

The Drama in Sociodramatic Play: Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy

Introduction

This article describes a study which investigates the use of drama as a play pedagogy to improve children's engagement in sociodramatic play. Drama in this study is viewed as 'a process that takes place in an imagined world in which the participants sustain fictional roles and situations and the teacher or leader functions within the experience as playwright and participant' (O'Neill 1995, xvi). Dramatic play is defined as an act of pretend behaviour in which a child uses actions and objects symbolically and sociodramatic play is seen as the most developed form of this play, characterized by interaction between children (Smilansky and Shefatya 1990). Drama is used as a play training method and the reason for the use of the term is it that much of the study draws on the work of Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) who developed guidelines for facilitators of play in order that children's sociodramatic play could be improved. Their methods included modelling; verbal guidance; thematic fantasy training (enactment of stories) and imaginative play training (the use of puppets or practising facial expressions). In dramatic play, children use a range of complex cognitive functions when they use their ability to pretend. Sociodramatic play training methods that have been identified by other researchers include approaches such as adding book related toys and props to the play area (Freyberg 1973; Rowe 1998; Heisner 2005) and visits to real life contexts related to play (Creaser 1990). Drama, in the form described in O'Neill's description above (ibid), is not a recommended form of training in the literature and this study seeks to identify why that might be and whether it could be useful.

Key motivations for the study were research (Toye and Prendiville 2000, 2003) and anecdotal observations in classrooms which suggested children in mainstream classrooms were not accessing sociodramatic play as fully as they might. *Aistear: The National Early Years Framework* was introduced in the Republic of Ireland in 2010. The provision of play is centralised, including sociodramatic play (NCCA 2009). My own observations (as a lecturer in teacher education) and student experience suggested there was a notable rise in the provision of sociodramatic play areas following its introduction. It was also evident however that, as the Early Years Framework was national policy that was introduced as well as, rather than instead of, the National Curriculum, due to a now overcrowded curriculum, there was another reason for the curricular requirement of Drama as a subject to fall by the wayside. Finneran (2016) discusses drama's already precarious existence in the Irish curriculum. It appeared that the implementation of Drama in the early years was now mainly the provision of sociodramatic play areas, with children playing alone. Toye and Prendiville's research (2000) found that teacher led dramas developed children's pretend skills more than home or theme corners and that early learning goals were more easily achieved by such means. Baldwin suggests (2003, 38) that in the early years, whole class drama is an advanced form of dramatic play in which there is shared creative ownership in an evolving experience framed and scaffolded by the teacher. Working within this paradigm, it seems that children may learn to access dramatic worlds in a deeper way if they experience an advanced form of dramatic play.

Accessing Sociodramatic Play in the Early Years:

Play is regarded as a natural behaviour through which children learn (Wood and Attfield 2005; Fromberg 2002; Isaacs, 1933). It may be however that assumptions are made around children's natural ability to engage in play, and a wide range of capacity to play in a dramatic context is noted by Woolland (1993) and Davidson (1996). It is thought that the development of pretense generally emerges between the ages of one and two (Frost, Wortham and Reifel 2005, 128). Factors such as socio-cultural context and socioeconomic background have been

found by researchers to have an effect on the level of children's engagement in dramatic play: Smilansky's and Shefatya's development of play training methods developed from research in the 1960s with Israeli preschoolers in which they found that those in lower socioeconomic groupings showed lower levels of socio-dramatic play than middle class children. They found that while play themes were similar for all socioeconomic groups, children from lower groups relied more on imitation for roles and had a more limited conception of roles, as well as a reliance on low level use of toys. (1990, 56). Corsaro also discusses issues of accessibility and is similar to Smilansky in his assessment of the contrast between the play of children in disadvantaged settings compared to middle class children. He finds that the children in the disadvantaged settings use much less fantasy, reflect the hardship of their families' lives through play and rely more on the realities of their harsher lives to construct play narratives (2003, 26). He noted that because children reflect their reality in sociodramatic play and because children in lower socioeconomic groupings are exposed to more limited cultural routines, their play is more limited. Scrafton and Whittington (2015) completed a study of Australian preschoolers from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds which indicates the challenges children in this group encounter in accessing sociodramatic play

