

## Children's Responses to Different Types of Teacher Involvement During Free Play

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*This qualitative study uses secondary data from videos of 11 teachers in community childcare settings to explore the different roles that teachers use to facilitate play and the way children respond to teachers' behaviours within these roles. Results suggest that specific teacher behaviours within the roles they adopt elicit three types of children's responses: ignore/reject, evaluative, and acceptance behaviours. The co-player and play leader roles were often associated with children's acceptance behaviours and were considered more appropriate for teachers to support children's development.*

**Key words:** play; teachers' roles; teacher-child interactions; childcare

Teacher involvement in play has been a long-time debate in early childhood (Han, 2009; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Tarman & Tarman, 2011). Some researchers believe that adults should not interfere in children's play because it disrupts free play and disempowers children (Brown & Freeman, 2001; Spielberger & McLane, 2002), while others support adult involvement in play to enhance learning and the quality of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Vygotsky, 1967). Recent studies support more positive views on teachers' involvement in play and emphasize the importance of teachers' role in facilitating children's learning in play (Enz & Christie, 1997; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013b). As a result of these studies, researchers have found that teachers take on various roles during play. Some teachers are more successful at facilitating children's play; others struggle to engage children in play or support learning through play. It is useful for teachers to know what kinds of roles they can adopt to support children's play. This calls for more

research on teachers' roles in play and children's responses to the teachers' roles. The current study expands the previous literature by examining the children's responses in depth in relation to the different functions of the teachers' roles during play.

## Theoretical Framework

The present study was guided by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development and Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) concept of scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) states that the zone of proximal development consists of the difference between what children can do on their own and what they can accomplish with some support. The guidance that a child receives from adults or more competent peers to reach their maximum potential is known as "scaffolding" (Wood et al., 1976). When a child is able to perform elements of a task alone, the adult gradually withdraws support and lets the child act more independently. This kind of adult intervention and guidance can be helpful for children to expand their knowledge and learning during play. These concepts set the stage to better understand the process of teacher-child interactions during play.

## Play and Early Development

Play represents the core of young children's activities during childhood. It is a universal activity that has been categorized by the United Nations (1989) as a right for children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Play has been studied in diverse contexts, and the importance of play in the early years has widely been documented in different developmental domains (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Vygotsky, 1930/2004). Researchers have stated that play promotes social competence, academic performance, confidence, self-regulation, and management of emotions and behaviours (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008). It is also an important vehicle for developing language, cognition, and social competence (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Consistent with Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development, Roskos and Christie (2011) argue that play itself becomes a tool that children use on their own to reach greater levels of cognitive functioning. Likewise, during play children have opportunities to spontaneously express specific needs that arise during the preschool years and is important for their development (Vygotsky, 1967). Play, free play in particular, has been shown to offer valuable opportunities to cognitively challenge children (Gest, Holland-Coviello, Welsh, Eicher-Catt, & Gill, 2006). All these aspects highlight the importance of play in the early years and place it as one of the principles of developmentally appropriate practice, as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009).

However, in the current era of standards-driven education, the role of play in the classroom is a topic of debate. On one side of this argument, play is conceived as essential for children to learn and develop, while an opposite view argues that learning has its basis in different influences, such as direct instruction and adult modelling. According to the latter point of view, play should not be an important focus at school and should be left to entertain children at home. A third perspective tries to reconcile these two positions by supporting the notion of equifinality, which means that different paths can lead to the same outcome; proponents of this perspective argue that play is one of multiple processes that influence learning and development (Lillard et al., 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2010).

Although experts agree that play is important for development across a variety of domains, there is less agreement about the mechanisms through which play has an impact. Lillard et al. (2013) conducted a comprehensive literature review on pretend play and its relationship to different domains of development (e.g., language, executive function) that generated a debate among play researchers. Lillard and colleagues reported that play most likely has a causal relation with language and a possible causal link with reasoning, emotion regulation, and narrative.

