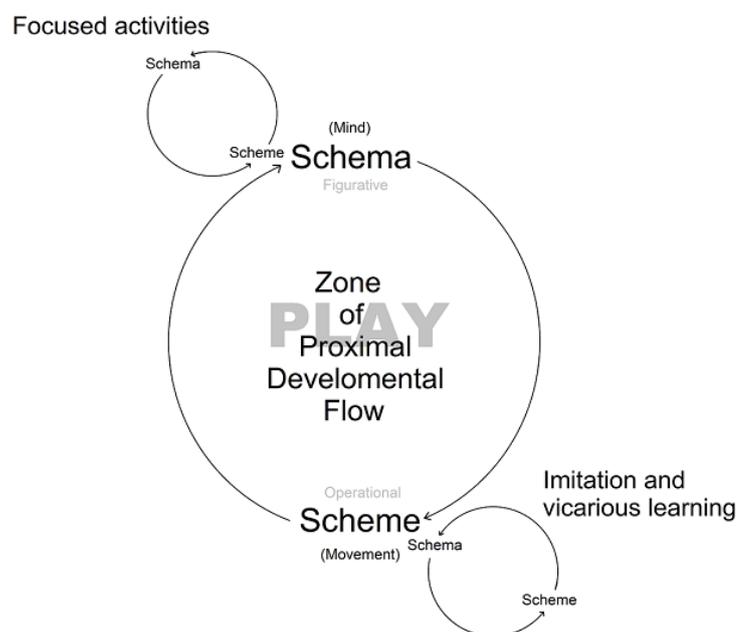


Grasping the confidence to achieve their potential: The importance of socio-dramatic role play and the co-construction of the preschool curriculum (SchemaPlay 2 of 4)

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This is the second of four articles exploring different aspects of what are often referred to as schemas in early childhood learning and development. In the first article of the series we explained why it is useful to distinguish between the 'operative' schemes, and the more 'figurative' schema that young children commonly draw upon in their free flow play. The ZPDF model was presented as a means by which we could identify the role of the adult in supporting the child's play. The model identifies the child's play as a continuous process whereby the child applies their established schemas to the different schematic contexts that are offered by their social and material environment. The model also identifies the key role played by the educator, who provocatively offers new schema contexts, and at times 'focused activities' that provide the opportunity to develop new schemas in familiar schema and schema contexts. At the point at which these two creative learning cycles (of the child and of the adult) meet there is a genuine 'meeting of minds' where both the adult and the child are focused upon the same schema and or schema. In the previous article it was argued that this sort of interaction has been identified in empirical study as 'sustained shared thinking'. At these times we can also say that the curriculum is being collaboratively 'co-constructed'. In this article this process is taken a stage further to explain how this works in the specific context of socio-dramatic play.



From an ecological perspective of child development (Gibson, 1969), the operative schemes that we often see children apply in their free-flow play are considered cognitively 'embodied', and while we may be familiar with the most basic and common examples that Athey identified; the schemes of 'transporting', 'containing', 'positioning' etc., she was fully aware that there were many others. The sociodramatic role-play activities engaged in by four-year olds are often dominated by a single scheme or may involve a combination of schemes. One of the most common is in playing 'shop' where the scheme of 'exchange', involves both giving one thing and receiving another (usually pretend money) in return. But even where a child is putting a doll into bed, covering it with a blanket and singing it a song we can see this in terms of schemes: of containment/ enclosure and then in playing out the 'comforting

song' scheme. All of these operative schemes have been learnt by the child in their interactions with their social and material environment, and from the perspective of Activity Theory they are referred to as the 'rules' that are applied in role play (El'konin, 1978, van Oers, 2013). Damasio (2012) identifies the underlying process where these everyday stories of our individual interactions with the socio-cultural and physical world that we are immersed within, provide our sense of self, our autobiographical memory, and the everyday narratives that provide the central means by which we cognitively function. Frank Smith understood this when he wrote that literacy was best considered as a 'club', if children are to take on the 'roles' of being readers and writers they must first become aware of those roles and be motivated to participate in them. Sociodramatic role play provides the contexts for that to happen. A case study will help to clarify the processes involved:

Bella (4) enjoyed dressing up and repeatedly chose a princess dress and pretended to make tea (pouring water from a teapot). Her favourite colours in the dresses (pink and blue) also determined her selection of tea set resources, even though there were many other colour options. In her free-play, Bella was overheard saying, "I am going to be a princess when I am a grown up. I like dressing-up." Bella's princess play usually took on a character from a favoured book.

Her practitioners built upon her interest in princesses by providing more dresses and reading stories about princesses, but they were concerned that the play did not appear to evolve.. Bella herself seemed to be aware by the limitations of being a princess, saying "Princesses don't always know what to do, do they?"

