Developing literacy through symbolic play

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Abstract
This study examined the effects of symbolic play on children's emerging literacy. Benefits, as well as problems, associated with facilitating literacy through symbolic play were discussed. Guidelines for teachers on the successful use of symbolic play as a tool for literacy development were presented. Conclusions were drawn from the literature and recommendations made for the future facilitation of literacy-based play.
Developing Literacy through Symbolic Play

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

Play has always been a component of early childhood education programs. Friedrich Froebel, the nineteenth century German educator and founder of the original kindergarten, recognized the value of play and utilized it in his program. Froebel's kindergarten curriculum included manipulative materials called Gifts, craft activities called Occupations, and songs and games called Mother's Plays and Songs. Children were to manipulate the gifts according to teacher instructions and engage in the occupations in systematic, planned sequences. It was hoped that the materials and activities would help children discover spiritual meanings and abstract concepts. Although Froebel formulated his kindergarten methods by observing the natural play of children, free or unstructured types of play were absent in his curriculum (Morrison, 1988).

Maria Montessori also emphasized the manipulation of materials when she designed her early childhood program in the twentieth century. Her methods and materials were created to help children gain sensory awareness, organize their experiences, and practice life skills (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Like the Froebelian curriculum, the Montessori program consisted of manipulative activities carried out by children in prescribed ways with specific directions, thus removing the spontaneous elements of play. Despite the fact that both Froebel and Montessori used observations of children's play to develop their approaches, the activities in their programs would be regarded as work today (Saracho, 1991).

The Progressive movement, led by John Dewey in the early twentieth century, brought about the modern conception of children's play as a vehicle for development and learning. Dewey rejected Froebel's principles of learning and also the views of play rooted in colonial America. Opposed to the early colonial notions of play as a frivolous activity,
Dewey advocated children's natural play, engaged in for its own sake, and believed it should be nurtured in school environments. It was also during the Progressive Era that the importance of dramatic play for young children was recognized. The Progressive kindergarten and the modern nursery school viewed pretend play as a valuable educational medium. Dramatic play was a way for children to take on adult roles and share their understandings of the world with other children (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

The interest in dramatic play continued to increase after the Progressive period. It was not until the 1960s that the work of Jean Piaget and, more recently, Lev S. Vygotsky received attention in the United States. Their theories have provided the framework for much of the research on play, specifically symbolic play or pretense (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993).

In Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children construct knowledge through the simultaneous processes of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation occurs when children take in or integrate information into their current mental structures. When children are confronted with information that is inconsistent with their existing knowledge, they must change or accommodate their cognitive structures to accept this new information (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Adapted thought occurs when the opposing processes of assimilation and accommodation reach a state of equilibrium or balanced tension (Fein, 1979). According to Piaget (1962), "play is essentially assimilation, or the primacy of assimilation over accommodation" (p. 87). In symbolic play, children can make their scenarios adapt to their wishes, instead of changing or accommodating to them. Piaget concluded, through observations of his own children, that the activity of play is "... no longer an effort to learn, it is only a happy display of known actions" (p. 93).

Piaget viewed make-believe play as emerging spontaneously, between the ages of 2 and 7 years, when children become capable of symbolic thought (Berk, 1994). During pretense, children are empowered to detach meaning from real objects, situations, or people and use them symbolically to represent something else. A significant aspect of
Piaget's theory is his contention that children's play reflects a particular stage in their cognitive development. In short, changes in cognitive development lead to changes in play. Each category of play requires a certain level of intellectual sophistication. Symbolic abilities, therefore, emerge in the preoperational stage of development and enable the child to engage in pretense (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Piaget concluded, therefore, that because symbolic play was primarily assimilative, it allowed children to practice previously constructed knowledge rather than create new knowledge (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993).

Vygotsky (1967), on the other hand, considered make-believe play to be a "... leading source of development in the preschool years" (p. 6). He emphasized the relationship between representational play and learning with the following comments:

Play ... creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior. (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16)

Imaginative play, in Vygotsky's view, serves as a zone of proximal development or dynamic region where children move themselves forward to higher levels of functioning (Berk, 1994).