These researchers also discussed a number of methodological flaws in previous research, and argued that further research is needed to clarify this relationship. Different play scholars have since critiqued their literature review. For instance, Bergan (2013) states that their choice of studies that used dramatic play to draw conclusions was questionable, since many of these studies did not use pretend play in a genuine way. Likewise, Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2013a) argue that, given the complexity of the play construct, it should be studied through different methodological approaches, including qualitative studies, and should not be limited to experimental studies. Walker and Gopnik (2013) also argue that Lillard et al. (2013) did not provide the basis for future research on the relationship between pretend play and development, and suggest that “counterfactual reasoning” (i.e., related to causality learning) was related to pretend play. To better understand the relationship between play and development, more research is needed, particularly studies employing a greater breadth of methodologies.

## Teachers’ Role in Children’s Play

Vygotsky (1967) viewed play as a context for socially assisted learning and scaffolding where children, with adult assistance, can perform on a higher level than their current developmental level. Teachers not only have an important role in promoting and supporting children’s play activities in the classroom by defining different contexts and activities children will be exposed to, but also have the opportunity to use play to enhance children’s development. Researchers have examined teacher–child interactions during play and have identified different roles by which teachers enhance or disrupt children’s play (Johnson et al., 2005; Kontos, 1999; Meacham, Vukelich, Han, & Buell, 2013, 2014; Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015). Johnson et al. (2005) divide these roles into two groups: precarious roles (e.g., uninvolved, director, and redirector) and facilitative roles (e.g., onlooker, stage manager, co-player, and play leader). The facilitative roles seem to generate positive responses from children, while the precarious roles are either uninvolved or disrupt children’s play (Johnson et al., 2005). Vu, Han, and Buell (2015) examined the effects of the teacher roles on the quality of children’s play. They found that higher levels of teacher engagement as a co-player or play leader were linked to more cognitively complex play (e.g., sociodramatic play) and a higher level of social play (e.g., cooperative play). Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) also examined teachers’ support to children’s needs during play. They found that a good fit in adult–child play interactions often led to children’s independent play, but a poor fit in adult–child interactions did not. These studies highlight the need to inform teachers how to facilitate children’s play. A few other studies have also looked at teachers’ facilitative roles during play (Kontos, 1999; Meacham et al., 2013); however, to date, there is little research on children’s responses to teachers’ roles. The current study tries to expand the literature by studying in more depth the functions of teachers’ roles in relation to the child’s responses.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the functions of different roles that teachers assume to facilitate children’s play and to examine children’s responses to teachers’ behaviours within different roles. Our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What roles do teachers adopt during children’s free play, and how are these roles used?
2. How do children respond to teachers’ facilitation during free play, and what kinds of teacher behaviours elicit those responses?

## Method

### *Participants*

The study used video data collected from an earlier project (see Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015, for original study

description). Participants were 11 teachers working in three different childcare centres and the children in their classrooms. Two private centres were located in a suburban area and one nonprofit childcare centre was located in an urban area in a mid-Atlantic state in the US. The 11 teachers were randomly selected from the 30 original participants to be videotaped in their classrooms. Of the 11 teachers, six were lead teachers in their classrooms, two were administrators who were certified teachers and were also teaching at the time, two were teaching assistants, and one was an intern. Participants had between three and 28 years of experience teaching in an early childhood setting, and were all female. The children observed in these classrooms were preschool-aged boys and girls between 3 and 5 years of age.

### *Procedure*

This study was approved by an institutional review board, and both teachers and parents signed the appropriate consent form before the videotaping. Teachers were videotaped indoors during free play and/or free centre time, and were asked to behave as they normally would. Teachers wore a wireless microphone to better capture their speech and the voices of the children they were interacting with. Approximately 30 consecutive minutes of video were analyzed for each teacher. Although the number of children present in each classroom when the videotaping took place ranged from four to over 15, teachers often interacted with four or fewer children at any given time. All videos were transcribed verbatim by the first author and later reviewed by two graduate students for accuracy. In cases where audio content could not be understood, utterances were transcribed as inaudible content.

### *Data Analysis*

The current study used qualitative analysis and was guided by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach, where different research procedures (e.g., coding phases) were followed to allow new conceptual categories to emerge from the data. Given that little is known about children's responses to teachers' involvement and roles during play, grounded theory was suitable for this exploratory study. The coding process is described below.

