Supporting Sociodramatic Play in Ways That Enhance Academic Learning

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“We need three purses and three babies or we can’t go shopping together,” Sue Lin announces, as she puts a long skirt over her shorts. Cherise and Tanya nod their heads. Sue Lin digs out three huge purses and three small dolls from a pile of clothes on the floor of the homemaking area. She hands these to each girl, and the 4-year-olds walk around together, swinging their purses and holding their babies. The three girls settle into the window seat, purses between them, holding their babies. “We’re gonna get our groceries,” urges Sue Lin.

In this example of preschoolers’ play, the children are immersed in their pretend roles for the enjoyment of the play itself. “Children begin to engage in more mature forms of dramatic play, in which by the age of 3–5 they may act out specific roles, interact with one another, and plan how the play will go (Copple & Bredekamp 2009, 14–15). Sociodramatic play in which roles and rules are followed supports learning abilities children will later use for their success in school (Copple & Bredekamp 2009).

Two main areas showcase the positive effects of play: representation and self-regulation. In the opening vignette, the 4-year-olds categorize objects and use groupings of three—purses and dolls—while pretending to be mothers holding their babies (representation). They stay within their roles of mothers shopping together, without following other interests (self-regulation). While this shows their ability to play, preschoolers can build on their play skills with the support of knowledgeable adults (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek 2006; Leong & Bodrova 2012).

Even though children spend more time in preschool today than in the past, “the long blocks of time devoted to free play … are disappearing, crowded out by a focus on pre-academics as the foundation of school readiness. ‘Free play’—the kind of play that children control and direct themselves—happens in the leftover time, when there is nothing ‘more important’ to do” (Hewes 2010, 1). Placing less importance on free play can lessen teachers’ focus on play.

In addition to providing more focus on play, what can teachers do to support children’s play? The adult’s role in fostering play must be cultivated. Although play is a natural act for children, adults need help in guiding the use of play to make it most productive (Kagan, Scott-Little, & Frelow 2009, 24). This article discusses specific skills teachers can apply to foster children’s play skills of representation and self-regulation and how these support learning.

Gains from supporting sociodramatic play
When children have many opportunities for pretend play in the preschool years, they can advance in ways that enhance their cognitive skills (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). Representational play. By using symbols and pretense in play, children progress in the development of language and literacy (e.g., trying out new words to name ingredients in their soup; recognizing the printed word stop), problem solving (e.g., substituting a block for a cell phone), perspective taking (e.g., understanding that the “baby” will cry when “mommy” leaves the house), and other represen-
tational skills (e.g., using pipe cleaners to make earphones) (Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009).

**Self-regulation.** Self-control and inhibition of desires for the sake of a goal—self-regulation—promotes socioemotional development. Through sociodramatic play, children gain “lots of practice in independent, autonomous thinking, so they gradually develop decision-making skills and master self-discipline” (Stephens 2009). Self-regulation also helps children collaborate with peers, follow rules, stay on task, and control their impulses (Bergen 2002; Bodrova & Leong 2007; Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009).

These essential gains from dramatic play foster the skills children need to succeed in elementary school and beyond (see “Benefits From Two Major Aspects of Dramatic Play,” p. 64).

### Helping children develop more mature skills in sociodramatic play

Teachers promote mastery of self-regulation and representation when they provide a setting for play that includes uninterrupted time for dramatic play, support for various play themes, and appropriate props. In addition, teachers can support further skills when they plan the play with children, provide information about the play scenes, involve themselves in children’s discussions about their play, and, finally, participate in the play (see “Planning for Play and Participation With Children,” p. 68).

### Settings for dramatic play

Classroom learning centers, such as homemaking and block areas, define where dramatic play naturally occurs. The daily schedule must provide enough uninterrupted time to develop involved play themes. These themes often emerge from what children know in family life, such as playing kitty (see “Nonplayer Participation,” p. 66). When teachers carefully observe and follow the children’s intent in play, they are better prepared to support new themes that emerge (Mabry & Fucigna 2009).

In planning for props, it is important for teachers to...
provide open-ended materials so children can imagine them fulfilling various uses (Bodrova & Leong 2007). Children can freely imagine when they encounter collections of cubes, large buttons or beads, or natural items such as acorn tops in the homemaking area instead of realistic props like a plastic hamburger or fried egg. In their planning children might use items in the art area to make props: paper, glue, crayons, and various recycled items (e.g., paper cones, ribbons, tongue depressors) provide the raw materials. The most advanced use of imagination happens when the props are no longer needed—when children name and perhaps describe an imagined item and pretend to use it characteristically (Bodrova & Leong 2007).

