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Article

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Robert Lecusay [1,*,†] (ID)**, Anna Pauliina Rainio** [2,*,†] **and Beth Ferholt** [3,†]

1   Department of Education & Didactics, Södertörn University, 141 89 Huddinge, Sweden
2   Department of Education, University of Helsinki, 00170 Helsinki, Finland
3   Department of Early Childhood and Art Education, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY 11210, USA;
    bferholt@gmail.com
*   Correspondence: robert.lecusay@sh.se (R.L.); anna.rainio@helsinki.fi (A.P.R.)
†   These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: We investigate the concept of care in adult-child joint play through two cases that illustrate ways in which the development of care relations among researchers, pedagogues, and children—and the imaginary characters they create through their joint play—shape and sustain early childhood education and care research and practice. We focus on the ways that early childhood education and care pedagogues' approaches to care provide insights into practices of social sustainability, specifically social inclusion. The cases we present are drawn from recent studies of early childhood play. The studies belong to a corpus of international research projects that are researcher-teacher collaborations. These studies explore a unique form of adult-child joint imaginary play known as playworlds. Playworlds are based on cultural historical theories of development and art, Gunilla Lindqvist's studies of playworlds, and local theory and practice of early childhood education and care. Our analyses of playworlds are based, in part, on Winnicott's concept of transitional objects. The two cases are drawn from ECEC playworlds in Finland and the US. Each exemplifies how playworlds, as forms of participatory design research, make social sustainability possible. Furthermore, these cases highlight how, by working with the boundaries between and moving between real and imagined, the participants are able to develop new ways of being that are radically inclusive. We argue that they do so by facilitating and maintaining the development of care relations among researchers, teachers, children, and, importantly, imaginary characters, in ways that create what we call *transitional subjects*. We conclude that social sustainability, like care, should be conceived of as an ecology of caring practices.

Keywords: early childhood education and care; play; social sustainability; care; playworlds; cultural historical activity theory; participatory design research; inclusion; imagination

1. Introduction

Social Sustainability is a polysemic concept, one that is undertheorized in the literature on early childhood education and care (ECEC) for sustainability [1]. This literature has described social sustainability as centered on issues of cultural, social, and political importance that are consequential to people's lives both locally and globally. There is also a temporal dimension in which social sustainability is understood in relation to how the actions we take today affect the lives of current and future generations, with particular focus on questions of equality and human rights, and on finding ways to co-exist [1–4].

Taking this characterization of social sustainability as a point of reference, we understand ECEC settings as playing a central role in creating social sustainability. This is evident, for example, in Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence's framing of ECEC as "public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance", [5] (p. 78). At the same time, there is a growing and

methodologically diverse corpus of research examining the ways in which the organization of ECEC actually and potentially supports a transition to a more socially sustainable society. For example, this research includes ethnographic and observational studies delineating processes of community building by adults and children in ECEC settings [6,7]; interview and survey studies characterizing in-service ECEC teachers' conceptions of and pedagogical approaches toward social sustainability [8,9]; research examining how sustainability is taught and understood in ECEC teacher training programs [2,10]; studies problematizing how social sustainability is formulated in ECEC research, policy and steering documents [1,11]; and research on ECEC organization showing the importance of good governance and an intergenerational orientation for supporting social sustainability in ECEC settings and networks [3,12].

Social Sustainability, Radical Inclusion, and ECEC. Within the latter corpus of research is scholarship that highlights the importance of belonging and inclusion as concepts important for theorizing and practicing social sustainability in ECEC [1,6]. The question of inclusion in ECEC is central in our scholarship on adult-child joint play. Specifically, we examine ways in which ECEC settings—as important nodes in the broader socio-cultural ecology, where the interests and activities of children, practitioners, guardians, researchers, and local stakeholders converge—can be spaces of radical inclusion [13]. In defining radical inclusion, we draw on the work of renowned American preschool teacher and author Vivian Paley who argued that if a "preschool activity cannot include all the children in the classroom in some way, then the activity has to be reexamined, or the way one is doing the activity has to be reexamined", [14].

Relations of Care in ECEC from a Cultural-Historical Perspective. Furthermore, as researchers working in the tradition of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) [15,16], we understand radical inclusion in ECEC from a perspective that conceives of ECEC as an activity that is culturally co-constituted by adults and children as they make and negotiate the shared meaning of this joint activity. This is a view with resonances in other arenas of ECEC scholarship understand ECEC in these cultural and processual terms [5,17].

The development of ECEC as a community of practice, particularly as an inclusive activity, depends fundamentally on sustaining *relations of care* among those persons who constitute the community/ies of the ECEC settings [17]. On this point, we highlight recent arguments about the need for CHAT to further theorize and orient to questions of care, particularly in the context of ECEC research. Winther-Lindqvist characterizes CHAT as having a bias toward learning and development but lacking a vocabulary for studying care [18]. She argues, however, that:

> . . . this bias is unwarranted since well-being, learning and development rest on a foundation of caring, which also corresponds well with the radical social ontology [of CHAT] . . . . This bias probably stems from a primary focus on *activities* rather than relationships in most cultural-historical theorizing. However, activities always imply *relationships* and the motivational forces involved in our engagement and participation in activities are equally forcefully driven by the relationships we enjoy through them.
>
> (Emphasis in original) [18] (p. 3)

Winther-Lindqvist goes on to argue for the need to theorize activities and relationships through this lens of care, seeing them as "intertwined and codependent phenomena", [18] (p. 3). She addresses this care gap in CHAT ECEC research by formulating a conceptual framework, grounded in conceptions of moral imagination, for understanding how children are cared for in educational settings. The framework distinguishes between two forms of moral imagination. *Responsive caring* refers to tending to the immediate needs of children. Moral imagination is implicated in the form of empathetic identification. *Proactive caring*, as the term indicates, focuses on "extended anticipatory goals" [18] (p. 2) and concerns questions of child development such that practitioners are mindful of children's motives and correspondingly collaborate with children on "transforming and expanding children's

participation possibilities in relationships and activities", [18] (p. 1). We consider these forms of caring in our subsequent analysis.

