Telling Stories with Blocks: Encouraging Language in the Block Center

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Abstract

A large body of research documents the positive impact of sociodramatic play on children's language development. Through the social interaction that takes place during sociodramatic play, children develop the ability to express thoughts in a logical sequence, share ideas about events in which there is not shared context, and develop vocabulary. Previous research on the relationship between sociodramatic play and language development in the preschool setting primarily has been conducted in the dramatic play center. However, some children prefer other activity areas that also are conducive to this beneficial form of play. The block center is one such area. With its open-ended activities and constructive play opportunities, the block center provides an area in which children can use their imagination to create fanciful structures with their friends and then take on roles as they interact with their creations and their peers. The impact of a specific effort to incorporate toys from the block center into shared storybook reading in order to promote sociodramatic play in the block center is discussed in this essay as well as observations and recommendations for promoting more of this important type of interaction throughout the classroom.

Introduction

Do you find that play in the block center is often unfocused and fleeting? Does play in this center frequently deteriorate into roughhousing? Would you like to encourage richer and more developed episodes of sociodramatic play in the block center?

This essay explores a shared book-reading and modeling technique designed to promote sociodramatic play in the block center. Sociodramatic play is described by Smilansky (1968) as dramatic play involving language between two or more children. The block area was chosen because, like the housekeeping center, it has been identified as a play area in the classroom that elicits imaginative language and is conducive to social interaction (Pellegrini, 1983). In developmentally appropriate classrooms, it is important to ensure that language and emergent literacy opportunities are encouraged and supported throughout the classroom because not all children frequent every area during free play (Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1992). The block center, with its open-ended constructive-type activities and the opportunity for groups of children to create together, is an area that can readily support sociodramatic play (Pellegrini, 1983).

Benefits of Sociodramatic Play

The relationship between dramatic play and the language and literacy development of preschool children is well documented in research on early childhood emergent literacy (Fein, 1981). Dramatic play has been defined as the "behaviors children use to transform the identities of objects, actions, and people" (Pellegrini, 1985, p. 108) and is also referred to as pretend play (Katz, 2001), fantasy play (Pellegrini, 1983, 1984; Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977), symbolic play (Pellegrini, Galda, Dresden, & Cox, 1991), and sociodramatic play (Smilansky, 1968). Dramatic play has been linked to improvements in children's vocabulary (Levy, Wolfgang, & Koorland, 1992) and story comprehension (Rowe, 1998; Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977), increases in the use of decontextualized language (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001), facilitation of syntactical complexity, increases in concept development (Levy, Wolfgang, & Koorland, 1992), and increases in story recall (Pellegrini, 1984). Through participation in dramatic play activities, children develop decontextualized language skills, enabling them to discuss a pretend event in which there is not shared context with another child (Snow, 1983), take fantasy roles such as being a fireman, and symbolically represent objects such as pretending to talk on the telephone using a block (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Smilansky, 1968). These skills are characteristic of the

literate behaviors required for later school success (Pellegrini, 1985).

Shared Storybook Reading

Equally represented in the literature on language development is research showing the benefits of reading to preschool children (Elley, 1989; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Neuman (1996) implemented book clubs to provide access to literacy materials and promote parent-child storybook reading in a study with Head Start children and their parents. Parents received instruction on how to analyze story events and ideas, relate stories to personal experiences, and ask stimulating questions. To determine whether different types of stories provided differing levels of scaffolding, book selections for this training included stories with highly predictable language and familiar sequences, episodic predictable texts, and narratives.

Results showed that the interactive style between the parents and children differed most significantly depending on whether the book was a highly predictive text or a narrative text. Predictable texts resulted in more chiming of familiar words and passages and more book-focused conversations, whereas narrative texts resulted in more reconstructing of story events and connections being made by the parent between the life experiences of their children and the story text. These results suggest that children benefit from the different types of interactions generated by shared storybook reading opportunities with a variety of text types.

In a study by Whitehurst and colleagues (1994), interactive book reading by teachers, which included defining vocabulary words, asking children open-ended questions, and providing children with the opportunities to talk about the books being read to them, improved the vocabulary of at-risk 4-year-olds. These interactive book-reading sessions took place in small groups of no more than five children and demonstrated that this interactive reading style could be practically and effectively implemented in a real-world preschool classroom.

