European Early Childhood Education Research Journal
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t776628938

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To cite this Article Bodrova, Elena(2008) 'Make-believe play versus academic skills: a Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education', European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 16: 3, 357 — 369
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13502930802291777
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13502930802291777

European Early Childhood Education Research Journal
Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2008, 357–369

Make-believe play versus academic skills: a Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education

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This paper was presented as a keynote at the 17th Annual EECERA Conference in Prague, 2007

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the Vygotskian approach to high quality early childhood education in light of the challenges facing early childhood educators in Russia and in the West. One of these challenges is the constant pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of traditional early childhood activities. Vygotskian approach suggests that young children can master necessary prerequisites of academic skills through engagement in mature make-believe play. The article emphasizes the need for the adult scaffolding of play in the current social context and discusses the strategies for such scaffolding.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article présente l'approche vygotskienne pour une éducation de grande qualité de la petite enfance au regard des défis auxquels les éducateurs ont à faire face en Russie et à l'Ouest. Parmi ces défis: la pression constante pour commencer de plus en plus tôt les apprentissages scolaires au détriment des activités éducatives traditionnelles. Selon l'approche vygotskienne, l'implication dans le jeu de faire semblant contribue à la maîtrise des prérequis scolaires. Cet article insiste sur la nécessité de l'étayage du jeu par l'adulte dans le contexte social habituel et analyse les stratégies pour un tel étayage.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Der Beitrag fokussiert auf Vygotskys Ansatz zu hochqualitativer frühkindlicher Bildung im Lichte der Herausforderungen, denen sich frühpädagogische Fachkräfte in Russland und im Westen gegenübersehen. Eine der Herausforderungen ist der konstante Druck, akademische Fertigkeiten in einem immer früheren Alter zu vermitteln auf Kosten traditioneller frühkindlicher Aktivitäten. Vygotskys Ansatz legt nahe, dass junge Kinder die notwendigen Vorbedingungen akademischer Fertigkeiten durch Engagement in einem reifen Phantasiespiel meistern können. Der Artikel betont die Notwendigkeit, dass Erwachsene Hilfestellungen für das Spiel im gegebenen sozialen Kontext geben und diskutiert Strategien für solche Hilfestellungen.

RESUMEN: A partir de los desafíos que enfrentan los educadores de niños pequeños en Rusia y otras partes del mundo, el tema central de este artículo es el enfoque vigotskyano para crear una educación infantil de buena calidad. Uno de estos desafíos es la presión de empezar la enseñanza académica a estudiantes cada vez más jóvenes disminuyendo así las actividades tradicionales de la infancia. El pensamiento vigotskyano sugiere que los niños pequeños pueden llegar a dominar los requisitos necesarios de aprendizaje académico a través de participar en juegos creativos y desarrolladores. Este artículo enfatiza la necesidad de que los adultos afianzen los juegos de los niños en su contexto social y examina también las estrategias de este tipo de afianzamiento.

Keywords: Vygotsky; play; scaffolding; (pre)academic skills; child development

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ISSN 1350-293X print/ISSN 1752-1807 online

DOI: 10.1080/13502930802291777
http://www.informaworld.com

Introduction

Today, educators in countries across the globe face the same pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of traditional early childhood activities. This pressure is largely caused by the concerns about children not being ready for school as well as concerns about children falling behind in their later academic learning (Zigler and Bishop-Josef 2006). However, the examination of the effects of academically-oriented preschool programs reveals that they do not necessarily guarantee future academic success, especially in long-term, and may even exacerbate children's problems in social and emotional areas (see e.g. Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer 2006; Marcon 2002). At the same time, the only alternative to academically-oriented classrooms is often expressed as the idea of a classroom where the teacher's role is relegated to 'following the child's lead'. For too many children this alternative does not seem to be a viable one (Whitehurst 2001).

