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A Case for Symbolic Play: An Important Foundation for Literacy Development

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Abstract

This article presents a case for symbolic play and its role in literacy development in the early years. First, symbolic play is examined as one of the most significant cognitive developments for young children. Next, the role of symbolic play is presented as a natural and necessary precursor to emerging literacy. Examples are provided to illustrate how children practice representing objects and events symbolically through play. Then, the role of symbolic play is examined in the development of language, drawing, writing and reading. Finally, examples are given for ways early childhood educators can provide rich play environments for young children that support symbolic play opportunities. The case for symbolic play should lead educators to see the value of play, and the integral importance of symbolic play, as a necessary precursor to language and literacy development for all children.

An often overlooked and unexplored area of child development is the relationship of play to emerging literacy. The understanding of this relationship challenges educators to reassess the importance of play in early childhood and primary classrooms (Dickey, Castle, & Pryor, 2016; Stone, 1995, 2005). In order to provide programs and practices that will undergird literacy development for all children, play environments must be vigorously pursued to ensure solid foundations for literacy development.

The importance of play has been championed by early childhood professional organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI). Play is recognized as essential for the well-being of every child and vitally important for the development of all children (Dickey et al., 2016; Fromberg & Bergen, 2015; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005; Jambor & VanGils, 2007; Stone, 1993, 2005, 2007b; Van Horn, Nourot, Scales, & Rodriguez Alward, 2007; Wolfberg, DeWitt, Young, & Nguyen, 2015). Play's role in child development is whole-child oriented, including a powerful role in cognitive development. Children grow in their ability to *think* (Burriss, 2005, 2007; Christie, 1991; Jones & Cooper, 2005; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Piaget, 1962; Piers, 1972). In fact, the ability to *think* is grounded in symbolic play.

What is often misunderstood is that one of the most significant cognitive developments of the young child is symbolic play (Stone & Stone, 2015). Symbolic play initiates the development of *representational thought*. It is critical to understand that young children are not born with representational thought and are not able to hold thoughts and meaning for objects in their minds in the beginning of their early cognitive development. Representing objects and events *symbolically* in a child's mind is a gradual process facilitated by symbolic play. Piaget (1952) describes the human mind as a "dynamic set of cognitive structures" that helps individuals make sense of the world (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Indeed, making sense of the world would be impossible without symbolic representation. "The key importance of representational thought is that the child is now able to represent objects and events *symbolically* in his or her mind" indicating that the brain is developing *abstract thinking* (Stone & Stone, 2015, p. 4), the critical component of sense-making.

Piaget's research concluded that children's personal constructions of knowledge are a process of "continual construction and reorganization" (Piaget & Inhelder, 1971, p. 2). Personal construction of knowledge would not be possible without representational thought. As Pellegrini (1985) suggests, symbolic play is the "assimilative process, which enables children to practice at symbolically representing objects and events" (p. 80). It is this *practice* through play, which enables children to develop *abstract or representational thought*. For example, a child plays with a block and then uses the process of symbolic play to separate the *meaning* of the wooden block as it stands for in reality, thus using the block as a substitute for the meaning of a car (Vygotsky, 1976). The child, through play, captures the meaning of the "block as car" and is able to represent this meaning in his mind, but it is essential for the child to hold onto the new meaning with the substitution or scaffold of the wooden block. Symbolic play is the process that develops this cognitive function of representational thought. It is the very beginning of the use of symbols to "stand for" other meanings. Objects like a wooden block "stand for" a car. The block of wood is a "symbol" for the car. Children use symbolic play to practice making these important transformations. A block becomes a car, a spoon becomes a dancing figure, and clay becomes a pizza. Amazingly, all the play transformations begin to become more decontextualized. The representations become more abstract. A child will move from similar objects to dissimilar objects to using no objects at all to "stand for" objects and events. Symbolic

play is the phenomenal process enabling children to *think* at the abstract level, which is the framework for literacy development.

