Play And School Readiness

—Sue Bredekamp

In Evelyn Delgado's Head Start classroom in Philadelphia, the dramatic play area has been turned into a doctor's office (HeadsUp! Reading, 2002). Six or seven children dress up in white coats and play with more or less realistic props such as stethoscopes, "medicines," plastic syringes, prescription pads, and other medical implements. Several books about visiting the doctor are also available. Evelyn enters the play, and the children designate her the patient as they swarm around her on the floor. She nervously says, "What's wrong with me, doctor?" and the children start listing her various symptoms, diagnosing a fever, and giving her medicine for her eyes. When Evelyn becomes fearful, one of the children gives her a telephone to call her Mom. "Mommy, please come," she cries into the phone. "There's a whole bunch of doctors and I'm afraid." One of the little girls quickly takes on the role of Evelyn's mother. She picks up the book, *Go to the Doctor* (Berenstein & Berenstein, 1981) and begins to "read" it to Evelyn to calm her fears. The little girl points to one of the pictures and says, "He's not afraid because he's the big brother."

Evelyn Delgado is a masterful early childhood educator. In her teaching, she puts into practice what research says about the potential positive effects of preschool children's play on readiness for school. Sociodramatic play provides an excellent context for children to develop and practice many of the important skills and behaviors that contribute to later success in school and life (Bergen, 2002; Fromberg, 1999; Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990). The purpose of this chapter is to describe some of the key research findings that demonstrate the relationship between school readiness and preschool play. The chapter begins with definitions of both school readiness and play. Next and perhaps most important, the chapter describes the teacher's role in ensuring that play is used effectively to promote school readiness. As the scene in Evelyn Delgado's classroom shows, play does not automatically result in positive learning experiences for children; teachers have several essential roles to play themselves. Then, the chapter explores the relationship between children's dramatic play and the development of key school readiness skills-self-regulation, higher order social skills, language, and early literacy skills such as symbolic representation and print awareness. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of motivation in relation to play and school readiness.

Defining Terms: School Readiness and Play

The terms *school readiness and play* represent complex constructs that have been defined and used in various ways, sometimes leading to miscommunication and misinterpretation. The main problem with each of these terms is that, at times, they are defined very broadly and, at other times, quite narrowly. Therefore, any discussion of these constructs must begin with explication of how these terms will be used in this context.

School Readiness

The concept of school readiness first reached national prominence in 1990 when the president and 50 governors established the National Education Goals Panel, identifying Goal 1 as "By the year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn." Subsequently, the Goals Panel (National Education Goals Panel, 1991) defined the construct of "ready to learn" as consisting of five dimensions: language use, cognition and general knowledge, physical health and well-being, social and emotional development, and approaches to learning. More recently, the Head Start Bureau (2001) expanded on the construct when it promulgated a Child Outcomes Framework delineating the expectations for children on leaving Head Start. The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework lists eight dimensions of school readiness with numerous indicators or examples provided to further describe each dimension: language development, literacy, mathematics, science, creative arts, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and physical health and development. Unlike the Goals Panel definition, the Head Start framework uses terminology more aligned with the academic subjects of elementary school.

Kindergarten teachers also have been asked to report which factors are very important or essential for kindergarten readiness. In one survey by the U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999),

more than 75% of teachers considered it very important or essential that children be physically healthy, rested, and nourished; enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities; and able to communicate needs, wants, and thoughts verbally in their home language. In addition, 51%-75% of teachers reported that taking turns and sharing, not disrupting class, being sensitive to other children's feelings, and following directions are very important or essential. Finishing tasks, knowing the English language, and sitting still and paying attention were reported as being important or very important by 26%–50% of teachers. Most interesting, fewer than 26% of kindergarten teachers in this survey reported that it is essential or very important for entering kindergarten children to count to 20, have good problem-solving skills, use a pencil or paintbrush, or know letters of the alphabet. Clearly, these survey results show that kindergarten teachers believe that children's language abilities, their eagerness to learn, and their overall ability to regulate their own behavior in group settings (including following rules set by the teacher and getting along with peers) are the key determinants of readiness. Teachers no doubt assume that, given these preexisting conditions, they can teach children specific skills but that, in the absence of these factors, teaching becomes quite difficult.

