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Vygotskian perspectives on using dramatic play to enhance children's development and balance creativity with structure in the early childhood classroom

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What kind of environmental and administrative factors support the balance between child-centred and teacher-directed practices in the early childhood classroom? What specific aspects of children's development are nurtured by this pedagogy? These and other pedagogical issues are addressed in this article as it describes how a particular curriculum on dramatic play was initiated, implemented and developed with a group of four year olds. The article includes a detailed discussion of the step-by-step process of how this curriculum was developed and an analysis of the multi-dimensional development in children that occurred as a result of this project. The discussion is framed within a Vygotskian perspective as connections are explored between this curriculum, children's development and specific Vygotskian ideas such as language and cognition, the zone of proximal development, cultural signs and tools, socio-cultural construction of knowledge and the notion of willpower. This project on dramatic play may be viewed in terms of guided participation in which the children were active learners in a classroom community of people who supported, challenged and guided novices as they participated collectively in a cultural activity.

Keywords: balanced curriculum; dramatic play; practice and theory; reflective teaching; socio-cultural constructivism; Vygotsky

The teacher and the storyteller

It was Jenny's turn to be storyteller of the day. I sat down with her during free play to write down the story she wanted to dictate to me. A few of the other children hung around to hear what the story was all about. The rest were busy playing at the several learning centres that the classroom offered. Jenny began to dictate her story:

> There were two princesses in the forest – walking. And then they died. And then a prince came. The prince died too. The rabbit and the deer were in the forest. They were very nice. They were playing in the forest. Then a fairy came and made the princesses alive and the prince alive. They went home and they cooked chicken and ate it. And the prince lived with the princesses.

I put the story away and Jenny went back to working on an activity of her choice. A little later, about 20 minutes before lunch, I announced to the class that it was story time. They needed no second reminder to put away what they were doing and clean-up. Within a few minutes they were on the rug, ready for the story. I read Jenny's story to them, while she proudly stood next to me.

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Once I had finished reading the story, several hands went up as children indicated they wanted to participate in the acting out of the story:

Teacher: Jenny, who do you need in your story?
Jenny: I need two princesses.
Teacher: Alright, choose two princesses from the audience.

Jenny called out to two of the children who had their hands raised.

Jenny: Sandra and Anya. And now I need a prince.
Teacher: OK. Choose a prince.
Jenny: Eric.

And so it continued. Every time a role was mentioned, several hands went up and Jenny chose one of the children. Willy got the part of the deer, Rob was chosen as the rabbit and Jin-Young was given the role of the fairy. Once all the characters had been decided, Jenny asked them to put on costumes which were made from materials already present in the classroom: clothes from the housekeeping and dress-up areas, cardboard boxes and paints for props and sceneries. For this story Jenny had, during free play, painted a row of trees on easel paper to look like a forest. We taped this to the sand box which stood in the area where the children would be performing. The audience sat patiently on one side of the rug, while the actors lined up on the other side. Each actor knew the part he/she would be playing. Jenny began her story:

There were two princesses in the forest – walking. 'Come on Sandra and Anya. Walk. And now you're supposed to die'.

Sandra and Anya did as they were told. It was Jenny's story and they were ready to do things just as she wanted it. Each storyteller could lay down his/her own rules. Jenny went on:

Eric, now you have to walk and then die too.

This continued until the whole story had been acted out. I prompted whenever Jenny asked for help, but it was essentially her effort. At the end of the play I asked the audience to respond to the story:

Hung-Li: I liked the fairy because the dress was beautiful.
Carol: I didn't like the story. I didn't like it when the princesses die. And I don't like forests.
Caity: I liked the stove and the costumes.
Willy: I liked the deer because that's me.