Emergent Literacy as Symbolic Play

A closer look at symbolic play reveals how it is the natural and necessary precursor to emerging literacy (Chang & Yawkey, 1998). Both literacy and symbolic play require the child to use other objects or “words, gestures or mental images to represent actual objects, events or actions” (Isenberg & Jacobs, 1983, p. 272). As Vygotsky (1976) notes, symbolic play is the first order or stage of symbolism whereas reading and writing is the second order or stage of symbolism. The first stage of symbolic play development leads to the second stage of literacy. Children use a similar representation mental process in both stages in that children develop a variety of *represented* meanings (Vygotsky, 1976). This process of gradual degrees or stages of symbolization serves as a basis for the successful development of literacy.

Looking more deeply into the process, we see that symbolic play progresses from simple transformation to complex or higher-level symbolization as the play becomes more decontextualized, more removed from reality. For example, three types of symbolic transformations were observed among mixed-age children (ages 5-7) who were scaffolding symbolic transformations for each other (Stone, 2007a). Stone (2007a) used Copple, Cocking, and Matthews’ (1984) descriptions of the types of symbolic transformations in children’s play: Objects, Roles, and Ideational. For *object transformations*, a child *substitutes* one object to “stand for” or represent another object. For example, in the mixed-age grouping, children used a storybook to “stand for” a recipe book and another child transformed a shawl into a superhero cape. For *roles*, a child was designated “the baby” by another child in the playgroup, and the child assumed the role of baby. Another child put on a hat and became “the dad.” The third symbolic transformation is *ideational* where the child uses language, gestures or imagination to create the make-believe scenario. For example, in the mixed age grouping, a child transformed herself into Little Red Riding Hood and pretended to knock on a nonexistent door to the “home” center.

The preceding examples illustrate how symbolic play is a way for children to *practice* symbolically representing objects and events (Vygotsky, 1976). Children typically begin this process by transforming similar objects into the new transformation. A spoon into a figure would be an example as the spoon is similar in shape to a figure. Children, as they develop, then move to transforming dissimilar objects into the new transformations. For example, a pencil is changed into a claw of a monster. As time progresses, children become more sophisticated in their transformations, including transforming themselves into something else. Eventually, they do not need objects at all and can transform into fantasy without the scaffold of any props. For example, in the Stone study (2007a), a child pretended to use a video game machine without any props to assist in scaffolding the transformation. A child gets better and better at symbolization, from simple transformations to complex transformations, as the play becomes more decontextualized, less reliant on props as a scaffold to representational thought as a child did when pretending to play a video game without any props. The thought represented in the brain can stand alone without the support of a substitute object.

As Vygotsky (1976) notes, children use a similar representation mental process in both symbolic play and in reading and writing. Play provides a context where children “get good at” the first stage of symbolism through symbolic play. Children learn to move quickly representing objects for other objects and then representing objects with no objects at all. The symbols, while

initially dependent on action and physical similarity for their development and expression, “become less dependent as the symbol becomes an internalized image” (Ungerer, Kearsley, & O’Leary, 1981, p. 187).

While the most significant contribution of symbolic play to literacy is symbolic representation, other features of symbolic play also offer strong support to the literacy base, namely meaning and language.

Symbolic Play, Emergent Literacy, and Language

First to be considered is how symbolic play helps children understand and make sense of their experiences. As a child assimilates the environment, she is able to reach accommodation and establish equilibrium. This process of assimilation is the major component of symbolic play. In literacy development, the child must also make sense out of language, writing, and reading. The inherent process of play (assimilation) is the basis for constructing one’s own reality – in other words, “making meaning.” As a child plays with his environment, he is able to abstract *meaning* from objects and represent them symbolically. As a child plays with language and letters, she is also able to abstract meaning from them and use them symbolically.

