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ABSTRACT

This study compared the quality of preschool children's sociodramatic play in classrooms that used centers for housekeeping role play with those that used centers for various other types of role play. Classroom play sessions in the preschool were videotaped biweekly over the course of the 1992-1993 academic year. These videotapes were then reviewed and coded for eight variables of advanced sociodramatic play: (1) role choosing; (2) role playing; (3) choice of props; (4) use of props; (5) make believe; (6) play time; (7) interaction; and (8) verbal communication. The presence and type of literary acts, as well as the number of boys and girls involved, were also recorded. The study found that the quality of play, as measured by four of the eight variables (role choosing, prop use, make believe, and play time), was significantly higher in the thematic sociodramatic play centers than in the housekeeping play centers. No significant differences were found in the other four variables. The number of literacy acts was quite low in both organizational patterns. No significant sex differences were observed. (MDM)

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# HOUSEKEEPING OR THEMATIC SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY CENTERS: WHICH IS BETTER IN THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM?

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## Introduction:

Early childhood educators have long valued sociodramatic play in the preschool classroom. Sociodramatic or group pretend play with a common goal or theme offers children the opportunity to engage in pretend or symbolic activity while at the same time interacting with other children. The ability to pretend has been linked with cognitive development and sociodramatic play, in particular, is unique in the preschool curriculum because of its emphasis on social skills. It is also considered developmentally appropriate (Bredenkamp, 1987) because children are in control of their own actions rather than being directed by an adult.

Traditionally, preschool classrooms have supported sociodramatic play through the presence of the housekeeping center in which children could pretend through familiar family roles. Recently, however, educators, have been urged to expand the variety of themes supported (post office, doctor's office or shoe store) (Vulkelich, 1990) so children

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can expand their realm of experiences.

The housekeeping center has traditionally appealed to girls because of its enactment of domestic themes whereas boys prefer more action themes or constructive materials (Paley, 1984; Grief, 1976). Some like Morrow and Rand (1991) urge the use of a wider variety of themes because these themes support a wider variety of literacy acts. One wonders what the effect of a more thematic approach to the sociodramatic play center would be in appealing to boys to play in the center and also on support for literacy processes.

A search of the literature documented no studies in which children's play in these two centers was contrasted on a long-term basis although a few such as Morrow and Rand (1991) examined children's play for shorter periods of time.

Documentation of differences in the play of children when the sociodramatic play center is organized in either a housekeeping or thematic pattern is warranted. Special attention will be devoted to documenting the use of the center by boys and the number of literacy acts.

#### **Research Focus:**

This study compares the quality of children's play in the sociodramatic play center when the theme is housekeeping and when the

theme is periodically changed to support a variety of roles. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. Does the quality of children's play in the two organizations of the sociodramatic center differ significantly?
2. Are there significant gender differences in the use of the centers with the two organizational patterns?
3. Is there a significant difference in the number of literacy acts in the two organizational patterns?

#### Methodology:

The study was conducted in a nationally accredited preschool program sponsored by the state through a local school district in a moderate size city in a Midwest state during the 1992-93 academic year. The children came from a variety of social, economic and racial backgrounds. Eleven classrooms in two buildings, with most having both a morning and afternoon session (18 groups of children), were utilized. Classrooms were visited biweekly.

Each teacher chose the organizational pattern for the sociodramatic center for her room. Six classrooms utilized thematic organization, and thirteen utilized housekeeping organization. The researcher positioned the video camera to view the sociodramatic play area before the children

arrived. As free choice time began, a member of the classroom staff turned on the camera which was allowed to run until clean up time. The researcher also obtained a count of boys and girls present each day.

The school year was divided into fourths. One tape from each classroom group for each quarter was randomly selected for analysis. These tapes were screened for quality. If quality was inferior another tape was randomly selected. In all, 68 tapes were analyzed.

