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# **Investigating the Influence of Dramatic Arts on Young Children’s Social and Academic Development in the World of “Jack and the Beanstalk”**

by

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## **Abstract:**

*This article reports findings from an evaluation study of a 10-week interactive drama residency in a large Head Start preschool in a southeastern state. The goal of the study was to learn about what happened when three to five-year old children and their teachers experienced interactive drama, with particular questions about how the young children’s academic and social development might be supported with dramatic arts. Findings from a qualitative analysis of observations, interviews and children’s drawing samples indicated how important movement is for engaging young children, how rituals supported self-efficacy and risk taking, and how traveling in and out of a story world supported the imagination necessary for early literacy development. Findings also suggested the importance of involving classroom teachers in professional development about dramatic arts. These findings provoked new questions and plans for future research.*

## **Theoretical Support for Drama Education in Early Childhood Classrooms**

Make believe or pretend play, with guidance and support from adults, blossoms in the preschool years and allows children to make a number of cognitive gains as they try out new ideas and skills...there is something special about social pretend play for preschoolers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 131).

Widely accepted developmental theory supports play as the primary means for children to learn, not only cognitively, but holistically, including social and emotional learning. Jean Piaget (1962) believed play strengthens children's abilities to think abstractly. And Jerome Bruner (1983) knew play to be deeply related to children's development of thought and language, noting that, "In play we transform the world according to our desires" (p.61). These fundamental understandings are the bedrock of the "developmentally appropriate" practices that have been advocated by international early childhood experts for decades, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Copple & Bredekamp (2009), authors of the definitive NAEYC volumes on developmentally practice identified that, "[Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation, cognition, and social competence" (p. 14).

This study is particularly grounded in the sociocultural theory of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), who defined the essence of the value of play when he said that in play children are "a head taller" than themselves. Vygotsky's emphasis on the social in children's learning lends fundamental support for dramatic play that is interactive, creative, and imaginative (John-Steiner, Connery, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010).

Research from varied paradigms has determined the effects of dramatic play on learning. Research with experimental designs, for example showed effects on math (Emfinger, 2009; Sezer & Oztürk, 2011), language (Mages, 2008; McNamee et al, 1985), science (Gross, 2012) and social emotional development (Brown & Sax, 2012). Experimental researchers Sezer & Oztürk (2011) said of their study, "The results showed that experimental children were significantly more successful than the control group concerning the concepts of number and operation. In other words, it was observed that drama has an important effect in helping children acquire the concepts of number and operation and in supporting these concepts" (p. 1210).

From a contrasting methodological stance, qualitative case study and naturalistic research designs also document the power of drama and play on learning. Wohlwend (2011) observed kindergarten children engaged in play for an academic year and learned that play allows young children to design and transform text and relational identities. Vasquez (2004) showed how drama and play helped children take up dispositions of social justice and equality. Wee (2009), in a case study of one drama educator, identified elements of preschool drama that classroom teachers could emulate. Contemporary sociocultural research on play not only recognizes its value for literacy development, as traditionally defined, but as *a new literacy* (Wohlwend, 2011) and essential for learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Contemporary early childhood theorists advocate for play and the arts in curriculum and instruction. Whether described as the hundred languages of children in Reggio Emilia classrooms (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011), multiple intelligences

(Gardner, 1999), or multiple ways of knowing (Leland & Harste, 1994), research indicates again and again that children need many opportunities to take in and express new knowledge via holistic and active interactions with varied symbol systems, as provided in arts-based experiences. From a Vygotskian perspective, these symbol systems are tools that mediate learners' meaning making (Edmiston, 2014).

Given that research convincingly indicates that the arts—and particularly creative dramatics—improves children's learning (Caterall, 2009; Edmiston, 2014; Mages, 2008), early childhood educators continue to be frustrated by current local and national demands on time for accountability and high stakes testing that make drama education absent in most early childhood curriculum. For example, in the state in which my study took place, a heavy focus on kindergarten readiness meant that teachers, administrators, parents, and the general public were concerned about scores on readiness screeners for individual children, child development centers, neighborhoods, and counties. As a result, drama education typically required additional funding for teaching artists while state-provided professional development attended more strongly to increasing screening scores.

### **The Context**

The Blue Apple Players (Blue Apple) educational theater program had been in existence for 36 years in a city in the southeast at the time of this study. It served over 53,000 children each year in schools, community centers, and other settings with interactive drama experiences designed to provide academic content and social-emotional learning. This study investigated the academic and social opportunities for preschool children during Blue Apple's 10-week residency of the folktale, "Jack and the Beanstalk" (hereafter referred to as "Jack"). During the study, two pairs of teaching artists engaged with 20 multi-age preschool classrooms. Classroom teachers and teaching associates participated in varying degrees by taking on adult roles in the drama. In addition, Blue Apple teaching artists provided two storytelling events for each classroom and a drama education component for two family education events held by the school.

All of the 304 three to five year old children who attended Bluegrass County Preschool (BCP) participated in the 10-week residency. Eligibility for the BCP meant the children met Head Start or State Funded Preschool income guidelines or had a disability as set forth in the federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as well as state and district regulations. Thus, the children's families were primarily low-income and were bused from a countywide rural area outside the city where the Blue Apple was headquartered.

