Beginnings Workshop

looking into children's play communities

by Mark Mabry and Carolee Fucigna

We all need the patience and the vision to look into children's play, not just at [children's play].
— Harley, 1999, pg. 26

Play, particularly children's sociodramatic play, is very much the cornerstone of early childhood classrooms in the United States. As early childhood educators, we learn and expound the ubiquitous mantras of 'the value of play,' 'play-based programs,' 'children learning through play,' and 'play as child's work.' We strive to promote the importance of making a place for play in programs for young children, and to educate parents and broader communities about the benefits that children derive from engaging in play with one another.

Children's social play is one of the most important venues for learning in the early childhood classroom. Through play with others, they develop self-direction and self-control, an understanding of symbolic representation, fluency in communication and cooperation, problem-solving strategies, and an understanding of cultural rules and social behavior (Meckley, 2005). Yet articulating the significance of dramatic play in terms of what unfolds daily in our own classroom can be a complex, multi-layered, and somewhat 'slippery' task. While this play is easily identifiable, understanding its meaning, *especially from the children's points of view*, requires careful observation and analysis. Trying to uncover meanings from their perspective has the potential to yield insight into an aspect of classroom life that may not be apparent to teachers — the children's play community.

As children engage in sociodramatic play in our classrooms on a daily basis, we notice that, rather than simply engaging in a sequence of unrelated play events or scripts, children are participating in the ongoing creation and maintenance of what Alice Meckley (1994) describes as a *play community*. In their play community, children build a shared repertoire of actions, scripts, and meanings. This social construction of shared rules, roles, players, and events evolves in a particular classroom during a particular school year. "A familiar group of children establish individual and collective routines of preferred play with objects, with play events, and with each other" (Meckley, 1994). While common play themes may surface every year in our classrooms, each group of children will develop a play community that is uniquely their own. It is important to view dramatic play not simply as individual children participating in individual play events, but as a group of players "collectively establishing cultural patterns as they play" (Meckley, 1994).

Meckley (1994) also notes that as children repeatedly play together, their shared play themes become more familiar to the players and their signals and cues to each other during play become less explicit and more idiosyncratic. This can make observing and interpreting dramatic play challenging as we may not be privy to the significance of this nuanced communication. In addition, children are often involved in multiple play events simultaneously, participating in the ebb and flow of various scripts and players that intertwine and influence each other.

In order to successfully understand the nuances and meanings children are establishing together in their dramatic play communities, it is necessary to dedicate ourselves to careful observation of the play *over an extended period of time* in order to understand the culture negotiated by the players. The work of Vivien Paley (1984, 1986, 1988) is perhaps the most familiar example of a classroom teacher-researcher who has diligently tried to reflect upon the communal sharing in the play communities that have emerged in her classroom over the years. William Corsaro's (2003) research into peer cultures shows classroom communi-

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ties most often based around children's play with "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that kids produce and share in interaction with each other." (Corsaro, 2003, p.37)

If we wish to have a window into the world of our children's developing play communities, it is clear that we must develop the disposition to carefully observe, record, and analyze the dramatic play in our classrooms over extended periods of time. We can find such a methodology embedded in the practice of documentation as inspired by the preschools of Reggio Emilia. Documentation is a key part of what the teachers in Reggio call 'the pedagogy of listening.' This listening requires not just careful observation by the teacher, but also the collection of artifacts (e.g., photos, running records, videos, and children's products). These artifacts can then be pored over and used to construct a *contextual* narrative of the dramatic play events.

What sets documentation apart from merely reporting a dramatic play vignette as a sequence of events is its emphasis on analysis and interpretation of recorded events in order to make the meaning of the play clearer. "The intent of documentation is to explain, not merely to display" (Forman & Fyfe, 1998, p. 241). This effort also requires reflecting on documentation with colleagues, parents, and the children themselves in order to hypothesize about, and uncover possible meanings the children might be bringing to their activities. This reflective process allows for the *integration* of different perspectives on a particular event and may help us move closer to understanding the intent of the original players. For teachers and parents, reflecting on documentation of dramatic play may also raise awareness of events such as shifts in play interests or social relationships. For the children themselves, revisiting play documentation might bring into their consciousness a sense of how they negotiate common elements of their dramatic play themes, how roles and rules are assigned, what strategies they use to 'keep the ball in the air' during play, or how they fit into the evolving social world framed by their play community.

Meckley (1994, 2005) has identified some common characteristics of children's play communities which documentation can be particularly useful in attempting to uncover. These rather ritualistic aspects of play communities allow children to use a mutually constructed and understood framework within which they can innovate and negotiate during their dramatic play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Without this balance of ritual and innovation, children would be forced to start from scratch every time they initiated their play. Using Meckley's definitions, we can look at these characteristics through the following examples of documentation of 'dog and owner' dramatic play over the course of a month in one author's classroom:

Rules: *Actions, objects, players, and words are repeated in distinct, predictable, and consistent patterns.*

- When engaging in dog-owner play, the 'owners' connect and control play dog leashes, organize habitats for their 'dogs,' and distribute treats. Collections of math manipulatives and plastic linking chains serve as symbolic treats.

- Dogs move on all-fours, communicate with expressive gestures and sounds (whines and barks, never words), and are generally submissive. When revisiting the documentation of this play, Carla comments, "She was walking me. Sonia was carrying the chains. She was walking me and I was a good dog and when I stopped she gave me a treat (a plastic link)."