Vygotskian approach provides a new answer to this dilemma: intentional instruction in preschool and kindergarten can and should foster the prerequisites for the academic skills but it should do it by promoting foundational competencies that are 'uniquely preschool' and promoting them through play. Alexander Zaporozhets, one of the closest colleagues and students of Lev Vygotsky and a life-long advocate for high quality preschool programs, describes this approach as 'amplification of development' that focuses on the expansion and enrichment of the content of appropriate activities (Zaporozhets 1986). Zaporozhets contrasts amplification with the 'acceleration of development', which forces preschool children into inappropriate activities:

> Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period-that would prematurely turn a toddler into a preschooler and a preschooler into a first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite – expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely 'preschool': from play to painting to interactions with peers and adults. (p. 88)

The Vygotskian approach has both the theoretical framework and practical strategies that may help resolve the dichotomy that seems to exist between the contemporary proponents of 'adapting rearing to development' (Vygotsky 1997, p. 224) and those who believe that the primary mission of preschool should be to support early academic learning. While the question of what and how preschoolers should be taught has just recently moved from the realm of academic discussion to that of policy and instructional practices in the West (see for example, Christie and Roskos 2006), Vygotskians in Russia have been dealing with this issue for significantly longer and their experience provides valuable insights for educators in other countries. One of the important contributions of the Vygotskian approach is a thorough study of 'uniquely preschool' activities in general and make-believe play in particular along with the analysis of the effects of children's engagement in these activities on their learning and development. To argue Vygotsky's point that promoting make-believe play should be seen not as competing with academic learning but rather as enhancing it, the current paper will discuss play in the context of academic learning in general and literacy learning in particular.

Make-believe play: the Vygotskian perspective

One of the major differences in Vygotsky's approach to play compared to the theories of his contemporaries is that in Vygotsky's view, play is more than a reflection of child's current

level of development: most important, it is a mechanism propelling child development forward:

> In play, the most important thing is not the satisfaction the child receives through playing, but the objective use and objective meaning of the play, of which the child himself is unaware. This meaning, as is well known, involves the development and exercise of all the child's powers and latent strengths. (Vygotsky 1930/2004, 65)

Another distinguishing characteristic of Vygotsky's approach to play is that he did not view play as a 'naturalistic', i.e. as an outgrowth of children's instinctive tendencies. Instead, he believed play to be a cultural-historical phenomenon largely dependent on the degree and quality of adult mediation (Karpov 2005).

Vygotsky's definition of play

It is important to note that when writing about play, Vygotsky limited the use of this term to the dramatic or make-believe play typical for preschoolers and children of primary school age. Thus, Vygotsky's definition of play does not include many kinds of other activities, such as movement activities, object manipulations and explorations, that were (and still are) referred to as 'play' by most educators as well as non-educators. 'Real' play, according to Vygotsky, has three components:

- children create an imaginary situation,
- take on and act out roles, and
- follow a set of rules determined by specific roles.

While imaginary situation and roles in make-believe play had been often mentioned by other researchers in their analysis of play, the idea that play is not totally spontaneous but is instead contingent on players abiding by a set of rules was first introduced by Vygotsky. At first, the notion of play being the most restrictive context for child's actions may sound completely counterintuitive. However, Vygotsky argues that this rule-based nature is an essential characteristic of children's make-believe play:

> Whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules – not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation. Therefore, to imagine that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules, i.e. as he behaves in a real situation, is simply impossible. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior. The role the child plays, and her relationship to the object if the object has changed its meaning, will always stem from the rules, i.e. the imaginary situation will always contain rules. In play the child is free. But this is an illusory freedom. (Vygotsky 1933/1967, 10)

As Vygotsky (1933/1967) examined different components of play and the way they affect the young child's emerging mental functions he concluded that play 'is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading source of development in preschool years' (p. 6). This idea of play being the leading source of development for young children was later elaborated by Vygotsky's colleagues Alexei Leont'ev and Daniel Elkonin who considered play the 'leading activity' for preschool- and kindergarten-aged children (Elkonin 1972; Leont'ev 1981). The concept of *leading activity* builds on an earlier Vygotsky's (1998) notion of 'social situation of development' to specify the types of interactions between the

child and the social environment that lead to achievement of the developmental accomplishments in one period of life and that will prepare him for the next period (Karpov 2005). According to Leont'ev:

