

Symbolism and the Jolly Roger

Seven children were constructing a large structure using gum tree branches. The first phase of the play was construction based. The language revolved around asking for help, giving instructions to others, and asking questions about the unfamiliar resources, such as 'where did they come from', and 'are there spiders in the bark'. As the structure took shape imaginative language started to appear. Some made comments it was a bush house and they were going to live in it, while others started to express ideas such as this can be the door that will keep the wolves out. When the cubby house was nearly complete some children found a bag of Skulls and bones which they used to decorate the cubby house. One child said 'it's a Pirate ship'. The moment it became a Pirate ship the content of the language field changed. Sharks, pirates, gangplanks and cannons prevailed. The language would change from Pirate talk, to instructional talk. Such as 'watch out or I will cut you with my sword! That stick is the door, leave it there'.

The importance of play for language development will be argued by looking at the correlation between play and symbolic representation using the lens of social Interaction. When a collection of sticks become a boat, or a sword, the child involved has symbolically created them through play. Vygotsky argued the concept of symbolically representing sticks as a boat is on parity with words representing sound (Smidt 2009, p. 53). At the beginning of the play episode the language was interpersonal. 'Can I have that stick', and 'Stop! That will make the roof collapse', as examples, however once the children engaged in pretend play, symbolic representation appeared. One child's declaration of a stick being a sword was met with a rebuttal from another child who insisted it was just a stick. This shows the second child wasn't yet ready to engage in pretend play language, her focus was still on construction (Harris 2013, p. 157). When the bulk of the structure was completed, the children moved to pretend play, with the catalyst being the bones on the roof. In the children's play culture, bones mean either dinosaurs, or pirates, and when any of those words are mentioned in an active play environment, children are eager to pick up on it. The incident where a child coaches another in the finer points of pirate talk, illustrates the Social Interactionist Theory of a more knowledgeable person scaffolding another's learning (Harris 2013, p. 16), in this case the concept of symbolic representation in regards to intonation, gestures, and field choice. As the play deepens the objects at hand develop various symbolic functions, as does the language used to convey their meaning. The sticks become swords, gangplanks, and flag poles. When a pile of branches collapse a child shouts, 'the ship is sinking!' Being immersed in this literacy event serves to scaffold an understanding of how the meaning of a concept can be separated from a concept. In this instance, a ship isn't needed because they only need the meaning of a ship (Smidt 2009, p. 106). The next literacy phase of the play was the introduction of Texta's and paper. All of the children in the play are familiar with the pirate symbol, the Jolly Roger, and within five minutes they had already produced three separate flags. Marsh (1999, p. 124) notes, meaningful, symbolic notation gravitates a child to a pathway of deeper literacy understandings and this could be seen in the fervour in which the children engaged in this activity. The making of treasure maps became the next major activity. Here the scaffolding was evident when one child produced a detailed representation of the yard including the 'X marks the spot'. Children, who were within the ZPD in regards to achieving similar map outcomes, reflected on their own work then added landmarks, paid more attention to the spatial layout and introduced dotted lines to represent the path to take. One child looked at another's detailed map and proclaimed 'the way to the treasure is through bone forest'. Harris (2013, p. 163) identifies role-playing

reading as the beginning of a child's reading development, as they exhibit early reading competencies. Marsh (1999, p. 118) suggest educators have to re-think their idea on standard literacy curriculum, and look at incorporating literacy interest the children already have. In her research into literacy and Batman and Batwoman, Marsh found children already had a great deal of knowledge of the involvement of literacy events in their pretend play. In this play experience this would explain the little prompting needed to encourage children to start drawing treasure maps, Flags and warning signs

The phrase, play is a child's work, has been used by educators, theorist and toy manufactures to validate the play based curriculum for ages. When using suitable conceptual frameworks to analysis play episodes, evidence for the serious nature of the work can be uncovered. Children use play to explore the language of social interaction, meaning-making, and even the metafunction of Language. The nature of play being risk free enables them to explore the farthest reaches of their understanding and beyond. Play enables them to practice and refine language within many contexts without the all knowing eye of an adult controlling them.

References

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