At the same time a young child is making the dramatic moves to symbolic representation, she is also beginning to talk. Because oral language is a primary component of emergent literacy, it is important to establish the relationship of symbolic play and oral language development. Symbolic play functions in the role of creating the circumstances where symbolic representation is a verbal expression of the symbolic representation. The development of language begins with *imitation*. A child may say “chair” without attributing *meaning* to the word. Similarly, a child may progress through imitation of an action to deferred imitation where the action is represented internally and played back at a later time. In symbolic play, the child uses assimilation to practice representing objects or events symbolically. The *meaning* of the object is severed from the object itself with the use of a “pivot” (Vygotsky, 1976). The “pivot” is play. Representation occurs when sensorimotor assimilation becomes mental assimilation through differentiation between the signifier and the signified (Piaget, 1962). Symbolic representation, then, is the ability to use mental symbols to represent objects and events. In respect to language, words are symbolic representations of objects and events. From Vygotsky’s viewpoint, symbolic play is essential to the development of language because it provides the means for the development of representational thought. The child is able to use the word “chair” as a symbol for the object and can do so with *meaning* attached.

Vygotsky’s theoretical viewpoint expresses that the child’s first words are perceived by the child as a property of the object rather than a symbol. This is important to note because “symbolic play is the behavioral mechanism that precipitates the transition from ‘things as objects of actions’ to ‘things as objects of thought’” (Fein, 1979, p. 4). When the child says the word chair, it now holds *meaning*, and is not a simple repetition of the word or a property of the object. It is not a parroted response, but an intellectual response. Language moves from simple imitation to meaningful thought.

Symbolic play not only provides the process for language as representational thought but also provides the meaningful context for language to be used (Dennis & Stockall, 2015; Wohlwend, 2008). Pellegrini (1985) observed the play of preschoolers and found that the children used language to assign imaginary properties or identities to the objects, whereas in ideational transformations, the children used language to create fantasies that were independent of the objects. Elements of literate language were recorded. Some of these elements were

endophora, elaborated noun phrases, conjunctions and verbs. Endophora measure the speaker's "linguistic rendering of meaning" (p. 90). High incidences of endophora occurred with highly abstract play transformations. The children used explicit language such as endophora to encode the transformations. An example of an endophoric reference is, "How about you be the nurse." The words defined the playmate's role in the play frame. This resolved the ambiguity of which role the child would take in play. In symbolic play, children use explicit language to avoid ambiguity. Stone (2007a) found mixed-age children scaffold for each other with experts leading novices into play transformations most often through language.

Copple, Cocking, and Matthews (1984) discovered in their research of cognitive activity in symbolic play that as a child bridges the gap as to what an object would be like and what is at hand, he uses oral language. For example, a child may say about a shawl, "This will be my cape. Pretend it is red. Pretend it has an 'S' on it" (Stone, 2007a). Verbalizations not only illustrate the "children's awareness of their own evaluation processes in selecting objects for symbolic use" (Copple et al., 1984, p. 110), but demonstrate more advanced language schemas to describe the objects for play. Unlike endophora, elaborated noun phrases were used in both object and ideational transformation. The language of early literacy and make-believe play (symbolic play) is similar (Stone, 2009/2010). In fact, make-believe play enhances the language necessary for early literacy (endophora, linguistic verbs, temporal conjunctions). "Symbolic play seems to be an important context for the development of this form of language" (Pellegrini & Galda, 1990, p. 86).

Another aspect of literate behavior is the production and comprehension of *decontextualized* language. Decontextualized language conveys *meaning* independent of the context (Pellegrini, 1985). It displays meaning by the linguistic elements within the text. Evans (1985) defines decontextualization as the "gradual separation of language from environment and activity on which it is based and necessity of expressing one's meaning unambiguously with words" (p. 31). Children use decontextualized language in both symbolic play and literate behavior. Pellegrini (1980), in examining the relationship between language and play, found a significant effect of dramatic play on language achievement. Dramatic play requires that the child use symbolic thought, and the child uses language (a symbolic medium) to create the fantasy play. "Symbolic play modes required children to be conscious of the process by which they defined and interpreted symbols" (Pellegrini, 1980, p. 534).

