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The values of dramatic play in children

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The value of dramatic play seems to lie in five basic functions: 1) it provides personal expression and catharsis of inner desires; 2) it helps the child to distinguish between reality and fantasy; 3) it provides for children's social adaptation; 4) it is dynamic for learning; and 5) it improves intellectual development and specifically creativity, through interaction, transformation and imagination. Generally, dramatic play is fundamental to emotional, social and intellectual development of children.

Key words: Dramatic play, values, children, emotional, social, intellectual

"Dramatic play occurs when a child, or children, by means of interacting with the environment adopts roles and uses make-believe transformations act out stories, real or imaginary, and create new stories as well" (Mellou, 1994b:77). Dramatic play has been a central feature of nursery education since its inception in the 1920s. It has close relationship to creative drama or tutored dramatic play with very small differences (Mellou, 1994c:128). Most of play has a dramatic form (Mellou, 1993).

There is a general agreement among teachers of dramatic play (Koste, 1978; Kouretzis, 1991) that important values can be gained from this activity. These values may be listed as follows: a) an opportunity to develop imagination; b) an opportunity for independent thinking; c) freedom for the group to develop its own ideas; d) an opportunity for cooperation; e) an opportunity to build social awareness; f) a release of emotion; g) better habits of speech; h) experience with good literature; i) an introduction to the theatre arts; and k) recreation (McCaslin, 1984, 1987).

Therapists and educational workers with a psycho-analytical orientation such as Isaacs (1933), have seen dramatic play as channel for growth in both individual and social areas. Two important functions of dramatic play are the exploration of oneself and one's environment. *"All play is a process of exploring and structuring"* (McCaslin, 1981: 224). Indeed, the great thing about play is that it totally involves the whole personality of the child. Particular, it modifies attitudes, character and emotions. However, not all forms of free play contribute to development. For example, there is little evidence that links the non-social forms of dramatic play with growth in intellectual or social skills (Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984).

By and large, the value of dramatic play seems to lie in five basic functions: 1) it provides personal expression and catharsis of inner desires; 2) it helps the child to distinguish between reality and fantasy; 3) it provides for children's

social adaptation; 4) it is a dynamic for learning; and 5) it improves intellectual development and specifically creativity.

Firstly, dramatic play which is full of energy, movement, and action provides an outlet for personal feelings and from tensions. According to psychoanalytic theory, dramatic play is viewed as a mechanism whereby children can cope with specific sources of real life tension (Peller, 1952). The events represented in dramatic play have a special relationship to events in the real world (Fein, 1987). Dramatic play also may have value to the adult who seeks to aid the child in his/her growth (Hartley *et al.*, 1952). As Hartley *et al.* (1952) suggest,

“if adults are to make a fruitful study of children’s dramatic play, they must first recognise that it reflects the interaction of their inner needs with external events; and second, have some knowledge of the real circumstances with which they have to cope” (p.21).

Hartley *et al.* (1952) stress the value of dramatic play as an individual expression of the child’s inner needs, strivings, and concepts. “*By permitting the child to play freely in a setting of security and acceptance, we enable him to feel satisfactorily and healthfully with his most urgent problems*” (Hartley *et al.*, 1952:16). Today’s children are faced with a sometimes frightening environment. The confusing, violent activities they see around them may become part of their dramatic play. This opportunity for emotional expression is very important, and it is the adult’s role to help children understand their world.

Isaacs (1938) also firmly believes that through dramatic play in particular, the child is able to resolve inner conflict and anxiety. The children take a role in order to accentuate the distance between themselves and a particular behaviour. For example, a child may say: “*If I make believe these things, they will not cling to me in real life.*” (Peller, 1952: 83). In this way, the children work out their difficulties for themselves, so that they can meet the challenges of their world with confidence. The child frequently finds it easier to express his/her inner and half-understood experiences when wearing a disguise like an animal costume or sometimes just a hat (McCaslin, 1981). Both catharsis and expression are basic to dramatic play.

