
Play and Literacy Learning in a Diverse Language Pre-kindergarten Classroom

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ABSTRACT This study explores a teacher's understandings of the role of play and her use of play in literacy learning serving children from diverse language backgrounds. The participants in this study were a public pre-kindergarten teacher and her class. Data were collected from interviews, informal conversations, observations, and self-reflexive notes. The teacher believed that play, as she defined it, has an important role in children's literacy learning and development, and she used playful activities (concrete, manipulative, fun, hands-on, and creative activities, including games) as potential teaching and learning mediums for literacy learning, within her own unique understanding and use of play. Implications for understanding multicultural and developmentally appropriate literacy practices are discussed in terms of teacher beliefs and understandings.

Introduction

This study explored teaching in an early childhood classroom where children with different languages encounter literacy in the form of play activities. In particular, it grappled with how a teacher, who claims to believe in play as a learning tool for young children, reasons about play and literacy as she constructs a curriculum that aligns with those beliefs. The purpose of this study was to describe a teacher's understanding and practice of play in literacy learning serving children from diverse language backgrounds in a public pre-kindergarten classroom. Guiding questions were: What does a teacher understand about the value of children's play for literacy learning with children from diverse language backgrounds? How does a teacher use play in literacy learning with children from diverse language backgrounds in her classroom practices? What are the general constraints on incorporating her curriculum into playful literacy lessons? These questions relate to a number of contemporary research issues, including the global growth of immigration and diversity, classroom practices with diverse populations, the relevance of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) for diverse classrooms of young children, the forms of literacy practice in DAP classrooms, the meaning of play in DAP, teacher understanding and beliefs about practice, and the relationship of teacher thinking to practice.

In many nations, there are increasing populations of immigrant children who speak a language other than the dominant language of instruction. According to the 1990 US census, over 6.3 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 years spoke a language other than English at home. Although there are increasing populations of these children, the research on second-language children's reading and writing is limited in scope and quantity (Garcia, 2000). Therefore, examining how a typical preschool teacher understands literacy learning serving children from diverse language backgrounds will help expand knowledge on teacher beliefs and practices and also has other implications for working with children from different language backgrounds.

Developmentally appropriate practice assumes universal developmental notions for understanding children and their growth, including play as a significant contributor to all aspects of development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). But DAP's notion of learning and play may fail to

capture the multilingual, multicultural characters of many families and communities. Critical voices about DAP note disputes about DAP; 'developmentally appropriate' practice may not always look the same (or mean the same thing, as this study intends to explore) in classrooms with diverse children. Genishi et al (1994) suggested that teachers use multiple perspectives to see learners grow and learn in developmentally appropriate settings by viewing children's knowledge of diverse languages, dialects, and discourse patterns as a developmental 'plus', not a developmental deficiency. Dyson (1995) examined teachers' perspectives of sociocultural diversity and teaching focused on the teaching of writing. She found sociocultural differences related to the issues of daily interactions with individual children in school life. Therefore, differences are not only from ethnic or racial heritage, language or economic class, but are tied with physical abilities, age and age-related culture, and more (Dyson, 1995). Teachers might need to think about their practices differently; 'instead of believing that values and understandings need to be shared and differences resolved, educators might come to see that the different views and practices within a teaching community are themselves a resource' (Lubeck, 1998, p. 290).

Preschool and kindergarten children are likely to engage in more voluntary literacy behaviors during free-play periods when literacy materials are introduced and teachers guide children to use those materials (Morrow & Rand, 1991). The interactive nature of play in the literacy-enriched centers is particularly important for children who come to school with varying experiences in literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). Play-based learning activities provide multiple ways for children to learn a variety of different skills and concepts. They allow children the opportunity to learn relevant skills and feel competent about their ability to learn in a comfortable and supportive environment (Klenk, 2001; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

Some studies also demonstrate that children whose play activities are enriched with literacy props or interventions acquire a fuller understanding of print. Roskos & Neuman (1993) found that day-care teachers facilitate literacy in a play context using characteristic behaviors and roles such as observer, participant, and trainer. Roskos & Neuman (1993) also observed that when teachers include literacy props such as books, markers, and signs in a dramatic play center, it increases print awareness and students engage in more literacy-related activities such as reading and writing. Adult interventions to prompt the literacy routines are necessary (Trawick-Smith & Picard, 2003). Moreover, according to Benz & Christie (1997), teachers should directly guide children during their play. Wilcox-Herzog (2002) demonstrated that make-believe play and literacy activities tended to increase with teachers' active engagement. Bennett et al's (1998) study notes that, in practice, teachers are more interventionist when teaching through play rather than emphasizing spontaneous learning as their own stated theories suggest. Thus, many integrate play into the curriculum with specific intent to guide literacy and mathematics learning in play (Bennett et al, 1997). These authors note that there are often discrepancies between how teachers think about practice and what they actually do in their classrooms.

Does our thinking about play relate to practice, and do discourses on play merit the attention they receive (Cannella, 1997; Reifel, 1999; Ailwood, 2003)? This study explores how one teacher constructs her own discourse about play in the particular conditions of her classroom. Traditionally, early childhood educators and practitioners in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) support child-initiated, teacher-supported play as an important aspect for children's learning and development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Children's learning and development depend largely on the play materials, equipment, and role models around them, as well as on what educators think can be accomplished by means of play. This view was the guiding conception for the researchers at the outset of the study. Researchers have explored children's literacy development in a play context (e.g. Christie, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991), but little research exists on literacy learning and teachers' understanding, practice, and the relationship between understanding and practice when teachers are serving children from diverse language backgrounds in a play context. Research about teacher understanding of the role of play and its practice is important for our knowledge about teacher thinking, for further teacher education, and for children's learning and development.

