

Jolanta Sajdera
Preschool and Early Education Institute
Pedagogical University of Cracow
jsajdera@ap.krakow.pl

Let's pretend !

The educational worth of pretend-playing

The pre-school age is called the period of imagination development. On one hand the child moves easily from the real world to the world of fiction, on the other hand she/he finds it difficult to predict the changes of the real objects. The expression by means of body movements is a form of externalizing child's internal representation of reality. At pretend-playing the child can improve its skill to "translate" external information into motor reactions, it creates its own "movement dictionary" (Sherborne 1997).

The world of child's imagination can be easily seen especially at theme play, when children take up "pretend" activities and use substitute objects. Scholars specializing in children games refer to them as fictional (Buhler 1993), creative (Rudik 1950), illusionary (Hurlock 1985). The roles adopted by children at play are based on the imitation of other people's behavior, on acting out fairy tales or television characters. Words replace the actual course of action. Toys become an indispensable attribute which, depending on the play topic, change their meaning turning into symbols. John Flavell (1993) refers to this phenomenon as the emergence of child's first metaphors. He draws our attention to the process of gradual acquisition of symbols taking place at play, when a child becomes aware that one thing is a symbol of some other thing and starts to use it both as a real object and a symbol of something else.

In case of small children early manifestation of movement representations takes the form of deferred imitative schemata. In represented real life situations (e.g. putting a doll into sleep) not only stereotypical imitative movements may be observed but fictional elements as well (Przetacznik-Gierowska 1993). At preschool age „movement lavishness” (synkinesis) diminishes, movement habit absorption enables a child to control its body and to combine movements into sequences. As it was stated by Piaget (1996), children at the stage of preoperational thinking encounter difficulties when presenting movement mental images. It mostly refers to children up to the age of five, whose symmetric movements dominate free ones, and in case of whom there is a clear difference between simultaneous imitations and images- the movement copies. According to Piaget a breakthrough moment takes place at the age of six.. Then children's play activities are capable of complete sequence reproduction of the events. A child willingly reproduces previously observed real world objects, surprising adults with its precision of such reproductions. Movement compositions usually have a form of rhythmic movements stimulated by music.

Method

In my research¹ I have focused on the social context of image manifestation in various forms of child's activity. This paper discusses movement representations of a well known object in an enactive mode of representation in case of six year old children, during the "I am a cook" game. The game was proposed to children by an adult by saying:

Think for a while about your dad's job. Do not tell me what he does, try to show it and I will guess.

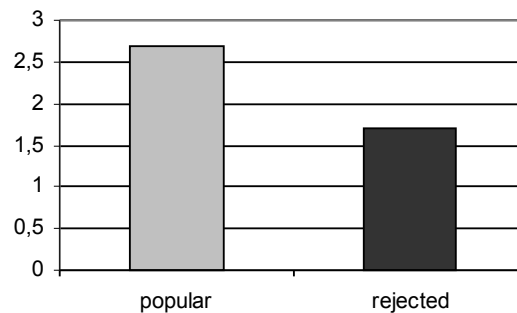
After the completion of the task another instruction followed: *And if your dad were a cook, how would you show it?*

A majority of children from both sample groups carried out the instruction. The average frequency of movements in both groups can be found in table 1 and chart 1.

Table 1 An average number of movements performed during a "cook" task.

Sample groups	N	Number of movements	X	Max	Min
Rejected	44	73	1,65	5	0
Popular	30	81	2,7	8	0
Razem	74	154	2,08	8	0

Chart 1 An average number of movements performed at "A Cook" play.



$p < 0,01$

The difference shown in chart 1 proved statistically valid, therefore it might be said that the bigger popularity, the bigger the number of the object movements performed in a form of the enactive representation.

Following the instruction children presented the object movement activity in a sequence of consecutive movements or presented a single action or a number of disconnected actions². The table below (Table2) shows the differences in the organization of the movements existing between the sample groups. Popular children more frequently used complex sequences. The reconstructed activities performed by the "cook" maintained the original order. The sequence included for example: mixing, putting into an oven, taking out of an oven, serving.

¹The poster presents the results of a part of research project on 6 years old preschoolers. They worked on 15 imagery tasks based on Piaget-Inhalder's and Bruner's conceptions. The tasks involved generating reproductory and anticipatory images in a movement mode of representation.

