed by Vygotsky.

The physical environment, interactional environment and curriculum of four preschool classrooms were examined to find the factors that influence children’s the complexity of dramatic play behaviour, and their involvement in the activity. The findings from this investigation have raised some important implications in regards to
pedagogy in early childhood education, pre-service training, and professional development opportunities for early childhood educators.

6.1.1 Implications for early childhood pedagogy

The complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour and their levels of involvement in the activity raise concerns about the provisions available to children within their preschool classroom to foster the development of the necessary and critical skills associated with dramatic play. The critical skills that are specifically associated with involvement in complex dramatic play are related to the acquisition and application of meta-cognitive skills, a tool of higher mental function required for literacy, numeracy and social learning dispositions, and can be practiced (Karpov, 2014). Accordingly, previous works have recommended a reconceptualization of pedagogy associated with dramatic play so as to address the declining level of children’s involvement in the activity and support the aforementioned cognitive abilities (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2013). The findings of the current study have raised a number of implications for the educators’ pedagogical approach to dramatic play, including its assessment and planning, the provisions available for the activity in the physical environment, and how dramatic is fostered through educator-child interactions and the environment.

Assessing and planning for dramatic play: The current study has proposed that the complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour is influenced by their play styles and preferences. For the purpose of the current study, the concept of play style referred to observed patterns of behaviour relating to how children engage with others socially, children’s flexibility to substitute objects and also how children positioned themselves within the play episode (i.e., inside or outside the play). Play preferences referred to the play spaces and objects that children were orientated towards, for example, the construction space, dramatic play space or playground. The findings proposed four styles of play, which were developed by the researcher. These included: i) Mature Players, ii) Role Players, iii) Constructive Players, and iv) Uninvolved Players (see Section 4.1.2).

The styles of play specifically highlighted that dramatic play appeared to serve children different sources of satisfaction, depending on their creative ability and the
intention of their involvement in the activity. For example, Mature Players showed the
greatest cognitive flexibility in their dramatic play behaviour, based on their complex
and frequent objective substitutions, elaborate role enactments and high levels of
persistence in the activity. Accordingly these children were observed to gain
satisfaction out of dramatic play through their dual positioning of being inside and
outside the play episode to plan, manage, act and reflect upon the development of
roles and situations occurring in the activity. In contrast, Constructive Players showed
less cognitive flexibility, as they displayed a dependence upon realistic props and
seldom enacted the role of someone else. Accordingly, Constructive Players appeared
to gain more satisfaction out of dramatic play by building a scene, assembling props
and narrating the occurrences in the play episode from outside the imaginary
situation. Rather than taking on a role, these children would project a role into a toy.

Acknowledgement of children’s play styles presents important implications for
educators’ assessment and planning of the children’s learning in cognitive, social and
emotional areas of development in three ways. Firstly, it is recommended that
educators focus more attention of their assessment and planning on the complexity
of children’s dramatic play behaviour. Similar to the findings of previous studies
(Bodrova et al., 2013; Lu Soo Ai, 2007; Smirnova, 2013), the current study suggests
that the complexity of children’s dramatic play was low because of their
representational skills and meta-cognitive abilities associated with object substitution
and role play behaviour. Accordingly, it is recommended that the typology of play
styles developed in the current study be used by educators as a framework to
document and analyse the elements of children’s dramatic play. Specifically, the way
that children are using objects and positioning themselves in their dramatic play
behaviour can provide educators with an understanding of aspects of cognitive and
social development including representational thought, metacognitive abilities to
reproduce scenarios, reflect and develop in action, and perspective taking. Such an
analysis of children’s behaviour in dramatic play may provide educators with an
appropriate platform to plan more responsive learning experiences that encourage
higher levels of involvement in the activity where deep-level learning can occur
(Laevers, 1994). For example, assisting Constructive Players to substitute the meaning
of objects so as to support their involvement with peers in social dramatic play episodes.

Secondly, the findings showed that the style of children’s dramatic play was related to the social behaviours present within dramatic play activity. Social development was viewed by the educators participating in the current study to be a focal learning area of dramatic play. Several previous studies have similarly highlighted the value that educators hold for social development through children’s involvement in dramatic play (Dockett, 2011; Kemple, 1996). Interestingly, the findings showed that despite viewing the social importance of dramatic play, educators would still rarely intervene to assist the social coherence of peer groups. This is an important consideration as the findings showed that the complexity of children’s dramatic play in the current study was influenced by limited amounts of collaborative interactions that built upon and extended the ideas of one another. Specifically, it appeared that variation of cognitive abilities associated with object substitution and role enactments of members within peer groups, was an influencing factor in the social behaviours of children in dramatic play. For example, play episodes were repetitive, contained less collaborative interactions and less complex enacted roles, situations and events when the members of peer groups were dependent upon realistic objects. Accordingly, it is recommended that educators use the typology of play styles presented in the current study to identify the possible factors that are supporting and interfering with children’s involvement and contribution to a collaborative play episode. Such an analysis may assist educators to plan responsive strategies to improve the complexity of children’s social behaviours, so as to assist the level of persistence in a role and the elaborateness of actions, situations and collaborative interactions in a play episode.