Children's creative engagement with reading and writing activities through play has important implications for their literacy development (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Dyson, 1995). This research has been stimulated by the growing acceptance of emergent literacy. In this vein,

educators encourage literacy learning through play in classroom settings by providing materials, including theme-related print materials – for example, putting menus, pencils, a note pad for food orders in a restaurant center as a dramatic play area – and teacher intervention through modeling and coaching to help children engage in literacy practices through play (Christie, 1994). In these print-enriched environments, children often incorporate literacy into their dramatic play, so play can be a good medium for young children’s learning and development (Vukelich, 1994; Dyson, 1995; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

Many play literacy researchers have been guided by Vygotsky (1978), who maintained that symbolic play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language. Therefore, children may use these early symbolic activities to build literacy (McLane & McNamee, 1990). Dyson (1992) studied how African American children in an urban school use written language to represent and reflect on their ideas and as a mediator for social activity including play. Much of young children’s writing is exploratory play. The development of written language was intertwined with children’s social play experiences with diverse symbolic media. Literacy was linked to social play and the arts (Dyson, 1992). The notion of play was expanded, to include activities not often associated with DAP.

Beliefs in the value of play as a literacy tool are part of the larger body of teaching beliefs (e. g. Elbaz, 1981; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Shulman, 1986). Based on the study of Elbaz (1981), a teacher’s practical knowledge is not acquired randomly and abstractly; rather, it is learned, tested, and developed through field experiences. Our study provides a useful framework for thinking about research on teachers’ implicit theories (in our case, thinking about play for English as a second language [ESL] literacy) and about the dynamic of those theories in use (in an early childhood classroom):

[T]eachers do seem to hold implicit theories about their work and that these conceptual systems can be made more explicit through a variety of direct and indirect inquiry techniques. In other words, teachers do have theories and belief systems that influence their perceptions, plans and actions. (Clark & Peterson, 1986, pp. 291-292)

We describe one teacher’s thinking and actions related to play in her curriculum.

Several studies have looked at teacher understanding related to early childhood literacy and play. Saracho (2002) examined the roles of the teacher as play intervener in support of literacy learning. Teachers extended their roles in relation to children’s play to integrate their philosophy of emergent literacy in early childhood play environments. As teachers acquire knowledge and understanding of their roles, they apply the principles of literacy and early childhood education to practical situations (Saracho, 2002). Genishi et al (1995) explored a first-grade teacher’s theories regarding second-language learning and development, and they found that a teacher’s theories can be conceptualized and reconceptualized over time in classroom practice. This study suggests that the creation and application of theories will occur in dynamic and interactive ways in particular contexts (Genishi et al, 1995). Teachers’ understandings of play, especially of literacy play with ESL students, need further explication (Saracho, 2001; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002).

Although many types of play exist, most studies of literacy learning in a play context are focused on dramatic play (also called symbolic, sociodramatic, pretend, imaginative, or make-believe play) as an ideal place for children’s literacy learning, and it has been of most interest to literacy researchers (Yaden et al, 2000). However, this study offers another opportunity to explore other types of play from a teacher’s perspective, to better understand children’s literacy learning in a play context and how her classroom practice serves children from diverse language backgrounds.

We began the study with preliminary, ‘working’ definitions of terms about understanding, ESL literacy-related activities, and play, based on DAP, pre-existing studies and our own beliefs. For the analysis, Clark & Peterson (1986), Pajares (1992), Tsui (2003), and Woods (1996) provided frameworks for looking at teacher understanding, including personalized general judgment about the meanings based on beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, experience, images, values, and conceptions of teaching and learning. ESL literacy-related activities promote the development of oral language, writing, reading, and storytelling (Nielson & Monson, 1996; Weis, 1999). Our initial working definition of classroom play included explorative, manipulative, fun, and enjoyable

activities, including games or puzzles with pictures/words, constructive play, and dramatic play during circle time or center time in a classroom (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Frost et al, 2008).

Method

A qualitative research method was used for this study. The first author visited a public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) classroom and observed the teacher and students. Data were collected by naturalistic observation and documentation of the teacher and class regarding the role of play in literacy learning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

The first author served as participant observer to help children in a public pre-K classroom, which included students who spoke a language other than English. She had known the teacher, Ms Joyce (a pseudonym), for over one and a half years. According to Glesne (1999), an 'observer as a participant' remains primarily an observer but has some interaction with study participants. In this sense, although the first author had a close relationship with the teacher and her students, she looked on her position as an assistant teacher, helper, or friend, but she did not teach them. The classroom teacher introduced the first author as a friend and sometimes asked for her help during lessons or activities.

The first author observed the classroom for one and a half years. In the first year, in spring 2003, the class consisted of 13 Korean students, 4 Chinese students, 1 Spanish-speaking student, 2 students from Pakistan and 2 English speakers among 22-24 students. In the second year, the number varied from around 14 students to 20 students. The changing number of students was due to children from a nearby children's shelter, some of whom stayed in the classroom for transition times of two weeks to several months. Among those 14-20 students were 6 ESL students (5 Korean and 1 Chinese) and 2-3 special needs children who needed help with speech and language. Most children were born in their home countries and maintained home culture in their neighborhoods; some children were newly arrived in the USA. Most children were between 4 and 5 years old.

The School

The school was an elementary school, with pre-K to fifth graders. There were two pre-K classes. The sample for this study was a teacher in one of the pre-K classes. The other pre-K class was taught by a Spanish-English bilingual teacher for Spanish-speaking students, so we chose as our observational classroom the one that had a greater variety of ESL students, including a Korean population. This school had many international students from university housing, so it had one Korean teacher and one Chinese teacher. In pre-K, these bilingual teachers did not pull out students to teach their home languages but helped Korean or Chinese students to adjust in their classrooms, translating their language into English or vice versa.

