A case study on kindergarten children's social behaviors during peer play

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Abstract

The recent peer play perspectives have brought into a new theoretical consciousness for early childhood in the contemporary world, giving new ways of thinking on the relationship between child development and social behaviors. Peer play lays the foundation for developing prosocial abilities among young children. During this process, they gradually learn social and moral norms for behavior and social skills. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of teachers towards the implementation of peer play in the kindergarten setting as well as to investigate the various social behaviors of young children during peer play. This study employed a qualitative approach using case study with interviews and field observations to explore teachers' beliefs and practices, and children's social behaviors during peer play. Narrative analysis and thematic analysis were used to gain a holistic view. The participants are the kindergarten teachers and children at the selected kindergarten in Zhejiang, China. The results indicated that the kindergarten children were able to generate rich social behaviors during peer play. Most kindergarten teachers were aware of the values of peer play. They implemented peer play in their overall daily activities in their workplace. However, the findings revealed that there were some teachers unable to resolve peer conflicts during peer play, yet find it is challenging to handle young children resolve doubts, dealing and solving conflicts during peer play. These findings suggested that teachers need training with relevant resources for effective implementation of peer play with desired learning outcomes. Future research should further explore the impact of peer play in relation to expanding young children's imagination and promoting collaborative learning.

Keywords: Kindergarten, peer play, social behavior development

Introduction

Play is natural; play is essential; and it has a significant impact on children's development as their "second life" (Leon, 2019; Pei, 2022; Vygotsky, 1978). Peer play serves as an important way to develop children's social interaction skills. It means that children of similar ages plan to play together at a certain time and place, follow certain rules of play, and feel good about themselves (Guo et al., 2018). During playtime with their friends, children gradually acquire social and moral norms for behavior and social skills. Hartup, an American developmental psychologist, points out that children can't act socially unless they interact with other people (Hartup, 1996; Wang, 2022). Among them, social behavior refers to the composition of attitudes, language, and behaviors that individuals exhibit during interactions (Wang, 2011). In a sense, social behaviors are specific interactive behaviors, including prosocial and antisocial behaviors. Through peer play, children receive social signal feedback from their peers. When children show pro-social behaviors such as cooperation and sharing, their peers respond to them through friendliness. When children show antisocial behaviors such as unfriendliness and aggression, their peers will respond in a manner that shows denial and rejection. This kind of feedback can help kids learn how to work with others and improve their social skills.

In the past decade, numerous early childhood educators have acknowledged the significance of children's social-emotional development and play. It was supported by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2020), in its "Guideline for Kindergarten Education" that children's social behaviors can develop through imitation and peer play during their daily. In short, giving young children a dynamic social environment, fostering teamwork, and offering peer play materials improves peer relationships and prosocial behavior (Pei, 2022).

Currently, still many teachers face with the conundrum even though they understand the importance of developmentally appropriate practices for children yet find it challenging to match parents' academic goals. Kindergarteners shouldn't compromise play for schoolwork, say Newman, Brody, and Beauchamp (1996). Although numerous early childhood researchers have completed considerable research on the benefits of play and the social development of young children, little research has been published on the study on social behaviors in peer play. Cultural history theory believes play originated in children's immediate world and environment. These traits piqued the researcher's interest and inspired this study, contrary to the social learning hypothesis, which states that young children learn from their peers. In order to demonstrate the importance of peer play in early childhood settings, this research will employ qualitative approach, using case study for observations, interviews so as to investigate children's social skills and kindergarten teachers' perspectives towards social behaviour during peer play.

Problem statement

Early childhood education is an important component of China's educational system (Chen et al., 2020; Pei, 2022). However, few psychologists and educators have utilized qualitative methods to explore the related study. Many young children's teachers don't grasp the importance of peer play for social development. Therefore, the systematic research on young children's peer play social behaviors is sparse (Li, 2014).

According to statistics, China now has over 181 million sole children as a result of 'family planning" policy (Feng, 2020). Fudan University Professor Dr. Lu, found that many "only child" lack of opportunities for peer play because they do not have siblings and lack playmates of similar age in the family. This could lead to antisocial behavior such as toy fights

that may encourage unfriendly behaviours and result in misunderstanding or quarrel that are detrimental to young children's social play and development (Fu, 2021; Luo, 2018).

Current education system in China prioritizes instructions over play (Hines, 2017), however, most educators underestimate peer play, and the excessive academic focus may hinder or deprive young children's social abilities (Pei, 2022).

Many preschool teachers found it was challenging to integrate peer play and social development. This form of schooling doesn't support young children's social development, and teachers don't use play. If the young children are unable compromise with their classmates, then the argument will prevent them from playing together (Sun, 2020).

