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Exploring children's and adults' joint appropriation of children's books through the concept of playworld

Abstract

Research into the role of literature in the Nordic classroom has shown that literary texts are predominantly seen as a tool for the developing of literacy skills and often focus on the structural components of the text itself. This often leads to the equally important creative and playful aspects being sidelined. Addressing this imbalance, the present article argues in favour of creating opportunities for young learners to take more agency and promote creative dialogue and playful expression in classroom reading practices through the framework of *playworld* (Swedish: *lekvärlden*) (Lindqvist, 1992, 1996). Specifically, this article attempts to answer the following questions: (1) how can oral and written interaction based on the reading of a children's book be understood in terms of playworld; and (2) in what ways can the concept of playworld enrich the understanding of students' and teachers' engagement with children's books? The findings are based on a classroom study of a Swedish Grade 4 students, focusing on discussions and activities related to the reading aloud of Wegelius's *The Legend of Sally Jones*. The results of this study have enabled us to shift from the dominant focus on individual readers and readings to the dialogic interplay in playworld between the children and the adult / teachers who creatively reworked and expanded upon the text. The concept of *playworld* is employed as a tool to empower both teachers' and students' creative engagement with literary texts in a way that builds on a collective imagination.

Keywords: playworld, children's literature, creative engagement, collective imagination, reading in the classroom

Att utforska barns och vuxna gemensamma appropriering av barnböcker genom begreppet "lekvärld"

Sammendrag

Forskning har visat att skönlitteratöra texters position i nordiska klassrum ofta är som redskap för att utveckla språkfärdigheter och undervisa om strukturella aspekter av texterna. Detta perspektiv undanskymmer den lika viktiga kreativa och lekfulla sidan av att läsa litteratur. Denna teoretiska artikel adresserar denna obalans genom att visa hur

konceptet lekvärld (Lindqvist, 1992, 1996) kan användas för att för att främja unga elevers agentskap och kreativa uttryck i läsandet av barnlitteratur. Mer specifikt svarar artikeln på frågorna, 1) hur kan muntlig och skriftlig interaktion baserad på läsningen av en barnbok förstås i termer av lekvärld, och 2) på vilket sätt kan konceptet lekvärld berika förståelsen av studenters och lärares möte med barnböcker. Forskningen baseras på en klassrumsstudie i en svensk årskurs 4 med fokuset på diskussioner och aktiviteter under högläsningen av Wegelius *Legenden om Sally Jones*. Resultatet möjliggör att skifta perspektivet från individuella läsare och läsresponser till ett dialogiskt samspel mellan barnen och den vuxne som på ett kreativt sätt omstöpte och utvecklade texten. Konceptet lekvärld visas som ett redskap som kan främja både lärares och elevers kreativa möten med litterära texter som bidrar till en kollektiv fantasi.

Nyckelord: *lekvärld*, barnlitteratur, kreativ involvering, kollektiv fantasi, klassrumsläsning

Introduction

In this thematic article, we propose *playworld* as a concept that can be used to understand and promote creative dialogue and playful expression in classroom reading practices. Play, argues Huizinga in his seminal book *Homo Ludens* (1938 / 2016), is in itself a basic component of human nature that leads to the creation of knowledge, culture, and other systems. However, pure play without any rules or regulations can easily devolve into a devastating force of chaos. As such, the player needs to engage in self-regulated behaviours (Bodrova et al., 2013) — learning to voluntarily follow the rules of play without any direct intervention from authority— in order to harness the power of creativity and creation that leads to the development of both cognitive abilities and affective process in learning (Russ & Wallace, 2013). In other words, play can be integrated into structured pedagogic activities.

Our point of departure is that creativity and play are integral aspects of reading which many teachers, both in and outside the Nordic countries, actively employ. In Sweden, discussion-based and experiential approaches to teaching literature, inviting students to share their unique experiences and interpretations, have been important parts of the Swedish language teaching tradition (e.g., Bergöö, 2005; Jönsson, 2007; Malmgren, 1996; Thavenius, 2017). However, as the present review will show, there are strong concerns that these aspects are at risk of being sidelined due to current trends and curriculum emphases in language arts teaching. For this reason, it is vital to develop conceptual tools to better understand the value of playfulness and creativity in collective and aesthetic classrooms readings. We aim to make such a contribution by expanding on the concept of playworld and showing how it can be applied in classroom practice.