Contrary to the opinions of many of these kindergarten teachers, however, research shows that children who enter kindergarten with certain kinds of knowledge and skill in early literacy such as recognizing letters, phonological awareness, and overall language ability are more likely to succeed in learning to read later on (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Probably more important, children who are severely lacking in these areas are more likely to experience difficulties in learning to read (Snow et al., 1998).

School readiness matters because achievement gaps continue to persist between children from low-income families and their middle-class counterparts as well as among children from diverse linguistic and cultural groups (Coley, 2002). Because these gaps are evident as early as kindergarten entry (Lee & Burkam, 2002; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000), addressing these inequities during the preschool years is necessary.

Extensive research reviews (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; FAN: The Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Snow et al., 1998) have contributed a great deal to what is now known about the kinds of skills and knowledge that constitute school readiness. Given this broad knowledge base, it becomes essential to use a multidimensional definition of school readiness that in effect encompasses all aspects rated by the kindergarten teachers and more. For the purposes of this chapter, however, that definition will be limited to those dimensions of school readiness on which play seems to have the greatest potential effect: self-regulation, social skills, language, and early literacy skills such as print awareness and symbolic representation.

Play

The term play is one of the most frequently used but most loosely defined terms in the early childhood lexicon. Because so many general, bromidic statements about play appear frequently in early childhood literature, a great deal of misunderstanding surrounds the concept (see DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002, pp. 6–10). In fact, if advocates for play in early childhood used the term less often but under more clearly delimited conditions, they would strengthen their case.

This chapter works from a relatively narrow definition of play. The kind of play that appears to be most effective in developing the school readiness abilities listed previously is *sociodramatic* play (Smilansky, 1968) about which a great deal has been written in the literature. This type of play, also called dramatic, imaginative, or pretend play, can occur with peers, adults, or both. Characteristics of sociodramatic play include make-believe that involves roles, objects, and situations; persists for at least 10 minutes; and includes language and social interaction. The social dimension distinguishes sociodramatic play from dramatic play because children can and do pretend during solitary play. Sociodramatic play may also occur in combination with constructive play in early childhood classrooms, for example, when a group of children build a car with blocks and then pretend that they are a family taking a trip.

Much of the current research on sociodramatic play derives from a Vygotskian theoretical base (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 1998). Vygotsky (1933/1966) saw play as the leading behavior in children's development, "the preeminent educational activity of early childhood" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 57). In Vygotsky's theory, during play, children behave beyond their current level of independent mastery. This type of play is characterized by several elements. First, the play must include an imaginary situation

such as the doctor's office in Evelyn's classroom. Second, the players have assigned roles with implicit rules for acting each part. As the classroom scene showed, the children playing the role of doctor knew that their role was to be in charge, providing the diagnosis and treatment, not asking What's wrong with me? like a patient would; similarly, the girl playing the mother took on the parental role of reading to her child. And finally, language must be involved (Bodrova & Leong, 1998).

Dramatic play first emerges during late toddlerhood when children begin using objects for imaginary purposes and "playing tea party" or other situations with adults or older children (Haight & Miller, 1993). If this type of play is supported during the preschool years, then by age 4 or 5, children can become quite skilled as players, engaging in the kind of play that includes all the elements listed above. Bodrova and Leong (2003) identify this type of play as "mature play" to distinguish it from the "immature play" in which many children engage, even as preschoolers and kindergartners, because they have not learned more sophisticated play skills. Immature play is repetitive and unimaginative and does not benefit children the same way mature play does. As Bodrova and Leong (2003) wisely point out, "when parents or school administrators propose replacing play in an early childhood classroom with more academic activities they are prompted by the fact that the play they see in these classrooms is actually happening at an immature level" (p. 14).

