Playing Within and Beyond the Story: Encouraging Book-Related Pretend Play

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Book-related pretend play, a form of symbolic play directly related to children's literature, appears to encourage text interactions in preschool students.

"Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin." "Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!" By calling this familiar dialogue back and forth to one another, my preschool students demonstrated how they used their imaginations to place themselves within the familiar stories they've heard at home and school. The foundations for later reading are based on early literacy experiences. Early childhood teachers are striving to address academic demands but also value the role of imaginative play in the primary school years, with good reason. Research indicates that play around stories may encourage the development of critical comprehension skills while simultaneously developing students' love of stories and their abilities to connect to books on a personal level (Heath, 1982). During a study of very young students' literacy interactions, Rowe (1998, 2000) noticed how, with little adult direction, students easily integrated the themes and elements from storybook readings in their play. As a former preschool and kindergarten teacher, I sought to discover how preschoolers could be encouraged to play with familiar stories through rich experiences with literature and opportunities to play with related props.

Why Is Pretend Important?

Pretend Play Is a Context for Learning

One of the most complex forms of play, symbolic or pretend play, requires students to use mental representations to change the meanings of actions and objects (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). The pretend world is a place where preschool students have a great deal of control. Pellegrini (1980) saw young students as intrinsically motivated to play, mostly concerned with the process of play rather than the product. Vygotsky (1978) identified play activities as the center of young students' zones of proximal development, where new knowledge was gained through social interactions with more competent players. When pretending, students translate their perceptions of the real world into the actions that create and define the world of play. A pencil is no longer a writing implement but is mentally transformed into a magic wand, and the waving of the "wand" and casting of spells depend on that abstract idea. Conversely, the pretend world can assist students in developing their understandings of the real world.

Pretend Play Contributes to Development

As students grow in their mental capacities, pretend play also contributes to critical areas of development. The purposeful language interactions during pretend play require students to use their developing verbal skills. As the actor, a student must rely on developing verbal skills to maintain and advance the play by speaking in character, suggesting actions, or directing other players (Giffin, 1984). The verbal prompts, descriptions, interpretations, and negotiations that result in metacommunication about the play fall within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The shared meaning created during play encourages students' social and emotional competence. Students who spent more time in pretend play appeared to be more socially active (Connolly & Doyle,

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1984). Social engagement in play and adoption of pretend roles lead students to develop the empathic responses to others that are necessary for positive social interactions (Hoffman, 1993).

Cognitively, successful pretense requires students to mentally coordinate the multiple elements of a complex play episode. Roskos (1990) defined three basic activities of pretend:

1. Play with objects
2. Playing at being like someone or something
3. Making up people, places, and things

These play activities fell into two related categories: schemes and episodes. Schemes appeared as the general context of play, based on the existence of a play topic, specific objects, and complimentary behaviors. Appearing within schemes, episodes focused on the resolution of a problem, dependent upon social interactions and language use. In other words, a tea set would suggest the scheme of a tea party, including the typical behaviors of a tea party (e.g., drinking, pouring, eating). An episode might arise when a tea party member becomes sick, changing the focus of the play from the concrete to the abstract. Representing a sophisticated level of play (Gowen, 1995; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978), the episode "provides a more complete and accurate picture of children's representational and communicative competence" (Roskos, 1990, p. 510). The abstract nature of these episodes may contribute to students' comprehension skills later as readers.

Pretend Play Enhances Comprehension

A focus on play around familiar stories and literature capitalizes on the storylines that define pretend schemes and episodes. Thematic fantasy play is a training technique in which students are directed by adults to enact roles and themes based on children's literature (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977). In a comparison of instructional methods, Pellegrini and Galda (1982) found that thematic fantasy play resulted in greater story comprehension. The authors noted the importance of the peer interaction and the beneficial aspects of pretend as contributing to students' increased ability to understand the story.