> Some types of activity are the leading ones at a given stage and are of greatest significance for the individual's subsequent development, and others are less important. We can say accordingly, that each stage of psychic development is characterized by a definite relation of the child to reality that is the leading one at that stage and by a definite, leading type of activity.' (1981, 395)

Make-believe play as a source of development

Vygotsky assigned play a special place in his theory, listing it specifically as one of the social contexts responsible for creating young children's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD):

> In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play he is, as it were, a head above himself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his usual level. The relationship of play to development should be compared to the relationship between instruction and development … Play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. (Vygotsky 1978, 74)

While the description of other sources and mechanisms involved in creating children's ZPD remained relatively vague in his other writings, thus leaving this issue open to wide interpretation (see e.g. Chaiklin 2003), Vygotsky's statement on play as a source of ZPD was specific enough to lead to a series of experimental studies, which proved that young children's performance in play context was indeed 'a head above' their performance in non-play contexts. For example, Manujlenko (Elkonin 1978) and Istomina (Istomina 1977) found that the young child's mental skills are at a higher level during play than in during other activities, representing operating at what Vygotsky identified as the higher level of the ZPD. Manujlenko, in particular, found higher levels of self-regulation of children's physical behaviors in play than in non-play contexts. For example, when a boy was asked to be the lookout, he remained at his post and did not move for a longer period of time than he could when the experimenter asked him to stand still in a laboratory condition.

In another study, Istomina (1977) compared the number of words children could deliberately remember during a dramatic play session involving a grocery store with the number of words they could remember in a typical laboratory experiment. In both situations, children were given a list of unrelated words to remember. In the dramatic play situation, the words were presented as the items on a 'shopping list' to use in a pretend grocery store. In the laboratory experiment, the instructions were simply to memorize the words. Istomina found that preschoolers remembered more items in the dramatic play condition, functioning at the level that older children could demonstrate in the non-play condition that was similar to typical school task.

These findings support Vygotsky's view of play as the 'focus of a magnifying glass' in the quotation above indicating that new developmental accomplishments do become apparent in play far earlier that they do in other activities. Vygotsky maintained that for children of preschool and kindergarten age their mastery of academic skills is not as good a predictor of their later scholastic abilities as the quality of their play. In a four-year-old's play one can observe higher levels of such abilities as attention, symbolizing and problem solving than in other situations – one can actually watch the child of tomorrow.

Make-believe play as a prerequisite

In regards to the child development in general, Vygotskians view play as an important mechanism and source of development of higher mental functions – mediated, intentional and internalized mental processes. In its mature state, higher mental functions are an outgrowth of specific cultural practices including formal schooling; however, children's successful functioning in the very context of formal schooling depends in turn on the existence of higher mental functions, even if in their nascent form.

Each of three components of play – imaginary situation, roles and rules – has an important role in formation of the child's mind, in affecting the development of children's abstract and symbolic thinking, their ability to act internally or on an 'internal mental plane' and their ability to engage in intentional and voluntary behaviors.

Developing new forms of thinking. Play promotes the development of internalized representations because in play children act in accordance with internal ideas rather than with external reality: the child sees one thing, but acts differently in relation to what he sees as when she uses a long block as a computer keyboard. In Vygotsky's words, 'a situation is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees.' (Vygotsky 1933/1967, 11)

Development of abstract and symbolic thinking becomes also possible because of play: role-playing in an imaginary situation requires children to carry on two types of actions simultaneously – external and internal. In play, these internal actions – 'operations on the meanings' – are still dependent on the external operations on the objects. However, the very emergence of the internal actions signals the beginning of a child's transition from the earlier forms of thought processes – sensory-motor and visual-representational – to more advanced abstract thought:

> A child learns to consciously recognize his own actions and becomes aware that every object has a meaning. From the point of view of development, the fact of creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought. (Vygotsky 1933/1967, 17)

Developing self-regulation. Another way make-believe play contributes to children's readiness for formal schooling is by promoting their intentional behaviors. The relationship between children's ability to act with intentionality (i.e. to self-regulate their social and cognitive behaviors) and their success in academic learning has long been observed by practitioners and now is documented in research (see, for example, Blair 2002; Blair and Razza 2007). The Vygotsky theory of how play affects self-regulation is based on his idea of internalized (or 'intra-mental') higher mental functions evolving from shared ('inter-mental' in Vygotsky's words) behaviors. Vygotsky called this transition from shared to individual *the general law of cultural development* emphasizing that in the course of development of higher mental functions, 'social relations, real relations of people, stand behind all the higher mental functions and their relations' (Vygotsky 1997, 106)