Drama educators have highlighted the issue of repetition and superficial engagement that occurs when children are left to play alone (Anim-Addo 1990; Kitson 2005). Repetition in play is beneficial for children to some extent but sometimes it may be that play is unengaging simply because children don't know how to develop the play script. Winston and Tandy (2001, 40) ask: 'When everyone has written a prescription, sorted the clothes ready for the washing or served the umpteenth cup of tea, what will happen next?' They suggest that when a child who cannot access the play world or is becoming unengaged by its events, the child is seeking tension, surprises and problems, or in other words, drama. If the child cannot create or access sociodramatic contexts alone, the scaffolding approach often used in play pedagogy (Vygotsky 1967) advocates that the child should be supported by a player who is capable of using play skills. In the context of sociodramatic play, that means combining dramatic elements in a context within which the child can learn through collaborative experience so that that child can eventually create drama with less support. This suggests that an experience in which an adult uses drama would help children to access sociodramatic play. Dunn (2003) also sees a strong relationship between engagement in drama and dramatic play and asserts that in dramatic play children intuitively use the elements of drama. She uses Creaser's term (1990) of master dramatists, which describes highly skilled dramatic players who are able to combine these elements as they play. Jones and Reynolds (1997) also use the term of master dramatists to describe children who skillfully combine the ability to create characters, define plot, devise props and integrate a variety of scripts (improvised scripts) in pretend play. Davidson (1996) observes that master players can take a small suggestion or idea and develop it into a longer, more involved script and refers to Jones and Reynolds (1997, 1) who says that master players 'are skilled at representing their experiences symbolically in self initiated improvisational drama'. Dunn comments (2003, 213) that 'there has been little recognition within educational contexts of the importance of these elements as the fundamental ingredients for meaningful play' and suggests that educators need more awareness of how to use the elements of drama to enhance the dramatic qualities of texts which naturally emerge during dramatic play.

The Research

The study involved four classrooms in designated economically disadvantaged settings. There were two primary school classes with boys and girls aged four to six and two preschool classes with boys and girls aged three to five. There were twenty nine children in

the experimental groups and eight children in the control groups. In the control condition the children were given identical play resources to reduce the possibility that the props would influence the results of the research. In the experimental groups children participated in ten drama sessions, facilitated by the me and co-operating teachers with whom I planned and reflected with each week. The quantitative element of the methodology helps to mitigate the bias that might exist when acting as a participant in the intervention phase of the research, as well as the fact that the scale is norm referenced with good inter-rater reliability (Smilansky and Shefatya 1990). The Smilansky measurement scale was applied in the period before drama, during drama and after drama. The Smilansky scale categories are shown here:

1. 'Imitative Role-Play: The child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalization.
 2. Make-Believe with objects: Toys, non-structured materials, movements or verbal declarations are substituted for real objects.
 3. Make Believe in regard to actions and situations. Verbal descriptions are substituted for actions and situations.
 4. Persistence: The child continues playing in a specific episode for at least ten minutes.
 5. Interaction: There are at least two players interacting within the context of a play episode.
 6. Verbal communication: There is some verbal interaction relating to the play episode.'
- (Smilansky and Shefatya 1990)

In order to calculate scores using the scale, detailed observations must be completed. Permission was sought to use video in this study to create verbal and nonverbal data to create a rich, qualitative description which was then used to provide quantitative results. Smilansky and Shefatya offer detailed scoring guidelines (1990) which include crucial points which highlight what can be identified as real engagement in sociodramatic play: For example, a child may score in categories one to four but cannot be said to be engaging in socio-dramatic play unless he or she also score in categories five and six. In relation to role, if a child simply puts on hat and announces 'I am a builder', he or she would not receive a score. Action associated with the role must take place to achieve a score. For the purposes of this article, the overall results will be summarised and some of the themes which emerged will be discussed. The names of all participants are changed.

The Intervention Phase: Playing or Doing Drama?

'And wherever there is Play there is Drama, but Drama of a kind which is not always recognizable to the adult' (Slade 1954, 23).

The decision to provide scores relating to the drama sessions in addition to the children's play was initially problematic as the Smilansky scale was not devised for drama sessions. The literature shows however that process drama should involve the same elements as sociodramatic play (role playing, make believe with objects, make believe with situations or actions, language and interaction (O' Neill and Lambert 1982, 12) and therefore the drama sessions were event sampled for these categories in order to show whether children display these characteristics during drama sessions and if so, to what extent. The teacher structures process drama but children should create the content within the session, thereby using spontaneous rather than directed action. Interactions with children in the study also supported this paradigm as they spoke about drama in a way which showed that for them, it overlapped with play: One child who was expressing frustration with his school day, included an instruction to me that he was 'never playing drama again'. (Thankfully he did, responding to

the a role that emerged when a castle needed a guard, supporting Warren's assertion (1996) that children are engaged by the transfer of power offered by drama and play structures.) His words stayed with me as I had never used the term 'playing drama' but more and more of the children started to use the term. It seemed that for them during the intervention phase of a drama facilitated by the teacher, they were still engaged in play.