Secondly, in relieving tensions and externalizing inner experiences, dramatic play may help the child set the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Especially for the young child, dramatic play experiences may have a greater reality value than they have for somewhat older children (Hartley *et al.*, 1952). Indeed, Bost & Martin (1957), who attempted to investigate whether young children (mean age five years and one month) distinguish between reality and fantasy, found that these children in their dramatic play demonstrated only infrequently a distinct recognition of the bounds between reality and fantasy. The results of a recent study are consistent with Bost & Martin (1957) as well. This study, in children of 2 years and 6 months to 6 years and 6 months (Fisher & Watson, 1988), indicates that as age increases, children show greater progress in the sequence of developing ever clearer boundaries between fantasy and reality.

As evidence has shown, an imaginative predisposition helps children to inte-

grate the two states of mind more effectively, enabling them to think more clearly, building up a more realistic view of themselves and the world.

Thirdly, dramatic play offers an intimate means of communication and co-operation at an age when social growth is just beginning to accelerate (Isaacs, 1993) Young children talk to themselves a great deal, exploring linguistic and manipulative skills as they move from what Piaget calls their 'egocentricity' to self-awareness. At the same time, they are beginning to differentiate themselves from the world of objects around them. Dramatic play further helps the child develop from a purely egocentric being into an individual capable of sharing and of give-and-take.

Several studies have obtained observational evidence that dramatic play results in improved social, intellectual, and verbal communications skills in young children (e.g., Bost & Martin, 1957; Smilansky, 1968; Biblow, 1973). For example, Bost & Martin (1957) found that, a great deal of the content of children's dramatic play was devoted to playing out social roles and relationships, with a resultant clarification of social reality for the participating child. Litsinger's (1962) study also found that dramatic play seemed to generate greater amounts of pupil-planning behaviour, pupil-initiated social control, and original expressiveness than other activities in the curriculum at the UCLA demonstration school. In McKinney & Golden's (1973) study, one can find evidence that dramatic play has a positive effect on productive and cooperative behaviour in the classroom. Indeed, though the children are pretending, they are learning to live together harmoniously, and this alone is an invaluable experience for them. Dramatic play also is the precursor for the organized games which become popular as children become more socially adept and socially oriented.

However, there are many teachers who complain that the dramatic play area produces immature behaviour (dogs barking, many babies, etc.). It is often dominated by one or two children. Children recreate the same roles everyday. Aggressive themes that may help children "play through" emotions can be quite disruptive to the rest of the classroom. It seems really a difficult area for teachers to set up, provision, provide guidance, and defend (especially if the area feels and looks out of control) to parents and principals. Teachers have difficulty knowing when to let children explore their own ideas and when it is time for intervention or redirection. Mellou (1994a) discusses the care of intervention in young child's dramatic play in order to develop creativity. She observes that only appropriate dramatic play intervention seems to be important to the development of emotional, social and intellectual ability. The intervention in dramatic play should depend upon the child's age, gender, intelligence, personality, social class, cultural, ethnic and family background (Mellou, 1994a). She also supports that an *"effective way to help young children realize that dramatic play is acceptable is for teacher to join in children's play and model pretend behaviours"* (Mellou, 1994a:59). Teachers can plan so that dramatic play can offer opportunities for children to explore developing ideas and concepts relating to the classroom theme.

The findings of Gimmesta & de Chiara's (1982) study constitute positive signs regarding the effectiveness of dramatic play as a vehicle for prejudice reduction

among elementary school children. Through dramatic play young children begin to relate personal to corporate life by discovering the mutual acceptance of social conventions. By making use of the dramatic tendencies of children, one is using one of the most powerful instruments to humanize school life, to train the imagination, and thus enable the children to understand other experiences than their own and sympathize with other points of view (Reaney, 1927).

By playing at acting out what they have seen others do, children learn to comprehend types of social behaviour, as well as coping with their own fears and fantasies. So, children learn what it is like to be someone else, and, trying out different roles, they structure the particular traits they have observed and subsequently play them out until they have formed meaningful patterns of behaviour. Through experimenting with adult life styles and occupations, such as mothers, fathers, teachers, doctors, cowboys, spacemen, nurses, children create a personality. As a child participates in many creative dramatic play experiences and becomes many different characters. s/he gains a better understanding not only of others and society, but also of him/herself.