The Classroom

The classroom was located in a portable building outside of the main school building but it was spacious and connected with the other pre-K classroom and shared toilet facilities. The teacher liked to change her classroom often, rearranging furniture and materials, and believed that changing materials increased children's creativity, which to her was an important characteristic of play. The classroom had a home center as one of the dramatic play areas; a manipulative center with letter puzzles, games, and small/big figures; library centers with books and two comfortable chairs; an art center (it could be changed into other centers depending on the lessons, but usually it was used for paintings, stencils, and crafts); an area for construction with wooden unit building blocks (it was used for circle time and had a children's name mat on the floor); and a computer center (it was opened in the afternoon).

The Teacher, Ms Joyce

In order to find a teacher who valued children's play and ESL literacy learning, the first author visited the school for an internship and asked the principal for a playful multicultural classroom. Ms Joyce was well known among Korean parents as a good teacher who understood ESL children and had special concern for them. As an example, even though Ms Joyce was a monolingual English speaker, her warm attitude toward ESL children made children think that she could understand and even speak in their home languages. She was a very experienced teacher for preschool-aged children and had taught at the current public school for four years. She also valued parents' participation in children's learning, so she asked parents to read books at home in the children's home language and to volunteer as a translator or assistant at school. However, she never asked parents to donate money or purchase classroom items because she knew that most of her students were from the university student housing or nearby homes in which children were not rich.

Ms Joyce was a white, Anglo-American, native-English speaker. Before teaching at the public school, she had more than 15 years' experience in private preschool settings with children ranging in age from 18 months to 12 years, but primarily with 3-5 year-olds. She graduated college with a business management degree, but she said that she never left the field of education. She ran a preschool and returned to college to begin a master's degree, pausing to raise her own children. She then decided to return to teaching, so she applied to attain her teaching certificate and was hired by the public school. The study began during her fourth year at the public school.

During early discussions with the first author, Ms Joyce indicated that she was a member of the National Association of the Education for Young Children (NAEYC). She had been interested in second language learners since her first year of public school teaching, because the majority of the children in her class were ESL students. She wanted to help children in her classroom and wanted to know more about this topic, so she attended workshops especially for teaching ESL students. In addition, she read books and checked out materials prior to passing the test for her ESL certification which was offered by the state board. Through this, she became familiar with the different theories and, thus, felt up to date with current thinking. Moreover, she paid to attend workshops and then used websites and resources provided by the speakers to find additional ideas. She most valued children's cooperative learning with their peers and the expression of themselves either orally or in writing/drawing that revealed their ideas and thoughts. Providing a safe and nurturing environment was very important to Ms Joyce to help children explore, try new things, take risks, and express themselves, including children who came to the class from stressful situations such as the children's shelter. In addition, Ms Joyce indicated that teachers should use different materials based on children's learning styles. The curriculum she taught was based on pre-K guidelines from the state, which was divided into mathematics, science, language, early literacy, fine art, listening comprehension, and social studies. Ms Joyce said she knew DAP as a member of NAEYC and attempted to relate DAP to curriculum guidelines from the school district. However, she claimed to negotiate her classroom curriculum not only following fixed guidelines, but also applying her own creative curriculum based on her experience. She said that she applied her own teaching methods based on her knowledge from workshops, theorists, and well-known curricula such as High-Scope and Montessori. She claimed to spend more time on language and literacy development in her curriculum because of the ESL students.

The ESL Children and their Families

Ms Joyce's class consisted of children who were native English speakers and children from diverse language backgrounds. Conversations with parents and school records showed that most of the children from diverse language backgrounds lived in university student housing and their parents were graduate students at the university. Many of these parents stay in the United States for 2-5 years during their graduate study and then go back to their home countries. Other parents get jobs in the United States and then move to another state or area. Therefore, in this elementary school, there were many children with languages other than English spoken at home in pre-K through first or second grade class, and then the number of these children decreased after second grade.

At least one of the parents of these children had prepared to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or Graduate

Management Admission Test (GMAT) to enter graduate school; most were university educated in their home countries. They could read and write English but their speaking and listening English abilities were often not developed when they first arrived from their home countries. Usually, they were highly concerned about their children's education both at home and at school. For parents, learning English for themselves and teaching English to their children was important whether they were going back to their home countries or planned to stay in the United States, because learning English was important in their countries. Parents were eager to teach English to their children during their stay in the United States, but at the same time, they wanted them to keep their home languages so children would make a smooth transition when they returned to their countries. Ms Joyce's advice on the first day of school that 'if you speak your native language well, you can speak English well' was seen as a good maxim for these parents.

Children from diverse language backgrounds could be categorized into two groups. One group was children who had had some preschool experience in the United States before coming to this pre-K class and the other was children who had just arrived from their home countries. Children in the first group appeared more active in class even at the beginning of school, because they could understand and speak English better and communicate better with the teacher than children who had recently arrived from their home countries. In addition, these children could help the teacher and their friends in the class as translators or mediators. The other children seemed to be more shy and reluctant because of their limited English. However, as time went by, they adjusted well with the special help of their classroom teacher, the bilingual Korean or Chinese teachers and other children.

Children from diverse language backgrounds learned English in a short time through the print-enriched environment, interactive social relationships among friends and Ms Joyce. Parents spoke of their amazement at their children's English improvement by the end of the school year. Some reported that their children were correcting parents' incorrect pronunciation or grammar in English.