The Jack and the Beanstalk residency was a process drama experience designed to engage young children interactively in telling and becoming a part of the story. No book or particular text was ever read, and over the 10 week period the children experienced the story through the facilitated dramatic play rather than "performed" the story. One teaching artist played the role of Jack (or Jill, depending on the artist's gender). A second teaching artist played the role of Jack's sister, as well as the Giant. Classroom teachers and assistants played the roles of Jack's mother, Mr. Beano (who sold the magic beans to Jack), and the goose who laid the golden eggs. The children played active roles as Jack's additional siblings. As the story progressed, the teaching artists involved the children in making decisions about what to do when problems occurred (such as how to return to the giant's castle when the beanstalk was already chopped down) and offering ideas for

activities in the plot (such as how they might play in the rain or what they should give mother for a gift).

In addition to taking liberties with the “Jack and the Beanstalk” characters, the Blue Apple version of the story modified the well-known plot to increase children’s learning. The story began as expected: Jack and his mother experienced poverty and hunger; Jack sold their cow for three magic beans; and Jack climbed the beanstalk to encounter the giant and take away a bag of gold, a goose who laid golden eggs, and a harp who sang. At this point the Blue Apple version shifted. The giant was so sad about losing his “friends” (the goose and the harp) that he cried enough to cause a flood at Jack’s home, thereby creating a problem that the children needed to solve. Jack and his siblings had to devise a way to get the giant to stop crying. In the process, they learned the giant’s side of the story and were invited to empathize, to talk about friendship, and to think about how to build a relationship with someone who is “different.” All of these events offered many opportunities for children to contribute to the composition of the story.

Each 30-minute Jack curriculum session in the residency followed the same sequence of activities. When the teaching artists arrived, they immediately engaged the children in The Name Game, in which the group clapped in rhythm to the words: “Hello, hello, and what’s your name?” After each child said her or his name, the group said, for example, “Hello, Madison,” then repeated the sequence to the next child.

With hellos completed, the teaching artists invited the children to retell, with their assistance, what had happened in the previous session before they entered into a pretend story world by putting on imaginary costumes to become Jack’s brothers and sisters and closing their eyes to be narrated into “Jack’s world.” After an escapade in pretend, the teaching artists narrated the children back into the real world of their classroom, facilitated a retelling of the events that transpired during pretend, and closed with the ritual of a Goodbye Song. The first of the ten-week residency was an introductory story time, and during the last week, the teaching artists invited the children to draw their favorite memories of Jack’s world. For each of the eight weeks of pretend, the children experienced the plot elements described above.

### **Research Design and Methods**

This was a descriptive and interpretive qualitative study. The intention of qualitative research is to understand the process of meaning making from the participants’ perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Three multiage preschool classrooms of children and teachers participated. Given the multimodal nature of interactive drama education, as well as the age of the children, the focus was on observation and informal conversation with children, teachers, and teaching artists as they experienced the Jack residency.

#### **Data Collection**

**Observations and field notes.** The primary data was 33 weekly ethnographic observations gathered in three classrooms. The principal at BCP selected the classrooms, although all teachers volunteered to participate. Four university researchers arrived at the classroom 30 minutes before the arrival of the Blue Apple teaching artists, continued observing for the 30 minutes of Jack curriculum, and stayed for an additional 30 minutes. Researchers documented systematic dense descriptions of these naturally occurring

activities in field notes. Expanded field notes took particular note of occurrences of joy, language, and play, and kept note of evidence of effects of problem solving and storytelling on children's learning.

**Documents.** Prior to any observations, the existing Blue Apple written curriculum, which expressed the intentions of the teaching artists and described each day's plan, was read and coded for intended learning outcomes for the children and teachers, as well as to gain insight into the language used by the teaching artists.

**Interviews.** All BCP classroom teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the residency, and, after the residency, concluded with the same sets of questions. Since two teachers were not available for either the first or second interview, eight complete interview sets were transcribed of the 18 interviews conducted. The goal of the pre-residency interviews was to document teachers' experiences and comfort with drama education and to attain descriptions of their students and classrooms. The goal of the post-residency interviews was to document the teachers' descriptions of effects of the Jack residency on children's learning and behaviors and to gauge the effects of the Jack residency on future teaching decisions.

The four teaching artists in the Jack residency were interviewed as a focus group at the mid-point of the residency, and the Blue Apple grant writer and executive director and the BCP principal also participated. The goal of the focus group interview was to understand the teaching artists' goals, intentions, and challenges with the Jack residency and their perspectives on the effects on children's learning.

**Children's drawings.** On the final day of the Jack residency, the teaching artists asked all children to draw "what they liked best" about going into the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, and the adults in the classroom wrote the children's descriptions of their drawings on the pages. All samples were scanned for analysis. As Farokhi & Hashemi (2011) suggest, "Drawing tends to recount far more things to the reader than language. Children do not yet have sufficient capabilities for abstract linguistic expression, but they have symbolic communication methods such as drawing" (p. 2220). The children's choices for their drawings provided hints into their thinking and served as illustrations of what they perceived as memorable in the experience from their point of view.

**Family surveys.** Lastly, although not the focus of this article, parents were surveyed at the beginning and conclusion of the Jack residency. The surveys included Lickert scale and open-ended short answer responses. The initial survey asked about the children's interests in drama, pretend, and story and the parents' familiarity with the Blue Apple Players. (Many parents indicated they had experienced drama education with Blue Apple when they were children). The second survey asked parents to evaluate the program and to report on any carry over at home. Although return rates on the second survey were disappointing, participating parents shared what they believed their children learned from the Jack residency, including the following:

- Pretend play, confidence & how to use his imagination.
- To be even more dramatic when he tells stories.
- How to use his imagination to the fullest.
- Acting out fictional stories. She enjoys acting out stories & even dancing.

