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Development of Authoring and Agency in Early Childhood Through Play

Pi-Chun Grace Ho

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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DEVELOPMENT OF AUTHORING AND AGENCY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

THROUGH PLAY

by

PI-CHUN GRACE HO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2017
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Anna Stetsenko, Ph.D

______________________________

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Richard Bodnar, Ph.D.

______________________________

Date

Executive Officer

Bruce Homer, Ph.D.

______________________________

Konstantinos Alexakos, Ph.D.

______________________________

Ana Marjanovic-Shane, Ph.D.

______________________________

Beth Ferholt, Ph.D.

______________________________

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

DEVELOPMENT OF AUTHORING AND AGENCY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD THROUGH PLAY

by

Pi-Chun Grace Ho

Advisor: Professor Anna Stetsenko

The recent national focus on universal early childhood education programs has drawn attention to the challenges of organizing learning contexts and practices in which children can thrive as learners and community members. Preparing children for school and improving the quality of early childhood education face limits, however, when the role of play is dismissed or reduced to merely instrumental activity. Framed in Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory, Bakhtin’s dialogic approach, and Stetsenko’s transformative activist stance, I reframe play as a process of authoring that fuels children’s passion for being agentive actors in the world and their own lives. This approach addresses how children are positioning themselves in trying out different play roles in the world they themselves co-create with others. This process entails the initiation of intentions, agency, and the negotiation of differences, all cumulating in a stance children take in co-authoring their lives and their worlds.

This qualitative study was conducted in a naturalistic setting where dimensions of interaction, authoring processes, and positionality were observed and analyzed through an ethnographic lens focused on authoring themes. Data included naturalistic observations, field
notes and video-recordings with 14 children ages 3 to 5 engaging in extended episodes of free-play time over a twelve-week period.

Four themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data: (1) *initiating/setting intention* in which children began a play scenario and showed the desire and intention to pursue a play role; (2) *negotiating/making decision* in which children constructed boundaries and negotiated their stance and space with others, that is, how children began to differentiate self-other relationships; (3) *acknowledging/showing attention* in which children established a standpoint and position collaboratively yet from an individually unique stance; (4) *claiming/exercising authority* in which children showed an active dialogic understanding of a shared goal, and exercised authority by claiming a space or position. The patterns of interaction among these four themes reveal the complex journey children take in the process of authoring their identity.

This study suggests that play creates the space of authoring in which children can exercise agency in co-creating their world and themselves, where they can re-experience and negotiate their possible selves within possible worlds in relation to others. This research contributes to both theoretical and educational re-conceptualizations of play as an important developmental portal through which children develop agency.
Acknowledgements

This is a journey of self-transformation toward a doctoral degree, and that I couldn’t have done this without all the support, encouragement, and collaboration. There are so many people who enriched and supported my doctoral work in meaningful ways. I give you all my deepest and most eternal thanks.

I am deeply and forever grateful to my advisor, Dr. Anna Stetsenko, for your constant encouragement, strong support, patience, and incredible guidance throughout my doctoral studies – you have been a source of continual inspiration to me as a caring mentor and an outstanding and passionate scholar, your constant reassurance helped me to believe in myself and to be who I am today.

I am also grateful to my committee members, Dr. Bruce Homer, Dr. Konstantinos Alexakos, Dr. Ana Marjanovic-Shane, and Dr. Beth Ferholt. I am very fortunate to have had an opportunity to work with you. Thank you for your valuable time, insightful suggestions, and contributions to the direction and richness on this dissertation.

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I appreciate my friends, colleagues, and staff in academia who have supported and offered me tremendous support in many ways. Special thanks to Jude Kubran for always being there to
give me guidance during happy and hard moments—your support, generous care, and friendship means a lot to me. I would also like to express my gratitude and appreciation to my friends, Martita Goshen, Sheila Lamb, Marie Aguirre, Dolores Buonasora, Liang Lin, and Robert Sauté, for your support, help, and encouragement throughout this process.

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Thank you all for sharing this amazing journey with me. The joy is truly in the becoming…
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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

“Pretend you are the children who are playing,” she said. “What are you trying to accomplish and what stands in your way? Act out what you’ve seen and fill in the blanks. Remind yourselves of what it was like to be a child.”

(Vivian Paley, 2004, p.2)

Consider a moment as a child would—have you ever played like a child? Have you ever recognized a child’s passionate attachment to fantasy and imagination in their play world? Play is a complex, universal and contextual activity (Göncü, 1999). Play is the essence of life. But what play is, and why do children play and with so much enthusiasm?

The efforts to understand children’s play holds a central place within the field of psychology and early childhood education. However, how play is defined according to many different theoretical frameworks and assumptions of the researcher. For example, some empirical studies suggest that play is culturally situated (Göncü & Gaskins, 2006; Pellegrini 2011) and historically constructed (Elkonin, 2005). From a cultural-historical perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the developmental significance of children’s play by defining play as the “leading activity.” Fleer (2013, p. 74) further noted that “a cultural-historical definition of play foregrounds the child’s creation of an imaginary situation where children give new meaning to the everyday objects and actions in their world.” In extending the work of Vygotsky, Leont’ev emphasized imaginative play as a leading activity for it allows children to “appropriate from a given imagined situation in question as well as enabling children to rehearse adult roles in which they must engage in the future” (Göncü, Tuerman, Jain, & Johnson, 1999, p. 155).
I personally have had a great interest in and an opportunity to work with young children for years. I have been fascinated by observing how children spend countless hours at play, but never tiring of pretending, imaging, fantasizing, and creating. “Let’s pretend” is always a strong statement to draw my attention to discover how children can construct self-initiated play when opportunity comes. Children master various forms of play, especially in its dramatic and fantasy forms; play represents a quintessential expression of what is a uniquely human world of possibility and agency. In this study, I focused on play as situated in each individual’s contexts and experiences. I acknowledge that the definition of play is always in the making – it is non-instrumental yet liberating, and it is situated in the constantly changing contexts. Furthermore, there is a need to address that “play belongs to a continuum of human life understood as one unified and uninterrupted process of striving, developing, and becoming” (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015, p. 223), so that it helps us to understand children’s play at a deeper level and why children do this so passionately as they engage in play.

*Why play matters?*

We all live in the same world but view it through different lenses, taking various perspectives on what is going on around us. How do young children put things into perspectives and develop a subjective (or ‘partisan’) view of reality and their world? What, if any, role does play have in this processes and why does it matter for children? In play, children do simple things; but complex dynamic layers reside within this activity. Through play, children take the world as it is and discover the world of “as if” and “beyond.” It gives children an awareness of their capacity, potential and possibility, where they initiate and co-create action and meaning, negotiate responsibility, and enact authority.
Play is a leading activity and a major milestone of early childhood that continues to attract the attention of researchers working across multiple fields of inquiry, for example, from psychology and pedagogy to literacy and educational practices. Its role and specific functions, however, are far from fully explained. They continue to be debated from various theoretical standpoints. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in exploring broad issues related to the topic of play, narratives, and creativity. Specifically, studies in the last decade have addressed the relationship between children’s play and narrative in the process of development, especially in the domains of cognition, language, and social competence (e.g., Nicolopoulou, 2006; Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2006; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). In addition, there is a growing body of narrative research involving young children’s literacy development (Nicolopoulou, 2005; Stadler & Ward, 2005; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). There have been, however, relatively few attempts to explore how children’s narrative and play relate to creativity (Faulkner & Coates, 2011; Sawyer, 2009, 2011). Thus, there is a need to build on theories of play and related topics in psychology and other fields in order to understand play’s creative and dynamic dimensions. In addition, explorations into play can benefit from broad inquiries into the deepest questions about the human condition and nature including what makes us human, what roles we play in the world, and what our world is all about (cf. Stetsenko & Ho, 2015).

For children, play is not just for fun; instead, play expands and informs who children are, how they develop and express themselves, and what they desire to be and become. Children’s play, according to Vygotsky, starts with social interaction and is also associated with their creativity and divergent thinking through dialectically interrelated processes (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Yet we live in a time that demands conformity and standardization education,
and as a result, young children face a gradual loss of opportunities to play. Play requires further elaboration especially within the present sociopolitical landscape of increasing standardization, high stake testing extended to ever younger ages, and centralization of outcome-based curricula, even in early childhood education. These developments marginalize play along with art education and other types of activities which policy makers consider unnecessary “luxuries” that can be neglected especially during difficult economic times that require austerity measures. Within this socio-political climate, play has been largely marginalized, resulting in limited opportunities for young children to develop and learn in multiple ways—beyond only cognitive and computational—and at various levels that are constitutive of human development (e.g., Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Meier, Engel, & Taylor, 2010; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015).

What if?

What if? The question itself opens up the capacity for wishful and creative thinking—namely, imagination. What if children’s imagination is fundamental to play? What if children’s play starts with telling stories as a deep level of a shared activity? Imagination “allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (Greene, 1995, p. 3); it enables children to access “what ifs” and allows them to enter a dialogue of meaningful and purposeful creation. Such a dialogue is the ultimate source of creativity. Play is not merely a mundane activity; it is a realization of imagination and an expansion of real life beyond what is given. In play, children are in charge of creating microcosm of the world, and their own landscapes or fields of shared activity. It is in those microcosms that they learn to exercise agency by participating in social practices as co-authors and co-creators of reality. It is essential to stress that, from the social-cultural activity theory, agency is a culturally and socially
distributed process, that is, it is an intersubjective, socially, and historically changing and contradictory process of development through participation in the human community (Ranio, 2010). The concept of agency is also closely related to perspective and position exchange (Martin & Gillespie, 2013). Therefore, agency and society are always in a dynamic interplay and bi-directionally related in the sense that “people are created by the social conditions of their life at the same time as they also actively create and shape these conditions” (Stetsenko, 2007a, p. 110). Furthermore, we as human beings not only enter social practices but make a difference in them, thus “gradually coming to co-author these practices in becoming agentive actors in their enactments and transformations”; and more specifically, “these collaborative social practices are realized through unique activist contributions by individual agents acting from their own irreplaceable positions and stances” (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015, p. 227). This conceptualization also resonates in some way to the application of Bakhtin’s dialogic thinking, according to which “without others, subjectivity is limited.” As White (2016, p. 23) further explained, “We always have the opportunity to exercise agency through relationships with others since diverse ways of thinking and doing can be revealed in ways that alter the way we are thought of by others, and perhaps even ourselves.”

Play is profoundly social. What children do in play is to converse, communicate, express, imagine and exercise relational positions and unique agentive stances within purposeful play-world scenarios. Play provides children with spaces and tools to make choices and create alternatives to what is “given” in the present. Interaction and collaboration are the sources of children’s play, but challenges and contradictions are its inherent components. The question to tap into is how to capture more deeply the opportunities children have, through play, to learn to be agentive rather than passive, that is, to learn to initiate possibilities, negotiate differences,
acknowledge struggles, and exercise agency. This is the starting point to rethinking how to value children’s play and create a vision of a personal becoming through play. Arguably, the essence of play is that children are free to explore their world and their own potential, to learn how to be themselves in their own, individually unique ways.

Play affords children to create their own pathway of becoming, but what is becoming? In my view, it is an open process of creative expression that anticipates uncertainty and transforms potentiality. Becoming entails a unique positioning in time and space, constantly unfolding and evolving. It is about change. In relating to dialogism assumption, Holquist (1990) noted,

…behavior is constituted by actions, and further that these can be known only by the change they enact in space and time. Human being is a deed in the sense that our lives are shaped by constant choices, each of which has consequence. Choice is an act in so far as it effects a change between what is and what was, and thus the act is simultaneous with the difference that defines it. (p. 154)

The point I would like to stress is that becoming itself is creativity. The process of children becoming agentive actors is a highly complex endeavor involving many facets and dimensions including authoring. Authoring is the ability not only to respond but also to create and initiate activities, to carry out actions on one’s terms, perspectives and stances, to take into account consequences, make choices and instantiate changes beyond what is and what has been, stretching into what can be.

In acknowledging continuities between play and all human creative strivings, and by extension between childhood and the totality of human life throughout its span, I have been inspired by Vygotsky’s position that creativity is inherent at all stages of life in all of its expressions. It is also consonant with Bakhtin’s notion of becoming as “postuplenie” (for a more
detailed discussion, see chapter 3). The notion of “postuplenie” refers to a “ceaseless and open-ended quest for humanness that all people embark on and pursue throughout their lives. This process begins in childhood and draws on a vast repertoire of tools including play, with its hallmark features such as imagination and the ability to create novelty, transcend the given, and project into the future” (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015, p. 223).

By addressing the current challenges of organizing learning contexts and educational practices in ways that would support all the complex dimensions of children’s development, this study brings together a conceptual synthesis in a framework that integrates a cultural-historical theory, dialogic approach, and transformative activist stance for understanding and valuing young children’s play as a process of authoring. Figure 1 shows a combination of the three dimensions of this theoretical framework to explore the concept of play as authoring which represents an interconnectedness of three stances—developmental, authorial, and transformative activist stances. I consider how the aspects in the process of being-doing-becoming are simultaneously merged within these three stances, and further discuss the conceptualization of time-space-choice as constructed in line with these broad premises. This framework illuminates the broader dynamics of human existence in ways that are applicable to studying play not only on the functional level but also in drawing the attention to the expressive level to explore the individual freedom and relationality in play. Table 1 illustrates the elements of each stance that serves as a foundation to conceptualize the theoretical framework in this study.
Figure 1
A Three Dimensional Construction of Play as Authoring Theoretical Framework
Table 1

Elements of the three dimensional stances

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<th>Transformative Activist Stance</th>
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<td>Theme</td>
<td>Social interaction</td>
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<td>Social contribution</td>
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<td>In-process</td>
<td>In-relation</td>
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<td>Ethical</td>
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<td>Doing</td>
<td>Co-being</td>
<td>Becoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation</td>
<td>Outside—in</td>
<td>In-between</td>
<td>Synchronicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Cultural tools</td>
<td>Voices</td>
<td>Choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pathway</td>
<td>Vertical</td>
<td>Horizontal</td>
<td>Transversal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Progression</td>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>Decision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>Open-endedness</td>
<td>Interconnectedness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distributed field</td>
<td>Shared activity</td>
<td>Time—space</td>
<td>Self—world</td>
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<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Co-participation</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
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This dissertation consists of four parts. The first is a general overview of socio-cultural theory and cultural mediation in relation to children’s play and development. It is followed by a discussion of the transformative activist stance, which grounds how I see children’s play as a transformative becoming that embraces evolving collaborative participation and acknowledges individual contributions. In the second part, I address Bakhtinian dialogic approach to authorship and discuss how authoring is initiated and activated in play. The third part merges insights from Vygotsky and Bakhtin in the transformative activist stance to elaborate the play-as-authoring framework. The last part presents a qualitative study that I conducted in a naturalistic setting with a group of 3-to-5-year old where I observed and analyzed dimensions of interaction, authoring processes, positionality through an ethnographic lens focusing on authoring themes defined within a three dimensional theoretical framework.
CHAPTER TWO
Play in Cultural-Historical Theory

“In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior. In play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.”

(Vygotsky, 1978, p.102)

2.1 What is Play for?

What is play and what is it for? Why is play so important and essential for young children? There has been an extensive research focus on exploring and expanding on Vygotsky’s claim that play is leading activity during the preschool period, with this activity serving as major source that leads overall development (e.g., Duncan & Tarulli, 2003; Göncü, Tuemer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999; Nicolopoulou, 1993, 1996). It is widely acknowledged that play is the central force in the development of young children. Vygotsky’s words in the opening quote answer the fundamental question, “What is the essence of play for young children?” In play, children rise above their average level and stretch themselves beyond their everyday realities to confront experience with imaginary situations. This standpoint relates to one of the most widely discussed concepts in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory— the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), which generally refers to the distance between actual and potential developmental level as determined through the novice-expert relationship. The most often acknowledged definition of ZPD by Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) is in the following passage:

It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.
This means that the ZPD reflects levels of potentials, and awakens a variety of possibilities in the internal developmental process, which takes place when the child initiates an interaction and collaborates with adults or peers. Based on these insights, ZPD characterizes developmental potential in children’s play as a relational and complex activity and also creates a dynamic process of personal development across various collaborative situations and imaginative spheres. Moreover, Vygotsky (1966, 1978) reminds us of the developmental tendencies in play and notes that “play also creates the zone of proximal development of the child.” From this standpoint, Ferholt and Lecusay (2010) further suggest that, “a child’s world is as ‘real’ as our own, and play is the activity that creates a zone of proximal development” (p. 59). This expression refers to the hidden landscape of a “‘real world’ that children make sense of and create through play.

Similarly, as Holzman (2010) noted, “through acting out roles (play acting), children try out the roles they will soon take on in ‘real life’” (p. 37). These insights relate to a fundamental question that needs to be addressed—what are the sources of play in relation to children’s development? And how do children make sense of their “real world” through play?

### 2.1.1 Social Sources of Development

According to Vygotsky, the primacy of social interaction and socio-historical processes in human development needs to be emphasized. He points that development is strongly related to interaction with others and the environment. In particular, what Vygotsky suggests about the role of environment is that it needs to be understood as “the source of development”, not as a “setting” (Bredikyte, 2011). Vygotsky describes that children’s development occurs only when they internalize the tools made available to them through social interactions. That is, through social activities, children learn to use cultural tools and social inventions. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: First, on the social
level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (p. 57). This is a powerful claim that explains the dynamic of interdependence and interconnectedness of social and individual process. In other words, development begins at the social level and moves towards individual level through the process of internalization, and it is a fluid and constantly changing process, dynamically taking place in between the two spaces—external and internal. More specifically, Vygotsky’s concept of development as highlighted by John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) is “the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes. In this way he rejected the Cartesian dichotomy between the internal and the external” (p. 192). In this sense, we understand that development is about change; however, not every change could be regarded as development; that is, in my view, development is about change with goals and purpose. Moreover, that Vygotsky (1987) placed action and activity at the center of development is also evident in his “general law” of development referring to:

…the transition from inter-psychological functions to intra-psychological ones, that is, from forms of social, collective activity of the child to his individual functions. This transition is a general law, for the development of all higher psychological functions, which arise first as forms of activity in collaboration and only later are transferred by the child into the sphere of her own psychological forms of activity. (p. 259)

From this point of view, development is a relational process which encompasses mutual transformations and transitions of elements and dimensions of psychological processes. The following statement explains the term that is essential to Vygotsky’s analysis:
We shall place this transition from a social influence outside the individual to a social influence within the individual at the center of our research and try to elucidate the most important moments from which it arises. (cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 61)

Furthermore, Vygotsky’s framework emphasizes that development and the modes of thinking are situated in cultural contexts and other social activities rather than inside organisms; that is, a constant dialogue and relation with the world is central to development. Importantly, Vygotsky addresses how individuals’ social and psychological processes are fundamentally based on the ability to use and master psychological tools which mediate our thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, as well as language in which is the crucial one. In his approach, psychological tools represent a powerful capacity to transform mental functioning. Wertsch (1985) points out the feature of psychological tools in relation to Vygotsky’s analysis of mental processes: “He viewed development not as a steady stream of quantitative increments but in terms of fundamental qualitative transformations or ‘revolutions’ associated with changes in the psychological tools” (p. 79). It is also important to note that psychological tools develop within the diverse cultural and historical contexts. As Stetsenko (2004) elaborated the concept of tools and signs,

Because complex cultural signs embody experiences and skills of previous generations, learning to use them brings a dimension of social history and culture into each individual’s development. This emerging capacity to use tools and signs, according to Vygotsky, gradually allows humans—in their history as a biological species (phylogeny), as a civilization (social history), and as individuals (ontogeny) – to leap from the constraints of the natural environment, defined by the laws of biological evolution and stimulus-response modes of behavior, into the realm of cultural-historical development with its infinite degrees of freedom. (p. 507)
Moreover, in terms of the “higher psychological functions,” Nicolopoulou (1993) explains that in the Vygotskian theory, culture plays a crucial role associated with its transmission through social interaction and communication; that is, “Vygosky emphasizes that children do not develop in isolation, but rather within a social matrix—more precisely, a set of matrices” (p. 8). Nicolopoulou explains the meaning of social matrix in the following passage:

These matrices are formed by the interconnection of two key elements—on the one hand, systems of social relationship and interactions shaped by the social organization of the society as a whole and organizing of its particular institutions (e.g., the family, school, market) and, on the other hand, collectively elaborated conceptual and symbolic systems that are the cultural heritage of the society. The resources embodied in culture include not only specific pieces of information but also cognitive structures. (ibid.)

