

DRAMATIC PLAY

IN THE EARLY YEARS

Elizabeth Coffman

© Hawker Brownlow Education

Contents

Introduction: Learning through Play Experiences 5

- Once upon a Time 5
- The Value of Play 6
- A Partnership between Teacher and Learners 7
- A Focus on the Thinking Required for Co-construction 9
- A Reflection of the Reggio Emilia Approach 9
- Acknowledgments 9

Chapter 1: The Creative Process 10

- Before the *Aha* Moment 10
- Thinking Imaginatively 11
- Pausing to Reflect and Experiment 12
- Dramatic Play as Bodily Knowing 13
- The Creative Process at Work: Becoming Animals 13
- Your Role in the Creative Process 14
- How Dramatic Play Unfolds: Regaining the Castle 15

Chapter 2: Beginning Dramatic Play 18

- Working as a Whole Group 18
- The Willing Suspension of Disbelief 19
- Assessing Children's Commitment 20
- A Good Start for a Story 21
- Warming Up to Play Together: Strategies 22
- Where Comprehension, Meaning, and Insight Meet: The Pause 23
- Listening for Next Steps 24
- The Benefits of Pausing Dramatic Play 25
- Your Role in the Beginning of Play 26
- How Dramatic Play Unfolds: Children as Rainforest Creatures 27

Chapter 3: The Importance of Practice 29

- Working towards Focus and Control 30
- Physical Games and Activities to Promote Focus 31
- Drawing as an Exercise in Sustained Observation 33
- Side-Coaching 34
- Slow Motion Practice 36
- Your Role during Practice 36
- How Dramatic Play Unfolds: Practicing Their Way into Character 37

Chapter 4: Building Belief 41

Balancing Play Energy and Theatre Practice 41
Using Space to Help Suspend Disbelief 42
Using Narration to Cast a Spell 44
Using Rumors to Promote Imagining 44
Using Research to Provide Detail 45
Augmenting Understanding through Art 46
Building Belief through Use of Blank Paper 47
Writing in Role and First-Person Singular 48
Your Role in Building Belief 49
How Dramatic Play Unfolds: Building Belief within a Story 50

Chapter 5: Finding the Story 53

Walking with Words: Working with a Story Text 53
Staying inside the Story 55
Choosing a Story 55
Going Deeper: Experiencing Cinderella's Plight 56
Ways to Expand Understanding 57
Your Role within a Story 59
Improvising a Story 60
Prompting Improvisation: Strategies 61
How Dramatic Play Unfolds: Expanding the Story of Icarus 62

Chapter 6: Playing inside Curriculum 64

Establishing a Framework for Investigation 64
Getting into the Curriculum Story: Approaches 66
Finding the Story in Social Studies 68
Framing Historical Stories 70
A Framework Example: Leaving Home for a New Life 71
Experiencing History: Aboard *La Grande Hermine* 73
Finding the Story in Science 74
Exploring Living Things in Science: Becoming Butterflies 75
How Dramatic Play Unfolds: Addressing Drought 77

Chapter 7: Teacher in Role 79

What Is a Formal Role? 80
Planning for a Formal Role 80
Your Role as Teacher in a Formal Role 83
A Formal Role, Three Ways: Bully, Bystander, Bullied 84
What Is an Interactive Role? 85
Planning an Interactive Role 86
How Dramatic Play Unfolds: The Timid Triceratops 87

References 91

Introduction: Learning through Play Experiences

The Grade 1 students were learning about fairy tales. Having immersed the children in all of the classics, the classroom teacher wondered what the children had actually absorbed. Did they have a grasp of the common elements found in fairy tales? Were they aware of the human characters and animals that helped and hindered? She was also curious about the children's ability to play together to create their own fairy tale. What themes and characters might they create? How could dramatic play provide an assessment of what they had learned? The teacher was well aware of the risk of entering into a whole-class dramatic play experience without preplanning the story and acting it out as they usually did, but she wanted to take the experience further. She invited a dramatist with lots of play experience to partner with her so that she could observe and document the children's experiences.

Once upon a Time

The Fairy Tale

The dramatist showed the children four potentially magic symbols that she and the teacher had chosen ahead of time. The objects were a wand, a stone heart, a carved duck, and a feather. The children simply nodded in agreement that all of these items could be part of their story. The dramatist marvelled at their willingness to accept these as possibilities, while not knowing the story outcome. But how best to begin, she wondered . . . ?

Not having a beginning in mind is always an uncomfortable prospect for an adult, but trusting that children are capable of suggesting a beginning is an important element in dramatic play. Since the dramatist knew this, she simply asked how the students thought the story should begin. Suggestions followed until a child commented that they could play like they do at recess. Realizing that this was a perfect beginning that would include the whole class, the dramatist then took the next step. She asked the children for the first words of the story. With great enthusiasm, the whole class responded with "Once upon a time." So, with her best storytelling voice, she began:

"Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a village full of children who loved to play."