**Teachers' roles.** An event-sampling technique (Reis & Gable, 2000) was used to capture the events in which teachers interacted with children during play. Each video was broken into play and nonplay events (e.g., academic or routine activities). A play event consisted of a period of time that met two criteria based on the work of Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005): (1) the episode presented a combination of indicators of play (i.e., nonliterality, free choice, process orientation, and positive affect); and (2) the teacher assumed one of the categories of teachers' roles during play (i.e., onlooker, stage manager, co-player, play leader, director, and redirector). A play event started when the teacher assumed a specific role and ended when the teacher transitioned to a different role or if the play indicators were no longer present. The nonplay events consisted of periods of time in which there were no indicators of play (e.g., academic activity taking place), and/or the teacher was doing a different activity and was not engaged in children's play. Once the videos were broken into events, the teacher's role codes were assigned to each event and the main teachers' characteristics in each role were identified. The first author was in charge of the coding process. A trained graduate student also coded 25% of the data (i.e., identifying play events and assigning teachers' roles). To ensure consistency in the coding, a process of intercoder reliability was performed, and a kappa value of .83 was obtained. This value met the standards for good agreement (i.e., .65 or higher) as suggested by Landis and Koch (1977). If there were discrepancies in the coding process between the researcher and the graduate student, they discussed the case until a consensus was reached.

**Children's responses.** Audiovisual data were analyzed through the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as well as through open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the open coding phase, videos were observed to identify teachers' behaviours and children's responses when interacting with the



## Results

### *Functions of Teachers' Roles*

A total of 261 play events and 78 nonplay events were identified. On average, teachers spent 66.9% of the coded 30 minutes involved in children's play. All 11 teachers engaged in nonplay activities (ranging from two to ten nonplay events) at some point during the 30 minutes. The nonplay events included episodes in which teachers were observed talking to another adult (e.g., talking to a parent who came into the classroom), doing academic activities (e.g., patterns at a centre table), helping children with routine activities (e.g., washing hands), organizing material and planning activities, talking on the phone, eating, or doing paperwork.

In the play events, teachers assumed one of the play roles (i.e., onlooker, stage manager, co-player, play leader, director, or redirector). Two kinds of play were observed within the play events: sociodramatic and constructive play. The number of events and the amount of time teachers spent in each role showed a consistent pattern (see Table 1). The most popular role among the teachers was the onlooker (42.5% of the events,  $N = 11$ ), followed by the stage manager (24.2%,  $N = 10$ ), the co-player (15.3%,  $N = 7$ ), the director (8.8%,  $N = 6$ ), the play leader (6.5%,  $N = 6$ ), and the redirector (2.7%,  $N = 4$ ).

*Table 1. Total Number of Play Events and Amount of Time Teachers Spent in Each Role*

Role	Number of events	% of events	Duration of events in seconds	% time of play events
Onlooker	111	42.5%	5701	43.1%
Stage manager	63	24.2%	3616	27.3%
Co-player	40	15.3%	2070	15.6%
Play leader	17	6.5%	599	4.6%
Director	23	8.8%	1079	8.1%
Redirector	7	2.7%	169	1.3%
Total	261	100%	13234	100

**Onlooker.** When assuming the onlooker role, teachers were not actively involved in children's play although they assumed an observer position. Some of the functions within this role included teachers monitoring children's play, commenting or giving directions to children such as "don't touch that" or "be careful" (usually from a distance and related to safety), and engaging in verbal interaction with children by getting close to them and asking questions about the play. For example, while observing children play, Ms. Elise got closer to the group. Without entering the children's play, Ms. Elise was able to find out about what children were doing by asking, "What are you guys making?" After children told her they were making ice cream, Ms. Elise provided positive comments validating their play: Ms. Elise: "Ice cream? Very cool, very cool! [...] It looks like a yummy ice cream." In many events, verbal interactions between teachers and children started with children approaching the teacher to ask play-related questions, seek her approval, or ask her to join them in the play.