Data Collection Procedures

The first author collected data for more than one and a half years. In the first spring semester, she got to know the teacher and classroom, and identified some salient or recurrent themes or activities in order to develop research questions. Data included interviews, informal conversations, scheduled observations, and self-reflexive notes about the teacher and her students (focusing on the teacher's general educational background and philosophies about children and their learning). Detailed interview sessions and observations, informal conversations, and self-reflexive notes about the teacher and her students were gathered the following year.

During the first semester, data were gathered twice each week, usually on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, including lunchtime. Subsequently, data were collected three mornings each week. Children appeared to be more likely to be engaged in literacy-related activities when they were familiar with the teacher and her routines. Children's literacy ability improved compared to the beginning of the school year, based on the first author's observations and interviews with the teacher. Therefore, we decided to add one more day to gather data in order not to miss valuable moments that would be related to research questions. Interviews with the teacher and observations of her interaction with children focused on ESL students while they learned literacy through play were collected for data analysis. During the summer vacation, the first author contacted the teacher several times via telephone, email, and letters to verify classroom activities and to verify the teacher's special intentions for the ESL children.

Data Analysis

Research on teacher thinking is necessary when we try to understand and predict what teachers do. According to Clark & Peterson (1986), teacher planning, teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions, and teachers' theories and beliefs are included as teachers' thought processes. They also support the research findings that teachers' thought processes are affected critically by an understanding of the constraints and opportunities provided by the teaching process. In the past,

interviews, field observations, and narrative descriptions of the participants in a study have been used in research on teachers' thought processes (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

This study was done using naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We began to analyze data from transcriptions of audiotaped interview sessions and field notes from classroom observations. Data analysis involves a constant comparative method to analyze the data, which involved unitizing, categorizing, filling in patterns, and member checking, as follows: read and think over interview transcripts, informal conversation, classroom observations, and self-reflexive notes considering research questions; make the data into the smallest units of information that might stand alone as independent thoughts, which could consist of a few key words, a sentence, or a paragraph. In this study, there were two major pieces of information: one was a teacher's philosophical understanding of the role of play in literacy learning serving children from diverse language backgrounds, and the other was her classroom practice regarding play in literacy learning. Therefore, first we tried to categorize units about the teacher's understandings based on the transcripts of interviews and informal conversations, which were supported by field observation that focused on Ms Joyce's beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge about play in literacy learning for children from diverse language backgrounds. After defining categories of Ms Joyce's understandings of play in literacy learning for children from diverse language backgrounds, we created categories of her classroom practice regarding play in ESL literacy learning with the information derived from interview sessions, observation and field notes.

After we developed tentative categories and titles, we moved back and forth between data and categories to judge the fit of the data with the respective categories. Through this process, we could examine the relationship between the teacher's understanding and practice of play in literacy learning serving children from diverse language backgrounds, as directly connected with the second research question presented in the introductory paragraph of this report. During and after moving the data into categories, we showed them to a peer debriefer, a graduate student in an education department who read interview transcripts and observation notes for data credibility.

Findings

Data from teacher interviews and observations of the classroom revealed a number of themes concerning teacher beliefs about children and play in the literacy curriculum, the teacher's involvement in play, relationships between home and school, and the difficulties of implementing a playful curriculum.

The Teacher's Understanding of the Value of Children's Play

Ms Joyce described play as a concrete, creative, fun activity for children's learning and development. She stated that play can help children with short attention spans and may provide natural peer learning and teaching contexts through children's social interaction. In regard to ESL and literacy, Ms Joyce valued emergent literacy learning, providing literacy-enriched materials in the classroom along with emphasizing the development of children's first language. Ms Joyce's values of play in ESL literacy are that play: (1) becomes an international language; (2) provides a relaxed and comfortable environment for children's learning; (3) helps with integrated lessons such as literacy and mathematics through play together; and (4) makes a natural connection between the home language and the target language (English). Last, in terms of her roles, Ms Joyce described herself as a provider, player, facilitator, helper, and monitor in ESL literacy through play. Ms Joyce described how she understood play:

About play, for me, if I see pre-K, it is kind of playful and play ... it's using materials to explore and as they play and as they talk and they learn from each other ... that's how they make it more concrete by saying it and by doing it.

Ms Joyce regarded play as concrete, manipulative, hands-on activities for each learning center. She believed that children who have short attention spans benefit and learn through constant engagement with concrete and manipulative activities:

I want them to explore as much as possible and use hands-on materials as much as possible to learn concepts, because I know they have short attention spans and can't sit at the circle time for a long time.

She wanted the children to be engaged with many hands-on activities during center time and even circle time, so she made the curriculum something visual and tangible to the children:

Play continues to be important to me and we know that children at this age have short attention spans and have different rates of grabbing developmental concepts, so we provide many learning centers and many activities ... um ... for them to interact on their level with concrete materials and hands-on materials. We learn through observation and listening to children when they teach each other and when they act on their own environment, so by doing that ... it just helps them to learn and to tell friends to help them to incorporate meanings.

Since creativity was an important element for managing her class in a more meaningful and fun way, Ms Joyce changed and rotated classroom furniture, toys, and learning materials often to make them new and fresh:

I think play is creativity. I change my classroom often. I do like to rotate books and switch materials. Just stretch their own play and what they are doing. If I see that they haven't gone to a center, I might in the afternoon, I sort of close off some centers and then they would go 'I've not done puzzle for a while'. I like to change the room often ... you would find if you rotate the materials, or take something away and put it in closet for three weeks and then bring it back out ... or just twist the home center a little bit by adding new things ... that the children become more engaged and interested and then spend longer time there.

Ms Joyce indicated that play would be the best way to learn by doing, creating, experiencing, and exploring the world. Sometimes, when she provided new props or toys during center time, she gave children enough time to find new items in the classroom, let them initiate conversation about the new toys, and let children figure them out through exploration. Ms Joyce also pointed out play could be an open-ended, self-discovery, and theme-based learning place for young children. Unlike study or work, play itself implies free choices, self-discovery, and no right or wrong answers, which can be connected with open-ended activities. Ms. Joyce liked to use play in her teaching because she found it a fun way to learn, a universal tool for children, and a good way to manage children's short attention spans.

