Sociodramatic play, literacy, & English language learners

*Effect of Sociodramatic play on literacy skills of English language learners*

*Area of Inquiry: Teaching, Learning & Instructional Resources*

Description, Research Questions & Significance of the Project

English language learners (ELL) continue to perform far below students who are non-ELLs in reading assessments (NAEP; Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Only 8% designated ELLs in fourth grade scored “at or above proficient” in reading compared to 42% non-ELLs. Similarly, only 4% ELLs in eighth grade scored “at or above proficient” in reading compared to 33% non-ELLs. In order to close the glaring gap, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers advocate for strategic intervention in emergent literacy beginning in preschool.

English language learners are often at risk for communication and language delays—crucial elements in the foundation of early literacy skills (Hart & Risley, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000). Studies have shown that preschool children involved in sociodramatic play demonstrate greater proficiency and interest in reading (Christensen & Kelly, 2003; Einarsdottir, 1996). Sociodramatic play is child-centered, child-selected, and child-directed. Consequently, for non-native English speakers, this type of play is particularly important as it motivates them to stretch their language skills in order to keep the play going (Davidson, 1996; Pelligrini & Galda, 1998; Sandall et al., 2002). In sociodramatic play young children can control the complexity level and fully exercise their emerging language abilities. Further, sociodramatic play allows preschool children from linguistic and cultural diversity to bring in personal experiences, which may otherwise not be acceptable or desired in the large group.

While a number of studies investigate the effects of play on preschool children’s early literacy skills, a literature search spanning 20 years in major educational databases did not reveal any research that specifically investigated the impact of sociodramatic play intervention with ELLs.
Given the growing gap in literacy performance of ELLs in the United States, and the importance of play on the development of early literacy skills, the proposed study seeks to investigate the following two research questions: (a) Do language-rich environments during sociodramatic play routines positively impact early literacy skills of ELLs? (b) Does the role of adults as facilitator or mediator during sociodramatic play routines positively impact early literacy skills of ELLs? This study is designed to fill important gaps in our understanding of how environmental and adult interventions on sociodramatic play of young ELLs impact their early literacy development.

Literature Review

Sociodramatic play and early literacy: Sociodramatic play occurs most frequently during the preschool period and accounts for a significant portion of children’s behavior during this period (Banerjee & Horn, 2005). Sociodramatic play involves six characteristics: (1) make-believing using objects; (2) assuming a make-believe role; (3) make-believing about a situation or action; (4) persisting or being able to continue the play in face of challenges; (5) using language to communicate the context of play; and (6) interacting socially while playing (Smilansky, 1968). This type of play fosters development in all domains including social-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development, and allows children to function at their highest level of competence (Vygotsky, 1977).

A number of studies link play and literacy development in early childhood. In their review of literature published between 1992 and 2000, Roskos and Christie (2004) found strong evidence that well designed, literacy promoting play environments provide for language experiences that lead to young children building connections between oral and written modes of expression and thus support their later literacy learning. Morrow and Rand (1991) investigated the impact of