Echoing the aforementioned concerns, analyses of language arts curricula in the Nordic countries (Gourvennec et al., 2019; Liberg et al., 2012) have shown

that literature instruction in the classroom is at risk of being subsumed by a tendency to foreground the development of literacy skills. Moreover, a comparative study of policy frameworks in Norway, Denmark and the USA showed an increasing shift towards developing analytical skills in the latter two countries (Jeffrey et al., 2019). The 2022 revision of the Swedish national curriculum (Skolverket, 2022a) for compulsory schooling does little to change this picture, given that the core teaching guidelines still foreground the structural components of literary texts (see Gourvennec, 2020), typical features of language, and analytical acts such as the discernment of messages in literary texts without any mention of “creativity” or “play”. Interestingly, this stands in contrast to the corresponding new curriculum in neighbouring Norway which, under the heading *Relevance and central values*, states that the teaching of literature “shall provide the pupils with literary experiences and the possibility to express themselves creatively and inventively” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). Furthermore, one of the aims for Grade 4 students is to “explore and present texts through conversation, writing, play, movement and other creative expressions”.

In a separate curriculum for Swedish as a second language (Skolverket, 2022b), language skills are further emphasised by references to teaching “words and expressions” when using literary texts. While language development and genre knowledge are key areas for language arts teaching, we argue that creative and playful expressions based on the reading of literature should be given equal weight. This argument also echoes the concerns raised in Gabrielsen et al.’s (2019) large-scale classroom study of the use of literature in Norwegian lower-secondary classrooms which showed a marked slant towards genre knowledge and analytical skills. National qualitative studies of Swedish classrooms have found a similar emphasis on using children’s literature to learn and use principles for structuring texts (Vuorenää, 2016; Walldén, 2020, 2021). As also shown by Watkin’s (1999) examination of structuralist, genre-based approaches to classroom reading, such an instrumental use of literary texts is unlikely to foster students’ meaningful participation in reading practices.

Since aesthetic dimensions in the reading of literature, including the use of playful and creative expression, are widely recognized as integral to literary understanding in reader response theory and research (e.g., Felski, 2008; Langer, 1995/2017; Sipe, 2000), a one-sided focus on skills relating to analysis, genre knowledge and language development seems highly problematic. Creative aspects in which the students are allowed to take agency in exploring, owning and creatively re-shaping literary texts are given little attention in both the Swedish curriculum and the nation-wide Reading Boost project (Läslyftet) (discussed in Erixon & Löfgren, 2020). This provides further evidence that fiction is seen as having a largely instrumental role, and indicates a further need to highlight the role of creative and playful expression in language arts classrooms.

Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González’s recent study of participatory approaches in children’s literature (2022) suggests that a lack of attention to

children's creative and playful engagement with literary texts in the classroom is the result of adult normativity and outdated views on children's literature. Children's literature, after all, can never escape the lingering presence of adults in its various aspects. It is mostly adults who write and produce children's literature, and it is mostly the parents or teachers who decide which books children can and cannot read. Books for children are often selected and deselected based on their 'didactic values' (Nodelman, 1992; Kidd, 2020). While Nodelman (1992) describes this practice as a form of adult colonialisation of children, Nikolajeva (2011) refers to this exercise of power as *aetonormativity* —the normativity of adults. Should this normativity continue to be exercised, there is a danger that children lose agency in, and ownership of, the texts supposedly made for them.

Therefore, the main focus of this thematic article is the opportunities created for children, in playful interaction with adults, to take agency and find creative expression and engagement in the reading of children's literature in language arts classrooms. The necessary reversal of traditional classroom power structures calls to mind Gunilla Lindqvist's approach to children's learning, known as *playworld / lekvärlden* (1992, 1996). Lindqvist's concept is used as the backbone of this paper exploring and promoting creative and child-led interactions with literary texts. In this endeavour, we build on a previous study (Malilang & Walldén, 2022) which identified untapped potentials in read-aloud discussions for further encouraging students' playful expressions and intertextual connections in open-ended dialogue. To provide empirical grounding, we use data from a different study (Walldén, 2022) in which the participant teacher to a greater extent leveraged such potential. The study focused on the read-aloud of the award-winning picture book *Legenden om Sally Jones* (The Legend of Sally Jones) by Wegelius (2008). It showed how students were given ample opportunities for creative expression and their continued engagement throughout the reading. In the present study, some of the examples of oral classroom discussions in Walldén (2022) are re-analysed to build on the concept of playworld. Furthermore, we use samples of students' writing to further explore this concept.

The aim of this thematic contribution is to explore how the concept of playworld can be applied to understand the dialogue between adults and children in reading activities. In particular, we answer the questions:

- 1) How can oral and written interaction based on the reading of a children's book be understood in terms of playworld?
- 2) In what ways can the concept of playworld enrich the understanding of students' and teacher engagement with children's books?

By answering these questions, it is possible to contribute to the critical discussion about current emphases and priorities in language arts curricula and classrooms.