Moreover, to Ms Joyce, play meant creating a natural environment for peer learning and teaching. She valued play as social learning in a relaxed mode. While children talk, listen, and share stories through play, they may increase and stretch their vocabulary and express themselves, as well as foster their friendships:

I think they learn from each other, I think they learn in a relaxed environment. If you play alongside them, you can sort of stretch their play a little bit and give them some more ideas, but through play, you can learn about their own vocabulary and own understanding and they can act out the experiences that they had or wish they had. Providing them with props is the way that stretches their vocabulary and their play. But I really think that they learn how to express themselves and how to get along with their friends.

Since she valued play as a relaxed vehicle for children's language learning and development, Ms Joyce also provided related props to stretch their use of vocabulary and ideas with friends.

The Teacher's Different Roles in Play Associated with ESL Literacy Learning

Ms Joyce assumed the role of provider, player, facilitator, helper, and monitor during children's literacy learning through play including children from diverse language backgrounds. Ms Joyce knew how to scaffold ESL children's literacy development through play. In the beginning, she modeled it with step-by-step guidance, and later, she reduced her scaffolding and played with the children as a parallel player. At the end, she let children help each other to learn literacy through play:

Well, my role is kind of facilitating play by setting up the environment and providing the props so that they can have an enriched environment to act out and to act upon the things they are given. So, I am providing hands-on materials and different choices of materials ... I mean right now ... later in the year, we have so much material[s] out. It's because at the very beginning, we teach them how to use materials and we help them to be independent to use materials and they change the use of materials, which is great. They expand their knowledge ... sort it out and put it away on their own. So, just as a facilitator ... to help them meet the objectives ... they don't even know they're meeting ... they don't know there is this list of things that I want to look for. [She is showing a pre-K guideline.]

You have purposes. Let children play and interact with their environment in order to achieve those purposes. However, I kind of monitor the play as well because if it's just play everyday, it's kind of ... I want them to stretch their thinking and learning, so I don't want them to just play without purposes ... so, purposeful play where the skills are involved. I am kind of monitoring ... sometimes, I am just taking notes while children play. To me, play is very important because that's how they achieve the goals that I am setting like by doing, by playing and by acting on their environment.

Ms Joyce saw her role was an active facilitator, not only observing ESL children's play but also digging in and becoming a part of their play for a moment. And then she stepped out of their play for a while in order to let children go forward. When Ms Joyce provided or introduced new materials to the class or play center, exploration was always first:

...explorations are always first. Let them learn and let them tell a fact to me, I can see them where they are and then at the beginning of the year, explore, explore and explore and then know that I could make links over here. So at first let them explore ... and then show them to the different purposes ... we can use this to make a pattern or you can make something and help and guide them for the next step ... it helps their play become more purposeful. And you can see them developmentally where they are and what area you need to help them with to grow.

For Ms Joyce, explorations were always the first step to learning and knowing new things in her class, especially at the beginning of the year. She provided something new to learn and checked developmentally where the children were and what she needed to do to help them grow. With these observations, she could guide them through the next steps in their play, which became more purposeful.

The Teacher's Practice of Using Play in the Classroom

Use play as 'game' or 'trick'.

We play games about reading and they always love pictures with words. I have these little books that I purchased as centers for them by theme. And I will hold up those and say, 'oh you can tell me what it says' ... They love it. And 'You can't trick us, we are so smart,' they say. 'We can read that, the whole book.' 'You can? Oh my goodness!' So they think they are reading from what they want and they are ... picture reading. Then they are learning that that word there has meaning because I just told you the same day. So you're just helping them to identify talk and later as they learn letters and sounds and then they can start using invented spelling on their own ... That's where we are right now.

Whenever Ms Joyce introduced literacy-related activities, she liked to use a term, 'game' or 'trick', to encourage children to concentrate on their learning in a joyful way. Even though she used worksheets to teach opposite words, she was saying, 'This is an opposite word game', so she treated the task more like play to attract the children. In addition, she made literacy games such as 'HEART' game, the question box, and question of the day from ideas she got at workshops or in magazines, the aim of which was to teach literacy in a meaningful and authentic context by incorporating it with other subject matter such as mathematics or science.

Word games. Ms Joyce provided various kinds of picture-word matching games with different materials in the manipulative center during center play time. She believed that children would see

print and picture and then try match them. Through these playful and fun activities, children learn letters or words, understanding directionality, i.e. that print goes from left to right and top to bottom. Moreover, she used the word games in a non-competitive way, so she worked with children as a team or in cooperative pairs. An example was the 'HEART' game with a letter die made by Ms Joyce, based on a literacy workshop she had attended. It was a game where children could roll the die for a letter in order to make the word, 'HEART'. Later, Ms Joyce also used this game as a model to spell the word 'heart' for them. She regarded this 'HEART' game as a great example of cooperative literacy games that children could learn and play together:

Heart game: there is a big game board, on which 'HEART' is written on the top and the bottom. There are two dice. On each die, H, E, A, R, T, and Free are written.

T: Let's play together. [The classroom aide is her partner to play the game. They are sitting across and the children are surrounding them. All the children are watching the game.] What does it say? What's the beginning sound like? H ... Helmet, Hello Kitty, hate, hard, hug ...

C: [repeat words starting with h] H ... Helmet, Hello Kitty, hate, hard, hug ...

T: I am gonna roll the cube. Thank you team. I have 'A' [she puts a coin on the letter, 'R' on the big board intentionally.]