Winther-Lindqvist's forms of caring offer a needed vocabulary for considering the role of the imagination in the development and maintenance of caring relations in ECEC, with a focus on the perspective of the ECEC worker as directing care toward children. We argue that it is also important to theorize and study relations of care as bidirectional, as relations of mutual care among all members of an ECEC setting (adult-child, adult-adult, child-child) where persons are one another's subjects of care, with the need to be cared for and care about one another [19]. We further this argument in this paper by exploring questions about the specificity of care relations in the context of playworlds [20], a practice of joint play between children and adults in ECEC settings.

Play and care relations in ECEC: Playworlds. Although there are versions of playworlds that are adapted for work with persons in middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood [21,22], playworlds are commonly situated in early childhood settings. This approach, which was introduced and developed several decades ago in Sweden by Gunilla Lindqvist [20,23], has also been developed and studied by researchers and practitioners in Finland, Japan, Serbia, and the United States [21,24–26]. Broadly speaking, playworlds involve the joint creation by adults and children of a shared imaginary world often loosely based on a narrative, often from children's literature or drama. The selection of the narrative is driven partly by interests related to topics important in the children's and adults' lives, which the adults and children wish to explore. The topics can be wide-ranging, from emotions to abstract concepts (e.g., fear, loneliness, friendship).

Development of a playworld is often a long-term process in which the children and adults collaborate in the creation and enactment/use of characters, props, and plots. In playworlds that rely on children's narratives as an organizing feature, the narratives are selected to ensure the inclusion of tensions rooted in contradictions of character and circumstance (i.e., drama), as these motivate participants to pursue creative and critical approaches to engaging in joint play [26]. It is these dramatic qualities that underpin the emotional pull, drawing children and adults into the play and making them invested in it.

The chosen narrative functions not as a script for a play, but rather as a source of inspiration through which adults and children negotiate the development of a shared imagined world. In other words, the narrative serves as a common point of reference that can support the negotiation of mutual care and understanding among participants, both adults and children. This in turn facilitates movement in and out of the shared story. The narrative also provides a flexible framework through which adults and children explore topics via role-play based on established or improvised characters and plots. This process of development generally unfolds over months (at times up to an entire school year), and in different phases where different aspects of this development are emphasized. These aspects can include the selection of the narrative; defining characters and roles; reading the original story; building and playing with props; negotiating and enacting changes to the plot; and reflecting on the activity itself.

Researcher-Practitioner Care Relations in Playworlds. In our present examination of care relations in playworlds, we draw on the work of The Care Collective to define care (We acknowledge the literature on care—not linked directly to ECEC, and not focused on the creative aspects of care—but which avoids the universalizing perspective of a manifesto. However, given the scope of this article, we limit ourselves to The Care Manifesto. We chose this text because it speaks directly to the creative capacity of ECEC). The Collective is a group of cultural studies scholars focused on understanding and addressing the many "crises of care" in contemporary society. They define care not only as "the work people do when directly looking after the physical and emotional needs of others", but also as "our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive along with the planet itself" [27] (pp. 5–6). Critical for our purposes is the Collective's focus

on working against the "pervasiveness of carelessness" means putting care center stage and "building on a wealth of examples" that can be called "care in practice" [27] (p. 19).

When considering the question of "care in practice" in ECEC, the literature often focuses on relations between children and practitioners. However, various other persons are involved in the activity of ECEC. This involvement can be rooted in relations of care among these different persons. For example, in the ECEC philosophy of Reggio Emilia [28,29], the nurturing of heterogenous relations of care is pursued by design through the intentional involvement of artists, pedagogical consultants, researchers, and local community stakeholders. Participation by these actors is seen as contributing to collective meaning-making through the introduction of multiple voices into the activities of the ECEC community [28]. As Rajala et al. remind us, such arrangements highlight the need for developing organizational structures to promote care and compassion in ECEC, "ones that support reflection and analysis of taken-for-granted ways of organizing work as well as envisioning and implementing new models of the activity to remove systemic and institutional obstacles for well-being and flourishing", [30].

In the case of playworlds, researchers play an important role in mediating the interpersonal and inter-institutional relations that underpin this activity. As a form of participatory design research (see Section 2.1), playworlds involve sustained collaboration among children, practitioners, and researchers. While the critical study of researcher-practitioner relations and positionings is a hallmark of this kind of research, only recently have studies emerged examining relations of care between practitioners and researchers, particularly in education practice and research [31]. For example, Bergmark—an education research scholar working from an action research orientation—draws on Noddings' *ethics of care* to highlight the key role that researcher-practitioner relations of care play in such collaborative forms of research [32]. She emphasizes the importance, between researcher and practitioner, of mutual attention to one another's views and beliefs, and of the need for creating opportunities to "contextualize and enact these views and beliefs" [32] (p. 341). Such contextualization and enactment—through mutual attention—has been observed among teachers and researchers and, also, children, in playworld projects, raising questions about the role that joint play in supporting such mutual attention [33,34].

