Supporting drama and imaginative play in the early years

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This book is one of a series which will be of interest to all those concerned with the care and education of children from birth to 6 years old – childminders, teachers and other professionals in schools, those who work in playgroups, private and community nurseries and similar institutions; governors, providers and managers. We also speak to parents and carers, whose involvement is probably the most influential of all for children’s learning and development.

Our focus is on improving the effectiveness of early education. Policy developments come and go, and difficult decisions are often forced on all those with responsibility for young children’s well-being. We aim to help with these decisions by showing how developmental approaches to young children’s education not only accord with our fundamental educational principles, but provide a positive and sound basis for learning.

Each book recognizes and demonstrates that children from birth to 6 years old have particular developmental learning needs, and that all those providing care and education for them would be wise to approach their work developmentally. This applies just as much to the acquisition of subject knowledge, skills and understanding, as to other educational goals such as social skills, attitudes and dispositions. In this series, there are several volumes with a subject-based focus, and the main aim is to show how that can be introduced to young children within the framework of an integrated and developmentally appropriate curriculum, without losing its integrity as an area of knowledge in its own right. We also stress
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the importance of providing a learning environment which is carefully planned for children's own active learning. The present volume shows how important drama, role play and dramatic play are across the whole curriculum. They stimulate the development of the imagination, and generally help children to understand and appreciate their cultural heritage and lifestyles. Moreover, the authors show us how practitioners themselves can gain from and enjoy the whole process of being involved in drama activities.

Access for all children is fundamental to the provision of educational opportunity. We are concerned to emphasize anti-discriminatory approaches throughout, as well as the importance of recognizing that meeting special educational needs must be an integral purpose of curriculum development and planning. We see the role of play in learning as a central one, and one which also relates to all-round emotional, social and physical development. Play, along with other forms of active learning, is normally a natural point of access to the curriculum for each child at his or her particular stage and level of understanding. It is therefore an essential force in making equal opportunities in learning, intrinsic as it is to all areas of development. We believe that these two aspects, play and equal opportunities, are so important that we not only highlight them in each volume in this series, but we also include separate volumes on them as well.

Throughout this series, we encourage readers to reflect on the education being offered to young children, by revisiting the developmental principles which most practitioners hold, and using them to analyse their observations of the children. In this way, readers can evaluate ideas about the most effective ways of educating young children, and develop strategies for approaching their practice in ways which exemplify their fundamental educational beliefs, and offer every child a more appropriate education.

The authors of each book in the series subscribe to the following set of principles for a developmental curriculum:

Principles for a developmental curriculum

• Each child is an individual and should be respected and treated as such.
• The early years are a period of development in their own right, and education of young children should be seen as a specialism with its own valid criteria of appropriate practice.
• The role of the educator of young children is to engage actively with what most concerns the child, and to support learning through these preoccupations.
• The educator has a responsibility to foster positive attitudes in children to both self and others, and to counter negative messages which children may have received.
• Each child’s cultural and linguistic endowment is seen as the fundamental medium of learning.
• An anti-discriminatory approach is the basis of all respect-worthy education, and is essential as a criterion for a developmentally appropriate curriculum (DAC).
• All children should be offered equal opportunities to progress and develop, and should have equal access to good quality provision. The concepts of multiculturalism and anti-racism are intrinsic to this whole educational approach.
• Partnership with parents should be given priority as the most effective means of ensuring coherence and continuity in children’s experiences, and in the curriculum offered to them.
• A democratic perspective permeates education of good quality and is the basis of transactions between people.

_Vicky Hurst and Jenefer Joseph_
Introduction

Drama has always been the Cinderella of the arts as far as education is concerned. In the National Curriculum, it has been made to sit, with discomfort, in English, although recently some hope has been given to drama practitioners with the introduction of ‘Curriculum 2000’ (DfEE/QCA 1999b). Drama activities are now given a discrete heading and in the new English orders for ‘Speaking and Listening’ there is a distinct drama strand. However, this is still to confine drama within English whereas engagement in ‘imaginative play’ has potential for the whole curriculum, both as an art form and as a teaching and learning medium.

