

Event-Based Play: Symbolizing Children's Thinking

by Susan Whitaker

Two three-year-old boys, in the Making Area, create some faces from cardboard which they call Big Bird. These faces become the pivot for the development of a puppet show. The boys use some outdoor blocks to divide the space so that they can stand behind a barrier with their puppets and then they get some chairs for the audience to sit on. Other children who have been 'in the snowfields' and 'driving taxis' arrive for the 'theatre/show'.

All the while the staff help the children organize their thinking and recall their prior knowledge of the world, by asking questions such as "Do you have enough seats for everyone?"; "Do you think this show is for free or should we buy tickets?" (the children discuss this and decide the show is free!); "What time should it start?" When the puppet show does start and the puppeteers cannot be heard by the audience, the teacher asks, "I wonder if the microphones are on?" which of course indicates to the puppeteers that they aren't being heard. This they resolve by raising their voices!

At the end of the show, the question, "How are we going to get home?" results in the children who had been 'taxi drivers' setting up the taxi ride home by lining chairs in a row. Comments from the 'passengers', which include the teacher, such as "When I've been in 'taxis' before we sat side by side, not in rows" resulted in more negotiation and compromise with a rearrangement of the seating.

*This series of play episodes, with a range of 'players' participating at different times, continued over the week. Each child had some prior, yet different, knowledge of 'theatre' or 'shows' and so, in order for play to progress, the children collapsed their knowledge into meaningful actions, compromised, and negotiated. So learning occurred. This is known as **event-based play**.*

The term *event-based play* evolved from a group of State Education Department preschool teachers working with Dr. Rosemary Perry and Sue Thomas in Queensland, Australia during the 1980s.

These teachers had noted the positives of the children's engagement in 'make believe' play where, as Dockett & Fleer

(1999: 14) state, children operate according to an 'attitude of mind' and 'where people, objects, and ideas are treated 'as if' they were something else' (ibid: 15) that is, pretence and playful activity. For example, when the child uses a wooden block as a telephone or holds his hand as if it were a phone. These practitioners wanted to capture that enthusiasm and extend the children's overall play experience. They did this by recognizing the 'Vygotskian theory that play is always a social, symbolic experience,' and that 'the themes involved in play all relate to the society and culture in which children are situated' (ibid: 63); thereby furthering the 'as if' element in their play based curricula.

To further establish the background to the development of event-based play, Perry, in her book *Play Based Preschool Curriculum* highlights the five main functions of play as a basis for this approach to teaching. These functions are:

■ Play enables children to use symbols and to represent their world in a variety of forms — *as children play, they frequently use objects and actions symbolically. That is, they use them to represent other objects and actions and in this way come to act in accordance with internal ideas rather than external reality* (Vygotsky cited in Perry: 1998). Very young children may need more realistic objects to support their make believe play, whereas, by their preschool years children can 'imagine objects and events without any direct support from the real world' (Berk, 1994).

As preschoolers' play develops, so does their ability to make these substitutions . . . this ability to separate meaning from objects and



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to act on internal ideas is vital preparation for the development of literacy and numeracy (Berk cited in Perry: 1998; Bodrova and Leong cited in Perry: 1998). As children become skilled in using objects or take on roles 'as if' they were something or someone else they are separating an object or role from an idea. This same ability is necessary in reading and writing where the letter looks nothing like the sound it makes and a word looks nothing like the object it stands for . . . " (Perry, 1998: 12).

- Play promotes creative flexibility in thinking
- Play assists children to build their knowledge — constructed by living and learning in the social world, they begin to build their own personal "scripts" of 'what happens when . . . ' (Nelson cited in Perry, 1998: 12).
- Play fosters language and social abilities.
- Play helps children jump above their usual level — *Play serves to scaffold children's learning. Play provides children with roles, rules, situations, or events which enable them to focus and attend at a higher level than is possible without the scaffolding offered by play* (Perry, 1998: 13) (ibid:11).

So what makes *event-based play* different from some other approaches to teaching?

The *event-based* approach to teaching is one which encourages children to recall events, roles, and experiences which are familiar in their daily lives. In recreating familiar experiences they negotiate their own goal with the adults in the environment.

Children, therefore, have the opportunity to recall familiar events/experiences in their lives — what they know— and through their interactions with others, have that knowledge extended and clarified, utilizing their own personal scripts — "what happens when . . . " — to develop/negotiate shared meanings.

In practice, the traditional classroom might look something like this:

- Well resourced areas, attractively arranged equipment suited to the children's interests and abilities, placed on low open shelving units;
- Materials might be organized into specific areas such as: block corner, puzzle/manipulative area, book corner, collage/art area, home corner (which may take on the appearance of hospital, shop at times).

Some traditional approaches to learning may be that:

- Children are very busy acting on objects and practicing the acquisition of skills — painting, cutting;

- Children are engaged in dressing up in the Home Corner — trying on clothes, cooking a meal — activities they have done many times before;
- The play is based very much in the here and now;
- The challenge to draw on past experience is not apparent, there are no requirements on children to access past experience;
- Children undertake a range of activities provided by the teacher with a view to achieving particular goals designated by the teacher.