This particular scene was the culminating chapter of a drama-based project carried out in a pre-K classroom of 18 four and five year olds in New York City. Using dramatic play and theatre to support children's development in a pre-K classroom is not a new idea, and certainly is a common pedagogical technique to facilitate the development of the whole child. Nevertheless, this particular approach to dramatic play is unusual in that it offered young children a drama experience that was both child-initiated and teacher-directed at the same time. It allowed children to exercise their imagination and creativity while at the same time requiring them to be mindful of the broader rules of membership in a group. Traditionally, dramatic play has been used in a couple of different ways in the early childhood classroom. One approach, which is relatively free of any teacher direction, has focused on the unstructured experience that children get in the various learning centres of a typical progressive early childhood classroom where they are able to role-act and engage in imaginary play as they create their own scenarios alone or with a few other children. Another way in which school children experience drama is by way of the more structured and formal drama class where a drama or a movement/music teacher guides, facilitates or directs various dramatic play situations. This particular project was initially inspired by Vivian Paley's

(1981) book, *Wally's Stories*, but gradually evolved into an experience that blended both child-directed and teacher-directed practices taking place in the children's classroom within the day's schedule and without requiring a special time period or specialised drama teacher.

Methodology: initiating the project

The foundations of this project were rooted in the use of children's stories to promote literacy development. Original stories that emerged out of the children's own voices in the form of conversations, narratives, dialogues and messages were extended into dramatised scenarios. This specific process was different from the usual dramatic play that children engaged in on a daily basis in the dress-up/housekeeping centre. Almost every day the housekeeping centre was witness to some wonderful make-believe and spontaneous activities involving a few children at a time. The project in discussion, however, was more structured and required the participation of all children, as well as the presence of a teacher. In keeping sight of the developmentally appropriate guidelines this progressive school adhered to, the primary challenge for the teacher was to keep the activity as child-centred as possible while at the same time inviting the participation of the entire class. This process involved much more deliberation and planning on the part of the teacher in order to determine ways in which to get the children interested enough to voluntarily participate. It began at first as a small-group activity offered as one of several activities that children could select from during free play time, and only much later did it reach the stage when it could be incorporated into the existing curriculum and presented as a regularly scheduled activity in the daily routine.

Although acting out a story was not new to this group of four year olds, they were unaccustomed to the idea of being able to dramatise one of their own stories, where they could write a story and then create an impromptu 'play' and be intimately involved in directing the dramatisation of this 'play'. The teacher acknowledged that before she could implement this drama-based activity as she had visualised it, she actually had to start with a situation that was more familiar to the children, and then gradually move into the more unfamiliar terrain where their personal narratives which had been very private thus far would be acted out in a more public domain. The teacher employed a three-phase process in order to achieve this: (1) she first established a comfort level for the children by having them act out popular stories based on the familiar books found on their classroom bookshelves, the most popular being *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Heckedy Peg*, *Strega Nona* and *Three Little Pigs* which they had been reading and enjoying that month; (2) the teacher then introduced the children to the idea that they could write their own original stories, which were simply dictated narratives in which they verbalised their thoughts, ideas and experiences; and (3) finally, the teacher attempted to synchronise both these variables and introduce a new activity that would connect play-acting and drama to those stories that the children had conceptualised or 'written' themselves rather than published books.

Clearing the initial obstacles

During the initial phases, once the children identified a book as a possible story to act out, the teacher offered its enactment as a choice to the class. A few children volunteered to participate in the acting out of the story, while the others continued to play in the various other centres during the daily period of choice time. Very early on in the process of introducing and implementing the new project, however, the teacher made the following observations: (1) the same group of four to five children participated in the play-acting each time and the activity failed to stimulate most of the other children, thus occurring within a very narrow locus of interest; (2) the high degree of teacher direction as the teacher prompted from a published book led to decreased levels in children's interest and participation; (3) interest levels could not be sustained for long as the children

wearied of the activity and were distracted by the other options available to them in the classroom, as well as by the children playing in other areas of the room; and (4) the few children who were not engaged in the actual 'acting' but were merely observing felt disconnected and distanced from the activity.