This analysis also informs the perspective that children’s development starts within social interaction with others as a process of socialization into the dialogue and co-creation of the existing systems of meaning in culture (Bredikyte, 2011; Göncü, 1999).

2.1.2 Cultural Tools & Mediation

Vygotsky’s notion of cultural tools and mediation are essential to unravel the various layers of individual’s development of knowing and being. It is important to stress that cultural tools provide the necessary link between socio-cultural setting and mental functioning and play an essential role in “shaping actions” (Wertsch, 1995, p. 90). Specifically, cultural tools enable us to embody our everyday experiences and mediate an active process of relating to the world; this mediation allows us to make connections and make meanings within these collective experiences. In other words, the assumption of the relation between individuals and cultural tools is based on the understanding that action, means, and goals are interconnected; in this sense, cultural tools
such as language, stories and narratives by themselves do not determine action but rather mediate the actions and the psychological process ensuing from actions. As Wertsch (1985) noted, “we can expect such processes to be indirectly shaped by forces that originate in the dynamic of communication” (p. 81). The use of cultural tools also links a dimension of social history into children’s development. As further suggested by Stetsenko (2004),

Cultural tools allow people to embody their collective experiences (e.g., skills, knowledge, beliefs) in external forms such as material objects (e.g., words, pictures, books, houses), patterns of behavior organized in space and time (e.g., rituals), and modes of acting, thinking, and communicating in everyday life. Such external (or reified) forms that embody collective social knowledge and experience constitute a unique dimension of existence—human culture, into which each child is born and which he or she has to acquire in order to participate in social life. (p. 505)

Furthermore, the concept of tools and signs, as well as the notion of mediation have profound implications in the field of children’s learning and development. For example, Vygotsky formulated a practical paradigm of education for children with special needs (i.e., deaf-and blind children, handicapped children), and he believed, for example, as Stetsenko mentioned, “when provided with adequate meditational (i.e., sign-based) support from adults in organizing their activities in life setting, all children can progress to the highest levels of functioning to become fully competent members of society” (ibid., p. 510).

In elaborating the notion of cultural mediation, Cole and Wertsch (1996) stressed that “higher psychological functions are transactions that include the biological individual, the cultural meditational artifacts, and the culturally structured social and natural environments of which person are a part” (p. 253). This point of view actually defines the texture of human mind
which is re-located into the space “out of the head,” instead of conceiving it as developing from the pre-programmed genetic blueprints— it is distributed among the collective and individual activities, and can be highlighted as a complex dynamic process. With this viewpoint, it is clear that the mind develops as a process through which people constantly reenact and engage their interactions with others through participation in dynamic collaborative activities, including through the use of cultural artifacts that make our mental process more efficient and connected.

2.1.3 Play as a Leading Activity

Vygotsky (1933/1966) identified play as the “leading source of development in preschool years” that also creates the zone of proximal development. He further suggests that, through the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Actions in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be considered a leading activity that determines the child’s development. (1978, pp. 102-103)

In the above statement, there are three notable insights for discussion. First, Vygotsky claimed that play is a leading activity during the preschool period, which is the most profound type of activity during this phase of child’s socio-psychological development; in other words, this activity is the major source that leads development (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003; Göncü et al., 1999; Nicolopoulou, 1993). The notion of leading activity was further developed and elaborated by Leont’ev and Elkonin who identified the essence of leading activity with the uniqueness of activity itself that brings about the qualitative changes as most central to the specific

…it is in connection with whose development the most important changes take place in the child’s psyche and within which psychic processes develop that pave the way for the child’s transition to a new, higher level of development. (p. 272)

According to Göncü, Tuemer, Jain, and Johnson (1999), both Vygotsky and Leont’ev believed that children engage in play to “fulfill the tendencies that they normally cannot do in real life” (p. 155). In advancing this perspective, they further noted that Leont’ev posits activity as a unit of life in which children constantly engage to satisfy a need; specifically, this is a need that children try to pretend like adults—that is, the need to act. Meanwhile, this need for children also encourages them to “explore how a real-life action becomes an operation of children’s play, leading to the development of abstract thinking and humor” (ibid., p. 167).

Based in the insight about *real-life* action, this point connects back to my question in the beginning of this chapter—how do children make sense of their real-world through play? I would like to further advance the idea of *real-life act* itself as a transformative practice—namely, a transformation. Along with this premise, I also argue that children engage in play mainly not only to fulfill what they are incapable of doing in real-life, or their desire to acquire adult actions, but it is a way in which they make sense of the world. As Vygotsky (1967) recognized, when children play, their attention is more on the meaning of things and events in imagined worlds rather than on actual objects, illuminating complex relationships between realistic thinking, imagination, and creativity. Gillen (2007) further draws on Vygotsky’s idea that in play,

…each step in the child’s achievement of a more profound penetration of reality is linked with a continued liberation from earlier, more primitive forms of cognition. A more
profound penetration of reality demands that consciousness attain a freer relationship to the elements of that reality, that consciousness depart from the external and apparent aspect of reality that is given directly in perception. (p. 349)

Following Vygotsky’s conceptualization, Edmiston (2010) argues that the ratio of action to meaning is inverted in play, as in the arts, so that social spaces are created that are “imagined-and-real.” Thus, in these spaces, the physical space is transformed into places where children can have “lived imagined-and-real experiences of, for example, violent aggression, bravery, kindness and deliberation” (ibid., p. 203).

Furthermore, it may be helpful to consider children’s socio-psychological development in play as a developmental process of exploring who they are and who they are yet to be. In my view, it is helpful to relate Leont’ev’s idea of “leading activity” to the notion of “self” along the lines of how Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004a) elaborated and expanded upon Leont’ev’s approach in their notion of the self as a leading activity. They argued that the self can be regarded as a process which connects each individual to the social world in a recognition that the self represents “a moment in ongoing social activities that is not stored somewhere in the depth of a human soul, but is constantly re-enacted and constructed by individuals anew in the ever-shifting balances of life” (ibid., p. 493). This new conceptualization conveys three meaningful points. First, the self can be considered as an activity that leads the transformation of the world. These authors further suggested that “the self appears as made up of real-life processes and as oriented toward real-life practical tasks and pursuits of changing something in and about the world (including in oneself as part of the world)” (ibid., p. 494). Second, the idea of the self as a leading activity is grounded in the notion of doing rather than owning a self. This is also a realization of each individual’s uniqueness, through the persons becoming aware and realizing
their contributions through their very engagement in social transformation enacted in their doing.
Third, it captures the idea that “the self is not separate from other activities that individuals conduct and engage in, but instead is inherent in the totality of a person’s life” (p. 496).

This explicit elaboration and re-conceptualization of the self as a leading activity in terms of the purposeful relational approach awakens the self from just being engaged in a socio-cultural activity into the embodiment of acting, doing, and positioning as a leading activity, and further contributing to a joint activity. In this sense, this notion conveys that children’s play is a purposeful leading activity, through which children themselves are actively engaging in and contributing to collaborative change within their socio-cultural context. This approach seems to go beyond the gap of focusing on the dynamic process between social and individual to integrate the dimensions of intentionality on both intersubjectivity and intrasubjectivity levels within the dynamic flux of socio-cultural practice—namely, the transformative embodied self enacted through and in the activity. At the same time, this activity is socially rooted but also deeply individual. Elaborating on this view, I suggest to focus on the essence of play as a leading activity, using Stetsenko & Arievitch’s (2004a) words—as a meaningful life project. This connects to how I view play as an embodiment of real-life acts, a transformative leading activity.

Second, the perspective of desires and motives is important to be addressed. Play leads to an activation of motives and a fulfillment of desires. Vygotsky (1933/1966) refused to define play on the basis of the pleasure principle; rather, play appears as connected to the motives of children to shift toward the realization of unrealizable personal desires through imagination and the use of fantasy (e.g., John-Steiner, Connery, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010; Nicolopoulou, 1993). As Vygotsky (1978) asserted, play provides children with a new form of desires. In particular, at the preschool age, he noted, “a great many unrealizable tendencies and desires emerge;” he
believed that “if needs that could not be realized immediately did not develop during the school years, there would be no play, because play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies” (p. 93). It is because of these unfulfilled tendencies in real life that children have the need to act on what they desire through imagination. Leont’ev extended the line of this thought and suggests that these desires are as a result of children’s wish to act like adults or do things by themselves (Göncü et al., 1999; Nicolopoulou, 1993). By recognizing the wish to act, there is the motivation that makes play activity so unique. As Göncü, Tuemer, Jain, and Johnson (1999) cited Leont’ev’s original writing: “…by activities we mean processes that are psychologically characterized by what the process as a whole is directed to (its object) always coinciding with the objective that stimulates the subject to this activity, i.e., the motive” (p. 154). In addition, Leont’ev posits that “each activity has an existence of its own, involving a subject, an object, and a motive. Variations across activities in any of these components lead to variations in the appropriation of skills specific to each activity” (ibid.). Therefore, it appears that Leont’ev’s approach is very dynamic in capturing play as a relational and ever changing and shifting process with the continuous flow of motives and goals.

Third, knowing that play leads children’s development, Vygotsky reminds us that in play activity, children act as if they are a head taller than themselves. He described that “the zone of proximal development permits us to delineate the child’s immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing” (1978, p. 87). This notion conveys the developmental potential and dynamic becoming. To understand Vygotsky’s conceptualization related to the existence of the zone of proximal development, the role of imitation and maturation needs to be considered. In Vygotsky’s own words, “Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well
beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults” (ibid., p. 88). The concept of imitation may cause some misunderstanding at certain level as a limitation, at least in my view. However, Chaiklin (2003), in a review of Vygotsky’s analysis of ZPD, explained that “imitation is not a mindless copying of actions” (p. 51), and further clarified that the term imitation refers to “situations in which a child is able to engage in interaction with more competent others around specific tasks that the child would otherwise not be able to perform alone, because of the presence of maturing psychological functions” (p. 52). This elaboration informs a new awareness of taking social-relational perspective into account. In addition, perhaps beyond each imitation, there is a new creation. In further relating ZPD to children’s play, as Duncan and Tarulli (2003) offered a following comment,

When the child is engaged in play, the social contextual and situational supports integral to the activity enable the child to act in ways that are beyond the actual developmental level, the lower boundary of the children’s zone of proximal development, carrying out actions which are in advance of his or her everyday real-life actions. These are actions corresponding to the child’s potential developmental level, the upper boundary of the zone of proximal development. The context of play activity, then, draws the child into the zone of proximal development. (p. 277)

Overall, both Vygotsky’s and Leont’ev’s conceptualizations of play suggest many significant implications for preschool-age child’s learning and development, especially in their focus on play as leading activity for preschoolers (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003; see also Göncü et al., 1999). Based on above discussion and insights, I argue that an important task in studying and understanding play is not only seeking to explore how children come to be who they are, but to
discover how they can become, through play, what they are not yet. In this way, especially by considering play in connecting to the ZPD, it is possible to inform this potentiality and activate the freedom of going beyond the capacity of imitation and perhaps, transforming the limitations into new possibilities through active creation. Again, play is participation, communication, imagination, and a purposeful activity that affords each child’s unique development.

2.1.4 Imaginary Situation, Rules, and Meaning

Notably, Vygotsky (1933/1966) remarks on two essential characteristics of play: imaginary situations and rules. In Vygotsky’s words, “for distinguishing a child’s play from other forms of activity it must be accepted that in play a child creates an imaginary situation” (p. 4). He further explained as follows:

Whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules—not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation. Therefore, to imagine that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules, i.e., as he behaves in a real situation, is simply impossible. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior. The role the child plays, and her relationship to the object if he object has changed its meaning, will always stem from the rules, i.e., the imaginary situation will always contain rules. (p. 7)

Nicolopoulou (1996) continues this line of thought and further elaborates it from a developmental perspective noting that,

...in play, children collaborate in constructing and maintaining a shared “imaginary situation” in an activity that is simultaneously voluntary, open to spontaneity, and structured by rules—but these are rules recognized and accepted as necessary by the children themselves, not handed down from above by adults. (p. 373)
This suggests that the interplay between imagination and rules consists of forms and structures that create meanings in play. In particular, rules are important in pretend play; however, they are not imposed from the outside nor are they preconditions for the play to occur; rather, they are employed in the service of the imaginary situation which brings into existence the need for rules (Lobman, 2010). This is what Vygotsky (2004) posits in the notion that “all games with imaginary situations are simultaneously games with rules and vice versa” (p. 7). Edmiston and Taylor (2010) also express that “children playing are actually self-monitoring, developing he ability to choose appropriate action and control behavior within the rules of any imagined situation” (p. 177). In explaining the idea of imaginary situation, Vygotsky noted that it is something essentially new but impossible for children under three—“it is a novel form of behavior in which the child is liberated from situational constraints through his activity in an imaginary situation” (p. 8). In this sense, imaginary situation also informs the process between meaning and action especially in preschool-age children. As Vygotsky further explained:

…the action is completed not for the action itself, but for the meaning it carries. At first, in a child of preschool age, action dominates over meaning and is incompletely understood; a child is able to do more than he can understand. It is at preschool age that there first arises an action structure in which meaning is the determinant; but the action itself is not a sideline or subordinated feature; it is a structural feature. (ibid., p. 14)

Indeed, there is always an evolving interdependent cycle of action and meaning. That is, “internal and external action are inseparable: imagination, interpretation, and will are internal processes in external action” (ibid., p. 14). In terms of the action and meaning in play, Vygotsky (1978) argues that “in play, action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life, of course, action
dominates meaning” (p. 101). It is important to note that the divergence between what children perceive and the meaning created occurs at preschool age. As Vygotsky wrote:

A divergence between the fields of meaning and vision first occurs at preschool age. In play thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things: a piece of wood begins to b a doll and a stick becomes a horse. (ibid., p. 97)

When Vygotsky emphasizes the significance of play, it is crucial to consider the elements of imagination and fantasy. In particular, children’s imagination is a symbolic act that dominates meaning through the process of creation and elaboration (Nicolopoulou, 1996). Imagination frees children from situational constraints and enables them to try out different situations and play various roles within their imaginative spheres, so as to learn to position themselves in different roles and learn to be agents. As such, children exercise through play in acting that is truly agentive and self-determined.

The view of children’s symbolic play as role play or pretend play is more static than the view of play as involving positionality by which children are socially situated in complex and multiple ways. By emphasizing how children position themselves in play, dynamic systems theory may be useful for further understanding the complexity of change. Thelen (2005) addresses three critical principles in her dynamic systems theoretical framework—complexity, continuity in time, and dynamic stability. Specifically, the essential characteristic of dynamic stability is that a dynamic system must lose stability to shift from one stable state to another; in other words, when patterns are very stable, there are no opportunities to explore and reassemble new solutions. It appears that this standpoint can be applied to the way we see how children position themselves in different activities and roles, and how they re-construct their experiences and meaning in play.
2.1.5 Meaning Making, Imagination, and Creativity

Vygotsky claims that how we construct meaning determines in part how we develop. I further suggest that we never know how the world really is until we construct this meaning through our own “doing” to realize our “being”, and perhaps also “co-being.” Play is a form of meaning-making. Through play, children learn how to make sense of their experiences and their relation with the world through the lens of seeing, doing and different ways of acting. Just as Singer and Singer (2006) characterized play as a dimension of human experience, I would like to extend this perspective and argue that play restores full dimensionality, and also facilitates children’s meaning-making, imagination, and creativity as reflected in their evolving development through play. In terms of imagination, it is the capacity for creating possibility in new realities. As Greene (2007) notes, imagination is a force that enables persons to reach towards alternatives, to reach beyond their current circumstances. There is always a connection between imagination and experience. For example, Vygotsky (2004) stresses, “every act of imagination starts with the accumulation of experience… and the richer the experience, the richer the act of imagination” (p. 15). Also, as Dewey mentioned in his book Art as Experience, imagination comes from the interplay between a present interaction and past experiences.

Furthermore, imagination, as Vygotsky (2004) asserted “is not just an idle mental amusement, not merely an activity without consequences in reality, but rather a function essential to life” (p. 13). Exploring the operation of imagination, Vygotsky identified four basic ways. The first way is mainly built on previous experiences—that is, “the creative activity of the imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of a person’s previous experience because this experience provides the material from which the products of fantasy are constructed;” therefore, “the act of imagination starts with this accumulation of experience” (pp. 14-15). Second, it involves the linkage between the final product of imagination and some
complex real phenomenon. Specifically, the product of imagination includes transformed and reworked elements of reality and the previous experience is required to create images out of these elements. Vygotsky further explained:

Imagination… becomes the means by which a person’s experience is broadened, because he can imagine what he has not seen, can conceptualize something from another person’s narration and description of what he himself has never directly experienced. He is not limited to the narrow circle and narrow boundaries of his own experience but can venture far beyond these boundaries, assimilating, with the help of his imagination someone else’s historical or social experience. In this form, imagination is a completely essential condition for almost all human mental activity. (ibid., p. 17)

Third, there is emotional influence in the association between the functioning of imagination and reality. That is, “the images of imagination serve as an internal expression of our feelings”—namely, the law of emotional reality of the imagination. Vygotsky presented details referencing from Ribot’s formulation:

All forms of creative imagination,” he says, “include affective elements.” This means that every construct of the imagination has an effect on our feelings, and if this construct does not in itself correspond to reality, nonetheless the feelings it evokes are real feelings, feelings a person truly experiences. (ibid., p. 19)

Vygotsky continues by giving an example that, when a child goes into a dark room, he or she may have the illusion that clothes in the room are strange men or robbers who have broken into his house. Thus, “the image of the robber, created by the child’s imagination, is not real, but the fear and terror the child experiences are completely real, the child’s true experience” (ibid., p. 20). And this is also why the art works created by other people’s imagination can have a strong
emotional impact on us. As summarized by Moran and John-Steiner (2003, p. 73), “the sharing of emotions through art does not mean that each individual experiences that emotion in the same manner; each internalizes the experience through his or her own lens and background. Emotion may start out simply as a bodily reaction, but it takes on new, productive functions in the context of cultural mediation.” The last type reflects the idea that the imagination becomes reality, as Vygotsky (2004) noted:

The essence of this association is that a construct of fantasy may represent something substantially new, never encountered before in human experience and without correspondence to any object that actually exists in reality however, once it has been externally embodied, that is, has been given material form, this crystallized imagination that has become an object begins to actually exist in the real world, to affect other things. (p. 20)

Accordingly, Vygotsky (2004) argued that creativity occurs on the social plane, and he emphasized the essential role of social-cultural interactions in creativity (John-Steiner, 1992; Moran & John-Steiner, 2003; John-Steiner et al., 2010). Moreover, the roots of creativity are in children’s play, imagination, and fantasy. Especially his developmental theory of creativity focuses on creative imagination developing from children’s play activities and further developing into higher mental functions. Also relevant is John-Steiner’s (1992) suggestion that “the transformation of joint experiences into the foundation of one’s own mental development is a critical issue in the study of creativity” (p. 103). The other insight of Vygotsky’s contribution is the analysis of the interrelation between imagination and creativity. As Kim (2006) outlined this approach:

Vygotsky’s theory of creativity is based on two cognitive functions: imagination and abstract thinking. Imagination is the origin of creative activity (Vygotsky, 1990), but does
not automatically develop into a creative product. To transform creative imagination into a product, abstract thinking is necessary. (p. 29)

Indeed, the study of play helps to understand the complex relationship between the activity of realistic thinking and the activity of advanced forms of imagination and creativity. Furthermore, Vygotsky (2004) stresses the crucial role of imagination:

We should emphasize the particular importance of cultivating creativity in school-age children. The entire future of humanity will be attained through the creative imagination; orientation to the future, behavior based on the future and derived from this future, is the most important function of the imagination. To the extent that the main educational objective of teaching is guidance of school children’s behavior so as to prepare them for the future, development and exercise of the imagination should be one of the main forces enlisted for the attainment of this goal. (pp. 87-88)

2.2 Participation, Collaboration, and Transformation

Vygotsky’s concept of ZPD, as discussed in previous section, has important implications in various research fields especially in application to learning and development. Recently, researchers have extended this idea to include the mutual zone of proximal development for collaborative partners (John-Steiner, 2000); re-conceptualization of ZPD as a “social endeavour in which new horizons of development are collaboratively co-created” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004b); ZPD in the playworld educational practice focuses on adult-child joint improvisational acting (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2010); and also a new implication of ZPD as a relational, creative and improvisational activity (Holzman 2009, 2010). These extensive and broader implications of ZPD help to recognize and embrace the social and individual dimensions with a new dynamic unity—a full unity that incorporates participation, collaboration and transformation.
Theoretically, for example, Rogoff (1990, 1998) expands the concept of the zone of proximal development by emphasizing collaborative processes in cognition and human development, such as when children advance their understanding through “apprenticeship” with others, and also focuses on participation in the community. Specifically, she views human development as a process that takes place through continued participation in cultural activities that also contribute to changes in their cultural communities across generations. That is, she emphasizes development as a cultural process in which people develop as participants in their cultural communities (Rogoff, 2003). It is important to note that people constantly negotiate and construct their development through participation in an activity, and actively change their understanding and involvement in other events and activities. Children too are actively observing and participating in the activities, while being motivated to participate more centrally (Rogoff, 1991). As Rogoff noted, “…individuals transform culture as they participate in its practices, altering the practices with their generation to fit their circumstances” (1998, p. 10). In other words, human beings develop as they participate and collaborate with others in shared endeavors that both constitute and are evolved from community traditions.

