

# PLAYWORLDS: IMAGINATIVE ADULT-CHILD JOINT PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

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## Abstract

Play is considered as one of the most effective and meaningful ways of learning for children until the age of eight years (Skene et al., 2022). Play is also a prerequisite for human development and creativity (Rieber & Carton, 1987). However, many early learning classrooms struggle to find time or ways to include playful learning in their curriculums.

In this presentation I introduce an educational innovation that helps bring play in early learning classrooms. Playworlds are forms of adult-child joint play often centered around a piece of literature or story. The story is turned alive by acting, playing and creation of plot, characters and props (Lindqvist, 1995). Implementing playworlds often requires time and dedication so many teachers find it hard to combine it with formal learning goals of the school.

I will introduce a Finnish first year school classroom in which a teacher developed a playworld activity around the story of Crocodile Gene (by Eduard Uspenski). The class was culturally diverse with children from around six different home languages. The data analyzed consists of teacher diaries and notes, informal email correspondence and interviews between the teacher and the researcher during the school year.

I focus on one of the characters in the story, Chebi (a hand puppet played by the teacher) visiting the classroom and becoming a member of the class. I discuss how children who were ambivalently engaged (see Ferholt & Rainio, 2016) towards school going found meaningful ways to participate in class activities with the help of Chebi. The imaginative character played by the teacher was helping children to engage and attach to the classroom activities. The paper concludes that the power of imagination, play and stories should not be undermined in developing easy access and meaningful ways of participation in early learning classrooms.

**Keywords:** *Play, imagination, narrative, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), student engagement.*

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper I introduce a unique form of adult-child joint play called Playworlds. The work presented in the paper is based on a long-term work of International Playworld Network (IPWN), an organized group of playworld scholars who have been collaborating through joint research projects since 2003 (see more Chapter 14: Adult/Child Joint Play; Adult-child joint imaginative playworlds). Our work leans on cultural-historical theories on the role of play in children's development particularly as they are developed in Lev Vygotsky's (see e.g., Rieber & Carton, 1987) seminal work on imagination and creativity. Playworlds are based on a *holistic cultural approach* to children's play originally developed by an educational scholar and drama pedagogue Gunilla Lindqvist (1995; 2003) in Swedish preschools in 1990's. Since then, the playworlds have been actively developed, applied and studied in the field of ECEC in several countries including Finland, Sweden, Japan, Serbia, United States, and Australia. Our studies have shown for example that playworlds develop children's agency development (Rainio, 2008; 2010) and cognitive development such as narrative competence in classrooms (see Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009). Recently our focus has moved to analyzing and developing playworlds as ways of being that support engagement and belonging to children who feel easily excluded from classroom practices (see e.g., Ferholt & Rainio, 2016; Lecusay et al., 2022).

This paper discusses how joint play between adults and children can create possibilities for belonging and engagement for small children in preschools and schools. The empirical examples are from a Finnish elementary school classroom (first year class with 7-year-old children) in which the teacher

developed a small playworld around the story of Crocodile Gene (by Eduard Uspenski). The playworld was implemented in the class in Spring 2020 but could not be realized in its planned form as the COVID-19 lockdown closed schools in Finland for several months that season. Therefore, the playworld activity that took place in the classroom was very small-scale and was centered around one character from the book, Cheburashka (“Chebi”, a puppet played by the teacher). When school continued after the COVID-19 break, Chebi became an important part of the class activities. In my analysis of the data that I will present in closer detail in my presentation, this imaginative character, a puppet, turned to be an important mediating figure to the teacher to engage with children, and to the children to engage with school going.

## 2. Playworlds approach

In playworlds adult-child joint play is often centered around a piece of literature or story. The story is turned alive by acting, playing and creation of plot, characters and props (Lindqvist, 1995). Teachers often act in roles from the story. A thematic playworld lasting often several months is constructed by adults and children together using stories, folk tales, music, lights, dramatizations, visual aesthetics, pretending, role figures and characters (often presented by adults), scenery settings etc. Themes are selected by picking up some central themes from folk tales or stories, which are important in children’s general psychological development (e.g. fears, friendship, lying etc.). The themes are dealt with while constructing the plot of a playworld by acting and playing together (see more for example Rainio, 2010).

Playworlds can be described as a space between fantasy and reality where children and adults are able to meet to create meaning and to learn together about the world. For Lindqvist (1995, p. 211), the adults acting in a character are often mediators between the shared fictitious world created and the day care center in the playworld context. Adults’ role actions can make it easier for children to step into a literary world of the story and also help to establish a dialogue between the children. Lindqvist (1995, p. 211) writes: *“The children are enticed into the dialogue by the characters the adults dramatize, and as a result, both children and adults share a common playworld. This world is gradually established as children and adults interpret their experiences and portray a mutual world of meaning.”*

Recently, our focus has moved to understanding better how puppets – imaginative characters in the story becoming real for the class by being played by the teachers or for example professional artists – can help to establish such shared worlds between children and adults and help to deal with difficult themes and issues in the classroom and in children’s lives (see Ferholt et al., in press).

