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Play tutoring in early childhood education

CAROLYN TAN

Introduction

The market value of a Singaporean kindergarten or preschool is generally reflected in a highly structured curriculum. Many parents favour preschools with an emphasis on workbooks and readers. Programmes with play and little direct instruction make them nervous. With a streaming examination in Primary Four, the preschool programme often offers a thrust for school readiness to anxious parents who want to ascertain that their children can make the grade. Cases of children held back a year in kindergarten ("Kindergartens should teach through play", 1988 and "Many parents say no to learning through play", 1993) only serve to heighten their anxiety and make them search out those preschools that focus on academic skills.

Play as developmentally appropriate practice

Educationists agree that a high academic focus is neither developmentally appropriate nor effective for preschool children. Such a curriculum has inappropriate expectations of young children immersed in paperwork of letters and numbers. Apart from getting ready to join the school system, young children have a number of developmental tasks to attain. One of the most important of these tasks is to understand themselves in relation to their families, peers and their social world. A crucial aspect of this cognitive process is the development of an awareness and understanding of others' perspectives (perspective-taking ability). The importance of perspective-taking ability lies in its role as a forerunner in the child's development of moral reasoning, communicative skills and other prosocial behaviour such as co-operation, empathy and altruism. Experts have suggested that what is appropriate is quality guided play which will allow children to think about and manipulate the natural environment as well as operate efficiently and effectively in their social world (Yawkey & Pellegrini, 1984; Sylva, 1990).



Fantasy play and play tutoring

The theoretical rationale behind play tutoring is to provide a suitable context for the child's development using teacher-guided play. The term implies that the teacher has to take an active part in facilitating and guiding the children in play. The particular forms of play tutoring which are typically linked with perspective-taking are sociodramatic play and thematic fantasy play. This paper proposes that thematic fantasy play tutoring is a more suitable approach for use in our local preschools.

The hallmark of fantasy play is that the child "pretends" and enacts the perceived roles of people other than himself. In a complex fantasy play situation, the child's play involves him in recognizing and organizing perspectives and attitudes of others whose role responses the child is producing in his play. The better a child is at playing a role in fantasy play, the better he becomes at recognizing and inferring the perspectives of others. With play as the platform of pretending to be another, the child gains a sense of his own identity (Fein, 1984) as well as a better understanding of the reactions, attitudes and emotions of others.

Smilansky's (1968) large scale research with Israeli preschoolers made a pertinent contribution to play research by pioneering the play tutoring method which used sociodramatic play (a particular form of fantasy play) to enrich preschoolers' play, and attempting to link its effects with social and cognitive gains. Another type of play training is thematic fantasy play which was developed by Eli Saltz and James Johnson (1974). It is often used because it is a natural (but play-oriented) extension of the traditional classroom story-telling procedure.

Like sociodramatic play, thematic fantasy play (TFP) involves "role play, social interaction, and both social and object representation" (Saltz & Brodie, 1982). The proponents of TFP apply a three-step sequence: Firstly, the teacher reads a fairy tale and discusses it with the children. Secondly the teacher assigns roles and facilitates the children's enactment of the story. Thirdly, the children exchange roles and re-enact the story several times. This procedure is spread over several sessions. Reenactment of the story follows the original plot closely, although memorization of lines is not essential. No props or costumes are used in thematic fantasy play.

Compared to Smilansky's (1968) sociodramatic play, thematic fantasy play is more structured in that the children are assigned specific roles and enactment has to follow the story plot. On the other hand, sociodramatic play involves the children in realistic and familiar themes such as a mother-and-child-at-home scene or a playing school scene. Play in this case is unplotted and the children are encouraged to enact these episodes by planning their own story lines and making up their own roles with the use of props.

A more critical difference between thematic fantasy play and sociodramatic play lies in the content of the themes. As opposed to the realistic and familiar themes in sociodramatic play, thematic fantasy play uses themes from fairy tales that are extremely remote from the children's personal experiences. This highlights the cognitive demands of thematic fantasy play. According to Saltz & Johnson (1974:p.624), "in thematic fantasy play, children are required to imagine and perform behaviours described to them in story narration which are never actually observed in real life ... Thus, thematic fantasy play demands more than what is usually meant by the imitative behaviour so central in sociodramatic play; it demands imagined behaviour." The rationale behind this argument is that the more abstract the play, the more it will allow the children to "free themselves from the control of the concrete present stimuli in the environment" (Vygotsky, 1966; cited in Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983) and therefore, the greater enhancement of representational skills.

Compared to sociodramatic play, thematic fantasy play is a simpler form which focuses on fantasy and role play. Research has shown that it is ideal for use in Singaporean preschool classrooms as it incorporates a more structured approach (Tan-Miam, 1992). Children and teachers who are familiar with a structured curriculum will find difficulty responding to Smilansky's less structured approach. The physical constraints of the classroom as well as the class size often creates management issues for the teacher if one is not accustomed to a less structured approach. Furthermore, thematic fantasy play can be a natural extension activity from the traditional story-telling procedure that is a common practice in local classrooms. The teacher would find thematic fantasy play easier to incorporate and implement within the classroom than sociodramatic play.

Implications

The incorporation of thematic fantasy play enhances social cognitive skills (see Tan-Niam, 1992) as well as provides for a more balanced curriculum that will grant opportunities for both structured academic as well as play activities. In thematic fantasy play, there is a revision of the teacher-learner relationship in the classroom i.e. the teacher structures the children's play by guiding the children in the reenactment of the fairy tale. As an extension of their story-telling sessions, there is the extended implication that other important areas are not neglected. The children enjoy the developmentally appropriate group play experiences which in turn results in the generation of more fantasy play during free play periods (see Tan-Niam, 1992).

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