Early childhood education serves as a bridge between kindergarten and formal education (Villasin, 2020). Early intervention and problem detection are great places to start promoting young children's social development and peer play. The previous studies showed that kindergarten teachers' great challenge is to establishing good and successful peer play. Therefore, it seems necessary for researchers to explore the behaviours of young children during peer play (Coelho et al., 2017; Wang, 2022).

Literature review

Peer play in children's social development

As defined by Howes and Matheson (1992), children engage in many forms of play during free time: solitary, parallel, social, simple social, complementary-reciprocal, cooperative, and complex social play. With the exception of solitary and parallel play, the rest are defined as interactive peer play, while cooperative and complex pretend play are considered eligible forms of play with peers for children. In peer play, children have to work out their roles with their partners and be able to talk in a way that is clear, coherent, and expressive.

A growing body of research (Guo et al., 2018; Scott & Cogburn, 2023) shows that peer play, which is an important part of developing social behavior in young children (Sarah Al-Sharif, 2020), can help young children share values and rules and feel like they belong and are part of a group. Berndt (1981) stated that peers are significant social enhancers of young children's growth and learning and that peer play particularly improves young children's social and emotional competence, social skills, and ability to create relationships (Breeman et al., 2015; Lai et al., 2018). Related researchers have found that peer-to-peer play may lead to genuine friendships and that children will be more likely to share similar interests with peers when they begin to enjoy playing with them (Scott & Cogburn, 2023), especially in social pretend play, where they use language to problem-solve, for example, by explicitly discussing others' mental states, including imaginary characters, and teaching each other positive prosocial behaviors (Corsaro, 2012; Nilsen, 2021). When young children have harmonious peer relationships, they may exhibit more prosocial behaviors and be easily accepted by their peers (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014).

Recent social developmental theory suggests that play has become an important setting for children to acquire and express peer social competence (Pei, 2022). Repeated interpersonal interactions, especially those involving pro-social behavior or confrontational interactions, are key experiences that shape children's social development (Gleason, 2017). When young children engage in simple peer play, they use language to solve problems, comfort each other, and create positive prosocial behaviors. For example, if one child falls off a railing, another child may cry out to an adult. The attentive child now realizes that the other child is hurting and needs help. On the other hand, complex peer play means that peers begin to interact based on a common idea, allowing parallel play to transform into joint or cooperative play, in which case the development of prosocial behaviors such as empathy, turn

taking, sharing, cooperation, and negotiation will be more conducive to young children's social development.

Kindergarten teachers' perceptions of peer play

Teachers' views on children's play, development, and learning are becoming a well-studied topic (Baustad et al., 2018; Biesta et al., 2015). Even though teachers agree that play is vital for young learners' development, they have diverse notions about what play is and how it should be employed in educational contexts. Chinese scholar Ms. Yang has explored kindergarten teachers' views on play using the interview method. The study found that the kindergarten teachers' view of play is generally positive, such as when teachers can basically respect the subjectivity of children, but there are still some misconceptions, such as when teachers pay attention to the value of play for children's physical development but neglect the value of play for children's psychological development, this view is also supported by scholars such as Mona Alzahrani et al. (2019). In addition, most teachers acknowledged play's function in skill development but weren't sure how to apply it in their teaching, according to Hines (2017). Positive behaviors were linked to peer play, while bad behaviors were linked to peer rejection in young children. However, most teachers continue to underestimate the prevalence of aggressive behaviors and seem ignorant of their potential role in reducing negative behaviors and fostering prosocial behaviors. Due to time restrictions and rigorous rules, Chinese researcher Wang (2022) found that teachers valued play in the classroom but struggled to implement it. Teachers changed their methods because they felt pressure to go to college. This meant youngsters spent more time completing teacher-directed activities, leaving less time for play.

Mona Alzahrani et al. (2019) state that children must develop many social skills in the early years, including: interacting with adults and peers; interacting with peers in the classroom; building relationships with others; self-regulating; showing empathy; and participating socially, among others. However, it takes a long time for children to develop these skills, so it is important for teachers to engage children and their peers on a daily basis through the use of play-based activities kindergarten teachers play an important role in developing young children's skills. These teachers must have specific characteristics, such as honesty, patience, flexibility, fairness, and respect for all children (Mona Alzahrani et al., 2019). According to Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2010), teachers with more experience were better at helping young children play well. How teachers handle student interactions in the classroom affects how kids engage with their peers (Farmer et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020). Birch and Ladd (1994) noticed that close interactions with teachers may help children's social and academic development. Conflict between instructors and young children may increase peer hatred, school avoidance, externalizing conduct, and decreased prosocial behavior and collaboration (Wang, 2022). In conclusion, this study must prove the play's value.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development

Vygotsky was not just a prominent Soviet psychologist but also the originator of the "culture-history" paradigm. In his sociocultural theory, human growth is viewed as a process that is socially mediated. Young children can engage in cooperative discourse with members of the larger society through play activities such as role-playing and familiarization with social norms; Vygotsky's play theory is notable for its emphasis on the social aspects of play. He contends that games possess two different characteristics. First, the fictitious scenarios established by symbolic play allow youngsters to have unattainable ambitions. The second characteristic of symbolic play is that children must obey the game rules established by their

peers in order to be successful in this game. Later phases of early childhood are characterized by rule-based play activities (Hines, 2017). For instance, when a child pretends to go to bed, he adheres to the behavior guidelines for rest time. In role-play, a child who imagines himself to be his father and his friends to be his children will act the way his father tells him to.