**Stage manager.** Unlike the onlooker role, teachers who assumed the stage manager role played an active role by helping the children without being involved in the children's play itself. While in this role, most teachers helped children prepare play props and materials and introduced theme ideas. For instance, in a play event Ms. Kelly helped the children make tickets to go to the carnival. After a child asked her to spell "Ferris wheel" and to write it on the ticket, they started discussing what tickets should be used for. When in this role, teachers also dealt with conflicts between players or helped a child resolve a problem. For example, one conflict occurred while Ms. Gabrielle was helping the children find the right pieces for playing house. Gia asked Lara multiple times if she could have a person, and Lara did not want to share. It was at this point when Ms. Gabrielle intervened: "Is [sic] there other people? Lara, you can't have all the people. Can you share a couple people with Gia? ... Lara, you can't have all four. Wouldn't it be nice if you share?" After going back and forth for a little while, Lara finally shared with Gia.

Multiple conversations between children and teachers happened while teachers were serving as stage managers. Conversations usually were related to the play material or play theme and in many cases were transferred outside the play context to real-life situations.

**Co-player.** This type of role was most frequent in sociodramatic play in which teachers played a minor role, such as being the customer in a restaurant setting or the patient when playing doctor's office. Teachers did not control the play plots but rather followed the children's lead. In manipulative pretend play, they often adopted equal roles with the children by being similar characters (e.g., students and teachers were all dinosaurs, or trucks). The following excerpt illustrates how a teacher adopted a co-player role in sociodramatic play while playing restaurant. Ms. Deb was sitting on a table and Rose was cooking for her and serving the food. After Ms. Deb finished eating, Rose brought her a drink and went back to the kitchen. When Rose came back to the table she asked, "Where is the tea?":

Ms. Deb: I don't know. Where did my sweet tea go?

Rose: You get sweet tea. [Grabs a new cup, and looks at it in detail] It's a coffee cup! Do you want coffee?

Ms. Deb: Umm

Rose: That's the only thing we have.

Ms. Deb: Well, can you put ice in it?

Rose: We don't have any ice.

Ms. Deb: You don't have ice? All right, I'll drink it hot.

In the above excerpt, Ms. Deb was actively involved in children's sociodramatic play, taking on a minor role (the major role in the scene was being played by the child). Although the child led the episode, the teacher took an active role and made comments and demands within her character. In some other cases it was possible to see teachers breaking character to provide some suggestions for the play, which the children either accepted or rejected. However, most of the time they were engaged in conversations within the play context. It was also observed in some events that as soon as the teacher stopped engaging as a co-player, children engaged in fewer verbal interactions and the level of social and cognitive play was also lower. When teachers assumed a co-player role, they usually caught the attention of other children who were not interacting with them, who asked to join the play or tried to get the teacher involved in their play.

**Play leader.** In this role, teachers tried to influence children's play by providing ideas and themes that helped their play. In many cases, teachers still adopted a minor or equal role in the play. Usually the ideas suggested by the teachers were novel and attractive to the children, and in many cases were related to real-life experiences (e.g., being stuck in traffic, going through a drive-thru, doing an x-ray). By doing this, teachers were able to introduce specific vocabulary that was soon used by the children.

The following example shows how teachers adopting the play leader role introduced a little twist to the play that opened the possibilities of a new plot, and therefore kept the play alive. The children and Ms. Lauren were pretending the chairs were cars. They had been playing for a while when Ms. Lauren transitioned from the co-player role to the play leader role.

Cait: We have to go past the gate so we can go back home.

Ms. Lauren: Oh! We're going back home? Okay, good, 'cause I'm hungry, I'm hungry. Who's cooking? Who's cooking tonight?

Cait: Me!

Ms. Lauren: Cait, you're cooking for us? Oh, good! 'Cause we're coming over. [to Cynthia] I hope she makes something good.

Cynthia: She is gonna make cupcakes.

Ms. Lauren: Are you making cupcakes? Oh! Thank goodness! I love cupcakes.

Cynthia: That's good! We can take a piece of the cupcake.

Ms. Lauren: I wonder what kind she is making.

Cynthia: We're making yellow cupcakes.

In this episode, the teacher followed the child's lead but added a new idea that changed the course of the play and got the children excited again. As seen with the co-player role, the teacher's play leader role was observed most often in sociodramatic play. In a few events, teachers adopted the play leader role to suggest interactions among children.

