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SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

The Role of Dramatic Tension in Playworlds: Bridging Drama Pedagogy and Play Research in Preschool



ABSTRACT

Play is a central activity in early childhood education, and preschool teachers are increasingly expected to initiate, participate in and sustain play as active participants in children's play. However, research indicates that maintaining playworlds over time presents particular challenges, especially when the play begins to falter. Drawing on a four-year play development project in a Swedish municipality, this article examines how dramatic tension can serve as a pedagogical tool in playworlds.

This study is grounded in cultural-historical play theory and drama theory, and utilises participant observation, teacher interviews, reflective logs and constructed vignettes. Two analytical vignettes illustrate how different uses of teacher-in-role, improvisation and status positioning can either sustain or dissolve shared imaginative engagement.

The findings suggest that dramatic tension should be understood not only as a feature of narrative content but also as a didactic and dramaturgical tool that preschool teachers can actively shape into playful action. When teachers make conscious choices regarding role, status, ambivalence and relational positioning, dramatic tension can be distributed and extended over time, enabling playworlds to deepen. The article argues that knowledge of dramatic tension may constitute a core competence for early childhood educators working with playworlds.

Keywords:

playworlds; dramatic tension; teacher-in-role; drama pedagogy; early childhood education

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Introduction

Play is a leading activity in early childhood education and in the Swedish Preschool Curriculum, Lpfö 18: revised 2025 (Skolverket, 2025). Preschool teachers are encouraged not only to value children's play but also to actively engage in, initiate and extend play. This expectation can present a pedagogical dilemma. When teachers engage in playworlds without access to dramaturgical and performative tools for shaping dramatic tension, sustaining the play and the shared imaginative engagement over time may become challenging. This occurs even when teachers enter playworlds with enthusiasm, for example, by using teacher-in-role, but without access to the "recharging tools". When dramatic tension is not recognised as a pedagogical resource, the loss of energy may be perceived as a natural closure rather than an opportunity for further imaginative development.

This article is based on a four-year play development project in a Swedish municipality, conducted across several preschools introducing *playworlds*. Playworlds is a cultural-historical approach in which children and adults co-create imaginary worlds, often based on a narrative or book with existential questions at its core, engaging all ages (Lindqvist, 1995). The aim of the project was to revitalise imaginative play and role-taking among both children and teachers. This was achieved through play networks, international exchanges for some of the teachers, and in-service courses entitled *Play, drama and role-taking* for other groups of teachers. Research was conducted over the four years in various forms, including participant observation, interviews with individuals and groups, and teacher logs. According to preschool management, the project has resulted in "They play like never before!" and a richer play culture, which in turn has contributed to the development of social sustainability between children and adults within the preschool community.

The article presents findings from participant observation research and preschool teachers' reflective logs, focusing primarily on how preschool staff use drama and role-taking as pedagogical tools when initiating and participating in playworlds. Two analytical vignettes from the research context exemplify the dynamic interplay between teacher participation and the sustaining of imaginative engagement. The article also considers how the concept of *dramatic tension* might enrich education and research on play and playworlds.

Theoretical background

Playworlds and Cultural-historical Play Theory

Playworlds are a pedagogical practice grounded in the aesthetic theory developed by the Swedish play researcher Gunilla Lindqvist (1995; 1996), which draws on her interpretation of Vygotsky's theory of play, imagination, and the psychology of art (Vygotsky, 1930/1995; 1967). Within playworlds, children and adults jointly explore moral, emotional, and existential questions through collaborative action. By becoming co-creators of play cultures, all participants in a playworld contribute something unique to enrich the play. According to Lindqvist (1995), children bring their play skills, while adults contribute with arts and science. Often, when this is mentioned, art is exemplified by books, poems, or narratives that serve as the backdrop or framework for the playworld and as sources of inspiration for its content.

Play competence

To be able to participate in playworlds, preschool teachers must understand what it means to be a play partner with children. Being a play partner and co-creator involves not only responding to children's play initiatives but also engaging from within the play and showing a genuine interest in exploring its content. Simultaneously, the teacher must also consider another perspective, which Brèdikyté (2022), following Kravtsov and Kravtsova, refers to as double subjectivity. Double subjectivity means that the teacher should act not only as a play partner but also as a play guide from within the role. While immersed in the play, the teacher must be ready to advance the play if the children run out of ideas. This dual role can be both challenging and more difficult than anticipated without access to dramaturgical tools, as confirmed by playworld research, including the work of Fleer (2015) and Brèdikyté (2022).