Play Encourages Personal Response

Rowe (1998, 2000) explored a naturally occurring, student-directed form of play with stories that supported students' understanding of literature but differed from adult-directed thematic fantasy play. She observed very young preschoolers making spontaneous connections between storybooks and their pretend play. These preschoolers sought out toys that related to familiar books and linked their actions and language with the book content. Through play, the preschoolers engaged in reenactments, explored their perspective on the story characters, and sorted out the author's meaning. They investigated family interactions, social relationships, and other themes of interest through the book's context. Rowe saw play as a supportive environment through which multiple connections to books could be made. Play served as a medium for aesthetic responses to text, encouraged by social interactions. Book-related dramatic play, concluded Rowe, might allow students to adopt a powerful strategy for literature comprehension.

Defining Book-Related Pretend Play

For my former students, pretending often focused around the cartoons and movies to which they were repeatedly exposed. Rowe's study (1998) prompted me to consider if play around literature, as an alternative, could be encouraged as part of the preschool learning environment. Examination of the students' behaviors during story play could shed light on how pretend play might contribute to a deeper understanding of text. The suggestive power of objects in play (Roskos, 1990; Rowe, 1998, 2000) was also given consideration. The concept of *book-related pretend play* can be defined as student-directed and initiated pretend play schemes and episodes in which students, through interactions with others, make object substitutions, integrate imaginary elements, or assume roles directly related to the characters, objects, actions, setting, language, and themes found in children's literature. On their own and by their own choosing, students may use this type of play to explore the most fundamental purpose of literacy, the construction of meaning.

Setting the Stage

This study involved two veteran preschool teachers, each with degrees in early childhood education. Both had been teaching at a rural elementary school in the United States for a number of years. Between their two classrooms, 33 four-year-olds were exposed to high-quality children's literature and story-specific props. Each classroom environment reflected typical early childhood practices and routines. The materials for pretend play around books were introduced during a morning read-aloud and were available during the center activity period that followed.

Selecting and Sharing the Books

The first step in setting the stage for book-related pretend play was selecting the books and gathering the props. Because students may have more motivation to consider and respond to the magical elements in stories (Shine & Roser, 1999), each of the selected books fell within the fantasy genre. Book selection was based on two main criteria: the existence of memorable repeated language or refrains and the presence of objects integral to the plot. The repeated language would naturally indicate the play around the story. Objects that were integral to the plot would provide logical choices for complementary props. The books selected were *Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000), *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Brett, 1987), *Froggy Gets Dressed* (London, 1992), *Strega Nona* (DePaola, 1975), *The Little Red Hen (Makes a Pizza)* (Sturges, 1999), and *The Three Little Pigs* (Galdone, 1970).

Over a six-week period, each book was shared by the two teachers during the daily read-aloud time. The Monday read-aloud encouraged general understanding of the text. The teachers used their typical reading style, which included periodic questions or comments during the reading and a general discussion before and after reading. They also conducted a reading of the text during the Wednesday and Friday read-aloud times to provide additional opportunities for meaning construction. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the story was read aloud as well, but in these readings, the teachers paused several times during the reading to identify the repeated language. The students were then encouraged to recite these lines as they appeared in the story.

Creating and Sharing the Prop Sets

For each book, a companion prop set was created to encourage the students' book-related pretend play. These items were collected from the classroom or purchased during browsing trips to dollar stores and discount retailers. The props for each book, and the book itself, were placed in a clear plastic bin, labeled with the name of the book and a picture of the cover. Each set had at least three objects that could be related to the text, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Prop Sets

Title	Prop set
Strega Nona	black pot, scarf, paper-bag, vest, cut rubber bands, small broom
Froggy Gets Dressed	green handkerchief with frog face, sleeping cap, scarf, mittens, scrub pants, button-down shirt
Three Little Pigs	pop-up tent, pencils, yellow pipe cleaners, sponges
The Little Red Hen (Makes a Pizza)	circular bamboo tray, measuring cup, white streamer roll, foam shapes, paint stirrer
Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type	red handkerchief, black plastic box, five typed notes, large rectangle of purple felt
Goldilocks and the Three Bears	three plastic mixing bowls (graduated in size), three foam squares (graduated in size), three pieces of fleece (graduated in size)

To consider the students' reaction to different types of props, realistic or symbolic items were selected. Two sets, *Strega Nona* and *Froggy Gets Dressed*, were realistic in nature, containing materials that clearly represented story objects. These sets also included at least one object that could be used to represent a character, such as a head scarf for Strega Nona or a sleeping cap for Froggy's mother. The symbolic sets, *Three Little Pigs* and *The Little Red Hen (Makes A Pizza)*, contained items that required pretense to be used in story play. These sets did not include a character item. The props in the sets for *Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* were a combination of realistic and symbolic objects.

