CHILDREN'S PLAY AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of children's play and its relation to their symbolic representation in language development by addressing relevant issues, including needs and incentives, imagination and rules, objects and thoughts, and gesture and symbolism in children's play. As suggested by research reports, children's symbolic representation in play is a creative activity, involving a series of high-order thinking/concept formation and communicational representations. In play children's capacity for concept formation and symbolic representation may be fully developed through the use of gestures, speech, and written signs in an imaginary situation. Interacting with their playmates in play, children may also acquire understandings about the rules embedded in the operation and evolution of the nature and social institutions, and thus learn to employ appropriately languages and other forms of representations in communicating with their peers and assimilating into their societies. For the purpose of promoting the quality of care and educational services provided to young children within a multicultural context, play may be incorporated into children's daily activities to enhance their capacity for symbolic representation in language and social development.

Keywords: play; symbolism; imagination; object; gesture

1. INTRODUCTION

With regard to play and the child's development in relation to the external realities, Piaget argued that realities may exist to the child simply and solely as what is desired during the first stage of the child's development, with the world of play and the world of observation, two different but equal realities confronting the child, characterizing the second stage, and the child's play may thus be described as an autonomous reality in contrast to the true reality to which the child's play stands (as cited in Vygotsky, 1986). Since human beings engage so much in play in their daily lives, it appears to be difficult for them to reflect on the play activities and the influence these activities may have on them (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel, 2001). Due to the importance of symbolic representation in children's language development, in a line research on children's play and symbolic representation, researchers have attempted to study what symbolic meanings may occur in children's play and have obtained influential research results regarding this issue (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). This paper presents an analysis of children's play and its relation to their symbolic representation and language development by addressing such issues as needs and incentives, imagination and rules, objects and thoughts, and gesture and

symbolism, which are important to research and practice concerning how play may be incorporated into developmentally appropriate care and educational services for young children.

2. NEEDS AND INCENTIVES

While researchers have attempted to describe or define the child's play (e.g., King, 1979; Pellegrini and Boyd, 1993; Schwartzman, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978), understanding the child's play is a difficult problem to tackle for researchers and practitioners in the field of early childhood education due to the difficulty in taking an appropriate perspective in coping with this problem. Schwartzman (1978) argued that the child, as player, relates her knowledge of the play or game to a researcher, who thus should no longer act as analytic expert in studying the child's play. King (1979) mentioned that the perspectives on reality taken by the adult do not coincide with those of the child and defining play in kindergarten should be done from the child's point of view to add a new dimension to our understanding of the role which play would play in the life of the child as well as in the classroom setting. Thus, for researchers and practitioners the problem of understanding the child's play turns out to be a problem of understanding the child's understanding of play.

In studying the child's play, one of the relevant issues which should be addressed concerns what makes the child engage in play. Vygotsky (1978) attempted to answer this question from the perspective of the child's needs and their relation to the child's action. He mentioned that a child's development has been described as the development of her intellectual functions and every child, characterized by her level of intellectual development, is said to develop from one developmental stage to another. However, as he argued, since every advance in the child's development from one stage to the next is linked to a prominent change in such crucial factors as motives, incentives, and inclinations, it cannot be well understood, nor can the uniqueness of play as a form of activity in the child be fully known, if the child's needs are ignored and the incentives, which effectively make her act, are not considered. With the maturing of the child's needs as a dominant issue in his discussion of the child's play, Vygotsky further pointed out the inaccuracy in defining play as an activity in which the child is given pleasure, and argued that the child may acquire keener experiences of pleasure in many activities, such as sucking a pacifier, than in play. As he stated, in some of the games which are predominant at the end of preschool and the beginning of school age, the activity itself may not be pleasurable and may give pleasure to the child only if the result is interesting to him.