Furthermore, from a transformation of participation perspective that Rogoff formulated, change and development are essential in the process of participation, and are assumed to be inherent to activity, with prior and upcoming events involved in the dynamics of the ongoing present event. This point explains how activities relate to each other and how people’s participation in one activity relates to their participation in another. In this sense, as Rogoff (1998) suggests, “… the transformation of participation view have to do with how people’s roles and understanding changes as an activity develops, how different activities relate to each other, and how people prepare now for what they expect later on the basis of their prior participation”
Certainly, transformations are qualitative developmental changes in various contexts, for example, from socio-historical processes, as noted by Stetsenko (2005), “…people not only constantly transform and create their environment; they also create and constantly transform their very lives, consequently changing themselves in fundamental ways and, in the process, gaining self-knowledge” (p. 72). In this sense, transformation influences not just our sense of self, but our relations and interactions with others. As Dewey (2005) also posits, the self is transformed through interaction:

Individuality itself is originally a potentiality and is realized only in interaction with surrounding conditions. In this process of intercourse, native capacities, which contain an element of uniqueness, are transformed and become a self. Moreover, through resistances encountered, the nature of the self is discovered. The self is both formed and brought to consciousness through interaction with environment. (p. 293)

In other words, the transformation in activities with others affects our subjectivity and the transformative choices that we make. This standpoint somewhat connects to the implication that Rogoff (1998) addresses, according to which “… individual development is seen as contributing to as well as constituted by the sociocultural activities in which people participate” (p. 14). This is an insight to understand how children change from one kind of participation to another, and how transformative activities allow them to engage, evolve, create, and develop. I also argue that children participate in their everyday activities, such as play, through searching, exploring, and creating something that is meaningful and make sense to them, and through collaboration with others, they also co-create the transformative experience that shape their development and learning. Moreover, the notion of cultural tools is essential in considering how individual’s participation in sociocultural activities proceeds, and how it relates to children for participation
in their activities. As stated by Rogoff (1998), “we need to attend to the role of cultural tools—such as tools of language, genres of communication, and material technologies involved in problem solving—as well as to the functioning of the institutions in which collaboration occurs—the ways that thinking and collaborating are aspects of cultural practices in laboratories, schools, and families” (p. 48).

Indeed, cultural tools could be regarded as essential parts in the collaborative process, which make it possible for children to achieve meaning making and the construction of knowledge as they interact and cooperate with others within or across a variety of sociocultural joint activities. Importantly, collaboration is thoroughly social yet individual at the same time. Collaboration is a complex dynamic process that involves multiple dimensions and forms. The primary component involves individuals’ active engagement with others in sociocultural activities. However, collaboration is not easy to put into practice especially for young children—that is, I argue that collaboration not only includes active participation and engagement, but also requires creative expression and open-mined capacity to deal with conflict, challenges, contradiction or negotiations. Perhaps, collaboration itself is a transformation.

2.3 Transformative Activist Stance in Practice

“Who we are” is a matter of relationships, and it is always a process of becoming. Similarly, play reveals who children are and who they want to be. Considering the nature of play as a creative process for meaning making that relies on cultural tools employed in the zone of proximal development through interaction with others, provides a lens to see play also as a leading activity for a transformative becoming. I intend to re-conceptualize play as a dynamic integration of children’s purposeful and meaningful activity as it evolves via inner and outer co-
creation, regeneration, and transformation. By thinking about play as a transformative becoming, a new synthesis could be taken into account. Grounded and expanded from Vygotsky’s approach, the *transformative activist stance* developed by Stetsenko (2008) may shape a new form of understanding the value of children’s play. This approach captures the insights of evolving collaborative participation while also acknowledging individual contribution. She posits that individuals actively and constantly transform their world and themselves:

This alternative consists of seeing collaborative practice as the foundational reality within which, out of which, and for which human subjectivity—knowing and being, mind and self—emerge and develop; once emergent, however, this subjective dimension becomes instrumental at mature stages of development (of both society and individuals) so that it plays an indispensable role in organizing, shaping, and otherwise regulating social life and practice. That is, human subjectivity is understood to emerge out of, within, and through collaborative transformative practices, representing just one form (or mode), though highly specialized, in which these practices exist. (p. 484)

This framework provides a valuable perspective for recognizing the value of *process* and the idea of *in-between*—especially the *process of Becoming* as a developmental and interrelated process in conceptualizing children’s play as a transformative practice moving from being through doing to becoming. I always believed that we are part of the whole, and that everything we do regardless of specific time and location, in some senses has an impact on everything else. In other words, the consciousness of time—past, present, and future, could be assumed to co-exist. Considering this, the interrelational, mutually directional, cross-dimensional shifts in this transformative stance does inform every act that we do, does change everything else, and creates as well as contributes to the effects through time. In other words, there is always a reciprocal
recognition and mutual becoming in the change as a process and in the process. As Stetsenko (2007b) elaborates, “our actions always contribute to the unfolding collective sociocultural practices that stretch from the past to the present and carry on the past in them while also incurring changes for the future” (p. 748). The notion of Becoming is powerful, and yet vulnerable in some way. That is why, I think, collaboration is essential in this process, to transcend the individual’s limitation, vulnerability and uncertainty, and be able to move beyond the determining constraints that the individual is controlled by in order to recognize and honor their part of individual uniqueness within the whole. Importantly, reflecting back on the notion of transformative activist stance, this evolving process always embraces intentionality, purpose and goals, in that transformations are dynamic, collaborative, and creative. Accordingly, as Stetsenko (2011) expresses:

Human nature is a process of overcoming and transcending its own limitations through collaborative, continuous, and transformative practices mediated by cultural tools. In other words, it is a process of a historical Becoming of people not as creatures of nature but as agents of their own lives and development, that is, as agents whose nature IS to purposefully transform their world and to thus come into Being and Becoming. (p. 34)

This dynamic flow of being, doing and becoming affords me the awareness of re-thinking how children act in play. Building on this framework of transformative activist stance, I offer a variation with three levels to interpret this interconnected process as showed in Figure 2—that is, 1) attending—the past: being as knowing and honoring one’s history and heritage; 2) intending—the present: doing as authoring one’s present participation; and 3) anticipating—the future: becoming as contributing and envisioning one’s future commitment. These three levels may also imply the dynamic flow of progression from how individuals develop and move as
actors to become agents and lead the way to personhood. I suggest that this process always embraces and carries on with four elements: intention, decision, attention, and progression (see Appendix A). Even though I propose these three levels as an interconnected and non-linear process, children at the preschool age may most reflect on level 2, and this is also the level that I zoom in and focus on in this study. It is important to note that the consideration of individuality within the collaborative modality has a profound implication for children’s play. In my view, uniqueness is about choices. The acts of realizing the choices and making choices in play, such as choosing a role or setting up a scenario, negotiating perspectives or status, acknowledging one’s capacity and taking responsibility, exercising authority, etc. — all require the courage to take a stand and make a choice; however, it is also the pathway to transforming the being into becoming, and ultimately into becoming a conscious agent.

Figure 2

*Three levels of Interconnectedness Process*
CHAPTER THREE
Inter-landscape in Research on Play

3.1 Re-play: A Dialogic Approach

Play, for children, is ever-becoming. Play is dialogue, communication, and creation. The Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) provided a conceptual notion of existence as dialogue. Dialogicality as a form of relational connection between people is at the very core of human life. Bakhtin (1984) stresses that the actual experiencing of the world that is possible only because individuals are profoundly interconnected with others, essentially coming to be only through such interconnections. In his words, “life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue… a person invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life” (ibid., p. 293). As such, for Bakhtin, meaning is not pre-given nor does it exists internally, but resides within the dynamic relations of otherness; in other words, he also acknowledged that individuals only exist in relation to each other. This standpoint relates to the theory of authoring proposed by Bakhtin that emphasizes the general principle of the world as conceived. Kozulin (1991) expresses this notion as follows:

To be conceived, the world should be approached with some act of authoring. Such an act could be behavioral (e.g., postupok—a deed), mental (e.g., thought or concept), or communicative (e.g., speech or text). Whatever the nature of the act in order to become a human act it should be directed toward the Other and should anticipate the Other’s response. What in Bakhtin’s epistemology appears as a distinction between I and the Other becomes
in his aesthetics the distinction between the author, who occupies the position analogous to the Self, and the hero, who occupies a position analogous to the Other. (p. 338)

The above statement reflects Bakhtin’s idea of life as authorship grounded on the understanding of “the world is not given, but conceived” (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 59). The grounding for the ethical and for human existence itself, in Bakhtin’s works, has to do with individuals acting in their world and not just experiencing or contemplating it. Particularly, we make sense of the world through dynamic construction of meaning in an evolving dialogic communication with others. And there is always a distinct perspective from oneself to another, in which, as Clark and Holquist (1984) state, “my voice can mean, but only with others—at times in chorus, but at the best of times in dialogue” (p. 12). By acknowledging that without “thou” there is no “I”, individuals develop active engagement with dialogical relationships through the perspective of others, either in agreement or disagreement. In this sense, Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism informs the feature of the need for constant exchange and the un-finishing reciprocity in-between people. It is the idea that self is constantly engaged in relationship with others and the social context.

In recognizing this as the act of authoring that Bakhtin theorized, and also understanding that “human thoughts, acts, and intentions are viewed here as authoring” (Kozulin, 1991, p. 336), the issue here is how we relate this framework to the study of young children’s play. How do children put life in perspective for themselves? This is the question to tap into while considering the assumption that children are learning authoring through play. Most of the time we adults take for granted that we have different perspectives and points of views, but the ability to have a point of view is not natural and unquestioned, a feature or ability that is just given to people—we arguably learn this too. That is, for children, play makes it possible to learn to take a stand and
have a perspective. Implicit in this account, moreover, is the notion of dialogic process in application to young children’s play. This dialogic process is like an ongoing, unfinalized, authentic movement of inner and outer planes, as mover and observer—constantly involved in the process of acknowledging and engaging with others as unique individuals. From this position, I argue that the concept of “life as authoring” is closely related to re-conceptualizing the complex dynamics of how children’s play and storytelling emerge and develop, especially through the notion of “becoming” and “transcending.”

The idea of “life as authoring” highlights the power of play, and significantly connects to “play as storytelling”, and further develops into the notion of “play as authoring.” Namely, play is a pathway to authoring. Authorship, as elaborated in this study, highlights the unique pathway that children learn in order to take a standpoint and claim an authorship in and through play. “Becoming” is one of the critical essences of the “life as authoring” approach especially from a developmental perspective. In the Bakhtinian framework, it is important to note what he terms “ideological becoming.” As Duncan & Tarulli (2003) elaborate:

Ideological becoming involves establishing our own authority over others’ words, or achieving an individual voice amidst the many discourses that we encounter through our participation in social life. What is also critical in this connection is the idea that establishing one’s own authority over others’ discourse involves an active, dialogical appropriation of the other’s word; for it is only by dialogically engaging the discourses of others—by redefining them, differing with them, developing them—that one establishes one’s “own” voice. (pp. 282-283)

The concept of “ideological becoming” refers to how we view the world and make sense of it through an open-ended and unfinished process, and also further implies that “the world is
constituted by none other than incarnate answerable deeds united as one ceaseless process of “ideological Becoming” in pursuit of meaningful changes in the world” (Stetsenko, 2012, p. 151).

In this sense, “play as authoring” suggests children are learning how to author their own lives, their own beings, and the development of their own becoming. These tasks involve children developing into authors, and becoming creative agents through reconstructing and making sense of their experiences in play. Bakhtinian dialogism and authorship framework would add depth and new perspective to ground this standpoint.

3.1.1 Answerability and Responsibility

To further explore Bakhtin’s account of authorship, the notion of answerability and responsibility are the two essential elements to be addressed. As Clark and Holquist (1984) explain:

In Bakhtin, the difference between humans and other forms of life is a form of authorship, since the means by which a specific ratio of self-to-other responsibility is achieved in any given action - a deed being understood as an answer - comes about as the result of efforts by the self to shape a meaning out of the encounter between them. What the self is answerable to is the social environment; what the self is answerable for is the authorship of its responses. The self creates itself in crafting an architectonic relation between the unique locus of life activity and the constantly changing natural and social environment which surrounds it. This is the meaning of Bakhtin’s dictum that the self is an act of grace, a gift of the other. (pp. 67-68)

Specifically then, Bakhtin’s term of answerability refers to the unique responsibility that articulates the relational nature of being with recognizing the selves’ uniqueness within the self-other relationships. The self is radically conceived as “yet-to-be” instead of a whole (fixed) or
complete entity and with a particular position of “being without an alibi” (Bakhtin, 1990). As Clark and Holquist (1984) describe, “each of us occupies a unique time and place in life, an existence that is conceived not as passive state but as an activity, an event” (p. 64). What is grasped here is something more than a contemplative phenomenology of immediate experience. Rather, it is a phenomenology of “practical doings,” one that revolves around and is composed of incarnated activities. Our everyday life and reality itself do not exist before or outside of the actual “doings” by individuals and require “actual communion” with the concrete actions that the others perform. It is the concrete deed, always relational and cognizant of the others, of their voices and actions, that is the axiological center around which our existence revolves and of which it is composed. These “answerably performed acts” constitute and architectonic reality of existence (cf. Stetsenko, 2007b).

Along similar lines, Rule (2011) developed a notion of dialogic space grounded in Bakhtin’s approach, in which he described it as a zone of engagement that consists of values of trust, openness and responsibility and that enables dialogue at interpersonal, intrapersonal and discursive levels. Importantly, he noted that the concept of boundary has played an essential role in Bakhtin’s ideas about dialogue. As Rule (2011) explains, “this boundary is between the self and the other, and is a site of engagement, struggle and becoming as the self interacts with the worlds of the other and rejects them, accommodates them, makes them his own” (p. 938). In this way, as I understand, time and space are constantly changing and evolving, and it is the matter of embodied “answerable act” that the individual can move and shape from one position to the other, in response and responsive to changes in attending and intending the space and time.

Building on from this view, play itself allows for children to reconnect to what they produce and co-create in answerable and responsible deeds of their participation, from an actor on the
way to becoming an agent. Importantly, becoming an agent is about being responsive and also responsible. The assumption here is that children are authoring through play. We can explore how authorship is exercised and enacted in and through play; specifically, enacting the authorship through a dialogic process. Play is about authorship—being able to learn how to take positions and make decisions to be an author. Children take responsibility and they anticipate consequences. They learn to be aware of limitations and set the boundaries.

3.1.2 Authority, Power and Shared Voice

In Bakhtin’s analysis, dialogic act consists of three elements: a speaker, a listener or respondent, and the theme that stands as a relation between the two (Kozulin, 1991). By elaborating on this concept, in relating to young children’s play, Cohen and Uhry (2007) noted that “for children, understanding comes when they actively respond through external social speech, such as engaging in a dialogue with an adult, or in private speech by talking aloud, or through inner speech by responding internally to what has been said” (p. 304). Additionally, in children’s pretend play discourse, as Sawyer (2011) argues, play and narrative are improvisational interaction; he further discusses from Bakhtinian perspectives of voicing as the way children negotiate and occupy the role in play. As he noted, “in this negotiation the children combine a narrator’s voice with their play character’s voice using a ‘dialogic strategy’” (p. 20).

Voices, in my view, are about positions. For young children, it could be a challenge for them to have their own voices to be heard and to establish a standpoint. This is why play is so important and essential for children – it helps them learn to position themselves and claim authorship. When children are allowed to go beyond the determining forces that they are controlled by, then they embark on the way to take a stand and claim an authorship. Perhaps this is the critical process, whereby children constantly overcome and transcend their being
transitioning into becoming, while becoming able to further develop their commitment to how they want to see things happen in the next stages of authoring.

Children’s play may only reflect the initial step of authoring. Children learn to become agents with a standpoint and authorship, and then from there, they begin to contribute to the world around them. In preschool, children’s pretend play usually reflects layers of themes, such as social relations, power struggle, conflict, and negotiation. The intention is to look for not only what they pretend or for the pretend play itself, but to search deeper for the elements of this dynamic and how it allows for children to act differently and to make sense of the world.

As Bruner (2003) highlighted, life is about telling a story. It may be useful to understand that play does not simply capture what and how children do; it articulates who they are and how they make sense of their world. The power of play unwinds the possibility and creativity in young children, and especially empowers them to author their own life and have their voices to be heard. In play, they begin to experience the diverse positions and roles, in which they also reflect on how they experience and co-experience conflicts and contradictions. This is also where authoring is initiated and activated—that is, the conflict between children and the dynamic of how they face challenges unfold the possibility for them to actively and creatively be aware of contradiction while anticipating the solutions.

3.1.3 Ownership vs. Authorship

Considering play as authoring, it is important to clarify the conceptually nuanced contrast between ownership and authorship. The notion of ownership has a common implication in literacy education (e.g., Burke-Hengen, 1995; Dudley-Marling, 1995; Stires, 1995), and teaching-learning relationships (Rainer & Matthews, 2002). In an observational study of classroom interaction, Searle and Dudley-Marling (1995) examined how ownership is claimed,
given, or shared within the classroom, and showed that ownership involves processes and personal responsibility. In my understanding, ownership and authorship do share some critical elements, such as responsibility, power, authority, and voice. However, it seems that the concept of ownership is more about possession and a sense of belonging rather than a dynamic process, as in authorship. Additionally, I suggest that ownership is also part of the authorship. Therefore, in play, children may reveal how they exercise the authority and ownership as a step to claim the authorship.

It may be helpful to clarify the subtle differences between ownership and authorship by applying Bakhtin’s dialogic approach. In Bakhtin’s concept of authorship, as Hayes and Matusov (2005) summarized, “authorship, what is important is not so much ownership but the degree to which the author is able to address an unfinalized other, resulting in a dialogic exchange” (p. 3). As such, the concept of addressivity is fundamental to refer to dialogic authorship in which focuses on how acts have trajectories, and how motives and goals are embedded in actions. In Hayes and Matusov’s explanation, “addressivity refers to the social nature of one’s voice—conditioned by the people to whom the author addresses his/her deeds, work, thoughts, and words and from whom a response is expected. Bakhtin argued that addressivity provides meaning and motivation for one’s deeds and thoughts” (ibid., p. 7).

