ROLE PLAY AND DIALOGUE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

In order to explore how role play and dialogue in early childhood contexts contribute to our understanding of language and education, we focus on, but are not limited to studies of sociodramatic play, where children pretend in verbal interaction with others. The terms imaginative play, fantasy play and pretend play are also used to describe play that is crucial in children’s development, particularly around ages 4–6, beyond which more rule-governed games and language play take over (see Lytra, Playful Talk, Learners’ Play Frames and the Construction of Identities, Volume 3).

Smilansky (1968) characterises sociodramatic play as: (a) imitative role play, (b) make-believe with regard to toys or objects, (c) make-believe with regard to actions and situations, (d) persistence for at least 10 minutes, (e) interaction between at least two players and (f) verbal communication. In our discussion of role play we are not limited to studies of at least 10 minutes, nor indeed to those that involve two actual players, rather we focus on those that include analysis of the language of the role play, or the dialogue.

Assuming roles in dialogue is a complex process:

In role play, children are able to synthesise their ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ experiences, and also transform them for their own purposes. Such transformations involve both children’s affective selves and their adopted roles. That is, players do not simply reproduce pre-formed adult roles, but actively recreate playful versions of them. These re-creations do not necessarily adhere to ‘expected’ norms but may reflect players’ own interests and perspectives (Martin and Dombey, 2002, p. 58).

Role play generates dialogue in different ways. Before and during the role play, children negotiate roles, props and plot, sometimes producing written scripts for themselves or puppets to perform. Educators may be involved at various stages, or not. The roles and the play blend stories and lived experiences with children’s imagination and developing identities, moving in and out of the play and different social contexts. As

this suggests, role play is an excellent site for the study of dialogue that is creative, social and spontaneous in young children.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

The relationship between sociodramatic play and the language and literacy development of preschool children was well documented in the 1970s (Fein, 1981). Role play can promote increased language performance (Smilansky, 1968); a higher level of thinking skills (Bergen, 2001; Marjanovic-Umek and Musek-Lesnik, 2001) and power of imagination (Kitson, 1994; Martin and Dombey, 2002) in young children. It is a complex process that involves role taking, script knowledge and improvisation (Bergen, 2001).

Play is not only beneficial for children, but also allows adults to learn more about children’s needs, perceptions and growth. Teacher action research has long been interested in play. For instance, a project in Canada (Thornley-Hall, 1989) which engaged teachers in analysing the role of spontaneous play in the development of oracy in their classes has echoes in a recent teacher research project supported by the TTA teacher-researcher scheme in the UK called ‘using role play to improve nursery children’s language’ (Aubrey, Godfrey and Thompson, 2000, p. 74).

Play has been studied from a range of disciplinary perspectives and in different research traditions. Reference is made to early work by Piaget on developmental stages of play, or to Vygotsky and the importance of social interaction and adult scaffolding. Smilansky’s work on the effects of sociodramatic play on disadvantaged preschool children’s language development (1968) is a significant early contribution.

Broadly speaking, research on play has followed general trends in educational research. Two of the preoccupying themes of early childhood educational research in the late 1970s were classroom interaction, and play-tutoring, where teachers might initiate a role play with a child (Aubrey, Godfrey and Thompson, 2000, p. 74). The 1980s saw an increase in clinical studies of play and language whereas the 1990s could be characterised by an increase in interpretive methods to capture naturally occurring situations and complex, social practices.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Research on role play and dialogue is varied and scattered. We have selected contributions to illustrate three recurring themes: experimental research using role play in interventions; ethnographies showing the influence of popular culture on literacy development through role play; and the varied insights gained from children ‘playing school’. 
Dialogue as Intervention to Develop Role Play

The connections between the development of socio-dramatic play, cognition and language have led researchers to experiment with interventions to develop children's dialogue in specific directions. Two such studies are presented here.

