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Addressing Behavioral Deficits in Early Childhood Education:  
Promoting Positive Socio-Emotional Development through Dramatic Play

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the detrimental effects behavior can have on a child's social-emotional development and the vital role dramatic play opportunities have in overcoming these developmental deficits. A child's trajectory for success in school begins in early childhood. Children experience meaningful connections to learning, as well as higher teacher and peer approval, when they are capable of maintaining positive interactions in the classroom. For this to occur, children must have a solid foundation in socio-emotional skills such as expression, understanding, and regulation. Behavioral deficits impede development and reduce the likelihood of academic achievement. However, application of early behavioral and social skill intervention through dramatic play significantly increases the resources and strategies necessary for children to succeed in school.

### **Introduction**

In 2001 President George Bush enacted the No Child Left Behind Act. This educational law aimed at improving the nation's academic success, especially amongst at-risk children. No Child Left Behind required schools to meet specific yearly academic goals, with the threat of poor academic progress leading to significant penalizations, such as a reduction in funding, and possible government takeover (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011). While this law was meant to ensure that all schools provided students with high quality education opportunities, in 2010 President Obama realized that "NCLB's prescriptive requirements became increasingly unworkable for schools and educators" (U.S. Department of Education). Therefore, in 2015 President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act. This law granted more flexibility in meeting specific requirements "in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students" (U.S. Department of Education).

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2010 corresponds with another educational law that significantly affected schools' curriculum, the Common Core. In 2009, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers implemented the Common Core State Standards. This educational development also aimed at improving the nation's academic success through nation-wide standardized "consistent, real-world learning goals and launched this effort to ensure that all students, regardless of where they live are graduating high school prepared for college, career, and life" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017).

With the implementation of higher academic standards through ESSA and the Common Core Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn (1995) state that teaching strategies that were once reserved and employed in first grade “such as whole-class teacher directed-instruction, formal reading instruction, written assignments out of workbooks, and frequent grading- are now common in kindergartens” (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn, 1995, p. 209). Incoming kindergarten students often are expected to possess letter and sound identification skills, beginning reading strategies, correctly write their name, identify and write their numbers, as well as focus and participate cooperatively with their teachers and peers throughout the entire day. Due to the increasing expectations of incoming kindergarten students, early childhood educators are also experiencing increased pressure to switch their focus from whole child development to achievement of short-term academic goals. More time is being redirected for teacher-directed instruction opportunities that focus on increasing literacy and numeracy skills. While early childhood educators strive to provide all students with foundational skills required for meeting the increasing kindergarten expectations, children who have not experienced positive social-emotional development can develop behavioral issues that impede and deter from academic learning. According to McCabe and Altamura (2011) “research has show that 10 to 15% of preschool children exhibit moderate to clinically significant emotional and behavior difficulties” (p. 516).

The combination of increasing academic results in preschool students and the variety of developmental needs amongst their students, teachers feel overwhelmed on how to provide quality instruction to build all these foundational skills. However, play,

especially sociodramatic play, provides opportunities for children and adults to build this strong foundation of skills necessary for social and academic success.

### **Literature Review**

During the 1960's President Kennedy and President Johnson's implementations of the War on Poverty and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 shed light on the importance of early childhood education. These legislative acts led to the creation of Head Start, one of the nation's first programs specifically aimed at improving successful future outcomes for disadvantaged children through high quality educational and social skill programming (Winter & Kelley, 2008). Continuing research on the vitality of early childhood education of an individual's likelihood for a successful future in society, during the 1990's the National Goals Panel expanded its views on the notion of school readiness. Going beyond academic skills school focus shifted to include the overall development and well-being of a child as a major factor of school readiness. "According to the National Institute for Child Health and Development and other experts, school readiness consists of a broad set of competencies such as cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language development, motivation and approaches to learning, as well as discipline-specific domain including the literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts" (Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007, p. 7).

Children enter preschool classrooms with significant variances of background experiences and opportunities for school readiness development. However, one aspect that all children have in common is that they learn through play. Play has a notable value in the early childhood setting. Vorkapic and Katic (2015) state it is "impossible to separate children's play, learning, and development" (p. 113). Play often occurs

naturally, allowing children flexibility in learning content, integrating new knowledge, and demonstrating skills. Play is a very personal experience, varying between individuals and thus lacks clear definition amongst researchers. Mraz, Porcelli, and Tyler (2016) define play as “what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way, and for their own reasons” (p. 12). While researchers do not have a single, agreed upon definition of play, they concur on the critical role-play, opportunities have overall development during the early childhood years.