- Expressing the stories.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Data analysis followed procedures advocated by Charmaz (2015) as part of a constructivist grounded theory approach. All data sets were uploaded to Dedoose.com, a qualitative analysis program that effectively manages data and organizes analysis. Open coding procedures (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014) and triangulation across multiple data sources led to the themes presented in this article. My goal was to understand the meaning constructed by the BCP children, their teachers, and the teaching artists as the Jack and the Beanstalk residency unfolded in preschool classes. In particular, given that this study was designed in part to collect evidence on the value of a program for future decision making, I wanted to understand the merits of the Jack residency as related to young children's social and academic development.

### **Findings**

The analysis indicated that there were numerous opportunities for learning within the Jack residency, and that the residency accomplished many expectations for children's kindergarten readiness, as well as met State Early Childhood Standards. Some examples of conventional kindergarten readiness that were accomplished were practice with reading strategies, such as predicting and retelling; language development skills, including listening, rhyming, and singing; and integration of content area skills, such as counting and understanding the water cycle. Far more valuable than these "readiness" skills, however, are the findings that offer theoretical insight into *why* interactive drama is important for young learners and how interactive drama affects children as learners, particularly as they become more prepared for kindergarten.

The major themes of the analysis presented here are:

1. *Movement* within pretend increased engagement and joy.
2. *Rituals* increased comfort and thereby enabled risk taking.
3. The *world of story* and navigating real to pretend and back to real supported development of imagination, early literacy, and social-emotional learning.
4. Creating a version of a traditional tale introduced children to *problem solving*.
5. Interactive drama education holds promise for *teacher engagement* and professional development.

### **Movement Within Pretend Increased Engagement and Joy**

When children were engaged in the Jack curriculum, their faces lit up, they giggled and laughed, their eyes widened, and they often expressed their delight with words and sounds. In short, they were joyful! Moments of joy and engagement frequently intersected with movement and pretend (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Children and teaching artists moving during the Jack residency.

Moreover, the children were most engaged when they experienced movement and pretend as part of storytelling. My field notes described many moments like the following, which occurred late in the residency, when the children had just sung Megan (a teaching artist playing the giant; all names are pseudonyms) to sleep with a lullaby:

Collin (a teaching artist) whispers dramatically, “Brothers and sisters, the giant’s asleep. We’ll see Gregory [the name of the giant] tomorrow.” Collin takes the children tiptoeing away from the giant. When he gets up, the children get up; when he tiptoes, they tiptoe. Casey puts her finger to her lips like Collin. They tiptoe in a circle and get back to the beanstalk and climb down as Collin narrates. “C’mon brothers and sisters. How many steps does it take to go down the beanstalk?” They count down, 10, 9, 8, etc., and move their arms and bend over as they take steps down. All three teachers participate very actively, following Collin’s lead and extending children’s participation. The children make eye contact with me as they pass me in the circle. Their eyes are dancing and convey a conspiratorial and delighted look. Their faces are gleeful.

Engagement especially increased when the action of the story moved “off the mat” to other areas of the classrooms. Hillary was a child with special needs in one classroom—her physical limitations required an adult to move her from place to place throughout the day, and I had never heard her make any sounds. On one particularly



engaging day, the children pretended a journey to the giant's castle to rescue the silver harp. Hillary remained on the mat, momentarily (and very atypically) forgotten by the group and physically unable to move on her own. To my surprise, Hillary scooted to try to accompany the other children, pulling herself across the floor with one foot. She made a squeaking sound that communicated excitement. This was the first time I saw Hillary move on her own steam, and I realized that, if motivated and left to her own devices, she was fully capable of getting herself across the floor with speed and determination.

Meanwhile, the children and teachers crawled under a ribbon that represented the castle door. They whispered, then became quiet in anticipation. Hillary shrieked again as the group pretended to open the closet door to get the silver harp. Collin spoke in narrator voice as Hillary shrieked a third time. "Shhh!" Collin told the children gathered around him. "So Jack and all of his brothers and sisters came back to the castle. What does it look like to open a closet? Can everybody reach out? Everybody reach out and open the door. Jack reached in and got out the silver harp."

Haley remembered another moment that involved movement, when the children hid in an imaginary closet to escape the stomping, scary giant. She chose to draw this event as her memory (Figure 2). In this moment, like many, joyfulness was born of emotional intensity—fear of the giant coupled with the thrill of pretense, and emphasized by excitement from hiding together. Haley's joy as she represented her memory in drawing was evident in the bright, clean colors she selected, the way her drawing filled the page, and the smiles on her classmates' faces, even though they may have been scared. She used a dialogue bubble to indicate the music of the silver harp. Even the giant, drawn as much larger than the children, and looming just outside the closet space—indicated by