As objects seemed to be suggestive in Roskos's (1990) episodes, I was interested in how students would link the objects with the stories and how the props might encourage pretend behaviors. During the read-aloud in which the repeated language was highlighted, the teachers also showed each of the props to the students and explicitly connected these items to the text's characters and objects. In the following example, one teacher has begun reading *Strega Nona* for the second time. After the characters Strega Nona and Big Anthony are identified in the story, this teacher introduces some of the props (Big Anthony's paper bag vest, the black plastic pot, rubber band spaghetti noodles) and highlights the important language in the story as she continues the reading.

Teacher: OK, I've got something down in here. What do you think this is? [holds up the paper bag vest]

Students: A bag.

Teacher: It's a bag and look what we turned the bag into.

Student: A coat.

Teacher: Sort of like a coat or a vest. Who do you think could wear that in this story?

Students: Strega Nona.

Teacher: No, not Strega Nona.

Student: Big Anthony.

Teacher: Big Anthony. Look he has a brown vest on. So this is Big Anthony's brown vest. What was it that Strega Nona told Big Anthony he could never ever touch?

Students: The pot.

Teacher: The pasta pot. Ohhh, look at what I have down in this pot. [Holds up plastic pot and pulls out rubber band noodles] What do you think this could be?

Student: Pasta!

Teacher: It looks like pasta. What is pasta? We had some of it last week.

Student: Food.

Teacher: It's a type of food, that's right. It looks like spaghetti, a type of pasta. These are flat noodles, it's a type of pasta

Student: We have noodles like that in the kitchen!

Teacher: OK, let's see what else happens in our story. [reading] "One evening when Big Anthony was milking the goat, he heard Strega Nona singing. Peeking in the window, he saw Strega Nona standing over the..." (n.p.) what?

Students: Pasta pot.

Teacher: Pasta pot. Let's see what she was doing. Now I need your help in this part. She was singing...you ready? She was saying...

Teacher and Students: Bubble, bubble, pasta pot
Boil me some pasta, nice and hot
I'm hungry and it's time to sup
Boil enough pasta to fill me up. (n.p.)

The Play Is the Thing

Once everything had been introduced to the students, the props and book would be made available for the students four days a week as a dedicated center in each room. The observations conducted at this center would allow for definition of the behaviors the students might display. The students' reactions to materials that were more symbolic or realistic in nature would also be considered.

Ready to Play

During center time, the students were allowed to make their own choices, in addition to completing a required teacher-directed activity. To monitor the students' selection of the newly created book-related pretend play center, the teachers kept a log of which students played with the props each day. As an

observer at the center, my involvement was kept to a minimum to allow for the student-directed activity.

Collecting Information

I spent three mornings a week in each classroom; listening during the teachers' read-aloud sessions, tape recording the students' play, and taking notes at the book-related pretend play center. Both teachers were also interviewed after the study to learn about their views on this classroom center activity. After reviewing the transcribed recordings and field notes, I used Roskos's (1990) criteria to identify schemes and episodes within the students' play. A scheme was identified when the students made reference to a prop using the name presented in the book, when they referred to someone using a character name, or in other instances where pretense was clear. Schemes became episodes when players' interactions included the repeated, memorable language presented during the read-aloud, when there was some evidence of planning and directing the play and a narrative structure, or when characters, settings, or events were identified (Roskos, 1990). Following the recognition of many episodes between the two classes, close examination allowed me to identify and define the pretend play behaviors.

Examining the Students' Play

The students engaged in eight behaviors related to the concept of book-related pretend play across the episodes from both classes. These behaviors are described and examples are provided in Table 2. The results indicate that the students did indeed engage in what I defined as book-related pretend play.