3. IMAGINATION AND RULES

The association of children's language development with play may be examined with respect to children's capacity for imagination in play. In one line of research on children's language learning, researchers have attempted to understand children's acquisition of nouns and verbs with respect to the construct of imageability, defined as the ease with which a word leads to a mental image, and the notion of boundedness, in terms of the boundaries which a word's referent may have in distinguishing it from the world around it (Langacker, 1987; Ma, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, McDonough, and Tardif, 2009). As mentioned by Ma et al., while it has been reported for such languages as French, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch, Spanish and Korean that verbs are found to be

more difficult for children to learn than nouns, there exist inconsistencies in the relevant literature, which have been referred to by researchers as verb learning paradox, in that children's earliest vocabularies do contain verbs and such nouns as *uncle* or *idea* are reported to be learned after some verbs like *eat* or *drink*.

The issue of verb learning paradox is among the relevant ones concerning children's language learning, which is connected considerably to children's capacity for imagination. So far as children's language learning is concerned, the construct of imageability may be examined not only in terms of the ease with which a word would lead to a mental image and the boundaries which a word's referent may have in distinguishing it from the world around it, but also with respect to children's capacity for producing an appropriate, internalized image or external symbolic representation of a word or words with the aid of objects and gestures, in particular during the time when they engage in play. As described by Vygotsky (1978), the written language is a system of second-order symbolism and make-believe play is a major contributor to children's development of written language.

As mentioned by Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2001), Gregory Bateson's theory of play and fantasy connects communication to play and points out that signals are adapted in play to reveal the information regarding whether an action is real or imaginary. The play frame is a critical notion in Bateson's theory and refers to what is revealed as signals to indicate the intended shift from the reality to the imaginary, which constitutes the map of play with reality being the terrain. Players should communicate with signals and be engaged in the same imaginary world in order to be in the same frame in play. Frost, Wortham, and Reifel stated that the frame is not real and may be regarded as scripts or knowledge. As mentioned by Abelson (1981), a script, as one type of schema, is a hypothesized cognitive structure which may be activated to organize comprehension of event-based situations and to form expectations about the occurrence sequences of events. Furthermore, he argued that understanding a situation would involve the cognitive retrieval of those previous situations which are similar to the present situation and to take a role, such as customer in a restaurant, requires an understanding of the existence of such a possibility and commitment to the performance. With the aid of the idea of a cognitive script as an organizing device for daily experience, children's experiences in their daily lives and play can thus be documented and research results have been reported (e.g., Nelson and Gruendel, 1979, 1981).

Children's imagination plays a crucial role in their play. Children may reveal their intention to shift from the reality to the imaginary through communication with signals in play. However, one question may be raised as to why and when children will shift from the reality to the imaginary in their daily lives and play will thus take place. As suggested by Vygotsky (1978) as an answer to the question regarding the occurrence of children's play, play appears to be developed at the point when children begin to experience unrealized tendencies. Vygotsky mentioned that preschool children may enter an imaginary, illusory world to make unrealized desires be realized when desires cannot be immediately fulfilled, and imagination, as a new psychological process for children and totally absent in animals, is a conscious activity specifically for humans. While the old adage stipulates that the child's play is imagination in action, Vygotsky argued that it must be reversed by saying that "imagination in adolescence and school children is play without action" (p. 93).

In play, an imaginary situation is created by a child and distinguishes a child's play from other forms of activity (Vygotsky, 1978). However, in the literature the child's play is viewed as imitation or preparation for

adult activities and social behavior (Schwartzman, 1978) and contains a beneficial consequence beyond the stricter biological sense of adaptation (Pellegrini and Boyd, 1993). In a similar fashion, Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2001) stated that children play in ways which are associated with socialization into their society and begin to acquire gender roles, values, and understandings about social institutions during play. The association of the child's creation of an imaginary situation in play with the play function as imitation or preparation for adult activities and socialization into the society may be clarified from the Vygotskian perspective of the rules embedded in the child's play. As argued by Vygotsky, it is simply inaccurate that a child can behave and play a role in an imaginary situation without rules, since rules arise from an imaginary situation and exist in play whenever an imaginary situation is created by the player, just as a child follows the rules of maternal behavior when she plays the role of a mother. He noted that the so-called pure games with rules were demonstrated to be games with imaginary situations and every game with rules has an imaginary situation, just as the imaginary situation contains rules of behavior.