Furthermore, Vygotsky asserted that peer relationships, particularly with peers at higher developmental stages, contribute as much to children's cognitive level as interactions with parents and teachers (Hines, 2017). In cooperation and communication, more capable peers play the role of co-constructors, continuously establishing the "nearest developmental area" for less capable children. In this process, children with greater abilities can also attain new levels of development. Peers achieve a shared social construction in this manner.

Methodology

This qualitative study explored participants' subjective worlds. The qualitative data came from interviews and observations to address the following research objectives.

Research objectives

1. To investigate the kindergarten teachers' perspectives on peer play in the kindergarten settings.
2. To determine the different social behaviors of young children during peer play.

The five adopted open-ended questions (Ahn, 2008; Hines, 2017; Russo, 2009) were used for structured interviews to meet support the first objective. These five questions reveal teachers' definitions, attitudes, and children's daily peer play and social behaviour. The researcher analyzed the interview data using thematic analysis.

Table 1
Interview Questions (Teachers' Perceptions on Peer Play.)

No.	Question
Q1.	My definition of peer play is?
Q2.	Where does peer play happen?
Q3.	How does peer play affect a child's life?
Q4.	Do you think peer play can promote the development of children's social behavior? If yes, please give an example.
Q5.	What factors influenced your beliefs on peer play?

And in research involving children, data collection tools should be chosen carefully. Children are different from adults and understanding their lives and perspectives requires the use of methods appropriate to them, therefore the observational method was used to address the second objective (Arıcı et al., 2022; Einarsdóttir, 2007). The researcher entered the play area as a non-participant observer to collect data and evidence while the children played with their peers. The researcher observed children's play using the checklist, Pennsylvania Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS). This a teacher-rating instrument of interactive play behavior of kindergarten children. During data analysis, the researcher counts the frequency of social

behaviors during peer play and used the visual narrative analysis. A "visual narrative" is a story told primarily through video. This can be told through photography, illustrations, or video (Ridgway et al., 2020). Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. The selected participants are 17 of five years old children (selected from Child-A to Child-Z), and 5 in-service teachers from the same kindergartens (Teacher-1 to Teacher-5). Because of COVID-19, this study could only take samples from one of the selected kindergartens in Taizhou, Zhejiang Province, China.

Instruments

To achieve the first research objective, this study employed the open-ended interview questions aimed to obtained replies and information from the interviewees. The face-to-face interviews also allowed the interviewer to observe and record the relevant social cues such as voice intonation and body language, which are recorded on audio (Hines, 2017). The purpose of the interviews was to gather information about kindergarten teachers' perceptions of conducting peer play during school days.

The Child Social Behavior Assessment Checklist, derived from the Pennsylvania Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS), was used to assess peer social behavior to address and support the second research objective. The checklist included components of pro-social, anti-social, and non-social behaviors. The researcher used videos and photographs to support the checklist.

Results

The following are the explanations of the findings according to the objectives/questions of the study.

Data analysis for research question 1

What are kindergarten teachers' perspectives on peer play in the kindergarten settings?

Themes for Teacher Interviews

The qualitative thematic analysis has 3 themes in total, which addressed the overarching research question one. The first theme summarizes interview questions 1 and 2 and displays instructors' expertise of peer play and its regions. The second theme focuses on peer play 's impact on children's lives (interview questions 3 and 5). And interview question 4 was categorized as third theme, which focused on the factors influencing teachers' "peer view of play."

Theme 1: Peer play's definition and locations of occurrence. In Theme 1, most teachers gave accurate descriptions of peer play, which shows that most interviewees thought play was a good way to teach young children who are still developing.

"Peer play is when children the same age play together. Children learn how to communicate with each other, develop a sense of fair play, follow rules, create teamwork, and handle conflicts through peer games" (Teacher-1).

"Peer play involves two or more children playing together. Group play is typical. The activity has a labor division, shared purpose, and common plan. "Doll's house" and "small hospital" are popular role-play based peer play" (Teacher-3).

"Peer play is the spontaneous organization of play between two or more children of similar age or cognitive development level, and mutual learning, communication, and influence during play" (Teacher-4).

"I think peer play happens everywhere, especially in the independent zone play sessions in kindergarten daily activities. The zone activities provide a lot of play materials for children, so peer play often happens in all zones." (Teacher-4).