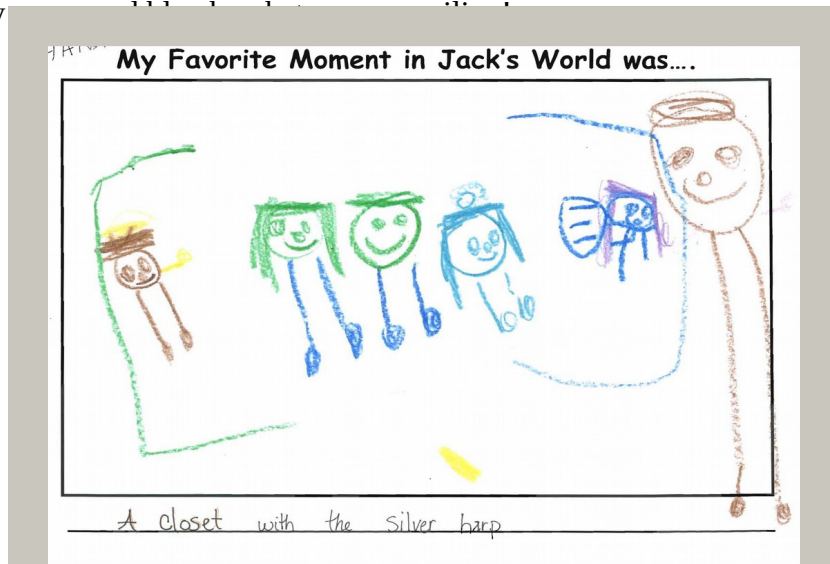


Figure 2. Haley's joyful drawing of a moment filled with emotion and movement.

In each of these examples, and many others, children were moving—moving to a different location in the classroom, moving their bodies in specific ways (tiptoeing, crouching down, huddling) and lowering or raising their voices to accomplish something in the plot, be it to escape the giant and rescue the silver harp, or to not wake a snoring giant. Often, children's movements were accompanied by related language—a chant or

song led by the teaching artists—and sometimes it was the children’s own expressions. In each of these examples, the children were *enacting* the events of the Jack story, using their bodies to make meaning, *being* the story.

Children were differently engaged when they were asked to listen to a part of the story with still bodies. These were rare times when bodies were expected (albeit appropriately) to be “quiet” and still rather than participate actively. The children became more audience members than story-makers, listening to a story being told. Finally, there were very few less engaging moments, such as an episode of lengthy verbal explanations by the teaching artists. The children then exhibited “onlooker behavior” and lost attention, as apparent in their wiggles and their teachers’ reprimands about sitting “on their bottoms” and paying attention.

Wee (2009) found that “students’ body movements in their homeroom are minimal and primarily instrumental, but those in drama are exploratory and expressive” (p. 493). In the BCP classrooms, “ordinary” movement occurred as children transitioned from one center to another during free playtime or went to use the restroom. In Jack’s world, however, children moved to pantomime to milk a cow, to climb up and down the beanstalk, to dance in a rainstorm, to pat down the ground around just buried bean seeds, and to tiptoe away from a sleeping giant. In these moments virtually every child actively participated with their bodies and brains, according to their abilities. Moreover, the teachers became so much a part of the action that they forgot their initial discomfort with “acting,” a topic to be addressed in a later section. These “movements [were] not random actions, but rather represent[ed] a state of consciousness involving full engagement and awareness” (Wee, 2009, p. 496).

Preschoolers are often expected to learn to control their bodies and reduce their movements at school, particularly as teachers and parents worry about their preparation for kindergarten. My observations illustrated the productive nature of movement as part of process drama for learning that engages preschoolers’ imagination, thinking, and bodies. These exciting times to physically enact the plot of the story were bracketed by a set of rituals that I describe in the next section.

### **Rituals Increase Comfort and Thereby Enable Risk Taking and Self-Efficacy**

A set of routines, alluded to in the context section, became rituals in the special community that developed in each preschool classroom. Rituals are important for all members of communities, from early childhood through adulthood. They increase predictability and enable the comfort that leads to risk taking so young children “feel secure in the learning environment and organize their experiences systematically” (Wee, 2009, p. 498). The children’s participation visibly increased over the 10-week Jack residency, which meant an increase in children’s confidence and willingness to engage.

Six predictable rituals in the Jack residency supported increased engagement:

- Playing the Name Game, a clapping and chanting ritual during which the children said their names to introduce themselves;
- Closing their eyes to go to the world of pretend and later back to reality;
- Putting on imaginary costumes to become Jack’s brothers and sisters;
- Sharing a “morning stretch,” led by Jack, each time they woke up in Jack’s world;

- Clapping to the two syllables of “pre-tend” when the word was said; and
- Singing the Goodbye Song at the end of each 30-minute period, in which the children learned to say goodbye in many ways, including in languages other than English.

These rituals were critical in supporting children’s social and emotional development—a necessity for academic achievement and learning. And because they involved movement and language, they added to engagement. Helen drew the ritual of “the clapping” that became synonymous with Blue Apple and meant it was time to enter Jack’s world. Helen’s drawing (Figure 3) shows the giant imagined in the position usually taken up by the children’s bodies during the ritual of the Name Game, on the floor with crossed legs, and a big smile. Perhaps Helen’s rendering indicates her acceptance of the giant into her classroom community, much like the invitation Helen and her friends extended to him to join Jack’s



Figure 3. Helen’s drawing of the giant joining the ritual of the Name Game.

The Name Game became a valuable yardstick for recognizing change in individual children. In one classroom, two children with special needs made observable growth during the Name Game. Hillary, the child previously mentioned who had significant physical and verbal limitations, and Jeremy, a child who had not yet said his name to his teachers, became active participants. Hillary and Jeremy’s teacher, Meredith explained:

[Jeremy] ... was not previously able to say his own name. And because of the Name Game he is now saying it. So that is like huge. ... [it] really opened up a whole kind of new realm for him. ... And I don’t think that it happened to be the timing. I do think it was because of the Name Game. ... It really reached him in particular.

I also noted Jeremy’s growth on April 16:

10:45 The Blue Apple Players arrive. They lead the children in the Name Game. Jeremy looks Megan right in the eye and says his name very

loudly. Megan and Collin laugh and smile through the game. Kendall says her name very quietly, looking down with a shy smile and then waving. All the children and teachers say their names in various volumes.