3.1.4 Embodied Boundaries: Positioning of Self and Other in Space and Time

“To participate in dialogue means to ask question, to heed, to respond, to agree and so forth with the eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, whole body and deeds.”

(Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293)

Play offers children the opportunity to experience, act, and create. I think in play there are always a listener and a speaker, mover and observer, or leader and follower—all of these may be
revealed by exploring children’s bodily expressions. These bodily expressions refer to the qualitative attitude that individuals experiences in their very existence. In other words, the body is fundamental and essential for sensing, feeling, experiencing, expressing and exploring one’s self and others. According to dialogic theory, self is an embodied entity, and the body is socially constituted. Bakhtin in his discussion of Rabelais noted “the individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the community, a member of the people’s mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself” (cited in Cresswell & Baerveldt, 2011, p. 266). Cresswell and Baerveldt elaborated on his point to suggest that “one enters into unity with others by virtue of being caught up in the ‘people’s mass body’ in enacting a corporeal style along with others. In the act of living traditions together, people come to have a felt sense of life that brings about a felt unity with others” (ibid., p. 267). In line with Bakhtin’s embodied dialogic self perspective, I take bodily experience into account when observing children’s play. Bodies speak, movements matter, especially for young children. Their body forms and movements can tap into many levels of meaning expressively and symbolically, and have always existed in socio-cultural context to fulfill their own growth process. Even the simple act of walking reveals the meaning of the self, of one’s history, of who they are, and how they are. Embodiment is not only about physicality, it is also about how we act and experience within the context of mutual relation, interaction, and position. I argue that embodied experience in its dialogic unfolding is profoundly related to how children actively shape their self-other relationships physically and socially. The understanding of self-other, according to Bakhtin, is a relation of simultaneity (Holquist, 1990). For example, in the context of play, when a child acts as a mover and another as an observer in the play context, even the observer is an active
participant in the relation of simultaneity. Holquist (1990) explains further in connecting relativity theory and dialogism,

…the observer’s ability to see motion depends on one body changing its position vis-à-vis other bodies. Motion, we have come to accept, has only a relative meaning. Stated differently, one body’s motion has meaning only in relation to another body; or—since it is a relation that is mutual – has meaning only in dialogue with another body. (p. 20)

This view of embodied dialogic positioning resonates with ideas developed by Martin and Gillespie (2013) who elaborate their “position exchange theory” as an embodied, situated positioning of the development of self and other understanding. They expand the perspective simultaneously taking it to a deeper physical-social level. They give an example of how children’s play supports this viewpoint: “when children are able to physically and socially occupy a position such as that of ‘giver’ or ‘seeker,’ and simultaneously recall, anticipate, and understand the perspectives associated with the position occupied and its complementary, related position, they achieve a basic, physically and socially supported form of perspective taking” (p. 14). That is, in play, children constantly exchange positions with others and that gives them the capacity “to recollect, anticipate, and differentiate physical-social positions” (ibid., p. 149), in ways that expand children’s self-other understanding and also support them in recognizing different perspectives.

Furthermore, in the context in which children play, embodied boundaries reveal additional dimensions of relations, communication, negotiation, and differentiation. Juzwik (2004) elaborates on this point:

Selves depend on transcendent others who respond to them, from beyond the boundaries of their bodies, for their existence. While the idea of consummation suggests a merging of
selves (as happens with lovers and often with mothers and children), Bakhtin clarifies that for ethical acts to occur boundaries between bodies and selves must be recognized as acting from distinctive vantage points in relation to one another. (p. 550)

As discussed earlier, boundaries are a zone of engagement, which may be considered as an ever-shifting threshold of verbal and non-verbal interaction and communication. Specifically, the factor of space and time convey the complexity of dynamic flow and patterns in children’s play. Space can be seen as action in relation to others and the environment. It is through space that boundaries develop, and paths of connections to others become another pattern of existence (Berger, 2012). From Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/2002) phenomenological view, “to be a body, is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily in space: it is of it” (p. 171). It is our body that addresses the totality of experiences in life and to responds to them. In this sense, it is never the outer condition that molds children’s acts, but rather, it is how children actively take positions in space and time that intersects with their relations with others and the world. This discussion returns to Holquist’s (1990) concept of dialogism, “our places are different not only because our bodies occupy different positions in exterior, physical space, but also because we regard the world and each other from different centers in cognitive time/space” (p. 22). In this sense, I would conclude that the body represents each individual’s unique standpoint on the world, and the bodily experience and expression serve as sources of walking in, through, beyond and even transcending participation in time/space reality.
3.2 Application of Vygotsky and Bakhtin’s Theories

According to the discussion in chapter two, Vygotsky’s theories have been widely used as a foundation for exploring the dynamics of social interaction and shared activities in children’s play. Much in sociocultural approach has further elaborated on this research angle. Various authors (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003; Göncü, Tufermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999; Nicolopoulou, 1993) have expanded on Vygotsky’s claims that play is a leading activity that leads overall development during the preschool period and that children engage in play to fulfill tendencies that they normally cannot do in real life (Vygotsky, 1933/1966). In contrast, Bakhtin’s works have found less resonance in research on play in early childhood. His works have been widely applied in research on discourse and literacy and in moral development theory and education (e.g., Juzwick, 2004; Tappen and Packer, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). Edmiston (2010) stated that the significance of Bakhtin’s theory especially in its focus on ethics and aesthetics, for early childhood and play has not been considered. However, this gap has recently begun to close in a shift that there has been a growing research discovering new dimensions and meanings of play in applying Bakhtin’s work (e.g., Cohen, 2011; Edmiston, 2010; Edmiston & Taylor, 2010; Marjanovic-Shane & White, 2014). For example, Edmiston (2010) applied Bakhtin’s ideas about dialogic process of coauthoring to child-adult play, he notes that cultural resources of play interactions such as social demands are tools for making meaning creating responses to the products of social positioning. Edmiston further comments that “children can choose in dramatic play to enter narrative worlds, where they already understand much of the social demands and cultural possibilities of imagined encounters. Knowing what characters do or might do, they can use their words, objects, actions and ideas to take charge of events, experiences and meaning-making” (p. 202).
Bakhtin views play as a social act that orients itself towards shared meaning with language as a way of positioning oneself in the social world. Cohen (2011) applied Bakhtin’s ideas of carnival and discourses to children’s pretend play and noted that, “as children experience what it means to be persons, they must engage in dialogic relations. By participating in dialogue with other players, children develop an understanding of their social worlds and an understanding of self” (p.199). This standpoint also connects to the ever-present “other,” even if it is not present. Therefore, play is a way of being with others or bringing others into being. There are often imaginary characters, for example, a store owner, pilot, teacher, baby…etc. who are reflected in early years play scenarios. This means addressing others and being addressed through different roles—playing out histories, events and experiences in ways that can shape their meaning or even provide a way of dealing with possible consequences. In Vygotsky’s theory, even though he never used the terms “otherness” and rarely discussed dialogicality in any great detail, he clearly attributed critical value to the role of others in development. For both Vygotsky and Bakhtin, the interconnectedness of human beings constitutes the deepest and most significant feature of human life and development.

Furthermore, Bakhtin’s concept of postuplenie captures the idea of lifelong process of becoming. Postuplenie conveys the sense of a process-like, continuous, and dynamic unfolding and active pressing forward in carrying out life. It is a stepping forward through deeds, a becoming-through-doing. In other words, postuplenie refers to a unique phenomenological richness of each and every deed that, together, forms a seamless stream of one’s life as an active project of “coming forward through doing” (see Stetsenko, 2007b). This concept is closely aligned with play in which the notion of a deed positions play as an ethical act of doing because it has an effect on others. Such an effect reveals the fundamental element of being seen and
heard, that is, answered. To activate this effect is to exercise agency. In the context of play, children always have the opportunity to take steps toward a different way of being that shapes their becoming.

The grounding of development by Bakhtin in the activity of becoming-through-doing bears similarity to Vygotsky’s position. Vygotsky stresses how consciousness emerges within and out of shared activities and actions. Consciousness never completely breaks away from shared activities and actions but is indicative of the same broad, ontological understanding of being as an active project of becoming that stems from and is constituted by shared forms of activities, or communal doings. Vygotsky’s acknowledges this position can be imputed form his reliance on the idea of collaborative transformative practice as the foundation of human development and learning (Stetsenko, 2008), which includes the roots of the human species itself in the tool-mediated shared activity. That Vygotsky placed action and activity at the center of development is also evident in his “general law” of development (see chapter 2). The general law refers to the transition from “forms of social, collective activity of the child to his individual functions…the sphere of her own psychological forms of activity” (Vygotsky 1987, p. 259).

Children’s play, from a combined perspective of Bakhtin and Vygotsky merged on a transformative activist stance—with its faculty of imagination and creativity, can be understood as an indispensable tool for simultaneously co-authoring oneself and the world. The simultaneous construction of social spaces and personal stances are both “real-and-imagined” (Soja, 1996) and tied to one’s identity, which comes about through trying out various roles and taking up responsibilities that accompany these roles in co-created social spaces.

This approach overlaps and expands on Edmiston (2010). Relying on Bakhtin and Vygotsky, he reframed development as a lifelong process of co-authoring ethical identities that
begin in early childhood when adults join children in dramatic play. In this approach, each person’s moral life quest is to author a self continuously in ethical relationships with those encountered in social relationships. Co-authoring occurs when participants project inside and move outside and among the consciousnesses available in fictional narratives that adults and children engage in together in play. Adult participation in play and their interpretations of various ethical stances are critical for children as the tools of their becoming. In further elaborating and applying this approach to my current study, I stress the process of children creating and co-authoring their world itself while they create and co-author their identities. Though this process is impossible without cultural mediation and supports in joint shared activities with adults, the child’s unique role in co-authoring imaginative spaces that crosscut into the real world, needs to be emphasized too.

From this position, I argue that the concept of authoring within a continuous life quest can be applied to re-conceptualizing the complex dynamics of children’s play. It is through becoming-through-doing that one co-authors the world and of oneself, that one transcends “the given” in its status quo. Authorship can be interpreted to highlight the unique pathway that children’s becoming takes as they learn to form perspectives on the world through play.

1 The discussion in this section is mostly based on the paper by Stetsenko & Ho (2015) entitled “The serious joy and the joyful work of play: Children becoming agentive actors in co-authoring themselves and their world through play.”
CHAPTER FOUR
Catch a Story

In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play
F. Nietzsche (1844-1900)

When watching children at play, everything we see is a response to the story they are telling. *Catch a Story* observes children at play and acknowledges their uniqueness as people who matter. It is not easy, however, for children or adults to be aware of each individual’s unique light. How do children come to form, recognize, and respond to their uniqueness? I assume that the space of *response* is the space of *authoring* and the place in which children playfully exercise agency.

4.1 Synthesis of the Elements

The foundation of this study synthesizes Bakhtin’s dialogic approach, Vygotsky’s developmental theory, and a “transformative activist stance” framework of play. Play is the process through which children gain the tools of authoring the world and becoming. We become who we are and come to know our world and ourselves through our responsive and responsible actions-deeds (*postuplenie*) in and with the world of other people. We are collaborative agents who participate in and contribute through their actions to the social practices and processes. Human development is an activist project and a struggle to continue and make a difference in life. This process co-authors the world and its history. Our identities form one fact of this process, from which we contribute through our acts of knowing, being, and doing. Human development is an active, or perhaps activist, project of becoming profoundly interconnected with the others. At the same time we are distinguishable and unique, irreplaceable, always matter, and make a difference in the world.
I focus not only on why play matters to children but also on acknowledging each child as a unique person who matters as an actor of shared communal practices and the world at large. In this approach, play is not merely a mundane leisure activity or an exercise in instrumental rationality but an expansion of the ability of children to participate in their own ways in communal forms of life from a unique standpoint, as agent and co-authors of what is present and possible.

Children not only learn about the real world through play, but as Vygotsky emphasized, play allows for children to expand their world, to give meaning through their acts, to build relationships, to try on different roles, and to especially to exercise their imagination (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Play also entails making sense of the world, since the world is not “out there” for them to discover, but only becomes meaningful through an active engagement with what they want to achieve and express. Vygotsky’s perspective of childhood development concerns active and collaborative engagement through the use of cultural tools, application of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and mediation. From this perspective, socio-cultural situations fundamentally affect children’s participation and collaboration in the shared activities development and growth. Stetsenko (2013, p. 184) elaborates a model of personhood from the standpoint of activism and ceaseless transformations, arguing that:

…the socio-cultural situation we are engulfed in requires persons to be active agents in their own lives and their own society, to be conscious and conscientious, responsive and responsible agents in society who are implicated in its dynamics and change, rather than simply ‘undergoers’ of solitary experiences or responders to brain chemistry and unconscious drives and habits.
This perspective can be applied to play so that children are valued as active agents to transform actively what is given and to create what is possible.

Second, Bakhtin’s dialogic approach brings in an essential horizontal dimension to making sense of children’s play. This dimension implies capturing the awareness of social struggles, for example, dimensions of power, authority, boundaries, challenges, limitations, and contradictions that arise in negotiating various positions in play. These social struggles are the fodder of great drama—play as drama is a possible way of seeing children’s play. The use of body, tools, voices, choices, space, the confrontation of ideas and passions, everything that shows up in children’s play is structured theatrically. It is a stage for children to exercise their power and authority, to practice their real-life scenario, and to author their lives.

Third, the transformative activist stance (Stetsenko, 2008) offers an insight into play’s role in facilitating a constant flow of transitions where new positions and intentions emerge through evolving collaborative participation and individual contribution. Theoretically, this approach shows the dialectics of individual and collective planes in which collective history and social practices shape individuals while at the same time shaping and realizing these processes through contributing to their dynamic materiality in moving beyond the status quo (Stetsenko, 2013). Moreover, this stance highlights “the activist, forward-looking stance and therefore, the future, the horizon and the destination of development and personhood” (ibid., p. 196). We are constantly living and becoming, and this forward-looking vision allows for the space of creating change and hope, which, especially for young children, is where the seed of activism is planted. The act of change takes courage and requires acknowledging one’s uniqueness. As Stetsenko (2013, p. 192) maintains:
…there is indeed *no gap* between changing one’s world and knowing it, there is also *no gap* between changing one’s world and being (becoming) oneself as a unique person, with both simultaneously created in this process of change. There is, in other words, no knowledge and no person that exist prior to and can be separated from a transformative activist engagement with the world (including, importantly, with other people and oneself).

This stance recognizes that people transcend what exists in “the here and now.”

Transformative activism recalls a spiral shape, the spiral of life, the representation of embracing being within becoming. It is not just a circular evolution but a traversal at a deeper and higher level, a traveling forward from being into becoming, from relation into expansion.

Overall, in considering these three stances—developmental, authorial, and transformative activist stances (see Table 1)—*play as tapestry* made of many different threads of ideas, knowledge, experiences, desires, intentions, decisions, and progressions comes to mind. A tapestry is a work of art in progress, with beauty and tangling chaos; so too is children’s play. It reveals aesthetic and dramatic threads of interaction and contradiction.
4.2 Researcher Positionality

Life is about telling a story (Bruner, 2003). But telling a story relies on having a viewpoint, position, and stand about what is and what can be. It is hardly a piece of “equipment” with which children come to the world. Even for an adult, the ability to take a standpoint and tell a story with one’s own voice is not arrived at easily but takes courage and commitment. As a researcher, walking into the field and research context with my own history, cultural background, values, beliefs, and thought processes, it takes effort, practice, reflection, and dialogue to arrive at an embodied and integrated understanding of my personal perspectives. Research continues as we reflect, and I carry out these reflections through active engagement that is shaped by who I am. I carry my own perspectives, expectations and lens that shape my interpretation. In each interpretation, however, I gained access to the freedom to be more. Access brings with it freedom of expression, becoming, making my own meanings, and acting as both insider—someone who has worked with preschoolers for years—and as outside, a curious researcher with a passion for creativity and possibility that play allows.

Who am I in the context of this becoming process? What is my positionality and stance as a researcher? Did my positionality affect how I reflected upon my experiences as a person/character and the interpretation as a researcher/storyteller? What enables the researcher to be vulnerable and open? Positionality represents a space and time reality in which objectivism and subjectivism meet. In acknowledging that research represents a shared space, shaped by both researcher and participants (England, 1994), an awareness of the self allows for us to acknowledge who we are. It is within this shared space and time that we expand our agency and horizons. In their position exchange theory, Martin and Gillespie (2013, p. 155) noted that “simultaneous experiencing of self and other perspectives in which individuals are both objects
and subjects in an important mechanism for both self-other differentiation and self-consciousness.” This research topic has been meaningful and rewarding to me but also personal at some level wherein I felt the risk of losing my objectivity. The study has allowed me to author my own development, to challenge the tension between individual freedom and relationality, and to engage in a deeper self-discovery and the freedom to explore different possibilities.

4.3 Research Focus

In this study, I sought a new way of seeing children’s play by integrating cultural-historical theory and dialogic approach with a transformative activist stance to address how children create their own pathway of becoming. An additional focus was an expansion of the Bakhtinian notion of authoring to the study of play. Authoring allows children agency to deal with collisions and contradictions among various perspectives of reality. Specifically, while Vygotsky stresses social interaction, Bakhtin leads us to capture “the ongoing social struggles and the continuous social demands, the responsibility of ‘answering’ that follow along with the symbolic gift” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 186). Bakhtin’s theory and Vygotsky’s insights about play point to authorial stances as a source of articulating who we are and who we can become in relating to and co-authoring the world and ourselves together with the others, initially through the tools of play. Edmiston (2010) applies Bakhtin’s dialogic process of coauthoring to child-adult play and notes that cultural resources and social demands are tools for making meaning and creating responses to the products of social positioning:

Children can choose in dramatic play to enter narrative worlds, where they already understand much of the social demands and cultural possibilities of imagined encounters. Knowing what characters do or might do, they can use their words, objects, actions and ideas to take charge of events, experiences and meaning-making. (p. 202)
This study aims to reveal a new perspective on valuing young children’s play—the notion of play as authoring. Vygotsky’s theory of imagination and creativity in play has increasingly influenced the study of young children’s learning and development (e.g., Eckhoff & Urbach, 2008; Lindqvist, 2003; Lobman, 2010); his cultural-historical theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how children develop a sense of self, relationships with others, and an understanding of the social sources of children’s play and development. Bakhtin’s dialogic approach captures the awareness of social struggles over power, authority, boundaries, limitations, contradictions, and challenges. I view these social struggles, however, as essential elements that set the stage for children to negotiate their relationship with others and to author their own positions and views, stances and goals—all of these as dimensions that shape the pathway of becoming. I applied these aspects of the relational ontology of dialogical being-through-doing, in particular focusing on the process of authoring, to re-conceptualize children’s play as a way of authoring their becoming as it evolves via the tools of play.

4.4 Research Hypotheses

This study assumes that through play children are exploring and developing dimensions of themselves as social actors who are able to take stances rather than just reflect on or passively adapt to the world. Such active positioning allows children to initiate new possibilities, envision alternatives, explore and negotiate differences and contradictions, and thus transform and evolve beyond what is given. The assumption highlights the essence of play as a creative process through which children are free not only to explore their world and their own potential, an assumption common to many sociocultural approaches to play. It is that through play children gain the tools of active becoming. Through learning in play they too co-author imaginary worlds that cut through, coalesce with, penetrate, and spill over into real life worlds.
How do children develop a unique position, enter in dialogues with otherness, and put life in perspective? These questions follow the assumption that children are co-authoring the world and themselves through play. In other words, play does not simply channel what children do and how they do it; it is a developmental gateway for setting in motion the process of their becoming agentive actors in the common world where their voices can be heard.