The above descriptions summarised that majority of respondents understood peer play correctly. In addition, The interviewees' classrooms also had play environments that met the preferences of different children in terms of indoor, outdoor, and autonomous play places were most mentioned. Teacher in China today are equipped with necessary resources to facilitate "peer play" physically and environmentally.

Most kindergarten teachers understand peer play and able to integrate theory and practice with a scientific approach to examine the different ways children behave when playing with peers.

Theme 2: The effect of peer play on young children. The following conversations and discussions revealed how peer play affects young children's social development.

"Peer play provides role models and reinforcement for children, reduces isolation behaviors, and provides the necessary conditions to promote important skills for the development of social behaviors in young children. Also, when young children have good relationships with their peers, they can control their negative impulses (like being mean, yelling, etc.)" (Teacher-3).

Majority of interviewees agreed with Teacher-3 and claimed that peer play promoted "good interpersonal relationships" between children and their peers. Kids make friends through peer play. These five interviewees also agreed that peer play helps kids resolve conflicts between peers. It was mentioned that conflict socializes children. Children may negotiate play roles when they have disagreement. The authors conclude that peer play will help children think and express their feelings, understand "equal reciprocity," and evaluate other perspectives. Several interviewers also cited peer play's skill-building benefits for children (Wang, 2022; Doliopoulou & Rizou, 2012).

According to the interview data, the term "prosocial behavior" appeared only twice in the interviews. One respondent said peer play and social behavior are interrelated. Peer play helps children's social skills. Social skills enable children to play together. The social behaviours and peer play always shows good relationship to reinforce and compliment with each other.

"In the dollhouse, young children may start out in competing roles, but then they may begin to discuss role assignments and a warm family scene emerges. In the hairdressing area, young attendants greet customers with polite words. 'Hello, welcome.'Do you need anything? Are you satisfied with my service? 'Goodbye, welcome next time,' etc., a developmental phenomenon of children's social behavior" (Teacher-1).

Based on the information provided by Teacher-1, and combining the aforementioned interview data, the researcher found that most early childhood teachers deeply perceive the positive influence of peer play, proving that teachers can successfully observe children's play behaviors during their regular independent play. Each instructor answered "What role (effect) does peer play have on children's lives?" with a distinct perspective. It was viewed differently. Thus, this indicated that most teachers monitor children's activities from diverse angles.

Theme 3: The influencing factors of the teacher's "overall view of peer play".
Theme 3 focused on understanding what factors influence teachers' perceptions of "peer play".

"I recall that the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of 3-6 Year Olds state that 'young children's sociality develops implicitly primarily through observation and imitation in everyday life and play'. Combining theory and input from classroom observations, I realized that young children can gradually learn skills such as communication and cooperation through interactive play with their peers" (Teacher-1).

"During an expert symposium on gamified curriculum, I learned that children's free play can teach them many things, such as their favorite themes, social behaviors, and fun challenges and conversations with their friends. In independent play, I found that 4-5-year-olds easily organize play with their peers, where they learn to share, negotiate, cooperate, etc. Through theoretical and field research, I realized that young children may form and evaluate social behaviors through peer play" (Teacher-2).

Based on the responses of the above interviewees, Teachers 1 and 2, the researcher found that one of the same factors supporting their beliefs about peer play was that they were diligent in thinking and good at combining theory and practice to come to some of their own ideas and understandings. However, Tarman & Tarman (2011) observed that some researchers, educators, and parents are now emphasizing play and academic activities for children and reducing free play time.Some young teachers of young children are eager to get their parents' approval, so they may add a lot of intellectual activities to the kindergarten day.

"During my studies, relevant pedagogical theories arose about the value of peer play and its benefits to young children's social skill development. However, since I am now in a classroom whose children are about to enter elementary school, many parents of young children have repeatedly given feedback that they would like to see more direct skill instruction that promotes academic development, so we have had to add purposeful, mandatory instructional activities (e.g., writing, phonics, English) to their children's overall activities at the request of parents. In the context of this pressure, we, as newly entering early childhood teachers, had to hold off on the play-whatever curriculum to accommodate and match the parents' needs" (Teacher-5).

Teachers are pressured to postpone the play curriculum, especially when, for new teachers entering kindergarten, parents who do not understand "peer play" are constantly pressuring the kindergarten teachers. Subject knowledge is needed to support young children's development. Others add, "When cooperative peer play ends because one child lacks responsibility, we need to help children gain a sense of responsibility for their cooperative learning role and appreciate the importance of their place in the game." The statement was duly supported by Tarman & Tarman (2011), kindergarten teachers should monitor the behavior of the children, and assist children who need assistance playing with other children and resolve conflicts between children if they occur.