Improvising in role is the most critical challenge for teachers when introducing narrative playworlds, and it remains an under-researched area, according to Brèdikyté (2022) and Devi et al. (2018). The transition from being a responsible teacher, fulfilling societal duties, to becoming a play partner and guide within the play is a significant and demanding step. We observe the same critical point in part of our material, although we address it differently from Brèdikyté.

Brèdikyté suggests that this competence, rooted in double subjectivity, can only be developed through continuous participation in children's play.



While a piece of costume can serve as a simple and effective reminder to stay in role, our material suggests that it does not sustain or deepen the play for much longer.

While we agree with this to some extent, we argue that the knowledge required to be a play partner and guide must be based on more than personal experience of playing with children. Previous research also indicates that deeper, sustained play is not always achieved without adult support (eg. Brèdikytè, 2022). From a pedagogical perspective, this highlights the need to examine more closely how teachers can help sustain and deepen play and playworlds.

According to Brèdikytè, teachers reported many positive experiences of being absorbed in the play and of how their relationships with the children changed as they became more confident in their role-playing. However, many found it difficult to avoid reverting to their controlling, instructive teacher role. Using a costume as a reminder that they were in role made it easier to remain within the fiction (Brèdikytè, 2022). A piece of costume thus became a mediating tool for role-taking.

While a piece of costume can serve as a simple and effective reminder to stay in role, our material suggests that it does not sustain or deepen the play for much longer. Utami et al. (2022) note that teachers in role often directed the children rather than co-creating, and no emotional engagement was observed. From a drama perspective, this could be described as a lack of *dramatic tension*, the central driving force in both play and drama.

Understanding play as a cultural form closely related to drama—sharing elements such as the transformation of place, role, and time into fiction, and the creation of a shared imaginative world in which a narrative unfolds—may help to develop play competence. Understanding the function of, and being able to manage these

elements and understanding their function means possessing play skills that go beyond simply adding a piece of costume to remain in role; it enables the deepening of play in this context.

Another argument for emphasising drama in relation to playworlds is the idea that children bring knowledge of play, while adults contribute knowledge of science and art (Lecusay & Nilsson, 2020). In this context, we wish to stress that knowledge of art forms refers to understanding how to apply these forms—drama, in this case—and how the use of their various components creates art, such as drama and playworlds. We argue that adults in playworlds become better co-players when they are familiar with the art form of drama. This is consistent with previous research, which demonstrates that drama pedagogical methods develop the play competence of both children and adults (Loizou et al., 2019; Sørensen, 2015).

Tension in Playworld Research

Tension is certainly discussed in research on playworlds, as playworlds are situated within the cultural-historical tradition, where tension and contradictions are the driving forces of development in an activity (Leontiev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1967). However, tension is described with slightly different meanings and understandings of its role in play. Lindqvist (1995) explores the similarities between the pedagogy of play and drama pedagogy, identifying tension as one of the dramatic instruments. In playworlds, tension is used to build and sustain the narrative action, helping the play to take off. Lindqvist (1995) also highlights the tension that arises from universal questions in folktales and books, such as loneliness, danger and safety, which is why these narratives are well suited as pre-texts for a playworld.

Emotional-dramatic tension, or *perezhivanie*, is central to playworld research as a productive, developmental force that unites emotion and cognition. It often emerges and is recognised in highly affective moments, such as during a crisis or when there is some kind of ambivalence, either within the fiction or between the imaginary and the real (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009; Lecusay & Nilsson, 2020). Rainio (2008) also examines tension in playworlds between the child and institutional norms, where role-taking shifts power positions in the classroom and expands children's agency.

In our view, tension in the playworld tradition is often generated through the plot of the book or story being

used. Tension arises during the play and provides insight into its social and cognitive contributions, rather than being something planned or used deliberately. When considering how teachers might use tension as a didactic tool to scaffold play and sustain imaginative and aesthetic engagement, this research offers few answers once the play begins to lose momentum.

