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# Dramatic Play Supports Children's Writing in Kindergarten and Grade One

by Shelley Stagg Peterson

Four-year old Aurora (all names are pseudonyms) is in the kitchen center in Shania's junior kindergarten classroom. She has set a plastic pizza on the table, and her peer is making what she calls a birthday cake with candles out of a peg toy. The pegs are birthday candles sitting on top of the cake. Aurora has one more thing to do before she is ready to serve food in her kitchen. She picks up a marker and very purposefully draws circles in a birthday candle pattern on a piece of paper. Then, Aurora draws a circle with dots on top of it to represent a pizza on a second piece of paper. She places the pizza sign next to the pizza and when her peer brings the pretend birthday cake, Aurora places the birthday cake sign on top of it. With her pizza and birthday cake and their accompanying signs in place, Aurora is now ready for hungry peers who want to be served in her kitchen.

Down the road from Shania's classroom in this northern Ontario community is Beth's first-grade classroom. Shania's and Beth's classrooms are in Cougar Creek First Nations, an Ojibwe community with a population of approximately 500 people in northern Ontario, Canada. People and goods travel to and from the community via winter roads and airplanes. English and Ojibwe are spoken in children's homes. Ojibwe is taught for half an hour each day, with English being the primary language of instruction. The newly-built school houses senior kindergarten through eighth grade. The junior kindergarten is in the old school at the other end of the community. Shania, the junior kindergarten and Aboriginal Head Start teacher, has lived in Cougar Creek throughout her life. This is her first year as a junior kindergarten teacher, though she has taught the Aboriginal Head Start program for 12 years. Beth, the first-grade teacher, has lived and taught in Cougar Creek for 10 years.



**Shelley Stagg Peterson**

It is early October and Beth has created a dramatic play center where children are employees of a sign-making company. Beth and other teachers in the school have contracts with the first-grade sign-making company for signs to label areas in the classroom. The children don their company badges and get down to their sign-making business when they visit this center. Their signs provide labels for the areas that they feel are important in the two classrooms. They even make a sign to label their teacher!

Shania and Beth are involved in an action research study with me (a university professor in Toronto who taught primary school in northern and central Alberta communities prior to becoming a professor) where we explore ways to support young children's writing and oral language through play. In this paper, I draw on examples of children's writing that Beth uploaded to our project website and that I videotaped while in Shania's classroom in October, 2014. I use the students' writing in the kitchen and sign-making play contexts, together with previous research, to make a case for dramatic play as an under-tapped context for supporting young children's writing and overall literacy learning. In an era of large-scale literacy tests, there is pressure on kindergarten and first-grade teachers to limit the teaching of writing to those skills that will be tested. In this article, I argue that the goal

of enhancing children's writing development can be more readily achieved when children are provided with open-ended, authentic writing contexts, such as those afforded in dramatic play. I conclude by suggesting ways to integrate this approach in Michigan classrooms.

## Why use Dramatic Play to Support Children's Writing

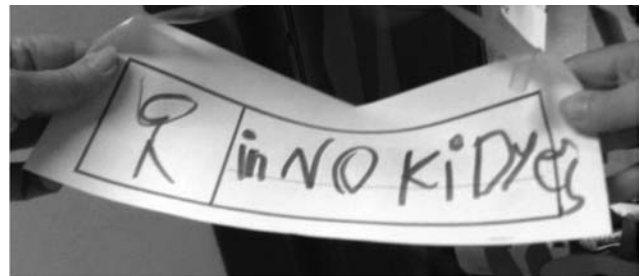
In dramatic play, children take up pretend roles as they interact with other children (Smilansky, 1968). Creating pretend situations and taking up roles within that situation involves the same kind of symbolic thinking that is involved in writing (Pellegrini & van Ryzin, 2009). Aurora engaged in symbolic thinking when she gave a peg toy new meaning—it became a birthday cake that she served in her kitchen. Her thinking was not tied to the concrete function of the peg toy. For the purpose of her kitchen play, the peg toy became something other than pegs inserted in a tray of holes, just as the marks on a page that we know as letters become something other than marks when they form written words that represent objects, things and ideas.

Beth and Shania frequently conduct shared and guided reading and writing activities. They also carry out whole-class and small-group lessons on forming letters of the alphabet and letter-sound relationships, but their writing instruction does not end there. Both teachers strive to provide meaningful contexts for children to apply what they are learning about print in formal writing lessons as well as in the read alouds, shared reading, and other print-based activities that are part of daily classroom activity. Dramatic play provides an authentic and motivational literacy context for children to explore what they can do with print (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2007).

In their dramatic play, children develop a sense of the meaningfulness of print—of what they can do with print in everyday life (Booth, 2005). Often,

children who may be reluctant to write in more formal classroom settings find it very satisfying to write in dramatic play contexts because written language helps them to achieve their own purposes. Beth observed that a boy in her classroom who had not shown enthusiasm for writing, for example, was an avid sign-maker who was self-motivated to make more and more signs.

The marks that children make on a page are a record not only of the hypotheses that they have made about print, but also of their cultural knowledge about human relationships and interactions, and how print can influence them (Rowe, 2009). In Beth's grade one classroom, for example, Treven's sign barring kindergartners demonstrates not only letter and phonics knowledge, but also cultural knowledge about the relationships between kindergartners and grade one students. Treven wrote the sign in early October when he was only a few months beyond being a kindergarten student himself. He used print to tease his next door neighbors in the kindergarten class—children with whom he played in school and in the wider community.