10:47 Collin tells the children they did a good job with the Name Game, as always. They are saying their names loudly, and he and Megan are learning their names.

Copple & Bredekamp (2009) remind us that, “Smiling, looking into children’s eyes, and using affectionate touch are likely to contribute to children’s emotional security, as long as these behaviors are within a child’s family and cultural norms” (p. 128), and that related shared rituals are part of building a strong learning community.

Teacher interviews confirmed self-efficacy developments in the children:

I had a lot of kids improve on just being able to say their name. Say it with, you know, empowerment. ...they were proud of their name. The ones that are very quiet in the classroom were projecting their voice.

Well, they will say their name loud and proud. ...And then also the other day that I saw them, they were sitting underneath the play structure on the playground, sitting in a circle and clapping, “Hello, hello and what’s your name!”

Like if somebody is new in the hallway or somebody is you know that they don’t see often in the hallway, they’ll ask them you know be more open to asking them well what’s your name. ...they actually initiate now a little bit better.

Play offers benefits for children’s self-efficacy, or competence, which is the essential willingness to undertake learning at home or at school (Epstein, 2000). Studies of the Kaleidoscope Head Start Preschool, where arts enrichment is significant, show the arts led to an increase in school readiness, emotion expression, and emotion regulation for low-income children (Brown et al., 2010; Brown & Sax, 2012).

Social emotional development is increasingly viewed as essentially related to school readiness (Epstein, 2000). The first guiding principle of the [State] Early Childhood Standards is: “Social-emotional experiences and relationships are the foundation for child development” (p. 5). Although the Name Game was the ritual most frequently mentioned in the data, four of the six rituals were significant to the process of helping children move from the real world of the classroom into the pretend world of Jack and back again. This is the substance of the next theme.

### **The World of Story and Navigating Real to Pretend and Back To Real Supports Development of Imagination, Early Literacy, and Social Emotional Learning**

Four of the six rituals that led children to be engaged were related to moving from the real classroom to Jack’s pretend world. The Blue Apple teaching artists supported the children’s identification of the world of pretend with an emphasis on the syllables in pretend, accompanied by two claps. Then, in another ritual, the teaching artists “pulled out an invisible bag of costumes which children put on to become Jack’s brothers and sisters. “Some children zipped into setting-appropriate imaginary farmer jackets, but others pulled on rainbow pants or donned sparkly princess dresses” (Author, 2015, p. 27). This

pleasurable ritual was represented by Lilly, in Figure 4. Lilly's dress is purple—in stark contrast to the brown around it, which may signify the joy she found in imagining any clothing she wanted to wear.

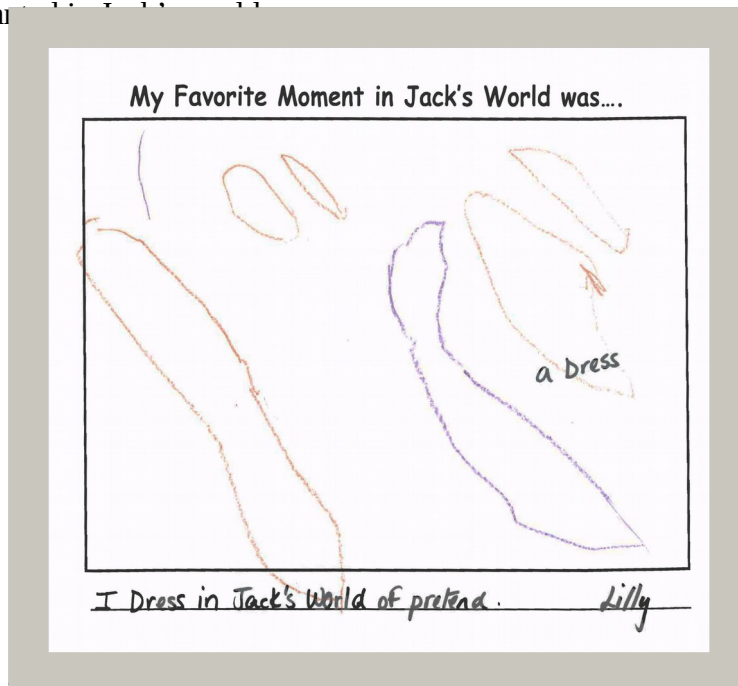


Figure 4. Lilly represented transitioning to the world of pretend by putting on an imaginary dress.

Inviting the children to close their eyes as the teaching artists narrated moving from real to pretend were final signals that play was beginning (Figure 5), and beginning each pretend interaction with a morning stretch confirmed the transition. The following are field note entries that show how the teaching artists facilitated the children's understanding of real and pretend:

Megan reminds the children that last week all the brothers and sisters were in their beds and Jack's mother came to wake them up. She directs them to make a pillow with their hands and close their eyes. Megan, Collin, and [the teaching assistant] put their costumes on. Megan says something like: When I count to three you'll be in Jack's bed. One, you can feel the soft pillows. Two, you can hear the wind blowing outside. Three, you can feel the soft blankets. [Teaching assistant] is smiling and has a lot of energy.

Megan tells them to be still while she tests the clouds for safety. She pokes her foot around on the imaginary surface, and decides they are safe. Soon everyone begins to walk carefully on them. Aaron says, "Hey, I'm not falling!" Megan replies, "They must be magic clouds." They feel the clouds and talk about whether they are warm or cool. Daniel says he sees a giant and Megan agrees that it is a giant castle. Megan then urgently whispers that "Somebody might see us!" and tells everyone to get down. They all lay down to hide and then take a nap.