A major Vygotskian premise is that all higher forms of cognitive activity are constructed through social collaboration and within a sociocultural context. Dialogues with others during make-believe play are crucial to learning and development. Therefore, Vygotsky believed that adults and peers can provide scaffolding for young children, facilitating the elaboration of their play. Another central idea in Vygotsky's theory is that make-believe play helps children to separate meaning from objects and, in this way, prepares them for later abstract thinking (Berk, 1994). In pretense, "... thought is separated from objects because a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a
horse" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 12). When symbolic play first begins, around 18 months, objects must resemble what they stand for. But as children get older, their object substitutions become much more flexible (Berk, 1994).

Another early advocate of young children's social pretend play was Sara Smilansky. Smilansky (1968) tested some of the ideas basic to Vygotskian theory with an empirical study of the effects of sociodramatic play training on economically disadvantaged Israeli preschoolers. Teachers intervened in children's spontaneous pretend play to make comments and suggestions or to model and participate. Children were "... taught how to engage in and sustain sociodramatic play" (p. 100). The findings indicated that training in sociodramatic play improves the quality and amount of children's play.

Smilansky's study prompted an overwhelming interest in sociodramatic play and set the stage for further research on its effects (Williamson & Silvern, 1991). The study of play as a tool for developing literacy is a recent phenomenon. Research on the relationship between symbolic play and literacy dates back to the early 1970s. However, the majority of studies on this connection have appeared within the last 15 years (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of symbolic play on children's emerging literacy and to present guidelines for using symbolic play as a tool for literacy development. To accomplish this purpose, this paper will address the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of play?
2. What are the benefits of symbolic play to children's emerging literacy?
3. What are the problems associated with facilitating children's literacy through symbolic play?
4. What are the guidelines for teachers in facilitating children's literacy through symbolic play?
Need for the Study

Researchers, from a variety of disciplines, have recently shown an increased interest in the ways in which children become literate. They have raised questions pertaining to the very nature of literacy and have introduced psychological constructs to show how literacy emerges in children. Symbolic play and its value to children's literacy is currently under investigation (Pelligrini & Galda, 1993).

According to Schrader (1990), many teachers of young children limit time for symbolic play because they feel pressure from administrators and parents to use formal teaching methods and to concentrate on fragmented academic skills. They do not understand how play can be utilized in the classroom to facilitate learning in various subject areas and, in addition, do not know how to function within the contexts of children's play. More work in this area is needed to demonstrate ways in which symbolic play can function as a tool for teaching and learning reading and writing in early childhood.

Wing (1995), in a study of children's perceptions of their school activities, expressed her concerns with the following remarks:

Certain activities such as math, writing, and reading were always considered work. It may be that teachers' (and children's) concerns for progress in these areas limits the possibilities for ways to engage in playing, or it may be that the extraordinary effort these pursuits require from young children precludes playful aspects from entering into them. If so, are there not ways in which reading, writing, and math as well as sand, painting, and so on can be engaged in as play?

Teachers need to understand the differences between work and play and be educated on how to function effectively during play time, to guide children's literacy learning.

Limitations

The majority of the research examined for this study investigated the contributions of symbolic play to children's developing literacy. Although these studies are invaluable
for understanding specific aspects of symbolic play, many of them have tended to overlook the processes of adult-child interaction during literacy-related play. "Rich descriptions of adult facilitation of literacy in children's naturally occurring play are rare" (Roskos & Neuman, 1993, p. 79). This study is limited to literature that provides general information on the role of the teacher during symbolic play, rather than detailed, descriptive analyses of teacher behaviors.

Definitions

In the literature reviewed for this study, researchers used the term symbolic play synonymously with dramatic, pretend, make-believe, sociodramatic, and fantasy play. In this paper, symbolic play will include all of these terms. For the purposes of clarity and understanding, the following terms will be defined:

**Emergent Literacy**: "The 'natural' learning about reading and writing that occurs before children enter school and receive formal instruction" (Christie & Enz, 1992, p.205).

**Metaplay**: Metacommmunication about play in which children negotiate the collective symbols of make-believe to direct, sustain, and embellish the play (Fein, 1985).