Finally, children’s play styles and preferences of play spaces were interrelated. For example, Mature and Role Players, who demonstrated higher levels of cognitive flexibility, were more likely to play dramatically in play spaces that contained ambiguous objects and encouraged them to enact a role of someone other than themselves. In contrast, Constructive and Uninvolved Players were more likely to be involved in dramatic play in play spaces that encouraged them to manipulate and construct with objects. Often, educators can segregate dramatic play to the dramatic play space, which the findings highlight can be limiting for play styles that do not
favour this play space for the activity. Accordingly, in assessing and planning for children’s dramatic play, educators should acknowledge that dramatic play occurs within several areas of the classroom and make appropriate provisions within the physical environment and curriculum to support all children’s involvement in the activity.

**The physical environment:** In using the typology of play styles for the assessment and planning for children’s dramatic play, educators may be provided with more support in designing a physical environment to support complex dramatic play. In comparison to previous literature (Mawson, 2010; Maxwell et al., 2008), which have suggested that dramatic play is enriched through ambiguous objects, the findings of the current study suggest that there is no one single recommendation that can be made for the provision of dramatic play spaces. Rather, educators need to acknowledge the physical environment as being fluid and dynamic, changing according to the developmental needs within the context of the individual classroom. Specifically, the findings of the current study highlight that while ambiguous objects are a crucial factor in challenging children’s dramatic play, some children may still be dependent upon realistic props. Accordingly a balance should be met to meet the needs of all types of play styles.

**The interactional environment:** Although the physical environment has an important role in guiding children’s dramatic play behaviour, the findings of the current study showed that the provision of a physical environment alone is not enough to support children in complex dramatic play behaviour. The findings of the current study showed that by becoming actively involved in children’s dramatic play, educators can assist children to make more conscious connections with prior learning experiences (e.g., a recent excursion to a hospital). This practice appeared to influence the complexity of children’s role enactments, persistence, collaborative interaction and the elaborateness of situations within a play episode. Specifically, it is recommended that educators partake a role in children’s dramatic play to assist children to enter the imaginary situation, give objects new meaning, conceptualise the rules of their role enactments and assist children to engage in collaborate interactions with one another.
The participative role of the aforementioned interactions challenge the prevailing perceptions of educators within the field who typically are found to favour passive interactional approaches in relation to dramatic play so as to support child-directed learning (Dockett, 2011; McInnes et al, 2011). However, the findings of this study, suggest that balance between child-led and adult-guided pedagogical approaches is necessary to support children in complex dramatic play. Educators do not need to impose on children’s dramatic play through methods of direct participation, as is suggested in previous literature (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Gmitrova, 2013; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). In contrast, subtle prompts to assist children’s dramatic play from outside the play episode were found to be efficient source of guidance for children’s involvement in dramatic play. Specifically, it is recommended that educators provoke children’s meta-cognitive abilities of planning, managing and reflecting on their activity through open-ended questioning. For example ‘What will you do when you get to China?’ , ‘How will you get there?’ ‘What will you use as the planets?’, ‘Who will be the pilot?’ and What does a pilot do?’ In doing so, educators can assist children to enter an imaginary world, model collaborative interaction, guide their thinking of the roles involved in the situation and prompt their involvement in the substitution of objects to engage representational thought.

The curriculum: As play based pedagogy underpins the curriculum of most ECEC within Australia, it could be argued that dramatic play is already strongly position within early childhood curriculum. However, the findings indicate that although opportunities for dramatic play were provided in the centres studied, the activity was often not strongly positioned within the curriculum. Among the participating educators, there was an overall uncertainty relating to the understandings of dramatic play and learning. These uncertainties often led to the segregation of dramatic play from other learning activities, a passive interactional approach and the devaluing of the learning process occurring in children’s play episodes; all common practices reported in previous literature (Howard & McInnes, 2010; McInnes et al., 2013). In contrast to these common practices, the current study has shown that the segregation of dramatic play within the curriculum appears to lower the level of children’s involvement in dramatic play.
Therefore it is recommended that educators position dramatic play as an integrated part of the curriculum so that crucial elements of dramatic play become a part of the common discourse of the classroom environment. This recommendation stands as it was found in the current study that in centres whereby educators prompted children to make connections between prior experiences and their play episodes, and used dramatic play as a tool to guide literacy, numeracy and conceptual knowledge of the world, children’s involvement in dramatic play was higher and the activity was more complex in behaviour. Accordingly, this suggests that children’s social and cognitive skills were better supported in this integrated curriculum approach (Fleer, 2014).

6.1.2 Implications for educator preparation and professional development

Hedge and Cassidy (2009) assert that the way in which individuals perceive events will affect the meaning they give to that event and influence the implementation of their practice. Accordingly, in the current study, dramatic play was integrated into the curriculum when the educators valued the activity as a source for holistic learning. These results suggest that in order to position dramatic play more strongly into the curriculum, educators require stronger understandings of play and learning to develop a philosophy that represents the true value of playful pedagogies. It would be useful for educators within ECEC centres to engage in critical reflections of their current philosophies, understandings and practice relating to children’s dramatic play to create a shared discourse within the centre (Moyles et al., 2003). Therefore, it is recommended that professional discussions be led by leaders of ECEC settings, with the aim of reframing educators’ understandings and views of dramatic play.