**Director.** Teachers who adopted this role were often overinvolved in children's play. They tended to control children's actions, and sometimes the play scripts, by telling them exactly what to do or say. For instance, in one of the events, Ms. Danielle was asking Michael to come on the table to play with her: "I need you to come and sit with me, buds, you have to help me build a roller coaster. Let me get these pieces over here." In this case, the teacher explicitly told the child what to do, therefore limiting his "free choice" options.

**Redirector.** In this role, teachers usually interrupted children's play by shifting their attention to other topics or activities. In some cases, teachers tried to reinforce academic concepts, such as numbers, colours, language, or other concepts in a way that was not opportune for the moment. For example, while building a roller coaster with a child, a teacher started reviewing prepositions by emphasizing up and down with the marbles, not the roller coaster cars, and breaking the pretend context (i.e., marbles were no longer roller coaster wagons) to reinforce academic concepts. In this case, the child's play was disturbed and they did not go back to the original plot.

### *Children's Responses to Teachers' Behaviours Within Different Roles*

Some of the general teachers' behaviours that elicited a response from children were identified through an initial screening of the data. In such cases, teachers were usually asking questions; providing comments, suggestions, and directions; evaluating children's behaviours and ideas; introducing new material; helping children organize their play; or resolving conflicts. These behaviours were linked to one or multiple roles as described in the previous section. Children's responses were identified and grouped in three major categories: reject/ignore, evaluative, and acceptance behaviours.

**Reject/ignore behaviours.** These behaviours implicated the lowest level of receptiveness from the child toward a teacher's behaviours or suggestions. Children either showed no response to the teacher or turned down the teacher's input or actions. Based on the events observed, some of the possible reasons for these responses include teachers asking multiple different questions in a short period of time, not being physically close to the child when making comments or asking questions, being overinvolved in children's play, giving directions and commands that required children to stop playing in the way they were doing it, presenting materials or ideas that were not of the child's interest, and providing inputs that had no apparent relevance for the children. Two different types of behaviours were identified within this category: reject and ignore behaviours.

**Reject.** These behaviours consisted of children verbally turning down teachers' input or disapproving of teachers' actions. For example, a child verbally rejected the teacher's suggestions when playing potato heads. Ms. Kelly said: "We need more pieces, don't we? Like mouths and stuff." Ryan responded, "No we don't." Some nonverbal expressions of rejection, such as saying "no" with head shaking, were also observed.

**Ignore.** Children who presented these behaviours often continued playing without paying attention to what the teacher was doing or saying. This occurred even if the teacher was asking questions or making comments directed to the specific child.

Although reject/ignore behaviours were observed in response to all the teachers' roles at some point, most of them occurred when the teacher was adopting the onlooker role, asking questions or making comments from an observer perspective. These types of responses were also frequent in the directive role, when teachers were trying to convince children to do something. Teachers approached various children who either rejected or ignored their input. However, they often ended up finding a different child who did not engage in reject/ignore behaviours with whom they could start an active interaction. It was also seen that teachers did not give up easily when children ignored them; they tended to keep repeating questions or comments until a child answered them. Rejection was sometimes accompanied by anger and frustration from children.

**Evaluative behaviours.** Children who presented these behaviours were more receptive to the teachers' involvement than children with reject/ignore responses. However, they still did not completely accept teachers' input or actions, or it took them time to incorporate teachers' suggestions into their play. Some of the possible observed reasons for these children's responses include teachers giving ideas that were not related to children's play plot and did not seem to convince the children, or teachers providing multiple different inputs in a short period of time. Evaluative behaviours were frequently observed when the teacher took an active role, especially in the co-player and director roles. Two subcategories were identified for this category: children either resisting or questioning teachers' behaviours.

**Resist.** Children with this type of response resisted doing what the teacher asked or suggested they do. Resistance behaviours often were resolved through subsequent acceptance or rejection behaviours. In the case of resolving as acceptance behaviours, some children provided a negative verbal response to the teacher's input but still performed

the action suggested, though with some level of initial resistance. In the case of resistance behaviours resolving in rejection behaviours, the initial resistance later turned into a clear rejection. For instance, while playing dolls, Ms. Diana asked Rachel if she put some sunscreen on the doll's face. Rachel touched the doll's face and paused for a minute, then said "no" to the teacher. Even though Ms. Diana kept insisting, Rachel continued to resist the teacher's idea.