Children's acquisition of understandings of the natural and social rules during play is well expressed by Froebel as follows:

> The baker cannot bake if the miller grinds him no meal; the miller can grind no meal if the famer brings him no corn; the farmer can bring no corn if the field yields him no grain; the field can yield no crop if nature does not work toward it in inner harmony; she could not work in this inner harmony if God did not place in here power and material, and if His love did not guide everything to its fulfillment.
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> It is doubtless with these ideas that children are brought up, who are playing at baking and feasting on bread…. (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel, 2001, p. 3)

The description presented by Froebel about children's play and its connection to the nature and social contexts concerns a society which provides children with opportunities to experience with the nature and the operations of a local economy and is an inspiring guidance to how children's play may be examined. Due to the various experiences children may acquire in their daily lives within physical and social contexts, the imaginary situations and rules which might be observed in children's play are associated with unexplored children's experiences which deserve further investigation.

4. OBJECTS AND THOUGHTS

With regard to the role physical objects and materials may play in children's language development, Neuman, Koh, and Dwyer (2008) argued that young children's language and literacy interaction may be enhanced through the use of the literacy objects and resources which are appropriately selected and arranged for them. In addressing language learning and cultures, East (2012) mentioned that intercultural navigation between the cultures represented in the interaction should be included in the acquisition of communicative competence in language learning, if communicative competence is considered in terms of cross-cultural understanding. As argued by Reifel and Yeatman (1993) with regard to the context within which children's play takes place, play objects influence considerably peer play, and the cultures and physical settings are reflected in play activities. Furthermore, Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2001) stated that play objects and the physical play contexts contribute considerably to children's peer play and cultures adapt to their physical settings. The importance of play objects

in children's play may be attributable not only to children's language and literacy interaction through the use of literacy objects and resources within a cultures-embedded physical context, but also to the complex thinking and concepts which children may generate in play within such a well-arranged, cultures-embedded physical context. This point may be seen by the arguments proposed by Vygotsky (1978) in describing objects, thought, and their relations.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that humans perceive not only the colors and shapes of real objects, but also the meanings, which arises at a very early age as a special feature of human perception and constitutes the so-called perception of real objects. However, as Vygotsky pointed out, in the child's play it is thought rather than objects which would lead to action, and the meanings are detached from their usual objects and actions, when the child uses a stick, for example, to represent a horse and the-horse-in-the-stick as the pivot to define her action. In play, the structure of the child's perceptions changes and meaning dominates real objects for the child, which leads to a radical change in the child's relation to reality. Vygotsky noted that the child's separation of meaning from real objects and action in play characterizes the traditional nature of play and constitutes a crucial stage in the child's development which is completely free of the purely situation constraints of early childhood and advances toward adult thought. These arguments constitute important parts of the propositions Vygotsky presented regarding play and the child's language development, in particular the development of second-order symbolism.

5. GESTURE AND SYMBOLISM

Gesture, as a sign system used frequently by the child in communication, is a significant contributor to the child's creative activities such as play (Wu, 2011). Piaget noted that one of gestures, movements, and mimicry as much as of words is the language used by the child in play (as cited in Vygotsky, 1986). With regard to children's use of gestures in play, Vygotsky (1978) argued that in play children's representation of meaning by means of real objects would initially take place as first-order symbolism with the aid of gestures, and that the object may obtain a sign function as second-order symbolism when it develops with a history of its own which does not depend on children's gestures. Furthermore, he stated that it would be inappropriate to understand children's symbolic representation by the perceptual similarity of objects, and it is the children's gestures in play which would facilitate children's production of symbolic representation by communicating and representing the meaning of playthings. In order to understand children's symbolic representation in play, Vygotsky observed experimentally how children would develop symbolic representation with the aid of objects and gestures in play. He found that make-believe play is a major contributor to the development of second-order symbolism and thus the written language in children's language development.