Based on the results of the interviews, the researcher came to the conclusion that most of the people she talked to agreed that peer play was important; and that teachers should get involved and watch and monitor children play to promote desired social behaviors. It was also found that discrepancies in interviewees' personal development plans and educational philosophies may affect their utilization of relevant educational resources. For example, teachers with more experience were more likely to use resources and value peer play than teachers with less experience

Data analysis for research question 2

What are the social behaviors of young children during peer play?

__Visual narrative case study__

Nicolopoulou (2007) believes that the narratives of children's play should be viewed as "closely connected stories." To demonstrate how diverse children's social behaviors are in peer play, the researcher selected six relevant cases and counted the frequency of children's social behaviors during peer play using visual story analysis.

Table 2
Statistical Frequency Scale of Young Children's Social Behavior Based on PIPPS

Item	Field Observation (17 children under observation)													
Classification of social behavior	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		Total Frequency (6)	
Frequency Yes (Y) or No (N)	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Factor 1 Prosocial behavior														
Comforts other when hurt or sad	√		√			√	√		√		√		5	1
Help others children	√		√		√		√		√			√	5	1
Creative in making up play	√		√		√		√		√		√		6	0
Help settle peer conflicts		√		√		√		√		√	√		2	4
Encourages others to join play		√		√		√	√		√		√		3	3
Share things with others	√		√		√		√		√			√	5	1
Disagrees without fighting		√		√	√			√		√		√	1	5
Positive emotion during play	√		√		√		√		√		√		6	0
Politely know the behavior of others	√		√		√		√		√		√		6	0

Factor 2 Antisocial behavior

Rejects play ideas of other	√		√	√	√		√	√	2	4
Does not share toys	√		√	√		√	√	√	1	5
Cries, whines, shows temper		√	√	√		√	√	√	5	1
Doesn't take turns		√	√	√	√	√	√		1	5
Destroys other's things		√	√	√	√	√		√	1	5
Starts fights & arguments	√		√	√	√		√	√	4	2
Grabs others things		√	√	√	√		√	√	0	6
Disrupts play	√	√		√	√		√	√	1	5
Verbally assaults others		√	√	√		√	√	√	4	2

Factor3 Non-social behavior

Confused in involvement in peer play	√	√		√		√	√	√	1	5
Seems unhappy	√		√	√	√		√	√	3	3
Needs help to start playing	√		√		√	√		√	3	3
Refuses to play when invited		√	√	√	√	√		√	1	5
Is ignored by others		√	√	√	√		√	√	2	4
Wanders aimlessly	√		√	√		√	√	√	3	3
Hovers outside play group	√		√	√	√	√		√	5	1
Is rejected by others	√		√	√	√	√		√	2	4
Need teacher's direction	√	√		√		√	√	√	2	4

Factor1: Prosocial behavior of young children - Frequency and occurrence.
Overall, our findings indicated that majority of the observed participants engaged in rich prosocial behaviors in various occasions of peer play. Based on the prosocial behavior presented in Factor 1 of Table 2, the researcher found that the most frequently mentioned items were "Positive emotion during play" and "Creative in making up play," which implies that the majority of children love to play. They are willing to play with their peers and be able to make an extension of the game, depending on the experience level. The finding is quite

similar and coincides with Scott and Cogburn's (2023) study, who believed that children are able to learn and control their feelings, make friends, and find out who they are through play. Also based on behavioral frequency, the researchers found children were more likely to "share things with others," "comfort others when hurt or sad," "politely know the behavior of others," and "help other children." all of which were produced during peer play, implying that play influences children's social behavior. The more life experiences children have, the more complex their role-playing and social behaviors become. In addition, the authors observed that few children were able to do these two things: "help settle peer conflicts" and "disagree without fighting".

Factor 2: Antisocial behavior of young children – Frequency and occurrence.
However, from the perspective of factor 2, some children are proned to antisocial behaviors such as crying, tantrums, and refusing to take turns during peer play, the most frequently mentioned are "cries, whines, shows temper," and "start fights & arguments", and will "verbally assaults others". According to Piaget's stages of cognitive development, young children were observed to be in the preoperational stage(Piaget,1952). Children in this stage are mostly self-centered and fixed in their thinking, which makes it difficult for them to agree with and accept other people's views, thus leading to arguments among peers. When they have arguments, they tend to cry for catharsis and attention. In addition, because of their limited verbal skills, children at this stage communicate with others mostly through body language, and when conflicts occur, they are less sure how to interpret them, so they physically collide with each other. The only item that was not mentioned was "grabs other things,". It was a good indication, which means that most of the children were able to play in the rightful manner with their peers to sustain play between peers. This positive phenomenon was also positively found in Factor 1 analysis whereby children were aware of the polite behaviors, willing to share things, and encourage each other to join play.