**Question.** Children sometimes questioned teachers' ideas by responding to the teacher's idea with a question (e.g., repeating the teacher's idea in a tone that was actually a question). The next example illustrates the case of a child who was questioning the teacher while she adopted the directive role:

Ms. Amy: Come here, Brick, let's make your elephant a house.

Brick: Oh! We ... we got to make him a house?

Ms. Amy: Yeah.

Brick: This is the house we're gonna make?

Ms. Amy: Yeah, put it on the [inaudible]

Instead of rejecting or accepting the teacher's idea, Brick started asking questions, with a tone that suggested he was not convinced about what the teacher was suggesting. Resistance behaviours usually resolved with children adopting either rejection or acceptance responses.

**Acceptance behaviours.** In these behaviours, children showed a high level of reception by following teachers' directions, responding to their questions, comments, and suggestions, and incorporating their ideas. In some cases, they went even further by building on the teachers' input and proposing new ideas, or assuming roles connected to the teachers' input. Some of the teachers' behaviours that were often linked to these responses included teachers showing interest in children's play; taking an active role in children's play; providing ideas, questions, comments, suggestions, and materials aligned with the play; incorporating real-life experiences related and pertinent to the play; letting children take an active role; or catching children's interest and attention. These types of responses from children were present across all the teachers' roles, but were observed more frequently in the co-player and play-leader roles. Three subcategories of acceptance behaviours were identified: respond, incorporate, and build on.

**Respond.** Children provided either a verbal answer or a nonverbal expression accepting or validating teachers' input or behaviour. This response was not followed up by an action related to the input. An example of this subcategory included children expressing that the teacher's idea was a good idea, but not subsequently incorporating it in their play.

**Incorporate.** The child could either provide or not provide a verbal answer, but they responded to teachers with actions. These children often incorporated teachers' ideas into their play and followed teachers' directions. For instance, while playing with houses and little people, Emma was looking for furniture for her house. Ms. Amy was helping the children to find the different elements for their play. When Emma grabbed a chair, Ms. Amy asked: "Why don't you try one of your persons to sit on that chair, Emma? See if one of your people could sit in that chair."

Emma, without looking or saying anything to the teacher, grabbed a person and sat it on the chair.

**Build on.** In this subcategory the children accepted the teachers’ input or behaviour and went beyond that with a proactive response. For instance, based on the teachers’ input, children provided new ideas for their play or came up with alternative uses for the material. It was often the case that children not only adopted the roles implied by the teachers, but also incorporated novel vocabulary. The following situation is an example of this subcategory.

While playing cars, the teacher introduced a new truck, a tow truck.

Ms. Lilly: Does anybody need a tow?

Pete: I need a tow.

Ms. Lilly: I’ll be right back to get your car.

Ryan: I’m a tow truck.

Ms. Lilly: All right, it’s parked right here. Oh, there’s another tow truck out here. Where is your car, Ryan? I came to get it.

Ryan: Now I’m a tow car.

Ms. Lilly: Okay.

Ryan: We’re tow cars.

Ms. Lilly: John, I’ll look and see if your car is fixed and I’ll bring it back to you.

Ryan: Here, I’m bringing that one.

Ms. Lilly: Oh! You wanna bring it back to him? All right, go ahead.

Ryan: I’m bringing the car back to you.

In this case, Ryan not only accepted the teacher’s idea in the play, but he also incorporated it into his own role and built on it. He adopted the tow car role and was able to assume its functions while using the appropriate vocabulary.

*Continuum of Receptiveness Toward Teachers’ Behaviours*

The identified children’s responses were conceived as a continuum of receptiveness, from most resistant to most receptive toward the behaviours of teachers during play (see Figure 2). On the highly receptive end of the continuum, children not only accept teachers’ behaviours, but also extend teachers’ input and build on it. In the centre of this continuum are evaluative behaviours in which children neither reject nor accept teachers’ behaviours right away. Rather, children first take some time to process and evaluate teachers’ inputs and behaviours. The reject/ignore behaviours represent low levels of receptiveness toward teachers’ input.