In an *event-based* classroom, the approach to learning involves:

- The child's world being introduced into the preschool/child care/school setting by the children and in recreating events in their lives — *what happens when* helps create a meaningful context in which they are able to access detail — *what happens next, what happens if . . . ;*
- Children providing the context in which to expand their knowledge; this, therefore, gives meaning and purpose to children, which in turn leads to increased motivation and empowerment;
- Children getting to play with their own ideas, to initiate and negotiate around their thinking: *event-based play* lies at one end of the child-initiated continuum.

***Event-based play* necessitates a rethink regarding the use of time, space, and materials. For example:**

Time:

- A group session is held and both children and adults get organized for the session. Roles are established, spaces negotiated, time allowed, and materials collected.
- Children need long periods of uninterrupted time in which to play.

Space:

- The children themselves negotiate the organization and the definition of space and are encouraged to do so. Hence, the classroom might be divided into smaller areas and have a variety of *walls* to define the specific space needed — traditional screens, lengths of material stretched between supports, sheets of cardboard.
- Chairs and tables may still be available for any of the traditional activities that would be apparent in any good early childhood classroom. Tables may, however, be used as shop counters, or turned upside down to become a boat; chairs might be used as seats in a bus; wooden blocks may become the outline of the walls of a house or plumbing lines into a factory.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Materials:

■ In several areas around the room, there are large amounts of open-ended materials readily available to children (large containers of cardboard, sheets of marine ply and timber, carpet lengths, lengths of material, crates, lengths of PVC piping and so on).

■ There is also a well-resourced, and large collage area with all sorts of materials, writing tools, paper, and paints available. This area may be called the *making* area. Children working in this area expand their involvement beyond just cutting, pasting, and painting activities. Here, there may be children making tickets for a concert, or invitations, party food, and decorations. Children are making resources, which they intend to use as part of their play/event/project. Children come and go from this area as the need arises.

■ A large variety of props are also available to the children. These props may be needed to expand the *as if* element of their make-believe play ideas, i.e. sets of keys, torches, mobile phones, bunches of silk flowers, tool boxes, hair dryers as well as clothes and hats — the list is only limited by the imagination of the collectors.

■ And, so, to the role of the adult: *event-based play offers an opportunity to get inside the young child's thinking — an interesting place to be!* (Perry interview: 2001). The role therefore encompasses the notion of helping this thinking happen — by building on what the children know, by being a facilitator, negotiator, co-operator, guide, planner, and player — but not a dominator, dictator, or director. This requires respect and trust for each child and few pre-determined expectations — although the adult can reject the children's ideas as can other children, if unsafe or otherwise unacceptable. Children and adults develop shared understandings and goals for the play, together.

Event-based play shares many similar concepts with other recent teaching approaches, i.e. respect for children's competence, a team-like approach to learning, child centered and initiated programs, the importance of social context in scaffolding knowledge, and adult as learner with the child. The major differences are the emphasis on the use of symbolization as the basis for play, the social context of the child from which the play emanates, and the negotiated shared meanings which develop.

This style of teaching can be applied as easily to the early years of schooling as to the preschool years, although it does

With thanks to Dr. Rosemary Perry (QUT) and to Ms. Heather Conroy (University of Southern Queensland, USQ) for their assistance in writing this article.

not suit every practitioner in the early childhood field. Event-based play will continue to evolve and to assist with practitioners thinking about, and extension of, a play-based curriculum.

References

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- Dockett, S. & Fleer, M. (1999). *Play and Pedagogy in Early Childhood — Bending the Rules*. Australia: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Perry, R. (1998). *Play-Based Pre-school Curriculum*. Brisbane, Australia: QUT.

Resources

- Video (1995). *Thinking through Play — overview of the event based approach*. Brisbane, Australia: Queensland University of Technology (QUT), (15 minutes).
- Perry, R. (1998). *Play-Based Pre-school Curriculum*. Brisbane, Australia: QUT.
- Perry, R. & Irwin, L. (2000). *Playing with Curriculum — Strategies and Benefits*. Brisbane, Australia: QUT. (This publication is for teachers in the early years of schooling)

These resources can be obtained from QUT Bookshop, Queensland University of Technology, Gardens Point Campus, Brisbane, Qld, Australia (QUT: www.qut.edu.au), phone: (61) 7 38643125, or e-mail: bookshop@qut.edu.au.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Playing with ideas: Observe the children at play and be alert to any "events" from their experiences that they may be "re-creating" even in a rudimentary way. To encourage the children to express/extend their ideas, introduce an appropriate prop (e.g., a bandage for the hurt baby doll) or take on a role appropriate to the context. Later, brainstorm ideas with colleagues for possible props and roles relating to common events. Be sure your contributions support children's ideas . . . not override them!!

Discovering differences: The two descriptions on page 50 describe play and learning approaches in a traditional classroom and those in an event-based play classroom. Discuss these two descriptions with staff, exploring the differences and similarities.

Further Reading: Whitaker cites a book by R. Perry as a resource for event-based play. Order this book for your staff library.