4.5 Research Questions

The general research question focuses on how, through play, children “do” authoring, how play paves the way for young children to co-author themselves and the world from their unique stances and positions. Specific questions address the following four authoring dimensions:

1) Initiating – role/project
   a. How do children take the initiative in setting play scenarios?
   b. To what extent do children choose a role with a clear status, and how do they take control of a role?

2) Negotiating – difference
   a. How do spontaneous narratives in play serve as a tool for dialogic negotiation over the awareness of others’ viewpoints and contradictions?
   b. When and how, do children negotiate turn taking and sharing, withdrawing and resuming in play?

3) Acknowledging – power/responsibility
   a. To what extent do children acknowledge their own role position to others?
   b. How do children establish a standpoint and create boundaries to express who is in charge or taking control of shared activities?
4) Claiming – authorship

a. How do children claim authorship in play against the background of contentious relations and struggles?

b. How is claiming authorship reflected in how children speak and act in anticipating others’ voices and positions?
CHAPTER FIVE
Methodology

This chapter includes an overview of my methods and study design, the descriptions of the research setting and participants, the researcher’s role, data collection process, and the development of the unit of analysis.

5.1 Overview

This study explores the articulation of children’s self-positioning in pre-school play. It examines how children negotiate differences, act out struggles, and exercise agency. It develops a conceptual synthesis by integrating dynamic, dialogic, and transformative dimensions of play. I conducted this study in a naturalistic setting, a child care center, where spontaneous dynamic interactions were most likely to occur, daily activities were unlikely to be interrupted, and children’s interactions could be extrapolated to real-life situations (Pepler & Craig, 1995).

This study takes an ethnographic approach in its initial steps, and uses procedures of grounded theory in its analysis. Grounded theory allows me to build on theories of play to address play as a process through which children learn to be themselves, where they exercise their agency and author their becoming. This approach integrates related theories to explore the creative, dynamic, and liberating dimensions of play that likely stretch beyond the obvious, the measurable, and the mundane. Grounded theory is a general methodology, a way of developing theory that is grounded in the systematic collection, conceptualization, and analysis of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Morse, et al., 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Throughout data collection, it encourages the construction of interpretive categories and themes and explores play’s multivariate and connected processes. As such, the data collection is oriented toward a concurrent interpretive analysis. As such, the interpretive nature of grounded theory requires the
inclusion of multiple perspectives to better understand diverse phenomena and specific context. The procedures—including the constant observation, comparison, theoretical questioning, concept development, and integration of data and theories—force “the researcher’s own voice to be questioning, questioned, and provisional” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 280). An on-going analysis from the beginning of observations encourages recurring meaning construction, elaboration, and multivariate interpretation. Grounded theory’s emphasis on patterns of actions and interaction means researchers tend to be concerned about discovering process—“reciprocal changes in patterns of action/interaction and in relationship with changes of conditions either internal or external to the process itself” (ibid., p. 278). That is, patterns and process are inter-dependent and inter-related. Development is a building process, and its progression occurs in identifiable patterns reflecting an individual’s unique stance. In the play context, young children’s dialogues and movements often reveal patterned histories of action (movement) within larger shared patterns (interaction) – these patterns allow researchers to reconstruct the data into play themes.

Grounded theory by its very nature offers aid in developing theories that are conceptually dense; however, the complexities in developing and integrating theories at different levels or contexts requires researchers to become theoretically sensitive, to immerse themselves in the data, and to take into account participants’ positionality (Glaser, 1978). Researchers’ knowledge, experience, personal values, and perspectives inform the development of categories, as well as serve as a narrative source. With the application of grounded theory, I will construct theoretical results that not only describe why play matters abstractly but also illuminate connections and dialogues by looking at “in-between” space and the “in-process” freedom of the play dynamic.
5.2 Setting and Participants

Fourteen children, nine boys and five girls, aged 3-5 years (the overall mean age = 4.1) participated in the study. I recruited participants from the Child Development and Learning Center at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The Child Development Center enrolls the children of full-time students at the Graduate Center; it also serves as a research laboratory for faculty and graduate students interested in studying preschoolers. The majority of children enrolled at the Child Development Center come from two parents’ families, at least one parent in the family is registered as a PhD student at the Graduate Center, and represent diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Classrooms at the center are divided into two multi-age groups: a younger group (2-3’s class) and an older group (3-4-5’s class). Depending on enrollment at the time, there are 10 to 14 children in each class.

Philosophically, the Center values play and exploration as two of the most important elements by which learning and development take place. The program supports a child-oriented philosophy, which allows each child to construct and recreate its own experience and expression. Emphasis is on encouraging development of self-expression, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning by providing a secure and nurturing environment, as well as open-ended materials and activities. Classroom teachers consist of a head teacher, an assistant teacher, and two teaching assistants. They work collaboratively with parents and peers to support children’s need. The head and assistant teacher present in the classroom across all sessions. The teaching assistants rotate from day to day.

The play environment at this center provides a small, cozy, and welcoming space for children to explore. There are two classrooms, two block rooms, and a playroom available for children’s activity and play. Each classroom provides activity areas in which dramatic play,
blocks, manipulative, story reading and telling, sand/water table activities, painting, and meetings take place. Table 2 lists a typical daily schedule for the 3 to 5 group. The time frames are flexible—the natural rhythm of the activities determines the transition from one activity to another. Children spend majority of their free play time choosing and participating in activities independently or with peers. Among various activities, children choose what to work on and with whom, while the teachers circulate in the classroom, providing assistance and support when needed. Meeting time was the only time that teachers direct activities in a circle, reading stories, singing songs, and engaging children with sharing moments. During play time, children engage in running, jumping, or dancing, intense physical movements, or in the block room they take up dramatic and pretend play in a dyads or small groups.

Table 2

*Daily Routine Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free play (Classroom)</td>
<td>9:00—11:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack time</td>
<td>11:00—11:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting time (Group story &amp; activity)</td>
<td>11:30—12:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play time (Playroom/Block room)</td>
<td>12:00—12:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch time</td>
<td>12:40—13:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nap time</td>
<td>13:20—14:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free play (Classroom)</td>
<td>14:00—15:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack time</td>
<td>15:30—16:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting time/Play time</td>
<td>16:00—17:00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Procedure

Initially, I explained the study’s purpose and procedures to and solicited help from the director of the Child Center and later sought recruitment assistance from the head and assistant teacher in the 3 to 5-year-old class. I asked to observe and videotape morning play times in the block room three mornings per week over approximately twelve weeks. Play time in the block room and playroom, which usually occurs at noon and last 30 to 45 minutes, is a part of the morning routine. When children chose to play in the block room during that period, a teacher accompanies them. Once the research plan had been approved by the IRB, consent letters were sent to parents/legal guardians of the children, informing them about the study and asking them to sign and return the consent form, if they agreed to have their child videotaped (Appendix H). Each of the fourteen children in the 3 to 5-year-old class participated in the study. In September 2013, before the actual data collection began, the director and the classroom teachers kindly offered me access to the Child Center. I spent two mornings a week in the classroom getting to know the children and observing their morning activities. Based on some previous research that shows children at preschool age generally adjust to a new setting in about six weeks (e.g., Chen et al., 2001; Killen & Turiel, 1991), I began data collection in October 2013 which allowed the children time to adjust to the new setting and daily routines (children’s school year began in the last week of August). Data—observation, videotaping, photographing—were generated over a period of twelve weeks from October 2013 to December 2013 and four weeks in March 2014. I also observed the classroom and took field notes two mornings a week for a period of three months from February to April 2014.
5.4 The Researcher’s Role

After consent forms were returned, I began the data collection. Prior to videotaping, I had spent two mornings a week in the classroom for over a month before actually beginning to videotape the children’s play. I was able to become familiar with the children’s routines, their name, and the preference in activities and playmate. At the same time, the children became accustomed to my presence in the sharing space and felt comfortable having me around in the classroom. My relationship with the children significantly changed during that period of time. They viewed me more as one of their teachers than simply an observer. When I began videotaping in the block room, I usually spent the snack time and meeting time (Table 2) in the classroom before video recording. I normally entered the block room ten minutes before children came in, setting up the tripod and camera in a corner of the room. Since the study focused on the play dynamics in the block room, I sought an angle as wide as possible and placed the digital camera on a tripod in a corner that allowed me to capture the entire block room. Whenever there were two or three dyads of play activity occurring at the same time, I would shift my position without getting too closer to them and use an additional hand-held camera to zoom in and record the activity on two cameras simultaneously.

At the very first videotaping session, the head teacher invited the children who chose to play in the block room to sit in a circle and explained why I was here to videotape them play. She informed them that I was working on a special project and wanted to learn from their activities and write a story about them. I showed them the camera and obtained children’s oral permission to be videotaped. They were excited about the idea of being in a story, and some children were curious about the equipment and tried to come back and forth to touch the camera. After the first
week of videotaping, children were used to the video recording equipment and paid little attention to its presence.

I felt as a researcher I should be as unobtrusive as possible throughout the data collection. During data collection, I located myself within the children’s play space but did not engage them directly. I stood back and only made brief responses if children initiated interactions. When the researcher acted solely as an observer, children were less likely to identify the researcher as an authority figure, which could influence how they interacted when researcher was nearby (Corsar & Schwarz, 1999). When the children wanted to show me block structures they were building, I usually responded non-verbally with a nod or smile to acknowledge them and minimize conversation as much as possible. There were, however, occasions when children sought my attention or asked me to join their play. At these times, I would say, “Show me what you like to play,” or “maybe your friend would like to join this exciting idea with you, and I can take a picture of your playing.” This usually helped children to shift their attention back to their play with peers. A few times there were conflict or confrontation in which a teacher needed to help to calm the children. I felt that my camera would have interrupted school processes, and I decided to turn it off until the problem was solved.

Throughout the videotaping, I realized that I had become more aware of my role, the space, and the boundaries of the field I was entering. I was aware of the boundaries that shaped who I am and what I do in this shared space. I recognized myself as an observer, trying to minimizing interactions with children. With my experience as a preschool teacher, I noticed that when adults participated in children’s play, even as reactive participants, they would influence the dynamic of dialogue and interaction. I attempted to position myself naturally at some distance so that I wouldn’t enter directly into their personal space. In particular, I intended to stay neutral, be
attentive to the space, yet invisible to the participants; at some point, I saw myself becoming transparent. I was fascinated and perplexed by the ways I presented myself in the space in relation to the others (participants) and the context. I think it is my positionality that created my own patterns of existence in this sharing space, and represented my individual standpoint in the process.

5.5 Data Analysis

I employed ethnographic methodologies of data collection and analysis to consider complex dimensions of interaction, authoring process, and positionality. Video recordings were made of children at play in the block room over fifteen school weeks, 45 days in total. Omitting the warm-up periods of videotaping, I filmed approximately 25 hours of video recordings, spanning 40 play episodes for a microanalysis. Episodes were defined based on participants and duration. It was determined that each episode must be defined by continuity of participants in the interaction throughout the duration of the specific episode. Furthermore, I divided each episode into short segments focusing on children’s play interactions and non-verbal communication, such as body position, eye contacts, and the use of space. All episodes were organized into play segments, a sequence of play that showed a beginning of a play theme when children (or an individual child) initiated a conversation and an ending in which they showed a change of the theme. For example, each play segment defined by continuity of the play activity that the children had created. In other words, the dyad or a group of children who initiated a play theme and participating in interactions such as “family” or “candy shop,” remained as the sole participants throughout the duration of the segment until a new player entered the activity or the topic of play changed, or when the time allocated for block room play ended. When additional
children joined in, or when a child or children left the setting, the previously defined segment
would be considered to have ended. Of the fourteen children participating in the study—eleven
children attended the Child Center at least four days a week, three children came in one or two
days a week. Table 3 shows a list of children who participated in the study, their gender and age,
the number of days per week each child came to the Child Center, and the total number of
episodes in which each child participated (see also Appendix I).

Table 3

Children Participated in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of days came to the Child Center per week</th>
<th>Total number of the 40 episodes in which each child presented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 EL</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 FE</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 MA</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 MI</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 NW</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 NZ</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 PA</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 OL</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 RE</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 TA</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 SO</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 TE</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 RA</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 MG</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In keeping with grounded theory; data analysis began with my transcribing the video
episodes after I collected the first ten sessions—a description of data collection steps and
analysis is illustrated in Figure 3. In the process of transcribing I had to re-familiarize myself
with these data, and through the repeated observation and initial analysis that occur concurrently
with ongoing data collection I had the opportunity to interpret my observations and reflect on emerging concepts. Constant comparison, an essential step in the conceptual building process, involved comparing data to emerging concepts and core theory (Stern & Porr, 2011). As part of the constant comparison process, I developed an observation impression checklist (Appendix D) and coding sheet (Appendix E) for adding an extra perspective in observing a focal child when needed. During this process, I coded and noted for categories and ideas that appeared significant. This substantive coding showed a range of concepts that I then compared to incoming data and as a preparation for further theoretical conceptualization. Comparisons of children’s play acts were made at different time frames, in interactions with other children, and in different spaces. Out of these comparisons concepts began to emerge. As such, the video observations might not only be treated as data, but also “as the evidence that serves to reconstruct the data” (Marjanovic-Shane, 2010, p. 44).

Figure 3
Steps of Analysis Process
Play episodes were the unit of analysis. I transcribed each video-recorded episode to facilitate interpretation according to “play as authoring” observation themes (Appendix B & C). My advisor and I developed and elaborated these themes through constant comparisons, specifically for the current research. They were also based on a previous pilot study of play episodes, which had parental permission for videotaping (Appendix G). Four theoretically derived authoring themes, which included four dynamic processes and four dimensions with awareness indices for each dimension (Table 4), were applied to analyze the unit of play episodes and authoring processes. I analyzed the data from an interpretive perspective using three dimensional stances: 1) a developmental dimension drawing on a Vygotskian perspective to explore forms of interaction and creative acts in each play episode; and 2) an authorial dimension grounded in Bakhtin’s dialogic approach, which examined how children negotiate the constraints of power struggles and boundaries and how layers of their creative expression in relating to others or acting in solidarity unfold; and 3) a transformative activist dimension (Stetsenko, 2008), which revealed children’s positionality and further analyzed how each child’s uniquely learns to have a perspective during play, and if possible, through their activism with collaborative participation and individual contribution. Analysis emphasized meaning-making through various dimensions of children’s authoring at both individual and collective levels. It showed the evident that children’s play acts and narratives reveal the significance of meaning-making and the authoring process in children’s worldview. These play acts and narratives were explored with the expectation that they are a transformative force that integrates new ways of seeing how children author their own being and becoming. They may further inform our understanding of children’s individual and collective authoring.
Table 4

“Play as Authoring” Dynamic Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamic Process</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiating</td>
<td>Role/Project</td>
<td>• Choosing a role/with clear status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Adopting a role/division of roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Scenario settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>• Standpoint differentiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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CHAPTER SIX

Results

The objective of this study is to create a perspective that values young children’s play as a process of authoring from three stances—developmental, authorial, and transformative stances. In this research I explore how children “do” authoring through play and that how authorship is exercised and enacted in play dynamics. The findings identify patterns and elements of positioning in children’s play interactions. I specifically explored the data in relation to the dynamics of children’s dialogues and interaction patterns based on three stances and four theoretically derived, dynamic authoring process themes. I emphasize an authoring process that is nonlinear with all its levels interacting, coexisting, and interconnected. Most episodes reveal all four authoring processes/themes; I will present examples within each authoring theme that are most revealing of each category.

Four authoring processes/themes (Figure 4) emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) initiating/setting intention in which children begin a play scenario and show a desire and intention to pursue a role and set a rule; (2) negotiating/making decision in which children construct boundaries and negotiate their stance and space with others, that is, how children begin to differentiate self-other relationships; (3) acknowledging/showing attention in which children establish a standpoint and position collaboratively and individually; (4) claiming/exercising authority in which children showed an active dialogic understanding of a shared goal and exercised authority by claiming a space or position. The patterns of interaction among these four themes reveal the complex journey children take in the process of authoring their identity.
I will present examples for each theme and describe them in further detail in this chapter.

Table 5 shows an overview of a conceptual representation of four themes with dialogue examples from the selected episodes, and how I categorized each authoring process/theme in relation to three stances, and authoring components. In the following descriptions, children have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.
### Table 5
#### An Overview and Examples of Four Authoring Themes

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6.1 Theme one—Initiating a Play Scenario: Setting Intention

In reflecting back to my research question in terms of how children “do” authoring in the process of initiating, the interpretations address how children show their desire and intention to occupy and act out a role and who takes the initiative in setting play scenarios. The following example with Sophie and Peter, both aged 4, illustrates a play situation in which children initiates positioning exchanges and negotiate levels of active engagement in creating agentive outlook and authorial positioning.

6.1.1 Positioning for Dialogue

**Extract 1: “Sophie’s World”**

*(Sophie is initiating a dialogue with the teacher and setting up a scenario to play)*

1.1 Sophie: I have to go to ballet.

1.2 Teacher > Sophie: Do you think Peter can go with you?

1.3 Sophie > Teacher: Sure.

1.4 Teacher > Sophie: You can invite him.

1.5 Sophie > Teacher: Sure, boys and girls can go to my ballet.

1.6 Sophie > Peter: Do you want to go to my ballet?

1.7 Peter > Sophie: well…

1.8 Sophie > Peter: It's for boys and girls.

1.9 Peter > Sophie: well…

1.10 Teacher > Peter: That's really fun

*Part of this Extract and analysis were published on the paper by Stetsenko & Ho (2015)*
1.11 Sophie > Peter: Yes... because you get to, you get to do...

(Sophie is walking toward the other corner of the playroom)

1.12 Sophie > Peter: Okay, here’s my ballet teacher… my ballet teacher. (Gesturing into the space)

1.13 Sophie > Ballet Teacher (imaginary character): Hi, ballet teacher, a child gets there. Come!

1.14 Sophie > Peter: You can go sweetie. Can you say hello?

1.15 Peter > Sophie: Yes, but… but, I’ve been not in ballet… well you know…

1.16 Sophie > Peter: I could ask her.

1.17 Peter > Sophie: Because I was not sick

1.18 Sophie > Peter: Yap, but I was sick.

(Play theme shifts- Peter initiates the dialogue)

1.19 Peter > Sophie: I need to go somewhere to get more guitars...

1.20 Sophie > Peter: Alright, I have one guitar that I gave to someone...and then he gave me back then (holding a long wooden block as a pretend guitar). So I could give it to you.

Look! This is old fashioned guitar. This is my old… (Pause for a moment and walk to the shelve to get another long block) This is my new guitar! Do you like it?

1.21 Peter > Sophie: Is that the old fashioned one?

1.22 Sophie > Peter: No! It is electric…

1.23 Peter > Sophie: I like electric better than old fashioned.

1.24 Sophie > Peter: This is fast too

1.25 Peter > Sophie: I’ll like this one because I like it.

1.26 Sophie > Peter: But this one is electric too.
1.27 Peter > Sophie: I like this electric because it’s very loud!

1.28 Sophie > Peter: Yes! This one gets louder and louder and louder. If you turn this switch up, it gets louder... Do you want this one? It gets louder and louder...

1.29 Peter > Sophie: I want to play with this...

1.30 Sophie > Peter: Okay, you can have both of them. (Passing guitars to Peter) You keep having both of them, and I need to hurry to ballet class.

1.31 Peter > Sophie: Okay. I have to go.

1.32 Sophie > Peter: Bye.
Figure 5

A Play Scene of Extract 1
This is an example to illustrate a dynamic process of how children “do” authoring in play and collaborate in co-authoring their possible selves while creating play landscape. As observed in the beginning of the episode, Sophie dominates conversation and initiates the scenario by inviting Peter to join “her” ballet class (line 1.1-1.6). She is already taking authorship in setting the stage by saying to Peter, “you can go to my ballet.” She positions herself clearly with the strong intention to create her own imaginary situation in which others can join in. This situation has rules and boundaries, with various actors-participants such as Sophie speaking in different voices—herself and an imaginary teacher (line 1.12-1.13). Sophie is clearly the author and agent in this imaginary world. She is in charge, exercising her agency by using her voice, space, and body to engage Peter to participate. She asserts her position by occupying a space and creating boundaries to exclude or include others.