Vygotsky's view of play is one in which the individual renounces his or her own needs and desires to conform to the rules of the play situation. Anyone who has observed children engaged in dramatic play has seen that, at times, they will step out of their roles to renegotiate (e.g., "Now you be the patient. I want to be the doctor."). But if children cease to conform to the roles assigned (that is, break the implicit rules), the play inevitably breaks down. In other words, from Vygotsky's perspective, play actually sets limits on children's behavior (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 1998). This perspective is a different view of play than that denoted by the oft-used phrase, "free play." As Berk and Winsler state so eloquently, "Free play is not really 'free' since renouncing impulsive action-that is, not doing just what one wants to do at the moment-is the route to satisfying, pleasurable make-believe" (1995, p. 56). And, as research is beginning to demonstrate more and more, play is at least in part the route to school readiness.

The Teacher's Role in Promoting Sociodramatic Play

Like virtually every other aspect of development, mature play does not happen naturally or occur automatically as children get older. Rather, children must learn how to engage in satisfying sociodramatic play, which means that adults or more capable peers must take responsibility for assisting them in this learning.

Several researchers have described various teacher roles with respect to supporting children's play (Christie & Enz, 1992; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Schrader, 1989, 1990). The most basic framework of this kind asserts that teachers play three key roles: observer, stage manager, and co-player. The observer role is obvious and similar to that played in other areas of the early childhood classroom. In the case of play, teachers must observe carefully to determine whether, when, how, and with whom to intervene. The roles of stage manager and co-player are particularly important to ensure that mature sociodramatic play develops and is sustained and that individual children who may need additional support to become more skilled players receive it. As stage manager, teachers can help provide a "theme" for the play that organizes it around a set of common experiences or knowledge, and they can provide time, space, and props to enhance the play (Schrader, 1990). The theme may arise from a shared experience such as a curriculum topic, a visit to the class by a doctor, or a trip to a nearby grocery store. As co-player, the teacher carefully involves him- or herself in the play, scaffolding language, and intervening to appropriately support and extend the play. In this context, the most helpful teacher support involves, not directly instructing or explaining, but rather, modeling, demonstrating, guiding as well as possibly elaborating and extending children's language by engaging in one-to-one conversation (Berk & Winsler, 1995). This role is crucial when children "get stuck" in immature play, repeatedly playing the same thing or simply imitating superhero or monster play. But adults must be careful not to be too intrusive in children's play. If adults begin to take over, children will inevitably desist (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

With key terms defined, the chapter now examines the relationship between play and school readiness. Each of the research studies described here clearly shows that the role of the adult is key to ensuring that children's involvement in play produces the desired school readiness results, a finding that has important implications for early childhood teacher education and professional development.

The Relationship Between Play and School Readiness Factors

A growing body of research connects Vygotskian-type sociodramatic play to particular skills and abilities that relate to later success in school and life. Key studies described here demonstrate how mature, teacher-supported sociodramatic play promotes desired learning and developmental outcomes in preschool children.

Self-Regulation

A recent review of child development and neurobiology research concluded that "the growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behavior" and that "development may be viewed as an increasing capacity for self-regulation, not so much in the specifics of individual behaviors but in the child's ability to function more independently in personal and social contexts" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 26). Thus, the prestigious scientists of the National Research Council concurred with the kindergarten teachers surveyed by the U.S. Department of Education about the importance of self-regulation for healthy development and learning. In the broadest sense, self-regulation is the ability to control one's own emotions, behaviors, and thinking processes.

Operating from a Vygotskian theoretical perspective, Bodrova and Leong (2001) developed a preschool-kindergarten curriculum model, Tools of the Mind, within which sociodramatic play has a central place. The model focuses on the teacher's role in developing mature play among young children. Preschoolers spend 40 to 50 minutes per day in sustained sociodramatic play, and teachers are trained in special instructional strategies, including strategies to introduce imaginary situations and props (that move from more realistic to less realistic to encourage symbolic thought) as well as strategies to expand the roles children take on.

