

Sociodramatic Play as a Vehicle for Curriculum Integration in First Grade

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It is center time on Monday morning in first grade. Last week the children had selected *pet shop* as the theme for the dramatic play area. Displaying an empty birdcage, fishbowls, boxes, a cash register, a telephone and directory, and two clipboards complete with paper, I invite them to help me open the pet shop. Accepting my invitation, several children announce that we need a sign reading The Original Pet Shop. At my suggestion they decide to create cats, dogs, birds, fish, rabbits, and frogs out of construction paper, and they eagerly begin negotiating who will make the sign and the animals. I step back and observe the following exchange between Karen, Cathy, Conner, and Teresa:

Karen: We're gonna write it and then copy it onto here.

Cathy: [*Offering a paper*] Yeah, maybe you can write it down, and then you can write it here.

Karen: [*Looking at Teresa*] Are you gonna write it on the sign? I'll write *the* and then I'll write *pet shop*. [*After writing the words the and pet, Karen realizes that she needs some help with the word shop.*] Teresa, can you help me?

All children: Sh . . . sh . . . sh . . .

Conner: That's like *Shawna*, *s-h*. [*Spelling the digraph*]

All children: [*Reading together*] The Pet Shop.

Karen: Now we need to write *original*. Teresa, you write it right here. [*While Teresa writes, the children carefully sound out each syllable and offer their suggestions on how to write it.*]

The children in this vignette are preparing to engage in one of the most significant and enjoyable childhood activities, sociodramatic play—that is, dramatic enactments among two or more children (Trawick-Smith 1994). For centuries scholars like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Hill have promoted the value of play for young children's development (Seefeldt & Barbour 1998). More recently researchers have linked dramatic play to various aspects of cognitive development (Piaget 1962; Vygotsky 1966; Sutton-Smith 1967; Golomb & Cornelius 1977; Dever & Wishon 1995; Roskos et al. 1995; Isenberg & Jalongo 2001). In this scenario, for example, the children share their knowledge of writing as they create the word

shop. As they collectively provide the *sh* sound, Conner makes a connection to the name of a classmate, Shawna. The word *original* proves more challenging, and, as suggestions are offered, each syllable is slowly and carefully attacked.

Today high-quality early childhood programs provide many opportunities for children to engage in various kinds of play. Educational literature provides continuous support for a play curriculum in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and primary grade classrooms. However, despite evidence of the benefits of play, its value is not always recognized or appreciated as part of the curriculum in the primary grades (Trawick-Smith 1994; Stone 1995).

The current focus on a narrow academic curriculum and accountability for test scores often puts teachers on the defensive about play curricula. In response, a thoughtful teacher can illuminate the play-based nature of academic subjects by including hands-on science, math manipulatives, and writers' workshops in the curriculum (Isenberg & Jalongo 2001). In addition, teachers can invite parents and administrators into their classrooms to observe firsthand the many cognitive tasks children master through play (Greenberg 2000).

While many types of play can find their way into primary classrooms, the focus of this article is sociodramatic play. Sociodramatic play, as defined by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990), involves the verbal interaction of two or more children as they engage in imitative and make-believe play. The experiences of a group of first-graders described here, as they prepare for and engage in sociodramatic play, demonstrate the value of sociodramatic play as a vehicle for integrating the curriculum in a first-grade classroom.

Play as a curricular tool

Early childhood educators agree that young children learn best through active engagement with objects and people in their environment. In addition, integrating academic subjects enables teachers to make learning meaningful and better captures the interests of the learners (Bredenkamp & Copple 1997; Schickedanz et al. 1997). For example, during a unit on communities, children might use literacy skills to read, write, and talk about various community types. They might use drawing, measuring, and calculating to create maps of their community. Early childhood educators suggest that play provides a vehicle for achieving active, integrated learning experiences (Athey 1988; Schickedanz et al. 1997).

Vygotsky (1978) and other theorists postulate that oral and print literacy are fostered by play. Many scholars assert that play supports children's cognitive development as it provides opportunities to assimilate new stimuli (Johnson 1990; Isenberg & Jalongo 2001). Through play, children categorize and generalize new experiences, test and revise conceptual understandings, solve problems, engage in mental planning, think symbolically, and test hypotheses.