Corrigan (1982), in his study of young children (ages 22-28 months), found children's language development was similar to their development in pretending. Children who exhibited play behaviors without symbolic substitution produced either no language or only a single component. However, children who used a single symbolic substitution produced a single component sentence, or the prototypical sentence (Mommy holds the baby). Play with two symbolic substitutions was most likely to "produce non-prototypical language requiring two or three animate or inanimate components" (Corrigan, 1982, p. 13351) (The mommy is giving daddy the baby – three animate components; the car hit the truck on the road – three inanimate components).

For both Piaget and Vygotsky, language can function as a medium of "making sense" to one's self as well as to others. Bohannon and Warren-Leubecker (1989) agree with Piaget that the basic nature of language as a symbolic system is for "the expression of intention or meaning" (p. 181). Thus, without symbolic representation, the sense making would be impossible with or without language. Without symbolic play, the child would be limited to the sensorimotor period interacting with objects but unable to symbolize them. Because symbolic play occurs before language, "play is the primary vehicle for the expression of thought" (Athey, 1974, p. 37).

Cognitively, the knowledge is not in the symbols, but rather the knowledge capacity produces the symbols.

Symbolic representation, through symbolic play, is the enabling factor for language to represent objects and actions. Through symbolic representation, language, then, becomes a tool for emerging literacy development.

Drawing, Writing, and Reading as Symbols

In the hierarchy of symbolization, Vygotsky maintains that children's first-order symbolism is play and drawings, whereas second-order symbolism is writing. Children represent the meaning of objects and events through the use of symbolic play and children also represent the meaning of objects and events through the use of the symbols of drawing. A block stands for (represents) a car. A drawing of a car stands for the car. Both representations are symbols. From this framework, Dyson (1983, 1990) suggests children must represent their ideas in oral language before they can encode them into written language. The necessity for language as an intermediate step will gradually disappear. Written language will then directly represent the meaning. Dyson's (1983) findings concur with Vygotsky's theory:

Children must discover that one cannot only draw things, but also speech-writing must be liberated from its association with concrete referents. In order to do this, children must become aware of spoken language as a separate structure, free from its embeddedness in events. (p. 20)

Children must be aware that writing and reading is "talk" written down. We can view the "process of development of written language as one which leads from oral language through symbolic play to written language" (Schrader, 1990, p. 81).

Decoding and encoding written language requires symbolization. The process for assigning meaning to symbols in dramatic play is the same for assigning meaning to letters. Sulzby's (1986) emergent writing components denote a continuum of symbolization that begins with drawing (first-order symbolization) and expands to conventional writing (second-order symbolization). The child's first writing, as presented by Goodman (1984), are symbols directly representing the objects or actions. The child wrote the letter "J" very large to represent "Dad." The letter did not represent the sounds, but the object (Dad). The letter stood for (represented) Dad.

As Piaget presents, "play is the primary medium of thought." Symbolic play paves the way for representational thought to appear in other forms such as writing. In functional and constructive play, the child acquires meaning by sensorimotor activity with his environment. The meaning of the object/event is fused with the object or event. Clay (1975) describes repetitive play with letters that mimic sensorimotor play with objects. For example, children repeat letters (recurring principle) and construct all the forms they know how to make (inventory principle). This exploratory play with letters is the beginning of creating meaning (constructing patterns). Each graphic construction leads to a successive construction. "The child is intrigued perceptually and begins to classify what is seen by repeating it. At first it is done out of mastery pleasure – 'assimilation'. Later, it is done to understand the pattern – 'accommodation'" (Zervigon-Hakes, 1984, p. 43).