Nolan and Kilderry (2010) highlight that views toward dramatic play are created by educators’ knowledge as constructed in their initial pre-service education programmes, curriculum documents, their own experiences and what they know about the children. Curriculum guidelines and experience alone are not an efficient source of knowledge to construct one’s philosophy. Strong philosophies are built around theoretical knowledge to understand the deeper purpose attached to one’s
practice. This therefore raises implications for educator preparation at two levels: pre-service training, and specific professional learning opportunities.

**Pre-service training**: In Australia, pre-service educator training includes an overview of play and play-based learning within their curricula. Since the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), play, including dramatic as well as other forms of play, has been emphasised with the view that it is an important activity that constructs children’s knowledge about the world around them, develops positive learning dispositions and creates a positive sense of self (DEEWR, 2009). As such, pre-service educators are provided with strategies to assess and respond to children’s learning in play, which promotes a position for themselves to facilitate children’s knowledge through joint participation in learning experiences.

However, the concept of *play* as outlined in the EYLF is broad and there is little information available to indicate where dramatic play fits within various pre-service training curricula. In addition, attention can be directed towards ECEC textbooks that contain ambiguous guidelines for educator practice in dramatic play activity. For instance, some texts imply that dramatic play develops naturally through the provision of an aesthetically, well-developed physical environment that supports social interrelationships and exploration of ideas (Curtis & Carter, 2014; Paptheodorou, 2010).

Nolan and Kilderry (2010) discuss that educators will often create learning environments and interact with children within that environment according to how they see play, and the children and learning within it. In the current study, the educators indicated that in their pre-service training their knowledge and belief was formed by a constructivist paradigm framed by developmentally appropriate practice. They discussed that they learned about the stages of play according to various theories (i.e., Piaget, Parten) and understood dramatic play to be important for children’s social learning. However, few showed knowledge of the cognitive complexity involved by children taking on a role of someone else, substituting the meaning of objects and developing elaborate play episodes through collaborative interactions. McInnes et al. (2011) suggest that the disconnection between knowledge and practice stems from the fact that educators in their pre-service training are not being provided with a
strong enough foundation of theoretical knowledge about how to implement playful pedagogies in practice. Indeed, the findings of the current study agree with specific recommendations that pre-service training needs to provide intensive knowledge of child development, learning processes and contemporary approaches of assessing and planning for play. The findings highlight that with a greater acknowledgement of the value of dramatic play for children’s learning and development and their own role to support children’s involvement in the activity, educators can be more equipped to facilitate complex dramatic play.

**Professional learning:** It is clear from the findings of this study that the participating educators would benefit from professional learning in the area of children’s dramatic play. Specifically, it would be useful for the educators to undertake professional learning relating to the importance of dramatic play for children’s learning and development, as well as the crucial developmental abilities that are attributed to children’s involvement in dramatic play. Knowledge of this nature, would assist the educators to assess children’s dramatic play, so that they are able to appropriately plan and respond in a way that will support higher levels of involvement in the activity. Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) show that upon undertaking an intensive course dedicated to understanding and responding to play, the educators’ knowledge of play theory was enhanced. As such, they were better prepared to guide children’s dramatic play, which was associated with developmental gains in the complexity of children’s dramatic play skills. Moreover, Lu Soo Ai (2007) reports that after receiving training in relation to dramatic play, children in a Singapore classroom were provided with new experiences and more appropriate guidance to develop their dramatic play skills.

These programmes of professional learning that were implemented for the purpose of enhancing children’s dramatic play skills through structured guidance, may not be sustainable for educators where time is limited, as they ran over several weeks. Nor, may they be in line with their teaching philosophy. Nolan and Kilderry (2010) discuss that the most effective professional learning programs involve active and reflective processes conducted within a community of learners. It is known that it is important for professional learning to be conducted in this way so as to develop an understanding of one’s own views, and then situate this in relation to one’s practice,
theory and professional identity. There is however far less known about the motive of educators in the current study to seek professional learning in regards to play pedagogies and the most effective methods of delivery to suit the needs of those whose time is limited. It is recommended that further research be conducted to examine these current gaps in the literature. Without this knowledge, it will be difficult to move forward from the current model of professional learning available in a way that provides a goodness of fit with the current needs of the field of early childhood education.

6.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The sample of participants in the current study was relatively small and may therefore limit the scope of generalisation. Nonetheless, the findings have presented new ideas as to how provisions of the classroom are able to support children’s involvement in complex dramatic play. The researcher acknowledges that involvement in play dramatic is influenced by factors in the children’s wider social contexts (i.e., the home; community). These are factors that are beyond the scope of the current study, which focussed primarily on the preschool classroom. Accordingly, the scope of the current study limits the degree to which analysis of the children’s wider experiences that influence their play style can be undertaken. For this reason, it is recommended that further research be conducted from an ecological systems theoretical perspective. This would provide a holistic understanding of the factors external and internal to the preschool classroom that influence the social construction of children’s dramatic play and educators play pedagogies.