The play experiment Vygotsky (1978) observed revealed information regarding the transition in children's symbolic representation from the first-order symbolism with the aid of objects and gestures to the second-order symbolism. In the experiment, the important elements of a story were represented and presented to the children through figurative gestures in such a way that keys represented children, a book off to one side referred to a house, a knife designated a doctor, a pocket watch stood for a drugstore, and so forth. As Vygotsky observed in the experiment, only through relevant gestures in play, an object may acquire a new meaning in addition to the thing it originally indicates. Just as a watch stood for a drugstore in play beyond a watch it originally indicates,

the numbers on the face of the watch were pointed to and mentioned by one child as the medicine in the drugstore instead of seconds, minutes or hours the numbers originally refer to. In a similar fashion, a child pointed to the neck of a bottle, which stood for a wolf in play, to refer to the mouth of the wolf. The data presented by Vygotsky demonstrated children's first-order symbolic representations with the aid of real objects and gestures in play. On the basis of the first-order symbolic representations in play, children may produce further representations in the form of higher-order symbolism to refer to concepts and complex thinking of various types.

Whereas Vygotsky (1978) did not explicitly describe how children's second-order symbolic representations may take place in play, he mentioned that it is the second-order symbolism that "the object acquires a sign function with a developmental history of its own that is now independent of the child's gesture" (p. 110). As described by Vygotsky for showing the occurrence of the second-order symbolism in the children's play he observed, with a knife playing the part of a doctor in play, if a child saw a knife fall, she would utter that the doctor had fallen. Furthermore, when the experimenter asked the child, who had pointed to the neck of a bottle to refer to the mouth of the wolf, the child responded by stating that the wolf caught the stopper and was holding it in his teeth.

In the two examples mentioned above, the real objects involved in the children's utterances first obtained their meanings through figurative gestures and then a sign function without the aid of gestures. As argued by Vygotsky (1978) with regard to the children's symbolic representation in play, features of real objects may be isolated and take a sign function in response to the modification of the customary structure of the real objects as a result of the new meaning the structure has acquired in the children's play, just as the customary structure of a stopper in a bottle was further modified and employed to represent the new structure of the wolf being holding the stopper in teeth. Revealed in the description presented by Vygotsky is a second-order symbolic representation produced by the children on the basis of the physical structure of the real objects, which acquired new meanings through gestural representations in the first-order symbolic representation in the children's play.

While it was mentioned by Vygotsky (1978) that it would be inappropriate to understand children's symbolic representation by the perceptual similarity of objects, and it is the children's gestures in play which would facilitate children's production of symbolic representation by communicating and representing the meaning of playthings, the argument appears to be more relevant to children's first-order symbolic representation in play than to their second-order symbolic representation. A further analysis of the data presented by Vygotsky (1978) in the framework for analyzing complex thinking of various types proposed by Vygotsky (1986) would suggest that the second-order symbolic representation produced by the children in the play experiment appeared to be triggered by the children's formation of the complex thinking of associating the customary structure of the real objects, which have acquired new meanings through figurative gestures in the first-order symbolic representation in play, with a new physical structure formed by the new-meanings-possessing objects according to the similarity in the physical structures formed by the two groups of objects. It is obvious that the experiences the children of the play experiment acquired within physical and social contexts played a crucial role in the children's perception of the similarity in the physical structures formed by the two groups of objects and thus contributed to the children's capacity for second-order symbolic representation through the complex thinking of an associative type, in the term proposed by Vygotsky (1986), on the basis of which the children developed the

concept of the wolf being holding the stopper in teeth.

6. CONCLUSION

Children's symbolic representation in play is a creative activity, involving a series of high-order thinking/concept formation and communicational representations, and is a crucial contributor to their language development. In play children can develop their capacity for concept formation and symbolic representation through the use of gestures, speech, and written signs in an imaginary situation, and have the opportunities to understand and obey the rules embedded in the operation and evolution of the nature and social institutions so that they may learn to take appropriate actions or roles in the natural environment or within their societies. Within a service-inclusive social context, play-incorporated care or educational services may be provided to young children to promote their developmental outcomes.

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