Care Relations in Adult-child Play. In the present paper, we examine questions of imagination and mutual "care in practice" in the context of the joint play as an arena through which relations of care are mediated by the imaginary world that is co-constructed by adults and children. We draw directly from Vygotsky's theories of play, imagination, and creativity. This theory highlights the importance of understanding imagination as being implicated in the process of creating and experiencing reality (vs. understood as something 'other' than reality). Vygotsky writes that imagination and realistic thinking (fantasy and reality, respectively) are integrated processes:

> There is no essential independence of the two developmental processes. Moreover, by observing the forms of imagination that are linked with creativity, that is, the forms of imagination that are directed toward reality, we find that the boundary between realistic thinking and imagination is erased. Imagination is an integral aspect of realistic thinking [35] (p. 349)

We present two cases of playworlds that represent vivid examples of radically inclusive relations of care. We argue that central in these examples is their basis in the creative acts at the boundary of imagination and reality. Our examination of these two cases is guided by the following questions:

> *How do the co-constructed imagined worlds and characters in a playworld mediate radically inclusive relations of care?*

> *What characterizes the process of creating mutual care in the examples?*

2. Materials and Methods: Playworlds

In the following section, we situate playworlds methodologically within the tradition of ethnography and as a form of Participatory Design Research. We proceed to describe the research projects from which our case studies are drawn, and the data analyses conducted in both cases.

2.1. Playworlds as Care-Centered Praxis of Social Sustainability

We turn now to discuss our approach to playworlds as a research collective—The Playworlds of Creative Research (PWCR). We see our efforts as part of an expanding corpus of participatory approaches to the study of ECEC that draw on mediational theories of mind (CHAT, sociocultural theory). This includes the already mentioned work of Winther-Lindqvist, the Cultures of Compassion research group at the University of Helsinki [36], and the work of Gloria Quiñones, Liang Li, and Avis Ridgway [37]. PCWR work can be seen as developing from the research tradition of social design experiments [38] and formative interventions [39]. We pursue a form of Participatory Design Research [40], adopting a methodological strategy of co-creating with others the activities that produce the phenomena of interest [15]. One key reason for adopting this approach: We are best positioned to understand a phenomenon if we are part of the activity that produces it. As researchers, we become observant participants when we become contributing members of the activity [41]. That is, one can experience what it is like to become a functional aspect of the system through active co-construction of the activity of interest [42].

We pursue our research reflexively, sensitive to the risks and power imbalances involved in the processes of partnering and design inherent in this kind of collaborative research. This is in line with PDR, as we emphasize the process of partnering as a central area of analysis in order to make visible questions of design and relationality that often go unexamined in educational research [40]. We see this as important for illuminating "dimensions of learning that both embody and help to bring about . . . change (that is) not just about conventional forms of what we typically label learning and practice but is also about transformative social change", (Bang and Vossoughi define transformative social change as " . . . the interweaving of structural critiques with the enactment of alternative forms of here-and-now activity that open up qualitatively distinct social relations, forms of learning and knowledge development, and contribute to the intellectual thriving and well-being of students, teachers, families, and communities. These co-constituted processes necessitate deeper analysis of theory and method in which the epistemological, ontological, and axiological dimensions of human activity are made explicitly visible and engaged as driving sensibilities in design, enactment, and analysis" [40] (p. 175)).

2.2. Methods and Research Sites

The cases described in our findings are drawn from ethnographies of playworld activities that were conducted in the US and Finland. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. The case from the US centers on a child whom we will refer to as Joseph. The case from Finland centers on a child who we will refer to as Dana.

US Playworld. The playworld in the US (hereafter the Trolls' Playworld) took place in New York City. It was developed as part of an ethnographic study of playworlds. The playworld took place over the course of one school year. Participants included a class of 25 children (aged 4–6 years at the start of the project), the class's teacher, three teachers from two of the three other kindergarten classes in the school, one freelance teaching artist, and two visual artists. The artists contributed photographs and video footage of the playworld on three separate occasions. Enrollment at the school is determined via a lottery for students across a large area of New York City and offers priority to 100% of its seats to children who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The playworld was in part initiated by the teachers as a means for them to learn more about the practice of Pedagogical Documentation (from the ECEC philosophy or Reggio Emilia). Data sources included field notes, audio recordings of teacher's meetings, and

rehearsals with the teaching artist. Photographs and video recordings of class meetings and playworld sessions were produced by all participants and were incorporated into the pedagogical documentation practice.

Preliminary structuring and analysis of the data took place during weekly pedagogical documentation meetings over the course of the playworld's duration. The practice of pedagogical documentation involves children in the production of documentation and its use for reflection. Thus, the children engaged in these preliminary analyses, although less explicitly than the adults. The teachers and the university-based researcher collaboratively engaged in the first stages of these preliminary analyses. This was done with a primary concern for the development of the playworld itself [43]. These initial analyses guided the subsequent analyses conducted for this paper (i.e., those in dialogue with the analysis of the Finnish playworld case). In this second stage of analysis, a focus was on the teachers' experiences during points of tension, rapid development, or reflection in the playworld process.

Finnish Playworld. The Finnish playworld (hereafter Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld) was developed as part of an ethnographic study of the development of play-based pedagogies to support school engagement in inclusive and culturally and socio-economically diverse classrooms during the first years of primary school in Finland. The case study was based on active teacher-researcher dialogue and collaboration. The project loosely followed three stages: the initial observation and analysis of the current practices, relationships, and development points in the class (Fall 2019), the planning and introduction of the playworld project in the class (January to March 2020), and implementation of the playworld project (March–May 2020). However, as COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were introduced in Finland in March 2020, the schools were closed and the actual implementation of the planned playworld project (based on the Russian children's novel Crocodile Gena written by Eduard Uspenski) had to be postponed. In this paper our focus is on events that unfolded prior to the start of this "planned" playworld: We describe what we consider to be as a spontaneously developed playworld initiated by a single child, the "Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld".