Specifically, it is recommended that study with a larger sample of children and educators within metropolitan, rural and regional locations be undertaken. Whilst it has been suggested that children and educators’ experiences, culture and upbringing contribute to the construction of classroom culture (Corsaro, 1997; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013), there have been limited studies conducted of this nature within the Australian context. A study of this nature would provide useful knowledge upon policy development, pedagogical practice and educator preparation in pre-service training institutions.
The current study suggests that children’s dramatic play style is derivative of their preferences and individual motives. However, the data collected from children in this study employed researcher observation. As such, the researcher acknowledges that the study is limited in the ability to make assumptions about how a child experiences play. It is recommended that future research relating to children’s dramatic play preferences and styles be conducted with the inclusion of the child’s perspective of their own activity. Research of this nature would provide a new perspective that strengthens the current knowledge base relating to dramatic play, as most research that reports on children’s dramatic play styles has been conducted through quantitative assessment (Saracho, 1999, 2002).

The findings have outlined the benefits of implementing a converged curriculum towards the program quality. In a converged curriculum, the indoor and outdoor playground are conjoined to allow children to flow between the two settings during periods of free play. This approach was found to provide a positive influence upon children’s involvement in dramatic play (Section 5.3.3). As the sample of the centres studied may be considered small in number, there are a number of arising issues that are yet to be addressed and were beyond the scope of this study. For example, the researcher is aware that some centres, nationally and internationally, do not have access to outdoor spaces, and rather have indoor playgrounds, or outdoor spaces that are not directly connected to the classroom. Therefore it is recommended that future research examine how the converged curriculum can be modified to be implemented in such centres. Further research is also recommended to investigate the significant implications the converged curriculum has upon children’s involvement in both play and non-play activities from a broader range of centres. It would be useful to examine educators’ behaviours within the converged curriculum to investigate their involvement with children in play and their methods of observation and planning.

Finally, in modern westernised society, technology has a significant influence on children’s everyday experiences. Within the current study, children’s involvement with technology was not examined. However, research has acknowledged that the amount of technology use, and the type of technology that children are engaging with, may be an influencing factor on children’s play (Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen & McPake, 2012). Therefore it is recommended that future research examine the influence that
technology use has on dramatic play behaviour. Moreover, it would be a useful consideration to examine how technology can be used in children’s dramatic play.

6.3 Conclusion

This study examined the complexity of children’s involvement in dramatic play. The study of children aged between 4-to 6-years within four centres in Melbourne, Australia employed a mixed methods design to understand the influence that factors of the classroom environment have upon their involvement in dramatic play. The focus was upon the physical environment, the interactional environment and the curriculum.

The children of the current study demonstrated a moderate level of involvement within dramatic play. Children who were categorised as playing at a moderate level were observed as being continuously busy, but they demonstrated limited energy, motivation and imagination within their dramatic play. The complexity of children’s dramatic play behaviour as measured by the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) was of a moderate to low level. At this level, the children demonstrated moderate involvement in social interactions, verbal language and object substitution. However children’s involvement and persistence in role enactments was limited. Moreover, the children’s actions and situations within play episodes were unsophisticated and repetitive. Accordingly, in the current study, the intensity children’s of involvement in dramatic play was not at a level where deep-level thinking is occurring (Laevers, 1994). Moveover, the complexity of children’s dramatic play was not of an adequate level considered to provide an optimal learning experience in the preschool year (Elkonin, 2005; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

In dramatic play, children were found to show preferences of play spaces and objects. These preferences were contingent upon their style of play and were associated with the complexity of their dramatic play behaviour. Styles of play have been discussed previously within the literature with regards to the child’s predisposed cognitive structure to process, acquire and arrange information about the environment (Saracho, 1999; Wolf & Grollman, 1982). Typically, children have been separated into two groups; those who are driven by representational thought and
those who are driven by logical thought. The researcher did not agree that children’s play styles were biologically determined and divergent. Rather, the findings of children’s dramatic play indicated that play styles are dynamic, fluid, and adaptable according to the support provided to children within the classroom environment to develop and exert skills associated with dramatic play.

Within a cultural-historical framework, dramatic play forms the leading activity for children to establish new cognitive processes in the preschool year (Leontiev, 1987). Whilst it is not the only activity of children’s involvement during this period of time, it is the most dominant. The current study suggests that to meet the demands of dramatic play as a leading activity, children need to have well developed social and cognitive functions. These functions specifically include representational skills associated with object substitution and meta-cognitive abilities associated with role play behaviours requiring children to take on the perspectives of others and self-organise their own behaviour to align with the rules of the play episode (Fleer, 2014; Karpov, 2005).

The findings relating to children’s play styles in the current study suggest when the aforementioned functions are not yet developed the child may change their behaviour within the activity of dramatic play to accommodate their individual abilities. This change in behaviour alters the intention of children’s dramatic play behaviour and the source of satisfaction that they achieve from the activity. For instance, in the current study the dramatic play behaviour associated with the play style termed ‘Constructive Players’, was driven by a dependence upon realistic props. The intention of Constructive Players’ dramatic play appeared to be to build scenes, assemble props and narrate occurrences in the play episode from outside the imaginary situation. Their involvement in this type of dramatic play episode where children would project a role onto a toy was measured to be high, indicating they gained satisfaction from this activity. However, if the same children were to be involved in a play episode where they were required to take on a role themselves to play out a scene, their involvement was much lower. In contrast to other play styles where children were more cognitively flexible to substitute objects (an aspect of complex dramatic play), children appeared to gain satisfaction out of enacting a role
themselves. Accordingly, the dramatic play of these children appeared to be socially motivated, rather than motivated by objects around them.