In the next example, Collin facilitated the transition back to the real world.

Collin puts the children to sleep again with his narration. “The brothers and sisters climbed down the beanstalk and they went into the little blue house and sat around the fire and they were so happy that they met Mr. Gregory. They were very tired [yawning with exaggeration] and it was a long day so they crawled up into their bedrooms, grabbed their pillows and one, you’re sound asleep with a full belly and a happy memory of a good day. Two, the sheets are warm around you as you sleep and dream, and three, hi Miss Megan.”



Figure 5. The children joined Amy in transition from real to pretend.

During the focus group interview, Megan described the power of pretend when it was accentuated with movement.

... we have a student ...he cannot say his name during the Name Game ... in fact it's not just that he can't say his name. He has to hide behind a teacher when it's his turn to say his name. But when we go into the world of pretend he doesn't have to be that person and ... last week, he was right on Collin's heels—the entire time when they were entering the castle, when they were going into the closet ... he was right on his heels and answering questions and wanting to be a part of the group. And when he wasn't aware of everyone paying attention to him he was beautifully active. But as soon as we got back he kind of went back to his spot. But it was the most amazing thing to see him free himself in this new world that he's found.

The role of imagination in children’s learning is rich. Imagination, as part of creativity, allows children to conceive of things they have not yet experienced for themselves—and things that are relevant to far more than the story immediately at hand. Children can imagine places, roles for themselves, ways to solve problems, and who they might become (Catterall, 2009). Moran and Brown (2013) elaborate, suggesting that play is “a space where children can exercise their imaginations, rehearse new skills, learn to self-regulate their behavior and emotions and gain a deeper understanding of context and roles” (p.89).

My reflections on field notes provide insight:

This week a bit more of the Jack story was unveiled, and there was much more action than some weeks. The physical movement to the castle and crouching under the ribbon added to getting “into” the story. We were all so into the story that I didn’t take as many notes as usual, or as I should... Going to the castle and bringing the money and goose home ... seemed to support the children’s belief in the story—they really went into the space of the story. In several places I noted that children were GRINNING.

Early childhood educators understand the essential nature of imagination and pretend play on young children’s learning. Paley (1990), an early childhood teacher and acclaimed author about play in her nursery classroom, said that play is, “along with its alter ego, storytelling and acting, the universal learning medium” (p. 10); she was emphatic that children “do not pretend to be storytellers; they *are* storytellers. It is their intuitive approach to all occasions. It is the way they think” (p. 17).

One teacher in my study confirmed Paley’s ideas:

And then the way that *they go into the world of pretend*. Kyliia over there in the dress with the braids, she is forever—she’ll go over and she goes ‘I’m gonna play pre-tend’ (clapping). Several of them will do that. They remember that, but the way that they remember that they go to sleep and then they’ll wake up in the world of Jack. That is just—I mean sometimes, for three year olds that can be *difficult for them to separate the world of pretend and the world of reality*. So I think it’s the way that [the teaching artists] do it. I think that only one child out of my twenty-nine had difficulties. ...And he’s younger ...(Emphasis added)

Several other teachers indicated that the idea of story as place, or space, was new to them, like this teacher who said:

I thought that it was going to cause me to change how I think about pretend in the classroom. ... Like I never thought about announcing, oh we’re going into the world of pretend. We just always played pretend. It was kind of interesting to see they made it a separate world.

Forty-six of the children literally put themselves into the world of Jack and pretend in their drawings; some added their personal dog, house, family or friends, and one child dictated, “Me and Jack found money trapped in a force field.” Valeria, in Figure 6, rightfully drew herself into the castle with the goose, an egg, and a door. Her rendition appropriates a classic sense of “castle” with its pointed rooflines and rich golden color.

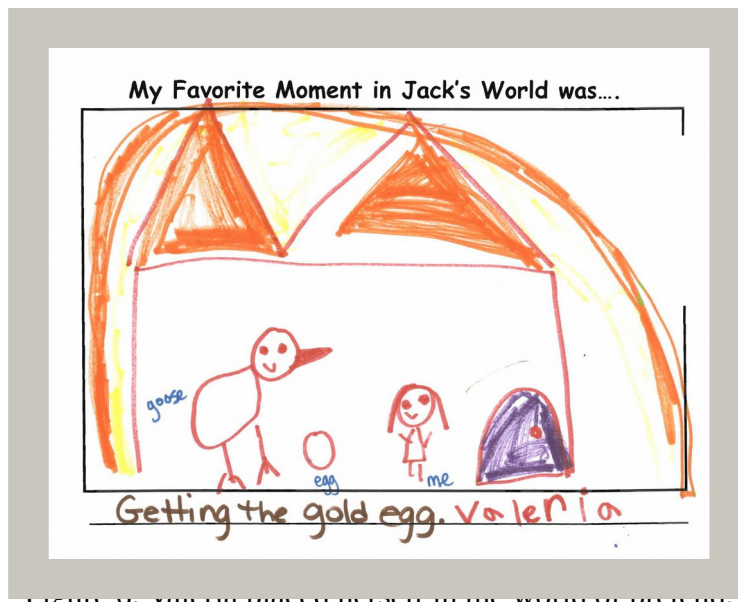


Figure 8. Valeria placed herself in the world of pretend.

The researchers observed for 30 minutes before and following the interactive drama event and noted that children self-initiated imaginative play related to Jack. One day, Hillary, Maggie and Denise had been playing in the rice table before I arrived—making a magic beans cake. When I asked Hillary about it, she said, “The magic bean cake made shoes dance by their selves.”