One of the core elements of Tools of the Mind that is designed to promote mature play is the use of "play plans." The plan is a written description of what the child plans to do during play, including the situation, roles, and props. Over time, the teacher encourages two or more children to plan together, an activity that enables the children, either themselves or with the teacher's help, to defuse potential social conflicts in advance. A key element of these plans is that they are on paper. Children draw or write their plans, using their own writing approximations that become more conventional over time (a process called "scaffolded writing"), thus

integrating early literacy skill development in the program. In the Tools of the Mind classrooms, play plans increased the level of self-regulation, both cognitive and social, and yielded less fighting and arguing among the children as well as more on-task behavior (Bodrova & Leong, 2001). Research in Tools of the Mind classrooms confirms the theory that mature play is not "free play" but, rather, contributes to children's impulse control and self-regulation, key aspects of school readiness. The Tools of the Mind curriculum approach also had significant positive effects on early literacy skills, which are described later in the chapter.

Elias and Berk (2002) also tested Vygotsky's theory of play and self-regulation. In a short-term longitudinal design, they observed 51 middle-income 3- and 4-yearolds in their preschools. The study involved naturalistic observations of total dramatic play, complex sociodramatic play, and solitary dramatic play as well as of self-regulation during clean-up and circle time. They found a positive relationship between the amount of time a child spent in complex sociodramatic play and that child's self-regulation during clean-up (but not the child's self-regulation during circle time). No relationship was found between total time a child spent in dramatic play and his or her self-regulation, and a negative relationship was found between a child's solitary dramatic play and his or her self-regulation. The relationship between complex sociodramatic play and self-regulation during clean-up was particularly strong for highly impulsive children. The researchers hypothesized that clean-up time requires greater levels of self-regulation than circle time because, during circle time, each child is clearly under the teacher's supervision and is constrained by the norms of the group, whereas during clean-up time, each child must function more independently.

Ironically, preschools are becoming more school-like in an attempt to prepare children for the self-regulatory expectations of school when research shows that play during the years before school is effective in developing the self-regulatory capacities of preschool children. But a qualifier must be added to this conclusion on self-regulation: Only mature sociodramatic play supported by trained teachers is effective.

Social Skills

Perhaps not surprising, research supports a strong relationship between sociodramatic play and social competence (Fromberg, 1999). Congruent with the findings on

self-regulation, during pretend play, social behavior among preschoolers is more mature, cooperative, and reciprocal, and children remain engaged longer than in other classroom situations (Connolly & Doyle, 1984; Connolly, Doyle, & Reznick, 1988). Children who engage in sociodramatic play are better able to take the perspective of others and are seen as more intellectually and socially competent by their teachers (Burns & Brainerd, 1979; Connolly & Doyle, 1984).

Involvement in sociodramatic play not only reflects children's social ability but also contributes to social competence (Berk & Winsler, 1995). A large-scale observational study of early childhood programs (Layzer, Goodson, & Moss, 1993) provided some insights into what goes on in early childhood classrooms. The study described experiences of 4-year-old children from low-income families in three types of programs: Head Start, child-care centers, and prekindergartens funded by Chapter I. The sample included 199 randomly selected programs from five areas of the country. Observers spent 1 week in each classroom and collected a wealth of data to provide a rich picture of "life in preschool" as the study was called. The researchers examined two outcome measures related to school readiness: (a) engagement in activities with goals and (b) use of higher-level social strategies such as initiating and sustaining cooperative social activities, taking turns, or working with others on joint projects. They found that children engaged in activities with goals approximately 40% of the time, whereas about 25% of children's interactions involved higher-level social strategies.

The relevance of these findings is that each of these types of child behavior occurred under different classroom conditions. Goal-directed tasks were more likely to occur during teacher-planned, teacher-directed activities, whereas higher-level social strategies were more likely to occur during sociodramatic play or informal, active play with peers. Apparently, children develop different, but equally important, school readiness abilities from their experiences in the diverse contexts of an early childhood classroom. One disturbing finding of the study was that, in classrooms with more highly qualified teachers (those with baccalaureate degrees), children spent more time on activities with goals, indicating that these better-trained teachers were not prepared to use the context of play to support the development of sophisticated social skills, self-regulation, and other school readiness abilities. Another disturbing finding is that one-on-one conversational interactions were relatively rare. Much of teacher talk was devoted to directives and administering

routines, demonstrating that many preschools are marked by too many missed opportunities for learning.