Heedegaard and Fleer (2013) show that a child’s preferences of dramatic play behaviours are constructed by the child’s involvement in their social situation. This includes the values and demands of the community, institution and home. Whilst the current study is unable to report on the values and demands within the community and home, the findings do show that the classroom environment (institution) can have implications upon children’s dramatic play. Specifically, the classroom environment can provide a context that can model the social and cognitive processes that are essential for dramatic play through an enriching physical environment, a flexible curriculum and active involvement from educators in children’s dramatic play. The current study has specifically highlighted the need for educators to create a climate within the classroom that scaffolds the core learning dispositions of creativity, flexibility, problem solving, curiosity and imagination.

Educators within the current study should be familiar with establishing an environment to support the aforementioned learning dispositions as they form a crucial part of the pedagogical practices and learning outcomes of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Within the Australian context, play-based learning forms the foundations of the curriculum in preschool classrooms. The EYLF implemented in 2009 (DEEWR, 2009) advocates for children to be provided with holistic opportunities to learn and develop through child-initiated and adult guided interactions. Dramatic play is subtly positioned as a valued activity within the EYLF, as educators are encouraged to adopt a pedagogical approach that empowers children’s curiosity, problem solving and creativity through imagination.

Despite the significance that the EYLF places on the development of learning dispositions and processes associated with dramatic play, educators in the current study were found to prioritise their interactions in the classroom towards explicitly developing children’s conceptual awareness of maths, literacy or science. Overall, there was little attention given to aspects of social and cognitive abilities relating to representational thought, perspective taking and collaborative interactions. Accordingly, the pedagogical focus of educators in the current study suggest that the
understanding of dramatic play as a tool for teaching and learning appears to becoming lost in a contemporary world where ‘getting ahead’ academically takes precedence (Fleer, 2010; Wood, 2010). The findings of educators’ behaviours in dramatic play indicate that there is a need for educators to develop a greater understanding of how they can use the activity as a tool for learning. This requires the development of strong theoretical understandings of the cognitive and social processes involved in dramatic play episodes.

Similarly, experts in dramatic play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Lu Soo Ai, 2007; Trawick-Smith, 1990) have argued that educators have a role to stimulate and enhance children’s dramatic play skills through the provision of an enriching environment and educator involvement in the activity. To stimulate dramatic play, interventions have been recommended;

We believe that the natural process of child growth and a passive environment are not sufficient to give children the necessary boost...children will not make progress in dramatic play simply by being provided facilities and an encouraging atmosphere (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990, p. 142).

In the current study an issue was raised with these recommended interventions as educators strongly asserted that they do not like to impose upon children’s dramatic play, as it was viewed as the child’s natural way to express themselves and gain social skills. Accordingly, as seen in the findings of other studies (Fleer, 2015; McInnes et al., 2013) many participants favoured a passive role in children’s dramatic play, believing that they were providing children with freedom and flexibility to explore concepts of their world. Interestingly, in undertaking such passive roles, educators of the current study were found to exert more control over children’s dramatic play through increased guidelines and behavioural expectations, which was at times found to impede children’s dramatic play, rather than promote it.

In contrast to many of the views and understandings of several educators in the current study, the most influential roles for children’s involvement in dramatic play were those where the educator acted as a participant in children’s dramatic play. In addition, the role of a facilitator, whereby the educator used subtle prompts through sustained shared thinking to assist children’s organisation of a play episode was also an influential strategy for children’s higher involvement in complex dramatic play. Of particular importance was the educators’ role to assist children to make more
conscious connections with prior learning experiences (e.g., a recent excursion to a hospital) so as to increase the complexity of the situations in their play episodes. This assisted children to conceptualise their role enactments, and to guide children’s engagement in collaborative interactions with one another.

The pedagogy of play presented in Chapter 5 proposes an innovative model to guide pedagogies of play so as to facilitate the development of children’s social and cognitive processes through the role of a participant in play and facilitator in play. The model of play pedagogies supports Fleer’s (2011b) theory that educators can use dramatic play as a pedagogical tool by framing the conceptual formation of everyday and scientific knowledge through interactions that instil imagination and conceptual learning. In contrast to Fleer’s ideas, the model proposed in the current study acknowledges that educators’ role in children’s dramatic play needs to have a dual objective: to guide both children’s learning in how to play, and also their conceptual learning in play. Accordingly, educators will need to have a clear understanding of how to assess and plan for children’s dramatic play. The typology of play styles developed in the current study may offer a useful tool for educators to undertake this process.

The findings of this study indicate that the provisions that educators create for children’s dramatic play within the classroom environment should be contextual to the play styles and preferences of children in the individual centre. This means that educators should be equipped with clear knowledge and skills to respond appropriately to the specific learning needs of children. In the current study, children’s dramatic play was more complex when the classroom environment consisted of:

a) Physical provisions for play that are clearly defined, open and accessible,

b) Flexibility to allow for creativity and imagination to develop,

c) Opportunities to engage in playful dialogue with adults and peers through a process of co-constructed learning, and

d) A positive social and emotional climate.