**Teachers’ roles**

The teachers meet to review their notes on the dramatic play theme of mothers shopping. They wonder what would bring further understanding to the children’s roles. What would they understand about shopping, taking care of babies, or transporting babies? As they compare notes, the teachers agree the role of transporting babies is rather limited.

“So let’s focus on that right now.”

“We can show them all kinds of carriers they may not know about—infant seats, baby carriers, strollers, car seats.”

“And ways other cultures carry babies. I know a great book, *A Ride on Mother’s Back: A Day of Baby Carrying Around the World.*”

To get started, Ms. Hampden introduces an infant seat and two doll strollers to the class. Before the three child players go back to play mothers shopping, Ms. Hampden talks with them about their plans. “How do you think you will use these to carry your babies?” “How does it work to carry the baby in the infant seat?” The girls try sitting in them, pushing the stroller, picking up the infant seat. “The three moms got to stay together,” said Sue Lin grimly. “How would that look for the three of you to have strollers and an infant seat?” On a sheet of paper, Sue Lin draws the three moms, then Cherise and Tanya each add a stroller. Sue Lin draws an infant seat in front of herself. She tapes it to the wall next to the doll bed, and they busily get dressed to go shopping.

**Benefits From Two Major Aspects of Dramatic Play**

1. In representational play, children substitute one object for another or imagine the object. In both practices, the child holds the meaning of the missing object in her mind. This separation of meaning from the object provides the foundation for using symbols, such as when hearing a book read by his teacher, the child understands that the words he hears stand for the objects and action he sees on the page.

   *Benefits for later learning:* Symbols help children

   - Learn vocabulary (literacy)
   - Read and write (literacy)
   - Understand maps (geography)
   - Use numerals and learn number conservation (mathematics)  
     (Bergen 2002; Bodrova 2008; Hanline, Milton, & Phelps 2008; Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009)

2. With self-regulation, a child stops his behavior (impulses) in order to achieve something he wants. In dramatic play, he follows his chosen role and the rules of that role, inhibiting impulses and emotional reactions in order to take part in the play. The child acts on his pretend role, while at the same time he does not act in another role (Bodrova & Leong 2007; NIEER 2008).

   *Benefits for later learning:* Self-regulation promotes children’s ability to

   - Think autonomously
   - Consider and control behavior
   - Control impuls
   - Apply self-discipline
   - Follow directions and rules
   - Plan and stay on task
   - Collaborate with peers
   - Enhance decision-making skills (Bodrova 2008; Stephens 2009)
Using knowledge gained through observing children’s play, the teacher can choose how to be involved. She might decide to observe without being involved in the play, taking notes for later discussions with the children about their knowledge of the play theme, the developing abilities in their roles, and the complexity of their play. Later the teacher might participate as a nonplayer or as an active participant.

**Discuss and plan curriculum**

After the previous episode, the teachers saw that children’s plans for their babies’ care continued on following days, and the mothers’ roles involved more detailed care. Amazingly, interactions among them in their roles as mothers also increased. As above, the teacher might discuss with the child players their reflections about the play, which often expands into a deeper understanding of the play theme. “Often times children lack background knowledge to build their scenarios. Even to play common themes … often children require more knowledge of the setting, roles, and actions associated with these roles” (Bodrova 2008, 364).

**Teachers can implement curriculum that emerges from play themes, which in turn feeds into children’s creation of richer thematic scenes.**

By carefully following the intent seen in any play, teachers can implement curriculum that emerges from play themes, which in turn feeds into children’s creation of richer thematic scenes (Mabry & Fucigna 2009). For the benefit of all the children, the teachers can request a visit from a mother bringing her infant in a baby carrier or a wrap. From there the child players and others could explore how they can use a wrap for the “baby.”

Children have gained more information to elaborate their play theme from observations of mothers and babies in and outside the school and exploring open-ended materials for carrying their babies. When the children go back to their play they will have a deeper sense of playing mothers shopping.

**Plan their play**

The girls’ drawings of their plan help them keep in mind what they intend so they are more likely stay in their roles. Carrying out all their plans is not important, as the process of planning itself develops their representation skill in play. The collaborative planning and then bringing at least some ideas into action advances the girls’ self-regulation (Bodrova & Leong 2007; Bodrova 2008).

**Participation**

Another way for a teacher to support children’s play is to participate, whether by commenting during play or taking
on a role within the play (Ashiabi 2007). For both, it is important to stay within the intent of the play. The more the adult follows the children’s lead, the less likely her presence will disrupt the flow of play. Also, the teacher should suggest ideas in such a way that children feel they are allowed to reject them. For example, “Would you want to put the baby in the infant seat while we eat?” And when adult participation is intentional, but minimal, the children are more likely to continue developing their own themes.