McWilliam and Howe (2004) cite their earlier findings that both construction and symbolic play were associated with the production of a greater number of explanatory exchanges, while symbolic play, fantasy and role play have frequently been linked to enhanced reasoning or justificatory skills. In this study, in an urban nursery setting in Scotland, they used role play with 'Alien' puppets to model either 'justificatory' or 'non-justificatory' three-turn exchanges to 4-year-old dyads in 10-minute play sessions, decreasing their support over 5 days. The dialogue with Aliens modelled in the experimental condition was 'claim-why-justification' (e.g. I like this school—why? —because I can talk to all the nice children), whereas in the control group it was 'claim-question-response' (e.g. I like this school—What do you like about it?—I like to talk to the nice children). On day 2, the researcher modelled one part of the exchange. On day 3, the researcher prompted the children in dyads (e.g. Tell Zag to answer the question), on day 4, the role play dialogue with puppets was simply encouraged where necessary and on day 5, the researcher moved away from the dyad after asking the children to talk with the puppets as before. The results show that the experimental groups were able to produce more 'why' questions and justifications at every stage of the intervention than the control group. For example:

Control: I'm playing with that (yellow puppet)—Do you not want to help with this?—yes that's his nose and put his hair on.

Experimental: I've a broken spaceship—Why did the spaceship crash?—Because he wasn't a very good driver.

This research is significant not only in its attribution of justificatory talk to children as young as four, in collaborative play (as opposed to conflictory talk where it had been previously noted), but also in its support for the identification of role play as an ideal site to develop justificatory talk.

Neeley, Neeley, Justen and Tipton-Sumner (2001) describe research on the effectiveness of scripted play as a teaching strategy for children with developmental disabilities. Their literature review suggests improvements in cognition, language development and socialisation may be positively correlated to a child's acquisition of more sophisticated play behaviours, and these behaviours can be facilitated using a scripted play paradigm (2001). Following 20 minutes of individual script training involving what would appear to be a fabricated dialogue of a service encounter
between an employee and visitor to a fast food restaurant, there was a clear shift in the children’s overall balance of play activity from solitary and functional play (muscle movements) to group constructive play (e.g. with blocks), games with rules, and dramatic (role) play, with group dramatic play being the most frequent after training. This study highlights both the social aspects of role play and the difficulties some children have in engaging initially, as well as the importance of shared scripts or schema (e.g. about the nature of service encounters) in the development of dialogue.

The issues and findings in these experimental studies resonate with studies from very different research traditions where play occurs naturally, in and out of school.

**Role Play in Natural Settings**

Spontaneous, naturally occurring role play is open to interpretation from many perspectives. To illustrate this, Danby in her study of preschool children’s speech practices in daily play in Australia contrasts a reading of her data based on ‘more traditional’ early childhood practices in terms of educational and social learning with one that “constitutes children as persons of gender and power by showing how they are positioned (and position themselves) as teachers, learners and players” (Danby, 1999, p. 151). Further perspectives are now illustrated.

**Revoicing, Recontextualisation and Popular Culture**

Dyson (2003) reports on an ethnographic study of a group of African-American first graders. Two of her findings are particularly relevant here: she shows how the children recontextualise from popular culture in their dramatic play and how these processes shape their entry into school literacy.

She examines how children appropriate ‘the symbolic stuff of media genres’, and adapt it in their dramatic play and other practices. This is a process of revoicing or recontextualising (see Maybin, Revoicing across Learning Spaces, Volume 3):

A song heard on the car radio... might become collaborative dramatic play among peers (as in playing “radio singing stars” on the playground), or particularly appealing bits of film dialogue might be lifted for group language play (ibid., p. 331).

Voices from the movie Space Jam which “incorporates the children’s three most common sources of symbolic material—sports media, songs and animation” (ibid., p. 329) provide a focus for her study. Here, Dyson traces one child’s experience with the movie:
Noah originally experienced *Space Jam* with his real family as a multimodal story, complete with pictures, music score and dialogue. Then, with fake siblings and classroom friends, Noah recontextualized and transformed that original experience into childhood practices of group singing and dramatic play (ibid., p. 342).