The students' play was self-directed and self-selected, as they made their own choices regarding when and how to play with the provided items. This initiation indicates that the play experiences fell within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). In reviewing the participation logs kept by the teachers, every single student in each classroom spent some time engaged in book-related pretend play. Although some may have limited their visits, many students spent extended time in the center each week, regardless of the story or props available. In my preschool experience, it was rare to have a center or activity which was enjoyed by every single student. As a result of the broad appeal, students in both classes were experiencing the cognitive, linguistic, and social benefits of pretend play.

The existence of schemes and episodes was confirmed with the identification of 119 episodes over the six books. Within each episode, multiple pretend behaviors and interactions between students were evident. The pretend activities involving objects, character roles, and imaginary elements were closely related to the elements of the story being enacted. The following is an example of an episode from *The Three Little Pigs* play in one class. This episode contained evidence of four behaviors: connecting books and props (CBP), reenactments (R), character portrayals (CP), and expansion and extension of story content (E).

Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3 are playing with the props at the library center. The tent is set up and the other props are strewn around on the floor. Student 1 is standing outside the tent and Student 2 is inside. Student 3 sits nearby, watching the other two.

Student 1: I've gotta blow your house down. (CBP) [Student 1 makes a blowing sound with her mouth] (R, CP)

Student 2: No my...my chinny chin chin...huff and puff. (R, CP)

Student 1: Now it's my turn. [Student 2 exits the house and Student 1 goes inside] (R)

Student 2: I'm gonna make my house (CBP), building my house, building my house, I'm building by myself, I'm building my house I'm building my there. There, I'm building my house. (E) [Student 2 sings these words to herself as she arranges the pencils in a pile on the floor]

Student 1: [calls from inside the house] You gotta blow my house down. (CBP)

Student 3: [stands by the tent and makes a blowing sound] (R)

As noted above, the students connected the books and props (CBP) by referring to the props by the story language, calling the tent a house. Student 2 also used the pencils as building materials. A reenactment (R) began when Student 1 prompted the familiar refrain ("Not by my chinny chin chin") by saying "I'm gonna blow your house down" and also when Student 3's blowing behavior was requested at the end of the episode. Character portrayals (CP) were evident when Students 1 and 3 both acted as the wolf

Table 2
Book-Related Pretend Play Behaviors

Behavior	Description	Example
Connecting books and props (CBP)	The students refer to the prop(s) by the name(s) used in the text.	Don't touch the pasta pot, it's hot. Don't touch the pasta pot. Gimme that fork.
Book interactions (B)	The students use the books during play, as a source for information.	There's only one boy. Look [points to an illustration in the book] in the book there's supposed to be one boy.
Reenactments (R)	The students engage in reenactments of the story, identified by use of the repeated language in the text.	Student 1: I'm the big bad wolf. Little pig, little pig, let me come in. Student 2: Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin. Student 1: I'll puff and puff, I blow your house down (blowing sound). I did it. Student 2: That's not how you do it. You huff and puff and then you did that and then you blow and then you stop.
Character portrayals (CP)	The students speak as the characters, using the dialogue in the book and adding details through new dialogue	Student 1: He's a bear, I'm Goldilocks. [Student 1 sits on each square. She lies under the yellow blanket and then under the green blanket] This bed is too hard.... I'm Goldilocks. This bed is too soft. [Student 1 sits on the couch and lies under the red blanket. She sits up and looks at Student 2] Aahhhhhh! [Student 1 pretends to run] You're the bears. Student 2: I'm a bear. Student 1: I ate your porridge.
Global themes (GT)	Students interject larger issues into the play, such as family relationships.	Student 1: Here wife, here wife Student 2: Ewwww Student 1: Hey mom, let's get some string cheese. Student 3: Get all that string cheese out, now give me that pepperoni.... Honey, put that pepperoni on my plate.
Expansion and extension of story content (E)	The students add new details to the elements already mentioned in the story to extend the already present story content. The students interject new elements, including new characters, into the play to expand the play content.	Student 1: Mom, can I go outside? Student 2: Yes. Student 1: I'm gonna go outside. Student 2: Don't bother going outside. Student 1: It's cold, it's cold. I'm not going out there.
Integration of real and pretend (I)	The students incorporate real world elements into the pretend play. They also use imaginary elements to manipulate happenings in the real world.	Student 1: Now let me go back to the house Student 2: No, no, there's a wolf in there. [Adult has directed that the doors to the tent stay open] A wolf will get in my house.
Prop changes and additions (PC)	The students change the name of a prop, provide a more specific name or bring in new objects with which to pretend.	[Student 1 and 2 put the foam pieces in the empty prop box. They stir the pieces with the stirrer and their hands. Student 1 tries to scoop the foam pieces out with the measuring cup] Student 1: Put it on the stove. Let's play like this is the stove.

