

# Dramatic Play as a Meaning-Making and Story-Making Activity

*Gisela Wajskop and Shelley Stagg Peterson*

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*Gisela Wajskop, former primary teacher and professor in teacher education in São Paulo, Brazil, is a sociologist, researcher, consultant, and educator in early childhood and teacher education. She is currently a visiting professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), Toronto, Ontario. She can be reached at giselawajskop@gmail.com.*

*Shelley Stagg Peterson, former primary teacher in Alberta, is a professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/University of Toronto. She can be reached at shelleystagg.peterson@utoronto.ca.*

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**D**ramatic play supports children's meaning making. It provides rich, complex and varied experiences for students' conceptual learning, story making and overall literacy development. As such, dramatic play, defined by Smilansky (1968) and Elkonin (2005) as play in which children take on pretend roles, has an important role in teaching and learning in preschool and primary classrooms. Alongside the many curriculum-directed learning activities of a typical school day, dramatic play offers children the possibility of choosing and controlling the directions that their interactions and learning will take as they create stories together (Brougère 2009).

In their dramatic play, children use explicit language, metalanguage and narrative language, which are important to early literacy (Pellegrini and Galda 2000). Children select, develop and put their imagination and knowledge into practice without direct adult intervention. Indeed, recent research shows that children's play may be more developed in the presence of peers than in presence of adults (Pellegrini and Galda 2000). This allows children to think about and solve problems free from the situational pressures of their immediate reality (Vygotsky 1978). As such, play is fundamental to children's literacy and conceptual and social learning, and should have a place in preschool and primary classrooms.

Starting with a play context in a Brazilian childhood education centre, we draw on our observations in Brazilian and Canadian classrooms and the literature on dramatic play to present our argument. We end with suggestions for classroom practice that makes the most of the meaning-making and story-making qualities of dramatic play.

## Dramatic Play as a Meaning-Making Practice

Five-year old-Diana, Maria and Juliana (all names are pseudonyms) are playing with José in a house centre in their suburban São Paulo daycare centre. They prepare breakfast with materials from the play kitchen and discuss what food they should have for breakfast. After they eat, the three girls prepare to go off to work as housekeepers, but José makes no move to leave the pretend house. He says, "No, no. I'm going to stay home and watch TV." Diana grabs him by the arm and says, "No! You have to go to work! Everybody has to work!" José replies, "But I don't have any work." Immediately, Diana opens a make-believe door and stands on the street, hailing an imaginary taxi. José looks at her with surprise as Diana shoves him into the taxi, saying to the taxi driver, "Take him to work!"

In this play context, the four children are rewriting stories of their lives, constructing new understandings about roles and relationships among family members within an imaginary world. The children are not simply recreating lived experiences and observations of everyday interactions. They are not merely retelling stories told by friends or relatives. Nor are they only re-enacting stories read to them by others or viewed on television and movies. Rather, they are giving new meaning to their observations of adult family members' work and absence of work outside the home by negotiating and using explicit language to communicate their ideas.

José's observations lead to an understanding that the unemployed household members stay home

while others head off to work. Diana has drawn a different conclusion: "I'm saying that everybody has to work!" She attempts to revise the meaning proposed by José by bringing in an imagined object and character with a particular role, that of a taxi driver who finds work for people who are unemployed. Through the imagined play situation, adult practices that do not seem right to the children can be reimagined. Sawyer and DeZutter (2009) explain that "before children can read and write, improvisation during play provides an opportunity for children to interact with and operate on the texts they encounter in the wider culture" (p 25). This negotiation of meaning between José and Diana occurs because they disagree "with their peers' interpretations of roles and events being enacted. ... Interpretative negotiations typically involved reflecting on the nature of the language a character used and making alternative suggestions. In other words, the process of negotiations during dramatic play results in children reflecting metacognitively on the social and linguistic process of their interactions, as evidenced by their use of such meta-terms as *say*, *think*, *talk* and *words*" (Pellegrini and Galda 2000, 60).