She describes the Grade One class watching the movie as a treat. Most had seen it many times before and joined in for group singing and reciting lines. “Noah matched tone, pitch and volume almost exactly. Indeed, he did not like others to say the lines if... ‘they don’t say it right’” (ibid., p. 335). Later in composing time, he drew Bugs Bunny and Michael Jordan in cartoon style. When he added a written report to this paper saying that he watched *Space Jam* with his cousins, he had converted it into a personal experience text that fulfilled the school expectations of composing. He later wrote longer texts that reframed the media resources with school expected voices (*I learned that...; I saw...*) as encouraged by the literacy teaching.

Dyson argues against narrow conceptions of young children’s literacy and for opening up classrooms to literacies that children engage with outside class. The movie provided the shared script which was imitated, extended and exaggerated in role play, eventually providing a focus for school literacy.

*Playing School*

Role play not only brings popular culture into school, but also extends school practices into play. Woods, Boyle and Hubbard (1999) observe that girls in their first year of school in particular were fond of playing school. One child would sit in the teacher’s chair, use the teacher’s pens with an old red diary as the register, and play ‘school’. Children with little English could also participate in pupil roles.

Bourne describes a range of school role play practices: “Sometimes they played ‘pretending games’, for example, when Ahmed was the ‘teacher’ telling a group to sit up straight and cross their legs; or when Najma, half in play and half seriously, instructed me in how to write in Bengali, drawing on the practices of her Bengali classes outside school, making me recite the text without telling me what the text meant (‘making sense’ being, in contrast, an essential feature of school reading practices). In the next example, Alea drew on past experiences of using the tape recorder in a previous ESL class to use another kind of discourse, with an intonation and delivery sadly only too familiar to teachers of ESL: ... Alea: (*In a clearly enunciated, stiff ‘drill’ voice*)
Yes Somitro. What is your name? My name is Alea" (Bourne, 2002, pp. 245–246).

Significant in this area is the work of Gregory and colleagues. In an investigation of the role played by siblings in mediating both home and school literacy practices, they compared ‘playing school’ with what actually happens in school, among monolingual and bilingual learners. Gregory (2004) reports on play between siblings, one aged 9–11, the other 4–8, in Bangladeshi British homes. The children learn from each other, “usually through playing out formal classroom experiences” (Gregory, 2004, p. 99; Williams, 2004). The ‘lessons’ at home, one of which lasts almost an hour, show that the older child “could almost be her sister’s real teacher. The curriculum is clearly focused, the discourse shows respect from both teacher and learner, and praise is given where deserved” (2004, p. 104). Direct comparisons of classroom interaction and home role plays illustrate that children’s play exemplifies procedural, cultural and as illustrated in Table 1, academic knowledge.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Classroom interaction</th>
<th>Siblings playing school at home</th>
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<td>81. Teacher: ‘Right’. Can you tell me why that’s a homophone, Sultana? What’s the other word that sounds like it? How would you spell that? Sorry, can’t hear you. A. can you spell it for me? 82. A. ‘w-r-i-g-h-t’ 83. Teacher: what ‘w-r-i-g-h-t’ Do you agree with him, M?</td>
<td>42: Now we’re going to do homophones. Who knows what a homophone is? No one? OK. I’ll tell you one and then you’re going to do some by yourselves. Like watch—one watch is your time watch, like what’s the time, watch. And another watch is I’m watching you, OK? So Sayeda you wrote some in your book, haven’t you? Can you tell me some please. Sayeda, can you only give me three please. 43. Oh I have to give five 44. No, Sayeda, we haven’t got enough time. We’ve only got another five minutes to assembly. And guess who’s going to do assembly—Miss Kudija (Wahida’s friend) . . . .</td>
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The older children are not only expert imitators of their teacher's talk and pedagogic style, they are also able to adjust the 'lesson' to the learner (making it a meaningful learning experience), and to inject creativity by extending or exaggerating the talk. For example, the 'teacher' gives her sister lines for bad behaviour (not a school practice); others blend (syncretic) literacy classes with styles used in Qur'anic and Bengali classes. (Gregory, 2004).