**Play**: Activity that is voluntary, pleasurable, child-initiated (as opposed to teacher-directed), intrinsically motivated, active, process-oriented, and nonliteral (Wing, 1995; Fein, 1985; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987).

**Scaffolding**: Vygotskian term for "a changing quality of support over a teaching session, in which a more skilled partner adjusts the assistance he or she provides to fit the child's current level of performance" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 171).

**Symbolic Play**: A type of play in which "children use objects to stand for things other than themselves and engage in roles in imaginary and realistic ways" (Saracho, 1991, p. 93). After assuming their roles, children "play out scenarios that they create spontaneously" (p. 93).
Zone of Proximal Development: Vygotskian term for "the distance between what an individual can accomplish during independent problem solving and what he or she can accomplish with the help of an adult or more competent member of the culture" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 171).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Characteristics of Play

The word play is a vague term because it has been defined in many different ways by a variety of researchers. It is crucial to the understanding of this paper that some general criteria for play are identified. Many researchers have tried to define play behavior according to its features or characteristics.

A study by Wing (1995), which explored young children's perspectives of activities in their classrooms, was particularly engaging because the criteria for determining whether an activity constituted work or play came from the children themselves. For an activity to meet the young participants' criteria for play, it had to "be voluntary, without evaluation (either positive or negative), without a great deal of effort (as perceived by children), with minimal teacher direction, with the possibility for physical activity, and with options for quitting" (p. 243).

Fein (1985) also investigated perceptions of work and play by interviewing children, between the ages of 5 and 9 years. She found that children distinguished between work and play according to the locus of the decision to participate in the activity, the affective aspects, and the goal orientation. In their minds, work was obligatory and oriented toward external rewards, like good grades or money. In contrast, children recognized the voluntary nature and affective aspects of play, using the word fun in their descriptions. When persons were mentioned in the interviews, play activities were with peers and work activities were with adults.

Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) generated their own list of 5 play characteristics including nonliterality, intrinsic motivation, process over product, free choice, and positive affect. Their definition of play is any activity that possesses most of these 5 characteristics. Through examination of the above literature, it became apparent
that children recognize play and work as distinct, separate constructs and interpret
tivities in terms of shared criteria. In this study, play is understood to mean activity that
is voluntary, pleasurable, child-initiated (as opposed to teacher-directed), intrinsically
motivated, active, process-oriented, and nonliteral (Wing, 1995; Fein, 1985; Johnson,
Christie, & Yawkey, 1987).

Benefits of Symbolic Play to Emergent Literacy

Both theorists and researchers agree that symbolic play as a curricular tool is
age-specific, serving a developmental function during the preschool and kindergarten
years, with its influence decreasing as children move through the primary grades (Pelligrini
& Galda, 1993). The theories of Vygotsky (1967) and Piaget (1962), as well as the
empirical research of Williamson, Silvern, Taylor, Surbeck, and Kelley (in Williamson &
Silvern, 1991) concur on the ineffectiveness of symbolic play as a literacy strategy for
upper-primary children. Thus, the literacy-related benefits of symbolic play, highlighted in
this paper, pertain to children from approximately 18 months to age 7.

The studies of Williamson and Silvern (1992) and Pelligrini, Galda, Dresden, and
Cox (1991) found that the language accompanying peer interaction during symbolic play
was important for children's story comprehension. They referred to the oral language,
metacommunication, and conflict resolution, which take place within the context of a play
episode, as metaplay. For example, when a child says, "You be the dad and read", or
"You can't be the wolf, you're a pig", this child is out of character and communicating
about play. Pelligrini, Galda, Dresden, and Cox (1991) emphasized children's use of
linguistic verbs, such as say, read, write, during metaplay. Williamson and Silvern (1992)
underscored the value of metaplay to early literacy as the following remarks reveal:

Metaplay is used to "make the story happen" in coordination with the other players
and thus, is indicative of sophisticated social skills, such as social problem solving
and perspective taking, as well as knowledge of story schemes. The language used
by metaplayers is largely instrumental—that is, it is intended to move the story
along. The language of metaplayers is also social in that the other players must eventually acquiesce or negotiate, or the play cannot continue. (p. 90)

Both studies demonstrated the contribution of metaplay or metalanguage, within symbolic play contexts, to emerging reading and specifically, story comprehension.