The concept of playworld

The notion of playworld was first coined by Gunilla Lindqvist as a concept that could be used to promote young learners' engagement with literary forms, such as folktales and children's literature. Within this concept, children's uninhibited instinct of playing to express their natural development and to learn more about their surrounding is utilised to foster their literary engagement. Additionally, Lindqvist (1996, p. 16) also sees the benefit of play free from adult influence, arguing that rigorous supervision would potentially inhibit the act of playing.

The idea to use play to engage with literary forms is seen in activities where adults and young learners collaborate in re-enactments or pretend play based on a book or text (Lindqvist, 1992). What differentiates Lindqvist's method from other practices of classroom dramatization is how it perceives power relations between the learners and the adult. Instead of being subjected to the directives of adults, young learners are afforded more power and authority in shaping this (re)creation. Nilsson (2009, p.17) sees this as Lindqvist's attempt to challenge the then-established view of childhood as a force of chaos, anarchy, and unpredictability that needs to be controlled by the adult force of order. It is when the adults begin to step back and relinquish their need for complete control that young learners are given the agency and opportunity to own the text by and for themselves. This process allows for the creation of a more horizontal power structure which, in turn, fosters dialogues that can lead to the birth of critical thinking and awareness, as suggested by Paulo Freire (1968), see also Malilang (2017).

This new power dynamic, however, does not mean that adults are expected to remain entirely passive. Instead, they are invited to participate in this *carnavalesque* realm which would allow them to recover their innocence and sense of wonder that might have been hidden or suppressed in the process of becoming an adult (You & Malilang, 2017). Furthermore, it is neither possible nor desirable to completely discount the experience and knowledge that the adults have accumulated through the years. In creating a horizontal power structure between adults and young learners in the playworld, these extensive life experiences should be used as resources that could be accessed by the young learners should they need help and assistance, instead of being regarded as a normative force (Nilsson, 2009; Ferholt et al., 2021).

With all these considerations in mind, the resulting playful re-enactment of the book will not be completely faithful to the original text. Letting the book be the ultimate norm for this play would betray the horizontal power structure between adults and children, given that any text for children is usually written by adults and thus reflects an adult voice (see Rose, 1984; Nodelman, 1992). Faithful recreation means that the children's voice and interpretation is relegated behind this hidden adult voice – which in this case serves as the highest authority. Consequently, the young learner's agency in this context is only as much as those of puppets on a string.

Since its conception, playworld has managed to grab the interest of an increasing number of scholars, as various research on its application to different subjects such as engineering (Fleer, 2020) and gender education (Utami et al., 2021) emerges. While most of this research continued with the idea of physical dramatisation and pretend play, You and Malilang (2017) took the idea of ‘playworld’ into a more abstract realm. They argue that reading is a play in itself, where young learners take agency and reduce the adults’ force behind the creation of texts. The process of engaging with the text and how the imagination is used in building the pictorial of the textual chronotope became the focus of their argument. You and Malilang (2017, p. 229) describe this as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” As the process itself is a play, it needs to be contained in a specific space (see Sutton-Smith, 1997), or in this case, a mental playground – a *playworld*.

Within the scope of this playground, the existing concept of reader-response theory is granted a license to go beyond discussing individual responses to include communal or collaborative responses. Initially developed by Rosenblatt (1994), reader-response theory acknowledges that readers will bring their different experiences and background knowledge to a text, allowing the creation of understandings that vary from one reader to another (Sipe, 2000). This framework, however, has been criticised as being overly focused on the individual reader (discussed in Degerman & Johansson, 2010). While influential elaborations on reader response theory, such as Langer’s (1995/2017) stances on envisionment building and Tengberg’s forms of reading (2011), have contributed to understanding potentials for literary understanding in classroom discussions, these approaches still focus on classifying responses (e.g., Economou, 2015; Malilang & Walldén, 2022; Nordberg, 2022; Wilinger, 2022).

In contrast, we seek to shift the emphasis to the interplay between collective and individual imaginations in interactions between teachers and their students. The contribution of playworld is to gather different experiences and background knowledge from children and adults, and to consider them as building blocks for the collective understanding of the text. Without the domination of an adult, the children’s interpretation of this text becomes a collective force that is at least equal to that of the adults, pushing aetionormativity into the background.

This power dynamic within the playworld also allows the participants to follow two laws of pleasurable play (Lindqvist, 1996; Nilsson, 2009). The first law, the law of least resistance, manifests in children’s ability to do what they want without any clear limitation. This provides children with the opportunity to experiment with their interpretations and understandings. However, a play completely devoid of rules will inevitably descend into pure chaos as the pleasure and fun slowly diminish. Thus, the second law —the law of greatest resistance— is needed to keep the play pleasurable. This means participants subject themselves to rules to gain optimal satisfaction. In this case, the adults’ knowledge,

experience, and tendency to be more orderly may resurface from time to time to enforce the rules, albeit not very strictly. Lindqvist (1996) herself believes that children are also aware of this second law and will consequently shift back towards order and regulation in an attempt to keep the play fun.

