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ABSTRACT

Dramatic play, an activity for which children show a natural inclination, provides kindergarten children with the opportunities for acquiring new vocabulary, extending word meaning, acquiring and practicing verbal expression and syntactical patterns, and gaining in language facility. In order to foster this language development, kindergarten children should be supplied with substantive content around which they may interact, with additional information about the topic provided as they are ready for it. In this way, children can engage in dramatic play; then discuss their activity, relating it to the informational source (such as a film); and, finally, explore the consequences and alternatives so that the activity becomes a reflective experience. An example of the language growth resulting from dramatic play may be seen in the activities of a San Francisco kindergarten class whose initial play with ships developed into an understanding of and a verbalization about San Francisco harbor activity. (JM)

THE TIME HAS COME TO TALK OF MANY THINGS:

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN THE KINDERGARTEN

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"The world is so full of a number of things," said Robert Louis Stevenson in his verse "Happy Thought," and most five-year-olds would agree, as they eagerly and vigorously explore the world around them. While today they probably would not be talking about sealing wax, most five-year-olds would concur with the walrus: "the time has come to talk of many things,"*--the things about which they are curious and about which they wonder, the things they are observing, doing, thinking and playing. Indeed, if they were given some sealing wax and told about its use in times past, its properties would be minutely examined, and perhaps later one might observe an enactment in which a letter is sealed with a piece of plasticine clay and a messenger is sent in haste with a secret message. Enthusiasm for learning is a prominent characteristic of most five-year-olds, and equally prominent is their propensity for dramatic play, the spontaneous enactments of roles, events and experiences.

Dramatic play traditionally has been a part of the kindergarten curriculum. The "playhouse corner" and the floor toys and unit blocks have been standard equipment, which usually have been utilized during the "activity period." The literature on early childhood education, both

*Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass.

past and present,delineates the many values of dramatic play in its contributions to the development of the self-concept, cognition, socialization, problem-solving abilities, and creativity. (See, for example, Sponseller, 1974.) In relation to language development, which is the focus of the present paper, dramatic play affords opportunities for the acquisition of new vocabulary, the extension of word meaning, acquisition and practice of verbal expression and syntactical patterns, and overall growth in general language facility.

In visiting kindergarten classrooms, one still will see children portraying roles in the playhouse, building structures with blocks, and playing with floor toys, such as trucks or planes, although the latter are observed less frequently because floor toys now seem to have been omitted as play equipment in some kindergartens. While dramatic play remains a part of the kindergarten program, it seems today, especially, but it also was true in the past, that these activities are considered as rather an incidental part of the curriculum. Unfortunately, many teachers pay relatively little attention to the dramatic play. Teachers, concerned with readiness skills, work with individuals or small groups of children on developing these skills and often are not cognizant of what is occurring in the dramatic play, unless some altercation or other disruption occurs. When dramatic play receives little attention, countless opportunities for cognitive and language development are lost. Such losses also result when no opportunity for talking about the dramatic play is provided.

Children learn to talk by talking, and their language development is enhanced when they have something substantive about which to talk--substantive content that relates to their curiosity and interest in understanding this world of many things. How much can one talk about a lotto game or an

exercise in matching shapes or letters? In contrast, listen to the verbal interchange as five-year-olds play out experiences and "try on for size" various social roles; note the growth in language expression, particularly, as will be elaborated shortly, when new information related to the topic of play is introduced in day-to-day continuity of learning.

The preceding comments were not intended to deprecate the emphasis on readiness skills. On the contrary, if we really are concerned with fostering positive readiness for learning, then the vital role of oral language development, especially in relation to reading, must be recognized and opportunities for oral language development must be maximized. Walter Loban (1963), in a longitudinal study, found that children who ranked high in oral language ability at the kindergarten level also ranked high in reading achievement in later years. The findings of other studies are in agreement with Loban's conclusion that proficiency in oral language is basic to achieving competence in reading.

How then can we maximize oral language development in the kindergarten? The answer suggested here is to capitalize on the child's natural inclination for dramatic play and to provide at the kindergarten level substantive content around which the children may interact in their dramatic play. Providing substantive content requires information-gaining procedures related to the topic of play; this means that teachers make new information available to children in a variety of ways (for example, reading the information to them, group discussions, films, field trips, etc.); it requires that teachers attend to the dramatic play and note misconceptions, vague concepts, and gaps in experience, all of which need to be taken into consideration in planning for the gaining of information. As children acquire information about a topic, they act upon it and interact with it in their

play, and, by so doing, it becomes meaningful and internalized. Providing substantive content requires that children, upon completion of the play period, have an opportunity to talk about what they did, to relate it to the informational source, for example, a film, and to explore consequences and alternatives; this makes the activity a reflective experience.

The following actual classroom example illustrates the process and results of the kind of dramatic play suggested here.

