

Play and language development as a social practice

In this report the Social Interactionist Perspective will be used to analysis the play experience and support the argument for the importance of play for language development. At the beginning of the play episode, (building a cubby from sticks) the focus was on construction and the bulk of the group hadn't entered the play yet. A lot of the dialogue was what Vygotsky calls egocentric speech (Smidt 2009, p. 60), with the children narrating what they are doing. The lack of interaction at this point reflected the fact the cubby house structure had yet to take shape and they had no clear intentions for the design. Some Interactions did occur such as a child asking if she could help and another asking the educator, where he got the branches from, however as the structure began to take form the group needed to work together, and language interaction emerged. When one child began putting too many sticks on the roof, another child told him to stop because the roof is too heavy. The child thought about what was asked and after a short silence said 'let's build the walls stronger'. This illustrates another Vygotsky concept of internalisation, where the child has an internal dialogue, thinks about the issues at hand, such as 'what will happen if I continue, what are my options', reaches a conclusion and then announces 'let's build the walls stronger'. Vygotsky believe this leads to higher mental concepts (Smidt 2009, p. 58).

As the structure took shape more children entered the play and with them a new field of text was introduced. The Social Interactionist view children's learning develops when they interact with children who are proficient language users (Harris 2013, p.16). Another aspect of furthering the children's language development was by scaffolding through modelling language (Harris 2013, p.16). The educator said 'make sure those branches there are sturdy enough', while he grabbed and shook them. 'Are they sturdy enough?' the child responded 'yeah. They look pretty sturdy'. When the child asked where the branches came from, the educator could have replied 'a forest', yet instead choose to say 'a sustainably grown forest'. That sparked the children's interest and they discussed what it meant. One child whose culture is embedded with such terminologies shared his understanding of the term with the other children. Later in the play a child referred to the cubby as a 'sustainably cubby'. Vygotsky refers to this as a pseudoconcept. It's when a child practices a new concept before he really understands it. (Smidt 2009, p. 108)

Once the structure resembled a cubby house language became focused on the pretend play aspect. As a group they engaged in the role playing quite enthusiastically. When a child started giving instructions on how to speak like a pirate many children were eager to learn. Bruner (cited by Harris 2013, p.16) calls this process scaffolding, and with it the children were learning higher language functions. Marsh (1999, p. 129) suggest with children who under-achieve in literacy events, incorporating their cultural interest is particularly important. The combination of cubby construction using natural sticks, and pretend play using wolves, sharks and pirates lead the children through a sustained literacy learning event where knowledge was co-constructed.

References

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