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Let's play!

An opportunity for learning

Introduction

This story explains my journey to incorporate socio-dramatic play into the *Primary School Curriculum*. I teach junior infants in an all girls' primary school, located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of Dublin city. The school is funded under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS Band 2) programme. The school has 405 pupils with an intake of approximately 60 pupils entering into two infant classes annually. The staff includes an administrative principal, a teaching deputy principal, 14 classroom teachers, 2 learning support teachers and 1 resource teacher. A Resource/Traveller Teacher, as well as a Home, School, Community Liaison officer are shared with a local school. The school has children from a number of new immigrant families and children from the Travelling community.

Socio-dramatic play and the curriculum

Pretend my baby is sick and you be the doctor and pretend I ring you. What's your phone number in the game?

Emmm... 299.

Ok. Hello Doctor, the baby is sick, come quick, she has a broken eye. Can you come over?

This scenario happened in my classroom. Can you see its possibilities for language development, maths, SPHE and drama in the *Primary School Curriculum*? Play is how young children learn and so is vital to implementing the curriculum they experience. Already you may be thinking about the challenges that might deter you from using play as a methodology. I know because I've been there.

The challenges of incorporating play into the curriculum

During my early graduate training, I became very interested in socio-dramatic play in early childhood education. I was fascinated by the way young children moved between the real and the imaginary worlds, adopting various characters and creating stories. Observing young children playing made me realise that socio-dramatic play offered a valuable and enjoyable context for young children to develop early literacy skills. However, while on teaching practice as a student teacher, I became disheartened as the difficulties teachers contended with to implement a play curriculum in their infant classrooms were revealed - overcrowded classes, lack of space and competing priorities in trying to address the content objectives and skills for all eleven subjects.

When I accepted the position of a junior infant teacher I was determined to do it differently. I anticipated fully integrating play into the curriculum and looked forward to providing abundant socio-dramatic play opportunities for my pupils. However, I too was confronted with the dilemma of providing evidence of learning, progression and achievement in play. I also felt the constraints of curriculum priorities, large class sizes, and uncertainties in planning for playful learning experiences, lack of resources, classroom space and adult support. Never one to give in to a challenge, I decided to undertake further studies to help me overcome some of the obstacles to using play in my classroom.

Socio-dramatic play in my classroom

Presently, in my classroom, socio-dramatic play occurs daily

- during morning sessions of free play which last approximately 30-40 minutes
- integrated into lessons, for example role-play in SPHE, dramatisation of a scenario in English or re-enactment of a story in history.

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The classroom environment

Along the back of my compact classroom, you will find the socio-dramatic play area (pictured in one of the photos). The play equipment is stored here but the children are free to move their play to other spaces in the classroom, moving tables and chairs if they wish. It is at this stage that you have to be able to let go of that image of your tidy organised classroom and let the children use the space creatively. Don't get too sentimental over your nature table display as often I have found it being shoved to one side and doubling up as a bank counter where the pine cones were being used to stamp the lodgement slips! Remember your classroom can always be restored to its former glory at tidy-up time.

The play props

As I flick through those educational supplies catalogues, I wish I could have that high gloss play kitchen or those period costumes. Unfortunately, they are out of my league. From home, children bring in old toys, empty food containers, baby clothes for the dolls, and old clothes for dress-up. I source whatever I can myself such as magazines, bank lodgement slips, old handbags, and accessories. Before I throw anything in the recycle bin, I ask myself, *can we play with this?*

These toys and props find new homes in plastic containers with an image that corresponds to their contents (again pictured in one of the photos). They are used to play shop, house, bank, post-office, the doctor's surgery and the secretary's office. Lengths of cloth one day represent sea waves and the next saris. Our adjustable Styrofoam frame is often constructed into the children's dream home without the worries of their planning permission being refused! To avoid over familiarity with the play props, I vary them throughout the year and try to include resources that relate to a theme that is being explored in different curriculum areas. For example, when we're discussing holidays in SESE, travel brochures, empty sun lotion bottles, sunglasses, and a beach towel magically appear.

My role in play

I listen, observe and intervene in the children's play so as to support and extend their learning. In other words to visualise playtime in my classroom, think of me placing an

order at a Chinese take-away while I weave my way around a row of aeroplane seats, sidestep the doctor's surgery while leaping over Sleeping Beauty, all to the tune of a child pretending to be a dog barking! And while this image may seem daunting and tidy-up time may take a little longer, the rewards are immense.

Learning through socio-dramatic play

My understanding of how socio-dramatic play contributes to children's learning and in particular to their literacy, has been strengthened through my classroom experiences. Through close observation and involvement in the children's play I justify my use of play in my junior infant classroom. The children

- develop key early literacy skills which will support them as they move on through the school
- learn to work and play together, to improvise, negotiate, develop and communicate to make a narrative or play script which can include tension, symbols, roles, language, time, space, and plot
- use object substitutions which echo children's later ability to use words to represent objects and ideas. How often have you seen a child use a hairbrush as a microphone?
- extend their knowledge of events, actions and emotions and learn about others' experiences and feelings.

Conclusion

I hope my story helps show what's possible when you use socio-dramatic play with infants. It involves active learning and higher-order thinking where children use representation and pretense, collaborative learning, and the development of social, emotional, physical, cognitive, numeracy and linguistic skills, all of which underpin our *Primary School Curriculum*. Therefore we should be confident and assertive in providing ample and quality opportunities for socio-dramatic play, safe in the knowledge that we are enriching our children's learning and development. The publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in October this year offers significant potential to support those of us teaching infants to further promote play as a significant learning experience. *Aistear's* guidelines on play and its appendix on play resources will help guide teachers in providing rich learning opportunities for children.

My advice to any teacher thinking about using socio-dramatic play is to go for it. Be prepared to take some risks, to give the children choices and the time to direct their play using the props and spaces provided. So whether Sam and Jack are in military talks on how to decimate the two armed-two legged alien attacking them or Rachel and Katie are disputing who looks more fabulous in their “Jimmy Choos”, don’t despair! Remember Carl Gustav Jung’s claim that “without this playing with fantasy, no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of the imagination is incalculable”.

The NCCA wants to thank Fiona Giblin of St. Canice's Girls' National School, Finglas, Dublin for sharing her school's story.