While Williamson and Silvern research (1992) typify a Piagetian orientation, their findings, at first glance, seem to contradict Piaget's belief that play is assimilative and not adaptive. Their investigation was designed to extend a hypothesis provided by Rubin (1980) concerning Piaget's theory of play. Rubin argued that Piaget viewed the play episode, not play itself, as leading to cognitive and social development. He contended that it is the social interaction and conflict between players, which occur during frame breaks in the play scenario, that cause disequilibrium and serve an accommodative function. The data collected by Williamson and Silvern (1992) support Rubin's hypothesis by indicating two features of a play situation: pretend play, when the children are in character and metaplay, when the children are out of character but communicating about play.

According to the outcome measures, researchers concluded that play itself is primarily assimilative, while the metaplay aspect, on the other hand, is accommodative and is related to story comprehension.

In addition to demonstrating the contributions of metaplay to emergent reading, Pellegrini, Galda, Dresden, and Cox (1991) found that preschoolers' use of symbolic transformations in play (e.g., using a block to represent a phone or transforming oneself into a firefighter) predicted their emergent writing status one year later. This relationship between symbolic play and writing was discussed in terms of Vygotsky's theory, for this theory holds that early writing is rooted in symbolic play. According to Vygotsky (1967, 1978), children use similar representational processes in both symbolic play and writing. Make-believe play, which develops children's abilities to separate meaning from objects and actions, provides the basis for utilizing written symbols. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the sequenced progression from play, through drawing, to writing by concluding that "...
make-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language" (p. 116).

A number of studies have shown that the enrichment of play environments with literacy materials, along with teacher involvement to encourage children to incorporate the materials into their play, increases their engagement in literacy behaviors and develops their understandings of reading and writing (Christie & Enz, 1992; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Vukelich, 1994). Children's spontaneous literacy behaviors during play included reading (e.g., book browsing, pretend reading), writing (e.g., tracing, scribbling), and paper handling (e.g., sorting, shuffling). The three studies revealed that combining literacy materials intervention with teacher involvement in play was more effective in promoting literacy-related play than materials intervention alone. These researchers encouraged children's self-initiated dramatic play with peers and adults during classroom free-play periods, also in settings that they enriched with print and literacy items. Vukelich (1994) stressed the importance of creating symbolic play settings that reflect outside school environments (e.g., restaurants, offices, veterinary hospitals) and that contain literacy materials common to those settings in the world outside of school. She found that functional experiences with adults in print-enriched play settings influenced children's abilities to read environmental print and gave them opportunities to make print-meaning connections. Morrow and Rand (1991) observed children's purposeful literacy activity in dramatic play areas designed to represent veterinary hospitals, such as reading magazines in waiting rooms, writing out appointments, and filling out admission and prescription forms for sick animals.

Christie and Enz (1992) described the adult play interventions utilized in their study as either (a) remaining outside the play frame and suggesting how literacy materials could be incorporated into children's play episodes, or (b) taking a role in the episodes and modeling a relevant literacy behavior. Before intervening in symbolic play, teachers and research assistants would observe children to discover their current play interests, so that
the interventions would flow naturally into the children's scenarios. In addition to promoting literacy-related play through modeling and suggestions, teachers also indirectly made dramatic play a popular activity. Qualitative observations revealed that the group provided with literacy materials only, with no adult involvement, either lost interest in dramatic play or eventually resorted to rough-and-tumble play. Children in the group with literacy materials plus adult involvement, on the other hand, maintained their interest and excitement for dramatic play. Teacher guidance proved to be highly effective in encouraging children to incorporate literacy props into their play scenarios and to engage in meaningful literacy-related play.