This playworld developed in the classroom over eight months. The ethnographic data sources included the teacher Julia's descriptions of various classroom events in her teacher diary as well as pictures, photographs, and drawings from the classroom work, active email and phone text correspondence between Julia and Anna (the second author), Anna's notes from informal phone discussions between her and Julia, and Anna's field notes (from a time before the COVID-19 lockdown). Due to the lockdown, Anna could not visit the school after March 2020 and the anticipated data collection of classroom observations could not be realized as intended. However, Julia recorded her impressions in her teacher's diary and described central events in the classroom from her perspective. Julia's role in knowledge production was key. The research setting was based on the idea of restructuring the research subject—researcher relationship as a democratic process that critically examines traditional hierarchical expert and power relationships [40].

The case is based on a narrative analysis [44] of the data gathered between August 2019 and March 2020. The data focused on documentation in which either Dana (the first-grade student, "Lion girl" who initiated this 'playworld') or the lion cub and cat play is mentioned. This data was first gathered into a file as a narrative timeline in chronological order. From this raw data, the development of the lion cub and cat play was constructed by the second author (and confirmed by Julia) into a short narrative form. The data was originally introduced and first analyzed in a prior study [45]. In the present paper, we expand the analysis of the same case to analyze the formation of radically inclusive care relations and interdependencies in playworld in a joint analysis with the Trolls' Playworld.

Joint analysis of the two cases. As noted, the authors are part of an active playworlds collaboration (The PWCR). The authors were in regular dialogue with one another about ongoing research concerning the respective US and Finnish playworlds. All three authors discussed these playworlds as part of routine PWCR research meetings between 2020 and 2022. They presented the events in the playworlds to each other, discussed them, and noted similarities and differences between the two cases that were relevant for understanding

how care and inclusion unfolded in the playworld activities. One striking similarity was found: The presence of an excluded/ambivalent child struggling to be seen and included. This was a situation that the teachers in each case considered to be both meaningful and problematic. The teachers, consequently, spoke repeatedly about these children with the authors. At the same time, all the authors were reading literature that included various sensitizing concepts, particularly, as we will discuss, Winnicott's concept of the transitional object (this later helped the authors articulate the role of imagination in these radically inclusive relations of care and develop the concept of a transitional subject). The authors were thus able to identify the two events, constituting the case studies, which exemplified the concepts they were exploring in complementary ways, allowing them to then make sense of and develop these concepts.

It was through this abductive process that the authors selected the cases presented herein. Abductive analysis is an iterative process, moving back and forth between theory and data; and also a process that includes revisiting the phenomenon, such that "recurrent revisits, when done carefully, almost necessarily provide what Walter Benjamin, writing about history, called an 'image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability' [46], a theoretically salient image that illuminates different aspects of the data and foregrounds previously undistinguishable facets", [47] (p. 176). Defamiliarization was also employed. Cross-cultural research teams and people who have not been participants in a playworld but know playworlds, are especially important for this kind of playworld analysis: "Defamiliarization ensures that we mull over aspects we took for granted, and revisiting allows us to return to the same observation transsituationally", [47] (p. 177).

Alternative casing also played an important role in the analysis: "When these processes (revisiting and defamiliarization) take place in a context of existing theories, we can "case" our data in different theoretical ways as we go along (Ragin and Becker 1992; Tavory and Timmermans 2009)", [47] (p. 177). Having already developed several theoretical tools specifically for playworlds analysis, (Concepts include dialectics of agency in playworlds [48]; ambivalence [13,49]; perezhivanie [50]; CONSTANTS [51]). whenever the authors encountered a playworld episode they were able to "case" the data in several ways using these tools. By employing all these components of abductive analysis, we were able to select and analyze "information-rich case(s) that manifest . . . the phenomenon of interest intensely" [52] (p. 234). The case in the present paper is the development of radically inclusive care relations. In our analytical and comparative reading of the two cases, we formulated *a three-step model of* the main events that led to the inclusion of a child that was ambivalent/excluded. Formulation of the model involved constructing, testing, and revising the model in relation to its applicability to both cases. The model made it possible to delineate the radically inclusive care relations in playworlds (the process), what was required from the participants to take them up, and what the role was of imagination in the formation of these relations. We describe our findings with the three-step model and proceed to introduce the idea that emerged through our analyses: the transitional subject.

3. Findings: Playworlds and the Development of Radically Inclusive Care Relations

Both cases reveal how interdependencies in playworlds are embraced. We argue that this embracing of interdependencies takes the form of radical inclusion, as discussed above. We first describe the main events in the two cases and then discuss how this radical inclusion unfolds in three phases:

1. An ambivalent/excluded child offers the larger group of teachers and children what is both a form of self-care and an invitation to their teacher and the other children;
2. The other children acknowledge and accept this invitation. They enter into this play space and further form caring relations.
3. The teacher follows both the lead of the children and the encouragement of the participating researcher and accepts this invitation in the face of the "chaos" they perceive.

3.1. Case 1: Trolls' Playworld

The Trolls' Playworld began when Sarafina, the teacher in whose classroom the playworld would take place, read to her students a folk tale, "The Three Billy Goat's Gruff". A central character in the tale is a troll that lives under a bridge. In addition to reading the tale to the children several times, Sarafina encouraged the children to create artwork and stories inspired by the tale. Over the course of the school year, a series of events unfolded which the children came to interpret through the lens of the folk tale's narrative. For example, on a class trip to the shore, the children found some of the trolls' "hair". They found some again, later, in their classroom. A problem in the classroom involving the lights flickering on and off? The children explained this as being caused by the trolls. By winter break, Gaby (another teacher) and Sarafina began entering the playworld in roles as sister trolls. Over several months of playworld work, the trolls developed to become visitors who would eventually be sent back "home", where they would rejoin their families and escape the frightening clomping of the billy goat gruff. The trolls needed much feeding and petting, as well as snuggling and "hanging out" with their new friends, the children, and the children were not in roles but did develop elaborate ways of welcoming the trolls into the classroom and sending them back to their families (e.g., reading them comic books, explaining to the trolls what it was like to lose one's tooth, making time machines to transport them home).