Order and Time: *Activities occur in an ordered, sequential manner over time and within consistent settings.*

- Dog-owner play begins soon after the children arrive at school. A child interested in being a dog or owner initiates play with another interested child. "Miki, can you own me?"

- A leash is obtained from the dramatic play supplies and attached to the wrist of the appropriate player using a circle of small plastic links.

- A home base is built with hollow blocks or negotiated within the room (e.g., pillows under the loft).

- Walks commence, which sometimes leads to new play settings (for example, the book area as a place to stop and eat).

Shared Knowledge *is demonstrated.*

- One of the clearest demonstrations of the children's shared knowledge emerges when they are all looking at documentation of dog-owner play and commenting on what they are observing. They are forthright about things such as roles and event sequences, for example:
  C: "Alejandro was my owner."
  H: "But before he was her owner, I was her owner."
  C: "Then we switched it up and Ana was Alejandro's owner."
  E: "Why is your tongue out (in the picture)?"
  H: "That's when the dog gets tired."
  L: "It helps them cool down."
  D: "When they get hot they need to cool down."
  Clearly there is shared knowledge of dog behaviors, such as panting, expressed here.

Interconnected and Shared Events: *Varied play events are interconnected due to the shared common interests, cooperative social interaction, and communication between play groups.*

- Dog-owner play is often happening simultaneously along with ship play in the hollow block area. Dogs and owners may come on the ship at the discretion of the child designated as 'first captain.' Dogs then transform into 'boat dogs.' Owners and other captains establish resting places for the dogs on board.

Roles: *Children's play roles reflect individual and collective reality.*

- Roles in dog play: owner, dog, differentiated member of dog family (i.e. sister dog). There have also been babysitters for dogs (they walk multiple dogs at the same time), a 'king dog,' and a 'wild and nice cat.'

Control: *Control and ownership of specific play events is shown.*

- If you are an owner, you are in the dominant role in dog play. If you are the first captain, you determine the roles (second captain, boat dog) and events on the ship. Others check in with you: "Can he be on the ship?"

So how might our classrooms benefit from us devoting the time and resources necessary to gaining a deeper understanding of our children's play communities? Reflecting on the consistent rituals found in a group's recurring dramatic play scripts might allow the teacher to fine-tune her understanding of the more provocative events that occur within the play. For example, in dog and owner play, dogs act 'wild' by running outdoors and refusing to be walked. They might mess up their food, disobey their owner, or toss away treats. By making an effort to examine these consistent *play frames* and the underlying themes being explored, the teacher might view this as a reasonable exploration of 'dog-ness' or stretching the typical frame of the dramatic play (Corsaro, 2003), rather than disruptive behavior that requires intervention.

Similarly, as we see children engage in the same dramatic play script over many days or weeks, we can appreciate their construction of a collective landscape, rather than worry about children being 'stuck' in their scripts. Documenting and revisiting this play helps develop a disposition to 'look before you leap,' and trust more in children's competence to negotiate, collaborate, and construct a community.

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Looking into children's dramatic play with this lens on the play community yields a precious and unique view of a complex, child-owned and child-constructed classroom culture, distinct from the community they share with adults.

When we begin to see that children negotiate consistent roles, actions, sequences, and rules in their dramatic play, it allows us to become better at interpreting the meaning that the play has for the players. Rather than seeing play episodes as spontaneous bursts of play, we may be able to become more skilled at interpreting dramatic play as a shared language and culture that children have negotiated. We might become clearer in our perception of the more esoteric aspects of their play — the verbal and gestural shortcuts that may seem on first blush to be nonsensical or extraneous might begin to be seen as a vocabulary that children have developed to signal and cue each other in sustaining their play. For example, in the dog game, two children kneeling and rapidly slapping their hands together while smiling and bobbing their heads, is a sign of two 'dogs playing.' The way to communicate to a friend he is your owner is as follows: "He is up and I am down and I look up into his eyes and he tells me what to do." Without carefully observing these play rituals as they construct them over time, we might miss out on the meaning these subtle cues convey.

We often look to dramatic play for curricular topics that children might be interested in further exploring. Investigating play communities allows us to make better and more deeply researched judgments about the direction of the emergent curriculum. As teachers, when we are tracking the players, the scripts, etc. over time, we are better prepared to plan investigations and activities that reflect the true interests of the children. For example, planning for dog-owner play isn't just about brainstorming 'all about dogs.' Maybe what is really interesting to the children in their ongoing scripts is expanding their repertoire of what dogs and owners do together (e.g., dog grooming).

PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY THE AUTHORS

It seems clear that focusing on the play community when observing classroom life affords unique insights about the children and their classroom play culture. It most certainly requires time — unstructured time during the school day to enable children to construct a play community and have the opportunity to develop into what Sutton-Smith (1997) calls "autonomous and cooperative social beings." It also requires us to dedicate time to documenting the ongoing dramatic play and reflect on it with each other, as well as with the children. Corsaro (2003) notes that when engaging in this process, we can develop a greater respect for the competence of children and for the importance of their participation in these communities. Looking into children's dramatic play with this lens on the play community yields a precious and unique view of a complex, child-owned and child-constructed classroom culture, distinct from the community they share with adults.

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