Problems Associated with Facilitating Literacy through Symbolic Play

The lack of time for children to engage in self-chosen symbolic play is a common problem of early childhood programs. Teachers often have difficulty fitting lengthy play periods into their schedules because of the large amounts of time spent in structured academic activities. Children need adequate blocks of time for symbolic play in order to plan story lines, select roles, gather props, settle differences, carry out scenarios, and elaborate on themes. If children are constantly forced to stop and clean up because their play periods are too short, they may give up dramatic play in favor of simpler types of play (e.g. physical play) which fit into short periods (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Sutton-Smith (1990) voiced his concerns about the increasing elimination of children's playtime in American schools by stressing that, "we have in the meantime to worry about their opportunities to play together before we reach for the more difficult possibility of our being taught how to play with them" (p. 5).

In addition to time, space for play can be a problem in many early childhood settings. Preschools and kindergartens, at the very least, should have a space for constructive play (e.g. blocks) and a housekeeping area for dramatic play. Incorporating a theme center and changing it periodically to represent various places can increase and
enrich children's sociodramatic play (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Saracho (1991) recommended that classrooms be organized into well-defined activity centers, rather than large, open spaces, occupied with tables and chairs. This arrangement into partitioned areas or centers encourages small group interactions and social symbolic play.

Early childhood teachers have also experienced problems when trying to guide children's symbolic play to increase literacy learning. Sutton-Smith (1990) noted that we, as educators, could infect children's play with "our own didactic ludic bumbling" (p. 5). Supporting this view, Fein (1985) cautioned teachers that active adult involvement may easily overpower children's spontaneous symbolic play and turn it into work.

In our well-meaning adult enthusiasm to leave no corner of the child's world untouched, we may touch this world so thoroughly as to destroy that which we are seeking to nurture. We may turn play into its opposite, another adult-dominated sphere of activity. If play contributes to children's learning, it surely does not do so directly. Because play is embedded in the child's thinking and feeling, learning in play occurs on the player's terms. (p. 54)

The fear of disrupting children's symbolic play in order to facilitate literacy skills has caused many teachers to remain aloof from children's play and take a noninterfering approach during free play periods (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Fiese (1990) found that maternal intrusiveness, redirecting, and questioning -or the opposite-uninvolvement, resulted in toddlers engaging in immature, simple exploratory forms of play. In contrast, turn-taking and reciprocal interaction between mother and child led to more complex, symbolic forms of play. This study demonstrated the importance for adults to limit their control over the make-believe episode and allow children to take the lead.

Roskos and Neuman (1993) pointed out that playing with children to facilitate literacy places great demands on teachers' skills and requires complex behaviors. These behaviors include interpreting literacy in play in order to guide it toward more advanced levels, responding sensitively to children's make-believe themes, and developing flexible interaction patterns rather than rigid role scripts. Their study provided evidence that
teachers use multiple literacy-assisting roles and actively switch among them depending on the play situation. Descriptive observations revealed three types of literacy-assisting roles assumed by teachers: onlooker, player, and leader. The onlooker oversees and acknowledges children's literacy attempts, while remaining outside of the make-believe area. The player genuinely participates in children's literacy-related play in a reciprocal way, whereas, the leader deliberately structures children's play to stimulate literacy skills. Knowing when to assume each of these roles to facilitate literacy learning takes a great deal of teacher expertise. According to Schrader (1990), teachers, within the context of children's symbolic play, have to function spontaneously, flexibly, and creatively without using lesson plans. Furthermore, participating in fantasy play with children, as an equal partner, can be extremely exhausting for adults (Sutton-Smith, 1990). Playing with children to promote meaningful reading and writing experiences demands teacher skill, energy, and creativity.
CHAPTER 3
GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING LITERACY THROUGH SYMBOLIC PLAY

Developing Guidelines

Teachers are critical in promoting literacy learning during spontaneous, symbolic play. They act as catalysts to change simple, recreational pretense into high level, educational play. A set of guidelines for teachers is necessary because facilitating literacy during play, without overpowering the activity and turning it into work, is a difficult task requiring many skills. The following suggestions can be utilized by teachers to ensure the success of symbolic play in developing literacy.