The children's dramatic play has provided a context for the children to make connections between the multifaceted and fragmented understandings that are generated from the immediate or vicarious experience, and to gain a deeper understanding of "different characteristics of the assumed role, its responsibilities and the relations with other roles and to generalize these understandings to other situations" (Wajskop 2009, 22). Dramatic play also allows the children to take up features of adult roles that are puzzling, interesting or striking or have some other reason to be salient to the children at the time of their play, and come to a deeper understanding of what the possibilities are for the adults they will become and to come to understand the interactions and roles of adults in their lives (Göncü et al 1999). In sum, dramatic play is a meaning-making practice in which children engage in multiple thinking processes (eg, inferring, reflecting, generalizing, applying) to construct understandings of their social and physical worlds.

## Play as Story Making

We argue that children's dramatic play is a story-making practice, as it involves children's use of different kinds of objects, together with explicit language, metalanguage and narrative language. In their dramatic play, children create characters in imagined settings and imagine characters' motivations for actions that are woven together into plots. The imagined characters' actions often align

with the social conventions of the real-life roles taken on by the imagined characters. In their play, children revise the plots, exploring relationships between characters, problems and ideas through the play activities. In this way, children's dramatic play is a short story in action that children can later dictate or write on their own.

Children use specific, explicit language in their interactions in order to explain the roles and relationships of the imagined characters. They support the play using gestures, such as opening an imaginary door, and use objects at hand as tools to represent objects in the imagined setting. For example, in a dramatic play centre in a rural Canadian classroom, Markus uses a broken curling iron as a sword and an ironing board cover as a shield in a sword fight. He and his classmates at the centre create a new narrative from those that they have experienced vicariously in family storytelling, literature, television and movies, other texts, and lived experiences. Their use of an object to represent something else that has no real-life functional similarities and very few physical similarities parallels the symbolic thought needed to be able to write. As such, children's symbolic transformations in play "strengthen children's general representational skills and prepare them to engage in the symbolic representation involved in writing" (Sawyer and DeZutter 2009, 22).

Pellegrini and Galda (2000) show that, on the one hand, functionally ambiguous objects (eg, pieces of wood) elicit young children's use of explicit language because the children need to explain and communicate with their peers the new meaning of the object they are using to play. For better explanation and communication with peers, children reflect on the meaning of words they have elected to use. Pellegrini and Galda (2000) explain that "when preschool children play with ambiguous props, they spend considerable effort verbally explicating the meaning of these props in play episodes. Consequently they do not have many cognitive resources to spend on embedding these individual transformations in longer, more involved themes" (p 61). On the other hand, explicit props/objects (eg, dolls) used intentionally in pretend play become a path for building more complex narratives and mature play as children use the language to negotiate meanings of rules, characters and plots that they play with. Similar pretend play story making occurs when children are introduced to narrative literature and movies, underscoring the importance of enriching children's preschool and primary school environment with stories and explicit objects, as well as materials that they can use to represent objects in the imagined settings created in their play.

The symbolic thinking that leads to the creation of the dramatic play narrative parallels the symbolic thinking involved in writing (Pellegrini and Van Ryzin 2007). Additionally, children's audience awareness is nurtured through play, as children must make their ideas clear and appealing in order to convince peers to take them up in the play (Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). They have to think about what others know and understand as they introduce new characters, objects, themes and actions for the play. As Paley (1981) explains when assessing Wally's dramatic play that follows from stories he has dictated in her kindergarten class in Chicago, dramatic play makes many demands on children's knowledge of language and the conventions of dialogue. The children's contributions to imagined characters' dialogue have to fit with the structure of the play narrative and must make sense to peers so that they can follow with the next action/contribution to the dialogue.

## Three Principles for Bringing Dramatic Play into Primary Classrooms

The views we have presented on dramatic play have led us to develop three principles for building on the meaning-making and story-making potential of children's dramatic play: (1) teachers should observe and record children's meaning making and story making in dramatic play settings, (2) observations of children's meaning making and story making in their dramatic play should inform the planning of learning activities, and (3) teachers should create classroom environments that allow children to control the direction of their dramatic play.

An understanding that dramatic play offers content to inform teachers' planning leads to the principle that teachers should observe and listen to children's dramatic play to get a sense of the conceptual and social understandings that children are constructing in their play. These observations can serve as starting points for developing curriculum that is student centred, because it builds on what students know and can do (Rogers 2011). It is important, then, that teachers engage in what Dahlberg and Moss (2005) call a "pedagogy of listening" (p 98).