Development of self-regulation in play becomes possible because of the inherent relationship that exists between roles children play and rules they need to follow when playing these roles. This relationship requires children to practice self-regulation both in its shared and its individual form. In play, the shared form of self-regulation exists as 'other-regulation' as children monitor their play partners' 'playing by the rules' at the same time following directions issued by other players. By engaging in 'other-regulation,' preschoolers gain awareness of the rules of the play that they will be later able to apply to their own behavior.

In regards to self-regulation proper, for preschoolers, play becomes the first activity where children are driven not by the need for instant gratification, prevalent at this age, but instead by the need to suppress their immediate impulses. In play:

> … at every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rule of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game he acts counter to what he wants … [achieving] the maximum display of willpower in the sense of renunciation of an immediate attraction in the game in the form of candy, which by the rules of the game the children are not allowed to eat because it represents something inedible. Ordinarily a child experiences subordination to a rule in the renunciation of something he wants, but here subordination to a rule and renunciation of acting on immediate impulse are the means to maximum pleasure. (Vygotsky 1933/1967, 10)

Make-believe play thus equips children with the beginnings of symbol-mediated, intentional and internalized behaviors. Having developed these prerequisite competencies, a preschool child can make the necessary transition from learning that 'follows the child's own agenda' to the learning that 'follows the school agenda': one of the basic ways that the social situation of development in school differs from that of preschool (Vygotsky 1956, 426–427).

Make-believe play as a prerequisite for literacy learning

In addition to promoting the development of general pre-requisites for any academic learning, play, in Vygotsky's view, has a unique influence on the development of specific pre-requisites for reading and writing. Play impacts the development of early literacy by affecting oral language development, development of metalinguistic awareness and the development of imagination. In addition, play provides unique opportunities for young children to understand the authentic purpose of reading and writing and to practice reading and writing skills in a meaningful context.

Oral language development. Vygotsky considered language to be a primary mental tool because it facilitates the acquisition of other tools and supports the transformation of many mental functions from 'reactive' to 'intentional'. Oral speech, specifically in the form of 'private speech', was credited by Vygotsky with the power of transforming the perception-driven concrete thinking of toddlers into the abstract symbolic thinking of schoolchildren and adults (Vygotsky 1934/1987). Vygotsky points to the increased use of oral language in play of four- and five-year-old children associating it with the children's need to assign new meaning to toys, props and their own actions:

> Children agree among themselves, 'This will be a house, this will be a plate,' etc. At about the same age, an exceptionally rich oral connection appears that interprets, explains and imparts meaning to each separate movement, object and act.' (Vygotsky 1997, 135)

Current research confirms the connection established by Vygotsky between make-believe play and oral language development extending it to include its ties to later reading achievement (Dickinson and Tabors 2001; Griffin et al. 2004).

Developing metalinguistic awareness. Assigning new names to the play props as these are used in a new function helps children master the symbolic nature of words as the child first 'unconsciously and spontaneously makes use of the fact that he can separate meaning from

an object' (Vygotsky 1933/1967, 13). It leads to children's eventual realization of the unique relationship that exists between words and the objects they signify – in other words, the emergence of metalinguistic awareness, which is associated with children's mastery of written language:

> When learning to spell words that are spelled phonetically, the child gains conscious awareness that a word such as 'fast' contains the sounds F-A-S-T, that is gains conscious awareness of his own activity in the production of sound; he learns to pronounce each separate element of the sound structure voluntarily. In the same way, when the child learns to write, he begins to do with volition what he has previously done without volition in the domain of oral speech. (Vygotsky 1934/1987, 206)

Since Vygotsky's first insight into the relationship between play and metalinguistic awareness a great body of evidence has been accumulated in the field that documents the relationship between child's early awareness of language and their ability to read and write. Moreover, a successful instructional approach to teaching reading was developed by Vygotsky's student and colleague Daniel Elkonin that focuses on building children's metalinguistic awareness prior to the instruction in decoding and encoding (Elkonin 1971, 1973).