## 3. Research design: Crocodile Gene playworld in Finland

In Fall 2019 we launched a playworld collaboration with a first year class teacher Julia in Spring Valley School in Finland (all the names of people and places have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants). The school was culturally diverse and Julia’s class was rich in languages with six different mother tongues. Many families had arrived in the country within a year so there were several children who did not yet speak Finnish. The teacher Julia knew the playworlds methods beforehand and decided to collaborate with the University of Helsinki to create a playworld project around the idea of supporting inclusion and student engagement in the beginning of the school path.

The research project (2019-2020) followed the principles of participatory research design (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) with the idea that the actors involved in the research are experts in their respective fields and that the collaboration is built around dialogue of this expertise (with children also as active collaborators, see Clark, 2005). The project was based on active listening and building on the initiatives of the students in the classroom. The study has research permissions from the city, the school, the teacher Julia and the involved students’ parents as well as the children themselves. The research follows ethical guidelines of TENK (The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity).

Our main task in the project was to try out how a playworld way of being could play a role in creating a sense of community and belonging in the class with diverse language barriers between children. Julia formulated her idea of what she needed with a class like this:

*“[T]oday I thought that the most important thing is to build a way of working in the classroom, to the most mundane moments. [...] From the teacher's perspective, keeping in mind ways to build relationships and interaction with students that would support engagement, especially for children at risk of being misunderstood, due to challenging behaviors (which should rather be seen as symptoms of ambivalence) or because of the lack of [common] language.”*

The teacher Julia decided to build the playworld around the story of Crocodile Gene, a Russian children's book written by Eduard Uspenski (1994). In the book Chebi (Muksis in Finnish), a creature "completely unknown to science" transports from a tropical forest by mistake in a box of oranges in which it has jumped accidentally. Chebi tries to make its way in a new town and makes friends with Gena, a crocodile who works in a zoo; and Gail, a child. Chebi, Gene and Gail form a 'House of Friendship' together to help all different kind of beings, from people to animals, to find new friends and fight loneliness in the city. The teacher read aloud the book in the class and they watched a film based on it. The children discussed the events in the book and drew the characters. The idea was to gradually build the world of the story to the classroom and play in it, together with the children, and the teacher in role.

However, COVID-19 hit Finland and closed schools for several months so that the plans had to be postponed. Therefore, our data is from late Spring when the schools opened for two weeks and from the following Fall when the children returned to second grade. The researchers could not be present at these times either because of the corona restrictions but the teacher collected photos, wrote notes, memos and diary to the researchers. This data has been used to create our understanding of the Crocodile Gene playworld events from spring and fall 2020. Below I will present some of our very initial remarks from the data.

#### **4. Initial findings: Shared imaginative play with Muksis**

##### **4.1. Chebi arrives in the class after the COVID-19 lockdown**

In mid-May 2020 in Finland the schools opened again for a two weeks time before the start of the summer holidays. The students returned to classrooms. Julia had continued reading the story to the children during the close downs via online. During these two weeks that the school was open again, Julia felt that with the story she could create the class as supportive as possible for the children who had been away for so long. She decided to launch the playworld in a form of Chebi, a character from the story. Julia wrote to me:

*“This creature appeared into our class today. Chebi is a puppet but everyone is taking fully seriously and talking to it. Just this little push is needed and the whole thing takes off ♥. The first encountering was difficult for some of the children but I was surprised how all the students were involved in this already in the afternoon. However, most of my own energy went to playing the double role in the classroom.”*

After the students had met Chebi they wanted to include it to all school going activities. For example, Chebi got its own line on the blackboard for “credits” that the children got from behaving well or remembering to do things. Julia wrote in her notes that the students really helped Chebi to collect the credits and learn these skills. During the two weeks that is left of school before summer holidays, Chebi is a part of class activities daily, the children woke it up from naps by singing to it, they wanted to build a home to it during “art Tuesdays” and with Julia’s lead, they decided to “secretly” make their own school certificate for Chebi too. It included the same things as what the children were evaluated at the end of the year but the children also invented new things to praise Chebi about, such as “sleeping” and “reading ABC book”. Julia’s idea was that through this the class can also deal with what the certificate is as the students received it at the first time and many are very nervous about it. According to Julia’s notes, the children wanted to bring Chebi to the 2nd grade. They intended to teach all the necessary knowledge and skills to it. Chebi also participated in several trips with the class. During these trips, the students take care of and advice Chebi. Julia’s sense was that the presence of Chebi in the class helped the teacher and students to reconnect and perhaps also embrace the certain ambivalence caused by the challenging situation of returning to school after a long break just to enter the summer holidays again.