Within the dimension of the physical environment, the provision of defined play spaces equipped with accessible props was found to have a significant role in supporting children’s involvement in dramatic play. This finding supports the views
held by early childhood educators and researchers of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010) that have similarly acknowledged that the type of objects and play spaces provided within a classroom environment can influence the themes, preferences and complexity of children’s play. Previous research suggests that the physical environment can support children’s involvement in complex dramatic play when there is a goodness of fit between the current skills and interests of the children with the provision of objects and themes (Lu Soo Ai, 2007; Petrakos & Howe, 1996). Educators could be guided towards meeting this goodness of fit through the consideration of children’s play styles. For instance, in the current study, the prevailing play styles of children were influenced by a dependence upon realistic objects. To stimulate and support the involvement of children of the current study in dramatic play a balance between realistic and ambiguous objects is suggested. However, in a classroom environment where children show a greater amount of flexibility in their object substitutions, ambiguous objects may be more appropriate so as to challenge their involvement in the activity.

A further consideration for educators in the design of the physical environment is the play space preferences of children. This study showed that children’s dramatic play was not restricted to the designated dramatic play space, and in fact occurred within multiple classroom play spaces. The children’s specific preferences for play spaces were influenced by their play style. Accordingly, there is a need for educators to ensure that children have opportunities to play dramatically within the wider classroom environment through the provision of ambiguous objects in multiple play spaces. In addition, educators should widen their involvement with children in dramatic play to other play spaces in the classroom. The reason for this is that it was common for educators in the current study to undertake active roles in children’s dramatic play within the dramatic play space only. This is despite the findings showing that dramatic play occurs within multiple spaces of the classroom.

In the current study, the most complex dramatic play behaviour involved children’s cognitive ability to move in and out of an imaginary world to plan, manage, act and reflect on the occurrences happening inside a play episode. In order to facilitate this behaviour, the findings indicate that the classroom environment should provide a flexible and responsive curriculum. Alongside this argument, Chapter 5
conceptualised the importance of a pedagogy of listening (Craft, 2000) and working in unison with the physical environment, to pedagogically frame a classroom environment where the skills and dispositions of dramatic play are actively supported and responded to openly.

Since the introduction of the EYLF, there has been limited research conducted on dramatic play within the Australian context, especially research that has examined both children’s involvement in the activity and the educator’s knowledge, views and behaviours associated with the activity. The findings of the current study offer some new perspectives to the literature that have shown a decline in children’s dramatic play (Bodrova et al., 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Smirnova, 2013). Specifically, the findings relating to educators’ views and knowledge of dramatic play showed that the participants placed limited value on the importance of dramatic play for holistic learning and development. Moreover, educators appeared to have a lack of knowledge relating to the development of critical skills associated with involvement in complex dramatic play. Without this knowledge it is difficult for educators to assess and plan for children’s involvement in dramatic play within the physical and interactional environment, and the curriculum. Accordingly, without the appropriate support from these elements, the children in the current study were in need of greater guidance within the classroom environment to develop complex dramatic play skills.

The current study is innovative in that it examined how educators’ knowledge, views and behaviours influenced the complexity of children’s dramatic play. This has presented a holistic approach, which provides a more comprehensive insight into the current situation occurring within early childhood classrooms. The Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio Dramatic play has provided a useful framework to examine and understand children’s dramatic play. From the findings of children’s play styles, we can understand the current challenges that children are facing in their dramatic play behaviours.

The current study has highlighted that educators have a crucial and much needed role in guiding the development of children’s involvement in complex dramatic play. This study has identified implications for educator pedagogical practice, pre-service training, professional learning programs and future research. Moreover,
suggestions have been made in relation to ways the field of early childhood education can forward in the improvement of pedagogical practice to meet the learning needs of preschool children.
Reference List


Melbourne, Australia, Education 3-13, 43:6, 641-652, DOI:


Stagnitti, K. (2007). The child initiated pretend play assessment (ChIPPA)[kit].


Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). *The effective pre-school and primary education project*. Final report of the longitudinal study funded by the DfES.


Appendix A: HAE Approval Letter

Memorandum

To: Dr Bonnie Yim
School of Education

From: Faculty of Arts & Education Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG)

Date: 14 May, 2013

Subject: HAE-13-026
Children's play: An analysis of children's involvement in dramatic play

Please quote this project number in all future communications.

The application for this project has been considered by the Faculty HEAG under the terms of Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC).

Approval has been given for Ms Natalie Elizabeth Robertson, under the supervision of Dr Bonnie Yim, School of Education, to undertake this project from 14/05/2013 to 14/05/2017.

The approval given by the Faculty HEAG is given only for the project and for the period as stated in the approval. It is your responsibility to contact the Faculty HEAG immediately should any of the following occur:

- Serious or unexpected adverse effects on the participants
- Any proposed changes in the protocol, including extensions of time.
- Any events which might affect the continuing ethical acceptability of the project.
- The project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
- Modifications are requested by other HRECs.

In addition, you will be required to report on the progress of your project at least once every year and at the conclusion of the project. Failure to report as required will result in suspension of your approval to proceed with the project.

The Faculty HEAG and/or DUHREC may need to audit this project as part of the requirements for monitoring set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

Kylie Koukicoulias
HEAG Secretariat
Faculty of Arts and Education
Appendix B: DEECD Approval Letter

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Strategy and Review Group
2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Telephone: +61 3 9631 5000
DX 210883
GPO Box 0397
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

2013_001975

Miss Natalie Robertson
School of Arts and Education
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
BURWOOD 3125

Dear Miss Robertson

Thank you for your application of 19 April 2013 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings titled Children's Involvement in dramatic play: An analysis of play.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals and/or centre directors. This is to be supported by the DEECD approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.