Oral and print literacy learning have been a major focus of research on play and cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), there is a developmental sequence in children's symbolic thinking that begins with oral language, is then demonstrated in symbolic play, and culminates in the ability to use written language. In other words, symbolic play is a

developmental precursor to reading and writing (Dever & Wishon 1995; Roskos et al. 1995; Stone 1995).

Christie affirms that play creates a pleasurable, low-risk environment in which mistakes are inconsequential and which, as a result, can serve a significant role in supporting literacy development. In low-risk atmospheres children are able to engage in emergent forms of reading and writing, peers can serve as tutors and collaborators, and adults can “further enrich play by providing materials and enabling children to engage in literacy activities that they could not do on their own” (1995, 6). Combining reading and writing with play supports children’s understandings of written language by allowing them to practice what they know as well as demonstrate and confirm what they are capable of doing (Roskos et al. 1995).

Adults’ roles in sociodramatic play

Adults play an important role in children’s sociodramatic play. They can assist children in extending their play themes and interests, enrich their language and plot development, and facilitate as children explore and practice literacy. However, deciding when and how to intervene can be challenging. Enz (1995) suggests a continuum of adult responses that support literacy in play, ranging from those of onlooker or stage manager to those of coplayer or play leader.

As Enz (1995) describes these roles, an onlooker applauds literacy attempts, praises discoveries, provides brief comments, and encourages continued play. Enz further suggests that this interaction style is most appropriate when children are very involved in sociodramatic play. The stage manager gathers materials, makes props, constructs costumes, organizes sets, and makes script suggestions. As a stage manager, the adult does not take a role or join in the play setting but can suggest many literacy activities.

Coplayers and play leaders take active roles in children’s sociodramatic play. A coplayer joins the play in progress, participating and interacting directly with the children. This provides opportunities for conversation and learning, while creating a setting for the adult to offer open-ended questions that can lead to self-discovery (Trawick-Smith 1994). The play leader also actively participates in the play, introducing new literacy ideas and plot conflicts. This is the most direct teaching style and has the greatest potential to enhance children’s language and literacy production (Enz 1995).

First-grade play curriculum

The experiences described here took place in a city school populated primarily by lower middle-class, European American families and located in the western United States. I began implementing a sociodramatic play curriculum in the winter of 1997. Functioning as a stage manager, I created prop boxes for carrying out various play themes. My intent was to provide a meaningful context in which the children could use their developing reading and writing skills to carry out various play themes. What I observed exceeded my expectations, as my first-graders demonstrated as much interest in and enthusiasm for creating the play environments as they did for playing in them. The potential for sociodramatic play as a vehicle for integrating academic disciplines in my first-grade classroom was apparent.

To illustrate the effectiveness of this approach, I have selected one of the themes we implemented— *card shop*.

Creating a card shop

When it was time for a new play environment, I invited interested participants to help me create a card shop. Together we looked at the contents of the prop box and discussed plans for creating the sociodramatic play area. The children then took on the responsibility of making signs, additional props, and items they deemed necessary to play card shop. I felt these tasks were within their capabilities, and I encouraged peer dialogue and use of developing reading, writing, and mathematical skills as they prepared the play environment. I introduced the idea of creating greeting cards for the shop, and each child created one.

The process of creating greeting cards spanned a four-day period, beginning with a discussion about different kinds of cards (birthday, friendship, love, wedding, holiday, thank you). Children eagerly shared their personal experiences giving and receiving greeting cards. As they created their cards, I encouraged them to write any message they desired. Cathy's friendship card said simply, *I like my friend to play with on a bad day. Thank you, friend*. Beth, who had recently attended a wedding, chose to create a wedding card.

Seeing the opportunity to integrate mathematical concepts, I suggested the students use patterns (symmetrical, nonsymmetrical, repeating) or tangrams to decorate their cards. Beth's birthday card (bottom of p. 60) was complete with tangrams, and Kenny included a pattern on his card (at right).