##### **4.2. Chebi helps Alex to participate and stay included**

After the summer break in Fall the children turned to second grade and Chebi, too. Below I describe the relationship between Chebi and one child, whom we here call Alex. Alex had been having hard time since the quarantine. It was hard for her to sit still, follow any orders, doing school tasks. There were many special arrangements for Alex, for example shortened school days, even home days. At the start of the second year, Alex was seriously at the edge of disengagement and even exclusion. Alex had been fond of Chebi already when it arrived but in the Fall she first strongly suspected that “Chebi has left us for good”. However, Chebi returned to the class and Julia told me that Alex (the pupil) started to interact with Chebi by introducing him friends, other soft toys from her home. Alex’s parents had told that Alex was very fond of soft toys and had many of them at home but that the parents “had been afraid that if Alex brought soft toys to school, she would be bullied.” (Julia’s notes). Julia told the parents that

on the contrary: *“all students like soft toys, that's our shared thing here. The soft toys specifically help Alex connect with others. And since I play along with the whole group, it also tells everyone that this is ok, I encourage with my own example.”* (Julia's research diary). At September Julia described several examples in which Alex could participate and was calmer in the classroom when Chebi or some other soft toy (Chebi's friend) was with her:

*“It was an incredible day with Chebi & Alex! This photo tells it all! [in the photo Alex's soft toy called Wolf sits with Chebi]. The toy lesson started to be quite rowdy for many. Alex took on a completely different mood, a calm one, when I was close to her with Chebi. I told the special education teacher the outline of Alex's day, because it was breaking news for her too that this day went so well.”*

In a school trip some days later, Julia had wondered whether Alex could participate at all as she had refused all collaboration earlier. Julia described:

*“In the morning Alex was frolicking but was really restless. I was nervous about our lunch time, during which the downhill always starts at the latest (for Alex). But there Alex showed signs of calming down and participating. Then she asked if Chebi and Pierre (a dog friend given to Chebi by Alex) could come along. I said yes good idea. You can be the one in charge of Pierre, you will take care of him throughout the trip. As soon as Alex got Pierre (the soft toy that had become friends with Chebi) in her lap, everything went smoothly. Alex followed all instructions. Was friendly and talkative. Did the school tasks in the forest. There was a lot of going on, but Alex took all the guidance I gave her and it went well. Finally, there was time to play in the park and Alex climbed a tree with Pierre and rested there contentedly.”*

My initial interpretation of Alex's case with Chebi is that Julia (by reading the Crocodile Gene story to the class, then introducing a central figure from the story to the class by playing it at her hand), had created a shared world between children, teacher and fictional characters in the classroom where imagination and creativity were present and available for use. This helped Alex to use these tools of imagination to regulate herself and to concentrate, all this with the help of her teacher. As we conclude in other analyses of a related activity, co-regulation between children and adults with the help of play and fictional characters, is an important yet under-researched topic in student engagement and deserves closer attention (see Rainio et al., 2021; also Lecusay et al., 2022; Ferholt et al., in press).

## 5. Conclusions and discussion

There is strong evidence that early childhood play is indispensable to human development, health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Brooker & Woodhead, 2013; Whitebread, 2017). It is also an essential human right (UNESCO, 1989). In spite of this, it is hard to find time for imaginative play in schools.

In the case presented in this paper the original plans of a full-scale playworld activity in a school classroom went anew when the COVID-19 closed schools in Spring 2020. This made Julia the teacher to implement the planned playworld in a smallest possible way – and interestingly, it is just this fact that perhaps makes the applicability of the case easier for many classrooms. What was needed was a story that was interesting enough for the children and a character from the story that the children were attached to when the book was read aloud. This character then became a puppet played by the teacher (she had found a similar enough looking puppet from the school's storage room). The teacher played the puppet in her hand and for these children it was immediately Chebi from the story who was unfamiliar with the class practices and needed children's help in relating to school and becoming a member of the class. At the same time, Chebi was helping children to concentrate, participate and focus just by sitting close to them and talking to them and their soft toys.

In Julia's class Chebi helped Julia and the pupils to orient back to the classroom after a two-month break, to reflect (by teaching it to Chebi) what a classroom was, what was learned there, and why. Chebi also became an emotional friend, a so-called transitory object (Winnicott, 1990) for a child who had hard time participating in the classroom activities or concentrating. When Chebi was in Alex's lap, and interacted with her, Alex could concentrate better. The remarks made in this paper are still very initial and the systematic analysis is yet to be made of the data. One cannot generalize the findings on the basis of one-time unique case. However, combined into our long-term ethnographic and intervention research on playworlds and our earlier findings of the role of play in student engagement from other

playworld settings (e.g., Rainio, 2008; Ferholt & Rainio, 2016; Lecusay et al., 2022, Rainio et al., 2021), the case sheds light into an important topic. The paper also introduces a relatively easy way of using play-based methods in school settings. Implementing playworlds often requires time and dedication so many teachers find it hard to combine it with formal learning goals of the school. Using stories and puppets as low-threshold tools for classroom activities can be seen as an easy access to imagination and creativity as a part of the classroom teacher work.

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