One of the children in the class, Joseph, was having a difficult time during the year of the Trolls' playworld. His difficulties were such that he had a paraprofessional aid assigned to him to keep him from disrupting the class or hurting himself. Joseph did not often participate in the playworld activity, either because he had to be taken out of the room by the aid or because he chose not to join the activity. However, shortly before the last playworld session was to occur, a classroom discussion took place. Sarafina, Beth, and all the children were present. During this discussion, it became clear that Joseph had actually been engaged with the playworld activity all along. His aid was absent the day of the discussion. Joseph had been intermittently lying on Sarafina's lap, restless and anxious. Suddenly, he raised his hand, sat up on a chair, and gave a long explanation about an aspect of the playworld that seemed to be about hiding, fear, and death.

As the children were apt to do in the Trolls' Playworld, a class-wide philosophical discussion about important issues was taking place. Sarafina helped the children take turns speaking and asking questions to clarify what someone was saying. These conversations were often about some detail in the playworld (the only discussion prompt was for the children who had participated in the playworld that day to tell the others what had happened). The conversation on this day was partly about ghosts. Joseph, whom we had thought was not following the playworld activity very closely during the year, was now explaining to his classmates that he had been hiding behind a copy machine in the hall for many days and that he had very strong ("supersonic") ears, so he always heard the trolls arriving, even if he was not in the room for many of the playworld sessions. Then Joseph spoke at length to his classmates about ghosts and trolls: How the trolls had interacted with the other children in the class, pranks the troll played on the children, if ghosts and trolls are real, kindness, death, fear, etc. Joseph's tone, expressions, and gestures established him as an expert to his peers and the adults in the room, on all these interrelated topics.

The adults found the discussion difficult to follow but the children began asking Joseph questions that made it appear that they understood every word. The children asked Joseph to call on them, to answer their questions, and to explain things to them. In a very short time, Joseph moved from being severely disruptive of the playworld activity and other activities in the room, to being the agreed-upon playworld authority. He was still leading the discussion after thirteen minutes when it was time to end the conversation for lunch.

During the discussion, Sarafina repeatedly looked over at Beth. In joint analyses, Sarafina and Beth agreed that this was in part because Sarafina wanted confirmation that the conversation, and Joseph's transformation, was as amazing as she thought it was. Over the course of the conversation, Sarafina explicitly supported Joseph, both verbally and physically, in speaking, calling on the other children himself, and moving freely about the

circle, listening to his classmates when they spoke. The following exchange highlights some of what is described above:

Sarafina: Joseph, you want to say something? What do you want to say?

Joseph: It's just that ghosts are spirits and when spirits are ghosts it makes (Sarafina looks over at Author 3 to mark this moment) it makes it (Sarafina moves her arm to Joseph's back and looks at him speaking as he sits up straight in his chair) look like this idea of ghosts (Sarafina has removed her hand so Joseph is sitting without being touched) but if you went behind the copy machine and you went like in the office to see him you knew what was going on—Nigel, wake up! (This last part is almost shouted at a child who has fallen asleep while sitting in the circle.)

S: He's very tired. Go ahead (tapping Joseph's arm).

(Then, as the children laugh, Sarafina explains that Nigel lost his tooth, that he's probably tired from that, etc.)

S: But go ahead, tell us about the spirits . . .

(Joseph stutters as the children wiggle and talk, and then Sarafina interrupts Joseph)

S: Wait, wait. Time out. Is this fair to Joseph? We should be giving Joseph the attention he deserves. Go ahead, Joseph.

J: So, if I was there, I would look behind the copy machine because some ghosts like to hide behind stuff, you can't see it but, if, if, if you think it's a ghost, it might seem like a ghost but it's not what you think. It's not what you think. If it—If you think it's real, it's actually not real, because things cannot be, and if things are things, they are things. And some things are not as special as you seem. Some you love (he makes a heart with his hands), some you don't love (he opens his hands, palms up). That's life.

Allison—(The adults may not know what Joseph is talking about but we are paying as intense attention to Joseph as the children are. His tone and delivery are commanding and intriguing.)

Allison: I have a question for Joseph.

S: You have a question for Joseph? OK, ask him a question.

(Allison asks a long question about the color of ghosts and how we see them or not, and about scariness.)

S: Did anything else happen

J: I have a question to add to her.

S: OK, ask her.

J: So, ghosts . . . Joseph speaks for a while, more questions are asked of him, and he answers each one with great oratory skill and complexity. His authority is unmistakable to us all. The talk continues in this way until lunchtime, but the children's level of sustained attention indicates that it could have continued for quite a bit longer.

For Sarafina, this was the moment that made the struggles to sustain the playworld activity "all worthwhile". She called it a "transformation from start to end". She later said of the class during this event and of Joseph: "So amazing. How they articulated themselves and spoke to each other with such inference and depth. Unbelievable, incredible, magical. The miracle of Joseph", (1 February 2019, playworld meeting).

Sarafina attributed this "miracle" in part to chaos. She said she could see the interweaving of fantasy and reality by the children in her class when she was in the role. The children were mischievous, but she could not leave her place to do anything when she was

stuck in her role. She said that she always says: "Chaos is learning", quoting Mahatma Gandhi, when people visit her class, but now she had to remind herself of this very truth: "They needed the chaos to learn. Being in character made me say it to myself. I could not come out of character, but it was OK" (1 February 2019, playworld meeting). For Sarafina, Joseph's voice was raised and heard by his classmates due (in great part) to an interweaving of fantasy and reality in chaos.