Developing imagination. The use of images is critical for text comprehension (Duke and Pearson 2002) and imagination, although usually not discussed in the context of early literacy, is, however, linked to more advanced reading and writing skills. Vygotsky disagreed with those who viewed rich imagination as an innate characteristic of young children gradually replaced by their conforming to the reality principle. Instead, Vygotsky proposed that imagination builds on child's experiences and is first manifested in play of preschoolers:

> Imagination is a new formation which is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is totally absent in animals and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action. The old adage that child's play is imagination in action can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and schoolchildren is play without action. (Vygotsky 1933/1967, 8)

Understanding authentic purposes for reading and writing. Although not specifying the exact pedagogy of early literacy instruction, Vygotsky outlined its general path, emphasizing that 'teaching must be set up so that reading and writing satisfy the child's need' and that the goal of the instruction should be 'to teach a child written language and not writing the alphabet' (Vygotsky 1983/1997, 147). Focus on letter formation and learning of the alphabet leads in Vygotsky's view to children merely mastering the 'writing habit' as opposed to using written language the way it is supposed to be used in the culture: as means of communication with others and with oneself and as a mental tool. In this regard, play provides the optimal context for children to start using reading and writing meaningfully.

Characteristics of play as a leading activity

Not all play can be considered a leading activity because not all play-like behaviors promote development to the same extent. Although some elements of play emerge in infancy and toddlerhood, there are other kinds of leading activities that drive child development in these periods (Elkonin 1972; Karpov 2005). Only with all play elements fully developed and integrated into social make-believe play, the latter becomes the leading activity of preschool- and kindergarten-aged children.

What is mature play?

The idea of mature play comes from the work of Daniel Elkonin (1978, 2005a, 2005b) who had studied the development of play from infancy through primary grades and defined advanced play as a 'unique form of children's activity, the subject of which is the adult – his work and the system of his relationships with others' (Elkonin 2005a, 19). Although Vygotsky himself never used the terms 'mature' or 'advanced', the play vignettes one would encounter in his writings about preschoolers also describe play that is fairly advanced. Based on the work of Vygotsky and Elkonin, as well as the work of their students, it is possible to identify several components of mature play (Bodrova and Leong 2006).

First, mature play is characterized by the child's use of objects-substitutes that may bear very little if any resemblance to the objects they symbolize: they use a stick as a horse or a box as a train car. In a similar way, children use gestures to represent actions with real or imaginary objects. Second characteristic of mature play is the child's ability to take on and sustain a specific role by consistently engaging in actions, speech and interactions that fit this particular character. The more mature the play, the richer are the roles and relationships between them. Another sign of mature play is the child's ability to follow the rules associated with the pretend scenario in general (playing hospital versus playing school) and with a chosen character in particular (playing a doctor versus playing a teacher). Yet another characteristic of mature play is high quality of play scenarios that often integrate many themes and span the time of several days or even weeks.

Is play of today's preschoolers a mature one?

Unfortunately, play that exists in many of today's classrooms does not fit the definition of mature play. Even 5- and 6-year-old children who, according to Vygotsky and Elkonin, should be at the peak of their play performance often display the signs of immature play that is more typical for toddlers and younger preschoolers: they play only with realistic props, their play scenarios are stereotypical and primitive and their repertoire of themes and roles is rather limited.