The state of play

Play, of any kind, has not been high on the agenda in recent initiatives. Desirable Outcomes for Children’s Learning on Entering Compulsory Education (SCAA 1996) hardly mentioned play at all; the only recommendation was for ‘imaginative play’ mentioned under ‘Creative Development’. The DfEE review of the curriculum for under-5s in June 1998 revealed that many practitioners were unhappy about the prescriptive nature of Desirable Outcomes, stating that ‘They focused on subjects not children, and on outcomes rather than processes, thereby appearing to devalue the process of learning. Play was not mentioned, which led to learning that becomes formal too quickly’; and further: ‘outcomes in many cases have led to over-formalisation of the curriculum and the proliferation of worksheets. There
has often been overemphasis on adult-led learning experiences, with the result that spontaneity and play are lost’ (DfEE/QCA 2000a: 1–2).

Understanding dramatic play

We could blame the introduction of Desirable Outcomes and its successor, Early Learning Goals (DfEE/QCA 1999a) as the reason for ‘imaginative play’ to be undervalued, but sadly this has been the case for many years. Other than in preschool and nursery settings, there is no doubt that the move towards more formal schooling for younger children has led to the demise of role play areas. Other forms of ‘pretend’ activity have always been on the sidelines and there has never been strong evidence of children and adults engaging in ‘fantasy play’. This is in contrast to the home, where many parents encourage this kind of play and will join in such games themselves.

However, this it not the only reason for the undervaluation of dramatic activity. Drama, possibly, causes more fear among adult workers and teachers than any other of the creative subjects. On balance, trainee teachers, for example, would rather teach music than drama. The non-specialist seems to be fearful of a variety of factors that the idea of drama can present. These include both personal and pedagogical issues and are often based on previously perceived bad encounters with drama and memories of failure. These may possibly stem from previous experiences in secondary education when, in adolescence with peer pressure at its height, young people were made to feel foolish in front of their friends. Another reason why we might find the idea of drama in education difficult is that we try and compare it to what we know of adult drama. There is a perception that to use drama the early years practitioner will have to have strong personal acting skills. However, drama in education is not trying to make children into actresses and actors any more than physical education is trying to make them into the athletes or gymnasts of the future. Using drama activities with young children puts them on the path of a creative journey and helps them to develop their social, cognitive and language skills. Drama is about our humanity in all its complexity, helping us to make sense of the world around us.

The beginnings of dramatic play

‘Pretend play’ is remarkable in that it is one of the first activities that can be observed in the behaviour of early childhood. The willingness to ‘suspend
our disbelief’, a term attributed to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge which refers to the ability to be taken metaphorically into a fictional world, begins early. Ask any group of adults what games they played as children and without exception they reply, ‘mummies and daddies’, ‘doctors and nurses’, ‘cowboys and Indians’, ‘shops’, ‘hairdressers’ and so on. This ability to suspend disbelief, which we look at more fully in Chapter 1, can sometimes begin before the age of 2 and often carries on until children reach puberty, and in some instances beyond.

However, there is a tension between the classroom environment and what adults think is necessary to suspend disbelief. This has led the development of drama within early years education to become marginalized; a teaching strategy used occasionally to ‘service’ other subjects. Often drama is seen only as a useful device to encourage personal, social and emotional development. This is indeed a strength of its use but there is no evidence that children who are given (sometimes very powerful) experiences in a drama situation assume those roles in everyday life. The bullies who have had experience within drama of being the bullied do not necessarily change their actions in any lasting way. The drama will only give them an experience of such behaviour. The kind of behaviour modification needed for such individuals is the province of ‘drama therapy’ and should not be the purpose of educational drama in the ordinary early years setting.