Dramatic Tension in Drama Pedagogy

In drama pedagogy, dramatic tension is recognised as a central concept and driving force. It is used to draw participants into the context through uncertainty and anticipation, keeping them engaged both emotionally and cognitively (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). O’Toole and Stinson (2009) describe dramatic tension as a structuring force in the creation of process drama. It generates motives and emotional engagement for the characters to act, and thus meaning is created through drama. Four kinds of tension are often identified: tension through task, through relations, through surprise or secrets, and tension between fiction and reality (O’Toole, 1992). It is tempting to assume that conflict is a productive way to create dramatic tension. However, according to Taylor (2016), Heathcote distinguished between productive dramatic tension and conflict, with conflict being a shallower concept that locks participants into opposing standpoints and prevents more nuanced inquiry. Instead, it may be wise to follow Aitken’s (2021) advice and ask many What if...? questions during both the planning phase and, even more importantly, during the drama or play itself. It is all too easy to ask only “How...?”; however, “What if...?” opens up creative and imaginative ideas from all participants, both children and adults, in the play. A final kind of dramatic tension should be mentioned when discussing it as a didactic tool: presentational tension. This occurs when the teacher creates tension through the drama form by using light, sound, body, voice, manipulating the mood of the experience, special objects, withholding information, and so on, all done intentionally and consciously (Aitken, 2021). When dramatic tension is used as a tool for the teacher to deepen or re-ignite the drama, it is most often

achieved through various drama conventions. In playworlds, however, it is primarily accomplished through the convention of teacher-in-role during joint play.

Despite a growing body of research on playworlds and adult participation in play, there is still limited understanding of how to sustain and deepen playworlds as play begins to diminish. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how dramatic tension within playworld practice can serve as a didactic resource. The aim is to explore how dramatic tension functions within playworlds as both a pedagogical and dramaturgical resource for maintaining shared imaginative engagement over time.

The study addresses the following guiding questions:

- How does dramatic tension emerge and unfold within playworld practice when teacher-in-role is used?
- In what ways do dramaturgical choices concerning role, status and improvisation influence the maintenance of dramatic tension in playworlds?
- How can dramatic tension be conceptualised as a resource, and how might it be actively curated through pedagogical and dramaturgical choices?

Methodology

Research Context and Design

This article is based on a four-year play development project in a Swedish municipality, conducted across several preschools and involving a large group of preschool teachers. The project aimed to revitalise imaginative play by introducing play theory and playworlds inspired by cultural-historical perspectives. Alongside pedagogical development, the project included research into preschool teachers’ experiences of implementing playworlds in their settings.

The study employs a qualitative, practice-based research design, utilising methods such as participant observation, individual and group interviews, and teacher logs from professional development activities.

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The two authors of the article have a collaborative research project on play and drama, based at both Stockholm and Gothenburg Universities. Both are trained drama educators, one with a PhD and the other with a master's degree. One of the authors, the researcher, has participated in the playworld project as a participant observer, while the other author has participated in the analysis of the empirical material.

Participants and Settings

The project involved three interconnected types of settings: 1) four preschools and eight teachers from a larger play network in the municipality participating in the project, 2) international exchanges with four partner preschools, and 3) in-service courses on play, drama and role-taking involving approximately 130 preschool teachers. Some teachers participated in more than one setting.

The international exchanges comprised four week-long visits to each other's partner preschools, during which playworlds were collaboratively developed and trialled with the children. For many participants, the playworld approach with teacher-in-role was unfamiliar.

Participants received a small selection of articles to read, a couple of presentations by playworld researchers, and the drama researcher. Overall, drama input was limited, and practical work with playworlds at the preschools was largely intuitive. Teachers were encouraged to experiment, reflect and learn through practice.

Data Collection and Ethical Consideration

Data were collected over the four-year period using multiple qualitative methods. One of the authors acted as a participant researcher in one preschool, making regular visits to two departments with children aged approximately 2.5 to 5.5 years. The researcher also took part in international exchanges. Rather than teaching the preschool teachers, the researcher's role was to act as a reflective partner with expertise in drama. These visits included participation in play sessions, followed by reflective conversations and forward planning with teachers.