To address these impediments, the teacher found that she had to backtrack a little, moving away from the actual acting and focusing more on trying to interest the children in developing a personal narrative, and thus becoming more invested in their own story. Her initial attempts towards this goal consisted of encouraging them to frequently talk about and thus create stories on their drawings, paintings, collages, clay modelling, wood working and block buildings (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). These dictated messages about the interpretations of their work and play became the first narratives or 'stories' to be acted out in the classroom. Eric's narrative about his block building was 'Do not knock down my building because the fire truck will have to go save the people from the burning building'. Hung-Li narrated the following story about a collage he had worked on: 'The ghost has two round ears like a box bug. There's one round roller coming. And the ghost hurried away under the bridge and went over to … then there's a big thunderstorm. Then the thunderstorm went away and the ghost lived happily ever after'. One of the first narratives Jenny dictated was about her drawing: 'This is a flower – a summer flower. It's growing in the grass'. Willy's story about a structure he had constructed using bristle blocks was: 'This is a spaceship. This is a window. And this turns into a robot. That's the thing that makes the motor slow down. This thing has fire coming out and sends bullets. This thing is the steering wheel. That's where people sit back. That's the American flag'. The stories gradually became more complex, and the author of a 'story' would be encouraged to be the storyteller for the day with the responsibility and authority to choose actors for his/her play and direct it. That was the turning point at which a significant increase in the children's interest levels became noticeable. The privilege, responsibility of being the storyteller of the day and the recognition was a strong incentive for the children to want to participate in the activity.

The use of props

Not only did the motivation that was generated result in several children wanting to 'write' stories, but the narratives began taking on more elaborate forms and involving a larger number of characters and increasingly complex plots. Over a period of a few weeks, as the stories began to be written and acted out more enthusiastically, the day's storyteller became responsible for several things: providing the story plot and the characters; choosing the actors from those children who volunteered for each role; determining costumes to suit the various characters and roles in the story; having the option to paint the scenery for the stage; and directing the actors in the delivery of dialogue, choice of words and suitable body movements. Some of the props that were used included easel paintings of trees to symbolise a forest described in a story; a piece of art work on easel paper that would go up on a 'wall' for the story in which 'there was a painting hung on a wall'; discarded cardboard boxes that were painted on a daily basis would become a truck, or a castle, or a theatre, and even a teacher's desk in one the stories; clothes from the classroom dress-up area found their way onto the stage as costumes for the kings and princesses and witches, and in one instance three men's ties from the dress-up area became tails for three 'horses'; Alex always volunteered to take the role of and act out various props such as a tree, a window or a fireman's picnic basket because this ensured him a role in the play; in one story Jenny acted as the autumn leaves that were supposed to fall on a fire hydrant which in turn was acted out by Mackenzie; and towards the end of the project the children were even beginning to paint masks to use in their acting to pretend that they were all of these various items and ideas in their stories.

The director, the actors and the audience

The activity, although structured in its careful planning, in its teacher participation and in its expectation of the simultaneous participation of the whole group, was also largely a child-directed activity. The essence of the activity was the individual development of a child within a social context. Not only was the story initiated and created by the child, but the responsibility of taking charge and proceeding with the play-directing also largely belonged to the child. Since the idea originated from one of their peers, it seemed easier for the other children to relate to it and inter-nalise it. For some reason, even though the plot sometimes could sound incredulous to an adult, the children always took each story very seriously. Consequently, this led to a high degree of cooperation and interaction amongst the group. The teacher, however, was always present in the background ready to help whenever the storyteller required assistance. The massive amount of self-confidence and self-esteem built up during this process was quite tangible. Within a few weeks previously 'shy' children, reluctant to join in at first, were conducting the activity with much flair and confidence. The high demand to be the storyteller of the day never failed to amaze the teacher. The other goal, to participate as an 'actor' in the day's story, was also highly desirable no matter what the role. Whether the 'director' was looking for someone to play the role of the princess, or whether it was a kitchen table that needed to be present on stage, there were always several hands shooting up indicating no dearth of enthusiastic volunteers.