The purpose of dramatic play

What then is the purpose of engaging children in dramatic play? If it is not going to change behaviour or attitudes in any fundamental way, why engage in it at all? This is to misunderstand this mode of ‘play’. When young children engage in dramatic play they take on and manipulate identity, and not just of stylized characters – they ‘play out’ the ideas and characteristics of their culture and their environment. The short scenarios undertaken in the role play area, the playground or in the home, sometimes complete with actions, clothing and language, represent both shared knowledge and individual experience. Bruner (1986: 109) states:

We know the world in different ways, from different stances, and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations, or indeed, ‘realities’ . . . we become increasingly adept at seeing the same set of events from multiple perspectives or stances and at entertaining the results as, so to speak, alternative possible worlds.
Children instinctively engage in drama to develop their ability to understand this perspective. All mankind shares the ability to be imaginatively creative but the education and environments in which children find themselves can increasingly cut them off from their creative selves. These quickly make them adjust to a factual, material world. It is especially important for children of minority faiths and cultures, often finding themselves in the alien environment of an early years setting or school, to be able to ‘play’ in their cultural understanding. They need opportunities to practise what it is like to be an adult, telling stories of their lives. These activities help them to keep in touch with their cultural heritage. Through their ‘pretend’ stories they are making sense of their surroundings.

Children’s need for stories

There appears to be a causal link between the use of narrative and early learning and thinking (Fox 1993; Grainger 1997) and therefore early years practitioners should regard stories as a very important part of early years education. Stories should not be seen as a period of entertainment for 20 minutes at the end of the session but as an integral element of children’s learning. The involvement in stories with adults gives children an aural model for the cadences and intonation of the language. Hearing language spoken aloud helps the listener to understand more fully the patterns and rhythms of the discourse. As Grainger (1997) states: ‘storytelling enables not just teachers but children to actively use, experience and repeat the grammatical constructions which are part of the literary language of some stories and the repetitive oral refrains’.

Stories are the lifeblood of human existence and it is important that storytelling supports children’s early lives. Bettleheim (1975: 5) reminds us: ‘For story truly to hold the child’s attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help to develop his intellect and clarify his emotions’.

Making up stories together in an active form is also important for children’s emerging reading skills. As they embark on attempting to read for themselves young children do not always have the techniques necessary to make sense of continuous written text in their head. The slowness of processing the words does not allow them access to the more complex and powerful stories found in real books (Grainger 1997). By engaging with others and with the teacher, small children are given access to the power and structure of stories through acting out their own. Through such activity they will ‘appropriate’ the language used by their adult
communities without automatically understanding all of the vocabulary. As Anning and Edwards (1999: 74) state:

Appropriation is the term used to describe what learners do when they use language of their knowledge communities without necessarily understanding it in the way that more expert members do. This is often evident in imaginative role play where children assume the language and mannerisms of the role.

Children are able to practise and try out ‘hard words’, as a 6-year-old once described them, in the story-making situation. Through problem-solving and situation-creating events children are led to their own individual understanding of the world around them. The technique to undertake this form of dramatic activity is explained more fully in Chapter 8.

We are living in an increasingly prescriptive culture where young children are more used to passive experiences. Toys are more functional and children’s own imaginative resources are often underdeveloped. Practitioners frequently comment on their children’s lack of creative and imaginative ability. This is not actually the case. Children are by nature imaginative but the imagination requires nurture and encouragement. With the increasing erosion of play from early years settings, it is not surprising that children find imaginative play difficult. By undervaluing role play, dressing up and imaginative play young children are led to believe that this kind of activity is not significant. It is the pencil and paper formality of ‘real’ education that appears to be more important to adults.

It would appear then that children from an early age participate in fantasy play to help them make sense of the world. To do this they develop storylines or ‘plots’ which are often over-exaggerations of real life: ‘Pretence here stands as a commentary on non-pretence’ (Goldman 1998: 146). This type of play is often ignored as part of the structured learning environment within the classroom. Adults set up role play areas but seldom visit them. Pretend play is seen as a useful holding activity that will engage children without the need for adult guidance. This is to undervalue such behaviour. Pretend play has much to inform us about the children we care for and teach. It also provides an extraordinary vehicle for teaching and learning.