One area of a kindergarten class in San Francisco was equipped with an ample supply of unit blocks and floor toys representing tugboats, ocean liners and freighters. A nearby bulletin board depicted an ocean scene with one ship. To begin the children immediately played with the ships, and the first block constructions were "garages" for the ships. One rather elaborate structure replicated a several-story garage in San Francisco which has spiral ramps to the parking floors. In the discussion that followed this initial experience, the children who built this particular garage informed the group that the tugboat was parked on the top floor because it was the smallest ship. When asked by another youngster how the tugboat got down into the water, the reply was: "It slides down the ramp into the water. You drive it to the top of the ramp, and down it slides." The teacher asked the children why they needed garages for ships. Several children replied and the rest nodded agreement: "To park them at night and so they won't get wet when it's raining."

Each day the teacher presented information through a variety of means about ships, harbors and the San Francisco harbor. The blocks were not put away each day; rather, the harbors remained in the area, with only the blocks unused at the time put away. Gradually the garages changed into piers, and after a field trip to the harbor, transit sheds were added to the piers.

Ships sailed daily heavily laden with many types of cargo or passengers or both. After viewing some films, the youngsters, almost quoting the verbalization in the film, imitated the captain of the tugboat, the pilot docking the ship, and the workers loading and unloading the vessels. Round the world trips were made each period as the children sailed their ships to the many harbors constructed with blocks. The need for additional ships was recognized soon after the initial activity, and the children planned and constructed ships of their choice out of wood.

Activities other than the dramatic play became associated with the study of ships and the San Francisco harbor. The bulletin board, with ships drawn and cut out by the children, depicted the busiest ocean one could imagine. A large mural of San Francisco harbor was made, with a painting contribution from every child in the class. Language experience activities abounded--stories, poems, and periodic summaries of what the children had learned. At the completion of this study centered around dramatic play, the children looked back on what they had learned. Following is their final summary as it was dictated to the teacher.

> San Francisco is a sea city. San Francisco has a harbor. The harbor is a special place for ships to dock. All kinds of ships are in the harbor. All ships go in some dock. The ships come in the dock to get the cargo. Ships pick up people, too, and then the ship takes them some place.
>
> The people work very, very hard at the harbor. Some men work in the transit sheds and some work on the booms. Ships pick up the cargo from the transit sheds. The trains pick up cargo the ships bring to the transit sheds. Ships go to lots of places. The trains deliver the cargo and pick up the cargo at the transit sheds.
>
> All the cargo ends up in different places. Ships bring cargo to lots of places. The ships are big -- very big.

In addition to the numerous generalizations formed by the children, their summary also reflects substantial growth in language. Look for a

moment at the vocabulary development, a development that included terms which initially were new to the children but which became an integral part of their speaking vocabulary in the course of their daily dramatic play about this topic. Incidentally, the increase in vocabulary, conceptual development, and language facility were quickly recognized by the parents. Following is a list of new vocabulary and some of the words possibly previously known for which expansion of meaning was achieved; space does not permit a complete list. The first twenty words were new for all the children in this class.

Vocabulary

sea	drydock	rain
harbor	passenger	wind
dock	signal	calm
pier	net	rough
cargo	ocean	fishing boats
transit shed	water	lifeboat
booms	city	lifesaver
tugboat	sailing	rescue
freighter	sailor	anchor
ocean liner	captain	rope
route	ship	knot
fork lift	boat	sink
orders (merchandise)	bumper	float
orders (directives)	trains	heavy
buoy	trucks	big
lighthouse	work	small
haul	fog	jobs
hawser	foghorn	ticket

Activities concerned with expansion of word meaning have particular relevance in children's acquisition of relational terms. In a discussion of relational terms, Herbert Clark (1971) points out that comparative adjectives are polar opposites and that only one of the polar terms "...designates physical extension along a dimension" (p. 271). Long, for example, refers to the dimension of length, as in the statement The stick is two feet long. When identifying the physical dimension, the term is used in a nominal sense; however, it also has a contrastive use, as in the statement This block is longer than that one. The polar opposite, short, has only the contrastive use, as in This block is shorter than that one. Clark suggests a developmental sequence in children's understanding of relational terms. Using the terms more and less as examples, he states:

> First, the child uses more and less in the nominal non-comparative sense only. Second, since the nominal terms refers to extension rather than to lack of extension, he uses both more and less to refer to the extended end of the scale. Finally, he learns to distinguish less from more and apply it to the less extended end of the scale comparatively. (p. 272)

Dramatic play provides countless opportunities for acquisition of relational terms because the child is using them in a context of meaning. He is acting on things in relation to each other. The study of ships and the harbor described previously included expansion of meaning of the following comparative adjectives: more, less; large, small; big, little; long, short; tall, short; wide, narrow; heavy, light; fast, slow; thick, thin; high, low; deep, shallow; near, far; and same, different. Additionally, other relational terms were included, for example: in, out; up, down; under, over; above, below; before, after; in front of, in back of; ahead, behind; and inside, outside.

