Make-believe Play vs. Academic Skills: a Vygotskian Approach to Today’s Dilemma of Early Childhood Education

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One of challenges facing today’s Early Childhood teachers is the constant pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of traditional Early Childhood activities.
Concerns about children not being ready for school as well as concerns about children falling behind in their later academic learning can be answered by promoting foundational competencies that are “uniquely preschool” and promoting them through play.
I will use the example of early literacy as an area frequently targeted by “academically oriented” ECE programs to demonstrate that make-believe play and prerequisites of academic skills are not mutually exclusive but can develop a synergetic relationship
Lev Vygotsky on Play

Play also creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play, the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play, he is, as it were, a head above himself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his usual level.

(Vygotsky, 1933/1978, p.74)
The kind of play referred to by Vygotsky and later described by Elkonin as “fully developed” or mature play is the only kind of play that positively affects academic skills in general and literacy development in particular.
Mature play impacts the development of academic skills through

– Other-regulation leading to self-regulation
– Symbolic representation
– Perspective taking
Other-regulation leading to self-regulation

- Other-regulation precedes and prepares the way for self-regulation.
- Young children learn to regulate themselves in the context of make-believe play.
Symbolic representation

Through play, children learn that something can stand for something else.
Symbolic representation

Children practice symbolic representation by using play props, gestures, and words to represent:
- real objects
- roles they play
Perspective taking

• Perspective taking prepares the foundation for metacognition and reflective thought – essential components of various academic skills
Mature play impacts the development of early literacy through

– Oral language
– Naming and re-naming of roles and props (metalinguistic development)
– Imagination
– Understanding the authentic purpose of reading and writing
Oral language

Children practice their most mature language skills during play:

– The pretend scenario is created through language.

– Children use language to choose and negotiate their roles.
Oral language (continued)

- When children use imaginary props they have to use language to explain to each other what these props stand for.
- When acting out various roles, children learn to use more varied vocabulary and to adjust the way they talk to the specific characteristics of the roles they play.
Metalinguistic awareness

When learning to spell words that are spelled phonetically, the child gains conscious awareness that a word such as “fast” contains the sounds F-A-S-T, that is gains conscious awareness of his own activity in the production of sound; he learns to pronounce each separate element of the sound structure voluntarily. In the same way, when the child learns to write, he begins to do with volition what he has previously done without volition in the domain of oral speech. (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 206).
Imagination

• Practicing imagination in play prepares children to enter the imaginary world of literature
Understanding the purpose of reading and writing

- Children practice reading and writing in authentic contexts
- Writing is used to communicate to oneself and to the others
Not all play is created equal

Play that exists in many of today’s classrooms does not fit the definition of mature play.
Today’s social situation almost guarantees that children may not develop mature play unless special play scaffolding is provided.
By scaffolding make-believe play and making sure it DOES exist in its most mature form we can positively impact the development of early literacy skills.
Play scaffolding in ECE classrooms cannot mimic natural “play mentoring” that used to happen in multi-aged groups

- Same-age groups
- Short time frame
- Many children miss more than just play skills (background knowledge, knowing how to pretend, etc)
Systemic play intervention in *Tools of the Mind* approach

Teaching children how to use non-realistic props
Systemic play intervention in *Tools of the Mind* approach

Building background knowledge of roles
(field trips, guest speakers, books, videos)
Systemic play intervention in *Tools of the Mind* approach

Modeling roles and relationships between roles
Systemic play intervention in *Tools of the Mind* approach

Play planning
ROOPAN
I am going to be a加以
baby.
Effects of play intervention on make-believe play

- Longer play episodes
- Greater variety of roles acted out
- More complex relationships between roles
- More creative use of props
Effects of play intervention on early literacy development

- Increased phonological awareness
- Increased vocabulary size
- Increased letter knowledge
- Increased knowledge of the concepts of print
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