3.2. Case 2: Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld

In the fall of 2019, Anna (the second author) and Julia (a primary school teacher) started a playworld collaboration. Julia had been a master's student in Anna's university courses. She was familiar with playworlds as well as Anna's research on student ambivalence [6,37]. Julia had graduated and was beginning work as a new grade 1 (7-year-old children) teacher in an elementary school.

Very early in their collaboration, Julia started to talk to Anna about one student, Dana (and who we will also refer to as Lion girl, as Julia and Anna called her sometimes to understand that she was *both* a student and an animal character in this role, whereas sometimes in the class she was only Dana). At the start of the school year, many teachers found Dana difficult to work with. Dana was reacting strongly to the new rules of schooling (e.g., escaping from the school area, being restless and noisy). Julia told Anna over the phone that the child reminded her of Anna's work on ambivalence:

> This pupil does not talk to us adults, she rather meows, purrs, or pushes like a cat animal and wants to be petted. She is kind, polite, and social, and makes contact with other children and the adults too, but mainly through being a cat animal. With her, the other first graders pretend to be cats, sometimes. This creates chaos. The special education teacher thinks the child would perhaps benefit from a special education placement. However, right now I think she is just reacting to this open and unclear, new situation of the school start. And she reminds me of your term student ambivalence, it helps me understand her, helps me relate to her. I have words for the behavior.

> (Phone call from Julia to Anna, August 2019)

Soon, however, Dana started to feel more secure in Julia's class. Julia observed that Dana could regulate her behavior better through her embodied imagination and through play, an observation confirmed by Dana's parents who noted that Dana "the Lion girl" also emerged at home during difficult situations. Anna encouraged Julia to continue to stay in contact with the child by responding to her as if she was a lion cub, accepting her "invitations to play".

Julia convinced the special education teacher that Dana would not need a transfer to a special education class. However, in Julia's class, several other children had started to need special support. In her emails to Anna, Julia often described how, through Dana's playful invitations, not only to Julia but to other children in her class, Dana was helping Julia find ways to collaborate with Dana but also with the whole class (see an analysis of this co-regulation between teacher and students initiated by Dana [37]). Julia's class was culturally diverse, with six different mother tongues represented. Many families of the children had arrived in the country within a year so and there were several children who did not yet speak Finnish at all. Turning into an animal figure was gradually developing in Julia's class as a way of, for example, making new friends and caring relationships over the language barriers, encouraged by Dana's (as Lion girl) behavior. For example, a student named Susanna found a way to connect to another student, Alek, through pretending to be his cat. Alek was one of the students who had low motivation to be in the class. After this new, long-lasting play between Susanna and Alek, "Alek seems calmer and happier", wrote Julia to Anna (6 January 2020).

Additionally, Anna met Dana in a role when Anna visited the school. Dana invited Anna into her play and was very delicate with her non-verbal signs, as cats often are. Anna

sat on a chair in the back of the class and Dana crawled to her and climbed up the chair and stayed there, against Anna's back, purring like a cat. Anna wrote in her research diary: "I just said, 'hello cat' and let her stay there behind me. A moment later she went to pick up a picture book of cats and offered it to me and whispered, 'let's read'", (13 February 2020).

Julia and Anna started to realize that Dana's way of being in the classroom might signal a playworld invitation itself: Acting as a cat animal could be seen as her initiating a kind of playworld, in which she solved dilemmas she faced in her everyday life. She eagerly invited others, children, and adults, into this world. Julia supported her by accepting her invitations. Then other cats started to appear in the class, more or less regularly, improvised by several of the students. At the same time as Julia felt very happy about this spontaneous, expansive play, which helped many of her students to connect and engage with each other, she also suspected that "if another adult now would visit my class, it would look like a total chaos in the classroom, if one did not know what was going on", (phone discussion January 2020). Although Julia self-described as having good collegial support and collaboration with her colleagues in general, she felt that not all adults in the school understood her play-based ways of working with students like Dana. Julia and Anna discussed this and realized that they were perhaps dealing with an educational utopia that could be characterized as inclusion.

3.3. Findings: Transitional Subjects

We now turn to discuss the three-step analytical model that emerged from the two cases. See Table 1 for a comparative summary of the cases in relation to the model.

Table 1. Analytic stages and corresponding findings from the cases.

Analytic Stages	US Case: *Trolls' Playworld*	Finnish Case: *Lion Cubs & Cats Playworld*
1. Child's play invitation: An ambivalent/excluded child extends a play invitation to children and pedagogues in the group. This form of play acts as a means of self-care.	*Joseph's play*: The role of someone fluent and knowledgeable of the Troll's playworld, enacted through leading a discussion about the playworld with his peers. The role is a means through which to initiate and sustain engagement with his peers and teachers.	*Dana's play*: The role of cat/lion, enacted through performing common feline behaviors. The role is a means of sustaining engagement with others with relative freedom from anxiety; a means of solving everyday dilemmas.
2. Acceptance of invitation by other children The other children acknowledge and accept the play invitation. In this co-constructed play space the children form relations of mutual care.	*Joseph & children playing*: Joseph suddenly begins to talk about trolls and ghosts during the class discussion. His peers seem to have no problem understanding him, when by comparison it is difficult for the teacher to follow. Joseph *leads* the discussion for 13 uninterrupted minutes, calling on children to answer their questions. Implicit acceptance of Joseph's narrative that he had been hiding by the copy machine all along (i.e. that he had been included rather excluded).	*Dana & children playing*: Children behaving as cats with Dana and one another. Over time, in the classroom, the children's being "in" this play role was a way of solving dilemmas related to such things as making new friends and overcoming language barriers in interpersonal communication.
3. Acceptance of invitation by the teacher in the midst of chaos: The teacher follows the lead of both the playing child and the supportive researcher, accepting the invitation to play in a context that the teacher might otherwise consider chaotic *because* of the play.	During Joseph's leading of the discussion, Sarafina (his teacher) turns to Beth (researcher, author) with a look that conveys surprise and acknowledgement of the situation as remarkable. Sarafina later describes Joseph's actions as a "miracle" attributable in part to chaos.	Julia (Dana's teacher)—supported by Anna (researcher, author) directly and indirectly (via concept of ambivalence and beliefs about play)—acknowledges and takes up Dana's play invitations. She does this while conscious of how the play is seen as chaotic by other stakeholders (e.g. special education teacher).