("I'm gonna blow your house down," blowing motions) and when Student 2 adopted the pig role ("my chinny chin chin"). Finally, Student 2 extended (E) the original content of the text by demonstrating the pig's building of a stick house. Elements of students' use of imagination are represented throughout these behaviors. These play episodes demonstrate deep comprehension of the text characters and events, beyond what might be gained from a single listening to the story. As the defining elements of book-related pretend play can be confirmed, consideration of these behaviors reveals that two different types of book-related pretend play existed in these classrooms: play within text or play beyond text.

Play Within Text

The within text behaviors seemed to rely heavily on the text itself; the students connected books and props, adopted roles in character portrayals, engaged in reenactments, and consulted the text in book interactions. These behaviors were fostered by the students' initial interactions with the stories, the teacher's attention to the repeated language, and the introduction of the props during the read-aloud sessions. As an example, the following interaction occurred while three students were playing with the *Froggy Gets Dressed* prop set. Students 1 and 2 are the actors and Student 3 was trying to direct.

Student 1: Can I be Froggy now?

Student 2: No. I'm Froggy. You be the mother and say Froggy! You forgot something!

Student 1: Froggy, you forgot something!

Student 3: Your pants!

Student 2: Did I forget my pants?

Student 3: Your forgot your gloves, you [for]got your shirt.

Student 1: Gimme my hat, OK.

Student 3: You got your hat.

Student 1: I've got to go in and go to bed.

Student 3: You forgot your underwear.

Student 1: [laughing] I got my underwear.

In this episode, the students are reenacting the exchange between Froggy and his mother as he tries to leave the house half dressed. Two of the students have taken on the roles of Froggy and his mother, speaking the lines for both of the characters and using the provided clothing items much like they appeared in the story. Later in this episode, the two actors disagreed about the sequence of events and the third student checked the text and illustrations to help resolve the confusion. In many episodes, the students are very concerned with getting it right. The "rules" of the text provided the boundaries for social interactions and added an element of predictability to their play.

To successfully engage in these text-based behaviors, the students had to draw on their knowledge of the props, the script of the story, and the characters and events contained within. As Roskos (1990) identified in her taxonomy, the most basic aspect of a pretend interaction involves some suggestive object, in this case, the prop items and the text from the story. The text was the foundation, a script, for exchanges between the characters when students adopted roles and reenacted scenes. The props confirmed the students' basic understanding of the story and the characters, regardless of the symbolic or realistic nature of the items. Even if students had to pretend that the sponges were bricks, these items were extremely important to the character portrayals and reenactments in which they were used. Students who might have less skill in pretending could safely enter the play, with the text acting as a net to support their efforts. For students with limited experiences relating to books, developing the ability to imagine themselves within the story through book-related pretend play contributed to the development of a personal connection to the text.

Play Beyond Text

In contrast, several of the behaviors observed in these two classrooms required the students to play beyond the text. The inclusion of global themes, attempts to expand and extend the existing story elements, the integration of the real and pretend worlds, and prop changes required the players to step outside the framework provided by the text. Each behavior involved the students' adding some element to what existed in the story or prop set. For global themes, they often referred to family elements (mothers and fathers, siblings, children) and added these characters to the stories where they did not already exist. Extensions and expansions were observed when the students added new details or elements to the story.