Next, I introduced the idea of pricing the cards by creating a pricing-guide sheet. For some children the task of pricing was more challenging, so I encouraged the children to assist each other. This led to a dialogue between Karen and Beth. When Beth was ready to price her card, she sought Karen's assistance in using the pricing guide. Since I had helped Karen price her cards, she felt quite confident and willing to help Beth.

Karen: Okay, let's see your paper. Here's a pencil. [*Looking at the first question on the pricing guide sheet*] Do you have patterns? [*Perusing the card, she decides there is no pattern.*] Oh no, you don't have patterns.

Beth: Wait, I do . . . blue, blue, brown. [*Describing her pattern*]

Karen: It has to go this way: blue, brown, blue, brown, blue, brown.

Beth: There can be two colors that are the same in a pattern . . . so it's blue, blue, brown. So I do [have a pattern].

Karen: Then you put *yes*. [*She points to the spot on the pricing guide where Beth is to indicate that she has a pattern.*]

Beth: How much is that?

Karen: Patterns are four cents. Write it on here. Okay. Do you have tangrams? No, so put *no*.

Beth: So that's zero cents, right?

Karen: No tangrams—yep—zero cents. Do you have symmetrical?

Beth: What's symmetrical?

Karen: It's when you cut something in half and the parts are the same.

Beth: Yep, I do.

Karen: Write *yes*. Symmetrical is five cents. *[At this point, I remind the girls that it costs five cents for each symmetrical object.]* Count by fives. *[Karen suggests]*

Beth: Five, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35 . . . So that's 35 cents. Okay, how many words do I have? Hey! I read that! *[Because each word is worth two cents, Beth counts them by twos, coming up with 12 cents. After writing one cent, she uses the calculator to add all of her numbers.]* Fifty-one cents!

While pricing Beth's card, the two girls engaged in a great deal of thinking, collaboration, oral and written language (expressive and receptive), and problem solving. First, they read the pricing sheet together. Then, each verbalized her personal understanding of what a pattern was, and together they concluded that Beth's greeting card included a pattern. When Beth did not understand the term *symmetrical*, Karen shared her knowledge of that mathematical concept in language that Beth understood. The activity provided a purpose for counting by fives and twos as well as calculating a two-digit addition problem. Finally, when Karen became involved with another student, Beth was quite pleased that she was able to read the pricing guide by herself.

The children engaged in the processes of reading, writing, calculating, cooperating, and dialoguing as they created and priced greeting cards. The dialogue often resulted in opportunities for peer teaching, as Beth and Karen showed.

After a sufficient number of cards had been created, it was time to turn our attention to opening the card shop. Interested children joined me in the dramatic play area to discuss preparations for officially opening the card shop. Beth suggested that we needed a sign saying Different Kinds of Cards for Special Occasions. Karen agreed but added, "We also need a sign that says The Card Shop." Karen and Beth took on the task of creating the needed signs.

I then posed the question, "What shall we do with all of our cards?" Shawna suggested that we "put smalls on the bottom and bigs on the top," referring to the shelves in our card shop. The group considered her recommendation and continued to brainstorm ways to organize the cards. I facilitated the discussion by asking the children to think about how cards are displayed in card shops in town. Cathy suggested that cards are displayed "by how they are made." Following that idea, Cathy and Shawna began reading each card and sorting them into three categories—love cards, birthday cards, and friendship cards. Meanwhile, Karen busied herself creating OPEN and CLOSED signs so customers would know whether they could enter the shop.

Engaging in sociodramatic play

It was now time to begin playing, and the children quickly negotiated their roles. Karen would be the "money girl," while Cathy would be the "store helper," assisting customers (Chad, Conner, Anne, and John) to find cards. Beth and Shawna decided not to be players; rather, Shawna planned to count customers as they entered the shop, and Beth wanted to continue making cards.

Cathy's posting of the OPEN sign came not a moment too soon, as several customers were waiting to enter. The customers walked into the card shop and were greeted by Cathy, the store helper. She asked, "What kind of card are you looking for?" With calculator in hand and a smile on her face, the store helper directed the customers to specific cards. She read aloud the messages on various cards, and informed the customers of the prices. Much time was taken to select the perfect card for a mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, or friend.