Step one: An ambivalent/excluded child offers the group, in an act of bravery, what is both a form of self-care and an invitation to their teacher and the other children and researchers.

Elsewhere we describe the inventiveness of Dana's ways of supporting herself through acting as a cat and creating this world of a lion cub [37]. The children's way of creating imaginary worlds and characters through which to solve dilemmas in their everyday life can be understood as an inventive form of self-care. It appears that through acting as a cat Dana was able to stay in contact and in connection with others (whereas in school, as a "human-only" student, she easily ended up being dismissive, restless, escaping the school, etc., when experiencing stress). Calming oneself as a cat/lion cub was a form of self-care for Dana.

At the same time, for both Dana and Joseph a central point in their actions was to connect with others, to make an invitation, and stay included. We call this, here, an act of bravery, because inviting another to enter one's private world involves the risk of being excluded or misunderstood. Thus, such invitations are infused with vulnerability. For Dana, her "catness" was a way to contact both adults and children whom she did not yet know well (the school had just started), which was meant to invite others to these caring relationships or to take care of others. Anna experienced this too when she visited the classroom and found that it was Dana, as Lion girl, who welcomed Anna (a new adult stranger) into the class by making contact subtly and elegantly, as cats do, inviting Anna to read with her. Julia had told Anna that Dana was often quite stressed and restless when new adults entered the classroom space. The "catness" way of being was Dana's way of taking the situation under her control, without disturbing the class activities. Perhaps she could sense from the situation that for Anna it was fine and clear that she was a cat, although they had not met before.

For Joseph, there seemed to be few options for him to sustain his engagement in the class. Taking the role of teacher, the expert, was something he could do, after many months of observing his beloved teacher, Sarafina. When he took this step, all fell into place (and, in fact, this event marked a turning point in his participation in school life): The children and his teacher acknowledged his expertise. Interestingly, Joseph also taught us, researchers, as we developed in our profession. His analysis of the playworld, articulated in his leading of the discussion with the children and teacher (described above), threw into relief for us Vygotsky's understanding of the ways that reality and imagination are both aspects of one cycle, and how emotion is central to this cycle. In a similar vein, Dana helped the researcher and the teacher see the same cyclic nature of imagination and reality effectively in action [53].

Step two: The other children acknowledge and accept this invitation.

In both examples, we can see how the caring relations expand throughout the class. In the Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld, the cat play expanded to include Susanna and Alek, as well as to others who were keen to make new connections and form friendships across language barriers. It was Julia's ability to take seriously and accept Dana as a cat/lion that helped others in the class to accept each other as they are, as whole people.

In the Trolls' Playworld, the other children's acceptance of Joseph as an expert, as a knowledgeable and experienced person who had the right to call on children when the children raised their hands to speak, was immediate. Furthermore, by doing this the children accepted Joseph's experiences in the hallway by the copy machine as real as—or as a part of—their whole-class playworld. They accepted that Joseph does, indeed, have supersonic ears, giving him a key perspective from which to make sense of playworld events, quite the opposite of being someone who was often excluded from the playworld.

Step three: The teacher, following both the lead of the children and the encouragement of the participant researcher, accepts this invitation, in the face of the "chaos" they perceive.

As described above, in the Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld the researcher-teacher relationship and the other children's use of the Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld confirmed to Julia that even though she felt that "if another adult now would visit my class, it would look like a total chaos in the classroom, if one did not know what was going on" she herself knew that what was going on in the class was valuable and worthwhile (phone discussion January 2020). In another situation, she also said how she felt "other adults' eyes on her

back" (when co-acting with Dana that she was a lion cub [47]). Dana as Lion girl was creating chaos at the same time that she was creating care relations. However, Julia drew on her understanding of ambivalence (from her experience as a student), as well as her strong belief in the power of play, to interpret what Dana was doing in a manner that made sense as something worthwhile and important for Dana herself, for Julia, and for the life of the classroom. She also noted that she did not just 'let it [the chaotic Lion cubs and Cat playworld] happen' but that she encouraged it and made it possible in her classroom. She wrote in her teacher diary (6 January 2020):

> In practice, I think that if for example, my utopia did not include the idea of say the importance of play I also would not sensitize myself to those moments of play in the classroom or how to accept a child's play offer. During our call with Anna, I thought aloud that the cat play in the class has developed on its own, that I have mainly observed it, or maybe "accepted" it taking place, but Anna said she thinks my role is much more active. That I have encouraged it and when I think of it that is actually true and things like this happen in interaction anyhow.

In the Troll's Playworld, Sarafina, like Julia, also used the term "chaos" to describe the situation that she believed she needed to embrace. Beth's presence provided Sarafina with someone to turn to during the discussion led by Joseph. As noted, Sarafina turned and looked to Beth several times during the discussion for confirmation that what was taking place was surprising and remarkable, although strange (something that Sarafina was also led to believe through her belief in the power of play). Sarafina shared her teacher role with Joseph, even letting him override her at times in later parts of the discussion.