The real world often crept in through integrations, as when the students were asked to keep the door of the tent open and one student worried that it would now be easier for the wolf to enter. In prop changes, existing prop labels were changed or new materials were added to complete the scene. These behaviors were evidence of the students' abilities to enhance the stories they were given with their own experiences, desires, and interests.

In the following excerpt, both an expansion and extension of the preexisting content appear. Student 1, wearing the brown vest, has been looking through the *Strega Nona* book and pauses at the page with the pictures of Big Anthony on top of the growing pasta. Student 2 is standing nearby and the cardboard fork is lying near him on the floor. After putting down the book, Student 1 dumps the pasta out on the floor and lies down on his back, on top of the pasta.

Student 2: Pasta, pasta

Student 1: Ahhh, the pasta pot is spilling. [Student 1 dumps the pasta onto the floor] Get the fork. [to Student 2]

Student 2: Supposed to eat the pasta. [Student 2 picks up the fork from the floor]

Student 1: Supposed to eat with the fork. [Student 1 is now laying on his back on the floor] Movin' all around, it was movin'. [Student 1 squirms on the pasta] Ahhh, it's movin' me. Help, it's movin' me. Movin' me. Help, it's movin' me. Help, it's moving' me. Uhhhh. [Student 1 holds out his hands to Student 2, who is holding the fork. As Student 1 reaches out, Student 2 holds out the fork for him to grab.]

In this case, Student 1 expanded the text by adding new dialogue for the Big Anthony character ("Help, it's moving' me"). As an extension of the story, the fork was now used as a rescue device by a bystander. The illustration of Big Anthony being swept away by the flood of pasta sparked Student 1's imagination, encouraging him to bring the scene to life and then enriching the play with his own relevant ideas.

As Roskos (1990) explained, the sophisticated episode moves beyond the objects that suggested the pretend and their complementary actions. The pretend play becomes more reliant on the students' language and their interactions with one another. This theory was confirmed when looking at the link between the students' behaviors during play and the types of props that were provided. When symbolic props were provided, alone or in combination with more realistic items, students seemed to more often engage in these imaginative behaviors. This internalization of meaning, rather than a focus on a concrete, realistic object, relates to the origins of abstract thought. The students could assign their own meaning to the symbolic item and then focus on the language necessary to conduct the episode. For students who have developed skills in pretending, these behaviors allow for additions to the existing storyline, allowing them to make the story their own. In terms of reading skills, students who exhibit these behaviors are developing the ability to internalize the meaning of the text, the basis for the text response that is such an important component of comprehension.

Rowe (1998, 2000) identified pretend play as a familiar lens for learning. Whereas her very young preschoolers sought out items to relate to their favorite stories, the students in this study were provided with props for pretend play and included materials that would require a range of imagination. Using these materials, the students engaged in the sophisticated play episodes, interacted with their peers, used rich language, and constructed meaning around the texts. All of these behaviors were self-directed. I found that the students in these two classrooms relied on the stories and props as a familiar framework for their play and also as a springboard for more imaginative and personally relevant explorations of meaning. The play experiences available in these two classrooms contributed to the students' development in multiple areas and may result in a positive influence on their later experiences with books and reading.

Book-Related Pretend Play in the Classroom

Book-related pretend play represents a richer method of monitoring students' understanding of stories, moving beyond the typical questions and simple retellings. Although this study was based within a preschool environment, book-related pretend play would also be an appropriate literature response activity for kindergarten and primary-grade students. These play experiences would encourage students to develop the deeper, personal relationships with literature that

contribute to positive reading experiences. To make book-related pretend play a regular classroom activity or a specific center, the following suggestions would allow students to successfully use play as a way to explore within and beyond the story.