**Syncretic Literacy Studies**

The work of Gregory, Long and Volk (2004) under the umbrella of syncretic literacy studies is important in exploring how different languages and cultures blend in talk and literacy practices. It also brings to the study of role play the complex relationships between home and school talk. A study by Kelly (2004) describes a child who lacked confidence in school literacy practices, but then demonstrated use of specialist vocabulary and understanding of space procedures when able to join in sociodramatic play about Buzz Lightyear, a character he was familiar with from home videos. As with Dyson (2003), we see the transfer of popular culture from home, to play, to literacy in school. Role play also provides a window at home on school learning. Drury (2004) portrays 3-year-old Samia using English mixed with Pahari in playing nursery with her younger brother—though Samia's teacher was unaware that she could speak any English at all. In these diverse ways, role play enhances children's confidence, linguistic growth, literacy development and sheer pleasure.

**Role Play in Qualitative Research**

The work of Gregory and colleagues has promoted the use of role play as a research tool. For instance, Yaacob (2005) in her study of Year One Literacy Hours in Malaysia was able to use role play alongside classroom observation and participant interviews. With suitable props and a dedicated quiet space, she prompted children to pretend they were teaching younger children how to read, just as their teacher did. Recordings of the 'lessons' revealed how children were able to move in and out of the fantasy, as well as between English in the instructional register and several dialects of Malay in the regulative register, and showed their imitative and productive language proficiency and command of the script or dominant literacy practices. The role play technique also helped resolve the observer's paradox (Table 2). For example, the child playing 'teacher' would discipline the 'pupils' with techniques which were sometimes exaggerated, sometimes not:
Table 2 Role play and the observer’s paradox

| Farra: Diri atas kerusi! <stand on the chair!> | Some students start to play among themselves while the teacher is reading the text. She moves to the group and asks them to stand on the chair |
| She holds Sofea’s hand to help her stand. The other students stand up too. The teacher asks the students to hold their ears and bend up and down ten times. They count 1 to 10 as they do it and giggle among themselves |
| Farra: Nak sembang lagi? <Do you still want to talk?> |
| Farra: Hah duduk! <Ok sit down!> |
| All: Tak nak dah! <No!> |
| The teacher still holding the text book walks to the other side of the classroom |


In this instance, Yaacob recognised the punishment, was able to check with the real class teacher and confirm that indeed this was a practice, but one that she intentionally tried to avoid when being observed.

WORK IN PROGRESS

The rich variety of contextual variables in studies can make comparison difficult, which points to the value of continuing research on variation in the interactants, the props, the themes and the settings in relation to features of the dialogue in role play. In this section, we point readers to studies that have explored different aspects of the context.

Contextual Variables and Role Play

Props can prompt increased sociodramatic play. Levy, Wolfgang and Koortland (1992) found that building shared background information and adding time, space and props in play areas (hospital, restaurant) increased amount and complexity of language in sociodramatic play. Their single case repeated measures multiple-baseline design across three subjects found increased language (type, token and Mean Length of Utterance) as well as increased use of imaginative functions per se and in multi-functional units (e.g. from the imaginative bang! to the
imaginative and instrumental *I want a pizza*). Marjanovic-Umek and Musek-Lesnik (2001) found that ‘Doctor play’ gave children greater opportunities for personal interaction, verbal communication and make-believe with objects in comparison to ‘lost doggy’ play which was found to be more imitative with its involvement of fewer objects. Siraj-Blatchford and Whitebread (2003) describe children around a computer manipulating items on the screen which become props in their role play (ibid.) illustrating a new form of symbolic play and its interaction with sociodramatic play. The increase of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in early childhood education, and the fast developing technologies will continue to have an impact on the nature of young children’s Role Play and Dialogue.