Language

All the different ways of defining school readiness agree on one dimension of the definition: the importance of language. Language is a strong predictor of reading success, but language also relates to cognitive and social development in general (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow et al., 1998). One of the major characteristics of mature pretend play is the use of language, so it should come as no surprise that a strong relationship exists between pretend play and language development. During sociodramatic play, children often take on the roles of adults and, therefore, emulate the more sophisticated language of adults (Anderson, 1986); similarly, when children play out specific roles in pretend contexts, they adapt their speech style and emulate the scripts common to those settings. Different contexts such as the doctor's office, a space shuttle launch, a restaurant, or taking care of a baby at home require different language, and children learn to adjust their language to the demands of the situation.

One study (Levy, Schaefer, & Phelps, 1986) of 28 3- and 4-year-olds in a childcare center found that sociodramatic play can be valuable in improving the language scores of boys. Before the teacher's intervention, only girls participated in sustained sociodramatic play. The teachers engaged all of the children by organizing play around a shared set of experiences (a theme); providing time, space, and props to enhance the play; and intervening to support and extend involvement—especially that of males—in the play, thus enhancing their language development.

One of the most impressive recent studies from which we can learn about play and language is the Home School Study of Language and Literacy Development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). This longitudinal study of the effects of language and literacy environments on a group of 74 children from low-income homes began when the children were 3 years old. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) report effects through kindergarten, although children have since been followed into middle school where effects are still being found. Researchers conducted home visits all 3 years and observed and recorded parent-child interactions during play and reading. Then, they conducted observations and audiotaping of both children and teachers during a preschool visit each year. They obtained language data from "group meeting times, large-group book reading, small teacher-led groups,

free play, mealtimes, and transition times" (Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001, p. 9). During the kindergarten year, children were administered a battery of measures called the SHELL-K, which includes the following components: narrative production, picture description, definitions, superordinates (e.g., What are tables and chairs?), story comprehension, emergent literacy (including letter recognition, writing concepts, story and print concepts), and receptive vocabulary.

The findings of this study are rich and have numerous implications for teachers and parents. Of particular interest to the current discussion are the findings related to free play (Dickinson, 2001). Note that, although Dickinson refers to this play as "free play," it was actually mature, sociodramatic, rule-bound play, which, as discussed above, is not truly "free." The free play time during preschool was most beneficial for long-term language growth in classrooms that were rich with varied vocabulary. Researchers found "consistent links between kindergarten measures and the total number of words and the variety of words that children used during free play" (Dickinson, 2001, p. 251). Researchers also found that how teachers talked with children in varying contexts matters. During group times, the quantity of interesting and varying words teachers used seems to be what makes the difference for children. But during pretend play, the most effective teachers were those who were selective in their choice of words and were reciprocal in conversation.

In addition, the study found that children performed better in kindergarten if, during play, their preschool teachers limited their own talking and gave children more opportunity to talk. Effective preschool teachers listened to children, then spoke about the topic of their play, using rare and varied words related to the theme of the play. Children's kindergarten outcomes were less positive in situations where the teachers did more explaining during play than extending of children's own conversations. The researchers explained that what tended to happen was that teachers stepped in to resolve problems or enforce rules, which led to lengthy explanations that the children undoubtedly tuned out. This finding is the opposite of the study's finding related to group times where explanatory talk was beneficial. In short, preschool children benefit when teachers engage them in one-on-one extended conversation during pretend play, using rare words in context to extend children's vocabulary.

The major findings of this study point to the important role of play in the development of school readiness, especially literacy-related language skills (Dickinson, 2001):

❖ Across all 3 years of the study, the data showed associations between the amount of time children engaged in pretending and their performance on outcome measures in kindergarten.

❖ Pretend play provides opportunities to talk with other children and across all 3 years, the amount of time spent talking to other children was related to positive outcomes.

❖ Children benefited from talk with other children and teachers that involved varied vocabulary and interesting intellectual content.