Writing instruction that includes dramatic play can be considered culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), as it provides space for children to bring their home and community cultural knowledge to their literacy learning experiences in the classroom. Teachers can avoid cultural essentialization of the diverse Indigenous peoples who live in Michigan and Ontario by presenting “accurate images of both the past and present” within children's local communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 965). This may include inviting

community members to demonstrate traditional community practices in class and to share stories and teachings that have been passed on through generations within their communities. It may also take the form of activities and objects within children's everyday lived experience, such as their celebration of birthdays with birthday cakes and the presence of labels on everyday objects. The traditional practices and teachings, as well as the everyday experiences, may later serve as themes for children's dramatic play. Additionally, teachers might ask community Elders for assistance in creating print materials (e.g., signs and labels) in the community's Indigenous language(s) for children to use in their play.

The sign-making and writing of labels for the food in the kitchen are a form of environmental print—labels and signs that are associated with products, stores and other businesses, or traffic signs (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2008). Because environmental print has a lot of contextual information surrounding it, (e.g., the LEGO label is on the box of LEGO blocks) and is everywhere in children's lives, it is a ready print form to support children's awareness of print. Additionally, environmental print is accessible to children of all socioeconomic backgrounds, and the disparities in children's print knowledge that often arise as a result of socioeconomic differences are not present when their environmental print knowledge is measured (Korat, 2005).

### **Why Encourage Children to Experiment with Print in their Dramatic Play**

Writing involves making marks on a page with intention. Children are engaged in early writing activity whenever they use dots, scribbles, lines, circles, and other shapes or draw pictures to communicate with others, perhaps to represent someone or something significant in their lives or to tell a story of something that has happened to them (Lancaster, 2007).

Although Aurora may not have been using the letters of the words for pizza and birthday cake in her writing, her representation of a pizza and cake show that she recognizes that written symbols carry meaning. Aurora uses her writing at the kitchen center to communicate information to peers who come to her kitchen. In this respect, Aurora is becoming a member of the "Graphicacy Club". Members of this club "absorb visual information and gain an understanding of graphical representations in their journeys towards the 'literacies' that are used in the communities in which they are growing up" (Anning, 2003, p.6).



If Aurora and Treven had simply copied words that were supplied by their teachers, they would have missed the opportunity to experiment with and learn more about symbolic representation on a page in order to communicate with others. Indeed, in their observations of young children's writing, Ferreiro & Teberosky (1982) found that when children copied letters, words and sentences, their literacy development was minimal because they did not have the opportunity to generate hypotheses about how print works. The children went through the physical process of forming letters that looked more or less like the teacher's model, but they did not have to think about how to create the letters, about how many and which sounds they heard, nor which letter or letters represented the sounds they heard, among many other hypotheses that children make when they create their own texts (Clay, 1975).

## Teaching Writing through Dramatic Play: Getting Started

In this section, I make suggestions for setting up dramatic play settings that address curriculum objectives while providing rich contexts for children's writing and learning about written language. My suggestions are grouped into two sections. The first is for teachers who already have dramatic play centers in their classrooms and want to capitalize on the writing possibilities in this setting. The second is for teachers who wish integrate dramatic play into writing instruction without taking wide detours from their current literacy instruction.

### Dramatic Play Centers

Teachers might introduce the writing possibilities in dramatic play centers by role-playing how they would use either real-life writing samples or samples that they have created of various possible texts in each setting. They would then leave writing tools, as well as paper cut in the shape of the various types of environmental print, at the center for children to use in creating their own texts. Children might create the environmental print texts before they initiate their dramatic play, or throughout their play time when they feel the texts are needed. Children could post the print in places they feel are appropriate, incorporate the texts into their dramatic play, or leave the texts to the side for another time. Dramatic play writing provides opportunities for creating a range of genres, including the opinion, informative/explanatory, and narrative texts identified in the *Michigan K-12 Standards English Language Arts* (Michigan Department of Education, 2010).

Here are a few examples of themes and types of texts for centers:

- a. kitchen center: labels on boxes and cans of food;
- b. restaurant center: menus and signs;
- c. post office center: letters, magazines, flyers, sign with business hours;

- d. grocery store: product labels, signs for the aisles (meat, dairy, produce, etc.), and cash register tapes;
- e. gas station: road maps, hours of operation, prices of various grades of gas, and product labels.

### Integrating Dramatic Play into Formal Writing Instruction

- Teachers who wish to take initial steps toward creating dramatic play settings to support children's writing might engage children in imaginative play by providing props (e.g., dress-up clothes, a table cloth that can be spread out for a picnic, a big box from which children can invent a setting). The play would provide content for children's journal writing.
- Teachers might create a writing task that involves writing in role, such as the sign-making context that Beth set up in her first-grade classroom, or perhaps a greeting card company where children write and draw messages for special occasions.

In summary, dramatic play has great potential to support young children's writing and overall literacy learning, particularly in non-mainstream communities. Both writing and dramatic play require symbolic thinking as children assign new meaning to written marks on a page when they write and to objects in their dramatic play. The marks are most meaningful when children create them using what they know about print, rather than by copying words that the teacher has written. Dramatic play provides a motivating and authentic context for children to write, furthering children's recognition that they can achieve their own purposes with print. Furthermore, dramatic play creates space for children to bring their cultural understandings from their lives outside school to their literacy learning in school.

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## Author Biography

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