**Factor 3: Non-social behavior of young children - Frequency and occurrence.**
In addition, a very small number of children have difficulty joining in peer play, and their behavior is often categorized as in Factor 3 - unsocial behavior, which is mostly characterized by watching peers play and not interacting with or communicating with them. The most frequently mentioned "Hovers outside play group" and the least mentioned "refuses to play when invited," "confused in involvement in peer play" indicate that most children are willing to play and seldom refuse others' invitations, but a large proportion of children lack strategies to actively join the play.

Piaget (1952) and Pei (2022) emphasized the importance of cooperative tasks and play, arguing that play activities can help children express their internal thinking.Through Table 2, the researcher found that peer play provides a good environment for young children to produce social behaviors. In the following, the authors will use visual narrative analysis through Table 3 to describe the reasons for the production of relevant social behaviors in young children in play situations.

Based on Table 2, the researcher had selected some scenarios and had analyzed the social behavioral patterns of children, about their social behaviour during peer play. The interpretations on social behavior among the young children during play that based on the PIPPS were mentioned as follows.

Young children's social behavior in pretend peer play

Figure 1

Figure A (Case 1)   Figure B (Case 1)   Figure C (Case 2)
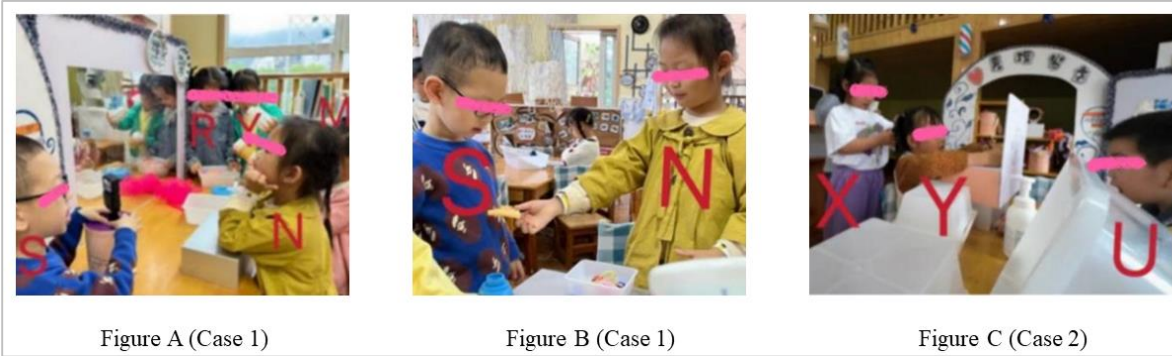
Case 1 and Case 2 are referring to pretend peer play.

Pretend play can be broadly defined as a child's action of playing "as if" and is considered a natural and joyful opportunity to promote children's positive social development. During pretend play, children can take on different roles and experiment with their and others' behavior (Fein, 1987; Jaggy et al., 2023). In Case 1, the children are preparing their own "meals," and during this process, they communicate mostly through borrowing and returning items (Figure A). For instance, when there was only one "bowl" remaining, Child-R and Child-N argued. When Child-S asked Child-N, "Can you kindly give me the pizza you cooked?" when Child-N made the pizza, (Figure B).

But in Case 2, the children and their friend resembled a rich, continuous narrative story. Child-X played the "mother" role. Child-U took the part of "infant," while Child-Y portrayed "sister." According to their respective roles, the children performed activities that were age-appropriate. Each character has his or her own task, and they act in accordance with their age-appropriate roles, which drives the progression of the plot. For example, Child-Y and Chid-X said, "Mom, can you brush my hair if it's messy?" Child-X responds, "Sure, I'm coming."

Compared to Cases 1 and 2, it is clear that children's social behavior is influenced by the setting and theme of play. When a game has a leader who encourages the formation of a new topic, the rest of the peers can add fresh, inventive content to their play and contribute to the evolution of the game under their direction. In Case 1's peer game, the children's roles were manifestly unbalanced, with four chefs and one customer in an extremely illogical role configuration. In Case 2, Child-X offered to play a "role-playing game" so that the social behaviors exhibited by the children would be more complex and peer interaction would be more apparent." Role-playing is the reproduction of children's social reality on their own volition. Therefore, the authors conclude that pretend play may have a positive impact on children's social behaviour and peer relationships as it is an opportunity for children to experience positive peer interactions such as sharing, waiting or assertion.

To promote scenarios and role play, early childhood educators should provide sound directions to facilitate play activities. This requires teachers to maximize limited space to create play areas where children can play in a relaxed and unstructured environment, and to boost interactions through situations and role play, which may increase the probability of children engaging in peer play. When children are unsure of their roles, teachers should immediately facilitate them thus making it easier for them to play with their peers.