❖ Children benefited when teachers engaged them in sustained conversation with several turns for each to listen and speak. (pp. 253–254)

Important to note is that the Home School Study found specific kinds of adult language that varies by context to be beneficial for children's development. In other words, what constitutes effective teacher talk with children varies depending on whether the context is group time, story time, mealtime, or pretend play. And the researchers caution that all of these contexts provide important learning opportunities. The findings are not suggesting that pretend play replace group time or other more structured teaching situations; rather, the researchers are imploring that those situations do not replace pretend play time, which, as this longitudinal study shows, provides powerful benefits for school readiness when effectively supported by teachers.

American preschools are now enrolling increasing numbers of children whose home language is not English. In fact, almost one third of Head Start children speak a language other than English at home. The realities of so many second-language learners means that preschools have a special responsibility to help children acquire English while also maintaining their home language. However, sociodramatic play, which is a desired activity of preschool children, can also be very challenging for second-language learners because the linguistic demands of pretend play are so high. Often, other children do not include second-language learners in pretend play or, at least, not until late in the year. Tabors (1997) describes the approach that is used by the Language Acquisition Preschool at the University of Kansas to ameliorate this situation and engage second-language learners in pretend play. Rather than leave the situation entirely up to the children, which is too often done in preschool, the teachers use a strategy called "scripted dramatic

play." In this strategy, the teachers introduce the props and roles for the play, giving background information in discussion and introducing new vocabulary and routines as part of the script related to the play situation. This strategy provides second-language learners with opportunities for verbal communication in meaningful contexts during situations where they are motivated to participate in play with other children.

Early Literacy Skills

A great deal of attention is now focused on the need for preschools to prepare children with early literacy skills that will increase the likelihood of later success in reading. With the emphasis on literacy, many preschool teachers feel pressured to limit or even eliminate sociodramatic play and increase group time during which teachers instruct the whole group in letters and sounds. The previous description of the Home School Study has shown that teacher-supported dramatic play can have a positive effect on children's literacy-related language skills at kindergarten.

Earlier, this chapter described the Tools of the Mind curriculum approach and its use of written play plans (Bodrova & Leong, 2001). An additional element of the approach that supports the use of play plans is scaffolded writing, a technique invented for the project. In this technique, the teacher helps a child plan his or her play by drawing a line to stand for each word the child says. The child repeats the message, and then writes on the lines, attempting to represent the words with letters and symbols. Over time, as children develop more understanding of letter-sound relationships, the amount of support provided by the teacher diminishes. In Tools of the Mind classrooms where children spent 50–60 minutes of a 2-1/2-hour program using play plans and scaffolded writing techniques based on Vygotsky's theory, children scored significantly higher than control group children on literacy skills in both preschool and kindergarten. Preschool measures included the following: letter recognition, soundto-symbol correspondence, comprehension of pattern in a text, understanding of the symbolic function of a printed word, and separating of a printed word into letters (Bodrova & Leong, 2001).

The teacher's role in using sociodramatic play as a context to support literacy is critical. Several researchers (Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1992, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993, 2001; Vukelich, 1994) have found that the physical environment of the classroom has a powerful effect on children's literacy behaviors. Simply by providing writing tools in dramatic play areas, children's writing increases. But here again, when the teacher provides a thematic organization for the play (such as veterinarian's office) and props, more literacy experiences result and more reading occurs. When the teacher participates and offers suggestions, scaffolding children's engagement, children participate more.

Davidson (1996) and Owocki (1999) describe the many ways that play can support literacy learning. Play provides a context within which children read and write for real purposes. By putting writing tools and appropriate books in play settings, children engage with these materials in meaningful ways. Dramatic play also provides practice in constructing narrative, or relating events or stories, similar to the process used in writing and helpful in understanding what is read (Fromberg 1999).