She stopped and asked the children to show her how they were playing and what they might play. There was no need to discuss. They knew instantly what this beginning scene in their story would look like. The dramatist then began

again, and this time the children responded, playing in small groups and pairs as if they were a well-rehearsed cast.

The children were, of course, noisy, which cued the dramatist for the next sentence. *“But the children were very noisy, and they knew that there was someone in their village who hated noisy children.”*

The dramatist stopped again, wondering what the children might suggest next. Would their play get out of control? Would they argue and want to take hero or villain roles? Could they make decisions together as a group along the way? When she asked them who might not like all the noise, however, she realized that the fairy-tale themes they had been studying had been thoroughly absorbed.

“The witch!” they cried in unison, pointing to their classroom teacher. Of course, it was the witch! Could it be anyone else?

The dramatist realized how capable these children were in telling this unknown story together. She asked the children which symbolic object the witch would find most useful. One child picked up the wand and handed it to the classroom teacher without a word. When asked what the teacher-witch would do with the wand, one boy cried out, “She will turn us into robots and lock us in the dungeon!”

And thus the story began . . .

The Value of Play

Beyond the Wand

Within their fairy tale, the children used all four symbolic objects. Later, when held in a dungeon, they chose the wooden duck to help them escape. “He can peck the bars loose.” When that failed, one child suggested that the duck (held by the dramatist) fly over to the snoring witch and steal a dangling key. Freed, the children raced away, but were asked to consider crossing a great river. This time they chose the feather, and one boy, feather in hand, flew each child across the water.

That left the stone heart. The dramatist asked the children what they might do with it. Without hesitation, one of them said, “The witch has lost her heart.”

They encircled the witch and as they passed the stone heart, each of them told her how her life would be better if she put back her heart. Moved by their appeals, the witch put back her heart, and the children cheered.

The fact that you have picked up this book on dramatic play suggests that you already sense the value of play in your classroom and are curious about how drama can enhance children’s learning experiences. Let us first note some research findings.

Much has been written about the value of play. Government documents, such as *Early Returns: Manitoba’s Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*, state clearly: “Play has intrinsic value far beyond a way to fill time. Play provides unlimited possibilities for learning and development” (Manitoba Child Care Program 2009, 6).

In the past, theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey began a new dialogue about childhood, learning, and the vital role of play in supporting a healthy child.

Vygotsky (1978, 74) argued that “[i]n play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play he is, as it were, a head above himself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his usual level.”

Experience is an important component of how we shape dramatic play. As Dewey (1938, 43–44) points out in *Experience and Education*: “In an experience, interaction occurs between an individual, objects, and other people. The experience becomes what it is because of this transaction between an individual and what constitutes his or her environment. The environment consists of whatever conditions (objects or people) interact with an individual’s internal personal needs, desires, capacities, and purposes that create the resulting experience.”

Many researchers in the twenty-first century have further developed the views of Vygotsky and Dewey. For example, a report by McCain, Mustard, and Shanker (2007, 49) states: “Play: expands intelligence, is a testing ground for language and reasoning, connecting to the challenges children face in school, such as literacy,

math, and science concepts, stimulates the imagination, encouraging creative problem solving, helps develop confidence, self-esteem, a sense of strengths and weaknesses, and a positive attitude toward learning, is a significant factor in brain and muscle development.” It is not difficult to uncover a wide range of insights, theories, and good reasons for keeping play alive in the early years classroom.

Dramatic play as a natural response

Dramatic play is a unique and powerful way for children and teachers to partner in an active investigation of stories, big ideas, and events. Some of the simple forms of dramatic play will be familiar to you. Children become playful, for example, in response to a story as you are reading it. They may bark at the mention of a dog or groan if a character in the story groans. You may also observe parts of the story being re-enacted when children are playing independently. Whether it is a whole-group response to a story, a re-enactment in the play area, or a play created by a small group of students on their own, it is inevitable that dramatic play will emerge in the early years classroom as a natural response to learning.

A Partnership between Teacher and Learners

As in any good story, dramatic play includes a structure, participants, a physical environment, and things that happen, but, unlike independent play, it is a distinct form: a partnership between teacher and learners. Dramatic play is not to be confused with theatre. There is no set script, lines to be memorized, or audience to watch and listen. Dramatic play does, however, borrow from children’s natural understanding of play and from the willing suspension of disbelief that we experience in all forms of effective theatre. Because dramatic play is about process rather than product or performance, the teacher is much involved in planning and playing with children in order to help them discover the complexities of the human journey and develop empathy towards others and themselves.

Most drama curricula state something like this: As students live through experiences of others in imagined situations, they learn to understand a variety of points of view and motives and to empathize with others. This exploration of the “as if” in roles and worlds will help students deepen their understanding of humanity and of issues of equity and social justice. Students will also learn to use language effectively to communicate a character’s emotional state and point of view.

It is in the transaction that dramatic play heightens the learning experience. We cannot expect children to fully comprehend unless they experience their learning in ways that deepen their understanding. This is why dramatic play is such a valuable approach for children. It is about living through an experience. It invites children to explore their learning from *inside* the story, whether the story is familiar, historical, leading into a science investigation, or based on children’s own experience. The difference between storytelling and dramatic play is in the children *becoming* the story, living the lives of the characters or animals, bumping up against the issues and tensions that the story brings into the foreground.

