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How a Storytelling Game is Played in a Preschool Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study will be to examine how early childhood learners and their teachers experience the play of a structured cooperative storytelling game in their shared classroom environment, with specific focus on cognitive and social knowledge construction. This study will use an instrumental case study approach to observe classroom game play sessions as well as qualitative interviews to explore the features of a cooperative storytelling game play activity, to ask how these features inform understanding of cognitive and social knowledge construction, to identify best practices for developing similar activities, and to identify implications for future inquiry. Thematic analysis of observations and interviews will be used to facilitate understanding of learner and teacher experiences in order to inform broader understanding of games-based play in early childhood classrooms.

Problem

Over the last twenty years, there have been many changes in the way that preschool and early grade school education approach academic skill development, focusing more heavily on explicit reading and mathematics instruction. As a consequence, and of deep concern to many educators, is the way in which skill oriented approaches have reduced the amount of time allocated toward play, particularly for early childhood learners. Some, such as Zigler & Bishop-Josef (2004) argue that this “evaporation” of play comes at too high a cost and that changes toward academic skill education have been at best ineffective in many cases, and may have an overall negative effect on school readiness.

Playing with Stories

The telling of stories is amongst the oldest tools for education and is still one of the primary methods of transferring content knowledge directly to learners as well as for modeling story elements in literacy development. While teachers often use storytelling only as an instructional technique, this use ignores the potential of learner-directed storytelling as a powerful framework for guiding knowledge construction from both cognitive and social perspectives.

One potential way to view this dual approach is in the context of Bruner’s narrative and paradigmatic

modes of thinking (Bruner, 1986). In Bruner's model, the paradigmatic mode is representative of the practice of looking at story process as merely a bridge toward explicit literacy instruction. In contrast, the narrative mode—storytelling as a method for constructing notions of reality—speaks more strongly toward the other values of the storytelling practice that are readily practicable in dramatic and storytelling play experiences.

Game as Structured Play

One area of interest for bringing semi-structured play activities into the classroom is found in the area of games-based learning. This notion of games as a valuable tool in learning has been acknowledged in the learning sciences for nearly a century. Piaget (1965) specifically focused on how a system of rules and play with rules impacts moral development. Extending upon this work, Vygotsky (1966) proposed play more prominently as a central source and process of development in early childhood. Imaginative play is described in terms of the then-new model of the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky proposed that when children encounter a concept just beyond their ability to realize and while there is a desire for immediate realization of the concept, they use imaginative play to satisfy and explore the concept. This led him to comment “And so I would like to say that the creation of an imaginary situation is not a fortuitous fact in a child's life; it is the first effect of the child's emancipation from situational constraints” (p. 68).

Statement of Purpose and Central Question

In an educational era where the role of play and games-based learning in early childhood classrooms has been increasingly minimized in deference to so-called “academic” interventions, how can we better understand the role and utility of play in early education? Specifically:

- What can we understand about organized play in the form of a generative storytelling game?
- How does this inform our understanding of cognitive and social knowledge construction?
- What might be best practices in developing this form of activity for classroom use?
- What are the implications of these findings for future inquiry?

The central question of the present research is, with an eye toward issues of cognitive and social knowledge construction, how do early childhood learners and their teachers experience the play of a structured cooperative storytelling game using pictorial representations in their shared classroom environment? Specifically, how do the features of this form of play activity facilitate or guide social and cognitive construction of knowledge in the context of story generation and what are the positive and negative affordances of this approach?

Methods and Data Collection

A collective instrumental case study was selected to examine the central phenomenon at hand, the shared experience of young children and their teachers generating stories through the play of a table game. For the present work, the case is bounded by the play space of a single game session, where the

underlying issue is the emergent narrative play of the players. Sub-boundaries of the game play session are the experiences of the learners and of the teachers during game play. To obtain multiple perspectives of the phenomenon of creating stories through storytelling game play, both preschool learners and their teachers will be recruited. Participants will be selected purposely but opportunistically from the laboratory preschool of a large Midwestern university. Learners in the classroom are children primarily between the ages of 4 and 5 years. Teachers include the permanent staff of the laboratory school as well as teacher students, who teach at the school under the supervision of the permanent teaching staff in order to fulfill practicum requirements.

Following an introductory session to explain the game rules and interview regarding personal and teaching experiences with games and storytelling, each teacher will play at least two rounds of the game with learners in small groups of 3–6 children. Observations of the game play sessions will focus on the narrative constructed by players from the game symbols as well as the social construction of narrative by the group as elements are connected through the course of gameplay. At the end of each game session, learners will be interviewed as a group about the thoughts and feelings they experienced while playing the game. Further, the teachers will be interviewed one-on-one about their experiences and observations about the game session. An important part of this interview will be an opportunity for the teacher to give necessary clarifications regarding references or vocabulary local to the classroom culture that might be unclear to an outside observer. A follow-up interview will be conducted with the teachers to check for any other thoughts or considerations about the game sessions after they have been given time for reflection.

The game selected for classroom play was Rory's Story Cubes (O'Connor, 2005). In terms of the theoretical model, this game provides a promising game space for narrative creation. It is minimally structured, allowing for player freedom. It has a short play time, allowing for more opportunities to create and contribute in a given time. Finally, it uses generalized pictorial elements which leave narrative options reasonably open while still providing a source for the learner to draw ideas from and eliminating dependency on the reading skills of the players.

Gathered observations and materials will be examined at unit level for emergent in-vivo language and imagery. This natural language will be translated into appropriate lean codes to extract themes for reflection in context of the central question. Particularly enlightening or representative quotes and observations reflecting these themes will also be noted for inclusion into the thematic descriptions. Understanding that each play experience will be unique, cross-case examination will then be performed, reviewing the codes and themes again to search for illuminating similarities and differences between the game play sessions. For validation and triangulation, initial drafts of case and theme discussions will be sent to the teacher participants for member checking and to ensure that their voices are appropriately reflected in the discussion. Because of the young age of the learners, the teacher participants and lab school director will also be asked to verify that the learners were accurately represented in the thematic analysis.

References

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