Tapes were viewed by the primary researcher who divided the children's activities into play episodes. A play episode consisted of actions of one or more children which portrayed a story or theme without break or the children left camera range.

The play episodes were analyzed for the quality of the play, boys and girls present and presence and type of literacy acts. Quality of play refers to a number of variables by which children's cognitive engagement and social skills can be measured. Each play event was coded as either beginning or advanced using behavioral definitions adapted from Smilansky's work by Dodge and Colker (1992). The percentage of events in which advanced behaviors occurred was calculated across the eight areas.

Table 1

Coding Definitions for Play Quality

Criteria	Beginning Level	Advanced Level
Role Play Role Chosen	Role relates to child's attempts to understand the familiar world (e.g. parents)	Role relates to child's attempts to understand the outside world (e.g. firefighter, etc.)
How Child Plays the role	Child imitates one or two aspects of the role (e.g., child announces, "I'm the Mommy," rocks the baby, and then leaves area.	Child expands concepts of the role (e.g., child announces, "I'm the Mom," feeds the baby, prepares dinner, reads the paper, goes to work, talks on telephone, etc.)
Use of Props Type of Prop Needed	Child uses real objects or replica of object (e.g. real or toy phone).	Child uses any object as prop (e.g., block for phone) or a pretend prop (e.g. holds hands to ears and pretends to dial phone.
How Child Uses Prop	Child enjoys physically playing with objects (e.g., banging receiver of phone, dialing.)	Prop used as part of play episode (e.g., child calls a doctor on phone)
Make Believe	Child imitates simple actions of adult (e.g., child moves iron back forth on ironing board)	Child's actions are part of a episode of make-believe (e.g. "I'm ironing this dress now so I can wear it for the party tonight")

Time	Fleeting involvement (e.g., child enters area plays with doll, puts on hat, leaves area)	Child stays in area more than 10 minutes (e.g. child is really involved in play episode and carries through on theme.)
Interaction	Solitary play (e.g., child acts out role alone with no apparent awareness of others	Functional cooperation (e.g. child interacts with others at various times when the need arises to share props or have a partner in play.  Cooperative effort (e.g., child acts out role cooperatively with others, recognizing the benefits or working together).
Verbal Communication	Verbalization centers around the use of toys (e.g., "Bring me that phone" or "I had the carriage first."	Dialogue about play theme-- constant chatter about roles children are playing (e.g. restaurant scene: "What do you want to eat?" "Do you have hamburgers?" "Yup. We have hamburgers, french fries, and cokes.")

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A count was kept of the boys and girls who entered the sociodramatic center during the play session. Finally, the presence and type of literacy acts (reading, writing, paper handling) as behaviorally defined by Morrow and Rand (1991) was recorded.

Table 2

Coding Definitions for Literacy

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Reading:	Browsing, pretend reading, book handling, storytelling, reading aloud to oneself or others and reading silently.
Writing:	Drawing, scribbling, tracing, copying, dictating, writing on a computer or typewriter, writing related to thematic play, story writing, and writing using invented writing forms.
Paper Handling:	Sorting, shuffling, and scanning.

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Coders, graduate students in education, were trained on actual tapes which were not part of the random sample. Group and individual sessions were held until an agreement rate of greater than 85% was reached. The coders then independently coded the tapes so each tape was coded by at least two graduate students. Coders and the researcher met periodically for clarification and additional training, if necessary. When the two coders disagreed, the researcher viewed the tape and served as the tie breaker. The intercoder level of agreement ranged between .56 (interaction) and .90 (time) with an overall average of .72. The percentage of the total play episodes which were coded as advanced was calculated.

A two way analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there were significant differences between the two organizational patterns



(thematic or housekeeping) and time of year (which of the 4 quarters) with each of the behaviors associated with play quality, literacy acts, and gender differences.