Documents, such as the DfEE-funded All Our Futures (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education 1999: 180) identify the problem. All our Futures notes that ‘Ofsted inspections suggest too few schools teach drama in Key Stages 1–3 and provision for drama is poor because of its low status and low levels of funding. Objectives are unclear, teachers lack confidence in teaching it, and practice varies between classes in the same school’. This would be seen as a national scandal if it applied
to any named core or foundation subject. We want to make the case that by undervaluing pretend play in this way we are depriving our children of a valuable learning experience.

The purpose of this book

This book hopes to redress the balance and show early years practitioners that engaging children in drama activity is not only a natural form of behaviour for small children but also a powerful learning medium. We will show how the use of drama more than adequately addresses most of the principles for a developmental curriculum which lie at the heart of this series.

Part 1 addresses ‘Understanding dramatic activity’. It examines theories from the disciplines of psychology and drama which show the importance of educational drama. We look at all aspects of the curriculum to explore the range of areas that can be affected by its engagement.

In Part 2 ‘Managing dramatic activity’ we provide examples and ideas for using drama within the curriculum to help develop not only children’s social, cognitive and language skills but also an appreciation for drama as an art form. We consider progression, assessment and evaluation to help practitioners and other adults build up their observational skills in assessing drama in early years settings.

This book is for all practitioners who are prepared to take risks so that the children in their care can benefit from powerful learning experiences.
Part 1

Understanding dramatic activity

Education is concerned with individuals; drama with the individuality of individuals, with the uniqueness of each human essence. Indeed this is one of the reasons for its intangibility and its immeasurability.

(Way 1967: 2)
The suspension of disbelief

The ability to suspend belief in reality and move into a ‘pretend’ world while at the same time knowing that the fantasy is not real would appear on the surface to be a extraordinary attribute. Most children, however, from a very early age can distinguish between the conventions of pretend play and reality. Pretend play requires the child to act in the ‘as if’; a state where one thing can stand in for another. To be able to do this a child needs to be involved in a mental act of representation. This is achieved by creating a person, an event and/or an artefact that either stands for or portrays some aspect or knowledge of the world.

Aristotle described this ability as ‘metaxis’, and Vygotsky as the ‘dual affect’. As O’Toole (1992: 98) explains, ‘Simultaneously the participant can stand in another’s shoes, conscientiously feeling “This is happening to me” (the first affect), and simultaneously conscious of the form “I am making this happen” (the second affect). Fantasy, make-believe, pretence, call it what you will, is a modality of play. This form of activity enables children to transform themselves and their surroundings from what they are into something that they want to be. Through engaging with time and space another reality is brought to ‘life’.
Early forms of dramatic behaviour

The earliest forms of play which demonstrate ‘this is happening to me’ and ‘I am making it happen’ can be observed in babies’ desire to move their arms and legs, experimenting with movement and with space. This early creative experimentation of kicking, extending the fingers and hands, reaching out towards objects both seen and unseen is more than just copying. It is as if the child becomes absorbed in the feelings and sensations that such actions create. The experimentation with sound and movement could be interpreted as the first stages in the understanding of mood and climax (Slade 1954).

Play is an innate process in which children desire to engage. From their very first year children imitate the people around them and from this imitation imaginary or pretend play develops. Imitative play involves children copying or imitating. Babies may copy facial expressions. As they develop they will imitate or reconstruct events they have experienced. They might use aspects of their bedtime routine while playing with a teddy. Later, imagination will influence their play. During imaginative play children are not simply copying what they have seen, but adding their own ideas. In their imaginative world children can experience things that cannot be realized in reality.