To operationalise the concept of playworld, we draw on a classroom study that documented the read-aloud of the picture book *The Legend of Sally Jones* in a Swedish Grade 4 classroom. Aside from reading the book aloud, the teacher engaged the students in numerous discussions about the text before and after reading, with a focus on the characters and central events of the story. In addition, the teacher asked the students to predict coming events and write letters between characters in the story. While this is similar to Sundmark and Sauro's (2016) research on the use of fan fiction in language classes to facilitate both literary understanding and language skills, their research relies more on the individual response and production instead of the collective response. Aligned with discussion-based approaches that have gained traction in Sweden and many other countries (e.g., Applebee et al., 2003), we do not believe these activities to be uncommon in the reading of children's literature in language arts classrooms.

Method and material

The article is based on a classroom study (see also Walldén, 2022) of a Swedish Grade 4 classroom that comprised two student groups (20 in each). The school (K-6) is located in a socially segregated area, with around half of the students having foreign backgrounds. The second author established contact with the school through his professional network, guided by a research interest in exploring the opportunities given to the students to engage in meaningful interaction based on high quality texts. At the time of the study, the participant teacher had worked at the school for eight years.

The present contribution draws on 12 lessons (each lasting around one hour) of discussions and activities related to the read-aloud of *The Legend of Sally Jones*, a book chosen by the teacher. The discussions and activities were planned and initiated by the teacher. These took place either before or after reading the book, including instances in which the students were asked to make predictions. While one of the two groups (Group A) was followed more (nine lessons compared to three in Group B), we show examples from both groups. The second author documented these lessons by means of audio recordings (10 hours), which were later transcribed. Field notes provided extra contextual information. Furthermore, 15 letters written by students from both groups were photographed. These letters were written by students who completed their writing during the documented lesson, and who gave their consent to having their writing photographed. Letters and excerpts from transcriptions have been translated from Swedish to English by the second author.

Regarding research ethics, we followed the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). This meant that we collected written consent from the teacher and the students' caregivers. To ensure informed consent in a context with possible language barriers, consent from caregivers was collected during annual progress talks with the teacher, enabling oral explanations and giving caregivers the opportunity to ask questions. In addition, the second author explained the nature of the research to the students and asked for their oral consent to participating, while stressing that they could tell their teacher if they did not want to be recorded.

To answer how oral and written interactions based on the reading of a children's book can be understood in terms of playworld, the analysis and choice of classroom examples were attuned to what we perceived as playful re-enactments of the book. Aside from the concept of playworld, we took analytical inspiration from Sipe's (2002) typology of expressive engagement, particularly the notion of children *taking over* the text by using it as a platform for creative expression. To further probe the students' engagement with the book, we employed Felski's (2020) notion of *identification* as an important source for attachment in reading. According to Felski, identification has several strands: alignment (through literary devices), allegiance (through ethical and political beliefs), recognition (seeing aspect of oneself or one's life), and empathy (feeling with and for others). While these concepts from reader-response theory are valuable analytical tools, as also shown in our previous research (Malilang & Walldén, 2021; Walldén, 2022), focusing on individual responses is not sufficient to provide an understanding of the possibilities for collective, playful, and non-hierarchical explorations of literary texts in classroom settings. Therefore, we will locate these reader-response perspectives in the dialogical framing of playworld.

The analytical process was abductive with repeated movements between the data and the theoretical perspectives (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In our close readings of the transcripts, we focused particularly on occurrences of playful and creative exchanges we could relate to the concept of playworld. At the same time, classroom data enabled us to develop the idea of playworld in the context of structured classroom activities where students were given considerable freedom to express themselves. As we sought for additional theoretical tools to mediate between the concept of playworld and the data collected, Felski's (2020) thoughts about identification (as described above) became increasingly important to bring further insight into the children's playful and creative responses to characters in the story.

The creation of playworld in a classroom reading practice

In this section, we will use classroom examples to explore the potential of playworld in teaching practice. The empirical examples, including both

transcribed interactions and excerpts from the student letters stem from the read-aloud of *The Legend of Sally Jones*. Students' opportunities to engage in playworld through classroom discussion and writing activities are highlighted in this study.

Playful engagements in classroom discussions

One manifestation of children's playful engagement with the story can be seen in a recurring activity in which the teacher asks the students to place characters on a sliding scale of good and evil. Printed images of the characters are placed on the whiteboard horizontally, allowing back-and-forth movement. Such activities could occur both before and after the read-aloud of parts of the book.