#### Results:

Of the eight characteristics which were examined to determine quality of play, there were significant differences in four quality indicators in favor of the thematic organizational pattern of the sociodramatic play in terms of the mean percentage of advanced play for role chosen (35.82 vs. 9.59); prop use (54.31 vs. 33.45); quality of make believe (34.75 vs. 18.81) and time spent playing (7.68 vs. 1.20).

The make believe and time of play variables had significant interaction effects, In make believe the thematic centers were always higher but not always at significant levels. In time spent playing, the thematic centers were lower during the first quarter but higher in the other three quarters.

Table 3

Significant Two-way ANOVAs: Mean Percentage of Advanced Play by Time of Year and Organizational Pattern (n=68)

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Play Area	Time	Organizational Pattern	Interaction
	<u>F</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>F</u>
	<u>(p)</u>	<u>(p)</u>	<u>(p)</u>
Role Chosen	1.19 (.322)	16.38* (.000)	1.28 (.289)
Prop Use	.733 (.536)	11.10* (.001)	2.66 (.056)
Make Believe	3.32* (.026)	14.83* (.000)	4.51* (.006)
Play Time	1.28 (.289)	9.35* (.003)	4.27* (.008)

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$p < .05$

Table 4

Mean Percentages of Advanced Play by Time of Year and Organizational  
Pattern (n = 68)

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Play Area	Time in Quarters				
	I	II	III	IV	Total
Org. Pattern	<u>M</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>M</u>
<hr/>					
Role Chosen					
Housekeeping	3.92	13.72	6.21	15.02	9.59
Thematic	28.60	20.08	44.45	52.00	35.82
Prop Use					
Housekeeping	38.54	38.40	25.83	30.09	18.81
Thematic	42.38	47.66	47.40	78.50	34.75
Make Believe					
Housekeeping	19.50	20.50	13.18	21.42	33.45
Thematic	27.56	21.12	27.13	61.60	54.31
Time Spent					
Housekeeping	2.12	.43	1.90	.43	1.21
Thematic	1.26	1.66	9.38	18.52	7.68

Play in thematic centers was significantly higher than that in housekeeping for the quality of the make believe which includes the number of aspects of the role enacted. In every quarter, the level of play was higher but not always significantly higher. The most dramatic differences during the fourth quarter when it was three times as great.

In the coding scheme, time of play was assessed with play coded as advanced if the play episode continued for ten minutes or more. In the first quarter of the year, the play was actually lower in the thematic centers; but as the year passed, the difference grew with the thematic centers supporting more advanced play while the housekeeping center indicated a less consistent pattern. The difference was particularly marked in the fourth quarter.

Utilizing a thematic approach to organizing the sociodramatic play center is supported by this study as indicated by growth in levels of advanced make believe and advanced time. Play in the thematic centers shows a steady growth in percentages of advanced for make believe and time behaviors while housekeeping centers indicate a sporadic or less consistent pattern.

There were no significant differences between the organizational patterns in use of the centers by boys ( $x = .49$ ) (girls  $x = .62$ ). The overall

number of literacy acts was quite low in both organizational patterns (reading  $x = 5.64$ ; writing  $x = 2.87$ ; paper handling  $x = 2.98$ ).

#### Discussion:

The hypothesis that thematic organization of the sociodramatic play center would lead to higher quality play was supported in four of the eight aspects of play. In the remaining eight, no significant differences were found. Therefore, early childhood educators who wish to organize their sociodramatic play center around a variety of themes will find the practice supported, leading to longer play episodes, increased symbolic use of play props and higher quality make believe. The hypotheses about increasing use of the center by boys and increased literacy acts were not supported.

The presence of the video camera did not appear to impact the children's behavior. On one occasion, there was actually two cameras in the room because a mother had come to record her child's first day of school. However, it may have affected teacher behavior. In one case it may have cause the teacher to exert more control over the center. However, the level of teacher involvement was quite low cross the classrooms. Some teachers were heard to comment that they didn't want to be caught by the camera. Perhaps with more teacher involvement, the

results would be different. However, the level of involvement seems pretty typical because many teachers are reluctant to get involved for a variety of reasons from a desire not to control the play or because they consider it silly. It would be interesting to repeat the study in classrooms with higher levels of teacher involvement to see if the results changed.