Play is also related to the important capacity of symbolic representation, the ability to separate thought from objects and actions. Oral language is a symbol system, and written language is a more complex symbol system. In both instances, an agreed-on set of abstract symbols is used to represent or stand for something else. Dramatic play also requires use of symbols. Children use words, actions, and props to stand for or symbolize what they are imagining. The ability to symbolically represent objects in thought is developmental (Corrigan, 1987). Toddlers require the real object (such as a toy telephone) to pretend, whereas by age 2 years, children can use a less realistic prop such as a block to stand for a phone. Preschoolers can imagine the object without the prop. Vygotsky believed that play serves as vital preparation for later abstract and imaginative thought by helping children separate meaning from concrete objects and action; that is, acquire the capacity for symbolic representation (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Play and Motivation

Having seen the importance of play for self-regulation, social skills, language, and early literacy, let us return to Evelyn Delgado's Head Start classroom. Today, the dramatic play area of Evelyn's class is an eye doctor's office. In the play area is a large eye chart filled with varying-size alphabet letters, notepads, eye patches, and numerous pairs of old eyeglass frames that several of the children are wearing. At first, Evelyn plays the role of patient again. Two children hold the chart while the doctor points to the letters. Evelyn covers one eye and hesitantly says, "Doctor, I can't see very well. Is that an *R?*" After examining the chart, the doctor replies impa-

tiently, "No, it's a *K!*" Although not much research supports the role of dramatic play in acquiring alphabet knowledge or phonological awareness (two important predictors of reading in first grade), Evelyn's creative teaching demonstrates how easily instruction related to these topics can be incorporated in a play situation that also promotes other important school readiness skills.

But why use pretend play as the context for teaching and learning when group time or worksheets might also be effective? One answer to this question is that preschool children are highly motivated to engage in pretend play. Play is such a pleasurable activity for young children, in fact, that there is no need to coerce or cajole them to participate as there often is in other types of teacher-directed activity.

One interesting study (Wiltz & Klein, 2001) actually asked preschool children in high- and low-quality child-care centers their preferences with respect to their experiences in those centers. The quality of the centers was assessed independently by the researchers based on classroom observations using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). Researchers observed and interviewed 122 children about their likes and dislikes as well as their understanding of events and procedures at school (about which their perceptions were highly accurate). Not surprisingly, play (broadly defined by the children) was the favorite activity of 98% of the children across all classrooms, even children in low-quality classrooms where opportunities to play were more limited and teacher-controlled. Children in high-quality classrooms expressed a greater desire specifically for dramatic play than did children in low-quality classrooms where the environments were more impoverished.

When asked what they do not like about school, responses were more varied. Nearly one third of the children reported meanness by teachers or peers. Nap time and time-out were other aspects of school disliked by some children. But circle time was also actively disliked, less often by children in high-quality centers (8%) than by children in low-quality centers (25%) where the circle time lasted 30 to 40 minutes and involved rote memorization of calendar, letters, and numbers. Even in high-quality classrooms where circle time was more interesting and engaging, many children reported disliking it primarily because it takes too long. As one little boy, Don, said, "Well, I don't really like . . . you know, like sit in circle and listen . . . I don't like that part (because) I think it's too long for me. I'd rather be playing" (Wiltz & Klein, 2001, p. 225).

Considerable evidence exists that pretend play during preschool is associated with development of important school readiness behaviors such as self-regulation, social skills, language, and early literacy skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2001; Connolly & Doyle; 1984; Dickinson, 2001; Neuman & Roskos, 1992, 1993). Evidence also exists that the preschool years are a unique period of the life span during which the capacity to engage in dramatic play gradually develops if modeled and supported by adults and peers (Haight & Miller, 1993). This kind of play seems to reach its peak by kindergarten and then gradually wanes as school-age children's play becomes dominated by games with rules. In other words, preschool is the optimum time for sociodramatic play to support children's development. And children are highly motivated to engage in play. But all play is not equal, and children are not natural players. The most valuable play is mature play involving imaginary situations, roles, implicit rules for behavior, and extended language interaction.

For children to benefit fully from play, teachers must take their own roles seriously. Early childhood educators cannot wander around classrooms operating on the vague assumption that children learn through play while, at the same time, lamenting the challenges to play coming from parents and administrators. Instead, teachers must recognize play as one of the key teaching and learning contexts in the early childhood classroom, must acquire skills themselves in research-based effective teaching strategies such as scaffolding language to use during play, and must incorporate play along with other more directive teaching throughout the preschool day.

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