In *Story Drama*, David Booth (2005, 13) notes: “Drama may be one of the few language situations in school that opens up story possibilities, that allows spontaneous narrative to enter naturally into the flow of talk — every kind of story from personal experience to literary fictions — so that the narrative mode can be an integral part of the school curriculum.”

Staying alert to story possibilities

Dramatic play, like any good piece of theatre, is a story told. Because the story emerges from a variety of places, the teacher, in planning for dramatic play, stays alert to story possibilities offered by the children that can lead into complex ideas worth living through. The story is investigated collaboratively, with the teacher co-constructing the unfolding of the story as she listens to the children, initiating the central tensions to be explored, stopping and starting as the story develops to consider the next steps.

Like written stories or scripts, dramatic play will have characters (animal, human, or otherwise) and something exciting that happens. Characters have attitudes and conversations, and there may even be some narration of the events as they unfold. Scenes that bring shifts and changes will be created. Costumes and props may be required as well, although they are often ordinary blocks and classroom objects used to represent a variety of things.

Dramatic play can be further developed by the teacher by borrowing from the art of theatre: children can be helped to willingly suspend their disbelief as they explore inside the story. By being aware of and using some of the skills involved in drama, such as expressive use of voice, characterization, movement, stillness, concentration, and listening, children can become more expressive in their play. Most children understand the importance of voice and movement in interpreting characters. Monsters with heavy feet, arms reaching out, and a big voice come readily to mind, but staying in the story in a focused way and constructing its direction with others is often what proves to be difficult.

Dealing with unknown outcomes

Dramatic play in the learning environment can be particularly challenging for adults who often feel obligated to focus entirely on outcomes. In dramatic play the outcome is often not known ahead of time. The main features of the story may form parts of the dramatic story, but the details, content, and responses are the children's. This characteristic represents a shift from the teacher-directed classroom to a place in which children's ideas, theories, and voices are respected and central to the experience. The teacher is the one who is curious, who observes, who facilitates, and who partners with the children in their play experience.

Letting go of full control and focus on outcomes can be difficult, but the rewards far outweigh the struggle to do so. Once children have had an opportunity to play together and have learned some of the basic skills involved in dramatic play, the dynamic of the classroom shifts, new voices are heard, learning is motivated by enthusiasm, and deeper understanding emerges.

With a supportive environment and strategies in place, an educational culture of creativity can accommodate creative explorations where outcomes are largely unknown. This implies that parameters for learning experiences, designed for this environment, allow enough latitude for experimentation, idea generation, and potentially diverse outcomes. (Kelly and Leggo 2008, 31)

A Focus on the Thinking Required for Co-construction

Throughout this book, the focus is on the thinking essential for you to be a co-constructor with the children in dramatic play. You will be led from beginning steps to more challenging approaches, such as teacher in role. As you will see, however, the application approach in each chapter is really much more circular, with all of the ingredients in each chapter stirred together in every dramatic play event. In other words, the creative process is constantly at work, with efforts taken to practice each step of the way and to work towards the building of belief over and over again.

Author as Dramatist

In the story experiences presented, I refer to myself as “the dramatist,” as someone who brings a specific understanding of the blending of the elements of drama and of play to dramatic play experiences. The convention is meant to distinguish me from the teachers who welcomed me into their classrooms.

All seven chapters are organized in a step-by-step manner. Each chapter contains strategies; examples; an outline of your role; descriptions of dramatic play experiences, based on my own work with students; and a summary of key points. The accounts of dramatic play, which interweave through the chapters, will provide you with an authentic sense of the practice as experienced in an ordinary classroom with real children. In the book, I am also weaving in an image of the children I have encountered as competent, powerful storytellers.

A Reflection of the Reggio Emilia Approach

The image of children as “rich,” “strong,” and “powerful” is key to the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education that first developed in Italy more than 40 years ago. That understanding is also central to this book.

Carla Rinaldi, president of Reggio Children, was interviewed by Lella Gandini. She said: “The cornerstone of our experience, based on practice, theory, and research, is the image of the child as rich in resources, strong, and competent. The emphasis is placed on seeing the children as unique individuals with rights rather than simply needs. They have potential, plasticity, openness, the desire to grow, curiosity, a sense of wonder and the desire to relate to other people and to communicate” (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1998, 114).

My experience with children in dramatic play has taught me that children are capable, interested, curious, and wanting to make meaningful connections with the world around them. The dramatic play experiences I outline will, I hope, inspire you to create more lived-through experiences in your own classroom, knowing that children love to play and that when they play, their wisdom guides us to understand more clearly who they are as learners.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all the early years teachers who have invited me into their classrooms and let me play. In your classrooms, I have had the privilege of gaining a greater understanding of the beauty of children’s imaginations which, I hope, I have reflected in this book. I especially thank Beth Albers-Jones, who has provided many opportunities for me to play with her and her students over the years.