Observation of pretend play reveals how children use it to sort out their understanding of the world and gain control over events. By studying children during pretend play, we can find out what they know about their world and what is important to them. Such play appears to be an intentional process. Children knowingly manipulate actions and events to create new worlds or confirm old ones. Early forms of play show children varying between understanding things as they are in reality and as they are in pretend play.

Theoretical views from psychology

Psychologists studying play have made a distinction between several categories of social play, identifying five types: symbolic play; role play; socio-dramatic play; thematic-fantasy play; and play with rules.

One could argue that socio-dramatic play and thematic-fantasy play are very similar but we will learn that each has its own separate thinking skills. However, all of these types of play will require some form of role play. Role play, discussed further in the following chapter, has interchangeable definitions that will not necessarily please everyone. The fluidity of the term ‘role play’ can be seen in the following theories.
American researchers Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) proposed that there were six developmental elements associated with ‘fantasy’ play. These are:

- Imitative role play: child assumes a make-believe role and uses imitative action and/or verbalization.
- Make-believe with regard to toys: materials or toys are moved and used as characters.
- Verbal make-believe with regard to actions and situations: use of narration as substitute for actions and situations.
- Persistence in role play: a period of at least ten minutes is spent in developing role play.
- Interaction: at least two children play together within the context of the story.
- Verbal communication: there is dialogue related to the play.

Greta Fein (1984), another North American psychologist, carried out a series of studies in which she linked the affect of socio-dramatic play with a child’s acquisition of social perspective-taking skills and self-development. By using video to capture children’s play sequences, she was able to describe four levels in the development of young children’s perspective-taking skills. Her research showed that between the ages of 2 and 4 years there is an increase in the complexity of children’s fantasy play. Through their role taking, children are able to try out the attitudes and perspectives of others. Fein described her four levels of development as follows:

- **Level 1:** self in pretend activities – children are themselves within ‘pretend’ activities, e.g. ‘I am pretending to teach my dolls’.
- **Level 2:** generic role transformation – child takes on the role of another in a pretend situation, e.g. ‘I am a doctor looking after my patients’.
- **Level 3:** generic role with complementary – child takes on a role which involves interacting with a complementary other, e.g. ‘I am pretending to be mother and I am talking to my child’.
- **Level 4:** generic role with complementary and reversibility – child can switch from pretending to be the mother talking to her child to the child answering and vice versa.

In their longitudinal study of 40 first-born children, Dunn and Kendrick (1982) also discovered that role-taking games were a common feature from an early age. They found role-taking games such as ‘hide-and-seek, chaser-chased, and peekaboo were frequent features of the interaction not only between the mother and infant, but between sibling and infant’ (p. 135). They found there was agreement with Bruner’s four features of
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playful interaction in the development of language (Dunn and Kendrick 1982: 136):

- In playful exchanges the semantic domain and structure of the routine are highly restricted and well understood by the child.
- The role structure [emphasis added] is reversible.
- The play routines (‘tasks’) are amenable to having constituents varied, and the variations can be marked by vocalizations.
- The playful atmosphere of such interactions permits the child to ‘distance’ him/herself, in a way that sustains the child’s readiness to innovate without making mistakes.

The observers recorded numerous occasions when siblings engaged in pretend play that contained fantasy or make-believe. This ability to share in pretend play was noted in children as young as 18 months.

Two modes of thinking

At this point it is important to make a distinction between socio-dramatic play and thematic-fantasy play. Whereas socio-dramatic play involves pretend activities such as laying the table, putting dolly to bed or cooking on the pretend oven, thematic-fantasy play consists of imaginary scenarios and fictional narratives. During thematic-fantasy play children create imaginary worlds for themselves and their toys based on the plots of stories they know, what they have watched on television, films they have seen or from their own imaginations.

Two American psychologists, Dorothy and Jerome Singer (1990), carried out a study into pretend play and the development of children’s imaginations and found that there may be a link between two modes of thinking. Bruner (1986), who first described these two forms of thinking, defined them as the ‘paradigmatic mode’ and the ‘narrative mode’. He explained paradigmatic thought as being involved with logic, sequencing and the ability to be analytical.