In looking back over this first example of dramatic play, it becomes apparent that the input of information gave direction to the play. The children grabbed hold of the information, so to speak, and played it out in their daily enactments. They were eager to use the information, so eager one day that a discussion could not be held after a film; the children wanted immediately to enact the episode in which six tugboats were employed in docking a huge ocean liner. The informational input facilitated the children's play and day-to-day continuity of learning. Piaget recently stated:

> ...it is important that teachers present children with materials and situations and occasions that allow them to move forward. It is not a matter of just allowing children to do anything. It is a matter of presenting to the children situations which offer new problems, problems that follow on from one to another. You need a mixture of direction and freedom. (Evans, 1973, p. 53)

Dramatic play that has day-to-day continuity of learning and informational input gives rise to problems that lead one to another and enable the children to move forward.

This procedure for dramatic play does not preclude fantasy entering into the play from time to time. One day, to recall an incident from the classroom described, three boys used the ocean liners as battleships and had a little war in one of the harbors. Later when reporting on what they had done, another youngster in the class commented: "But an ocean liner isn't a battleship! It has no place for fighter planes, either!" One of the three boys replied, "Yes--but we were just pretending." It seemed that the dramatic play about the nonmilitary vessels was not considered "pretend," at least not in the same way as the battleship episode. The former had a reality base and the latter was acknowledged fantasy. Should one worry that the reality base of the former might impede creativity, such

was not the case. The children's tranit sheds were far more architecturally pleasing than those at the San Francisco harbor, and their solutions to problems in block construction were often ingenious feats of engineering.

A second example of the kind of dramatic play suggested here recounts an incident that occurred in the playhouse one day and the learning that followed.

Several children were in the playhouse engaging in a number of activities: washing dishes, preparing food, setting the table, and taking care of dolls. The equipment included plastic models of food, a turkey, a steak, bread, and assorted fruits and vegetables. An altercation ensued, and John came storming over to the teacher announcing that he had "fired" Virginia"out of the house". The teacher responded that he could not do that, discussed the problem with him, and sent him back to the playhouse to see if the problem could be solved. Shortly Virginia came to the teacher protesting that John was "messing everything up." Since it was time to clean up, the teacher suggested that she and John bring their problem to the group.

To begin the discussion, Virginia, with appropriate gestures of indignation, stated: "I was putting dinner on the table and we were having turkey. John kept putting the steak on the table, too! And whoever heard of having two kinds of meat for dinner!" John, equally indignant, retorted: "There we were having thirteen people to have dinner, and one puny little turkey won't feed thirteen people!" The teacher asked the class what they thought about having two kinds of meat for dinner. In the discussion it was revealed that some families ate dinner together, all eating the same type of food; other children said, stating a variety of reasons, that their family members did not eat together nor did all of them eat the same type food;

still others remarked that sometimes they ate the same kind of food as their parents and sometimes they did not. The teacher requested that the children get additional information from their parents, and the next day a variety of responses and reasons was again reported. The teacher, lifting the discussion to the generalization level, then asked the children what they could say about what they found out. A number of children, almost in a chorus response, replied: "People just do things different," and the other children agreed. The teacher, recognizing the opportunity for the development of an important value judgment, next asked: "What do you think about this 'doing things differently'?" One child responded: "It's okay, as long as you're a person." A chorus of "Yeah, it's okay," indicated the issue was resolved, and in days following turkey and steak were often served for dinner in the playhouse.

Looking back over this last example, one can readily see the importance of group discussion in helping kindergarten children in their growth from an egocentric to a sociocentric frame of reference. The result of such growth is the child's ability to decenter and see things from another perspective. In relation to language learning, such growth contributes to genuine communication and the achievement of communication abilities.

Piaget states that social interaction is one of the factors influencing intellectual development. He points out the importance of the child encountering different points of view and ideas discrepant in relation to his own. In this context, Piaget (1963) says:

> It is in fact very difficult to understand how the individual would come to group his operations in any precise manner, and consequently to change his intuitive representations into transitive, reversible, identical and associative operations, without interchange of thought.

> ...In fact, it is precisely by a constant interchange of thought with others that we are able to decentralize ourselves..., to co-ordinate internally relations deriving from different viewpoints. (p. 164)

Dramatic play is a natural group endeavor for kindergarten children--it is their way of meeting their individual needs. Yet today, with the emphasis on individualization, dramatic play and other group endeavors seem to be on the decline in kindergarten classrooms, as well as other primary classrooms. Individualization does not mean working alone; if this is the case, I submit that the individual needs of children are <u>not</u> being met. If such is the case, then, indeed, the time has come to talk of many things.

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