C: No! That's not 'A', it's 'R'

T: Everybody, make a sign with your hand, "T" [Modeling how to make "T"]

T: The other team finished first, but it's not a winning game, it's a helping game so we can finish this game together. S, will you roll for me?

C: [children are taking turns to roll the cube and they are ready to play the game by themselves.]

(Field notes: 2/11/04)

Ms Joyce used this game as an assessment by letting children correct her errors during their play. In addition, she called this game not a winning game but a helping game, so ESL children could learn words through non-competitive play in a non-threatening environment.

Use play for integrated lessons. Ms Joyce thought that children were ready to be involved whenever learning and play were combined with, for example, mathematics, counting numbers, reading, or writing letters or sequences. She valued integrated learning not only for teaching subject matter but also for helping children obtain knowledge easily from something already familiar to them. For her, play was a good medium to teach literacy; literacy and mathematics; literacy, mathematics and science; as integrated lessons.

I like the way that play let[s] children find new items to use for learning in a fun way. Children are ready to be involved, or ready to learn whenever the learning and play are combined together such as math, counting numbers, reading and writing letters or sequences. Yes, I like the way of incorporated learning because kids can get the knowledge easily when something is already familiar to them. For example, last semester ... my husband brought my dog to the class, so they have already touched his fur. I could remind them of the feeling of touching the fur and of the animal lesson. Children will learn easily in a fun way. Winter would be a good theme to teach about ice, cold, warm, fur ... these words.

Ms Joyce thought that children would learn easily in a fun way when their play was focused on a theme. She named grocery store pretend play as a good example of integrated lessons, because it combined calculating money, sorting items, reading labels, making a shopping list, and reading and copying words in books.

Use play to act out characters in a book. Although Ms Joyce did not differentiate her teaching methods explicitly between ESL children and native-speaking children, based on the interviews and observations of her classroom, she had a special concern for ESL children who did not understand and speak English fluently from the beginning of the year. She tried to act out such things as the daily schedule to clarify some words and sentences to communicate better with ESL children. In addition, whenever she read a book in a circle time, she read with a realistic voice, facial expression, and body motions, encouraging the children to follow her. Sometimes she decided to act out a story as a skit with props so all could play together. By doing this, she could help children develop their own story before acting it out and learn social skills by taking turns being characters in a book.

Children could read and speak some words or a sentence in a useful context to participate in story play.

Reading a book and acting out a story, The Mitten by Jan Brett. According to Ms Joyce, *The Mitten* was a good story to act out because of the sequence of happenings in the story, so children could make a sequence strip about which animal came first and which one found the mitten next. Children had to remember the order in which animals appeared. The story included new animals that the children had never seen such as a badger or hedgehog, and new vocabulary like 'knitting'. She thought a skit with masks would be exciting and useful for children from diverse language backgrounds because it visualized and integrated lessons such as sequencing a story, extending a story, and becoming a character through acting out a story.

Classroom practice (Field notes: 1/16/04)

T: First, we are gonna tell the story back. Then we are going to take a turn. Before we act out, we should look at the story. We are going to take a turn

SB [Korean speaking child]: He loves mitten and animals go there ...

T: [taking a body motion of jumping and playing] Does anyone remember his grandmother, Baba?

T: Let's put our hands apart to make a big ... like this [showing her hands apart]

T: [let children tell the story with their own words while she is holding the book and pointing pictures and word]) Who is coming next?

SB: Mitten is flying into the sky.

T: Who is the next?

C: Badger ... it's growing and stretching.

T: If you are a hedgehog, watch out prickles ... it may poke you out ... if you are rabbit, be careful about prickles.

B [Korean speaking child]: Do you remember why? Why animals were so afraid? Because they see the shiny sharp, golden and white teeth.

T: Everybody wants to talk about bear

SB: Mitten flies.

J [Chinese speaking child]: The mouse is very small. We cannot make it because he is very busy.

T: What happens?

SH [Korean speaking child]: When the mouse gets in, it's fitting. There was not an enough room for the mouse, so she was on the top of bear's nose.

C: This is the best part, funny ... we love this part. [kids are laughing]

T: I think, the author, Jan Brett wants us to laugh, when the bear sneezes. The mitten pops and fly ... blew out of the mitten. They are just flying everywhere. Owl, look! There is owl's feather. So, when we act it out can you remember how the owl does.

B: Rabbit might be bumped into the tree.

T: At the end of the story, the mitten falls down. Look mitten-small, mitten-big.

Here are our props: blue hat for Nickki, orange blanket for Baba, animal masks with its name word. Who would like to be a Baba?

Children: Not me, not me.

T: Who wants to be a mole?

C: Everybody raises hands

T: It's hard to choose it. I am going to use name cards, so I am not looking ... I chose this. I want you to read the name of the animal character. [Ms Joyce asked each child whether she or he is accepting the role or not. If they say, yes, she gives them animal masks and if they say, no, she asks them to wait for the next turn.]

T: Achoo~. You have to scoop over to make a space for the bear. What does the bear? Ha-ha-choo and makes the mitten fly. Everybody is laughing and clapping. This is the way ... keep your costume here. [She hangs up all animal masks. And children change the character and act it out again.]

Ms Joyce used acting out the story with masks to enhance children's independent literacy learning. She encouraged children to practise by taking their favorite characters at any time during the day

after she had shown them how to use props such as masks and blankets. She liked to use this hands-on, independent, and playful activity where children could even take the characters home. Most interestingly, children copied the storyline in the beginning, but later they extended the story and developed dialogue of their own corresponding to the character they wanted to be and their own interpretation, which was neither Ms Joyce's nor the book author's, Jan Brett.