**Nonplayer participation.** As a nonplayer participant, the teacher can discuss the drama of play with questions and suggestions. For example, to children playing kitty, she may suggest, “Kitty, I hear you meowing. I wonder what you want.” The child might act out what her character wants, or kitty’s owner might quickly provide what he thinks the kitty wants. Here children freely advance their play in the direction they want it to go.

**The more the adult follows the children’s lead, the less likely her presence will disrupt the flow of play.**

**Taking a role within the play.** A teacher might propose ways for children to extend play or construct further concepts. As a participant, the teacher’s communication with children is direct and unmediated. Thus, it becomes essential to be mindful of what one says in that context, being careful not to control the flow of play (Ashiabi 2007).

A group of 3-year-olds and their teacher take a neighborhood walk to find the homes of classmates who live nearby. After the walk, Abby, a student teacher, makes a large map of the neighborhood. She draws the school and five houses, each one representing a child’s home they had seen. Abby labels each house with the child’s first name and the street address. She wonders how these 3-year-olds will use the map in their play.

When Abby places the large-scale map so it covers the floor in the block area, Carlos, Antonio, and Mike eagerly drive the large trucks on its streets. Carlos drives to a house and stops.

- **Carlos:** Maria, are you home? Come and play with us.
- **Abby:** Oh, I see you are at Maria’s house. Is she home?
- **Carlos:** No. She went shopping.
- **Abby:** I want to go to Juan’s house but I forgot how to get there. Can you show me? Is it by the school?
- **Carlos:** No, it’s way on the other side over there (pointing). Go down this road. (*Carlos slowly drives his truck in that direction.*)
- **Abby:** What do I do when I get to this corner?
- **Carlos:** You got to stop and look. (*Carlos stops his truck.*)
- **Abby:** Which direction do I go from here? Do I go toward the school?
- **Carlos:** No, you go away from the school. You go down this road (showing Abby by driving the truck, looking back at her) and then the next one, and stop right there! (*He stops his truck in front of Juan’s house.*)
- **Abby:** I see. I go on two roads or streets to get there. Let’s see what I have to do. First I go down this street and turn away from the school. Then I go two streets and get to Juan’s house. How will I know it’s Juan’s house?
- **Carlos:** It’s got Juan’s name on it.
- **Abby:** Okay, I’ll look for Juan’s name. I hope he is home. You gave me good directions to Juan’s.
- **Carlos:** Yep, I showed you.
Abby was amazed at how capably Carlos understood the representational map. Abby and I discussed Carlos’s gains through the planning of this dramatic play and Abby’s role as participant. In this representational play Carlos used symbols by “driving” the representation of the truck. In the representation of mapping, Carlos understood both the path and direction. He identified the children’s first names. Even though children’s addresses were on the map, Carlos did not use them. Carlos used self-regulation to consider Abby’s request and change his own play to answer her. Abby pointed out how clearly Carlos was able to use the rules of the play (driving on the streets) to explain directions in ways she could easily understand.

**Conclusion**

Actively promoting child-directed play is essential for the early years (Hewes 2010). Teachers can intentionally plan the time and space for play and enhance social and cognitive skills that emerge in sociodramatic play, and which affect children’s later success in school.

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Planning for Play and Participation With Children

Provide a setting for dramatic play

Schedule uninterrupted time—40 to 60 minutes

Plan for dramatic play themes
- Create classroom areas for basic themes such as family life (as in the opening vignette)
- Respond to themes that emerge from children’s life experiences and interests

Offer props that are fluid and open-ended
- Include items that engage children’s imagination and can be used in various ways
- Display collections of items
  - Natural materials (e.g., smooth stones, leaves, nuts in shells, seashells, crosscut branches)
  - Small manmade objects (e.g., wooden cubes, small blocks, large buttons, plastic bottle caps, pompoms, counters)
  - Recycled items (e.g., fabric scraps, cardboard, wallpaper samples, yogurt cups, large and small boxes)
- Provide materials children can use to create props (e.g., many materials already in the art area)
- Help children acknowledge imagined props (e.g., when the child asks for some money, the teacher pretends to hand her some dollars; or when the child asks for something to make yellow soup, the teacher confers with her what that might look like, then suggests that she could pretend to add it to the soup)

Assume different teaching roles

Observe children’s play
- Identify the purpose and intent of play
- Note the play skills of individuals and the group

Talk about the play theme and actions with children
- Discuss the roles children assume
- Provide detailed information about themes and the roles children choose

Help children plan their play roles and props (e.g., ask who else is coming to your house, and what the cousins bring when they visit)

Be involved in the play
- Suggest ideas from nonplayer role (e.g., “I wonder what you will plan for the cousins when they get to your house?”)
- Participate in a role (e.g., “I’m going to come for a visit. Knock-knock!”)


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