Another day, Carter made a wall of small rubber blocks on the table and said, “It’s the giant’s house.” He made “boom, boom” loud steps and “proom, prroom” as puffs of air. He said individual blocks were “being” Jack and the giant and moved the blocks into a tall stack. Soon two stacks of blocks became “the big dude” (the giant) and “the little dude” (Jack) as he continued to play.

Through my observations during and outside of the dramatic play, I saw that the Jack residency asked children to *become* or *be* the story, as opposed to listen to the story. We know that “preschoolers are more likely to understand and remember relationships, concepts, and strategies that they acquire through firsthand, meaningful experience” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 133). We also know that narrative is a primary vehicle for exploring new and familiar ideas and fundamental to early literacy development. Interactive dramatic play brought the content “out of the book” and created a liminal “third space” (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005) in which children became someone new.

### **Creating a Version of a Traditional Tale Introduced Children to *Problem Solving***

In addition to rich academic and sociodramatic development, the Jack residency provided children beginning opportunities to learn how to sort through problems as they experienced a traditional tale from multiple alternative points of view and talked about and acted on the feelings of others. One fantasy variation was explicitly designed to increase children’s problem solving skill: the occurrence of a flood in Jack’s community that was caused by the giant’s tears. The written curriculum stated these goals as examples:

To explore the environment in rain; discover that rain is coming from Giant’s tears; make a plan to solve the problem.



To plan steps and carry out plan for solving problem of the rain, learn about Giant's feelings and behavior, explore the importance of knowing someone's name, look at ways to make friends.

The primary ways the teaching artists engaged the children solving problems like this one was to solicit their ideas. When their mother was angry they had sold Daisy, the children suggested they could write her a letter that said they were sorry, to help her feel better. When it was "raining" giant tears, the children volunteered ideas like stomping and dancing for playing in the rain, and when they needed to return to the castle, even though they had already chopped down the beanstalk, children brainstormed ways to get there, like finding a "really tall ladder." In each of these examples, the teaching artists accepted multiple suggestions, playing them all out when possible, as in the rain play incident, and facilitating a group decision when a single solution was required.

On the final day of the Jack experience in one classroom, a substitute teacher sat on the floor playing with a group of children in the block area. As the children argued about who needed which block, the teacher encouraged the children to stop and "think like Jack—what would Jack do here? He would solve the problem by using his words." Indeed, throughout the interactive dramatic play, the children helped Jack solve problems.

These observations confirm that problem solving is an important and legitimate teaching aim for preschoolers. We know, "The preschool years are a crucial time for children to develop qualities such as consideration for others, conscience, and a sense of right and wrong" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 125) and that "increasing capacity to use language in thought is a key development of the preschool period and enables children to solve new problems rather than rely solely on trial and error" (p. 142).

### **Interactive Drama Education Holds Promise for Teacher Engagement and Professional Development**

One day Collin noted to an BCP teacher in an observation that, "It's important that the children see people they know change into the story world," referring to the teachers playing the roles of Mother, Mr. Beano, and the harp. The children clearly loved their teachers' active participation. They laughed with delight when the adults who mattered to them donned aprons and hats and entered the world of pretend in the roles of "Mother" and "Mr. Beano." Grace, in fact, decided to represent her teacher as Mother (Figure 7), claiming it was what she liked best and filling the page with her image.

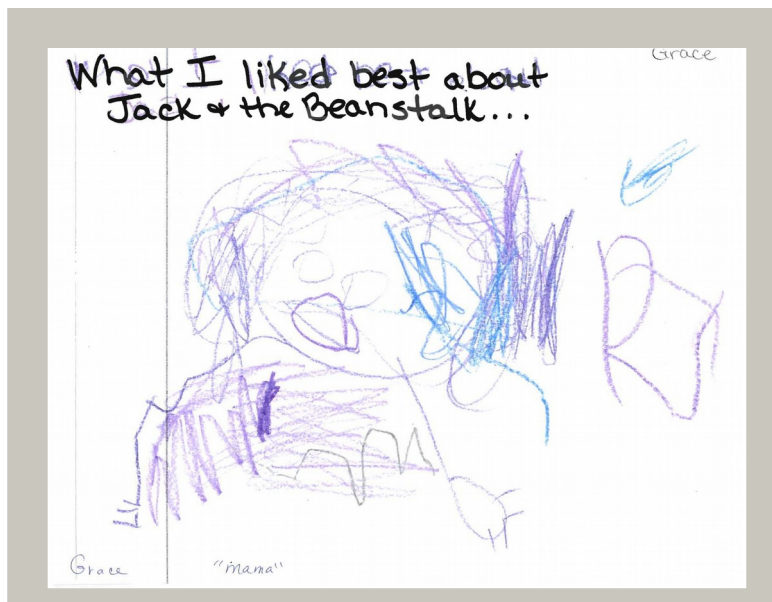


Figure 7. Grace decided that her teacher, in the role of Mother, was what she liked best about Jack and the Beanstalk.

Teacher participation was visibly connected to children’s engagement learning, and yet the classroom teachers engaged and participated along a continuum from highly engaged and involved to minimally so. Their previous experiences with drama and drama education prior to the Jack residency and their comfort level when the residency began also varied, as represented in Table 1. However, the majority of the teachers had no to very little experience.

Previous drama experience	Number of teachers	Examples
None	3	
Little	2	In a play in 4 <sup>th</sup> grade
Some	2	In church plays
Considerable	1	Theater minor in college

Table 1. Teachers’ previous experiences.