² The criteria were based on the object (in this case „cook") definition found in dictionaries of synonymus and family resemblances

Table 2. The strategies of the reproduction of kinetic mental images during “I am cook” game

Movement sequence structure	Popular		Rejected		χ^2	P	Df
	N	%	N	%			
Simple activity	8	27	18	41	1,587	ni	Ni
Seperate activities	0	0	2	4,5	1,401	ni	Ni
Complex sequence	19	63	18	41	3,587	0,05	1

No substantial difference was found between the number of movements included in one sequence. In case of popular children a single sequence comprised between 2 and 8 movements and in case of rejected children between 2 and 6. Both groups presented about 19 different types of actions (Table3), and the action of mixing, used by both groups with the same frequency, acquired the status of a stereotyped one. Therefore it could be recognized as a motor symbol of “being a cook” script.

Table 3. Kinds of activity acted out by children in “I’m a cook”-game

Lp.	A cook’s activity (the structure of “to be a cook” category”)	Child’s activities
1.	Preparing for cooking	It rubs hand against hand- pretending to strike a match.
2.		It turns its hand in front of itself- pretending to turn on the gas,
3.	High temperature maintaining	It holds out one hand, keeps fingers together and raises its hand- pretending to pick a lid up,
4.	Meal making	It makes with its hand short moves- pretending to chop some food item,
5.		It hits its shoulder with one hand, than holds its hand out- pretending to add an egg into a bowl,
6.	A cook bustles about an oven	It turns around pretending to perform a few activities in several places,
7.	A cook clenches a ladle like a scepter	It clenches its fist and makes a circular move- pretending to mix,
8.	Taste seasoning	It holds out one hand and rubs fingers- pretending to add some spice to food,
9.		It holds out one hand, next moves it near his mouth- pretending to taste
10.	Putting a pot on	It draws its hands aside- pretending to put a pot on a cooker,
11.	Backing in an oven	It crouches and holds out its hands and inserting and removing sth. from “an oven”,
12.	Frying on a frying pan	It holds out one hand- pretending to keep a frying pan or/and throws up “pancakes”,
13.	Serving meals	It holds out one hand- pretending to pour same soup in a bowl or to place food on a plate,
14.	Grating	It makes with its fist short moves up and down- pretending to grate,
15.	Beating down	It makes with its fist short moves with its wrist- pretending to beat sth. down,
16.	Grinding	It makes a circular vertical move with its hand- pretending to grind,
17.	Rolling	It uses both hands pushing “a roll” forth and back
18.	Kneading	It clenches its hands- pretending to press “dough” continuously
19.	Finishing work	It wipes its hands and/or strokes its stomach.

As most of the enacted activities required the application of some tool (e.g. a spoon, a frying-pan, a lid) the way in which a child replaced a given object while performing an activity was observed. All the popular children who undertook the task represented the objects symbolically, imitating the act of holding them in hand. Most of the rejected/isolated children did the same. However there were two children who substituted an object with a body part (e.g. performed the act of mixing using their finger) and two who used another object (e.g. a sheet of paper representing a frying-pan).

No relation was noticed between a socio-metric status and the number of verbal messages used at play. Some children first came up with a verbal answer “ *I am cooking*” and next showed the activity. Some other described a performed activity “ *He cooked and served the soup*” , and one popular child first performed the act and next provided a verbal description, as if to help the researcher get a clear picture.

Discussion

Pretend games are spontaneously undertaken by children and also often used by a preschool teacher. The results of the presented research emphasize their enormous diagnostic value, with regard to child’s social as well as cognitive skills. According to the acquired results, popular children are much more skilful at managing movement images, which is manifested not only by the number of the generated images but also by their complex sequence organization, maintaining the actual order of object movements. It may be presumed that those children’s bigger explorative activity encourages them not only to get acquainted with the appearance of the objects but also with their features related to the changes in their position in space. As it was pointed out by Marc Marschark (1988) active participation in the object position reinforces the process of movement image gathering. On the other hand the tendency for replacing an imaginary object with a body part, as it was observed in case of a few rejected children, leads us to the conclusion that the process of symbolic representation acquisition has not been completed yet. This mode of behavior is therefore typical of younger children(Boyatzis, Watson 1993).

Pretend games are a perfect example of child’s activity in which real life social situations reconstruction reinforces acquired social knowledge and stimulates images in action. This type of games may prove extremely useful for a teacher organizing activities for children who have difficulties in social relation, since, as stated by Jerome Bruner (1987),child’s mental development does not depend solely on its abilities but also, to a large extent, on the knowledge of how to apply them using the techniques acquired from the contacts with child’s social environment.

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