A high degree of negotiating and decision-making was involved during the process of choosing a handful of actors from a host of eager volunteers. Those who did not get acting roles became the spectators, or the audience. But a ground rule had to be put into place whereby a carefully planned and deliberate attempt was made to ensure that children who wanted parts and did not get chosen would get a chance to act in some future story. Being asked to wait used to upset some children in the beginning, but the issue was quickly resolved when waiting lists were created for those who wanted a turn to act in a story. Even these four year olds soon realised that, sooner or later, all children did get a turn to act in a story. And although a certain degree of disinterest was definitely noticeable amongst the audience participants in the beginning, this too mitigated when a special and new responsibility for members of the audience was created, that of providing feedback and comments at the end of the play. The children came to understand that they, as part of the audience, had a key role to play in offering their thoughts and responses at the end of the enacted story. A group discussion was held at the close of each play and the teacher wrote down the children's comments as they reflected candidly about aspects of the play they liked or disliked. This process began to generate profuse verbal interaction and exchange of ideas on several social issues that had emerged during the course of the story. Some of the issues that came up for discussion were the ethics of hunting and the killing of animals, gender differences and why certain roles had to be limited to either gender, the debate between good guys and bad guys, death, issues of control and power that were associated with certain characters like kings and policemen, and so forth. Audience participation in this manner certainly helped to better sustain everyone's interest levels. Snippets of some post-performance conversations from three different stories are shared below:

Willy:	That doesn't look like a bad guy.
Caity:	I'm a girl bad guy.
Alec:	Girls can be bad guys too.

Gabriel:	Jenny, you're a girl dolphin.
Willy:	I liked the snake.
Eric and Carol:	We liked the fairy.
Sonya:	I liked it when the snakes came alive.
Jin-Young:	I liked the snakes.
Eric:	I didn't like the hunter because he killed the snakes!

| Alec: | I liked the hunter because he stepped on the snakes. The snakes had to be bad. |
| Rob: | They weren't bad snakes. They were just walking home. |

Hung-Li:	I liked the princesses.
Anthony:	I didn't think the castle looked real.
Sonya:	I liked the forest.
Jennifer:	I liked the fairy because she was so nice.
Hung-Li:	I want to do it next.
Sonya:	Then me!
Willy:	I'll do it after Sonya, and then Jennifer can do it.

One story was very short but the enactment generated a lot of feedback. This was Willy's story: 'There is a lion and the lion is getting the bad guy. Then a bird gets the lion'. Here were some comments from the audience:

Alec:	I liked the lion because he was so mighty and fierce.
Anna:	I liked the bird and the lion.
Sam:	I liked the tiger because he had a funny tail.
Hung-Li:	I liked the bird because it caught the lion.
Gabriel:	I liked the bad guy because he had on a hat.
Rob:	I liked the tiger because he had a funny tail.
Jenny:	I liked the lion because he had a silly tail and he was funny.

Most important for its success was the intrinsic motivation that resulted due to the fact that the play had been initiated and generated by the children. In the months that followed, there was never a day when the children didn't want to 'do' a story. In fact, they would spontaneously come up to the teacher, requesting to be the storyteller for the day. The positive responses and the desire to participate and create their own story was overwhelming, and eventually the teacher had to start keeping a list of names in order to keep track of whose turn it was next to be the storyteller. The project had proved to be successful in many ways with regard to language development, cognitive development, socio-emotional development, community building, the creation of an environment of multiculturalism in the classroom. How this multi-dimensional project was theoretically supported is what will be discussed next because for educators it is the understanding of the inter-facing between educational practice and theory that is of most significance.

Relating practice to theory

Egocentrism and socio-centrism

The above drama-based project offered enormous scope for problem-solving as well as decision-making in tasks such as outlining a story; deciding on characters, dialogue, costumes and props; choosing the actors; organising the stage; handling the direction of the play and dealing with suggestions and advice. Traditionally, children's thinking has been viewed within a Piagetian framework which describes young children as being egocentric and unable to decentre from their individual perspectives. Margaret Donaldson (1979) was one of the first to challenge this premise providing empirical evidence to the contrary. According to her perspective, children's thinking does take on a socio-centric character when it is done in a social context that is of interest and relevance to them. Researchers such as Hughes and Donaldson (1979) noted the minimum use of language in many of the Piagetian experiments and proposed that this could have been one of the reasons why children responded in a more egocentric way. When experiments and studies similar to the Piagetian tasks were conducted involving the use of language and within a context that was meaningful and of interest to the children their responses indicated a definite socio-centric way of thinking (Lee, 1989). Several other studies on children's visual perceptions, spatial perspectives and age-appropriate speech styles lend support to the viewpoint that even very young children are socio-centric and aware of perspectives other than their own (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982;

Ives, 1980; Lempers, Flavell, & Flavell, 1977; Leung & Rheingold, 1981; Sachs & Devin, 1976). One story had the main character cutting down a tree. The author of the story was Alec and chose Anthony to play the role of the main character. During the enactment, Alec directed Anthony to chop the tree in a vertical motion. Anthony objected pointing out that a tree has to be chopped in a horizontal chopping motion. But Alec insisted on his way, and since it was Alec's story and he had the 'dramatic licence' for the day, Anthony agreed to try chopping the tree in a different way.