One teacher reported in the pre-Jack interview:

I’m a little shy so I get a little embarrassed. Especially when it’s a larger group of people. If it’s just a couple of kids I’m okay with acting silly and

doing stuff. I get a little shy when it's a larger group. Maybe that's why I don't do it so much. Maybe I don't like the spotlight too much.

Another teacher conveyed a common sentiment: "Drama? That's very much out of my comfort zone." Teachers described the minimal ways they engaged their children in drama education before the Blue Apple experience, including designing a "pretend" or "house" or "dramatic play" area in the classroom and "Read[ing] the story and then have the kids act it out."

The rituals described earlier supported teachers' learning and participation in ways that paralleled their students' learning. Teachers and teaching associates became more comfortable, less resistant, and more actively engaged each week. In one classroom, on the first day that there was to be teacher involvement in the story world, one teacher, Meredith, and her associate teacher, Beth, teasingly cajoled another associate, Janelle, into taking on the role of Mother. Meredith was so reluctant to play a role that she enlisted the children to convince Janelle to be Mother. The children agreed, telling her she would be a good mother because she is "pretty," and she has real children herself.

Over the residency Meredith took small steps and slowly became involved. She accepted the "role" of the harp (the least risky role), and even improvised a few lines. By mid-April, I observed the following interaction in which she took up teaching artists' techniques as part of natural practice:

Meredith says the Blue Apple Players are coming, Mr. Collin and Miss Megan, but that other people are coming too. She says they will go "in the world of [pause])" and the children fill in the pause, "pre-tend," with claps. But before then they need to do one thing. "Planning sheets," the children say together.

In the post-Jack interviews, 100% of teachers expressed a positive evaluation of the program. Three teachers suggested that some of the Blue Apple practices would become part of their teaching in the following ways:

... the storytelling and the imaginative play. Like I think that's been the big thing and I think that when I tell a story now, ... I've used some of their techniques. Close your eyes we're going to count to three talking about things that way and with one of my classes specifically ... they really took to that approach ... So they gave me some techniques to use so that was good.

I feel like I've always been a dramatic person. You can ask my husband. But I feel like it's helped me kind of amp up like just being silly and like over dramatic with the kids to gain their attention. I had kind of gotten away from that but I'm back to it.

Not surprisingly, there was still a lot of hesitation and a lack of confidence expressed in many of the teachers' responses:

I have to say that I'm probably, that's not one of my strong points, I don't do a lot of [it], we do some role playing and some things like that, but to be perfectly honest it's not something I spend a lot of time doing.

And I did enjoy more than I thought I would. Brought me out of my comfort zone a little bit. ... So hopefully I will get myself to do more of that. It'd be nice if they just came back and did it for me. Force me into it.

So I hope to be able trying get myself to come out of the comfort zone and do a little bit of that. I would love for someone to come in and lead it for me. I would be happy to participate in it. I'm not good at that.

Examples occurred in the observations that showed the potential of the Jack residency to affect teachers' practices, and thereby children's learning. A subsequent collaboration with another early learning center built on these promises with a teacher study group in which teaching artists and classroom teachers reflected, interpreted, and planned together (Whitmore, 2015).

### **Implications for Practice**

"Preschoolers revel in their increasing coordination, using their bodies exuberantly. They thrive in environments that encourage them to experiment with new materials, roles, and ideas, through various projects and especially through play" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 113). The following implications for practice may be drawn from this study:

1. Early childhood teachers might capitalize on the value of movement and engaging bodies as part of pretend and problem solving, to maximize the benefits for thinking and language development, and to increase joy! Copple and Bredekamp say, "Preschoolers are extremely physical creatures—constantly moving, running, and jumping. They react joyfully to opportunities for dancing, creative movement, physical dramatic play, and being outdoors where they can move without constraint" (2009, p. 113-114). This study indicates that movement + language + pretend = learning.
2. Use rituals to initiate and conclude each dramatic play time to build confidence and predictability for children—and teachers.
3. Invite children into imagined spaces—where they *become* the story. Use interactive techniques, such as asking children to suggest actions and make decisions to introduce children to problem solving.
4. Classroom teachers and arts educators can work collaboratively to make the most of interactive dramatic arts experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The Jack residency had profound influence on children's academic and social learning. Children played and pretended, particularly when they were invited to move actively and use their voices, thereby becoming "a head taller than themselves." They increasingly took risks and gained confidence and self-efficacy as their participation increased, thanks to the Jack rituals. Children's imaginations were particularly engaged when they moved in and out of the story world of Jack where they learned to navigate from real to pretend and back again and came to understand the story from the inside out. They relished opportunities to join in problem solving as part of the story. Teachers came to the curriculum with very little experience and a lack of confidence, but agreed that the residency was beneficial and expressed a desire to incorporate the techniques they experienced.

In 1983, Jerome Bruner wrote:

*...play gives pleasure—great pleasure.* Even the obstacles that we set up in play in order to surmount them give us pleasure in doing so. Indeed, the obstacles seem necessary, for without them the child quickly becomes bored. In this sense, I think we would have to agree that play has about something of the quality of problem solving, but *in a most joyous fashion*. But let me be clear. Unless we bear in mind that *play is a source of pleasure*, we are really missing the point of what it's about (p. 61).  
(Emphasis added)

Bruner's understanding about the connections between play, pleasure (joy), and problems solving certainly rang true as preschoolers became the story of Jack and the Beanstalk.

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