Neppyl and Murray (1997) found that interactive, imaginative play tended to occur most where children were grouped in same sex pairs, largely because they opted for different kinds of play activities. Where girls seem to feature in the research on playing school, boys are central in studies on superheroes. For instance, Hicks and Kanevsky (1992) note that Mike’s symbolic play focused on superheroes and flying vehicles in their description of the discourse processes surrounding journal writing.

Kitson (1994) looked at pretend play through collaborative talk and makes a case for adult intervention arguing that

“Structuring the play enables us to extend and enhance children’s learning. Through socio-dramatic play, educators are able to create a situation and generate motivation which will encourage children to behave and function at a cognitive level beyond their norm” (Kitson, 1994, p. 98).

Paradoxically, Gmitrova and Gmitrov (2003) found that child-directed play in small groups resulted in a significant increase cognitively in comparison with teacher-directed play in their Slovak classrooms.

Drummond (1999) extends the focus on the role of adults to the setting. She contrasts a mainstream argument for play based around learning outcomes, achievements and cognitive gains with an approach that allows children to imitate and express their will in play in Steiner schools. “When the children arrive at kindergarten, the adults are doing adults’ work—sewing, preparing snacks, mending a broken toy—which creates the freedom, rhythm and creative space in which children can play” (ibid., p. 53). This means that teachers do not question children to elicit verbal displays of understanding, they do not engage in Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF)-type exchanges, they do not use the ‘teacher tone of voice’ to call for silence or issue instructions. They talk, laugh and sing, as the children engage in spontaneous, creative, transformative play (1999).

As part of a series of studies on the telephone dialogues of children in pretence play, Gillen and Hall (2001) analyse the dialogue of
3–4 year olds in a nursery setting in spontaneous role play as they make emergency calls, place delivery orders and call their parents on a toy phone in a play hut. They found, for instance, that 71% of calls included an appropriate opening move, 45% included a closing move whereas 51% including turn taking. Whereas the imaginary interlocutor was usually identified, self-identification was rare. One third of the ‘emergency’ calls followed the pattern of a request or imperative followed by justification, such as:

Amg: Doctor come round tomorrow ‘cos someone’s poorly.

It’s teddy bear poorly so come round. Call ends (ibid., p. 20).

Gillen’s one-sided telephone dialogues show children’s proficiency in pretence telephone talk exceeding their proficiency in actual dialogues. This is then extended when a second telephone is added to the nursery setting and children are able to communicate by phone as part of their play (Gillen, 2000). With the lack of face-to-face communication usual in role play, these telephone dialogues show children’s developing ability to use less contextualised language.

In a similar way, Janson’s (2001) study of blind and sighted pre-school children’s negotiations in fantasy play are conducted in contexts which require more explicit language. It is not the disability that impedes communication, but the different scripts and experiences blind and sighted children have in familiar contexts. Where background knowledge and scripts differ, there is more need for negotiation. In contrast, Annica (2005) examines the interaction in a Swedish pre-school between two girls playing at holding a funeral ceremony and shows how new knowledge occurs through negotiation. Children also draw on their different cultural backgrounds. For instance, Riojas-Cortez (2001) shows how Mexican American children in their socio-dramatic play draw on funds of knowledge including language, values, beliefs, ways of discipline and the value of education.

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

As studies have shown, an effective means to capture spontaneous socio-dramatic play is through ethnography. The drawbacks are well rehearsed, but the rewards are rich (see Toohey, Ethnography and Language Education, Volume 10). Through ethnographic research, researchers observe the naturalistic development of language, social interaction and negotiation over longer periods of time. They learn to understand the children, and their backgrounds, in context, in ways that inform interpretation of the role play. Although ethnographies are well tested, and developments in Linguistic Ethnography (Creese, Linguistic Ethnography, Volume 10) in particular are a current focus of research activity in Britain and North America, many researchers do not have
the luxury of being able to spend many months or years with children. Here the use of strategically placed video cameras, as in Gillen and Hall (2001), can help with studies tied to specific play areas, or attaching microphones to individual children can provide data on individuals, as in Bourne (2002). The use of researcher-initiated role play of teaching practices as in Yaacob (2005) is also possible, although personal communication with some researchers in the UK suggests that their attempts to encourage young bilingual children in England to ‘play school’ were ‘hilarious’ but ultimately unsuccessful in yielding useful insights into children’s learning or practices. Working with young children is challenging, and careful trial is necessary if techniques are to be developed to record specific types of dialogue or role play in relatively natural settings.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Bergen (2002) in her synthesis of the latest research on the role of play in children’s cognitive, social and academic development, which notes the clear links between pretend play and social and linguistic competence, identifies the need for research on the relationship between high-quality pretend play and development of specific academic skills. This is one possible future direction.