Vygotskian concepts

Language and cognition

The role played by language and social interaction is a central aspect in Vygotsky's theory and provides an overarching theme for this article. It is though encountering difficulties, being puzzled, and arriving at resolutions that children become increasingly aware of language and thought. Having established their socio-centric nature, one can better consider that even young children must learn to become aware of language as an independent structure and this awareness develops when something gives them an opportunity for thought, and instead of proceeding with an activity they stop to consider possibilities. As opportunities for social interaction and use of language increase, there is a corresponding increase in problem-solving and reflection and the child becomes more able to articulate the results of actual experience and knowledge. In the curriculum on dramatic play discussed here, the contextual significance of the children's own stories and the feeling of being in control led to many opportunities for reflection and internal motivation and helped children achieve a set of critical thinking skills. Cognitive processes were refined as the children were required to give more thought to their stories that were about to be acted out. Writing stories was not a private activity anymore but one which was going to be presented to the entire class. Questions asked by their peers would have to be answered and fielded by the storyteller, and this involved additional thinking, reasoning, figuring out and explaining. It also required children to reflect on and consider each other's perspectives. The negotiations such as those that occurred between the director and the actors also led to information exchange through the competencies of speaking, listening, composing messages and framing questions, which further resulted in significant enhancement in the communication skills of the children. External social activities were gradually being internalised, thus leading to intellectual development, and the tool that was being used to achieve this was language. A strong parallel to Vygotsky's theory was beginning to emerge.

   Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, a firm believer in the social construction of knowledge through children's interactions with adults and more capable peers, conceptualised thinking as a process that entails cognitive processes such as actively remembering and drawing on memories, contemplating, planning and perceiving rather than merely the static acquisition and possession of memories, plans and cognitions (Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Further, Vygotsky emphasised the interrelated roles of the individual and the environment, noting that the child is not an independent entity but is intimately connected to his/her environment. Thus, from a Vygotskian perspective, the process of cognitive development is socio-cultural in nature and involves the development of skills as supported by cultural tools such as language, and occurs through active interaction and communication (Gupta, 2006). When children are involved in collaboration with peers and adults, a shared thinking is produced by the interaction which is qualitatively different from the thinking produced by the individual. Further, this shared thinking provides the opportunity to be involved in joint decision-making processes which are more socio-cultural in nature. These socio-cultural processes are then internalised by the individual cognising child for later use (Wood, 1991). From such social interactions in cultural contexts emerges intellectual activity, dialogue and informal teaching, and these begin to form the basis of understanding and cognition. The telling of stories

and the dramatisation of those stories provides a powerful medium for the promotion of language development. In addition to the composition of stories, dramatic play itself is instrumental in triggering discussions and arguments which call upon the use of explanatory and reasoning skills. Research has established that a relationship between individuals forms the basis for cognitive and linguistic mastery. This project certainly promoted a high frequency of opportunities for transmission, construction, transaction and transformation in complex and ongoing interplays between various individuals.

Vygotsky's ideas on the importance of early literacy experiences in the acquisition of literacy skills were also very evident. According to him, gestures are writings in air and written signs are merely gestures that become fixed (Vygotsky, 1978), and the origins of written language can be linked to gestures, scribbling, and dramatic or symbolic play. Several studies have supported the idea that the nature of the interaction between a teacher and a child, a print-rich environment, and the encouragement of literacy uses valued by the child's culture all contribute to shaping the child's foundations in literacy acquisition.