Sophie’s interaction pattern, verbal and nonverbal, in this scenario reveals her strong voice—direct eye contact, and whole body movement—as she attempts to maintain social connection as well as shape her relationships with others and her surroundings. She is attentive to her personal space, the playroom space about her, and interactional space between Peter and herself. Peter’s responses, however, show hesitation (line 1.7, 1.9, 1.15). In the beginning of this play situation when responding to Sophie, he retreats, placing his body against the wall without much eye contact (Figure 5). Specifically, he is more likely to act as a listener and follower and struggles to have his voice heard. In other words, it seems that Peter is trying to figure out his own position but has hesitated in speaking up and deciding what he wants to do. As the play theme develops, they are increasingly working out shared goals as they negotiate who dominates the interaction. When the play themes shift (line 1.19), they take turns in initiating play scenarios and show active dialogic understanding of shared meaning-making.
Sophie explores the imaginary world from different perspectives as well as exploring her possible self in terms of establishing “me” as an actor and an agent.

If we assume that voices are about positions and space is about power, then it is revealing that Sophie strongly engages her voice to give directions and acknowledge others’ perspectives (line 1.20). At the same time, she allows for the dialogic positioning to shift and unfold. For example, when Peter initiates the guitar playing theme, Sophie quickly picks up the new role and comes to an agreement with him while contributing her agency to the unfolding storyline (line 1.19-1.20). The children’s shared activity leads them to develop collaborative positioning about what they want to do and who they want to be. Her activity leads Peter and her to develop collaborative positioning and personal commitment. It is how they learn to claim and entertain a position to establish in “me” a sense of belongingness and showcase power. Acknowledging one’s power and responsibility is the starting point to exercising agency. When children are answerable to what’s going on during play, they are more likely to speak up, make decisions, express their own voices, and be attuned to other perspectives. In this extract, Sophie who does much of the work of authoring her own world in which she is exercising agency and claiming a stance by initiating the play scenario, voicing perspectives, negotiating turn-taking, and taking control of shared activities. Figure 6 presents a conceptual illustration of major component that revealed in this extract.
6.1.2 Role & Rule

Vygotsky (1933/1966) stresses that in play children create an imaginary situation as “a means of developing abstract thought” (p.17). Children take on many roles as they imagine themselves in each of the character’s position, and rules are invented as they go along. As play develops, children make connections and add structure of rules according to their own logic and experiences. In Vygotsky’s definition of play, there are three components: “children create an imaginary situation, take on and act out roles and follow a set of rules determined by specific roles” (Bordrova, 2008, p. 359). In addressing the rules in play, Vygotsky asserted that “there is
no such thing as play without rules and the child’s particular attitude toward them and that only actions which fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation” (ibid., p. 9). From cultural-historical perspective, children’s play shows that “the rules of everyday life and the child’s experience of everyday practice shape how play is enacted” (Fleer, 2010, p. 70). In play scenarios, children use multiple voices and take on various roles as they depict the figures and events within their narratives. The coordination of body movement, gesture, voice, and the use of space are components of asserting their positions and make decisions of how they set rules and negotiate roles. The following example demonstrates the aspects of how children take the initiative in setting play scenarios and dominating a conversation: how they use their body, voice, and space to claim their choice, and how they show the intention of choosing a role.

**Extract 2: “I want to be the police too!”**

Nicole, Rachael, and Naomi are playing next to each other. Each of them occupies a space and is engaged in family-themed play with a set of baby dolls. Nicole builds a store in the center of the block room with a few babies inside, and she is holding a paper block as a birds’ cage in her hand. Rachael use blocks to build a house and she is holding a baby sitting inside the house. Naomi uses the table as her house, and she is holding a baby sitting on the chair. Nicole initiates the conversation:

2.1 Nicole: Now, I need to call the police.

*(She picks up a telephone and dials the numbers)*

2.2 Nicole>Police (imaginary character): A baby bird [is] stuck by mistake, and he is very stuck, so can you help me.

2.3 Rachael>Nicole: Okay, I am coming. I am the police right?

2.4 Nicole>Rachael: Uh-huh.
(Rachael walking from her house toward Nicole’s house)

2.5 Nicole>Rachael: But… okay, police, go over here, just...

(Naomi walking from her house toward Nicole’s house)

2.6 Nicole>Naomi: You are not the police; you go back to your home.

2.7 Naomi>Nicole: But I am just… just sitting here.

(Naomi is slowly sitting down on the floor)

2.8 Nicole>Naomi: Well…

2.9 Rachael>Nicole: Can I come inside?

(Rachael walks toward Nicole)

2.10 Nicole>Rachael: But you need to come in here; I don’t want the door to break.

2.11 Nicole>Naomi: You don’t have a wall that’s where you are coming [from]?

(Nicole pointed to the direction of Naomi’s house)

2.12 Nicole: Oh, this store is messy, my baby swallows all of it, and now he is sick.

2.13 Naomi>Nicole: I want to be the policeman too!

2.14 Nicole>Naomi: Oh, I will show you something. You can be the robber or the policeman.

Policemen are nicer.

2.15 Naomi>Nicole: Okay, I will be the policeman.

2.16 Nicole>Naomi: Okay. But you need to go back to that home (pointed to the space next to her store); that’s next to my home.

2.17 Rachael: I have a home next to Naomi’s too.

2.18 Nicole>Naomi: Okay, I need to put [up] a wall for you. Umm, let me go to make a wall.
In this extract, there are three main components that shape children’s choices (in terms of role and rule), interaction patterns, and authoring process: body, space, and voice. From the body and space aspects, figure 6 shows a few snapshots from the video footage of Extract 2. It reflects how each child positioned herself in the space in relation to others. In the beginning, they each occupy their own space (Figure 7—①). Nichole initiates the conversation by making a phone call to the imaginary character, the policeman (line 2.1-2.2). Rachael quickly picks up the role as the policeman and answers Nichole’s phone call (line 2.3-2.4). There is a dialogic
negotiation concerning who will occupy the role of “policeman” when Naomi joins in (line 2.6). Nicole responds and rejects Naomi with a strong voice and gesture (line 2.6; Figure 7—③④). As the play theme develops; Nichole dominates the dialogues and interaction in using her strong voice. Her gesture pointing out directions in the space is assertive (Figure 7—⑤⑥), and she has set boundaries by directing Rachael and Naomi to go back to their own house (line 2.10, 2.16).

In this scenario, there are power dynamics, negotiation, and conflict in pursuing a role, setting the rule, and deciding how to listen and respond to each other. I conclude this interpretation with an authoring structure (Figure 8) using an image of tetrahedron. It illustrates the structure of authoring components, the body, space, and voice, that shape how choices are related—specifically in this extract, how they set a rule and enact a role.

Figure 8

_A Visual Illustration of Authoring Structure for Extract 2_
6.2 Theme Two—Negotiating Differences: Making Decision

This theme emerged from observations of the way in which children’s interaction focused on *self-other* relationship—how they use voice to compare their positions and viewpoints to others and how they differentiate the standpoints and limitations of others. It is when children negotiate differences in their roles, viewpoints, and contradictions that they start to reconstruct the idea of themselves in relation to others (from *I* to *We*). The following example shows how children constructed boundaries and negotiated their stance and space with others, that is, how children began to differentiate self-other relationships.

6.2.1 Voicing Perspectives

Mary and Sophie, both aged 4, use blocks to build a house in the center of the playroom together.

Extract 3, Scene #1: “It’s a boy baby”

*(Mary and Sophie are carrying a baby and walking into the house)*

3.1 Sophie > Baby boy (imaginary character): Oh, it’s so cold, let’s get you inside the house.
   Let’s talk about this inside. Let’s get you into the warm house.

3.2 Mary > Sophie: Yap…

3.3 Sophie > Baby boy: Yap… let’s get you in the house. Babies don’t like to wear clothes.
   Let’s take baby’s clothes off.

3.4 Mary: Yap… *(Holding a baby and talking to the baby, “if you take off your clothes, you will be naked.”)*

3.5 Sophie > Mary: Babies don’t like wearing the clothes, so let’s take their clothes off.

3.6 Mary > Sophie: Yap… We have to take off their clothes. My sister likes her clothes and put them in the house.
3.7 Sophie> Sophie: This is a boy baby, see, he has a penis.

3.8 Mary> Sophie: Huh?

3.9 Sophie> Mary: This baby is a boy, so he has a penis, I still like him.

3.10 Mary> Sophie: This is a girl, and doesn’t have a penis… a girl.

3.11 Sophie> Mary: Girl has vagina.

3.12 Mary> Sophie: Uh-huh.

Figure 9

*The Play Scene of Extract 3*
Extract 3, Scene #2: “Let’s pretend”

(Mary and Sophie are in the house discussing the role they want to choose)

3.13 Mary>Sophie: How about you be the sister and I be the mama?

3.14 Sophie>Mary: Okay.

3.15 Mary>Sophie: Honey.

3.16 Sophie>Mary: What?

3.17 Mary>Sophie: Let's buy something, let's buy some coins... and then, we're going to get the toy for the baby...

3.18 Sophie>Mary: Okay, now, I am going to get some coins from this restaurant.

3.19 Mary>Sophie: I am going to make something.

3.20 Sophie>Mary: Pretend I was ten years old.

3.21 Mary>Sophie: I am five years old.

3.22 Sophie>Mary: I am really four years old, but pretending I was, uh, ten years old.

3.23 Mary>Sophie: Let's do it. Let's collect all our money.

3.24 Sophie>Mary: Yes let's collect some money. (Sophie is singing money, money, money, we love money, a lot of money and dollars)

(Sophie is approaching the teacher and asking for a bag)

3.25 Sophie>Teacher: Can I go get a bag please? It’s for our money. We need a bag because we are collecting a lot of money because we try to buy something really special for our baby. (In the meantime, Sophie is picking up a block and showing it to the teacher) This! It’s a rattling, but it costs...

3.26 Mary>Sophie: Five dollars!

3.27 Sophie>Mary: Five dollars and we only have one, two, three, four dollars!
3.28 Mary>Sophie: No! *(Running toward a box by the wall and picking up a block)* We have five! And we could put them together!

3.29 Sophie>Mary: Yap! We could have enough to buy this! Let’s collect all the money that we could find.

3.30 Mary>Sophie: Yap, let’s collect it!

  *(Sophie and Mary are picking up blocks together and putting them into the basket. Mary returns to the house while Sophie is still collecting money.)*

  *(A few minutes later, Sophie walks back to the house and is talking to Mary.)*

3.31 Sophie>Mary: Look! I brought all the bags back, so we could collect something in this if we want to carry some. How did that sounds, mother?

3.32 Mary>Sophie: Good.

3.33 Sophie>Mary: Let’s just take a look, and then we could, buy... have enough money to buy a toy for our babies.

3.34 Mary>Sophie: *(Whispering)* Yap. Let’s do this.

This extract illustrates children constantly negotiating their viewpoints. Their participation is a way of contributing to a transformation, and it shows how they collaboratively co-author their possible selves and put together play landscapes. In scene #1, Mary and Sophie together initiate the project by using blocks to build “their” house. Sophie is positioning herself as a person who takes care of the baby without choosing a role with clear status. She interacts simply with the baby and voices her perspective saying, “let’s get you inside the house” (line 3.1); in the meantime, she keeps the engagement going and announces her intention to claim a standpoint in this dyadic relation with Mary. It is her way of providing a sense of agency. Sophie shifts between being an actor (line 3.1) talking to the baby and an agent by positioning herself in
different roles and expressing her viewpoints (line 3.5, 3.7, 3.9, 3.11). Her presence in shifting between the real and imagined world is well articulated.

Interestingly, in this scene, there is not much eye contact and body movement or many gestures between Sophie and Mary during their interaction (Figure 9); Sophie, however, is very attentive to the space and answerable to “others” (to both Mary and baby boy). In contrast to Sophie’s interaction pattern, Mary expresses less verbally; however, she is a good listener, observer, and reflector. For example, in the beginning of the dialogue, even though Sophie initiates the conversation with the imaginary character (baby boy), Mary listens and responds right away, aware of what Sophie says, and most of the time, agrees with Sophie’s viewpoints (line 3.2, 3.4, 3.6). In play context, children are movers and observers; even the observer is an active participant in the relation of simultaneity (Holquist, 1990). In scene #2, Sophie is a mover who is in charge of how play develops, and Mary is an observer who constantly observes and responds to Sophie’s viewpoints and directions. For example, even Mary initiates the invitation to adopt a role by asking Sophie “How about you be the sister, and I be the mama (line 3.14)?” But later on, Sophie directs how the play scenario is going to develop (line 3.17-3.22). There is, however, significant progress in Mary’s interaction pattern—she is trying to find a voice and make it heard by initiating the play scenario (line 3.13, 3.15, 3.17). She negotiates the turn-taking with Sophie instead of merely responding or repeating what Sophie says, as we observed in Scene #1. Mary starts establishing her standpoint with the intention of settling into the role enactment as a “mama” who wants to buy something for the baby (line 3.17). They are co-creating the sense of togetherness (from I to We) and increasingly working out the shared goals as they negotiate interactions. Throughout Scene #2, both Mary and Sophie use “we” or “let’s...” to engage a dialogue with each other (line 3.17, 3.23-25, 3.27-34) most of the time. “Let’s
pretend” is a common yet strong discourse we often hear in children’s play. It represents how children develop a possible self and re-experience self in relation to others, as they re-enact social roles and voice pretend characters. For example, in this scenario, Sophie mentions that “pretend I was ten years old” (line 3.20, 3.22), which reveals how children differentiated the real and imaginary play world where the latter shows everything is possible.

Overall, this extract reflects how children work out their shared meaning. The meaning making resides not only with what is possible for individuals but also with how the “I” is positioned in relation to others. This is a dialogic approach—how children address others and are addressed in enacting different roles. Furthermore, how they negotiate their own stand about what is going on and decide for themselves so that their actions and deeds count matters for each other.

6.2.2 Voice & Space

In play, meaning is both individually and collectively constructed, and so are voice and space. Children often take their play themes from everyday life, and they learn to enact the roles of mothers, sisters, teachers, or babies socially. While enacting roles, children use their voice and space-time to constitute a social understanding of the adult world. Voice is a plural construct in dialogic thinking. Bakhtin stresses that “each of us uses multiple voices to speak, and that these draw from our past, present and imagined futures” (White, 2016, p. 24). As I argue, voice is about positions, and children use multiple voice in dialogic interactions to explore the possible self. As the example in Extract 3 illustrates, Sophie initiates the dialogue in saying “I am really four years old, but pretending I was ten years old” (line 3.22). This is a
salient point that she engages in pretense. She is aware of the space-time reality, specifically, in between the everyday space and the imagined space; she is in control of how she will play; and she has agency to author a possible self and develop a sense of identity. For young children in play, they are learning to be answerable to themselves, each other, and to those voices that shape their experience. They improvise responses to influence their relative position. It is revealing that in Sophie and Mary’s dyadic interaction they produce pretend role that relates to experiences from their real lives, while enacting the role as a mother (Mary) and a sister (Sophie), they provide voice and dialogue for those particular character, and they listen and respond to each other (line 3.31-34).

Play is a unique dialogic space for authoring because it offers children an opportunity to try out different identities, establish boundaries, transform their observations and experiences, and explore possibilities. Edmiston (2008) proposed that “pretend play can be conceptualized as taking place in three socio-cultural spaces: everyday spaces, socially imagined pretend play spaces, and projective-evaluative authoring spaces” (p. 98). I extend his idea of the space of play and add on three components—space, time, and voice—into the model. Space represents the quality of attention, the where; time represents decision, the when; voice represents position, the how. Figure 10 represents a conceptual representation of authoring space, and it shows that these three components are always embraced within everyday space and imagined space. Authoring occurs in the event of in-between-ness with the combination of space, time, and voice, which overlap everyday space and imagined space.
Figure 10

A Visual Illustration of Three Components Authoring Space for Extract 3
6.3 Theme Three—Acknowledging Power: Showing Attention

The essence of this theme is concerned with the ways in which children established a standpoint and position collaboratively and individually. Specifically, this has to do with observing how children are creating boundaries to exclude or include others, and how they express turn-taking and sharing to establish collective play goals.

6.3.1 Exercising Agency

Children have agency when they intend their actions and exercise choice over actions. In exercising agency, they learn to choose action by taking into account others’ viewpoints. The extract below shows how children are attuned to each other, and co-author selves and identities when they improvise in a situation with others. Mark, Reno, Terry, and Sophie are playing next to each other. Sophie builds a house on her own; Mark uses blocks to make an airplane with Reno and Terry later joining his airplane game. While Mark is still making an airplane, Sophie initiates the following conversation:

Extract 4: “Let’s make the airplane bigger!”

4.1 Sophie>Mark & Reno: How do you like this? I mean the portrait.
4.2 Mark>Sophie: Yap, I like it.
4.3 Reno>Sophie: What is that you call it?
4.4 Sophie>Reno: It’s called a portrait! (speaks in a high up voice)

<Terry walks toward Reno and stands next to him observing the conversation between Sophie and Reno>

4.5 Reno>Sophie: Do you use it to make a picture?
4.6 Mark>Terry: You need to come on the airplane.
(In the meantime, while Terry gets into Mark’s airplane, Reno is talking to Sophie and looking around her house and at the portrait, which is attached to one of the block)

4.7 Sophie>Reno: This is… I am five, this is a picture of me.  

4.8 Mark: You two know my airplane is close to her house?

4.9 Reno>Terry: Terry…this is… Do you know…..  

(Mark interrupts his dialogue to Terry with voice and gesture…)  

4.10 Mark>Reno: Hey Reno, hey hey Reno, guess what, my plane is close to Sophie’s house!  

(Mark raise his voice tone with much excitement)

4.11 Sophie>Mark: You can visit me anytime because you are next to me  

(Reno is excited and jumping up and down next to Sophie)

4.12 Terry: I need to come into the plane.

4.13 Mark: (walk into the structure) I need someone in the plane.

4.14 Reno>Mark: I need to!  

4.15 Teacher>Mark: Mark, are you the pilot?

4.16 Mark>Teacher: Yap. You know, the door open…  

(Reno puts down the big block and walks into the airplane)

4.17 Reno: I better come in. Now close the door  

(Sophie has been standing in front of her house and watching the conversation among three boys)

4.18 Sophie: Hi, I am traveling with you….I am coming.

4.19 Terry>Sophie: No… it is dangerous.
(The dialogues is interrupted by Reno’s conversation with Mark)

4.20 Reno>Mark: Hey Mark, Mark, I really have a good idea! Can you make the airplane bigger?

4.21 Terry: Because the plane is really small...

(Reno is trying to push down of the big tall block in front of Mark)

4.22 Mark>Reno: No! (Mark pull the block back)

4.23 Reno: I want to make it bigger! (Reno step out of the airplane)

4.24 Mark>Reno: But how? I don’t know how to...!

4.25 Reno>Mark: Maybe you can build... maybe you can make it bigger like that!

(Reno pulls down one big block on the floor)

4.26 Mark>Reno: Yap and we will make [the] other one next to it.

4.27 Reno>Mark: And we can put that like that.

4.28 Mark>Reno: Maybe I will put this one (Mark is walking toward the shelf and trying to grab another big block).

4.29 Teacher>Mark: (Whispering) One at a time.

4.30 Reno>Mark: No, let’s pretend Mark, that’s for pretend.

(Terry walks the shelf to help Mark and carry another block)

4.31 Mark: I don’t want to make long block (Mark Moves another block to the airplane).

4.32 Mark>Terry: I need that block...
4.33 Teacher>children: I like the way you guys are all working together to make the airplane bigger so everyone can fit.