In terms of operative 'schemes', Bella had been applying pouring and dressing schemes in her self-chosen free-play. She also expressed a preference for the colours blue and pink (significant schemas). In discussion with Bella's key person it was considered that the dressing-up and socio-dramatic play resources currently limited the children's ability to assign themselves other roles. It was agreed that Bella could be introduced to the role of being a scientist, building upon her dressing scheme, by providing a scientist's white coat, and building upon her pouring scheme by providing a variety of containers (test-tubes) to pour into, and building upon the colours; creating variations in tint through the dilution of food colouring. It was felt that this would also offer an opportunity to further support her hand-eye co-ordination and provide an opportunity to introduce different skills in pouring, such as using a funnel and a teat pipette. Pictures of scientists were sourced to support Bella's understanding of the role of a scientist, and books about scientists were placed in the book corner with supporting props.



The plan was to ensure that the new activity should open up new possibilities and potential aspirations yet be *anchored* in what Bella was already familiar with (her schemes and schemas), what Bella could *already do* and what she *already knew*, supporting Bella's self-esteem and belief.

In introducing the activity, Bella was asked: "Bella would you like to look at a new activity with me today, it involves what I know you like to do, dressing up and pouring. Shall we have a look at it together?" "First, shall we find out why these people wear a white coat, why they are pouring, and what job these men and ladies do? Bella had a look at the pictures and Bella and the adult discussed what each of the scientists in the pictures are doing. Bella's practitioner then put on a white coat and Bella immediately copied, saying "Are we going to be scientists?" Bella took control of pouring the water, and then after the practitioner had shown her how to use a pipette to add the *blue* food colouring, Bella took over. Provocative questions were asked, such as; "How can we make the next blue one darker?" Her practitioner encouraged her to find the lightest colour, then the next lightest, etc., until she had graded the test-tube colours by shade from light to dark.

After the initial introduction of the resources, Bella explained that she was going to show some of her friends how to be scientists. She was totally in '*flow*' and was heard telling her friend, "Be careful, you pour it like this when you are a scientist." Bella was proud of what she had achieved and happy in her 'scientist' role.

In her free play, Bella took out the apparatus and repeated the activity often and she always wore the white coat. Some weeks later Bella was asked if she would like to create a laboratory play area. Bella looked at the pictures of laboratory's shown in story books and chose the resources from a selection already sourced in a box. Bella went on to play with 'grouping', 'estimating', 'matching', 'counting' and 'measuring' activities, all key mathematical pre-requisite schemes for the early years' outcomes, 'Shape, Space and Measure, and Numbers.

Bella was thrilled to be asked to create her laboratory and this highlights the importance of sensitive adult intervention and participation. Bella's ownership of the laboratory enabled her to grow into the role of being

a scientist and have agency in the role, revisiting and testing out different experiments and also taking on new challenges (short focussed adult introductions were offered). Her outcomes in UTW, Expressive Arts & Design, Moving and Handling, and PSED were also supported in her new socio-dramatic play.

Bella now attends primary school and when asked a few days ago what she would like to be when she grows up, she replied “A hairdresser, scientist or nurse.” (in that order) Bella’s parents advised that she had also asked for a science set for Christmas.

The reason so many STEM initiatives have failed in the past is because they have not been implemented early enough in young children’s lives, and they haven’t included enough language and communication content to convince girls that they have anything to offer them.

The classic studies on occupational aspirations tell us that the child’s self-concept, and her occupational aspirations are mutually constituted (Gottfredson, 2002). Young children have agency, they ultimately aspire to roles that are compatible with the image they have of themselves. Their self-concept, in turn, is constituted in their individual socio-economic, gender and cultural experience in society. Their educational experience, feelings of achievement or underachievement has a powerful influence in this. As Gottfredson has suggested, self-conceptions and occupational aspirations might usefully be seen to develop in a ‘leapfrog’ manner. Individuals value occupations that are compatible with their self-concept, and their aspirations are determined by the sort of person they want to become, and the amount of effort they are willing or feel able to spend in realising these objectives.

Key Points:

- In SchemaPlay, the EYFS Curriculum is co-constructed by the adult and child in periods of sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2019).
- Adult intervention in free play should be sensitive and thoughtful, ideally the adult just puts a little ‘spin’ on the play at a time when it is sensed to be appropriate, and then steps back to let the play develop.
- To develop self-esteem, resilience and self-belief, new activities should be anchored in what the child already **knows** and what they can **do**. The distinction between schemas and schemes supports the practitioner in ensuring this.
- Socio-dramatic play provides significant support in terms of future aspirations and learning.

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