A pedagogy of listening may involve observing and listening to how children use objects to support their play. It would be helpful to note whether children use implicit or explicit objects. Children who use implicit objects develop a more abstract understanding of words because they have to use

metalanguage to negotiate with peers the meanings of words that they use to refer to the implicit objects. Explicit objects place children in a context where they are free from this negotiation and, as a result, can build a narrative centred on stories that they know about those objects (eg, a king's crown is worn by someone in the role of king, and there are certain expectations about the stories that can be created about kings, based on children's experience with literature, stories they have been told, movies and so forth). Teachers might also consider how children explain the meaning of the use of objects and characters' actions when they use implicit objects. They might also record whether children discuss the meanings of the words they use or their images of characters, for example.

A pedagogy of listening might also involve observing how children choose peers to engage in their dramatic play. This might include noting whether children are open to playing with children who are not close friends or whom they do not know well, for example. It might also involve observing how children engage in assigning or taking on roles and relationships among children who are friends and children whom they do not know well. Teachers could record these observations and add them as useful assessment information for gaining a holistic picture of children's learning.

A second principle is that teachers should use information gathered through observing children's play to plan learning activities that follow from the dramatic play. These activities include inviting children to tell and to write some of the narratives they have enacted in their dramatic play. For example, Claudete, the four Brazilian children's early childhood educator, gathered all the children together and started telling a story: "Once there was a family with four girls and one boy. They were making breakfast one morning and the girls were getting ready to go to work. The boy said he wasn't going to work. He wanted to stay home and watch TV." Recognizing this story, Maria piped up, "Nobody should stay at home. Everybody should go to work." The early childhood educator agreed, "Yes, and in the story, Diana grabbed the boy and shoved him into a taxi to make sure that he went to work." Making visible the story-making (representational) dimension of dramatic play, the teacher told the children that this story was created by Diana, Maria, Juliana and José in the house centre that morning.

Teachers might also encourage children to write stories placing the characters from their dramatic play in other social or imaginative contexts, or to write using other genres (eg, a guide to help José find a job in the play). Children might also draw

their characters or create figures of them using clay or other materials. They might create a mural or make implicit objects from everyday or scrap materials in the classroom to support their play.

A third principle is that play should be spontaneous, with the children in control of the starting point and the direction of the play. Their dramatic play might be drawn from something that happened in their lives outside the classrooms or it might come from curriculum learning in more teacher-directed parts of the school day. For example, children might explore or reflect on a concept introduced in a content area lesson. They might take up a theme or storyline, or include a character from a story read by the teacher. Regardless of the starting point for the dramatic play, the children should make the decision about what their dramatic play will be.

## In Summary

In this paper we have argued that dramatic play is a narrative-building practice. In their dramatic play, children use objects that may or may not have a close functional and physical representation of the objects in the imaginary situation, and gestures to indicate actions that characters take in the imagined setting. Dramatic play is an enjoyable learning experience for children as they create stories and explore ideas, values and daily life through their dramatic play. Through creating stories, children develop their imaginations. They ask questions and reflect on peers' explanations and ideas. They use the explicit language that characterizes written language to communicate the roles and relationships of characters and objects in the imagined setting. As such, dramatic play is a rich linguistic practice that supports children's literacy.

Dramatic play is also a meaning-making practice in which children use metalanguage to negotiate meanings of implicit objects and gestures that represent objects and actions in the play. They use multiple thinking processes to explore new ideas and to make sense of their experiences and observations about storying and stories, about concepts, and about social and cultural expectations, assumptions, and relationships.

Dramatic play provides opportunities for children to explore and come to new understandings about experiences and observations from everyday life. Children create stories and gain symbolic understandings, particularly when using implicit objects in their dramatic play. Play should be viewed as quality pedagogy, regardless of the perspectives underlying teachers' instructional practices. Dramatic play has meaning to the child players that

is more readily evident when teachers adopt a pedagogy of listening. Because of these transformative qualities and because teachers can learn so much about their students' learning through observing dramatic play, providing regular opportunities for children to engage in dramatic play is a valuable investment for both children and teachers.

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