The zone of proximal development

In his ideas on the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky (1978) focused on the fact that the guidance that is provided through a process of collaboration with a more skilled partner enhances support of the development of expertise and competencies in children. He perceived the zone as being the difference between what a child can achieve on his/her own and what he/she can achieve when working with an adult or a more capable peer. Interacting and collaborating with peers and with more capable peers, with free and reciprocal exchange of ideas with equals or with adults is a form of guided participation and social interaction which encourages children to grapple with intellectual challenges (Rogoff, 1991; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984). In the above project, children served as important facilitators of each other's cognitive development as they engaged in discussion with peers, and this also led to several instances of enhanced moral reasoning. This curriculum on dramatic play could very well be viewed in terms of guided participation in which children were active learners in a classroom community of people who supported, challenged and guided novices as they collectively participated in a cultural activity. Willy's parents shared that he was so taken up by the concept of story development and acting that he was trying out this activity at home with his younger brother and sister. Eric's father remarked that Eric too had become so interested in story that he would sit at home with paper and pencil and fill up pages of 'writing' saying that he was writing a story.

Cultural signs and tools

Vygotsky argued for the important role that cultural signs such as speech and writing systems played in promoting cognitive development. Speech and writing are symbolic systems created by a cultural group, and during the course of this curriculum the children had created their own sets of symbolic systems to use to communicate the story's ideas. Children have a basic need to organize their knowledge and experiences, and narrative or story is commonly used by them in an attempt to order their lives and imagine what could have happened, should have happened and what indeed did happen (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). All of the props that were created by the children were done so based on their understanding of the ideas in the story and in their attempt to convey a clearer story to an onlooker. The process certainly involved a high degree of cognitive processing as they gave thought to what they wanted to portray and the materials in the classroom that they could use to create their props so as to symbolise their ideas. The ideas themselves were situated within specific socio-cultural contexts, and each child was required to delve into his/her

own repertoire of memories, narratives and knowledge, and his/her own understanding of story, characters in various social roles, sceneries and past events. What was significant in the process was that children were actively communicating and working with each other as they shared and voiced aloud their dilemmas and solutions. Sandra had written a story with a castle in it, and it was she who for the first time indicated that she wanted to use a couple of empty cardboard boxes (that had been sitting in the hallway outside the classroom) to build the castle and asked Alex if he would help her do so. When Carol wrote a story about a painting hanging on the wall, she had thought of making the painting in advance during the period of choice time that was regularly scheduled before the play was staged. But she overlooked the fact that the play was being staged on the rug in the middle of the room and there was no wall on the 'stage'. She looked thoughtful for a minute but almost immediately said that someone could be the wall and hold up the painting. Hung-Li volunteered to play the 'wall' and as she stood on the edge of the rug holding up the painting, Carol got the appropriate backdrop for her story.

Willpower and personality

Another aspect of the human personality that Vygotsky acknowledged was willpower: which makes it possible for us to take action in situations in which forces pull us strongly against it. This could be seen in the case of a couple of very shy children.

Sonya was a shy girl, seldom spoke during large-group activities, and was reluctant to participate in any group activity in the classroom including morning meeting. She told her mother that she did not participate because she was shy. Her conversations with an adult involved a minimum number of words and she spoke mostly in a soft whisper. Sonya was the last to volunteer to be the storyteller and avoided taking part in plays. She had to be encouraged and cajoled into trying to write her first story which was very brief with the process requiring a lot of prompting and scaffolding by the teacher. This was understandable because the whole idea of standing in front of a large group and taking charge was something that was in opposition to her usually quiet and shy personality. But the experience of writing and directing that first story was so positive for her that she immediately told the teacher she wanted to do another story. For the second round of stories she had been waiting eagerly and needed no further help. By the end of the semester she was enthusiastically dictating her own stories, volunteering to act in other people's plays, and providing interesting bits of feedback as an audience member as well. Her language had blossomed, her confidence levels had soared and she had managed to break free of her usually shy mode of behaviour. But there is no doubt that it took a lot of willpower for her to initiate this change when she agreed to be the storyteller for the very first time.

Alec rarely used to leave the block area to work in the other centres. Blocks were his favourite activity and he very seldom worked on any art and writing work. Further, Alec was easily frustrated if he was not included in the acting out of the story. He would cry loudly, fling himself on the floor and prevent the activity from proceeding. With time, however, there was a marked change in his behaviour. Although he continued to exhibit initial disappointment if not chosen to act in a story, he began to quickly reconcile to being part of the audience, showed more patience and enthusiastically began to offer feedback at the end of each play.