Select Books That Encourage Play

Because much of play involves fantasy elements, it would be worthwhile to select books that fall into that particular genre. As class favorites, the two teachers cited *Click Clack Moo*, *Strega Nona*, and the *Three Little Pigs*. In addition to talking animals and magic, these stories include predictable, repeated language in the dialogue between characters. The students that I worked with seemed particularly drawn to the last book. The exchange between the wolf and the pigs is an enjoyable one for students. One of the teachers remarked that she felt the repeated language of these stories supported the students' character portrayals and reenactments. Stories containing strong characters with recognizable motivations also seemed to influence the students' episodes. The *Three Little Pigs* has a clear problem and an element of danger, contributed by the wolf. For primary-grade students, their familiarity with folk and fairy tales would possibly allow for more expansive, beyond-the-text play. The characteristics of both traditional and modern fantasy capture students' attention and may encourage exploration through play.

Vary Prop Types

Although fantasy stories with strong characters, language, and plot elements supported play, the selected props also drew the students' attention. Initially, the novelty of these items encouraged play. The students enjoyed playing with the rubber "noodles" and taking turns in the pop-up tent. Once the novelty wore off, these types of materials would assist students in making connections between the stories and props, representing characters, and reenacting story events—all within text behaviors. The ways the realistic props first suggested and later supported the students' play was especially valued by the participating teachers. "Dressing up" is a favorite play activity for preschoolers and is enjoyed by older students as well. The students I worked with seemed to especially enjoy dressing as Strega Nona and Froggy.

Items that require more imagination to connect to the story should also be considered. Because so many toys are realistic in nature, one teacher felt the symbolic materials encouraged students to stretch their imaginations. The flexibility offered by more symbolic items supported the beyond-the-text play. Imagination may not be confined to the provided items, so students should be allowed and encouraged to locate other materials that might be included in play. In this case, the plastic box that held the props became a regular part of the play, as an oven for the hen's pizza or as the cow's washing machine.

Provide Repeated Exposure

One reading is often not enough for students to gain familiarity with a story, so multiple readings are beneficial to book-related pretend play. In this study, the book was read every day for five days, which may not be realistic in most classrooms. In most cases, two to three readings may provide enough exposure and time to develop an understanding of the text that would support play. One of the teachers recommended three readings; a simple read-aloud first, a second read-aloud where the repeated text was highlighted, and prop introductions during a third read-aloud. She felt this would allow the students to focus on one aspect during each reading and give enough exposure for rich play.

Support Connections

Twice a week the teachers emphasized the repeated language within the text and also introduced items in the prop set during read-alouds. I believe these practices encouraged the students' play later during center time. It also seemed to support the students' connections between the props and the story. Often the students would question the purpose of a prop item. "They're really pencils," one teacher explained during her introduction of the *Three Little Pigs* props, "but we're going to pretend that they're sticks." This kind of language encouraged the students' behaviors as they played within and beyond the text.

Allow for Self-Direction

Although adult involvement in students' play has been shown to positively influence pretending (Bondioli, 2001; Christie & Enz, 1992; Morrow, 1990), the students were encouraged to direct their own play. With

the increase in structured, cognitively focused activities in early childhood classrooms, both younger and older students would likely welcome, and benefit from, opportunities to self-regulate their play activities. Aside from setting some guidelines for the book-related pretend play and the use of the props, the teachers and I acted as observers. However, the teachers did influence the students' play through their readings of the books and their demonstrations of the props. As a result of this indirect support, the students were allowed to determine and work within their own zones of proximal development.

Observe

When reflecting on this study, both teachers felt that the opportunities to pretend around the stories translated to other centers like the housekeeping area and to more episodes within students' play. One teacher discussed how, as a result of the study, she was more attentive to the students' pretending and noticed things about the students that she hadn't considered before. Making book-related pretend play a part of their classroom environment allows teachers to continue to value and encourage pretending as the real work of childhood.

Pretend Play Deepens Comprehension

Within an early childhood classroom, book-related pretend play could be considered an equal opportunity experience, in which every student can put on the hat, pick up the fork, go in the house, and enter the world of the story. Future research could use more formal measurements of students' comprehension after book-related pretend play and observation of students' experiences with different props or different text genres. The students' and teachers' experiences described here identify book-related pretend play as an early childhood classroom practice that supports students in their ability to comprehend and respond to literature.

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