4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.

5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in any publications arising from the research.

6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study’s indicative completion date.

7. If DEECD has commissioned you to undertake this research, the responsible Branch/Division will need to approve any material you provide for publication on the Department’s Research Register.
I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Youla Michaels, Project Support Officer, Research, Evaluation and Analytics Branch, by telephone on (03) 9637 2707 or by email at michaelsvoula.v@edumail.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Signature Redacted by Library

Joyce Cleary
Director
Research, Evaluation and Analytics Branch

47/06/2013

enc
Appendix C: Plain Language Statement and Consent Form

PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

TO: Parents and Legal Guardians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plain Language Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date:</strong> 24/06/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full Project Title:</strong> Children’s involvement in dramatic play: An analysis of Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Principal Researcher:</strong> Dr. Bonnie Yim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Researcher:</strong> Natalie Robertson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your child has been invited to participate in a research project being conducted as part of a PhD thesis. This Plain language statement will detail information of the project to ensure you are able to make an informed decision on whether you would like them to participate. At the end you will be asked to sign a consent form. Please feel free to ask the researcher questions you may have regarding the information provided.

**Purpose**

Play is significant to children’s learning and development making it important to understand the factors which contribute to children having high involvement in the activity. The purpose of this research project is to examine how early childhood classrooms best facilitate children’s dramatic play to foster higher levels of play. Specifically the project will investigate environmental and pedagogical factors influencing children’s active involvement in dramatic play.
Procedures

I am inviting your child’s participation to be involved in observations of the class during moments where children are involved in dramatic play over the period of one to two weeks. This invitation also includes being involved in video observations which will be conducted during times of children’s free play over two days with the aim to collect data on factors contributing to children’s involvement in dramatic play. Two video recorders will be placed in areas (one indoor and one outdoor) of the environment which capture a view of the play environment.

The video observations will be used for the purpose of the research findings; they will not be shown publically in any form. You do have the option of not consenting to the video observation and in this case the researcher will ensure your child’s face is blurred, unless otherwise specified in the consent form. Please note that if the consent form is not returned then your child’s image will be blurred in all footage. There will be audio recording but it is not expected that individual children will be identified.

Potential benefits

Your participation may provide benefits to the professional practice of your child’s educators which may contribute to an enhanced curriculum. This project may contribute new knowledge to that known of quality practice, providing benefits to the broader community.

Privacy and confidentiality

The privacy and confidentiality of participants will be protected through the use of pseudonym. No information regarding organization name, contact details or affiliation with council areas will be disclosed. To comply with Deakin University’s policies and guidelines, all data will be stored securely for five years from the final publication of results in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office. Following this time, the data will be securely disposed of.

Your Participation is Voluntary

Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Deakin University. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any stage. The withdrawal of consent form can be found on page 5. Please note once the data has been analysed it will not be possible to remove the data you have provided, however the data will be anonymous.
Dissemination of results

This research will be published in the form of a PhD thesis. In addition the research will be published in journal articles, book chapters or presented as a conference paper. You can receive a summary of results upon your request.

Further Information

The ethical aspect of this research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Deakin University and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The research is being monitored by the student and three Deakin University researchers whose details can be found below. Please contact one of these researchers if you would like more information.

Student Researcher
Ms Natalie Robertson

Principal Supervisor
Dr. Bonnie Yim

Associate Supervisor
Dr. Louise Paatsch

Associate Supervisor
Dr. Anne-Marie Morrissey

Complaints

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, the way it is being conducted or any questions about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact:

The Manager, Research Integrity, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood Victoria 3125, Telephone: 9251 7129, research-ethics@deakin.edu.au

Please quote project number HAE-13-026
PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

TO: Parents or caregiver

Date: 24/06/13
Full Project Title: Children’s involvement in dramatic play: An analysis of Play
Reference Number: HAE-13-026

I have read and I understand the attached Plain Language Statement.

I give my permission for ........................................................... (name of participant) to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement.

I have been given a copy of Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.

The researcher has agreed not to reveal my identity and personal details or the identity and personal details of the person for whom I am providing consent, including where information about this project is published, or presented in any public form.

I agree that;

1. I DO/ DO NOT give permission for my child to be observed by the researcher
2. I DO/DO NOT give permission for my child to be filmed in video observations
   □ I wish for my child to be removed from all video observations

Participant’s Name (printed) ..............................................................
Name of Person giving Consent (printed) ..............................................
Relationship to Participant: ...............................................................

Signature ................................................................. Date .................
PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

TO: Participants

---

Withdrawal of Consent Form

*(To be used for participants who wish to withdraw from the project)*

Date: 24/06/13

Full Project Title: Children’s involvement in play: An analysis of play

Reference Number: HAE-13-026

---

I hereby wish to WITHDRAW my consent to participate in the above research project and understand that such withdrawal WILL NOT jeopardise my relationship with Deakin University.

Participant’s Name (printed) .................................................................

Signature ......................................................................................... Date .................