Children's Social Behavior in constructive-based Peer Play

In the China kindergarten, construct-based peer play is a play activity which the young children are interested, and always willing to have active participation (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). In this process, there is interaction between children and their peers in terms of team building, cooperation, and verbal communication, which, through a combination of external influences as well as internal balancing mechanisms, builds a sense of community and promotes the formation of cooperative behaviors (Pei, 2022). Of course, there are cases of exclusion of peers from play, which is also a manifestation of young children's social behavior. Children's interest in the constructive-based activity and the level of difficulty in the constructed work influence the participation of play too. Combining the case studies, the researcher found that the five-year-olds developed further in their sense of self and awareness of others, they could choose their own playmates, and they exhibited cooperative behavior.

Figure 2

Figure D (Case 3)   Figure E (Case 3)   Figure F (Case 4)
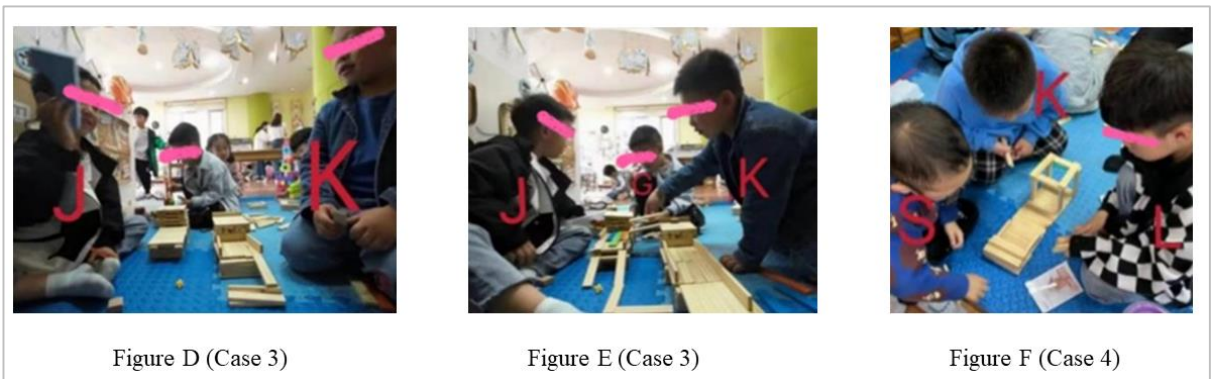
In Case 3, observed that Child-K and Child-J were able to build and connect the car separately (Figure D), while in Case 4, Child-L, Child-S, and Child-K were also able to complete the task according to the distribution of task (Figure F). This suggested that boys of similar age have comparable levels of construction. Similarly, based on Child K's words, "Come on, guys. Let's do together!" and other similar language expression, it can be concluded that children tend to form group relationships during play and choose peers at the same level, with similar interests, or partners they like to play with during play activities.

      The researcher found that children's prosocial behaviors in Case 3 and Case 4 were mostly manifested in the following aspects: cooperating with peers in constructive play (Figure E); helping peers to solve difficulties during building blocks; and comforting peers' negative emotions during constructive play. Combined with factor2 of Table4, most of the negative social behaviors in cases 3 and 4 were due to different ideas about building, and arguing or fighting over materials in the building area.

      Materials are basis or foundation of children's constructive play. Construction materials have a great impact on the quality of peer play. Based on the above case, the researcher found that most of the themes of peer play revolved around construction materials. The lack of materials may lead to unfriendly behaviors such as children fighting over materials (Pei, 2022). Therefore, kindergarten teachers should regularly assess the adequacy and appropriateness of play materials and provide sufficient construction materials to support peer play at the construction play area, such as robots, cardboard boxes, toy cars, and cans. This will attract children's interest to try different ways of playing together with peers. Open-ended

play materials are essential to avoid boredom because playing with the same old materials too frequent for a long time, they will lose the motivation to play.

Young children's social behavior in games rule-based type of peer play

Games rules-based peer play is also geared toward young children and their peers. Children must know self-regulaton, following game rules, and suppress their ego's needs during play. Games rule-based play is rational and allows children and peers to develop strategies and plans. As we observed in the case study, peer play constructs norms and children develop sociality by observing themselves, their peers, and their world to acquire rules (Chen et al., 2020). In Case 5, Child-T created the rules for a multi-player competitive game, so if other children wanted to play must followed the game rules (Figure G) . However, as children and peers developed their own games, they can become aware of the needs to develop play and social norms, but not all children will be able to follow these norms. Some children can arrange, develop, and interpret the rules of play and actively involved in decision making problem-solving, especially during peer play. Others may play aimlessly, break the rules, or cause peer strife, just like Child-A in Case 5, who was trying to break the game rule (Figure H). According to the study, peer conflict has two voices because both sides are self-centered and egocentric. They mainly focused on themselves and ignore the emotions of others. Each party expresses his/her worldview-related thoughts, ideas, and desires in these voices. These phenomena and the issues behind them are worthy of study.