All group reflections and interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Research logs were compiled after each participant observation. Reflective process documents from course participants, along with presentations produced during the international exchange, are also included in the empirical data set.

The teachers were informed that participation in the research was voluntary and that, should they choose to take part, their involvement would remain anonymous. Ethical consent was obtained from most participants; those who declined were still able to participate in the play project. Parents and children at the preschools were informed about the project. However, as the research focused on the teachers' professional practices rather than on the children, no formal ethical consents were required in accordance with Swedish national ethical guidelines.

Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeded in iterative cycles of reading, thematic coding, discussion and writing, combining thematic analysis and narrative inquiry. These analytical approaches were not applied simultaneously across all data, but were instead used strategically for different purposes. Thematic analysis (Alvinus et al., 2023; Tivenius, 2024) was applied to the broader empirical material, including observation logs, interview transcripts and reflective texts. This process resulted in two overarching analytical themes: situations in which the play died out, and situations in which it was recharged and took new directions. Play is a complex process created in the moment by those participating, and a range of variants emerged within each theme. Subthemes were identified to discern patterns related to dramatic tension and to the use of teacher-in-role, status positioning and improvisation when play was either revitalised or lost momentum within these two strands.

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006) was then used to analyse selected episodes of practice in depth, in order to understand the function that dramatic tension had within the play. Based on these two steps in the analytical process, the vignettes were constructed as analytical narratives through which patterns identified in the thematic analysis are examined in situated playworld practice. Narrative analyses enabled attention to be directed towards temporal aspects, shifts in role and status, and turning points where tension was either sustained or collapsed. These vignettes do not serve as representative cases, but should be understood as condensations of empirical material, used to illuminate critical moments in which didactic and dramaturgical choices shape the development of playworlds.

The two vignettes selected for this article were chosen for their analytical clarity and contrast, rather than for the frequency of similar situations in the empirical

material. The vignettes function as analytical lenses through which to explore how dramatic tension might operate as a didactic tool in practice.

Findings

The two vignettes presented below are drawn from the broader empirical material and should be understood as analytical illustrations and examples of the theoretical gap, rather than as representative cases. They have also been selected because they share several features. The teachers have been engaged in a process of introducing playworlds at their preschools by using teacher-in-role. For some, this has been simply another step in playing with the children, while for others it has proved challenging, and several have hesitated to assume a role in the play. The vignettes illuminate how preschool teachers' handling of role-taking functions as a pedagogical tool in playworlds, particularly in relation to the creation, maintenance and loss of dramatic tension.

Analytically, the focus is on how teachers prepare for and enter teacher-in-role, how they respond when play loses momentum, and how different uses of role, status and improvisation either enable or constrain the sustaining of shared imaginative engagement. The vignettes highlight moments when dramatic tension is rapidly consumed and collapses, as well as moments when tension is carefully modulated and extended over time.

By selecting a vignette in which dramatic tension falters, alongside one in which it is deliberately employed, the findings open up a discussion about the types of drama knowledge that may support preschool teachers in their dual roles as play partners and play guides.

Vignette 1: When the play was lost

This vignette depicts a situation where potentially dramatic elements are introduced but not sustained within a shared fictional inquiry. The episode is drawn from a play session during an international exchange, in which one of the preschool teachers attempted teacher-in-role for the first time. The children entered the yard without prior information that they would encounter a character from the shared book. They had previously experienced teacher-in-role a few times in other play sessions. Costumes and artefacts related to the ongoing playworld were available but initially remained unused. The drama researcher participated as an observer in this play session during the international exchange.

The children and a couple of teachers had just come out into the yard and were discussing what to do. Suddenly, the door opened and out came the teacher-in-role, immediately recognised as one of the characters from the shared book. She wore a red blanket like a poncho, symbolising the character. The poncho had previously been used when other preschool teachers or been in the role of the character, so it was a well-known symbol in the play. The character is usually happy and mischievous, high-status, and does as she pleases. This time, however, the character appeared more hesitant, perhaps worried, and she also held a bowl containing frozen small figures belonging to the story. Verbal communication was limited, and bodily expressions conveyed uncertainty rather than authority and invitation.