This curriculum also provided clear evidence of the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2001). Vygotskian ideas implied that individual development and higher order thinking is rooted in social experiences, and human action is mediated by cultural tools and signs (Wertsch, 1979, 1991). So it is also relevant to frame this activity within the consideration of the child's affective growth. A sense of balance has to be achieved between the child's own desires and those of his/her social environment to promote the emergence of a positive sense of self. The social processes of dramatic play provided

the child with an opportunity to create 'model situations' with complete control to freely plan and experiment with possibilities, and express himself/herself via different media such as language, art, movement, and so forth. The child is also able to thrash out, in a social context, possible conflicts that might exist within the self or with other individuals, thus dealing with the complexities of life to gain mastery over his/her realities. In other words, development first followed an inter-psychological path and was later internalised by the child as an intra-psychological phenomenon (Valsiner, 1987).

Spontaneous and scientific concepts

Evidence of Vygotsky's analysis on spontaneous and scientific concepts was also reflected in these activities. Spontaneous concepts are understandings that children develop in a non-formal manner, or outside of formal and systematic instruction. The shared enactment of various narratives created a medium within which children brought into a discussion their various understandings of different ideas and their definitions such as the question of whether all snakes are harmful, or whether all 'bad guys' are male, or whether all hunters are good or bad, and so forth. Clearly, in the course of their discussions, their own understanding of these spontaneous concepts was going through some form of transformation as they heard arguments from peers with different perspectives, perhaps crystallising into the rudiments of scientific concepts.

Enhancing the multicultural perspective

The connection between this curriculum and the tenets of multicultural education cannot be underscored enough. It is important to define how the term 'multicultural education' is used in the context of this activity. Ramsey (1987) very lucidly explains that 'multicultural education reflects a pluralistic point of view in which the diversity of … the world is valued and preserved' (p. 187). What is inherent in this definition is that multicultural education allows people to participate in the larger society without being required to abandon their perspectives. Multicultural education helps people unlearn some of their learned fears and negative responses about other groups. It helps challenge stereotypes and prejudices. If children are helped to form their earliest social impressions from a multicultural perspective, they may be able to resist the negative attitudes and social pressures later in life.

This 'multicultural' approach in education is not about a culture-specific curriculum or a curriculum about cultures. It is a process that focuses on validating children's backgrounds and lives, and challenging their social assumptions by providing different information and alternate perspectives. This includes the circumstance when the information emerges from the voices embedded in their own stories as was done in this activity on dramatic play described here. This sharing of personal narratives and enacting the stories based on those narratives goes a long way in expanding perspectives and creating an awareness of the fact that despite the many seen or unseen differences between people, they can share many similarities in their values and beliefs, and these similarities may also be clearly seen or sometimes deeply hidden. Each 'author or storyteller' in the classroom was given the opportunity to voice a personal narrative that was couched in beliefs and concepts that were important to the individual. This narrative was accepted by their peers as a perspective that was to be respected because it was important to the storyteller. Issues could be questioned and discussed, but ideas could not be rejected just on the basis of their being different from one's own personal perspectives.

Even though, on occasion, children's egocentrism may limit their ability to see information from multiple points of view, it does facilitate a certain empathy towards other people. Thus, while young children may not always understand another person's point of view, they are able

to respond to someone else's emotional experience. Children's awareness, preferences and assumptions reflect the attitudes of the adult world. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers help children articulate their ideas about differences amongst people in order to expand their understanding. The ability to see another's point of view is a complex cognitive process but the willingness to see another's point of view may be encouraged in children from their earliest social experiences. Further, as discussed earlier, when this is done within a context that is of interest to young children that shift towards socio-centrism, or the willing ability to see another's point of view, is indeed achieved.