To reiterate, we are describing these three phases as phases of a process of radical inclusion. They led to the inclusion of two children whom their teachers were struggling to include. This radical inclusion, we argue, is a form of embracing interdependencies (as per our working definition of care [29]) in that Julia and Sarafina collaborated with formerly or potentially excluded children to transform and expand their possibilities for participation both in the here and now (*responsive care*) and through anticipatory considerations and moves (*proactive care*) to ensure that each child was not excluded from the life of the classroom [20] (p. 7). For example, this was clear in Dana's case: Julia's responsive acceptance of Dana's invitation to be in the Lion Cubs and Cats Playworld in turn afforded Julia the perspective to develop a proactive stance that led Julia to intervene to keep Dana from being sent to the special education class. Furthermore, as we will discuss below, Joseph and Dana, in-role, enacted forms of responsive and proactive care themselves by showing the connections between the shared, imagined playworld and everyday occurrences in the life of the classroom. That is, they supported the development of their teachers' and classmates' appreciation of the interconnectedness of imagination and reality, which was an essential step in the creation of bidirectional, mutual care.

We are conceiving of Joseph and Dana's in-role as transitional subjects. Winnicott's transitional object (the blanket or stuffed animal) represents the mother (primary caretaker) when she (he) is absent. Winnicott writes of play: " . . . playing and cultural experience can be given a location if one uses the concept of the potential space between the mother and the baby", [54] (p. 53). We propose conceiving of these imaginary characters, those created by the two children, as *transitional subjects*. Whereas for Winnicott a stuffed animal can be seen as an object, a tool (both real and imagined) with which to soothe oneself when the caretaker is absent, a transitional subject is a subject—a subjectivity—an actor with agency towards the real (and imagined) situation. The transitional subject is a child becoming a cat or a knowledgeable person in the playworld, thus creating a potential space, an in-between-state, not only toward him or herself but for others to connect to her/him and learn from her/him, to include his/her way of being and to learn new ways of being (other children turning into cats, or the teacher Sarafina confirming she is doing the right thing). We argue that this transitional subject is based on the real subjectivities of the children, their experiences of ambivalence and exclusion, and the real subjectivities of the roles they create, with the help of significant others. With their brave acts and invitations,

they create the potential space and take us across this potential space [54] between the "real" world—which lacks a self-evident ecology of care that includes all, that includes them—and the ecology of care in which our interdependence with them is thrown into relief celebrated explored and leveraged to pursue social sustainability. The transitional subject as a concept has the potential to reveal new ways of mutual care in ECEC (and of developing Winnicott's theory further by bringing it into close dialogue with a Vygotskian/CHAT perspective).

4. Concluding Discussion

As we noted earlier, one way in which social sustainability is conceived of and engaged in ECEC is in terms of how persons come to feel a sense of belonging and social inclusion in ECEC settings [1,6]. ECEC settings, as "public forums . . . in which children and adults participate *together* in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance", [5] (p. 78, our emphasis), afford the development and exploration of various forms of community building. That is, forms for exploring and valuing inclusion and belonging [1,6]. In the present paper, we have sought to contribute to the literature examining how these forms of inclusion unfold and can be supported in ECEC by examining in-depth how the integration of joint adult-child play supports such inclusion among adults and children in the near and long term.

To develop the discussion of our two playworld cases, we begin by considering some counterfactuals. What would have been the more common and "careless" [27] practice in the Finnish case? If, for example, the teacher had forced Dana to remain excluded until she had learned to stop "pretending they were a cat" while she was in the classroom. In the Trolls' Playworld? If, for example, Joseph would have been denied the opportunity to voice his knowledge and experience of the playworld, through the denial of the truth of his hiding place by the copying machines and his supersonic ears, both of which contributed to this knowledge and experience. However, this did not happen. It was the children and researchers who could be said to have formed a transitional community that supported the teachers in their crossing back and forth between the relatively controlled world of the classroom and "chaos". It could even be argued that the playworld afforded the creation of a zone of proximal development (understood in the sense of a zone of bidirectional, mutual development [33,55]) consisting of a community of researchers and children with the teacher as the "learner", in focus.

We would like to stress that the two cases of embracing interdependencies have little in common if one conceives of playworlds as instructional methods or techniques. They have different durations, the imaginary characters figure in very different ways, who is doing the acting is quite different (in the Lion Cubs and Cat Playworld the ambivalent child, in the Trolls' Playworlds the teacher herself was a troll, etc.). However, they are both *ways of being* that include and rely on living through and engaging with imaginary characters: Dana as a cat/Lion girl and Joseph as a teacher.

We would also like to acknowledge the debate concerning if and how adults should be involved in children's play. As this phrasing suggests, the debate is a contested one in part because play is understood by many to be the exclusive domain of children. From this perspective, adult participation in children's play may be viewed as a violation of this domain. This is a legitimate concern. There are ways in which adult involvement can disrupt, marginalize, inhibit, and otherwise colonize children's play [56,57]. However, adult participation in play, or to put it differently, adult-child co-participation in play, can also be important for children. Vygotsky argued for careful, intentional involvement of adults in play as means of supporting children's learning and development [58]. Vygotsky stressed that play is not disconnected from the real world that we all, people of all ages, share [43]. In these cases, we see these two ambivalent children offer invitations that lead to a more caring community in their classrooms. This happens when these children work in solidarity with their classmates and the researchers, and with their teachers.

We recognize the limitations entailed in the case-based approach we have undertaken in this study. We are not claiming that the process that took place in these two playworlds would be replicable in or empirically generalizable to other similar ECEC settings. Instead, our aim

is to show how our empirical lived-through remarks and notions have theoretical bearing for creating a language—generalizable academic concepts—that can then be developed and tested in further studies in other settings [47,59]. That is, concepts, such as "transitional subjects", through which we can start to better understand the phenomenon of reciprocal caring in education and what social sustainability looks like in early childhood settings if children's right to play and imagine is given the space and appreciation it deserves.

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