Fourthly, this kind of play helps in learning, especially for young children (Bolton, 1982). By and large, there are three kinds of learning in drama (Byron, 1986), that seem to be similar to dramatic play as well: 1. *Cognitive learning*: (a) development of concepts through the content of the drama or (b) development of cognitive skills such as hypothesizing, recognizing implications, etc...; 2. *Social learning*: development through the social process of drama of the student's capacities to work together productively; and 3. *Learning how to use the drama form*. Since social learning has been discussed before, it will be elaborated below only the cognitive learning and the learning how to use the drama form:

(1) *Cognitive learning*: McCaslin (1981) says:

"Play, because it involves movement, helps learning to take place as the attributes of things and people are explored and organized into meaningful patterns" (p.224).

Indeed, young children engage in what Piaget has aptly called sensori-motor learning, which simply means that people learn by relating movement to the objects of sensation. Researchers have found that creative learning is better encouraged by free creative work upon the lines of the child's spontaneous expression in colour, form, rhythm and miming, than by set lessons in, for example, 'model drawing' or in the tonic sol-fa scale. Isaacs (1938) states:

"In the same way, we held that children's understanding is better fostered by meeting their natural interests in the world as a whole, and using their spontaneous impulses to handle and explore, than by giving set lessons in history and geography and the three R's..." (p.47).

One should try to bring learning experiences as close to play experiences as possible. Young children have a natural curiosity which one can harness. Children need the chance to explore the information they have been given

through purposeful play, otherwise they won't be able to absorb it. Isaacs (1938) notes that, when Jessica says that, "*if they built castles as high as the sky, the aeroplanes would knock them down*", such acts of hypothesis and imaginative construction are closely related to a type of play in which "*knowledge is dramatised and used in service of make-believe*" (p.50). This kind of dramatization in knowledge takes part most of the time in children's play.

All young children's activities are based on play. For example, 'art experience', such as dance, movement, involves children in play activities (Eisner, 1990; Kouretzis, 1991). A combination of these activities with play has the most positive effect on the learning of all children (Vince-Bakonyi, 1969). Thus, aesthetic experiences should have a basic foundation in Infant Education in order to encourage dramatic play. However, schools are often tempted to reduce or abandon aesthetic experiences in the curriculum, because of declining resources and increasing public demands (Christie & Johnsen, 1983). Eisner (1990) states: "*Both art and play, like imagination and fantasy, are not regarded as a part of the serious business of schooling*" (p.43).

Shmukler (1985) suggests that the value of play be recognized and included in educational provision for even intellectually-gifted children, so that their mental development may be enhanced. Dramatic play can be integrated into other curriculum areas in Infant Education such as maths, science, language with strong benefits, as research has shown (Lovinger, 1974; Becher & Wolfgang, 1977; Franklin, 1981; Pellegrini, 1985b; Hall *et al.*, 1987; Schrader, 1989; Christie, 1990). It can also result in a more creative understanding of solving problems (Hartshorn & Brantley, 1973).

(2) *Learning how to use drama form*: The young children through dramatic play, "*develop a familiarity with some of the concerns of drama as an art form*" (Mandelbaum, 1975:84). As McCaslin (1987) also states, when dramatic play is encouraged, "*it develops into drama – an art form, ... and a way of learning*" (p.1.) Perhaps the greatest value of dramatic play in infant schools lies in the opportunity it offers to children to produce an organized picture that themselves are the media for communication through drama (Pratt, 1939; Bolton, 1989; Kouretzis, 1991).

Fifthly, researchers have reached conclusions about the intellectual value of dramatic play (Almy, 1967) for the individual child that are based especially on the development of the components of creativity (Berreta, 1971; Feitelson, 1972; Dansky & Silverman, 1973, 1975; Feitelson & Ross, 1973; Lieberman, 1977; Dansky, 1980; Eriksson, 1985). Mellou (1993) also investigating in her Ph.D. thesis "The relationship between dramatic play and creativity in young children", found that children who involved in dramatic play activities, they enhanced the conditions of creativity, such as interaction, transformation, and imagination.