This use of printed images adds a physical dimension to the playful engagement, transforming the abstract characters from the text into something that students can touch and manipulate. The images become what Donald Winnicott (1971) dubs "transitional objects"—intermediary objects between the inner world of students' mind or thought and the external or actual reality. With the help of such objects, the area of engagement with the story is moved from the inner reality of the mind to the tangible realm. As Winnicott (1971, p. 63) explains, the freedom to control and manipulate these transitional objects also allows the children to gain "magical omnipotence". They become aware of their ability to take control over the play, over the characters in the books, and even over the plot – albeit temporarily. This realisation empowers the children in the construction of playworld.

Excerpt 1 (Group B lesson 2)

Student 1: Well, I just want to say that he should be below Silvio.

Teacher: Below Silvio. Yes. Tell me why.

Student 1: Because, well. He looks like a thief, and you'd never know how he is.

Teacher: No. But we have some examples of how he is. What did he do? /.../

Student 2: I think he's smart and he thought he should give them food and let them sleep and so on. /.../ He sort of helped them too. And then he brought them with him.

Teacher: Yes, exactly. That's right. Good. [student's name]?

Student 3: What's it called. Well. I think he still should be there. Down there [pointing]. Because uh look at like his. Well, his appearance he like looks a bit bad.

Teacher: Maybe a bit beardy like that. Yes. You know, the thing is. We should think about what he said. [the teacher goes on recounting what had happened] /.../ So, this far I think he seems a quite decent guy. But we don't know yet. Maybe he looks a bit crookish with that beard but at least he is smiling. /.../ What do you say?

Student 4: No no. I don't care about that. Like, just because he has a beard, he is evil.

Student 5: My dad is evil, by the way [spoken in English]. You also [pointing at the researcher]. My father is evil because he has a beard.

Teacher: Yes. Well, it's exactly as you say. You should not judge him based on appearance. /.../ But, then again, you never know.

In the above excerpt, Student 1 suggests that a character from the book, "the Chief", should be placed below another character judged as "bad". Instead of

proceeding to give feedback or corrections according to often-criticised traditional models of classroom interaction (Sinclair & Coulthardt, 1975; Vuorenperä, 2016), the teacher refrains from making any authoritative judgement. Her confirming responses, such as “Yes, exactly. That’s right. Good”, dialogically build on the students’ sometimes contrasting contributions rather than following a pre-established adult agenda. The responses serve the dual purpose of stimulating further discussion among peers while also establishing the adult’s (teachers) presence without overshadowing the students. It provides a foundation for the students to construct their self-regulation within the play (Bodrova et al., 2013).

In other words, the teacher temporarily relinquishes her authority as the sole source of knowledge and, at the same time, allows the students to take charge of the activity. Whether the student’s answer corresponds to the teacher’s understanding of the book or not is less important, as one of the characteristics of play is the attention to means and processes rather than the ends (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Her role in this play is merely to bring attention to what occurs in the book without passing any judgement on the students’ responses. This willingness to go along with the unpredictable, if not wild, responses from the students indicates her participation in the playworld without reverting to adult normativity.

This (mostly) absent adult normativity opens the door to relatively unrestrained play. The original text serves as an anchor or point of departure rather than a norm. Intertextual connections to students’ background knowledge or past experiences were made freely. Sometimes, the students’ responses may contradict one other, such as the two different answers from Student 1 and Student 2 in Excerpt 1. However, it does not keep them from collaboratively constructing the playworld. The labelling of evil characters based on their beard, for example, quickly becomes a collective play with other students chiming in. Every new contribution becomes a new building block that expands this playworld, to the point of inviting the participation of the researcher.

It is important to remember that this collective expansion of playworld does not merely cover the façade – random details without any clear logic or justification behind them. Just like any other construction, playworld needs to have strong foundations to avoid crumbling into pieces. In the case of playworld, this underlying foundation is often constructed subconsciously, when individual imaginations start to interact with each other and form a collective imagination (Fleer, 2013). The constant dialectic relation between collective and individual imagination, where one influences the other, provides a strong, cyclical core which becomes the foundation for the expansion. Consequently, the expansion follows a centrifugal-centripetal movement instead of a linear path. This process can be seen in the following exchanges between students and the teacher.

Excerpt 2 (Group A lesson 5)

Student 1: He fainted because he had been grogging /.../ drinking too much. So, he fainted. And then Sally ran away. And then she walked around in the forest. And, uh, tried to find Baba. But then she sees Baba. That is, he lies dead on the ground. /.../ [inaudible comments from students]

Teacher: I get the sense that several of you in the class feel like this, that you are a bit angry. Angry at Baba.

Excerpt 3 (Group A lesson 5)

Student 1: Sally will run away. Go where the journalist was eaten by a crocodile. Take the pencil. Go to Baba and kill Baba.