Incorporating Story-Related Props

Shared book reading not only helps children develop an appreciation for books but also facilitates the carryover of story themes into children's play (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977). Rowe (1998), in an effort to study the literate potentials of book-related dramatic play of 2- and 3-year-olds in a preschool setting, added toy sets—toys related to available children's books—to the library center. In addition to using the toy sets, teachers would help children locate book-related toys and props in the classroom and discuss how the toys represented the story themes. Rowe found that children tended to reenact the parts of books that were of special interest to them rather than reenacting the entire book. In addition to reenactment of story lines, children also used the stories as a springboard for their own dramatic play themes. The story-related props seemed to facilitate the transition from listening to stories to book-related dramatic play.

Levy, Wolfgang, and Koorland (1992), in a study with kindergarten children, enriched sociodramatic play by adding props to dramatic play areas set up to represent different themes (grocery store, hospital, and restaurant). Results showed that enriching the children's play environment with props along with adult scaffolding of play scenarios resulted in increased language and more complex language structures during sociodramatic play.

From Research to Practice

In light of the robust research touting the benefits of shared book reading and the addition of props to promote sociodramatic play, which in turn contribute to language development, I began to observe a preschool class to see whether research mirrors practice. In fact, just as the literature shows, sociodramatic play was alive and well in the dramatic play center. However, in the block center, very little language was being shared between children. Play in this center consisted predominantly of rambunctious car play, with the same children choosing the center

day after day. Although this activity was social in nature, it did not promote the kind of decontextualized and fantasy talk observed in the dramatic play center, which in this classroom was set up as a housekeeping area. In an effort to encourage more language among the children choosing the block center, I set out to see whether I could increase the amount of language interaction during block play by using block center toys to illustrate story themes during shared storybook reading. My goal was to see whether storybook reading accompanied by modeling would impact the amount of sociodramatic play in the block center.

The Intervention

In order to test my theory that incorporating items from the block center into the shared book-reading activity could be easily and practically implemented and would encourage more sociodramatic play, I conducted a small experiment in a preschool classroom, keeping in mind the constraints and limitations that preschool teachers have on their time and resources. I used inexpensive books purchased at a local bookstore, which could easily be substituted with books already present in the classroom. These books were chosen based on their simple story lines and the ease with which the story could be demonstrated with blocks and other items from the block center. The props used for modeling were taken off the shelves in the block center. Items from other areas of the classroom could also be used depending on the theme of the books read. As I read a story to the children, I illustrated parts of the story with items found in the block center—blocks, plastic people, and a wooden dollhouse. Afterward, I placed the items back in the block center along with the book read and observed the children's language behaviors during the free choice time that followed group storytime. The modeling intervention took place over a 3-week period.

The Results

Examples of the change in pretend play that resulted from the reading and modeling ranged from an increase in play with the plastic animals found in the block center to an elaborate dramatic play episode using a book in the block center as a reference. Of the five books presented to the children, each generated some related pretend play. After reading *Jack and the Animals* by Donald Davis (1995), I noticed an increase in the amount of pretend play with the plastic animals by the children in the block center. For *The Three Bears* by Paul Galdone (1972), I used small colored blocks as "porridge." While watching the play in the block center that followed, I observed a child hand one of the blocks to another child and say "eat this." Following the reading of*Flashing Fire Engines* by Tony Mitton and Ant Parker (1998), a child approached his peers and attempted to convince them to put on the fire hats that had been used to model parts of the story in the earlier reading. After hearing the story *Henry and Mudge and the Tall Tree House* by Cynthia Rylant (2002), a child picked up the book during block play and said to his playmates, "Let's go make a tree house." Lastly, after the story *When I Was Five* by Arthur Howard (1996) was read and modeled, a child began building bunk beds (as was modeled during the reading) for a house he was building.