Quickly, all the children gathered around the teacher-in-role and grabbed the frozen figures from the bowl. One child began throwing them to the ground, and the others followed. Ice and small figures flew through the air. The children seemed excited and joyful. Everyone laughed, jumped, and threw again. Soon, the small figures were freed from the ice, the shared fictional frame dissolved, and the play ended. The teacher stepped out of role and began collecting the figures from the ground, while the children dispersed into other unrelated activities.

The following analysis examines how dramaturgical conditions function in shaping the emergence and sustainability of dramatic tension in playworlds, and is not intended as an evaluation of the teacher's competence. From an analytical perspective, the situation contains several potential sources of dramatic tension: mystery (the frozen figures), task (how and why they are frozen), and relational positioning (a familiar character appearing altered). However, these potentials remain unframed within the fiction and are therefore resolved through the children's immediate physical action, rather than being developed into exploratory meaning-making. Analytically, this situation exemplifies patterns identified in the thematic analysis and can be understood in relation to the observation that, when potentially dramatic elements are introduced without clear dramaturgical framing, dramatic tension often dissipates rapidly.

Here, teacher-in-role functions primarily as a symbolic appearance rather than as a dramaturgical position. The role does not initiate a task, question, or invitation for



collective work. The character's original high-status position offered access to dramaturgical resources such as tempo, withholding information, and role-based authority, which could have been used to heighten and extend ambiguity within the fiction. The character's altered status was not activated as a shared problem. This demonstrates how dramatic tension can be quickly consumed when role, status, and presentational choices are not used to sustain the playworld.

It is tempting to conclude that dramatic tension vanished because of the children's actions; however, it was more a result of the children's collective framing, which was unclear, and the function of the collective role was not utilised. The children were not invited to become co-creators within the play frame, and in the absence of that positioning, their engagement became object-centred rather than fiction-centred.

A recurring pattern identified in the thematic analysis is the use of dramatic tension culminating in a single physical action. Rather than being distributed over time through withholding, ambiguity or relational negotiation, tension is resolved instantaneously. This pattern recurs in situations where artefacts or costumes are treated as initiators of play, rather than as elements within an evolving dramaturgical structure shaped by ambiguity and collective inquiry.

Vignette 2: When the play was found

This vignette demonstrates how dramatic tension can be sustained through deliberate role-taking, status positioning and improvisation. It is drawn from the experience of a preschool teacher participating in the in-service course on play, drama and role-playing, who kept a logbook of her playworld work during the course. The play initiatives described below are loosely connected to the themes of fear and danger around which the preschool's shared book revolves. The group consists of younger children aged 1.5 to 2.5 years.

The preschool teacher recounts her first role-playing session, in which she uses no props but instead transforms her body and voice, becoming a little frightening, like a ghost. The children respond immediately, which leads to a chase game. The teacher reflects that she had not considered how the role-taking would be used, but she quickly gains insight and manages to act on it.

The next teacher-in-role session is prepared more deliberately: a ghost costume is created, but as it appears a little scary, a happy mouth and a sun hat are added to introduce ambivalence about what ghosts are. The teacher chooses to present the costume to the children, repeatedly showing how she puts it on and takes it off, helping them to understand the play signals and role-taking. The children are also invited to try it themselves.

For the play session in which the ghost is to meet the children for real, the teacher selects two character traits: one is a lost, low-status trait, as the ghost does not know where she lives or what she likes to eat; the other is also curious about everything the children are, which enables a higher status. This proves constructive when a child, stressed by the unusual situation, begins throwing things around, which could have disrupted the play. Instead, the teacher chooses to use the ghost's curiosity, affirming the throwing by joining in and talking about it as something fun that children do. For a while, everyone in the group throws things together. The teacher reflects on how these two status positions become a tool for her to balance the teacher-in-role, ensuring she does not dominate the play.

Gradually, during their play sessions, the children arrange a home for the ghost where the teacher-in-role can settle, and the children continue to play independently based on the theme, with her as the anchor for the game. The children come and go, making sure the ghost has food and anything else it might need. The teacher concludes her reflection by noting that even the youngest children are capable of making choices and meeting challenges if given time. Time, she adds, is also something she and other teachers need in order to consciously rethink their ways of participating in and initiating play.