Narrative thinking, on the other hand, is more creative and requires the construction of real or imagined events. The role play area would appear to be encouraging socio-dramatic play whereas the more complex activity of interactive story-making requires children to engage in thematic-fantasy play, although this distinction may not be as clear-cut as first appears. However, it could be said that for the development of language skills and creative imagination, thematic-fantasy play is more important than socio-dramatic play. Nonetheless, it is essential that children are encouraged in both these kinds of activity in the classroom.
Theoretical views from drama practitioners

Drama practitioners have also been engaged in categorizing the development of children’s dramatic play. There have been various attempts since the late 1950s to identify the developmental stages of dramatic play.

A ‘developmental’ view

One of the earliest drama practitioners to undertake this task was Peter Slade. In his seminal book *Child Drama* (1954) he proposed the idea that there might be some form of ‘performance readiness’ and that children would work towards this state through what he called ‘personal’ and ‘projected’ play. In personal play the child would engage their whole body in the activity. As Slade (1954: 27) observes: ‘Personal Play is obvious Drama; the whole Person or Self is used. It is typified by movement and characterisation’.

Projected play, on the other hand, uses objects, or ‘treasures or properties’ as Slade refers to them, and the child, who often does not move, seems to be absorbed in extreme concentration. Here the child uses the object to ‘play out’ a scene: dolls, cars, Action Men, etc. take on the role projected onto them by the child’s imagination. This projection onto objects develops into personal role play. At this stage the objects become extensions of the role, not the role itself. Slade’s observations were very similar to those of later psychologists.

An abbreviation of Slade’s developmental stages is as follows:

0–5 years:
- elementary testing stage;
- experimentation with dance and rhythm (personal play);
- the beginnings of social awareness and sharing;
- growing understanding of mood and climax;
- the beginnings of game;
- growing quality of absorption, quietness and physical stillness (projected play).

5–7 years:
- growing understanding that movement is a language;
- speech-by-movement (use of the circle and spiral appears); art forms (including less obvious music and drama);
- the game continues;
- dramatic play proper and rhythm established (circle continues but properties abandoned);
- the development of seriousness.
According to Sue Jennings (1999), a play and drama therapist, the movement from projective playing with ‘things’ to dramatic playing through roles and characters indicates a child’s development of a conscience and an understanding of the outcomes of their actions. This comes at the same stage as the ability to talk to a toy and then reverse roles to become the toy. Jennings defined her own ‘early markers of life stages’ as:

- Embodiment: the physicality of play is predominant.
- Projection: the exploration of self in relation to other objects, especially toys.
- Roles: the taking on of role personally, not through toys or other objects.

Jennings’ ‘embodiment’ play deals with the child’s first experience of the world through looking, hearing, touching, smelling and feeling. It is from these first experiences that we gain a sense of self and our place in the physical world. By revisiting – as children do – these early experiences from time to time, sensory memories and forgotten ideas can be released.

Projective or symbolic play moves the child from the purely sensory into a pretend world. Here the child transforms everyday objects into other things from the ‘real’ world: a cardboard box becomes a boat, a chair becomes a bus and under the table becomes a house. Through replacing an object that exists at that moment with one that is absent the child is led into the notion of ‘as if’ – one object works ‘as if’ it were another. From this concept children become aware that objects can be given meaning – what Vygotsky referred to as ‘reality perception’ – and that the physical world has sense and significance.

Role play, as we have already discussed, is the extension of projected play. The player now takes on the role of another and plays ‘as if’ they were another. During this type of play children seem to perform what they already know. They will play the same scenario repeatedly, either by themselves or with others. It would appear that once freed from the constraints of the ‘real’ world, children are able to try out different combinations of behaviour. This type of play is characterized by the kinds of role children use.