Student 2: Yeah!

Teacher: Kill Baba?

Student 2: Because he was mean.

The excerpts above show students' responses when the teacher asks them to predict what will happen next in the story before they continue reading. Here, students' have just read about a scientist of dubious merit who has trapped Sally Jones in his home and abuses her through repeated beatings. The existence of collective imagination is evident here as Sally Jones' anger towards another character, Baba, permeates the discussion despite its absence in the text. This shows how the children are invested in the bond that Baba and Sally Jones have in the book. As pointed out by Felski (2020, p. 88), caring about characters is an important source of attachment in reading, having a key role in the translation between fiction and life. Therefore, it is not surprising that the students' attachment to Sally Jones and Baba was an important basis for the playworld activities encouraged by the teacher.

The two characters started bonding in Istanbul Zoo, where Sally Jones tried to support Baba, resulting in an ambiguous relationship that could be interpreted as love. The illustration also shows the two characters hugging in front of a full moon, a typical, if not cliched, portrayal of romance. Despite the separation that happens shortly after that page, Baba and Sally Jones manage to find each other and board a ship together. This adventure took them to Borneo, where Baba left Sally Jones to be with his fellow orangutans. He does not reappear in the book after this.

As the students collectively see this as an unforgivable act of betrayal, it becomes part of the collective imagination. The influence on their individual imaginations can be seen in the various manifestations of students' disappointment towards Baba and how most of them want him to be punished. One student wants to see Baba lying dead on the ground, while the other wants to see Sally Jones kill Baba. Instead of confronting these disappointments, the teacher takes a more neutral stance and acknowledges the collective feeling by saying "I get the sense that several of you in the class feel like this, that you are a bit angry. Angry at Baba." This acknowledgment by the teacher ensures validity and sustainability of the collective imagination in the act of play.

In these imaginative responses, the students manifest what Sipe (2002) terms *taking over*, a type of expressive engagement in which “anything goes”, as students use the text as a platform for subversive creative expressions. This becomes further evident in the later reading activity in which the teacher asks the students to predict the end of the book. At this point, the engagement with the characters in the story, including the animosity towards Baba, continues to fuel playful responses.

Excerpt 4 (Group A lesson 10)

Student: I would have liked the Chief to go to Kongo with that boat they bought. And they met Sally Jones' family. And then they are together, like, as a family. And then the chief becomes a part of the family.

Teacher: Like "happy ending", huh? [expressed in English]. That would have been nice.

Excerpt 5 (Group A lesson 10)

Student 1: I want the boat to sink. The Chief will die. Sally Jonas will ride, like, dolphins. They had lived in a hole in Texas. Then, fifty years later, they see flying ships and gets a heart attack.

Teacher: As usual, it is a bit, uh, science fiction

Student 1: Yes.

Teacher: And right away, you see [student] go further down this track if he got the opportunity.

Excerpt 6 (Group A lesson 10)

Student 1: Well, they take their small boat. Sail to Kongo. And then go to shore. But there, it happens, like Baba teleports all the way from Borneo to Kongo. So, they find him and kills him with knives they found in the ocean. And then, Sally Jones robs Baba's secret safe there inside of Baba. Finds all his organs. Brings them and eats them.

Student 2: Cannibal bananas. [laughter]

Teacher: Ok. [student] is delighted. Now, you're off the rails again. Here we go.

Student 2: But mine is better. Dolphins. Just riding dolphins over the Atlantic.

From the above conversation, it is apparent that Baba remains an important building block in the collective imagination. During this discussion, that building block was further developed by one student who added science fiction elements in their individual imagination. The students still treat Baba as a loose end in the story lacking in closure. This then opens up an additional space for playful exploration where Baba can be brought back anytime and inserted anywhere. While Felski (2020) has pointed out fictional characters' ability to cross boundaries and re-surface in different times, places, milieus and media, the empirical examples we draw on here show that such re-surfacing and boundary-crossing are an important resource for students' and teachers to draw on in the joint creation of playworld. In the competition between two students in Excerpt 5 and 6, the creative expression of taking over (Sipe, 2002) is particularly striking. It shows both the students' investment in the playworld activity and the creative space provided by the teacher's openness and dialogic stance.

Playful engagements with literature in writing activities

Staying true to the spirit of playworld, the teacher did not simply dismiss the back-references to Baba. Instead of correcting the students, she seized this opportunity to introduce a writing assignment. Leveraging the strong collective sentiment towards Baba, the teacher asked the class to don the persona of Sally Jones and write letters to Baba, recounting everything that the female gorilla had gone through. She even encouraged the students to write their feelings towards Baba.

Excerpt 7 (Group A lesson 7)

Teacher: In the letter, you can be very personal. You can write about things, thoughts, and feelings that have happened personally. Such letters will be more fun to read than the letters which are not personal.