Classroom Carryover. The ideas for dramatic play that the children gained as a result of the story reading and modeling intervention could also be carried over into other areas of the classroom, allowing for ongoing story lines and play scenarios between children. For example, *Jack and the Animals* could lead to a discussion of animals and the inclusion of a dramatic play area with a farm theme in the classroom. The science center would be a great place to display hay and oats as the children learn what farm animals eat. *The Three Bears* might prompt a porridge-cooking activity and a story reenactment in the housekeeping center. Bowls and spoons could be added to the sand table, allowing for the theme to continue there as well. *Flashing Fire Engines* would be a great segue into the theme of community helpers, easily acted out with vehicles, blocks, and pretend people as well as by the children themselves with dress-up clothes from the dramatic play center. By weaving dramatic play

themes throughout the classroom areas, all children, not just those who enjoy playing in the dramatic play area, are provided encouragement and opportunities for sociodramatic play. By allowing children to bring items from one activity area into another, a myriad of new dramatic play themes develop, providing even more language-sharing opportunities between children.

Implications for Future Practice. In addition to finding that book-related play did increase among some children after the modeling took place during shared storybook reading, certain behaviors were also noted during my observations that actually may have discouraged rich sociodramatic play in the block center. In an effort to keep the room somewhat organized and teach children that "everything has its place," children were discouraged from bringing materials from other play areas into the block center. On one specific occasion, a child brought a chair into the block area from the housekeeping center. The teacher at first told the child that the chair did not belong in the block area but then acquiesced. What resulted was a very elaborate dramatic play event in which children used a book located in the block area to provide ideas for a spaceship, which they designed from blocks. The "captain" sat in the chair and barked out orders to the other children in the block center, constantly referring to the book for ideas.

On another occasion, the classroom teacher joined the children in the block center and encouraged them to assist her in constructing a house for children with special needs that was in keeping with the topic they were studying during that particular week. Although one or two children did join in the activity for short periods, the teacher's presence and direction of the house-building activity seemed to actually inhibit other activities in the center. This finding is consistent with research (Dickinson & Smith, 1991) that has shown that preschool children tend to spend more time in pretend talk with their peers than with their teachers. However, other studies have shown the benefits of adult involvement in increasing literacy and dramatic play (Christie & Enz, 1992; Levy, Wolfgang, & Koorland, 1992). This contradiction may indicate a difference in the level of involvement of the teacher in the play activity, with benefits being derived from prompting and guiding as opposed to directing and organizing the play activity. The age of the children may also impact the effect of teacher involvement on pretend play, with older preschoolers having the ability to play more on their own and younger children benefiting from the scaffolding of adults to support their pretend play scenarios (Rowe, 1998).

Another benefit of combining props with a shared story was an increase in the total amount of block play for some of the children observed. Instead of flitting between centers, these children seemed to stay with their activities in the block center longer. Finding ways to increase children's time spent on play activities may allow them more opportunities to interact with other children in complex and mature ways. By providing opportunities for prolonged periods of social interaction, we give children the opportunity to participate in lengthy conversations with their peers, thereby helping them learn the "give-and-take" of mature dialogue. Pretending, exchanging ideas, and providing explanations build skills that children will later use when learning to read (Snow, 1983). By spending more time in the block center, children had increased opportunity to interact with other children during construction activities and, therefore, more time for dramatic play.

Conclusion

The incorporation of toys into shared story reading provides an easy-to-implement opportunity for teachers to promote sociodramatic play among children during their free play activities. Modeling story themes makes stories come to life and provides a pivot for further imaginary play with friends during later play opportunities. In addition, by showing children how book themes can be incorporated into play, teachers reinforce the importance of literacy in our lives. Making developmentally appropriate literacy opportunities available for children throughout the early childhood years is an important responsibility of the preschool teacher (NAEYC & IRA, 1998). Providing the necessary adult guidance and scaffolding activities helps children remain at one task long enough to have successful play experiences by providing opportunities for discussion

and interaction with peers and adults. Providing places and allowing time for children to interact create opportunities for social competence and language development.

The numerous daily classroom responsibilities of preschool teachers coupled with parent meetings, administrative paperwork, and daily housekeeping can lead to rigid classroom rules and stagnant classroom arrangements and activities. By becoming aware of the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of an environment and the activities available in that environment, teachers can make simple changes in their classrooms and in their formal and informal teaching activities that will increase children's opportunities for language sharing. Using classroom toys to model story themes is an easy way for preschool teachers to reinforce new vocabulary and concepts as well as help children better understand the story content. Understanding that stories can be "told" with items found in the classroom also provides a springboard for later pretend play. Re-creating stories during free play activities allows children to practice retelling stories in sequence and provides a common theme for children from which they can develop conversations and practice language.

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