

Symbolic Play and Emergent Literacy

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This paper addresses the role of symbolic play in emergent literacy. Symbolic play, along with deferred imitation and language, signals the development of representational thought. The key importance of representational thought is that the child now is able to represent objects and events symbolically. Both literacy and symbolic play require the ability to use words, gestures or mental images to represent actual objects, events or actions. The very nature of symbolic play (first-order symbolism) has an intimate relationship with reading and writing (second-order symbolism) in that children use similar representational mental processes in both. Vygotsky theorizes that symbolic play enables children to develop a variety of represented meanings that serve as a basis for successful literacy development..

As children emerge into literacy, many factors unfold. Of course, language is one of those obvious factors. However, symbolic play is an often-overlooked important scaffold to emerging literacy. The appearance of symbolic play is considered one of the most significant cognitive developments of the young child. Symbolic play, along with deferred imitation and language, signals the development of representational thought (Watson & Jackowitz, 1984; Weininger & Fitzgerald, 1988). The key importance of representational thought is that the child is now able to represent objects and events *symbolically*. Symbolic play is the assimilative process, which enables children to practice at symbolically representing objects and events” (Pellegrini, 1985, p. 80). With the advent of symbolic play, the child progresses through the play until it becomes more decontextualized. Object substitutions become more abstract, and the play becomes more social. The progression peaks during the preschool and early primary years and declines during the middle childhood years. This process provides an important source for literacy development. Both literacy and symbolic play require the “ability to use words, gestures or mental images to represent actual objects, events or actions” (Isenberg & Jacobs, 1983, p. 272). Symbolic play, from a relational standpoint, provides an important foundation for literacy development. The very nature of symbolic play (first order symbolism) has an intimate relationship with reading and writing (second-order symbolism) in that children use a similar representation mental process in both. Vygotsky theorizes that symbolic play enables children to develop a variety of represented meanings that serve as a basis for successful literacy development.

Three types of symbolic transformations were observed among mixed-age children who were scaffolding symbolic transformations for each other (Stone, 2007). The first type of symbolic transformation is *object transformations or substitutions* where a child imagines properties or gives identities to objects (Elder & Pederson, 1978; Jackowitz & Watson, 1980). For example, a book becomes a recipe book or a shawl becomes a superhero cape. The second transformation is *roles*: functional (organized by object or activity), relational (i.e., mother/child), character (i.e., fireman/Superman), and peripheral (not enacted – real or imaginary roles). For example, a child is designated “the baby” by another child in the playgroup, and the child assumes the role. The third symbolic transformation is *ideational* where

the child uses language, gestures or mental images (independent of objects) to create the fantasy. For example, a child transforms herself into Little Red Riding Hood and pretends to knock on a non-existent door to the “home” center.

Vygotsky (1976) envisions symbolic play as a way for children to practice symbolically representing objects and events. Children typically transform similar objects into the new transformation. A banana into a phone would be an example. Children then move to transforming dissimilar objects into the new transformations. For example, a pencil is changed into a claw of a monster. As time progresses, children become more sophisticated in their transformations, including transforming themselves into something else, and eventually they do not need objects at all and can transform into fantasy without the scaffold of any props. For example, a child can pretend to use a video game machine without any prop to assist in scaffolding the transformation.

As Vygotsky notes, children use a similar representation mental process in both symbolic play and in reading and writing. Play provides a context where children “get good at” first order symbolism through symbolic play. Children learn to move quickly representing objects for other objects and then representing objects with no objects at all. The symbols, while initially dependent on action and physical similarity for their development and expression, “become less dependent as the symbol becomes an internalized image” (Unger, Zelazo, Kearsley, & O’Leary, 1981, p. 187).

While the most significant contribution of symbolic play to literacy is symbolic representation, other features of symbolic play also offer strong support to the literacy base, namely meaning and language.

Meaning. First to be considered is how symbolic play helps children understand and make sense of their experiences. As a child assimilates the environment, he is able to reach accommodation and establish equilibrium. This process of assimilation is the major component of symbolic play. In literacy development, the child also must make sense out of reading, writing, and language. The very process of play (assimilation) is the basis for constructing one’s own reality –in other words, “making meaning”. As a child plays with his environment, he is able to abstract meaning from objects and represent them symbolically. As a child plays with language and letters, he is also able to abstract meaning from them and use them symbolically.

Language. As the same time a young child is making the dramatic moves to symbolic representation, he is also beginning to talk. Because oral language is a primary component of emergent literacy, it is important to establish the relationship of symbolic play and oral language development. Piaget views language and play as independent of one another in development and use, although both are expressive functions. However, Vygotsky perceives symbolic play as essential in the development of language. Even though language and symbolic play may be independent expressive functions, as viewed by Piaget, the ability for the child to use mental symbols for representation appears in both. Symbolic play functions in the role of creating the circumstances where symbolic representation is a verbal expression of the symbolic representation.