In order to help the students, the teacher began with a discussion on Sally Jones' feelings. Following the students' footsteps of diverging from the canon established in the book, she reintroduced Baba and used him as the centre of discussion to encourage students' participation. This strategy seemed to work, as some students, taking on the perspective of Sally Jones, started mentioning feeling 'angry', 'disappointed', 'used', and 'lonely' in relation to Baba. The discussion that followed expanded to include Sally Jones' feelings in general, such as 'homesick', 'losing hope', and 'depressed'. During the discussion, the teacher entertained every contribution from the students and even contributed her own thoughts without dismissing those of others.

Excerpt 8 (Group A lesson 7)

Teacher: She might be furious at Baba and think that he is a horrible slacker. It might be. I don't know for sure. I was just thinking... when I think of Sally Jones, I feel somewhat sad. But maybe that isn't it.

In the excerpt above, we see how the teacher intentionally adds an element of uncertainty to her contributions. This was done to trigger more discussion and responses among the students. She avoided giving the impression of finality in her answers to keep students' playful thoughts going in the collective dialogue. At the same time, this shows how she relegated her authority as a teacher and as an adult figure to keep the horizontal power structure operating in the playworld.

This act of collecting Sally Jones' possible feelings towards Baba consequently expands the playworld. It results in a space where Baba is brought back into the narrative, albeit temporarily. The students can now address how they feel about him out in the open instead of just offering stray comments about Baba here and there. This is also a space where all the lingering collective sentiments and feeling towards the said orangutan can be verbalised and given physicality through the letters as extension to the original text.

Letter 1 (Group A lesson 7)

Dear Baba,

I am very sad because of what you did to me in Borneo!

I gave you food on the boat, I saved you from the Zoo, the Chief and I brought you to Borneo, where you had your home.

But stil you just abandoned me.

You did not teach me how make a nest in the trees, and at night a snake came to my nest, I COULD HAVE DIED!

And then next morning your flock leader comes ands say that I [capital letters: JAG] bring danger and the like and that I must leave you.

I waited in the jungle for several weeks, I thought you would come back but you didn't. Why, why did you do this, I thought you cared about me, but no, I was wrong! I cared about you, but right now I'm so sad that I can't think about it without getting into a sea of tears.

But at least my hope has returned, the Chief, I don't know if you remember him, he who worked on the boat, he found me at a bar I had been sold to, it is a horrible story, I don't want you to know about it. You don't need to think about it but anyway. The Chief found me at that bar. He bought me for 100 pounds så he could take care of me.

Right now I work at a boat called S/S Patna with him.

I work as a mechanic.

But anyway, I hope you are well and that we'll see each other again!

Yours sincerely,

SALLY JONES

The resulting letters, such as the above contribution, reflect the characteristics of a fanfiction text, defined as “a writing that continues, interrupts, reimagines, or just riffs on stories and characters other people have written about” (Jamison, 2013: 17, cited in Sauro & Sundmark, 2016). Because the letter is written amidst Sally Jones' adventure, the texts interrupt the narrative flow. Although the point of interruption is quite short in terms of the whole narrative, the writing activity adds weight to this mere pause, making it feel longer and more significant. It diverts attention away from the actions in the text and towards Sally Jones' internal conflicts. This process involves the (re)imagination of Sally Jones' feelings, which were never featured in the original text – a result of collective play within playworld.

The letter above, for example, plays on Sally Jones' anger and disappointment using capital letters. “You did not teach me how to make a nest in the trees, and at night a snake came to my nest, I COULD HAVE DIED!” The conversational quality of this letter is another proof of reimagination as there are no direct utterances from Sally Jones in the original text. This playful use of language also reflects Sauro and Sundmark's (2016, p. 414) findings that the “adeptness of language play [in fan fiction text] underlies a language user's ability to appreciate and produce creative works and fiction and may therefore be considered a facet of language proficiency.”

As previously mentioned, the second student group was expected to take Baba's perspective in answering their classmates' letters. This entailed a more

radical re-insertion of the character in the story and identification with a character they often use as some sort of punching bag. In the pre-writing discussion about Baba's feelings, the students' solidarity with Sally Jones was apparent, for example when a student described Baba as "selfish" and "sorry for himself", referring to his act of leaving Sally Jones as well as his complaints and passivity during the rigors of the journey. In relation to Felski (2020), students in both groups expressed identification with Sally Jones through displays of empathy that shaped their playworld engagement. Since the story itself is presented from Sally Jones's perspective, this identification is also shaped by what Felski (2020) calls alignment – the perspective-taking promoted by literary devices such as focalisation.