Teachers should Create an Environment Conducive to Play

For children to gain the maximum benefits from symbolic play, it is extremely important for teachers to establish classroom atmospheres of mutual respect and cooperation. In "sociomoral atmospheres" teachers respect children, value their ideas, and strive to build communities of cooperation and fairness. They "... refrain from using their power unnecessarily in order to give children the opportunity to construct themselves gradually into personalities having self-confidence, respect for self and others, and active, inquiring, creative minds" (DeVries & Zan, 1994, p. 26). Children are empowered to take risks, solve problems, and think autonomously (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Symbolic play thrives in sociomoral classroom cultures because children feel ownership over their activities and are free to express themselves creatively.

Once this caring, cooperative atmosphere is in place, teachers need to set the stage for symbolic play by providing a literacy-rich physical environment. The addition of context-appropriate literacy props (e.g., for the restaurant setting: reservation books, menus, order pads, pencils, pens, open and closed signs, and play money) encourages children to play with print in meaningful and functional ways (Vukelich, 1994). Neuman
and Roskos offered three criteria for selecting literacy materials to be incorporated into symbolic play settings: "(a) appropriateness- the material is likely to be used naturally in children's play and is safe; (b) authenticity- it is a real item that might be found in children's environment; and (c) utility- the item serves a real function in everyday life" (in Christie & Enz, 1992, p. 212). The organized presentation of the literacy props makes the choices clear to children, allows for easy access and put away, and focuses their energies on play (Jones and Reynolds, 1992). Schickedanz (1986) suggested providing a skeleton setup and then adding print materials gradually to maintain children's interest in the dramatic play area. When literacy props are added a few at a time or in response to children's current interests, they are appreciated and utilized more fully. The creation of a print-enriched, play environment is the first step in supporting children's literacy-related play.

Teachers should Observe Children's Symbolic Play

Observation is essential to successful involvement in children's symbolic play. Paying attention to children's play enables teachers to practice taking a child's perspective. Through observation, teachers can try to gain answers to some of these questions: "What is happening for this child in this play? What is his agenda? Does he have the skills and materials he needs to accomplish his intent?" (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, p. 12). Much of the research on literacy and symbolic play has emphasized the importance of observing children at play to determine their current interests and intentions (Christie & Enz, 1992; Vukelich, 1994; Schrader, 1990; Roskos & Neuman, 1993). In these studies, a crucial part of the teacher intervention process involved pausing outside of the play frame to consider children's motives. By watching children play, teachers can base their interventions on the children's current needs and assume a role that is consistent with their scenarios. Teacher interventions without prior observations will most likely result in the disruption or distortion of children's play.
Roskos and Neuman (1993) demonstrated the tendency of teachers to take the role of onlooker while observing children's play. The teacher as onlooker watched children play, acknowledged their attempts at reading and writing, and occasionally queried them about their literacy-related play. The onlooker, however, did not participate or interfere in the children's play, but remained on the edge of their literacy in play. A teacher, while listening and watching from outside of the play frame, might suggest to children how literacy could be incorporated into their ongoing play episode (Christie & Enz, 1992). Observing symbolic play can give teachers important clues as to what children understand about the functions of literacy skills in specific contexts. "Children's language during play can be a window through which teachers see what children know" (Perlmutter & Laminack, 1993, p. 15).

Teachers should Get Involved in Children's Play

Vygotsky (1978) provided the theoretical support for teacher participation in children's symbolic play by contending that make-believe was a product of social collaboration. According to his theory, children can advance beyond their present levels of development when guided and stimulated by more experienced play partners. Vygotskian-based researchers, Bornstein, Haynes, O'Reilly, and Painter (1996), found that children who played with their mothers showed greater symbolic play sophistication than children who played alone, or with their peers. This finding suggests that active adult participation in symbolic play encourages and enhances children's representational competencies. In addition to expanded representational capacities, children also gain communicative conventions and social skills, all of which are important to early literacy (Berk, 1994). Teachers should help children engage in high-quality symbolic play so that it has a positive impact on their literacy development. "However, teachers must trust their judgment and not intervene if they feel they are intruding or if they are too tired or preoccupied to intervene effectively" (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987, p. 40).
Teachers become involved in children's spontaneous symbolic play in a variety of ways in order to facilitate literacy learning. In the player role, which was identified and described by Roskos and Neuman (1993), the teacher joins in an ongoing play episode, encourages children's self-expression through literacy, offers literacy materials in play, and dialogues with children about play matters. As a player, the teacher allows children to control the course of the play, but occasionally asks questions or makes comments in order to extend literacy development (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Perlmutter and Laminack (1993) gave the following examples to show how the teacher, within a symbolic play context, can focus children's attention on the functions of reading and writing:

In a participatory fashion, the teacher can lay bare the functions of print; 'I'm writing down what you want so I can show it to the cook.' 'I'll write down what medicine you need so you can give the prescription to the pharmacist at the drug store.' . . . 'This pamphlet will tell you what to feed your new baby.' (p. 16)

By becoming part of the action, teachers help children to make print-meaning connections and see the real functions of literacy. These examples, in which the teacher assumes a role in the play episode and models relevant literacy behaviors, are referred to by Schrader (1990) as extending types of adult involvement. Extending interaction styles were found to be much more effective in promoting literacy-related play than redirective intervention techniques in which teachers ignored children's intentions and introduced ideas unrelated to their current interests. When teachers are not directly invited to play by the children, Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) suggested that they enter the play by doing something playful that is consistent with the children's ongoing episode. Once inside children's imaginary world, teachers can subtly influence their symbolic play and oral language by asking for instructions, responding to children's actions, and modeling the use of literacy materials.

Inherent in the role of teacher as co-player is the danger of taking over and doing most of the work for the children, such as initiating interaction and solving problems.
(Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). In order to successfully facilitate emerging literacy skills, teachers must allow children to retain the lead and refrain from directing the action. When teachers try to replace children's play agendas with their own, the mutuality of adult-child interactions ceases and consequently, the play becomes work (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Occasionally, teachers need to take a more dominant literacy-assisting role in children's play by becoming a leader. In the leader's role the teacher demonstrates how to engage in sociodramatic play, deliberately models literacy behaviors, and makes literacy-related suggestions (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). Smilansky (1968) emphasized this more directive teacher role in her play training experiments. She found that children who were lacking play skills (e.g., role-playing, make-believe transformations, social interaction, verbal communication, or persistence) benefited from play tutoring and teacher modeling of new play behaviors. Beginning players, who have trouble taking initiative or who appear to be insecure, isolated, and at social risk, require special attention during playtime. As children's own abilities to sustain literacy-related play increase, the need for direct teacher intervention decreases. The teacher, then, is free to change from the more intrusive role of leader to the more equal role of player (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Teachers should use Conflict Resolution to Teach Children how to Mediate Conflicts during Symbolic Play

As a participant in play, the teacher is often called on to mediate disputes which are unavoidable in early childhood settings. Teacher mediation, in the form of questioning and modeling, helps children to acquire problem solving skills that they can utilize in future play. According to Rubin (1980), conflict resolution within the symbolic play context promotes children's social competence, which is an important factor in early literacy development. Williamson and Silvem (1992) viewed conflict resolution, occurring during breaks in the play episode, as a form of metaplay. Their research demonstrated
that the metacommunication utilized by children to resolve conflicts contributed to their emerging reading skills, particularly story comprehension. The teacher, by assuming the role of mediator, helps children negotiate with their peers to solve their problems and, in this way, encourages children to engage in higher levels of metaplay. Because metaplay is what makes the story happen, teacher mediation is critical in assisting children to resolve their conflicts and continue their play.

Teacher mediators get involved in children's play, not to manage behavior, but to find out more about children's play ideas, show them that their scripts are respected, and help them expand on their scenarios. By focusing attention on the content of the play episode, rather than on rule violation, the teacher shows respect for each child involved in the dispute. Skilled mediators ask genuine questions to help children notice the source of the problem and thus communicate effectively to solve it. Conflict is best mediated "in a power for mode, taking the children's script seriously as they [teachers] suggest alternatives for problem solving", as opposed to a power on mode, which "is used to domesticate, to help children learn how to behave" (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, p. 49). The teacher's goal as mediator is the development of children's oral language, social skills, and divergent thinking, all necessary precursors to later reading and writing. When choosing to get involved in children's play as either a player, leader, or mediator, teachers must remember to observe carefully first, and then assume the role most responsive to the current play situation.
CHAPTER 4
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The intent of this study was to explore the effects of symbolic play on children's emerging literacy and to present guidelines for using symbolic play as a context for literacy development. The paper addressed four questions to accomplish this purpose:

1. What are the characteristics of play?
2. What are the benefits of symbolic play to children's emerging literacy?
3. What are the problems associated with facilitating children's literacy through symbolic play?
4. What are the guidelines for teachers in facilitating children's literacy through symbolic play?