Use spontaneous play for ESL literacy learning. Pretend play and wooden unit block construction play areas were reinforced for children's literacy learning by providing pencils, papers, books, and markers in Ms Joyce's classroom. She valued children's spontaneous and exploratory play as much as structured play for teaching integrated lessons. She knew how to make questions or suggestions to encourage children to read or write something during spontaneous play, so children could connect their literacy learning naturally in their play situation.

Dramatic play. Most pretend play occurred in the dramatic play area. Ms Joyce maintained the home center all the time, although she changed or added to it with props creating other themes such as beauty shop, Asian restaurant, grocery store, or doctor's office. In the home center, Ms Joyce provided books such as *Cinderella*, *Bambi*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White* and other Disney books because she thought it would be good for children to try to read books because they are so popular. In particular, ESL children might be familiar with the stories from the movies or from reading them in their home languages.

Ms Joyce provided many props in the home center so it could be changed into, for example, an Asian restaurant, including a Korean menu, clothes, a Japanese kimono and Chinese newspapers. She respected her Korean and Chinese students' cultures and let them have ownership of the classroom by having their language and clothes present. Since Ms Joyce regarded children's speaking and listening to be as important as reading and writing, this dramatic play center was an ideal center to teach literacy through play. Ms Joyce provided not only culturally related props, such as clothes and newspapers, but literacy-related materials such as books and pens.

Ms Joyce encouraged children to write stories while they played in the Asian restaurant area, so children became interested in writing on the paper or on the white board and helping their friends to write letters. Moreover, she regarded children's drawing as early writing, as ways to express themselves or communicate with others. In this playful mood, ESL and other children could practise speaking, listening, reading and writing both in English and in their first languages.

Classroom practice (Field notes: 3/22/04)

J [Chinese speaking child], SR, SB [Korean speaking child] and SY [Korean speaking child] are playing in the home center. They are shouting, 'Fire in the house!'

T: Oh really? What are you gonna do?

J: Oh my baby [holding a baby doll]

SY: Monster is in the house and there is fire again. I called 911 to call firefighter

SR: [She is writing 'fire' and 'monster' on the white board which is at the corner of the center.]

'No FR' (fire) 'MoNSHR' (Monster)

SY: monster? It's D (ter)

SB: [She is drawing a door of house with her Korean name on top and marking X on the whole picture.] because of fire, you cannot get in the house. You should go to another house. Teacher! Where can I put the sign?

T: Maybe, you can put it on our door, so you will not forget it later.

Ms Joyce not only provided a literacy-enriched environment for children, but also participated in their play and guided them, carefully observing and giving direction whenever they needed her. This was also consistent with her role in play in literacy learning as a provider, facilitator, helper, and participant.

Block play. Ms Joyce thought block play to be important for children not only for their gross motor and fine motor skills, but also to watch and check their developmental progress. It would help further their mathematics and language skills, depending on how teachers used blocks in the class. Since Ms Joyce believed in the importance of block play for young children, she set up various

blocks with human and animal figures, and included literacy-related materials such as post-its, memos, papers, pens, markers, pens and books. She encouraged children to look at pictures in a book or draw or write a story about what they had built or what they thought, thus letting them have a chance to express themselves or explain what happened to them. Block play was used as a place to write with the teacher's guidance about what children were building or what was going on in their story.

Classroom practice (Field notes: 2/3/04)

Block center: near the wooden blocks there are colorful markers and papers.

Three boys [G., S., I] and B [Korean speaking child] are building castles and some other buildings. Sy joins. The teacher also comes to this center saying, 'Could you write your story? Can you do it for me to know what's going on in this center?'

B [Korean speaking child]: This is bad guy and this is good guy.

T: Show me how the bad guy looks. How does the good guy look? Can you write 'bad guy' so I can read it? Can you spell it? Can you stretch the word, 'Baaad guy?'

Sy: I can hear (bad) 'd' and (guy) 'g'.

B: [try to write bad guy]

T: [left center]

B: [drawing a good guy] I just want to draw the picture. Look, G. bad guy will die because a good guy has sharp hands.

I: [drawing and writing 'ClouDS']

Sy: [writing 'BeWare']

Children attached their story writing memos on the blocks or somewhere in the block center.

Ms Joyce believed that ESL children could learn effectively when teachers provided many hands-on activities and concrete objects and examples, so she added literacy-related materials such as human and animal figures, and books in the block play area.

General Constraints of Incorporating Her Curriculum into the Lessons

The third research question related to the constraints on implementing understanding into practice. First, according to Ms Joyce, the size of the classroom, including having a shifting population with different levels of students, and the management of her time in each activity are the most challenging factors preventing her from putting all her plans into practice. For example, although she set up ESL literacy-related play activities in the pretend play area, children did not become actively involved in the activities unless the teacher guided and engaged with them. One of her roles was also managing the whole classroom and talking with visitors, such as special teachers or the principal, which did not always allow her to take care of each child's needs in all centers at the same time.

Second, shortage of school support was critical in restricting practice in Ms Joyce's classroom. She reported frustration when the school did not support her by providing enough props or materials not only for ESL literacy learning through play but also for other children's learning activities in the classroom. Ms Joyce told of spending her own money to buy chairs, tables, books, markers, and pencils. In addition, she liked to attend workshops, and after workshops, she tried to put into practice new games or strategies. However, sometimes, she could not attend the workshops because she had to pay the fees herself as the school did not support her. This frustrated and discouraged her from learning additional methods for her students.

Discussion and Implication

Some of the findings from this study confirm findings of previous research about play, and literacy learning in the play context. The influence of Ms Joyce's membership in NAEYC also appears to be important as it relates to DAP.