With the main elements – imaginary situation, roles and rules – underdeveloped, this 'immature' play cannot serve as a source of child development or create ZPD; this was demonstrated in a Russian study replicating Manujlenko's experiment (Elkonin 1978) described earlier. The original study compared preschoolers' and kindergartners' ability to follow directions in play and non-play settings. The preschoolers of the 1940's followed directions better in play situations than in non-play settings but in the 2000's that difference did not show up until the children were much older. Demonstrating superior self-regulation in play had been in the past a characteristic of preschool children but this no longer is the case (Smirnova and Gudareva 2004). In addition, the ability to follow directions at all ages and in all conditions had generally declined compared to that found in the l940's study. The researchers found that the 7-year-olds of today have self-regulation levels more like those of the preschool children of the 1940's. The authors attributed this phenomenon to the decline in both quantity and quality of play in preschool and kindergarten. Similar findings were obtained in another study in the USA, where the correlations between play and self-regulation were found for children playing at a high level but not for the ones playing at a low level (Berk, Mann, and Ogan 2006). Researchers from different countries agree that make-believe play of today's children is not simply different from the play of the past, but that it has declined in both quality and quantity (see Johnson, Christie, and Wardle 2005; Karpov 2005 for reviews).

Vygotsky's and Elkonin's views of play as a cultural-historical phenomenon call for a detailed analysis of the changes in the preschoolers' social situation of development and the effects of these changes on their make-believe play. This analysis, even when not performed from the Vygotskian perspective (see, for example, Golincoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer 2006; Zigler and Bishop-Josef 2006; Chudacoff 2007), provide us with valuable insights about the factors responsible for the decline in quantity and quality of make-believe play in today's preschoolers and kindergartners. These factors include, but are not limited to, the increase in adult-directed forms of children's learning and recreation, proliferation of toys and games that limit children's imagination and safety limits set by parents and teachers on where and how children are allowed to play. The most important factor, however, is the decrease in adult mediation of make-believe play (Karpov 2005) affecting not one, but all if its components.

Thus, it can be said that today's social situation almost guarantees that children may not develop mature play unless adult mediation is restored. The idea that we need to teach young children how to play is not a new one, however, until recently it has been primarily discussed in the context of special education. While children with language delays or emotional disorders were thought to benefit from play interventions, typically developing children were expected to develop play skills on their own. This approach, while valid in the past, can no longer be adopted if we want all young children to develop mature play.

The changes in the social context of young children's development do not mean that the make-believe play is destined to disappear for good. These changes also create new opportunities such as availability of high quality preschool programs for scaffolding make-believe play, although the mechanisms for play scaffolding need to be designed to fit the new social context.

Scaffolding make-believe play in an early childhood classroom

For many children enrolled in center-based early childhood education (ECE) programs, their classroom may become the only place where they can learn how to play. It is important to note, however, that learning how to play in the classroom will not look the same as learning to play in an informal peer group of yesterday. First of all, in the past, most play existed in multi-aged groups where children had an opportunity to learn from older 'play experts', practice their play skills with the peers of the same age and then pass their knowledge on to the 'play novices'. In today's classrooms, children are almost always segregated by age and have to interact with play partners that are as inexperienced as they are. As a result, many of the play skills that children were able to learn in the past by observing and imitating their older playmates now have to be modeled and taught directly by the teachers.

In addition, unlike unstructured play of the past that often lasted for hours and days, play time in today's ECE classroom is limited and rarely exceeds one or two hours. Although after school time could be potentially used for expanding play, in reality it only happens after play in the classroom reaches its mature level. It means that to achieve rapid progress in the quality of play, play scaffolding in the classroom needs to be designed to strategically target its most critical components.

A systemic play intervention

A systemic play intervention was designed to provide this kind of play scaffolding to preschool- and kindergarten-aged children (Bodrova and Leong 2001; Bodrova et al. 2003). The intervention was based on Vygotsky and Elkonin's theories of make-believe play and

used specific strategies to scaffold such critical play components as using toys and props in a symbolic way; developing consistent and extended play scenarios; being able to take on and to stay in a pretend role for an extended play episode or a series of play episodes; and being able to consistently follow the rules determining what each pretend character can or cannot do.

Using toys and props in a symbolic way. Many of today's preschoolers grow up using extremely realistic toys and as a result have a hard time with the concept of 'pretend'. For these children, teachers need to model how to use props in a symbolic way gradually expanding the repertoire of different uses for the same object. Over the period of several months, the teachers need to introduce more unstructured and multi-functional props at the same time removing some of overly realistic ones such as plastic fried eggs. Older preschoolers and kindergartners can start making their own props while younger preschoolers should be shown how to make minimal changes in the existing props to change their purpose. An important part of adult scaffolding is monitoring children's language use to make sure that changes in the prop use are accompanied by the changes in prop labeling.