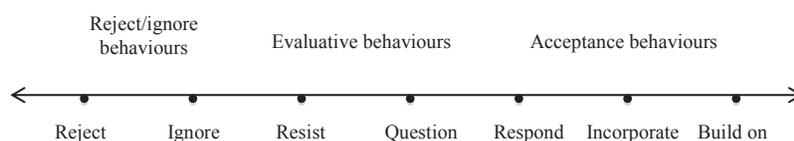


Figure 2. Continuum of receptiveness toward teachers’ behaviours.

Although each of the teachers’ roles elicited different responses along the continuum at some point, certain child responses were observed more often when teachers adopted certain roles. For instance, the acceptance behaviours were observed more often when teachers adopted the play leader and the co-player role, while the onlooker role seemed to be linked to more ignoring behaviours from children. Table 2 summarizes teachers’ behaviours (i.e., behaviours that elicit children’s responses), children’s behaviours (i.e., the three categories of responses identified), and the roles in which these were observed more frequently. It is important to note that although certain behaviours are associated with specific roles, it does not mean that they were not present in the other roles at some point.

*Table 2. Teachers’ Behaviours Within Roles and Children’s Responses*

	<b>Onlooker</b>	<b>Stage manager</b>	<b>Co-player</b>	<b>Play leader</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Redirector</b>
<b>Reject/ignore</b>						
Asking many questions	X	X				
Not being physically close to the child	X					
Being overinvolved					X	
Providing multiple directions and commands	X	X			X	
Providing ideas of no interest to the child	X	X				X
<b>Evaluative</b>						
Providing ideas not convincing the child			X		X	
Providing substantial input in a short period of time			X		X	
<b>Acceptance</b>						
Showing interest in children’s play	X	X	X	X	X	
Taking an active role			X	X	X	
Providing input related to children’s play	X	X	X	X		
Incorporating real-life experiences into play	X	X	X	X		
Letting children take an active role			X	X		
Catching children’s interest and attention	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Discussion**

The present study supports the idea that play should constitute a main context where children can learn and develop skills in the classroom. Although we recognize the importance of children having free play time without any adult

intervention in different contexts, including the classroom, we consider that adults' participation in children's play can be very beneficial for both the child and the adult if the appropriate setting and goals are identified. The current study focused on looking at teachers' different roles during children's play within the classroom, putting a special emphasis on children's responses to the teachers' involvement. This study builds on previous literature on the different roles of teachers during play.

We found that the teachers use different roles for many different purposes. In the current study, teachers spent more time involved in roles that were considered to facilitate children's play, engaging in specific behaviours that supported children's play. For instance, teachers in the onlooker role were able to monitor children's play and switch to an active role when necessary in order to support children's play. Teachers in the stage manager role assisted children with their play props, themes, and materials and helped resolve conflicts between players. Johnson et al. (2005) present these teachers' roles in a continuum of engagement, with the onlooker role being the role with least engagement in the involvement category. In the current study, most teachers spent the majority of their time in the onlooker role. This might suggest two different interpretations which need further research to unpack. One simple interpretation could be that teachers had a relatively low level of engagement in children's play. On the other hand, it might mean that teachers are more careful not to intervene in children's play when the children do not need support from the teacher. These results differ from Kontos's study (1999), which reported that Head Start teachers spent most of their time in the stage manager role during free play time. Perhaps this variation between findings might be linked to changes in educational context, such as the standards movement in early childhood education, lack of emphasis on play today, differences between community childcare centres and Head Start, or personal characteristics of the teachers in this study.