Play is a complex process created in the moment by those participating, and a range of variants emerged within each theme.



For many participants, the playworld approach with teacher-in-role was unfamiliar.

Analytically, this vignette illustrates a contrasting pattern to the previous example. The analysis of vignette two shows how deliberate dramaturgical choices can shape the conditions for sustaining dramatic tension over time through the design of role-taking and status modulation. It demonstrates how the preschool teacher, with some knowledge of drama as a tool for creating playworlds, makes a series of choices to support the children's entry into fiction, as well as decisions about her own role-taking.

From a drama pedagogical perspective, the design of the ghost with a happy mouth and a sun hat introduces ambivalence and uncertainty, which function as sources of dramatic tension rather than something to be resolved immediately.

The initial experience and subsequent reflection led to the development of a role-taking approach designed to support her, ensuring she would not dominate the interaction. The shifting between low-status and higher-status positions can be seen as a dramaturgical device that enables the teacher-in-role to remain responsive while still holding the fiction. If only a genuinely help-seeking, low-status role had been adopted, it would not have been possible to gather and lead the younger children, which is a necessary aspect.

Thus, the creation of a higher-status role, characterised by a curious attitude, enabled the teacher to direct curiosity towards the children. In turn, this makes it possible to understand that 'children' becomes a collective role, in which the children are simply assigned an expert role on children, but within the fiction. Here, responsibility for the continuation of the playworld shifted from the teacher to the group, allowing dramatic tension to be distributed and sustained beyond the teacher's immediate presence.

The curious attitude could also liberate the preschool teacher from her usual teacher role, enabling her to respond to problematic behaviour in a non-judgemental manner. By affirming the child's action within the fiction rather than interrupting it, a potentially disruptive moment was transformed into a resource for sustaining dramatic tension.

Dramatic tension in this vignette arises from the relationship between the ghost and the child-experts, as well as from the expected creepiness that ghosts connote in everyday life, which, in the world of their play, proves to be entirely mistaken. Taken together, the vignette demonstrates how dramatic tension in playworlds may



The ghost with a happy mouth and a sun hat, opened for ambivalence and uncertainty in relation to the children's ideas of a ghost.

be sustained through ambivalence, dynamic status positioning, and improvisational responsiveness, rather than through narrative events alone. The vignette also illustrates the role of reflection in refining dramaturgical choices over time.

Summary of findings

Across the thematic analysis, contrasting analytical patterns emerge, illustrated through the two vignettes. The introduction of potentially dramatic elements, such as symbolic objects or new characters, does not in itself sustain or deepen the play. This is evident in the first vignette, where the absence of a frame for role-taking, status positioning, and presentational choices leads to the rapid dissipation consumption of dramatic tension and a swift conclusion to quick ending of the shared

play. In contrast, the second vignette demonstrates how dramatic tension is sustained through ambivalence, relational positioning, improvisational responsiveness, and the distribution of responsibility within the fiction, which keeps the joint play alive even as the teacher recedes into the background.

Rather than representing successful or unsuccessful practice, the vignettes serve as analytical contrasts that make visible that dramatic tension in playworlds is not only embedded in the plot's narrative content but is also shaped by various dramaturgical conditions.

Discussion

The analysis shows that dramatic tension in playworlds cannot be understood solely as embedded in the narrative content or the pre-text. Conversely, the contrasting

vignettes illustrate how dramatic tension emerges and is sustained through pedagogical and dramaturgical choices in action. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on playworlds (Brédikyté, 2022; Fler, 2015), which identified critical points for teachers when introducing and sustaining playworlds, such as adopting roles, improvising, and being both a play partner and a play guide within the play. However, the present study adds nuance to playworld research by demonstrating that these challenges are closely related to teachers' access to recognise and modulate dramatic tension. The analytical patterns are further examined below to conceptualise dramatic tension as a didactic and dramaturgical resource for preschool teachers.

Dramatic tension beyond narrative content

Within playworld research, tension has often been understood as embedded in the narrative structure of the book framing the playworld, and as something that becomes visible in moments of intense emotion or ambivalence (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009; Lecusay & Nilsson, 2020). These understandings are important. However, they are insufficient when it comes to guiding teachers as the play begins to lose momentum.