The customers came prepared to purchase their cards with play money or a credit card. Sitting by the cash register, Karen, the money girl, directed the customers to stand in line. She had paper on hand to make receipts. Following is an interaction between the customers and the money girl.

Conner: [*Setting dimes on the table*] Ten, 20, 30, 40 . . . There's 40 cents.

Karen: Thank you, and I'll give you your receipt. [*Grabbing a pencil and starting to write*]

Conner: I'm not going to take this back, so I don't need a receipt.

Karen: Okay. [*Looking at the next customer, John*] Mister, we're ready. Let's see how much the cards are. [*Looking at the cards*] Ten cents. [*While waiting for the 10 cents from John, she looks at Chad, who is fumbling through his wallet.*] Chad, you can use a credit card.

Chad: Oh yes, that's what I have. [*Hands her the card*]

Karen: This is Zion's Bank . . . no Zion's Bank. Just use that one but not yet. [*She receives the 10 cents from John and gives him a receipt.*] Chad, you need to get behind Anne 'cause the line's right there. [*Talking to Anne*] Okay, 30 cents, just count by threes.

Anne: How?

Karen: Okay. Just give me the money, and I'll count it. [*She tears a piece of paper, writes on it, and hands it to Anne*] It's a receipt. If you don't use the card, you can bring it back . . . and I'll give you your money back.

Once cards were purchased, many customers used the card shop writing area to inscribe a message to a special recipient. For example, Karen bought a card for Jeff, who was moving, and inscribed it with *I will miss you*. (She spelled each word conventionally except *miss*, which she spelled *mis*.) Conner carefully inscribed a message on a card for his dad.

Similar sociodramatic enactments continued, and the card shop remained busy until center time was over. Then, the OPEN sign was carefully taken down and replaced with the CLOSED sign.

Conclusion

Sociodramatic play experiences like these provide evidence of the value of play as part of a first-grade curriculum. Further, the illumination of the learning that takes place as children create play props is noteworthy. Preparing for and engaging in sociodramatic play provides a nonthreatening, child-centered environment where children teach, learn, and experience real-life roles. It provides a meaningful context in which children use their developing skills for authentic purposes.

The children in this case demonstrated their understandings of the nature and purpose of greeting cards as they prepared for and enacted the card shop theme. For example, Cathy was thinking about expressions of friendship when she wrote her card, and Beth assimilated the experience of attending a wedding. The decision to create and use OPEN and CLOSED signs provides further evidence of the children's understanding of how written text communicates a message.

Preparing for and carrying out sociodramatic play in the card shop provided a meaningful context for the children to practice their developing skills. Creating the cards required the children to think about the meaning of text and use their knowledge of the functions and conventions of print to write their messages. The store helper used reading to carry out her role as she worked to sell various kinds of cards to the customers. The children relied on mathematical skills to calculate the prices of their cards and carry out their sociodramatic play roles as customers, money girl, and other important players.

The social interaction inherent in sociodramatic play provided opportunities for the children to collaborate and even teach each other. They created props; they collaboratively solved problems like deciding what signs were needed, whether a card included a pattern, how the cards should be sorted, and how words should be spelled. Karen taught Beth how to read the pricing guide and how to recognize a symmetrical pattern, and she modeled counting by threes for Anne.

Functioning as an onlooker, stage manager, or play leader, I interjected my expertise into the children's sociodramatic play preparation and enactments. As an onlooker, I acknowledged and valued their reading, writing, and mathematical skills. I raised issues for them to think about, such as, What message do you wish to convey on your card? How should cards be sorted? How should the prices be determined? As a stage manager, I supplied some props to support their play. For example, I created a pricing guide for them and assisted them in using it. As a play leader, I introduced an idea to the children when I wrote a message after purchasing a card. After that, several children visited the writing area in the card shop to inscribe a meaningful message.

The sociodramatic play center has earned a prominent place in my first-grade classroom. I continue to use it as a curricular tool and advocate for its inclusion in other primary grade classrooms.

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