Developing consistent and extended play scenarios. Scaffolding play scenarios has several components. First, often times children lack background knowledge to build their scenarios. Even to play 'house' or 'hospital' requires knowledge of the setting, roles and actions associated with these roles. To build this knowledge, teachers use field trips, guest speakers, as well as books and videos. The choice of places to take children on a field trip as well as the choice of books and videos is guided by Elkonin's ideas of role being the core unit of play. In other words, when field trips or books center on objects or animals, very little of their content gets re-enacted in make-believe play. Discussing the use of books as a fodder for make-believe play, Elkonin (2005) commented that 'Only those works that clearly and understandably described people, their activities and how they interacted caused the children to want to reproduce the content of the story in play' (p. 41). Positive impact of explicit modeling of play scenarios on children's engagement in play was found in several studies that involved demographically varied groups of children (see Karpov 2005 for a review). It indicates that in today's context not only at-risk children, but all preschoolers benefit from in-classroom scaffolding of pretend scenarios.

Developing and maintaining play roles and rules. As Elkonin (1978) pointed out, the focus of mature play is the social roles and relationships between people – something that children cannot learn by simply observing adult behaviors. Therefore, to promote mature play, teachers need to explain the purpose of these behaviors, their sequence, the cause and effect relationships between different behaviors, etc. The rules that hold make-believe play together are not arbitrary but are based on the logic of real-life situations (Elkonin 1978) so not knowing how these life scripts unfold will keep children from practicing self-regulated behaviors by following these rules. This calls for greater involvement of ECE teachers in children's play than most teachers are used to. However, for most children this involvement needs to last for a relatively short time: soon they would be able to use models provided by the teachers to build their own roles and rules thus requiring only occasional support of the adult.

Another way to scaffold roles and rules in make-believe play is by teaching children to plan ahead. Elkonin identified planning as one of the features of highly developed play describing play of older children as consisting mostly of lengthy discussions of who is going

to do what and how followed by brief periods of acting out (Elkonin 1978). As with other components of play, role planning can benefit from adult scaffolding. The teacher can start with asking children what they want to play or what they want to be encouraging them to discuss the choice of the roles with their peers. Later, the teacher can ask children about more specific details of their future play scenarios including what props they might need or whether they need to assume a different role. By making planning a necessary step in play, the teacher directs children's attention to the specifics of their roles and to the existence of rules associated with them. The planning process can take place orally, but if children are encouraged to represent their plans in drawing or pretend writing this process produces even greater benefits (Bodrova and Leong 2005, 2007). First, as children engage in drawing they are able to focus on their future play for a longer period of time, thus thinking over more details of their pretend scenarios. Second, having a tangible reminder helps children to regulate their own and their partners' behaviors: if a child has a picture of princess with her name on it, it becomes is harder for another child to usurp this role. Finally, by using play plans in their play, children learn about communicative and instrumental purposes of written language – thus engaging in literacy behaviors in the situation that in Vygotsky's (1983/1997) words 'satisfies their need for writing'.

How does the Vygotskian approach resolve the dilemma of play versus academic skills?

The results of our intervention (Bodrova and Leong 2001, 2003b; Barnett et al. 2006) as well as the results of other interventions that involved intentional scaffolding of make-believe play in ECE classrooms (see, e.g. Karpov 2005) indicate that in current social context in play scaffolding in the ECE classroom can and should be provided in order to support mature play. When this scaffolding does address the most critical components of play, not only the quantity and quality of play improves, but so do many other competencies – language, cognitive, social and emotional – for which mature play creates ZPD (Bodrova and Leong 2001, 2003b; Barnett et al. 2006). In addition to promoting general foundations for learning academic skills in a formalized school environment, mature make-believe play also has a potential to affect specific literacy skills, especially early writing (Bodrova and Leong 2005, 2007). So the Vygotskian approach *can* provide an answer to the dilemma in the title of this paper and the answer is: By scaffolding make-believe play and making sure it *does* exist in its most mature form, we can positively impact not only the development of play itself, but also the development of early academic skills.

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