In Vignette 1, tension is initially introduced through a potentially dramatic device: the frozen figures, and by a teacher-in-role character whose worried attitude contrasts with her often boisterous appearance. From a drama pedagogical perspective, this situation is a luxury, full of potential for dramatic tension—mystery, task, and relational tension. However, because these seeds of potential tension are not shaped or sustained by role, status, or presentational choices, they are quickly consumed by the children's physical engagement. The play collapses not because the children behave "wrong", but because the dramatic tension is not extended into a shared inquiry. In line with Utami et al. (2022), teacher-in-role does not guarantee sustained playworld engagement. The findings suggest that dramatic tension must be actively curated rather than merely introduced.

Teacher-in-role as a dramaturgical position

The contrast between the two vignettes highlights that teacher-in-role is a dramaturgical device involving continuous choices about status, relationships, and possible actions, rather than simply being a character in the play. The conscious choices and use of ambivalence, status shifts, and curiosity in Vignette 2 enable dramatic tension to build over time rather than be resolved immediately.



This aligns with drama research that emphasises tension as a structuring force for meaning-making (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O’Toole & Stinson, 2009). Also noteworthy is that productive tension does not depend on conflict. Here, tension is generated through uncertainty (“*What kind of ghost is this?*”), relational positioning (low-status lostness together with higher status curiosity), and the open-ended “*What if...?*” stance described by Aitken (2021).

From this perspective, the teacher’s improvisation is not only a spontaneous reaction but a skilled responsiveness, grounded in an understanding of newly acquired knowledge about how role-taking and dramatic tension work. The ability to transform the child’s throwing of objects without losing the fiction illustrates how dramatic tension can be maintained even in moments that threaten the fictional framework.

Improvisation, status and collective roles

In relation to the concept of double subjectivity (Brédikyté, 2022), dramatic tension can be understood as a mediating tool between being a play partner and a guide. In Vignette 2, the teacher’s balancing of high and low status allows her to stay within the fiction, serving as a responsive play partner while also sustaining and moving the play forward. Status is not fixed; it is a dynamic tool for teachers in fiction.

Furthermore, the analysis points to the importance of positioning the children in a collective role—in this case, a collective expert role—at the outset, so they are also ‘moved’ into the fiction. When the children are “experts on children” or “organisers of ghost-homes”, tension is redistributed across the group and becomes a shared responsibility. This resonates with Lindqvist’s emphasis on joint creation and Rainio’s analysis of how power relations can easily shift in playworlds, but adds a dramaturgical and didactic explanation of how such shifts can be enacted.

Implications for playworld pedagogy and research

The findings suggest that dramatic tension can be understood as a didactic resource that can support preschool teachers in creating, sustaining, and deepening playworlds. This perspective bridges drama pedagogy and playworld research by making visible the knowledge of the art form drama embedded in play facilitation, moving beyond materials and stories.

We return to our argument in the introduction: understanding and applying dramatic tension when working with playworlds should be a core competence for early childhood teachers. The playworld remains a joint creation, but drama skills—including handling dramatic tension through role-taking—should give teachers tools to stay responsive, imaginative, and engaged when the play becomes fragile or when it is about to grow.

Conclusion

By framing dramatic tension as a didactic tool, this study broadens the scope of existing playworld research, which has largely concentrated on participation, agency and emotional engagement. It also provides a tangible means of understanding what it means for adults to “bring art” into playworlds—not only through stories with themes to explore, costumes and role-taking, but also through embodied, improvisational knowledge of drama as an art form.

The findings highlight significant implications for teacher education and professional development. If preschool teachers are expected to initiate, participate in and extend play, as outlined in the revised Swedish Preschool Curriculum (Skolverket, 2025), they must know how to do so. Dramatic tension, conceptualised here as both a structuring and relational force, may serve as a conceptual and practical bridge. Further research is required to examine how increasingly structured drama pedagogical training within preschool teacher education influences teachers’ play competence over time.



The playworld remains a joint creation, but drama skills—including handling dramatic tension through role-taking—should give teachers tools to stay responsive, imaginative, and engaged when the play becomes fragile or when it is about to grow

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