In general, the project was quite successfully creating an environment which was conducive to co-participation, collaboration, enquiry and collaborative discovery as children proceeded to build upon the culturally shaped knowledge and value systems that they had brought into the classroom. Further, it allowed the teacher to understand the students in a more dynamic manner, contextualised within their own world-views and meaning-making processes. More importantly, it provided an opportunity to gain a more positive view of those children whose capabilities are often distorted by the dominant and mainstream pedagogical processes. The overall project which included writing the story, problem-solving, issuing directions and instructions to peers, designing props and costumes, analysing the plot, simulating movements of such things as flames, snakes, horses, kings, falling leaves, castles, firemen and so forth provided each child multiple opportunities to experience and practice their different interests and talents, or in other words, their various 'intelligences' like logico-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, artistic, kinaesthetic and spatial (Gardner, 1983).

Conclusion

Several of the above theoretical implications tied in perfectly with the project on dramatic play, and the observations may be summarised as follows:

1. Children's language was seen to improve with regard to an enhanced vocabulary and increased complexity of syntax. This occurred due to their participation in story-telling as well as through the increased verbal interactions with peers during and after the story enactment.
2. Deep-rooted emotional needs were expressed in the course of story-telling as children played around with and confronted their own conflicts. Playing out their emotional conflicts led to increased levels of self-confidence and self-esteem.
3. There was an increased awareness and interest in social issues that dealt with gender roles, power and control, ethical and moral issues, and so forth. In a story about hunters, the issue of hunting down and killing animals was explored as the discussion centred on whether it was right to kill animals even if they were not harming us.
4. The activity offered opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, negotiating, organisational skills, leadership skills and decision-making. Choosing actors for the various roles, designing props that would be used in each story, having to justify choices, and more importantly, coming to an agreement of sorts resulted in the facilitation of conflict resolution in the classroom in general.
5. Children served as important facilitators of each other's cognitive development as they engaged in discussion with peers and this led to enhanced instances of moral reasoning as well.
6. There was an increase in the recognition of different perspectives, a willingness to accept other possibilities, and a decentring from their own egocentric selves. This further led to the whole group becoming more aware of each other, knowing each other better and coming together as a stronger community.

The success of a good curricular activity lies, to some extent, in its ability to build up within the children a feeling of confidence, facilitating the development of developmental and academic skills and creating an emotionally balanced environment in the classroom wherein self-expression, creative efforts and learning are facilitated and propelled forward by its own momentum. This project on dramatic play gave the children opportunity after opportunity to mature in areas of cognitive, language, interpersonal and intrapersonal, emotional, artistic and even kinaesthetic development. It helped the children to discover themselves, discover their classmates, gain in self-confidence, learn how to organise and negotiate, how to lead and also how to follow, to be patient and wait for a turn, and most importantly, how to acknowledge and respect someone else's ideas, suggestions and perspectives. But it also facilitated literacy skills in reading, writing, dictating, listening and speaking.

The discussion of the implementation of this child-centred yet teacher-facilitated project would be incomplete if the classroom conditions and context within which it was implemented were not stated and acknowledged: (1) the project was successful because of a manageable class size: there were 18 children in the classroom, and two full-time teachers; (2) the school director was open to the idea of innovative classroom activities, and allowed teachers the freedom to design and individualise their curricula as opposed to following a state-mandated and scripted curriculum; (3) the teacher's own creativity, perseverance and faith in the value of this project cannot be discounted; (4) the project was based upon developmental and learning theories for young children, as well as upon the realities of an early childhood classroom; (5) the families and parents of the children in the classroom were supportive and respectful of the decisions that the classroom teachers made; (6) abundant resources available in the classroom with regard to physical space and materials such as paints, dress-up clothing, blocks, paper, art supplies, and so forth; and (7) the flexible schedule of the day allowed for large blocks of time to be used for classroom activities as determined by the teachers rather than have half-hour study periods to be followed strictly over the course of the school day. In an educational climate that currently emphasises scripted curricula for teachers, and a kindergarten school day dominated by only structured reading, writing and math activities, it becomes even more critical to ensure that the very young children are provided with holistic integrated activities that will encourage the co-construction of knowledge drawing upon the socio-cultural experiences children bring with them into the classroom while at the same time promoting the development of multiple skills. These are the activities which will prepare and equip young children with a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes which will ensure academic success in their elementary school years, and lead to children developing into well-rounded, balanced individuals.

Note on contributor

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