There appear to be at least three discrete functions that roles satisfy: action, stereotypical character and fictional character. Children will engage in action play (driving a car, shopping, eating a meal etc.) where the human quality of the actor does not matter. When children have moved into stereotypical character play, we begin to see people as occupations: the builder, the policeman, the teacher etc.; whereas fictional characters take on names and some personality: the Big Bad Wolf, Jack and the Giant, television characters, etc.

These theories of ‘dramatic’ development take the view that the growth
of understanding is a natural evolution from one stage to another. They are not advocating a structured training model.

‘Play tutoring’

There have been several attempts to accelerate the development of children’s dramatic play by using forms of ‘play tutoring’. Brian Way (1967), a contemporary of Peter Slade, suggested the idea that dramatic understanding was developed through the seven ‘facets of personality’: concentration; the senses; imagination; physical self; speech; emotion; and intellect. This was described as a circle with ‘the person’ at its centre. Way was convinced that although there may be a difference in detail at each point of the circle, all people have these points and the potential to develop them. He saw play as an instinctive need of all people and his theory was based on the development of the individual through experience. Its emphasis was child-centred and private, and consisted of activity outside adult judgement of what was ‘good’ drama. Way rejected the influence of adult theatre and focused on the essential element of development in children – their ability to play.

Way’s theory developed into the practice of a series of developmental exercises devised for infants through to secondary pupils. His book *Development through Drama* was the handbook for these exercises and became widely used. Way’s theories would accord well with the goal notion of the new early years curriculum currently advocated, as he believed that children should move towards more complex activity the older they became.

The idea of play tutoring was also used by Smilansky (1968). Wagner (1998: 42) suggests that the idea for Smilansky’s teaching of ‘basic techniques’ and ‘the training of teachers’ to intervene came from her discovery that ‘children in extreme poverty do not engage in socio-dramatic play’. Smilansky’s thesis that socio-dramatic play was an important influence on children’s social, cognitive and language skills led her to develop several methods for increasing the amount and complexity of socio-dramatic play.

A four-variant method was devised by Smilansky and others that comprised:

- **Modelling**, in which a teacher or adult joined in the play, and which demonstrated to children how certain roles could be undertaken.
- **Verbal guidance**, which allowed ‘side-coaching’ where the adult would make comments and suggestions to help children develop their chosen roles but which would not become part of the drama.
- **Thematic-fantasy training**, in which children were encouraged to ‘act out’
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...well-known fairy stories and which gave the teacher a more structured procedure to follow, as the plot was known to all.

- Imaginative play training, in which children were given training in techniques which developed their make-believe skills. For example, children were encouraged to use puppets, or to practise facial expressions to present different emotions.

Other researchers replicated the training using a control group to discover whether such coaching is of benefit. It was clear that there was an improvement in the quality of the play among the coached groups, but it is inconclusive whether it was the increase in socio-dramatic play or the increased involvement of adults that brought about the enhancement in learning (Sylva et al. 1980; Smith et al. 1981).

Interestingly, the term ‘structured’ (or ‘well-planned’) play was used in Early Learning Goals (DfEE/QCA 1999a: 10) as the essence of good play: ‘Well-planned play, both indoors and outdoors, is a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge’. This would appear to indicate that the outcomes of play activity are predetermined. Although we would see dramatic play as structured, this would only apply to the process undertaken and not to the outcomes to be achieved.

Dramatic play in non-western culture

Both the observations of western psychologists and drama practitioners point to very strong evidence that there is a natural development in children’s fantasy play. This is not just confined to western cultures – play of this kind is found around the world. A study of symbolic play among Turkish preschool children found that such play had an influence on the emotional, social and cognitive development of children at preschool level. Muzeyyen Sevinc’s research (1999) indicated that symbolic play was instrumental in increasing children’s capacity to focus on perceptual information and representational experience. Her preliminary findings showed a change in the degree of complexity and content of actions and utterances as children developed. She also found that symbolic play was an important means of helping children express their emotions and internalize social values and behaviour.