*(Mark, Terry, and Reno are negotiating the arrangement of the block to make the airplane bigger, and they are deciding the spot to place the drive seat)*

<See Figure 11-9>

4.34 Reno: I think this is the driver’s seat.

4.35 Mark>Reno: No, this is the driver’s seat.

4.36 Terry>Mark: No, this is the back of the plane.

4.37 Mark: Where is the driver’s seat?!

4.38 Terry>Mark: Right here!

4.39 Mark: *(pause and think for a moment)* Okay, that’s all right.
Figure 11

The Play Scene of Extract 4
Extract 4 is an example of a complex play dynamic in between two groups of children who are playing next to each other yet acknowledging one another’s presence. At some point, they engage and negotiate the power and freedom through showing attention and various other expressions. In the beginning, Sophie is playing by herself and creating her own space, a house; she is, however, attentive to the space and aware of what is going on around her. She initiates the dialogue without addressing a specific child by asking others their opinion of her portrait (line 4.1). Mark responds right away (line 4.2); in the meantime, Reno continues the conversation with Sophie (line 4.3-4.5), while Terry just quietly observes and listens to the dialogue among his friends. Children display considerable agency when they play because they are constantly improvising their interactions (Edmiston, 2008). Sophie continually exercises her agency and improvises her interactions to seek “identification” in belonging and owning—I interpret it as belonging to the group and owning the power. In terms of “identification,” sociologist Etienne Wenger (1998) defines it as follows, “identification [as] a process that is at once both relational and experiential, subjective and collective … something we do to ourselves and something we do to each other” (p. 191, quoted in Edmiston, 2008). Sophie shows a strong physical presence and assertive voice in interacting with others, she is articulate in showcasing the power, yet she acknowledges other’s standpoints and being answerable to others (line 4.4, 4.7, 4.11). When Mark initiates the dialogue by announcing that his airplane is close to Sophie’s house, the focus of Sophie’s interaction shifts to the three boys (line 4.8). Then, Mark leads the play in the direction of what he intends to by announcing that he needs someone in “his” airplane (line 4.13). Both Sophie and Mark show a desire to create a sense of belonging—my house, my airplane—through use of tools, language, and space. Later on, Reno invites Mark to make the airplane bigger (line 4.20). Terry responds and acknowledges Reno’s standpoint (line 4.21).
Mark is hesitant to say no to Reno (line 4.22), but Reno insists and steps out of the airplane. Mark is acting out the struggle but trying to figure out and listen to others’ positions and perspectives. With an emotional intonation expressing his frustration, he asks how to make it bigger (line 4.24). After that, Reno, Mark, and Terry work together to solve the problem and make the airplane bigger (line 4.25-4.28).

Overall in this extract, there is not much about the negotiation of the role and rules, but there is a focus on the continuation of the power dynamic shift. Negotiations are over who gets or shows attention and how they acknowledge and share the power that later develops into co-authoring the solution. They use dialogue to facilitate the interactions and collaboratively improvise responses in the imaginary situations, and they use space to showcase the power—from occupying a personal space to claiming an interactional space. There is tension between individual freedom and relationality when they try to take control of shared activities, offer respect and give feedbacks to each other, and show their interests. I see this scenario as a dancing dialogue of mover and observer; insider and outsider. Figure 11 shows a few physical placements of where the children are in relation to the space and others.

6.3.2 Power, Freedom, and Agency/Activism

Children are continually negotiating connections, and experiencing freedom in various forms. Freedom and power are constantly “in the making.” In Extract 4, children are working out their shared goals and identities as they learn to be an agentive and activist. They are re-experiencing and negotiating their possible selves in relation to others. Power is in the relation, not a possession; just as agency is not what children own but what is exercised by them. Edmiston (2008) applied Bakhtin’s ideas about co-authoring to child-adult play and addressed three types of power relationship stances when adults play with children: power over others; power for
others; and power with others. Ideally, the dominant relational power stance in dialogic discourse is power with others, that is, “when people negotiate with one another they use power collaboratively to create new interpretations of situations as they explore possible actions.

Sharing power in this way is ethical from moment to moment if people address and are answerable to one another and to those whose views are made visible and are heard” (ibid., p. 192). I see Extract 4 as showing the seed of how children use power in relations with others. In this case, Mark and Reno negotiate a power relationship in a collaborative way—when Reno insists on making the airplane bigger, Mark listens and takes into account other viewpoints. In this case the children are exercising their agency and self-determination through play, which is also how agency and individual freedom are exercised and realized. I conclude with a visual illustration of co-authoring space (Figure 12) to show that freedom and power are fundamental elements to connecting children’s agency in co-authoring their possible worlds to their becoming through being and doing.

Figure 12

*A Visual Illustration of Co-Authoring Space for Extract 4*
6.4 Theme Four—Claiming Authorship: Exercising Authority

This theme focused on the children’s active dialogic understanding of a shared goal and how they exercised authority by claiming a space or position. I reflect back to my research question to ask how children are exercising authority and what it takes for them to claim authorship. My interpretation addresses how children speak and act in anticipating of other’s voices and positions, how they exercise choices over their actions, and how they express a standpoint individually and collaboratively. The following extract shows how children share authority and how they co-author the shared identity.

6.4.1 Authoring Shared Identity

Rachael and Sophie use blocks to build their own house. Rachael sits inside her house and holds a telephone in her hand trying to dial the numbers. Sophie looks at her and walks to the shelf and grabs another telephone, then she initiates the conversation with Rachael:

Extract 5: “Pretending you say…”

5.1 Sophie>Rachael: You are trying to ring my phone, right?
5.2 Sophie>Rachael: Hello Rachael, my phone number is 333-444 <See Figure 13-.minutes>
5.3 Rachael>Sophie: Uh, uh, my number is…
5.4 Sophie>Rachael: What is your number?
5.5 Rachael>Sophie: 99-999-111 (Rachael is dialing the phone number)
5.6 Rachael>Sophie: Hello
5.7 Sophie>Rachael: Hello
5.8 Rachael>Sophie: I have to call you because I am on my way back. I forget to get the tingling things, so bye-bye.
5.9 Sophie>Rachael: Bye, I will see you next week, right?
5.10 Rachael>Sophie: Yah.

5.11 Sophie>Rachael: Bye-bye.

*(Rachael walks toward Sophie’s home)*

5.12 Sophie>Rachael: Hi

5.13 Rachael>Sophie: Hi

5.14 **Sophie**>Rachael: Pretend you say “what are you holding?”  

5.15 Rachael>Sophie: What are you holding?

5.16 Sophie>Rachael: A cane. *Say* “why do you have it?”

5.17 Rachael>Sophie: Why do you have it?

5.18 Sophie>Rachael: Because I sprain my ankle

5.19 Rachael>Sophie: Oh…

5.20 Sophie>Rachael: So bye

5.21 Rachael>Sophie: Bye

5.22 Sophie>Rachael: See you next week, right?

5.23 Rachael>Sophie: Okay.

*(Rachael walks away and goes to grab a long block then walks back to Sophie’s house)*

5.24 **Sophie**>Rachael: Pretend you need a cane because you bumped into your house, right? I did that too.

5.25 Rachael>Sophie: Uh… but pretend you say “what’s that in your hand?”

5.26 Sophie>Rachael: What’s that in your hand?  

5.27 Rachael>Sophie: It’s a cane.

5.28 Sophie>Rachael: What happened out there?

5.29 Rachael>Sophie: I bumped into my outside yard.
5.30 Sophie>Rachael: Oh, you bumped into your fence? Pretend I couldn’t understand you, because I speak Japanese and you speak English.

5.31 Rachael>Sophie: Okay. (Rachael turns to the other side and open a big box)

5.32 Rachael>Sophie: I got some pizza for you! <See Figure 13-①>

5.33 Sophie>Rachael: Ummm….That’s smells very good! Let's take back home.

5.34 Rachael>Sophie: Okay.

5.35 Sophie>Rachael: Take the cane with you.

(Rachael and Sophie both holding a long block as their pretending cane and walk toward other side of the room)

5.36 Sophie>Rachael: Pretend you heal faster than I did because mine was really bad because then I kicked in front of my door so I need two canes.

(Rachael walks away with one pretending cane)

5.37 Rachael: (talks to herself) I kicked in front of my door so I need this cane.

5.38 Sophie>Rachael: Wait! Here, you can have this one. (Sophie hands another blue pretend cane to Rachael)

5.39 Rachael>Sophie: But I already have it in blue. But I don’t have red, can I have a red?

(Sophie holds a blue cane and a red cane)

5.40 Sophie>Rachael: Umm… I can give you blue. <See Figure 13-③>

5.41 Rachael>Sophie: Umm… (Rachael takes the blue one) thank you.

(Sophie and Rachael both walk with two canes around the block room)

5.42 Sophie>Rachael: I need to walk faster, come on, I am late! Wait! Here’s the pizza, we are stopping here to get the pizza, right? <See Figure 13-⑥>

5.43 Rachael>Sophie: Yap!
In this extract, Sophie is a good observer—she picks up what Rachael is doing and initiates the interaction with her. In the beginning, she sees that Rachael is playing with a phone and trying to dial the number; Sophie quickly gets a telephone and initiates the interaction by asking Rachael, “you are trying to ring my phone, right (line 5.1-2)”? Rachael continues the dialogue with Sophie by answering the phone (line 5.8), and the play theme starts to develop. The dialogues created by these two girls reveal the complex journey they take in the process of forming a self and shared identity. I see two major characteristics reflected in this scenario—
freedom and choices—the freedom in negotiating meanings and choices to coordinate positions. According to Vygotsky, the great value of play is that it represents a context where freedom becomes possible, that is, play allows for the use of signs in ways that afford distance from the immediately given context through the power of imagination (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). As such, the child creates imaginary situations in which objects can be used as substitutes for other objects in roles that one assigns to them, for example, using sticks as horses to ride on. Sophie in this scenario uses long paper block as a cane for walking because she sprain her ankle (line 5.16, 5.18). Then Rachael follows Sophie’s imaginary use of the block as a cane, but later she creates her own ways of giving new meaning to the objects and action—she uses the paper box as the pizza (line 5.32).

Their scenario confirms Vygotsky’s idea that meaning and intention are fundamental in children’s play and that children repeatedly give new meanings to the everyday objects and actions in their world. They reside in a world where play allows them to create imaginary situations (Fleer, 2013). Their world echoes Edmiston’s (2008, p. 22) observation: “In pretend play, children can improvise freely with their cultural resources much more than they can in everyday life. Everyday experiences as well as imagined experiences from stories or other narratives are transformed in play.” The tools and objects in play enable children to be in charge of their acting, and in the meantime, these objects help them to negotiate with other children shared play meanings (Fleer, 2013).

Interestingly, we see Rachael and Sophie use an authoritative voice to ask each other say what they want. When Sophie is holding a paper block, she asks Rachael to ask her “pretending you say ‘what are you holding’” (line 5.14)? Rachael follows Sophie’s direction. In line 5.16, Sophie does not use “pretend” but ask Rachael to “say” why you have it. One can see the
power relation and shared authority in this interaction pattern. Later on, Rachael also uses the
“pretend…” to initiate the dialogue with Sophie, and they take turns asking each other say what
they want.

Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism (1981) is applicable to describe these patterns of children’s
interaction. Rachael and Sophie combine a narrator’s voice with their play character’s voice
using a dialogic strategy (Sawyer, 2011). Sawyer summarizes:

Bakhtin used the term ‘dialogism’ to refer to the two-leveled nature of improvised dialogue;
‘Behind the narrator’s story we read second story, the author’s story… We acutely sense
two levels at each moment in the story; one, the level of the narrator… and the other, the
level of the author. (ibid., p. 21)

Rachael and Sophie are directing the dialogue as a narrator when they use the expression
“Pretend…” to ask each other to repeat the narratives and continue the play. This requires
choosing where they are positioning themselves in relation to others within the play frame
( imaginary situation) and out of the play frame (reality). Kravtsova and Kravtsova (2010)
studied children’s positioning in play from extended Vygotskian perspectives and suggested
children take a “dual role” in play. That standpoint “allows the child to be the subject of play as
well as to take up the objective position in which he/she can also control play at will (p. 25)”
(cited in Fleer, 2013, p. 76). In reflecting back to Sophie and Rachael’s positioning, specifically
in line 5.24 to 5.30, they can be seen to simultaneously take two positions, one “inside” of the
play and another “outside” of the play within the imaginary situation.

Throughout the interaction pattern in Extract 5, Sophie and Rachael show a strong sense of
maintaining their individuality and personal space. As their play develops, they increasingly
exercise authority and create shared meaning to acknowledge each other and collaboratively
establish a sense of We (line 5.33, 5.42). They are articulating a shift in and out of the imaginary situation through dual positioning—they are both narrators and authors. Overall, one can see that Sophie and Rachael are exercising a shared identity to form their standpoints by using power with each other and negotiating their dual positions.

6.4.2 Standpoint & Choice (Agency/Activism)

In authorship children learn to take a standpoint and make choices. To author each other—to be answerable in dialogue—children need to take time to understand one another as individual in a particular moment in time and space (White, 2016). Most of the time, it is a challenge for young children to have their voices heard, yet it is even harder for them to form voices, while establishing their own stances from a relational and authorial position, their unique standpoint (cf. Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). To have a standpoint requires courage and commitment. As such, play allows children to be committed and passionate. In terms of commitment, it is how children learn to develop their standpoint as to what they want to see happen. This may be the next stage of authoring in which children acknowledge themselves as authors. They also develop an intention, wanting things to go in certain directions, and this has to do with a standpoint, a sense of being an activist with a commitment to the future. From a transformative activist stance, the idea of commitment suggests that “persons not so much expect or anticipate the future, but rather, actively work to bring this future into reality through their own deeds, often against the odds, that is, even if the future is not anticipated as likely and instead, requires struggle and active striving to achieve it” (Stetsenko, 2014, p. 193). In extract 5, their interaction reflects the seed of how children develop their commitment and co-author possible selves and shared identities. They
share authority and anticipate each other’s voices and positions. They are directing anticipated consequences by directing each other’s interactions and dialogues in their own way. Both Sophie and Rachael are authors in this scenario. They are attuned to each other’s perspectives and their developing ways of viewing the world. They are developing a dialogic understanding through the use of voice and space, in line with Bakhtin’s notion of “ideological becoming.” They constantly engage with each other’s words, intentions, and ideas to make their own meanings and form their own identities, which they do in endless dialogue in play.

Authoring happens through the struggle of becoming. Claiming authorship requires acting out struggles and mastering vulnerability. Children act out their struggles and figure out others’ positions and perspectives. They transform struggle into strength through play. In terms of vulnerability, it is our nature; we are mastering nature, and we transcend vulnerability into possibility for growth. It is a journey of becoming stronger as children allow themselves to be more vulnerable, emotional, and authentic, a point at which they liberate themselves, opening themselves up to choices. The essence of vulnerability is openness to experience. Without vulnerability, there is no creativity. Struggle and vulnerability allow children to move beyond the given and instead gain access to the “what if.” The authoring process is a constant initiation of transformation through participation and collaboration. It is a space-time-flow combination with intention, decision and progression. Figure 14 expands on a visual conceptual representation of the authoring process (Appendix F). This figure shows a broad overview of how various components of the authoring process are framed theoretically and how these components are interrelated. I specifically focus on the component of the authoring process in the center portion that is highlighted in the dark portion of this figure—it shows how children
connect authoring in the *present* with their positionality, answerability, and creativity. It is the space in which children are establishing their standpoint and becoming agents.

Figure 14

*A Conceptual Representation of Authoring Process for Extract 5*
CHAPTER SEVEN
Discussion

“To recognize the role of perspective and vantage point, to recognize at the same time that there are always multiple perspectives and multiple vantage points, is to recognize that no accounting, disciplinary or otherwise, can ever be finished or complete. There is always more. There is always possibility. And this is where the space opens for the pursuit of freedom.”

(Maxine Greene, 1988, p.128)

In chapter six, I presented the main findings of this study—the four authoring themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, and presented each authoring process and theme with examples and interpretations. In this chapter, I will come back to the theoretical framework introduced in chapters two and three and summarize the connections between play as authoring and children’s imagination, creativity, and their narratives. I will discuss how these aspects serve as a transformative force to support children’s authoring process in play. I will then conclude with a discussion of the significance and implications of this study.

The findings of this study reveal children’s play to be a very complex phenomenon as discussed in chapter six. There is much power dynamics, conflict, contradiction, and possibilities even in these seemingly mundane episodes with children showing attentions and entertaining positions through establishing a microcosm of the world in which they matter. In reflecting back on the theoretical foundation of Vygotsky and Bakhtin’s approach to play, it is essential to reiterate that Vygotsky stresses play as profoundly social. Play originates in the interactions with others and relies on cultural tools that these interactions provide. Bakhtin’s analysis shifts to a conflictual mode. He identifies dialogues and social interactions as sites of
struggles among divergent voices, values, and positions. For both scholars, dialogues and relations are important sources for understanding play. Moreover, from a combined perspective of Vygotsky and Bakhtin merged in the transformative activist stance, children’s play, with its faculty of imagination and creativity, can be understood as an indispensable space in which children simultaneously co-author themselves and the world (cf. Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). We see the co-authoring in the extracts highlighted in chapter six, especially Extract 5, in which Sophie and Rachael co-author shared identities by exploring dimensions of themselves as agentive actors—narrators and authors, and take active positions and stances to exercise authority and claim authorship. That is, children are expansively creating no less than the world in their acts of co-authoring it—including its social structures and processes, its cultural rules and norms, discourses and narratives, tools and resources. In this process, each child becomes a uniquely individual and irreplaceable actor in the social world, with authentic voice and an unrepeatable identity. Play exemplifies a context where complementary interplay of individuality and social belonging, freedom, choice, and obligation is possible. It is in the world that is open-ended, fluid, and infused with imagination and creativity, and thus recreated as a whole each time anew by each individual, that children can be agentive actors who simultaneously co-create and co-author social practices and themselves. In play, every situational constraint can be challenged and changed, rather than faithfully reproduced, so that children gain experience and tools for becoming social actors capable of exercising agency in challenging and contesting “the given” and the taken-for-granted. The following section will discuss how children transcend the “given” and move beyond the hidden gate—that is, through imagination and creativity.

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3 This section draws on from the paper by Stetsenko & Ho (2015).
7.1 Beyond the Hidden Gate: Imagination and Creativity

In regard to imagination and creativity in children’s play, there are questions to consider: How do we define “creativity”? How does creativity generate possibility in everyday life? Does children’s play inform creativity? Vygotsky (2004) notes, “In the everyday life that surrounds us, creativity is an essential condition for existence and all that goes beyond the rut of routine and involves innovation, albeit only a tiny amount owes its existence to the human creative process” (p. 11). In this sense, creativity is an activity that involves not just “being” but also “doing.” It involves two processes, being and becoming: being with uncertainty, and becoming with possibility. Specifically, creativity comes from the interaction between what is within us and what is outside of us. Greene (1995) notes that the spark of creativity is generated from individuals’ transactions with the world. Along with this thought, we could say that creativity is a relational act of transforming ideas into reality. Creativity is “a transformative activity where emotion, meaning, and cognitive symbols are synthesized” (John-Steiner, Connery, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010, p. 12). In considering creativity in the context of children’s play, it is essential to view creativity as a transformative activity through which children constantly engage the world, grow, and develop. In this sense, creativity enables children to move beyond being in flux to realizing possibilities and yet it also introduces the infinite freedom to create one’s own becoming. Vygotsky (2004) identifies that this creative process in children occurs at very early ages:

A child who sits astride a stick and pretends to be riding a horse; a little girl who plays with a doll and imagines she is its mother; a boy who in his games becomes a pirate, a soldier, or a sailor, all these children at play represent examples of the most authentic, truest creativity. Everyone knows what an enormous role imitation plays in children’s play. A child’s play
very often is just an echo of what he saw and heard adults do; nevertheless, these elements of his previous experience are never merely reproduced in play in exactly the way they occurred in reality. A child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desire. (p. 11)

His description highlights that children’s imagination is not separate from daily experiences but becomes a way of creating new meaning and new reality. That is, play is imagination in action (Lindqvist, 2001), a creative process—a realization of imagination, and an expansion of real-life for children. In episodes presented in chapter six, children reproduce pretend roles according to experiences from their real lives, or they directly imitate adult models (Cohen, 2011), such as a teacher (Extract 1), friends (Extract 1, 4), family members (Extract 3), or roles within various occupations (Extract 2).

