

Preschool Children's Cognitive Play: A Factor Analysis

Olivia N. Saracho

University of Maryland, U.S.A.

Bernard Spodek

University of Illinois, U.S.A.

A factor analysis was done on the play behavior of preschool children. The subjects were 2400 three-, four-, and five-year-old children attending an early childhood program. Their play behaviors were observed, recorded, and analyzed using the Play Rating Scale. Three factors underlying the play of these children were identified. These factors had strong loadings and a range of items. The factors were (1) Discussion of Ideas in Play Activities, (2) Sociodramatic Play Behaviors in Play Activities, and (3) Action Play in Physical Play Activities. These factors manifest the significance of discussing ideas, engaging in sociodramatic play, and using actions in their play activities. These outcomes suggest implications for the study of young children's play and support the constructs in children's play (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional development).

Play has been an integral part of early childhood education since the creation of the kindergarten by Freidrich Froebel (Froebel, 1887). While there are many theories of play as well as many definitions, a widely accepted one has been suggested by Garvey (1990). She suggests that play is a pleasurable, enjoyable activity with no extrinsic goals. It is spontaneous and voluntary, involving active engagement on the part of its participants and a certain relationship to what is not play. Play helps young children to learn about their physical and social world. It also helps children understand the use of symbols and, as a result, enhances both their oral and written language. By assuming a variety of social roles in their play, children learn the social uses of language, becoming flexible and expressive in their words and tones to communicate ideas and insure that rules are understood through voice or conversation patterns used in the different roles found in their play (Saracho, 1986).

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Olivia N. Saracho, Department of Curriculum and Instruction College of Education University of Maryland College Park, Maryland 20742 U.S.A.

Curry (1985) found a relationship in play between play and language and the development of the sense of self. As children acquire language comprehension their symbolic play moves to a more advanced stage. Le Normand (1986) found that a developmental exploration of language accompanies the symbolic play of young children during ages two to four. In this study language production was related to the primary forms of symbolic expression between the ages of two and one-half to three years. The production of language increased to a large extent between the ages of three and three- and one -half years. In addition, language production was better distinguished from the context of play.

Casby and Corte's study (1986) showed that symbolic play performance relates to early language development, specifically to the initial combinational language. Children who were at the combinational level of language development achieved significantly more representational ability than children at the single-word level.

Individuals use their language and symbolic systems to conceptualize their thoughts and to communicate their ideas to others. Symbolic development is intertwined with cognitive development at this stage. Because of this, there is a relationship between symbolic play and the development of language and cognition. The complexity in children's symbolic play cultivates their competence in replacing language for play actions and objects (Saracho, 1986).

The research cited here as well as other research (see Saracho & Spodek, 1998) suggests that play promotes children's cognitive development. If play is essential in young children's cognitive development, then play studies can help child development specialists and early childhood educators to understand the cognitive functions of play. Van Meel (1991) strongly recommends that the area of socialization be examined using valid measures that precisely considers a blend of socialization components. An instruments which assesses the different play behaviors within the four forms of play found in preschools will be used in settings where children use play to express their own learning interest. The purpose of this study was to identify factors underlying the play of three- to five-year-old children.