Organizing the sociodramatic play center around various themes within the preschool classroom is supported by this investigation. The utilization of a variety of themes resulted in higher quality play in four of the eight sociodramatic play characteristics analyzed. In no case did a housekeeping organization lead to a higher quality of play (significant or not). Thus, the preschool teacher is supported in organizing the sociodramatic play center around the various themes the children are investigating.

Just what do the four areas mean in terms of the differences between children's play? What kind of behavior or activity is best supported by the thematic organization?

First, in terms of the role played, the significant difference can be explained somewhat by the coding criteria. Smilansky designates as advanced any role in which the child attempts to understand the outside

world. One would naturally expect that the thematic centers would be more advanced. However, it is also clear that children do not as readily play these more advanced roles in the housekeeping center. The environment in which children are impacts the type of play in which they engage.

A second area in which there were significant differences was that of prop use. Children in the thematic centers showed significantly higher levels of advanced play indicating that they more often used their props as part of their play episode instead of physical manipulation or exploration of the object. Perhaps the props are more needed to enact the play theme. On the other hand, perhaps the commonness of the props in the housekeeping center led to the props being taken for granted or mindless manipulation.

Children who were playing in the thematic centers engaged in more advanced make believe in which they enacted more aspects of the role. Sociodramatic play has long been justified because of the opportunity it affords for children to understand the perspective of others. Because the thematic centers showed significantly higher levels of make believe, they support a more realist perspective than the housekeeping center.

The length of time one spends playing is important because of the assumption that higher levels of play will come from a child who is

actively involved for a longer period. While Smilansky's scheme seemed rather extreme in terms of time, the thematic centers supported, except for the first quarter, higher levels of advanced time. The differences are most remarkable in the fourth quarter in which the thematic centers sustained interest for longer periods of time while the length of play episodes in the housekeeping centers actually decreased..

The educator who wishes to support children's play would do well to consider thematic sociodramatic play centers. These centers encourage children to play longer, use props in their play and integrate more facets of the role being enacted.

Teachers in these classrooms who utilized the thematic organizational patterns used the housekeeping center at the beginning of the year and then changed to the wider variety of themes. They made the change at the time they wished by watching children's behavior. This study would support this practice. Children need the familiar at the beginning of the year when they are in a new setting with new people. By playing in a familiar setting, they can concentrate on working with each other while supported in their roles. However, as children become more familiar, a center which remains housekeeping may not provide enough stimulus for the children. They can benefit from a wider range of themes



which will encourage them to play longer. The children are also engaging in more symbolic activity because their actions are part of the play episode and the props they do use are part of their play rather than manipulation or exploration of materials.

One would anticipate that boys would be more attracted to the thematic centers because housekeeping centers have been considered female for so long. This belief is not supported by this study. In watching the tapes, it was apparent that boys were playing and attracted to the housekeeping centers. One boy was even filmed wearing a Tu Tu. Many boys took on nurturing roles with the other children or with dolls. Perhaps this is an indication of the more nurturing roles assumed by males in society in general. It might also be a reflection of changing economic times with more men at home assuming these roles so boys have models of a wider variety of behaviors.

There were no significant differences in the level of literacy acts. The researcher was somewhat surprised by the number of literacy acts observed in the housekeeping center. Teachers frequently placed pencil and paper and telephone books within the housekeeping center. Both types of centers equally supported children's literacy development but the mean number of literacy acts per day remained low. All early childhood

educators would benefit from increased attention to adding literacy materials to their sociodramatic play centers, regardless of organizational pattern

Teachers desiring to foster growth in their students would do well to consider a thematic approach to sociodramatic play as a means of increasing children's development.