Case 5 and Case 6 exhibit prosocial behaviors on the Social Behavior Assessment Form, including following the rules of play, preventing disagreements among peers, and encouraging peer play. In contrast, most antisocial behaviors were caused by losing games, using bad techniques to join games, not following rules, or not taking turns.

Figure 3

| Figure G (Case 5) | Figure H (Case 5) | Figure I (Case 6) |

In Case 6, Child P and Child V could not agree on who would play the next game until the teacher intervened (Fig. 11). Observed that the teacher used the guessing game to stop Child P and Child V from arguing, but she did not solve the problem. Instead of deciding the winner of the guessing game, the teacher should have taught the children the rules, turn-taking, and fairness. The researcher strongly believes that teachers' perceptions of the rationality and value of peer conflict in young children are the basis and foundation for teachers' resolution of peer conflict, and that affirming the value and rationality of conflict is the right philosophy for peer conflict. Teachers' beliefs on social behavior during peer play will affect how they handle the

situation by using positive and directive language, positive or negative emotions, and authoritative arbitration (Wang, 2022).

The Teaching Guide for Preschool Education in China emphasizes the importance of young children understanding and following basic rules of play and life (Heninger, 2017; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China,2023). This is important to know that negotiating game rules helps preschoolers understand themselves, their peers, and their environment. Rules can initiate conversations in which young children actively build meaning and impressionable children begin to disengage from egoism and gain empathy and respect for others and their relationships. Therefore, teachers should continually promote young children to learn and accept a variety of perspectives in order to coordinate people's actions and willingness to interact, and urge and guide them to understand each other and set rules with their peers.

Discussion and implications

Young children's play prepares them for future intellectual, social, and emotional success (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Wang, 2022). Nilsen (2021) shared that effective play programs cannot be developed to support preschoolers' school readiness without a better understanding of the factors associated with teachers' beliefs about the importance of play instruction.

The case studies showed that when children played with their peers, they learned to take turns, share, and help each other. Nevertheless, based on the frequency of children's social behaviors in the checklist, we found that currently there is still a large proportion of children who cannot autonomously produce pro-social behaviors in peer play. However, it is undeniable that the development of these potentially social behaviors is embedded in these peer plays. As the leading developmental theorists Piaget (1952) have stated, play is the primary context for the acquisition of important social competencies because it is often the medium through which children build social collaboration skills and learn to coordinate multiple social competencies, so peer play is the primary setting for the acquisition of important social competencies. Therefore, teachers need to not only help shape how young children act and behave but also make it possible for them to play with each other (Salter et al., 2016).

The implications of this study suggest that most teachers of young children are aware of the value of peer play and promote peer play in their classrooms. They mentioned different types of play in their interviews and acknowledged the use of play as a purposeful tool for children's learning. This revealed that these early childhood educators understand the developmental appropriateness and classroom practices to support learning through play. Some respondents felt that the amount of time the child spent on play was limited by the targeted academic achievements. This indicated that there is a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and perceptions, and their expectations towards learning through peer day. This is an important point because this discrepancy suggests that something needs to change in order for early childhood education teachers to be convinced of best practices in the classroom exactly as they know and experience them. In addition, the researchers used observational methods to explore the social behaviors young children exhibit in different kinds of peer play, which provides information sharing of current situations for educators in general to recognize the value of peer play. This approach is supported by Griffing (1983), who noted that play observation can help early childhood teachers understand what types of play and which environments young children primarily prefer. An observation revealed what children need in order to develop and extend their play (Gold et al., 2020).

In a nutshell, Play observations enable teachers to reveal children's social world. Peer play prepares young children for subsequent intellectual, social, and emotional success (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Wang, 2022). Even Vygotsky (1978) stressed play has an impact on cognitive development. The central to Vygotsky theory is the idea that young children usually develop new social and cognitive skills through interaction or communication with other individuals. From Griffing's (1983) perspective, play observation can assist early childhood teachers learn what sorts of play and which situations young children predominantly enjoy, as well as the complexity of play.

Conclusion

Overall, this qualitative study looks at what early childhood teachers' thoughts on how peer play can be developed in kindergarten and how children's social skills develop in peer play. Peer play is necessary as a part of early childhood education. It should continue to take priority in today's 21st-century classrooms. We should not allow high-pressure learning that leads us to take developmentally appropriate practices away from the young children. The significance of this study is that it provides an excellent platform for early childhood teachers to share their understanding, perceptions, implementation, and application of peer play to promote social behaviors. The results of this study are informative and can provide some insightful suggestions and recommendations for early childhood educators to further improve the applicability of peer play in the early childhood setting. In addition, early childhood teachers need to continually meet the changing needs of the 21st century and adapt to their new roles in the midst of global change. In this regard, equipping future teachers with the knowledge, skills and expertise to respond to the changing expectations and roles in contemporary school environments is of critical importance (Flores, 2020; Karakose et al., 2023).

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