---

Please mail or email this form to:

Natalie Robertson
Deakin University, School of Education
221 Burwood Hwy,
Burwood
Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Beliefs of Children’s Play and Learning

1. Please describe what the term ‘play’ means to you?
2. What do you believe ‘learning’ looks like?
3. Please discuss the context (or learning experiences) where you believe children experience effective learning
4. Please discuss the extent to which you agree that dramatic play to be the most important activity for children’s development in the year before school.

Background, knowledge and perspectives

5. Please discuss your personal philosophy towards children’s learning
6. How does your knowledge and experiences of child development influence your teaching practice?
7. Please describe your experiences of being involved in children’s dramatic play
8. Please describe the areas of the classroom you see dramatic play to most occur.

Practice

9. Please discuss the purpose/s you become involved in children’s dramatic play?
10. Please describe the roles you take when involved in children’s dramatic play?
11. How often do you provide, update or change dramatic play areas of the classroom environment?
12. How often do you use dramatic play as an intentional teaching opportunity?
13. In comparison to other curriculum areas, how much value does dramatic play have in your program?
### Physical Space Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service 1</th>
<th>Service 2</th>
<th>Service 3</th>
<th>Service 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearly defined play spaces Areas for small and large group play Passive and active areas are not separated Naturally defined play spaces Areas for small and large group play Passive and active areas are not separated Clearly defined play spaces Areas for small and large group play Passive and active areas are not separated Clearly defined play spaces Areas for small and large group play Passive and active areas are not separated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor Space Design</td>
<td>Outdoor Space Design</td>
<td>Art and cognitive materials activities</td>
<td>Pro-scenario structured and non-structured materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-set structured activities</td>
<td>No pre-set activities</td>
<td>Including water play and play dough</td>
<td>Art and cognitive materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-scenario structured activities</td>
<td>No pre-set structured activities</td>
<td>Construction and book reading</td>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Area (4-5 children)</td>
<td>Pro-scenario structured activities</td>
<td>Manipulative play/arts and craft materials</td>
<td>Arrangement for play outdoors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active play was permitted</td>
<td>Active play was permitted</td>
<td>Active play was permitted</td>
<td>Active play was permitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abundance of props</td>
<td>numerous pre-set play spaces</td>
<td>Numerous pre-set play spaces</td>
<td>Medium area and realistic props</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium area and realistic props</td>
<td>Limited props</td>
<td>Limited props</td>
<td>Abundance of props</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix E: Physical space design and props**
**List of props**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Table area</th>
<th>Block area</th>
<th>Dramatic area</th>
<th>Playground</th>
<th>Sandpit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Realistic</td>
<td>Cars, car mat, animal and people figurines.</td>
<td>Non-working computer, phone, dress ups, hand bags, dolls, oven, sink, plastic food, cooking utensils, gloves, medical tray, hairnet, face mask, bandages, sling, vacuum, stethoscope, knee hammer, ear light, thermometer, surgical knife, scissors, scales, needle, dolls bed. Animal figurines and money.</td>
<td>Dinosaur figurines, dolls house with dolls, large trucks, cubby house with an oven and cooking pans, bikes and scooters</td>
<td>Spades, buckets, trucks, cooking utensils</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Art materials including sticky tape, glue, scissors, paper. Nature table with rocks, coloured gems and tree branches</td>
<td>Different shaped and sized blocks, magnetic blocks, mobilo, fabric pieces, small manipulative blocks, tree branches</td>
<td>Rocks and grass clumps</td>
<td>Duplo, climbing frames</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Realistic</td>
<td>Cars, car mat, figurines (dinosaurs, animals), stethoscopes.</td>
<td>Oven, sink, cupboards, plastic food, cooking utensils, plates, cups, basket.</td>
<td>Dolls, cubby house with an oven, bikes and scooters, handbags, toy car ramp.</td>
<td>Spades, buckets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Art materials including sticky tape, glue, scissors,</td>
<td>Different shaped and sized blocks, magnetic blocks, small manipulative blocks, ice cream sticks</td>
<td>Large cushion blocks, blanket</td>
<td>Small plastic blocks, climbing frames</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Art materials including sticky tape, glue, scissors, paper, paint, small boxes</td>
<td>Different shaped and sized blocks, magnetic blocks, small manipulative blocks, Lego.</td>
<td>Shadow puppet board, Torch</td>
<td>Climbing frames, hula hoops, various sticks and seeds, pebbles, small blocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>Tea party with small cups, saucers, plates, cakes, utensils Puppet theatre with puppets</td>
<td>Cars, figurines (dinosaurs, animals), model volcano, mechanic themed duplo</td>
<td>Mobile phones, dress ups, hand bags, dolls, oven, sink, plastic food, cooking utensils, ironing board, iron, vacuum, table. Dolls house with figurines and furniture Cash register, scanner, postal boxes, post box, paper, pens, envelopes</td>
<td>Cubby house with an oven and cooking utensils, plastic food, rugs. Jumping frog toys, plastic animal, dinosaurs, shovel, construction worker costumes, road signs, wheelies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spades, buckets, cooking utensils, trucks, oven, stove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Art materials including sticky tape, glue, scissors, paper, paint, small boxes</td>
<td>Different shaped and sized blocks, Cogs and wheels, small manipulative blocks, lego.</td>
<td>Climbing frames, various sticks and seeds, pebbles, small blocks, logs</td>
<td>Sticks, logs, pipes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>