A second promising sign comes from the developments in cognitive psychology towards discursive psychology, which aims to use methods of conversational analysis in its pursuit of understanding of psychology. Most studies on the benefits of role play in early childhood education pay little attention to dialogue, or the actual language, and how this is used in context. A more effective analysis of the language or conversation would enhance current findings.

A third area of growth might be in the direction of work on language and identity. Research in this area has been growing, and in early childhood education we see the beginnings of how children, particularly when leaving their homes to enter new communities of practice for the first time, construct their identities through language (e.g. Sawyer, 1996). Role play could well provide an ideal lens for such studies.

In Britain and North America, the early years curriculum is perceived as having moved away from play. Teachers who advocate play as a central part of the curriculum are reported to be under pressure to conform to more traditional educational practices. The message from Bergen (2002) from an American cognitive perspective: “the limited research evidence that does exist suggests that educators should resist policies that reduce time for social pretend play experiences in preschool” is the same as from Gregory (2004) from a British syncretic literacies perspective, and indeed from all the research reviewed for this
paper. This is an area where research would not only inform our limited understanding of how role play and dialogue contribute in education, but would also add weight to the arguments for more socio-dramatic role play in early years educational settings.

REFERENCES


Parent involvement in early childhood education can extend the experiences that a child has in the classroom to real-world activities that happen in the home. A parent who understands what their child is working on at preschool has a better sense of their child’s competency and which areas they need to work on to improve confidence and ability. One of the most difficult challenges for early childhood educators is figuring out how to better engage parents in their child’s learning. By establishing good lines of communication between your child care center and parents, as well as making a strong Play helps children to engage and interact with the world around them. We present you a well-researched blog explaining the role of play in early childhood. 

We present you a well-researched blog explaining the role of play in early childhood. Play and child development are two subjects that are deeply wedded to each other in early childhood. Children learn through play, even if that is not their intention. Types of Play and their role in Child Development. Broadly, children’s play can be clubbed into 12 categories [1]: 1. Large-Motor Play. Child play in early childhood is dominant daily activity. Music game and the increasing attention paid to it has been a result of changing the concept of musical upbringing and education in broader professional circles. In the same time it is beyond dispute that learner-specific features are significant factors of foreign language learning and teaching. Pleasure, which is a consequence of play, is the only conscious reason of why children engage in play. Very early a child tries to involve an adult in a playful dialogue, and around the sixth month a child plays more intensely and cheerfully if somebody observes him/her. Between 8 and 12 months the existing functional games continue, while new appear (chattering, thumb sucking, watching objects, swinging). This chapter on role play and dialogue in early childhood contexts focuses on studies of sociodramatic play, where children pretend in verbal interaction with others, that include analysis of the discourse. The combination of reproduced roles and fictional play provides insights on children’s developing language and understandings of the world through the lenses of play registers. Play and playfulness are basic features in early childhood education. The elements of play are pleasure, a sense of freedom, and the co-construction of shared meaning through the use of rules or rhythms. Play and learning are closely related in early childhood. The child and play partner create a shared play-world by using rhythms, rules, and roles. Detailed analyses of parent-infant interactions, for instance, show how a shared play-world is created. The infant and parent communicate by imitating each other, through eye contact, by taking turns, and by repeating, varying, and improvising sounds and gestures (DeZutter, 2007; Trevarthen, 2011).