A common set of characteristics was identified to define play activities in contrast to work or non-play activities. Through extracting features frequently agreed upon by researchers, play was understood to mean any behavior that is voluntary, pleasurable, child-initiated, intrinsically motivated, active, process-oriented, and nonliteral (Wing, 1995; Fein, 1985; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). The specific focus of this study was symbolic or dramatic play, a category of play involving the symbolic representation of objects and experiences.

The value of symbolic play to children's emerging literacy has been affirmed by both theory and research. Piaget (1962) highlighted the importance of symbolic play in practicing representational thought, assimilating new information and consolidating it with prior experiences. Vygotsky (1967) stressed the crucial role of symbolic play with adults in promoting literacy development and the use of abstract thinking processes.

The studies of Williamson and Silvern (1992) and Pelligrini, Galda, Dresden, and Cox (1991) have shown that children's use of metaplay or metalanguage during symbolic
play with others contributed to their early reading, particularly story comprehension. In addition to demonstrating symbolic play's benefits to emerging reading, Pelligrini, Galda, Dresden, and Cox (1991) also found that preschoolers' use of symbolic transformations was a good predictor of early writing in kindergarten. Other studies have revealed that literacy-related props within play environments, along with teacher involvement to encourage children's use of the materials, increased children's reading and writing behaviors and facilitated literacy learning (Christie & Enz, 1992; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Vukelich, 1994).

Although researchers have pointed out symbolic play's numerous benefits, the use of symbolic play as a tool for literacy development is not without problems. Teachers must provide adequate blocks of time, well-defined spaces, and a variety of literacy materials for play. More importantly, teachers need the knowledge and skills to guide children's symbolic play to increase literacy. Well-meaning teachers, in an effort to scaffold children's learning, often overpower and disrupt children's spontaneous make-believe episodes, causing play to deteriorate into work.

This study determined that teachers need a set of guidelines to follow to achieve success in facilitating literacy through symbolic play. The first step is to create an environment conducive to play by establishing a "sociomoral atmosphere" of cooperation and mutual respect (DeVries & Zan, 1994, p. 26) and by providing context-appropriate literacy props to encourage reading and writing behaviors. Next, teachers should observe children at play to discover their needs, interests, and intentions. Prior observation is the key to successful teacher interventions. In addition to observing, teachers should get involved in children's play by assuming the roles of either co-player or leader, depending on the children's needs and current situation. Finally, teachers should guide children in mediating conflicts and solving problems during symbolic play. Conflict resolution, within symbolic play contexts, develops children's social competence, which is related to early literacy (Rubin, 1980; Williamson & Silvern, 1992).
Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Symbolic play is a valuable curricular tool for early literacy development.

2. Metaplay, which refers to children's use of language to reflect on language during symbolic play episodes, correlates positively with early reading and story comprehension.

3. The use of symbolic transformations during pretense is an important factor in early writing.

4. Teachers can facilitate children's natural literacy development within the context of symbolic play and without using formal instructional methods.

5. Teacher facilitation of children's literacy during symbolic play demands a broad knowledge base and a complex set of skills.

Recommendations

Based on a review of the literature, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Early childhood educators should provide time and space for spontaneous symbolic play.

2. Early childhood educators should enrich their dramatic play centers with literacy materials and involve themselves in symbolic play to encourage the incorporation of these materials.

3. Early childhood educators must limit their control and exercise flexibility when participating in children's symbolic play.

4. Teacher training programs are needed to provide educators with new knowledge and strategies concerning facilitation of literacy through symbolic play.

5. Further descriptive research is needed to understand the complex skills required to facilitate children's literacy-based play.
References