As the pre-writing discussion unfolded, some students started to express identification with Baba. One example is by pointing out that he had probably been trapped much longer at the zoo where they met, and that he must have missed his family terribly. Some students made explicit connections to their own lives to validate Baba's choice to leave Sally Jones. Thus, they engaged in the strand of identification termed *recognition* by Felski. This is exemplified below.

Excerpt 9 (Group B lesson 3)

Student 1: Like with my friends and my mum calls me. Then, I run there right away.

Teacher: Exactly. Like, family and mum come before friends. /.../ I will write that here, it's not a bad thought.

Student 2: That's exactly how it is. Family before friends.

The student mentioned running to his mother whenever she calls, a "family before friends" sentiment affirmed by the teacher and restated by another student. In accordance with the established horizontal power structure of playworld, the students' experiences were welcomed by the teacher and dialogically employed as resources for engaging with the book and the characters. At the same time, this expands the coverage of playworld, allowing more investment of personal experience in the play with the book. In this instance, it led to diverse expressions of identification that showed both alignment and dis-alignment with the focal character.

Letter 2 (Group B lesson 3)

Hi dear Sally jones. I'm fine. Me and my family have been hunted by many hunters and one of the orangutans were cought and another disappeared. it was not a great day. and the reason that I can't come back is that I like it here and my family takes care of me well. by the way, how did the chief find you? and when? #rip casper :'-(

SINCERELY

BABA

The above letter is an example of the interplay between personal experience and reading. We can see that the student incorporated the view of "family before friends" to justify Baba's decision to leave Sally Jones and to continue his story

to tie up the loose ends that triggered the collective negative sentiment towards Baba. We can also see traces of these negative sentiments in the letter where Baba received his punishment of being hunted and losing a family member. This entanglement between closure and punishment also shows the attempt to shift the alignment to Baba while at the same time, maintain the empathy towards Sally Jones. This activity thus manifests a gentle tug-of-war between allegiances, between collective sentiment and personal experiences, and between assignment and personal emotion. It is an act of balancing rules with pleasure. It is still play.

Conclusion and implications

Through the presentation of empirical examples and discussion above, we have shown that playworld creates a dialogical and creative space that mediates between individual and collective imaginations of the text. In the context of empirical reader-response research, the concept has enabled us to shift the focus from the common focus on individual readers and readings to a dialogical interplay between the children and the adult that creatively reworked and expanded upon the adventure of Sally Jones. Consequently, playworld appears as a promising tool of inquiry for promoting and understanding playful and meaningful classroom reading practices. This represents a divergence from the current emphasis on using literature – including children’s books – merely for promoting literacy skills and analytical capabilities (see Gourvenec, 2020; Liberg et al., 2012). We believe that the concept can be used to invigorate the dialogic approaches to literature teaching which are part of the Swedish subject tradition (e.g., Bergöö, 2007; Jönsson, 2007) but which risk becoming marginalised (see also Erixon & Löfgren, 2007). Grounded in children’s literature studies, the concept also responds to the needs of additional theorisation of creative and playful responses to literary texts.

As playworld’s most striking feature is the relegation of adult authority and children’s rise to power (You & Malilang, 2017; Nilsson, 2009; Lindqvist, 1996), we have also explored how this temporary abolition of aetnormativity (Nikolajeva, 2011) opened up an opportunity for teachers to frame classroom discussions and writing activities in ways which give the students agency in exploring and re-shaping the text. They do not need to conform to pre-determined didactic readings of the text or instrumental uses of children’s book – which is generally established by adults – to acquire decontextualised genre knowledge (e.g., Vuorenää, 2016; Walldén, 2020; Watkins, 1999). With the close association of *play* with child(ish) activity and the absence of teacher authority, the young readers are allowed to feel at home with the playworld and seize the opportunity to establish their leadership during the whole activity. At the same time, they are owning the text and taking creative license. This is reflected in students’ considerable agency their oral and written interactions with the text, resulting in various forms of creative thinking and interpretations.

Furthermore, these playful oral and written interactions all served to expand the playworld and inspire potential materials for teaching-learning activities. One important condition that facilitates this natural expansion, however, is the teacher's abstaining from seizing control and establishing a singular, acceptable response or interpretation of the truth. The teacher should instead join the play and position themselves as a participant at the same level as the other students. Should they want to express something, this contribution should be seen as an addition instead of a correction. In this way, playworld also requires the teacher to keep an open mind to the creative, sometimes even wild, thoughts of the children.

In future research, the concept of playworld can be further developed and applied in different stages of education to show the possibilities for creative expressions and playful negotiation of children's literature in classroom practice. We believe the concept can be empowering for teachers as a resource and rationale for using their own agency in teaching to promote their students' creative engagement with literary texts, and their contributions to the collective imagination.

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