Overall, creativity is a process of change with imaginative intention in which individuals are contributing their own individuality and further transforming their realities into the freedom of possibility. These realities, however, may be on both an individual and social-cultural plane. Moran and John-Steiner (2003) explain,

Creativity transforms both the creator, through the personal experience of the process, and others, through the impact of new knowledge and innovative artifacts disseminated through culture. By engaging in creative activity, people weave together the transformation of the known and the new into social forms. What makes this activity particularly salient is the sharing of emotions and the transformative power of jointly negotiated meaning making. (p. 72)
In addition, creativity mediates and deepens each individual’s self-experience via passion and commitment. In other words, creativity is a collaborative activity that helps each individual to realize her unique potentials via “being through doing” and participating in activities with individual and collective goals and intentions. From this viewpoint, I would also argue that creativity comes from intentions and desires to express oneself and one’s standpoint. It requires commitment and also takes practice, just as we can observe in children’s play. Given the understanding of creativity as a relational process, the idea of creativity demonstrates how profound is the ability of human beings to adapt and cope within various contexts and to co-construct and co-create the self in the course of development. Creativity enhances and supports the individual’s ability to engage the world, and it fills life with meaningful and dynamic relations, as well as enriching social interactions with deep transformative experiences.

7.2 Play as Storytelling: Narrative in the Making

Stories are rich sources of imagination, creativity, and meaning making. Children make sense of the world by telling stories. Through active participation and collaboration in various activities, young children’s play, storytelling, monologues, and dialogues all serve as transformative tools for learning and development. Children tell stories in various form when they play, when they talk with their peers, and when they interact. Dialogue in play is a story in action that cultivates social, cognitive, and affective processes essential in everyday settings. Similarly, as Paley (1990) argued, “storytelling is play put into narrative form” (p. 4), which affords children the creative expression of ideas and feelings. The experience of narrating—listening to a story and telling a story, and engaging in dialogue—provides a medium in which children construct their own reality and imaginary worlds through words (Nicolopoulou, 2006). They also use their words and stories to interpret these worlds. Spontaneous narrative in the
preschool classroom is an important and engaging activity for young children which empowers them to initiate unique ways of learning and constructing who they are and who they want to be. Children’s everyday classroom narratives can be explored as re-enactments and extensions of the dialogues children experience with others whereby children make sense of the world by constantly re-enacting and constructing their stories across ever-shifting activities (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Children’s play is infused with diverse narrative forms that allow for a creative expression via children’s positionality as actors in their possible worlds that they create. It allows for them to be agents who shape their experiences and understandings of the world. Narratives offer ways for children to explore how to become actors and agents, how to create rather than merely manipulate and re-express their past experiences. Play closely connects to the concept of narrative thinking, which reflects the essence of constructing meaning about the surrounding world through creating a story wherein events and experiences are developed into plotted structures (Bruner, 1990). I also argue that the concept of positionality is an important aspect of meaning-making that serves as a symbolic tool for narrative thinking. In other words, children’s narrative within play represents a way of knowing, being, and becoming.

Storytelling, I believe, is also about elaborating positionality. In play, children learn to author a position, a viewpoint, and ultimately their own uniqueness. Play and narrative are bi-directionally related in the sense that children are constantly re-enacting their positionality across various roles and re-creating and shaping new possibilities. I argue that if we look at play and narrative as one process, instead of searching for the relationship between the two, we might say that we learn to play as storytelling. In this way, we honor children as authors in the roles that they create through the lens of their positionality and the imaginative potential of who they want
to be. As such, the concept of “play as storytelling” helps us to understand play as performance, enactment, and creative activity.

We are not only human beings but also humans doing. It is the same for children—they are actors in their own way and are constantly constructing stories about themselves as agents and authors during their play. The concept of “play as storytelling” suggests that play itself is a form of storytelling that allows children to make sense of different positions, see things differently, and develop alternative ways of making sense of their worlds. As such, play and narrative exist in a dynamic interplay and a process of co-creation through mutual relation. By acknowledging children’s play as a journey, which itself is a story, we honor each child as a storyteller and offer space for their individually unique and collective stories to unfold.

7.3 Play as Authoring: A Dynamic Pathway to Becoming

The power of play releases young children’s possibilities and creativity, and especially empowers them to author their own lives and their own voices so that these voices can be heard. In play, the child is free to create “one’s own world” conceived from one’s own unique viewpoint where one’s stance and voice matter. Children begin to experience diverse positions and roles in which they reflect on how these collide, conflict, and align with those of others. This is also where authoring is initiated and enacted, where conflicts between children and the dynamics of how they face challenge unfold, and learn to resolve or at least to deal with these challenges and to co-create the world in moving beyond the given.

Building on this view, play can be understood to allow children to learn to be themselves in exercising their agency—through answerable and responsible deeds within their shared activities
with the others, evolving from being participants led by others to becoming agentive actors and agents of these activities. Importantly, becoming an agent is about being responsive and also responsible, and thus about authorship—being able to learn how to take positions and make decisions to be an agentive actor, in co-authoring oneself and one’s world. This is why play is so essential and appealing—it helps children to discover how to position themselves and claim authorship in a world that they themselves co-create through the tools of play. Therefore, it is important to explore how authorship is exercised and enacted in and through play through a dialogic process, how children take responsibility and anticipate consequences, how they learn to be aware of limitations, alignments, and contradictions of their stances with those of others in setting the boundaries for what can be done and who they can be. Children learn to become agents with a standpoint and stance through authoring play, for them to gradually begin to contribute to the social practices of their communities by becoming unique agentive actors of our common world and its shared history.

7.4 Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study have potential for direct application in early childhood education. As Stetsenko & Ho (2015) conclude, “in the perspective of Vygotsky and Bakhtin merge in the TAS, the reality of play might be more real than the one we encounter through the lens of passivity and resignation that often applies in our adult lives. This reality is where by imagining, we power the possible into the real and freely co-create ourselves and the world. There is much that children learn in playing, especially in the sense of self-discovery, which is why the value of this truly existential endeavor cannot be overestimated” (p. 233). Indeed, this study suggests that
play creates the space of authoring the world and identities in which children can playfully exercise agency in co-creating their world and themselves in re-experiencing and negotiating their possible selves in relation to others. The key point is about the significance of authoring in children’s evolving positioning manifested in the complex dynamic, dialogic, and transformative dimensions of play at both expressive and creative levels. I expect that this study will encourage a rethinking of educational approaches to learning and play by capitalizing on the significance of seeing children as authors and actors in their own lives. This study is likely to contribute to both theoretical and educational re-conceptualizations of play in children developing as active agents who have the power to transform themselves as creative individuals. My hope is to contribute to the ongoing debates about early childhood education by adding emphasis on new shared understandings and practices of approaching and valuing the humanity of play. Instead of relying only on preparing children for schooling and achieving outcome-based standards or completing core curriculums, we also need to support children’s agency and passion as lifelong learners and co-creators of our common world who sustain the potential for the future.
Final Thoughts

“Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture.”

(Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7)

I have passion for the creativity and possibility that play affords. In my view, play is life; authoring is living. Therefore, play is simply a way that life lives through authoring. This study offers me, and hopefully others including especially early childhood educators and policy makers, an opportunity to value play not for what children appear to be, but for what they express and create in their becoming. I believe that only through play children are empowered to value not only their essence of who they are, but also to actively author themselves in becoming who they are not yet and who they want to become—as an unfolding path of authorship and agency.
APPENDIX A: Play as Authoring Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLAY</th>
<th>NARRATIVE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>Elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Force (Intention)</td>
<td>What</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time (Decision)</td>
<td>When</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space (Attention)</td>
<td>Where</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flow (Progression)</td>
<td>How</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITIONALITY</th>
<th>ACTOR → AGENT → PERSONHOOD</th>
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</thead>
</table>

CREATIVITY
APPENDIX B: Play as Authoring Observation: Processes & Dimensions

**Process 1**  Initiating – **INTENTION**

**Dimension 1 – Role**

- Choose a role / choose a role with clear status: who initiate to choose a role
- Choose a role with power differential/division of roles: how they see themselves in relation to others; is there any dialogic negotiation concerning who is occupying the role
- Taking charge of a role
- Setting rules: who set the rules; who is the leader/follower

**Process 2**  Negotiating – **DECISION**

**Dimension 2 – Differences**

- Building (establishing) boundary—verbal & non-verbal way: claiming space (e.g., don’t enter my space, including or excluding others to enter—such as, this is my store, this is my house…)
- Defending one’s position / arguing in favor of one’s position: resisting intrusion; keeping to certain ideas
- Comparison / perspective taking: Comparing one’s position to others; conflict resolution
- Being in charge: giving directions, controlling the role

**Process 3**  Acknowledging – **ATTENTION**

**Dimension 3 – Power**

- Taking responsibility: one’s offer for others
- Awareness of one’s stand / seeing limitations of one’s position
- Acknowledging other people has a standpoint / be responsive to others’ standpoint
- Knowing where one stands/perspective taking

**Process 4**  Claiming – **PROGRESSION**

**Dimension 4 – Authorship**

- speaking and acting in anticipating of other people’s voice and positions
- Anticipating outcomes
- Exercising authority (defending one’s position)
- Claiming an authorship: correcting others; resistance of direct directions; initiating and controlling the activity; becoming aware of contradiction; flexibility/choice
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Key Questions</th>
<th>Guidance Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROLE / PROJECT</td>
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<td>INITIATING</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choosing a role</td>
<td>What clear status roles do children choose with power differential/division?</td>
<td>Child chooses a role, shows desire and intention to pursue a role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adopting a role</td>
<td>In what ways, do children take control of a role, and how do they see</td>
<td>Child dominates conversation to see how she/he is in relation to others; Child shows the intention of acting role she/he chooseaki in setting play scenarios (e.g., house, bakery)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting scenarios</td>
<td>Who leads/follows?</td>
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<td>DIFFERENCE</td>
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<td>NEGOITATING</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiating</td>
<td>Is there dialogic negotiation over who is occupying a role?</td>
<td>Aware of others’ viewpoints and contradictions, understanding different role possibilities, arguing for one’s position</td>
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<td>other’s standpoint</td>
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<td>Comparison/</td>
<td>When do children negotiate diversity and differences?</td>
<td>Comparing one’s position to others; aware of conflict &amp; contradiction</td>
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<td>awareness of</td>
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<tr>
<td>conflict</td>
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<td>Sharing/ taking</td>
<td>Since when do children initiate turn taking and sharing, withdrawing and</td>
<td>Sharing personal &amp; public space; negotiating attention, turn-taking and mutual relation</td>
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<tr>
<td>turns</td>
<td>resuming?</td>
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<tr>
<td>POWER / RESPONSIBILITY</td>
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<td>ACKNOWLEDGING</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishing</td>
<td>How do children occupy a space (personal, general, and interactional)?</td>
<td>Verbal &amp; non-verbal way, proximity, claiming space (e.g., don’t enter my space, including or excluding others to enter)</td>
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<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>In what way do children create boundaries to exclude or include others</td>
<td>Setting plot rules and limits to establish shared play goals</td>
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<td>Setting rules</td>
<td>(e.g., use of body, space, voice, or tools)?</td>
<td>Establishing a standpoint and position collaboratively and with individual uniqueness, resisting intrusion; maintaining ideas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking a stand</td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving directions; controlling a role; acknowledging one’s position to others; taking control and responsibility; owning power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking charge</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANSWERABILITY /</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AUTHORSHIP</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowing / perspective taking</td>
<td>How do children speak and act in anticipating others’ voices and positions?</td>
<td>Knowing how things look from where one stands</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLAIMING</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anticipating voices and positions</td>
<td>What is the evidence that children are exercising authority?</td>
<td>Being answerable to what’s going on during play; showing active dialogic understanding of a shared goal or issue; predicting the outcome of taking a position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising authority / ownership</td>
<td>How is claiming authorship reflected in how children are doing?</td>
<td>Being in charge; maintaining personal space; holding space for others; taking various perspectives into account; being attuned with other perspectives; shared authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: Play as Authoring Observation Impression Checklist

PLAY CATEGORY (based on POS by Rubin, 2001)

I. Cognitive Play
   A. Functional—simple repetitive motor actions (e.g., pouring water from container to container over and over; jumping on and off the chair).
   B. Constructive—creation with objects (e.g., cutting out clay with cookie cutter).
   C. Fantasy—pretend, make-believe role playing (e.g., using a block as a telephone).
   D. Dramatic—take on a role of someone else, or may be engaged in pretend activity. Some level of initiating and engaging others in play, collaborating and coordinating play with partners, having the same goals during play, reciprocity, questioning and/or commenting on the activity, development of a story plot (or narrative), assignment of roles, creation of rules, and adherence to rules.

II. Social Play
   E. Parallel—children play near others with similar materials but no interaction.
   F. Associative—children are engaged in separate activities than others nearby but interact with each other by exchanging toys and/or commenting on one another’s behaviors.
   G. Cooperative—children are engaged in an activity with others and there is a common goal or purpose to their activity.

III. Non-Play Behavior
   H. Onlooker—to watch (or to listen to) the behaviors and activities of other children.
   I. Hovering—on looking at a close proximity.
   J. Unoccupied Behavior—there is complete lack of goal or focus during this behavior.

KEYWORDS

Authoring—how children learn to author their own life, and their own being and the development of becoming—how children develop into an author, and being an agent, a creative agent through reconstructing and making sense of their experiences in play.

Commitment—how children learn to develop their commitment to what they want to see things happen—this may be the next stage of authoring—because children acknowledge themselves as an author, they also develop an intention of wanting things to go in certain directions, and that’s the standpoint in the sense of activist, commitment to the future.

Re-configuration (role)—to consider how children negotiate their roles with others, and also how the child is positioned in social relationships in their play (re-configuration the “T” to “We”).

Positionality—including the aspects of being (characters), doing (acting out), and becoming (creative enactment). Observation may include the following aspects: a) part—whole; b) breaking boundaries—crossing boundaries; c) embodiment*.

*Embodiment—is not only about physicality, it is also about how children act and experience with the context of interaction. The nature of movement is observed as part of the whole cycle of organic function, and is not separate from sensation, awareness, and relations.
## APPENDIXE: Play as Authoring Observation Impression Checklist / Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Interpreting / Role</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Authoring / Standpoint</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Envisioning / Commitment</th>
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<td>Reproduction ------</td>
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<td>Actor -----------------</td>
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<td>Reconstruction ----</td>
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<td>Agent -----------------</td>
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<td>Becoming ----------------</td>
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<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7 8</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7 8</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
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<td>Category</td>
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<td>Participation ---------</td>
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<td>Engagement -------------</td>
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<td>Meaning Making -----</td>
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<td>Contribution ----------</td>
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<td>Empowerment -------------</td>
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<td>5 6 7 8</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
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<td>1 2 3 4</td>
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<td>Evolving --------------</td>
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<td>Transformation ----------</td>
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<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7 8</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
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<td>Category</td>
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<td>Reflection ---------</td>
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<td>Collaboration --------</td>
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<td>Expansion ---------------</td>
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<td>5 6 7 8</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7 8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Factors

- **Weight (Intention)**
  - Inner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
  - Outer: 8
- **Time (Decision)**
  - Static: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
  - Dynamic: 8
- **Space (Attention)**
  - Occupying: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
  - Empowering: 8
- **Flow Progression**
  - Transmission: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
  - Transformation: 8

### NOTE:
APPENDIX F: A Visual Representation of Authoring Process
APPENDIX G: Permission for Video Taping

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Pi-Chun Grace Ho and I am a student in the Developmental Psychology Ph.D. Program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). I am currently working on my dissertation proposal entitled “Authoring a Life Project of Becoming: Children’s Play, Narrative, and Developing Creativity.” The study is expected to explore how children’s play incorporates elements of meaning-making, imagination, and creativity in making sense of their experiences. I am in the stage of developing a coding system for children’s creative play. I would like permission to videotape three episodes of your child’s play time in the block room, which will allow me to observe and develop a coding scheme for my research.

With your permission, I will be videotaping three play times in the block room over the next few days. The videotaped sessions will not disrupt the normal schedule of the classroom, nor will they require children to participate in any new activities.

Confidentiality of these videotapes will be protected; the names of the children will not be used. Only my advisor, Dr. Anna Stetsenko, and I will view these video clips. All personal or education information regarding any child will remain confidential.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact me at (646) 662-5371 or pho@gc.cuny.edu, or my advisor Anna Stetsenko at (212) 817-8715 or astetsenko@gc.cuny.edu.

The signed form below will be used to document your permission for videotaping your child’s play times. Thank you for your help, and I appreciate your cooperation with my efforts to develop my study.

Sincerely,

Pi-Chun Grace Ho
Developmental Psychology
The Graduate Center, CUNY
E-mail: pho@gc.cuny.edu
Phone: (646)662-5371
PERMISSION SLIP

Child’s Name: ________________________________________________

Please check the appropriate box and sign below

☐ I give permission to videotape my child.

☐ I do not give permission to videotape my child.

Signature of parent or guardian____________________________________________

Date_________________________________________

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Dear Parent(s):

My name is Pi-Chun Grace Ho and I am a student in the Developmental Psychology Ph.D. Program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of this project, entitled “Authoring a Life Project of Becoming: Children’s Play, Narrative, and Developing Creativity.” The study is expected to explore how children’s play incorporates elements of meaning-making, imagination, and creativity in making sense of their experiences. I would like permission to observe your child playing and interacting with his/her peers in the classroom or playroom.

With your permission, I will be spending time in your child’s classroom, observing and videotaping. Children will be videotaped during their 30-minute morning playroom time that is held from 12:00 to 12:30. I plan to videotape approximately twelve sessions. The study will not disrupt the normal schedule of the classroom, nor will it require any participation on the part of children in any new activities.

Confidentiality of the study will be protected; the names of the children will not be used. Videotapes and transcriptions will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, and all the related form and data will be stored and analyzed on a password-protected computer. All the relevant materials will be accessed only by my advisor Dr. Anna Stetsenko and me. Neither names nor any other identifying information will be used in reports or publications resulting from this study.

There are no known risks to your child in participating. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can withdraw your child from the study at any time. Your child has the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. If any unusual event arises during the study, I will immediately discontinue the study and report the situation to you and the CUNY IRB.

Although participation will not directly benefit you or your child, the results of the research will be helpful for continued research on understanding children’s play as an authoring process and how they are related to preschooler’s learning and development at school.

I may publish results of the study, but the names of the participants will not be used in any of the publications, nor will any identifying characteristics. If you would like a copy
of the general results of the study, please let me know and provide me with your address, and I will send you a copy in the future.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at (646) 662-5371 or pho@gc.cuny.edu, or my advisor Anna Stetsenko at (212) 817-8715 or astetsenko@gc.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kay Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 817-7525, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Sincerely,

Pi-Chun Grace Ho
Developmental Psychology
The Graduate Center, CUNY
E-mail: pho@gc.cuny.edu
Phone: (646)662-5371

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Statement of Participant(s)

I have read the description of the research and I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary. I know enough about the purpose, methods, risks and benefits of the research study to judge that I wish to allow my child to take part in it.

I agree that my child may be videotaped as part of the above described research project. (Please circle one): Yes No

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Child’s Name

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Parent’s signature DATE

____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Primary Investigator’s Signature DATE
### APPENDIX I: Frequencies of Each child’s Participation across Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode Number</th>
<th>EL</th>
<th>FE</th>
<th>MA</th>
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