If drama educators and children view play and drama as existing on a continuum it raises the question of why drama is not used more as a form of play pedagogy. Drama literature tends to suggest that they exist on a continuum (NCCA, 1999). Discourse in the fields of drama and in sociodramatic play is often similar, both reflecting a belief in the adult as co constructor of opportunities for new learning, both described as a powerful cognitive and emotional learning process, and both emphasising oral script writing. The crucial difference for some educators seems to be the role of the adult in drama. There is a small but key difference that perhaps suggests why drama pedagogy is not being used as much as it might in early childhood settings. Play pedagogy is child centred and co-constructed. Drama pedagogy shares these characteristics however it is adult led. The misunderstanding may be that, in the view of drama educators, it is adult facilitated, adult guided, adult structured but not adult directed. The influence of theorists such as Isaacs (1933), Froebel (1974) and Dewey (1971), on western kindergartens especially, means there is an emphasis on free exploration through play. This may be why there is a discomfort with anything with a perceived strong input from the adult. Rogers and Evans (2008) state that teachers still believe that dramatic play is only beneficial to the child if it is emergent. Yet when we look at definitions of drama used in some early childhood texts we see a very different conception of drama then the one generally used or accepted by drama educators today. Smilansky and Shefatya's conception of drama illustrates why they would not have seen drama as an appropriate methodology for improving sociodramatic play:

'Sociodramatic play should be differentiated from other forms of fantasy behaviour as well as from dramatization of stories.' (Smilansky and Shefatya 1990, 233)

The term 'dramatization of stories' implies acting out and imitative rather than spontaneous action which are not seen as qualities of meaningful play but nor are they approaches recommended by drama practitioners. It is interesting too that Smilansky disregards fantasy as a component of sociodramatic play, similar to Montessori's focus on reality rather than fantasy based tasks. When an educator using drama interacts with children in a dramatic context, play scripts can be extended beyond the familiar, developing language and knowledge through playful imagined experience. Drama educators (Dunn 2003; Warren 1996) discuss this benefit of using drama in the early years, building on the work of Slade who observed the limiting, object focussed nature of the commonly used home corner: He stated that 'Child Drama is an empire; house play is one tiny county in one country' (1954, 10).

Results of the research:

The Smilansky scale was completed for all thirty seven children in relation to the play periods before, during and after drama and the scores for each child were averaged over ten days. The process of averaging can imply less engaged behaviour than actually occurred as a child may score as much as 18 in one five minute period but then lower scores by less intensely engaged play in another five minute section. A maximum of six five minute periods were scored in each period, or as long as the child played. The results are also discussed in other contexts (McCabe 2013; McCabe 2010) and they can be summarised as follows: In the

class of children aged four to six nearly 75% of the children had a higher score in the post drama period, moving from an average of 2.82 to 4.44. In the preschool group children peaked in the drama period with an average of 5.2, moving from an average score of 2.8 in the pre drama periods to 3.5 in the post drama period. The scores suggest that the younger, preschool children benefit most from the drama phase and need the skilled adult dramatist more to engage successfully in play. The older children's improvement post drama suggests that they absorb skills in the drama period which enables them to play alone. In order to arrive at the Smilansky scale scores, data was compiled for each of the six categories. To illustrate an example of the scores that were used to arrive at a total, the tables below give a breakdown of the scores in the first category of role for the preschool experimental and control groups. Role is seen as a fundamental behaviour in drama and play and therefore has a direct impact on the overall scores.