Similarly, the initial process of symbols/letters as a representational system must be tied (fused) to the object for meaning before the meaning can be severed from the object in order to

appear in representational form, which is similar to the process in symbolic play and also making “meaningful” language as a representational system. This is also exemplified in how children will use only one grapheme to represent each object in a picture – a sign for each picture. The sign belongs to the picture. Then the child enters what Ferreiro (1984) calls the “moment of passage.” The child goes from using letter-graphemes where the letters were just letters and did not “say anything” to letter-substitute objects where the letters “say something.” They symbolically represent an object/event. As substitute objects, the letters hold the meaning. Again, without representational thought initiated by symbolic play, this process would not be possible.

In the beginning, a letter (any letter) represents the object. When the letter has meaning as a substitute object, the child moves to representing the word for the object, instead of representing the object itself. This is what Vygotsky refers to as “second-order symbolism” (written language that refers to oral language). The child must be able to represent ideas in oral language before they can be encoded into written language. The child begins by representing each syllable of a word with one letter (any letter) (Ferreiro, 1984). As the child acquires symbol-sound relationships, he begins to choose his letters by sound for syllable representation. He then moves from one grapheme per syllable to representing several phonemes in each syllable. The final stage is “full invented spelling” (Sulzby, 1986).

Dyson (1983) suggests a child’s first representation writing serves to label (organize) his or her world. This early writing would suggest first-order symbolization. Early writing has signifiers (the word “ball”) representing the object “ball” just as in symbolic transformations. At first, written words represent objects, not oral words. Talk surrounding this early writing is important for giving the labels *meaning*. Wolfgang and Sanders (1981) see both Piaget and Vygotsky theoretically demonstrating that “the use of symbols in play by young children (preoperational period) provides the foundational ability used in representation that will be needed later when using the higher abstract form that we know as signs or the written word” (p. 117).

On a literacy continuum, a child must progress through the early stages of symbolic play, attaining representational thought, to the other end of the continuum – reading. Play provides the means for the child to progress through the stages of representational development necessary for literacy (Christie & Stone, 1999; Stone & Christie, 1996; Stone & Stone, 2015). Educators can support children in their emerging literacy development by providing rich play environments with the intent of children practicing symbolic play transformations, using language, and drawings, and also through scaffolding each child to his or her next developmental stage of writing and reading development. Consider the following:

1. Symbolic Play – Provide children with many opportunities to symbolize objects and events through play at various play centers. Children practice and get good at representing their world with symbols tied to meaning (Stone, 2007a).
2. Language Play – Provide children with rich play contexts where children use language to express their play with meaning (Banerjee, Alsaman, & Alqafari, 2016; Dennis & Stockall, 2015; Pellegrini, 1985; Reifel & Nicholson, 2008; Wohlwend, 2008).
3. Drawing – Provide children with opportunities to represent their world through drawing as symbols, which often occur at the art, home, or writing center. Instead of using a block for a car, the child can use a picture of a car to stand for or symbolize a car (Dyson, 1983).

4. Writing – Support children as they begin to meaningfully represent language through the written word. First, they may represent their words with a scribble, then random letters, and next random and initial letter. Little by little children will move to using letters to stand for sounds (a higher level of symbolization) such as writing with initial consonant sounds, then ending consonant sounds, and then adding vowels. Children will then move to using correct spelling to represent words that represent (symbolize) objects and events (Stone, 2004; Sulzby, 1986).
5. Reading – Support children as they “pretend” to read by labeling the pictures, then tell a story from the pictures – all with *meaning* as the critical foundation. Next, children memorize the story to “stand for” reading the story. As children progress through the symbolic process, they begin to use a few letters and words to “stand for” sounds and words in the story. Again, little by little, children will use symbolization and their cues of meaning, grammar, and phonics to move to actual reading and self-correcting their reading if it does not make sense (Christie & Stone, 1999; Stone, 2004; Stone & Christie, 1996; Stone & Stone, 2015).

Considering the five areas of literacy development, early childhood educators can provide rich play environments where children can build literacy that makes sense and has meaning.