Curry and Arnaud (1984) compared the play of children in five different North American indigenous cultures. Their study indicated some common themes acted out by children in all five cultures. These included domestic play (especially based on food and feeding), family relationships, the use of toys to represent physical and human environments,
medical scenarios and play involving aggressive and frightening happenings. Such socio-dramatic play can be observed in most classrooms and playgrounds worldwide.

The work of Australian social anthropologist L.R. Goldman is of special interest to drama practitioners. His study of the Huli children of Papua New Guinea shows that ‘pretend’ is a very strong feature of their play. He suggests that children ‘play society’ through their symbolic behaviour (Goldman 1998: 146). His study of children from Melanesia analyses the kinds of identity and role taken by the children in their play. He discovered that the imaginative routines of these children are heavily influenced by the strong adult tradition of the oral storytelling of myths, folk tales and legends.

The children seem to create their fantasy play on two levels: first as a ‘role player’ and second as ‘myth-maker’. In this culture there seems to be strong evidence of socio-dramatic play and thematic-fantasy play becoming intertwined, indicating the simultaneous application of both paradigmatic and narrative thinking. Western culture does not have a strong oral storytelling tradition and this could account for the fragmentation of the different kinds of fantasy play observed in our children.

Pretend play as a natural phenomenon

The theories and research projects given as examples in this chapter make it clear that we are dealing with a very strong natural phenomenon. This occurrence is not confined only to the affluent western cultures but is present in children’s behaviour throughout the world. It has become startlingly clear that ‘pretend’ activity is a natural and innate behaviour. In the adult world this form of ‘playing society’ (Furth and Kane 1992; Goldman 1998) will take place within the confines of a theatre or other purpose-built space. Here, special adults, called actors, perform pre-scripted texts and the spectators to the fiction sit in an environment of silence and darkness. The watching of television also requires an atmosphere of quietness and passivity.

By contrast, settings in which children work together are neither dark nor silent, and we must require our children to be active participants in the make-believe, not just passive audiences. It is essential that practitioners working in early years environments seriously consider the importance of children engaging in all types of fantasy play. Studies have shown that between the ages of 2 and 4, pretend play grows in complexity as children develop their roles and perspectives. It is unclear whether we can make the case for a causal relationship between socio-dramatic or thematic-fantasy
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play experience and the increase in children’s social and emotional skills. However, there appears to be a strong link between the ability to develop perspective-taking skills and the development of self and social competence.

Observing children at play

There is no doubt that watching children engaged in socio-dramatic play can tell us much about their emotional well-being. In the safety of pretend play, children will let us witness their fears and anxieties. Through engagement in thematic fantasy play, we have an even more powerful medium. By working with stories developed by children (interactive story-making), we help develop creative thinking and an understanding of emotional tensions and themes. We also allow children to understand the relationships of power, status and cultural rituals within their society. All types of fantasy play promote language and communication skills and appear to be important in the development of gender and cultural identity.

The development of pretend play – a word of caution

Booth (1994) warns that the transition from children’s pretend play into the more adventurous thematic-fantasy play should be approached carefully. He relates how his 4-year-old son moved from his more cautious and structured versions of fairy tales, where he wanted the adult to ‘stick to the story’, into his ability to improvise for himself. He explains, ‘only when he entered kindergarten did he begin to allow “what if...” to creep into the play’ (p. 24). As with other areas of development in young children, we need to be watchful and only introduce more adventurous approaches when we feel the children are ready.

Conclusion

Children need ‘pretend’ play not as a treat but as a right. We need to think carefully as to how good quality pretend play activities can be introduced into the classroom. We are required to meet the needs of all our children. When working with young children, we must be observant and mindful of careful intervention so that children can make sense of their different worlds in a secure and safe environment.
Summary

This chapter has examined:

• the innate qualities of pretend play;
• the theories of psychologists and drama practitioners;
• the world view;
• the difference in thinking skills required for different aspects of pretend play.