The development of language begins with *imitation*. A child may say “chair” without attributing meaning to the word. Similarly, a child may progress through imitation of an action to deferred imitation where the action is represented internally and played back at a later time. In symbolic play, the child uses assimilation to practice representing objects or events symbolically. The meaning of the object is severed from the object itself with the use of a “pivot” (Vygotsky, 1976). Representation occurs when sensorimotor assimilation becomes mental assimilation

through differentiation between the signifier and the signified (Piaget, 1976). Symbolic representation, then, is the ability to use mental symbols to represent objects and events. In respect to language, words are symbolic representations of objects and events. From Vygotsky's viewpoint, symbolic play is essential to the development of language because it provides the means for the development of representational thought. The child is able to use the word "chair" as a symbol for the object and can do so with meaning attached. Vygotsky's theoretical viewpoint expresses that the child's first words are perceived by the child as a property of the object rather than a symbol. "Symbolic play is the behavioral mechanism that precipitates the transition from "things as objects of actions" to "things as objects of thought" (Fein, 1979, p. 4).

Pellegrini (1985a) observed the play of preschoolers and found that the children used language to assign imaginary properties or identities to the objects whereas in ideational transformations, the children used language to create fantasies that were independent of the objects. Elements of literate language were recorded. Some of these elements were endophora, elaborated noun phrases, conjunctions and verbs, Endophora measure the speaker's "linguistic rendering of meaning" (p. 90). High incidences of endophora occurred with highly abstract play transformations. The children used explicit language such as endophora to encode the transformations. "How about you being the moving man" is an example of an endophoric reference, defining a playmate's role in the play episode. This resolved the ambiguity of which role the child would take in play. In symbolic play, children use explicit language to avoid ambiguity. Stone (2007) found that mixed-age children scaffold for each other with experts leading novices into play transformations most often through language.

Copple, Cocking, and Matthews (1984) discovered in their research of cognitive activity in symbolic play that as a child bridges the gap as to what an object would be like and what is at hand, he uses oral language. For example, he may say, "This will be my phone. Pretend it has a dial. Pretend it's black like a phone." the verbalizations not only illustrated the "children's awareness of their own evaluation processes in selecting objects for symbolic use" (p. 110), but demonstrated more advanced language schemas to describe the objects for play. Unlike endophora, elaborated noun phrases were used in both object and ideational transformation. The language of early literacy and make-believe play (symbolic play) are similar. In fact, make-believe play enhances the language necessary for early literacy (endophora, linguistic verbs, temporal conjunctions). "Symbolic play seems to be an important context for the development of this form of language" (Pellegrini & Galda, 1990, p. 86).

Another aspect of literate behavior is the production and comprehension of *decontextualized* language. "Children's object substitutions during symbolic play become more abstract as their play becomes decontextualized" (Pellegrini, 1985b, p. 108). Decontextualized language conveys meaning independent of the context. It displays meaning by the linguistic elements within the text. Evans (1985) defines decontextualization as the "gradual separation of language from environment and activity on which it is based and necessity of expressing one's meaning unambiguously with words" (p. 31). Children use decontextualized language in both symbolic play and literate behavior. Pellegrini (1980), in examining the relationship between language and play, found a significant effect of dramatic play on language achievement. Dramatic play requires that the child use symbolic thought, and the child uses language (a symbolic medium) to create the fantasy play. "Symbolic play modes required children to be conscious of the process by which they defined and interpreted symbols" (p. 534).

Corrigan (1982), in his study of young children (ages 22-28 months), found that children's language development was similar to their development in pretending. Children who

exhibited play behaviors without symbolic substitution produced either no language or only a single component. However, children who used a single symbolic substitution produced a single component sentence, or the prototypical sentence (Mommy holds the baby). Play with two symbolic substitutions was most likely to “produce nonprototypical language requiring two or three animate or inanimate components” (p. 13351) (The mommy is giving daddy the baby – three animate components; the car hit the truck on the road – three inanimate components).

For both Piaget and Vygotsky, language can function as a medium of “making sense” to one’s self as well as to others. Bohannon and Warren-Leubecker (1989) agree with Piaget that the basic nature of language as a symbolic system is for “the expression of intention or meaning” (p. 181). However, without symbolic representation, the sense making would be impossible with or without language. Without symbolic play, the child would be limited to the sensorimotor period interacting with objects but unable to symbolize them. Because symbolic play occurs before language, “play is the primary vehicle for the expression of thought” (Athey, 1974, p. 37). Cognitively, the knowledge is not in the symbols, but rather the knowledge capacity produces the symbols.