Symbolic Play

For example, in the home center, educators can equip the center with supplies that can be “transformed” into other items. Blocks can be changed into “food,” books can symbolize “recipe books,” and paper can become “bandages, blankets, and money.” Early childhood educators must become cognizant of the wide range of possibilities that will enhance children making symbolic transformations from similar to dissimilar objects depending on each child’s degree of abstraction. In other words, objects in the centers should not always be replicas of the real objects such as plastic fruit to represent real fruit. Centers should accommodate choice and be fluid so children can go to other centers to get what they need to make the transformations necessary for their play to unfold. For example, a child leaves the home center to get paper from the art center to use it as “wrapping paper” for a surprise birthday party at the home center (Stone, 2007a).

Similarly, at the block center, an array of items should be available besides just the blocks so children can “transform” play dough into people, or popsicle sticks into bridges, or construction paper into lakes and rivers. Children should have the choice and flexibility to get items from other parts of the classroom to utilize those objects in their transformations. Of course, blocks and Legos naturally complement symbolic transformations as blocks become “cars, houses, towers, caves, and castles.” Legos become “jet packs, giants, space ships, and jungles.”

The drama center provides opportunities for children to create costumes to transform themselves into characters or simply transform themselves into characters without costumes. Objects can be transformed into simple props for children to play out the stories. For example, a “box” becomes a “boat” for Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak), or the “rock” in *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (Steig), or the “closet” in *There’s a Nightmare in My Closet* (Mayer) (Stone, 1993). Early childhood educators should rotate a variety of materials into the center, which can then be used to represent the objects they need for their play stories.

The art center provides opportunities for children to change play dough into pizza, which children pretend to eat, or tissue paper into butterfly wings where the child pretends to fly around the classroom. Or a child paints a mask to be used at the drama center.

Language Play

Early childhood educators can also enhance language play at the home center by providing theme tools such as a doctor/nurse kit, children's books to read to the "babies", grocery items, newspaper ads, dress-up clothes for various occupations or fantasy themes, play money, empty food containers, and toy pets. Varying theme tools will enlarge the amount of play and language of play. A wide repertoire of children's books will also support children's ideas for theme play and broaden language use to facilitate the play theme.

At the block center, language play is also enhanced by multiple props and books, which give children ideas to enlarge their play themes and engages them in broader language use. For example, children build the houses for *The Three Little Pigs* and use the book language to reenact the drama of the story. As books and various props become part of the building landscape, the greater the use of diverse language becomes.

Similarly, at the drama center, a variety props, costumes, and books multiply the possibilities of children using more elaborate language to tell their stories. At the art center, children use language to describe their art creations such as a painting of a big red dog named Clifford, or to tell how they solved the problem of keeping their glued tower from falling over with tape, or how blue and red turned into purple when they mixed the paints.

Drawing

As drawing provides children with opportunities to also symbolize their world, early childhood educators can promote this area of symbolic representation by adding paper to the home center. Children draw pictures to represent photographs of their families for the wall of the center, they draw pictures of food to represent what they are cooking at the stove, or they draw the moon and stars to pretend it is nighttime and time to go to bed. Flexible center choices allow children to get the drawing materials they need to represent their play.

Having materials available at the center or the freedom to retrieve what is needed during their play also enhances drawing at the block center. For example, a child might draw the fire for a building that was hit by lightening, or draw a king and queen to live in the castle, or draw the planets a newly constructed space ship will visit.

At the drama center, children will draw scenery for the stories they are playing such as a forest for *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak) or pictures for the room in *Goodnight Moon* (Brown).

Writing

The home center provides many opportunities for children to emerge into writing. Pencils, paper, and pens are used to label birthday presents with the birthday child's name for the upcoming birthday party, to write phone messages when receiving calls on the home phone, or to write notes of admiration to their teacher or parents. Children also write to pretend to do homework in the home center. At the block center, post-it notes are used to write letters and words to label their building projects, or construction paper is used to create "stop" signs or

words of warning. Children will write what they understand, ranging from simply one letter, to several letters, to correct spellings of words depending on their development of the written symbolization process.