"For example, a young child may have taken to the railway bridge to watch the trains. She has listened with growing excitement (interaction) various noises of the railway yard, has heard the rhythmical oncoming of the train growing louder and

louder, has seen with excitement the whole length of the trains gradually emerge, has watched it pass slowly out of sight in the distance, or disappear into a tunnel. Later in the day, she is re-living (transformation) her earlier experience in imagination. She can feel/see/hear in imagination the great throb of the train passing under the bridge, going over the whole event again until she watches the train grow magically smaller and smaller in the distance. Then the child tries to find ways (creativity) in her room to represent her earlier experience, using the table, for example, for the bridge and herself for the train. She is dramatizing her ideas, imprinting them indelibly on her mind, remembering, transforming, learning making her very own this new and exciting for her experience. Later on, she repeats this game many times, varying it in play with toys, modifying (creativity) it from time to time in relation to further actual experiences of trains and railways. In this way, the child from interaction with the new experience, uses imagination and transforms the new experience symbolically. Repeating the experience many times with pleasure, she modifies creatively the new experience according to her preferences. This procedure has as its outcome creativity, since as the child tries to modify the environment she had experienced, according to her preferences, she creates new environments; she becomes a creator" (Mellou, 1994b:77-78).

As children try out the many models of their world, interact with them transform themselves, and engage themselves imaginatively, they gain knowledge and develop many resources for recombining the familiar to produce the new. When dealing inventively with their world, the novel and speculative, the expression of imagination, the symbolic transformations in which objects and actions are used in new and unusual ways, are often evident during the dramatic play time of children. Children have a creative spirit which is evident in their freedom to do, to make, to be. They play as a way of expressing themselves. The young child by means of the dolls, blocks and equipment with which s/he can pretend to be keeping house, building a bridge, going for a walk, doing the marketing, or landing an aeroplane, has many opportunities to be creative.

Sutton-Smith (1971) supports the theory here presented in that he suggests that there are four basic modes of knowing 'imitation', 'exploration', 'testing', and 'construction'. Thus:

"imitation... relies on a mimicry of the externals only and is usually all that those of inferior status have available to them. Exploration is at a slightly higher level of information control because the knower now gets to handle and manipulate the objects of knowledge. In testing, the knower tries out what he can do himself and thus validates his own personal control over the situation. Finally in construction there is a personal synthesis of the different arrays of information into a novel scheme of the knower" (Sutton-Smith, 1972:33)

These types of knowing may be arranged transitively. It is apparent that the first three modes of knowing (imitation, exploration, testing) are related to the creative process, through the activities of reciprocal interaction, transformation and imagination, respectively. The last one (construction) is directly related to

creativity, since both involve synthesis of information and subsequent novelty. All three conditions of creativity are central characteristics of children's play: reciprocal interaction, transformation and imagination (Mellou, 1993).

CONCLUSION

This type of play, which reaches its peak between the ages of 4 and 6 (Christie, 1990) should be used by preschool and kindergarten teachers as a means of promoting children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development.

As York (1961) states:

"If we were to consider creative dramatics as only a means of preserving creativity through fostering sensitivity, fluency of ideas, flexibility of thinking and originality, these alone would be reason enough for making this art a part of the every-day life of all children" (p.128).

Young children use their imagination and transformational activity, modify whatever they find in their environment, and create new things, objects and activities and so new environments. In this way, through the reciprocal interaction of environment, transformation and imagination, creativity can be discerned. The young children use all these conditions, (interaction, transformation and imagination), in their dramatic play, as they try to represent a great deal of what they come to know of their world.

All schools should regard dramatic activities as being as natural to children as breathing and as necessary. Such play should form a natural part of the daily school programme. Shmukler (1985) in a study about gifted children concludes:

"Imaginative play, being both affective and cognitive, has an essential developmental function, helping the child to achieve a balance between inner and outer experience, and developing a reservoir of resourcefulness, liveliness, and self-esteem, encouraging both curiosity and the capacity for exploration. By its very nature, play demands that children use their potential to combine experiences into organized, yet flexible conceptual schemes. It is thus a powerful adjunct to early educational, preventive, and remedial procedures, and should be paramount in any pre-school activity" (p.88).

According to McCaslin (1987), modern education and creative drama share common values. Dramatic play promotes the following, educationally-valued, ends:

1. Creativity and aesthetic development.
2. The ability to think critically.
3. Social growth and the ability to work cooperatively with others.
4. Improved communication skills.

5. The development of moral and spiritual values.
6. Knowledge of self" (p.3).

If, then, there are good reasons for believing that dramatic play is fundamental to emotional, social and intellectual development, some means must be found in infant education to motivate it (Griffins, 1983). Indeed, the value of dramatic play lies in the opportunity that it provides for the young child to express his/her inner desires and to escape from his/her egocentricity, and to develop emotionally, socially, intellectually and artistically.

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