Symbolic representation, through symbolic play, is the enabling factor for language to represent objects and actions. Language, then becomes a tool for emerging literacy development.

Vygotsky maintains that children’s first-order symbolism is play and drawings, whereas second-order symbolism is writing. Children represent the meaning of objects and events through the use of symbolic play and children also represent the meaning of objects and events through the use of the symbols of drawing. A block stands for (represents) a car. A drawing of a car stands for the car. Both representations are symbols. From this framework, Dyson (1983) suggests that children must represent their ideas in oral language before they can encode them into written language. The necessity for language as an intermediate step will gradually disappear. Written language will then directly represent the meaning. Dyson’s (1983) finds concur with Vygotsky’s theory:

Children must discover that one cannot only draw things, but also speech-writing must be liberated from its association with concrete referents. In order to do this, children must become aware of spoken language as a separate structure, free from its embeddedness in events. (p. 20)

Children must be aware that writing and reading is “talk” written down. We can view the process of development of written language as one which leads from oral language through symbolic play to written language” (Schrader, 1990, p. 81).

Decoding and encoding written language requires symbolization. The process for assigning meaning to symbols in dramatic play is the same for assigning meaning to letters. Sulzby’s (1986) emergent writing components denote a continuum of symbolization that begins with drawing (first-order symbolization) and expands to conventional writing (second-order symbolization).

The child’s first writing, as present by Goodman (1984), are symbols directly representing the objects or actions. The child wrote the letter “J” very large to represent “Dad”. The letter did not represent the sounds, but the object (Dad). The letter stood for (represented) Dad.

As Piaget presents, “play is the primary medium of thought.” Symbolic play has paved the way for representational thought to appear in other forms such as writing. In functional and constructive play, the child acquires meaning by sensorimotor activity with his environment.

The meaning of the object/event is fused with the object or event., Mary Clay (1975) describes repetitive play with letters that mimic sensorimotor play with objects. For example, children repeat letters (recurring principle) and construct all the forms they know how to make (inventory principle). This exploratory play with letters is the beginning of creating meaning (constructing patterns). Each graphic construction leads to a successive construction. “The child is intrigued perceptually and begins to classify what is seen by repeating it. At first it is done out of mastery pleasure – ‘assimilation’. Later, it is done to understand the pattern – ‘accommodation’” (Zervigon-Hakes, 1984, p. 43).

Similarly, the initial process of symbols/letters as a representational system must be tied (fused) to the object for meaning before the meaning can be severed from the object in order to appear in representational form. This is also exemplified in how children will use only one grapheme to represent each object in a picture – a sign for each picture. The sign belongs to the picture. Then the child enters what Ferreiro (1984) calls the “moment of passage.” The child goes from using letter-graphemes where the letters were just letters and did not “say anything” to letter-substitute objects where the letters “say something.” They symbolically represent an object/event. As substitute objects, the letters hold the meaning. Again, without representational thought initiated by symbolic play, this process would not be possible.

In the beginning, a letter (any letter) represents the object. When the letter has meaning as a substitute object, the child moves to representing the word for the object, instead of representing the object itself. This is what Vygotsky refers to as “second-order symbolism” (written language that refers to oral language). The child must be able to represent ideas in oral language before they can be encoded into written language. The child begins by representing each syllable of a word with one letter (any letter) (Ferreiro, 1984). As the child acquires symbol-sound relationships, he begins to choose his letters by sound for syllable representation. He then moves from one graph per syllable to representing several phonemes in each syllable. The final stage is “full invented spelling” (Stone, 1996; Sulzby, 1986).

Dyson (1983) suggests that a child’s first representation writing serves to label (organize) their world. this early writing would suggest first-order symbolization. Early writing has signifiers (word “ball”) representing the object “ball” just as in symbolic transformations. At first, written words represent objects, not oral words. Talk surrounding this early writing is important for giving the labels meaning.

Wolfgang and Sanders (1981) see both Piaget and Vygotsky theoretically demonstrating that the use of symbols in play by young children (preoperational period) provides the foundational ability used in representation that will be needed later when using the higher abstract form that we know as signs or the written word” (p. 117).

On a literacy continuum, a child must progress through the early stages of symbolic play, attaining representational thought, to the other end of the continuum – reading. Play provided the means for the child to progress through the stages of representational development necessary for literacy.

Isenberg and Jacob (1983) propose that symbolic play fosters literacy development by providing an 1) “opportunity for children to use representational skills that serve as a basis for representation in literacy . . .” and by 2) providing “a safe environment in which children can practice the skills and social behaviors associated with literacy activities” (p. 272). Stone (2007) also suggest that symbolic play fosters literacy development by 3) creating a context for social interaction where children scaffold for and engage each other in a variety of play transformations.

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