At the drama center, children will label themselves as blue or yellow to tell the story of *Little Blue and Little Yellow* (Lionni). They may label the box as a TV for the story *Bedtime for Frances* (Hoban). Again, the availability or access to writing tools is essential in every play center.

Reading

At the home center, an array of children's books is displayed along the wall and in bookcases in the center. Books will vary from simple patterned books to read-aloud picture books. Some children may be reading the books and others may have memorized the familiar stories. Either way, children are engaged in pretending to read, memorized text "reading," or actually reading parts or all of the text. Children will engage in various levels of "reading" as they read to the babies, read to each other, or use the books for recipes to cook.

At the block center, children will use books as themes for their building projects or get ideas for things they want add to their creations. At the art center, children will "read" books and play with different art mediums such as Carle's artwork for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

At the drama center, children will use books as the basis for their dramatizations or actually use the books as text for Reader's Theatre. Children will also write their own plays and dramatize their creations.

As early childhood educators prepare play environments for the progression of symbolic representation (object transformations to reading) through enriching the materials, props, themes, and also the flexibility to accommodate the variety of children's development, they will be astounded at the remarkable *thinking* of children as they make meaning of symbols.

Isenberg and Jacob (1983) propose that symbolic play fosters literacy development by providing an "opportunity for children to use representational skills that serve as a basis for representation in literacy . . ." and by providing "a safe environment in which children can practice the skills and social behaviors associated with literacy activities" (p. 272). The process stems from the natural development of symbolic play as representational thought to the natural process of symbols becoming more and more complex over time as the child develops this system in the course of becoming literate. The safe environment of play allows children to build literacy authentically without drilling skills outside of a child's capabilities of symbolic transformation and supports the child to understand literacy as a process of making sense of language and print as a vehicle of expressing *meaning*. Just as symbolic play becomes more abstract as the process unfolds for every child, so does the development of writing and reading. Symbolic play is the beginning of the continuum of emerging literacy.

Preschool and primary educators must consider that symbolic play "peaks during preschool and early primary and declines during the middle childhood years" (Stone & Stone, 2015, p. 4). The most important years for this process to unfold happens, or does not happen, during the school day when children are most available to practice symbolizing through play. Even though play is the most significant influence in children's emerging cognitive development, without the knowledge and understanding of the relationship between symbolic play and literacy, it is very possible that schools and teachers may discourage the very environment that supports symbolic transformations.

Do we provide more worksheet time to drill skills needed to pass tests or do we choose to significantly impact children's abilities to *think*, represent thoughts and ideas, and emerge into the symbolization needed for literacy development with more play opportunities? Preschool and primary classrooms can provide play centers where children can practice and "get good at" making symbolic transformations and using meaningful language. Quality play centers may include drama, home, blocks, Lego, and art. These are typical places where children will use symbolic play to make transformations. Brooks and Brooks (1999) recognize that "opportunities for learners to learn are heavily controlled by the structures of schools" (p. 22). The educators' commitment to provide environments where children can construct their *thinking* and develop abstract thought through the natural events of symbolic play is crucial.

The place of symbolic play in the development of literacy is profound. An understanding of this process should lead educators to see the value of play, and the integral importance of symbolic play, as a necessary precursor to language and literacy development for all children. Through the advanced planning of informed educators, quality play environments maximize the opportunities for children to develop representational thought as they emerge into literacy (Hanline, 1999; Hardin, 2016; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1991; Newman, 2016; Reifel & Nicholson, 2008; Saracho, 2004; Stone, 2009/2010; Wohlwend, 2015). Through symbolic play, children engage in the process of representing meaning with oral language and then written words. Choosing a natural course of "thinking" through play for our children will benefit them far more than memorized skills absent of thinking or meaning. The case for play is substantial. It is vitally important for educators to include play into their daily environment.

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