Table 1.1 Detailed Results of one of the six Smilansky scale categories of Role: Preschool results

Children	Avg. Role			
	Pre	Drama	Post	% Change
Callum	1.28	2.25	1.61	25.32
Danny	1.50	1.89	1.83	22.22
Damian	1.44	1.81	1.75	21.49
Jenna	1.11	1.00	1.25	12.50
Kirk	0.67	1.25	No play	
Neil	1.00	1.00	No play	
Robbie	1.00	1.83	1.63	62.50
Stacey	1.00	1.75	2.56	156.25
Kirsty	1.31	1.73	2.20	67.80
Natalie	1.00	0	1.00	0
Natasha	1.00	1.63	2.00	100.00
Samantha	0.67	1.45	1.25	87.50
Sarah	1.00	1.50	1.22	22.22

Table 1.2 Role Results: Pre-school control group

Children	Avg. Role
Adam	1.11
Bella	0.50
Gemma	0.33
John	0.17

The rules of drama and sociodramatic play:

Examining the transcripts, the deeper engagement shown in role in the post drama period appeared to have an impact on the development of rules within imagined contexts. Bolton (1984, 81) observes that play, games and drama have the same structural basis in that they are built on structures embedded in real social interactions and he also notes that each three are rule governed. This implies an imperative for the participant in either play or drama to understand and be able to operate within the rules of the play or drama, or to be involved in the negotiation of those rules from within. It also implies that it is essential to be able to operate and negotiate these rules with others, or possibly risk rejection, reject others or self select an option not to enter in the first place. Drama can only occur when participants 'learn to share ideas, listen to each other, and build on each other's suggestions' (Wilhelm and Edmiston 1998, 112). Like play, it requires collaboration. The transcripts of the study suggested that when children played alone without the support of a teacher using Drama, their interactions were more negative and more likely to be exclusionary. The following was a typical play interaction of this child: Kirsty comes over and says to her in a pretend voice 'you're a bad girl and you can't come in [to the play area]'. In Drama and post Drama the roles Kirsty took on were not just more engaged but also often more positive. She responded to meeting characters who invited her into a fictional world in which she could help or suggested more imaginative roles.

The scores indicated that drama helped children to develop skills which then impacted on their ability to use dramatic elements. Letters and notes that come from characters within the drama are additions to drama experiences often used (Boulton and Ackroyd 2004; Toye and Prendiville 2000) and as children became familiar with them in drama, they used skills which would also be used in sociodramatic play. Hannah, although unable to read, used a note found (in a drama in which she was in role as part of a group of pirates), to develop script, insert tension and sustain the make believe context:

Drama 5: 'The note says please come to our island. Please come quick because we're going to take your treasure.'

In a drama in which the children were running an easter egg factory, when a tension was inserted by the teacher, children used persuasive language, negotiation and power:

'Angel of Easter, *please* come, the witch is after [sic] robbing all our eggs.'

The transcripts and scores suggested that greater opportunity for collaborative role including the adult during the drama sessions had impact on all of the other Smilansky categories. The first time one of the cooperating teachers took a role in the drama, the children were experiencing something new:

'Miss O' Shea is the queen?!

As the drama sessions continued, children became more confident with role ('you're not yourself now, you're the queen) and more likely to use role to develop the play script (can we just talk to the witch one more time?'), thus developing the play skills of metaxis and metacognition, and as a result, the Smilansky categories of make believe with actions and situations, persistence and interaction. Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) note that more able players move from the 'doing' to the 'being' mode and as drama seeks to deepen context this

seemed to deepen children's experience. Children in experimental groups were more likely to move beyond imitative words and action into the realm of real identification with the roles they took on during play, suggesting that they were operating in a drama mode, since according to Bolton 'action, even imitative action, is not in itself Drama.' (1981, 179).

Who is wearing the wellies? Child agency and the blended model:

'Drama gives the work 'a body', but in play we discover its 'heart'' (Abbott and Edmiston 1998, 26).

This small scale study shows that the use of drama pedagogy can improve the quality of children's play but does not seek to exclude child led play. Hilppö et al. (2016) assert that the promotion of young children's agency is increasingly identified as a key factor in learning, development and wellbeing outcomes. Elements of the transcripts generated findings around the idea of leaders in play and in structured drama. An interaction with one child pointed to the need, and occasional challenge, of maintaining a genuinely collaborative drama experience: The role play area was set up as a farm and as it was a pre drama observation period no intervention was taking place. Ross asked the adult somewhat impatiently 'when are you doing some drama?'. The answer of 'after break' was given and that it would be about the farm. Ross said excitedly, 'I'm going to have the wellies (wellington boots) on me!'. The wellington boots for a potential farmer were sitting unused in the role play area and co-player children were present but it seemed that the wellington boots would only become desirable once drama began. This points to the engagement of teacher structured drama for this child but also posed a challenge for the adult facilitator of the drama experience. When the drama session began it became evident that Ross was intent on being in charge of the farm, symbolised by the wearing of the wellingtons. The drama structure planned for that day had involved the children as animals who would meet the teacher in role as a farmer who would seek advice about what was going wrong on the farm. This ran contrary to Ross's plans about being the farmer himself, which may suggest a challenge to the genuine inclusion of child agency. It is worth observing though that sociodramatic play is 'a powerful, collaborative learning opportunity' (Pronin Fromberg 2002, 35) that may be more likely to occur at a higher level if a child learns through experience that the play script may be richer if he or she does not only do as he or she wants to do. Gussin Paley (1992, 15) notes that children often exclude others based on the idea that 'it was my game' and therefore 'it was up to me'. When using drama, an educator is using 'a collective, social art form which is created by participants working collaboratively' (Bowell and Heap 2001, 44) and, therefore, dependent on interaction. A drama educator would also remain open to working within the dramatic context emergently. For example, the teacher in role as farmer could respond to Ross by telephoning him to inquire how things were going on his farm and if he might have any advice or help to offer.