Furthermore, Fler (2015), although she did not refer to the teachers' roles described in this study, found that teachers spent most of their time outside children's imaginary play but often focused on learning outcomes in the play context. It appears to be common for teachers to not enter children's imaginary play episodes. However, our findings suggest that when teachers assumed the co-player and play leader roles (i.e., being inside the play), children tended to have more social interactions with peers, shifting from solitary and parallel play to higher social levels of play, such as cooperative behaviours. Vu, Han, and Buell (2015) found similar results in regard to teachers' roles. When teachers assumed the play leader, stage manager, and co-player roles, children showed higher social levels in their play, as well as greater cognitive complexity, reflected in more sociodramatic play episodes. This type of play, along with games with rules, requires children to achieve a level of representation and abstraction that is not necessary for higher levels of play (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). There seem to be benefits for children when teachers take on an active role inside their play, as children tend to use certain cognitive and social skills linked to their learning processes. Furthermore, the literature suggests that when teachers adopt a role in children's play, they are able to model children's play episodes by adding complexity to the narrative of the play, extending stories, helping children resolve conflicts within the play plot, as well as supporting specific learning goals and skills aligned with the play episode from within the play (Fler, 2015; Hakkarainen, Brédikyté, Jakkula, & Munter, 2013).

Nevertheless, it is also known that inappropriate or too much teacher engagement can disrupt children's play (Johnson et al., 2005). Teachers need to understand children's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and provide scaffolding when they need it. In the current study, teachers adopted the director role more than the play leader role, often being overinvolved and disrupting the play when they tried to participate. Higher levels of engagement are not necessarily the best way to support children's play.

The current study also found a continuum of children's responses toward teachers' behaviours that ranged from

low receptiveness (i.e., reject/ignore) to high receptiveness (i.e., acceptance and building on). The highest level of receptiveness in this continuum involved children going beyond the teachers' input to accomplish something specific (e.g., engaging in more socially and cognitively complex play). These behaviours were often observed when the teacher took on play leader and co-player roles. This finding suggests that when teachers adopt the roles linked to play-sensitive behaviours (e.g., providing verbal interventions related to the play plot, showing interest in children's play, helping with materials and ideas), they are able to advance children's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher's role during play is helping the child reach levels that they might not be able to achieve without this guidance. Findings from this study are partially aligned with the results from Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) in recognizing the importance of adequate involvement in children's play in order to elicit specific behaviours from children, since in their study, when teachers responded to children's needs, children were able to engage in more independent play as a result.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

Our findings indicate the need to educate teachers about the different ways they can interact with children during play and the roles they can take on to better support children's play while enhancing their learning. When participating in children's play episodes, it is important for teachers to know when and how to get involved. Teachers' interventions should be genuine and aligned with the dynamics of the play and with children's interests in order to elicit more positive responses from children and to be able to scaffold their learning and development through play. Providing professional development opportunities, such as play-focused training, would help inform in-service and preservice teachers of the importance of the different types of interactions and the roles they can assume with children during play in the classroom in order to elicit positive responses from children and maximize the benefits of these interactions. Such is the case of adopting facilitative roles without intruding and overstepping in children's play. If children show more positive responses to teachers' facilitative roles, it could strength their interactions with teachers and peers and could help bring the complexity of the play to a higher level, given that the interests of all the people involved are aligned. The results of the current study could therefore provide more evidence to help teachers consider play as an optimal scenario within the classroom to support the skills needed for children's school success.

The current study also comes with some limitations. For instance, this study was conducted with a relatively small sample of teachers from childcare settings, and the data represent only a single observation of the teachers. Having more than one observation would be ideal to ensure that the behaviours found to characterize the teachers were not specific to the day these videos were recorded. The potential for reactivity could also be a limitation. The fact that teachers were conscious that they were being recorded may have affected their behaviour. There was also variation in the type of teachers' qualifications, which may have influenced teachers' knowledge and the roles they adopted when interacting with children during play. Further, children's personalities and temperaments are additional considerations that could be addressed in future studies.

Future research should consider the development of an instrument to identify and classify teachers' behaviours and children's responses in a natural setting. A replication of the study in a different context, such as a Head Start centre, may help provide clarity to the particularities of the community childcare setting. Differences and/or similarities found across distinct types of childcare settings would help generalize findings and provide insights into the unique needs of certain centres. Given the important role that play has in the classroom and the different types of teacher-child interactions that can take place during play episodes, it is important to continue to explore this area of study to help teachers identify distinct ways of enhancing children's learning through play.

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