First, according to Ms Joyce's beliefs, play is a concrete, manipulative, fun, hands-on, and creative activity. From her view, it provides open-ended, self-discovery and theme-based teaching for children's learning and development. These beliefs are consistent with DAP. In her practice she often changes her classroom and asks children to figure out what is new or what has been changed. She regards all her concrete, manipulative, and hands-on activities as play, including games and puzzles during circle time and center time. In that sense, she regards any hands-on activity as play, any fun activity as play, any manipulative activity as play, so her practice of play includes activities not aligned with DAP or even her own expressed beliefs. In particular, Ms Joyce used play in the form of games or 'tricks' in her classroom to encourage children to concentrate on their learning in a fun way. In her practice, she used a term, *game*, in many classroom activities such as the name wall, pocket wall, the question box: 20 questions, and word games. Moreover, she emphasizes cooperative games like the 'HEART game' so that children may help each other to learn letters while they play together. Many of these go beyond her own stated beliefs about play, and beyond DAP's apparent meanings. Play emerges as a problematic, emergent concept for understanding early childhood practice. Adding to DAP ideas, this teacher constructed her own discourse of play in the classroom (Ailwood, 2003).

Her definition of play and naming of play as a game or trick are based on her own understanding about play rather than any scholarly definition of play. For example, Sutton-Smith (1997) addressed play in scholarship and practice under seven rhetorics: power (in sports), identity (in group), fate (in gambling), frivolity (in nonsense), progress (learning/development), imaginary (in fantasy), and self (in leisure) in his book, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997). He sees play as a scientific notion and discourse to be studied in its broadest meanings and not focused only on educational philosophy (Reifel, 1999; Frost et al, 2008). However, since Ms Joyce's play definition was focused on children's learning and development, her definition of play can be compared to one of Sutton-Smith's rhetorics, play as progress, in that 'play's function is to contribute to juvenile growth, particularly conventional moral, physical, affective, social and cognitive socialization' (Sutton-Smith, 1999, p. 152). In this vein, Ms Joyce's definition of play as a concrete, manipulative, fun, hands-on, and creative activity, especially including games or tricks, is very different from the definition of play of theorists like Sutton-Smith (1997, 1999). In addition, this view is not like the dramatic play research that is associated with the progress rhetoric. Ms Joyce's view of play as progress is very different from other play researchers who have usually focused on the study of children's pretend, symbolic, or make-believe play for their learning and development. Other researchers and DAP authors may want to consider play as progress not only regarding children's pretend play, but also other types of play such as concrete, manipulative, fun, hands-on, and creative activities, including games.

Ms Joyce's understandings of play were reflected in her practices in literacy learning in her classroom serving children from diverse language backgrounds. This aligns with previous research that 'what teachers do or do not do is strongly influenced by how they define language proficiency and their understanding of second language development' (Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 2003, p. 194). Bennett et al (1998) reported that each teacher has his/her own unique philosophy about play that is reflected in classroom practice, and this seemed to be the case with Ms Joyce. Therefore, a teacher may have a unique understanding about a topic or concept, and it may strongly affect her classroom practices within her own educational rhetoric of play (Reifel, 1999). This study also provides evidence that a teacher's unique understanding/belief in many ways guides her work with diverse language learners and the play she sees as relevant to their needs (Genishi et al, 1994).

Previous play research with literacy learning has focused heavily on how children's dramatic play is connected to literacy learning by provision of literacy-related props such as pencils, papers, and books and markers with/without thematic materials such as papers for doctor's appointments, prescriptions, or patient's records (e.g. a doctor's office) (Morrow & Rand, 1991; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Frost et al, 2008). Saracho (2001) examined teachers' perceptions of their roles to promote literacy learning during children's play in a kindergarten classroom of Spanish-speaking children. In her study, children's play time was not clearly defined, but explained as 'children in each class had the opportunity to select among various activities in different learning centers during play time' (Saracho, 2001, p. 21). Based on the current study, each teacher may have a unique understanding of play or playfulness and it may be strongly reflected in her/his practice in various

forms. In this vein, each teacher's knowledge or practical notions of play could be much broader and varied than simply play activity at center time. The present study shows that the way Ms Joyce used play in various situations conformed to her own concept of play for literary learning: 'tricking' children to tell picture book stories; using Korean menus in dramatic play; encouraging parents to read to children in their home languages.

Early childhood educators and practitioners who support developmentally appropriate practice state that 'play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development as well as a reflection of their development' (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 14). Although DAP guidelines mention that play is an ideal condition for children's learning and development, including children from diverse language backgrounds, developmentally appropriate notions of play in literacy learning are limited to children's pretend play or block play. However, from this study, Ms Joyce's understanding and use of play in literacy learning includes not only these two areas of children's play, but also various other playful activities such as pretending to be a teacher holding books, pointing at letters with toy pointers, games and tricks. Building on children's interests and abilities is seen as good for all children, and requiring particular playful support for second language learners to support first and second language literacy.

In short, Ms Joyce's previous membership in NAEYC partly influences her beliefs and practices in terms of play, literacy learning, and classroom practices such as pretend play and block play, and supports DAP guidelines. However, the current study indicates that a teacher's use of play to promote literacy learning for children from diverse language backgrounds can be much more specific as well as broader than views represented by DAP. This teacher included her own experience with ESL children, and other ESL theories based on her ESL certification. Early childhood educators and practitioners who support DAP should rethink and revise DAP guidelines about ESL children's play and literacy learning, considering teachers' various notions of play with their practices and their knowledge of theories of play, and respecting each child's unique culture and language difference. Since teachers' classroom practices are critically influenced by their beliefs/understandings, conducting more research about teachers' beliefs, practices, and their relationships, comparing between and within internal and external complications, would be meaningful and interesting, along with studying children of various language, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic groups.

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