Transcripts in the study do suggest a need for children to play alone as well as be supported by an educator using drama, particularly in the case of the older children aged four to six. Lee's scores showed that he sometimes was quite silent and low on interaction during times when the teacher worked through drama. Yet in the transcript below he shows the ability to use the drama skills of direction, script writing, and manipulator of skills and props. It would be conjecture to say whether or not he is shyer in the larger Drama group but he seems to be relishing his chance to create this drama with his peers here:

Lee: 'Take your hat off cos we don't know you're the witch. The witch comes back. I'm going home. Tesugi, Tesugi, look! (then puts his hands against the wall as if captured) Pretend we're hiding.' (Then acts as if he is really hiding, crouching down into corner.) 'She might do a spell.' Lee goes over to Hannah and says 'We sit here and you come and do a spell.'

Children's episodes of playing alone also showed that they sometimes select themes which would not necessarily be chosen by an adult and although the safe context is a core concept in drama, having the chance to play just with peers may be vital in facilitating children's exploration of themes which they wish or need to explore:

Hannah: 'Ok ok I'm on my way. Someone's dying in a hospital (sic), I have to hurry! Cancer, yeah.'

Even if children explored themes in play they did not bring to drama, scores suggest the experience of teacher supported drama might develop the skills of exploring the world further through play. O'Neill refers to the importance of enabling participants to examine, through drama, the experience of an event 'within the safety of knowing that just at this moment it is not really happening' (1982, 78). The skilled drama educator, having observed themes which emerge when children play alone, can use drama to explore those themes further.

Conclusion

In order to address the overcrowded primary curriculum referred to at the beginning of this article, consultation followed by structural changes are taking place in the Republic of Ireland in 2017. A key concern voiced by educators in the early years of the primary system who are supporting structural change is the need to prioritise child led play (NCCA 2016). Educators in the system have emphasised what they see as 'the very real challenge in using a play pedagogy within a subject-based curriculum' (2016, 18). This small scale study suggests that, while play would certainly be prioritised by being allocated more time, subject knowledge of drama should also still be a priority for educators. The study has shown that children will not always learn to play by playing. As Bruce notes (2001, 3) 'helping children play requires the most sophisticated teaching strategies of all' and the findings of the study support the idea that drama pedagogy can be a useful component of play pedagogy.

Rose and Rogers (2012) advise that co-construction is an important approach in early years teaching which enables children to make decisions together and make their play contexts meaningful. Co construction have been shown here to be elements of play and of drama and the study showed that drama gave children more opportunity to experience collaborative role. Wood (2004) proposes that as theory and policy have developed, better understandings of play can move pedagogy beyond an ideological commitment to free play towards an understanding of 'the role of adults in planning for play and playfulness in child-initiated or teacher-directed activities' (Wood 2009, 27). The study showed that engagement with dramatic elements structured by an educator helped children use the elements and constructs of sociodramatic play. This further supports the idea that drama pedagogy has a role in play pedagogy and that the two methods need not be viewed as distinctly and separately as they have been in early childhood education. A key benefit of drama as pedagogy in playful contexts has been to deepen engagement in role which impacts positively on the other Smilansky categories of sociodramatic play. Gussin Paley finds that in sociodramatic play children desire to become 'inside the story and necessary to the group' (2010, 90) and for educators using drama in the early years or beyond, one of the key aims is to work within a fiction in a collaborative mode. As curriculum evolves in Ireland and worldwide, the work of

Smilansky and Shefatya can be usefully built on to move beyond the remedial or training model to co-construct meaningful sociodramatic play with all children, through the use of drama.

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