During these early years, children’s brains are creating new neural connections with each new exposure to materials and situations as well as with interaction amongst peers. These meaningful connections shape the brain by making the individual smarter and more adaptable. Play provides the opportunity for children to develop their individual stress-response system by trying out new skills and to act out ideas in a safe environment. This helps to increase independence of a child and gives them confidence to face the world around them as how they might see the adults in their lives do on a daily basis. As Dewey (1962) stated, as quoted in Henniger (1991), “through their games they learn about the work and play of the grown-up world. Besides noting the elements which make up this world, they find out a good deal about the actions and processes that are necessary to keep it going” (p. 63). In addition to building neural connections, these play experiences allow children to develop empathy, grow optimism, flexibility, resilience, and emotional regulation (Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler, 2016).

Walk into a childcare center or a preschool classroom and witness children engaged in a variety of experiences. Students may be releasing energy through dancing and movement, while a small group of students might be working together exploring and

testing a new concept in the STEM center. Continue looking around and observe several more students re-enacting a recent trip to a doctor's office and see how their schema's change as they integrate their new knowledge. Vorkapic and Katic (2015) categorize these interactions into four distinct types of play:

- **Functional Play:** play where there is repetitive moments with no immediate purpose or goal
- **Constructive/ Building Play:** play where there is a specific goal for the creation
- **Play with rules (Didactic Play):** play with preset rules and a determined task
- **Symbolic Play (Dramatic Play):** imaginary play with no rules and the freedom for the children to develop their own rules and roles

While all four types of play are vital for a child's overall development, research has shown that sociodramatic play significantly impacts a child's social-emotional development and ultimately whether they experience positive academic and social outcomes needed for school readiness (McCabe & Altamura, 2011).

### **Sociodramatic Play**

As is quoted in Bodrova and Leong (2005) Alexander Zaporozhets states:

“Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period-that would prematurely turn a toddler into a preschooler and a preschooler into a first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite- expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely preschool” (p. 88).

Dramatic play is the prime example of what is uniquely preschool and the fundamental building block for young children to develop skills vital for school success. Dramatic play is a multifaceted experience, providing children with a safe and familiar space that allows them to gain a greater understanding about themselves and the world around them. While this specific type of play may appear on the surface as children engaging in simple wishful fantasy worlds, researchers found that dramatic play has three vital functions in a child's ability for successful social interactions and thus, ultimately future academic success. According to Ashiabi (2007), sociodramatic play positively promotes healthy development in "children's ability to (a) experience and appropriately express their emotions, (b) understand the emotions of peers, and (c) regulate their emotions," all which determines their success with peers, teachers, and academics (p. 200).

Appropriate emotional expression is a fundamental skill necessary for positive social and academic development. Preschool children are beginning to develop names for their emotional sensations. They begin to understand the underlying causes to these emotions and the reactions they cause. Thus, being able to express their emotions is a vital communication tool for children as it is essential for peer acceptance. Peers decipher the behaviors and decide whether to interact with the child versus retreat or reject the child (Ashiabi, 2007). Peer rejection is a significant source of increased behavior disruptions and diminishes meaningful connections within the classroom environment. Dramatic play provides the opportunity for children to enhance their emotional understanding skills. Participating in sociodramatic play encourages taking on a variety of roles. Role playing "enables children to understand themselves because as

they share emotions and responses during activities, they develop sensitivity to the needs of others and gain confidence in themselves as problem-solvers” (Ashiabi, 2007, p. 202).

This leads to the second aspect of social development that dramatic play positively influences which is a child’s emotional understanding. “Between 3 to 6 years of age, children establish a sense of their own strengths and weaknesses and begin to understand acceptable and unacceptable behavior as learned through their interactions” (McCabe & Altamura, 2011, p. 514). Dramatic play provides students opportunities to act out various situations they have seen or experience that produced these types of feelings. As previously stated, through dramatic play children are exposed to roles that provide opportunities to understand their own emotional responses as well as the emotional responses of their peers. By interacting with others and taking on a variety of different roles students move away from egocentrism and learn to understand the perspective of others. This role taking and developing of rules during dramatic play encourages collaboration with peers through building relationships and understanding each other’s different viewpoints. “An integral part of the process of emotional understanding is making a connection between the experiences of one’s own feelings to a representation of how others feel” (Ashiabi, 2007, p. 201). For if, a child cannot identify their own emotions and perceptions of a situation they will not be able to understand or make connections with their peers.

Another aspect of proper social development that students need for both social and academic success that sociodramatic play significantly influences is a child’s emotional regulation. Ashiabi (2007) describes that the “regulation of emotion occurs through the acquisition of culturally accepted way of expressing emotions, and involves

substituting one emotion for another, masking emotions, and minimizing, or maximizing emotional expressiveness” (p. 201).

Emotional regulation is often a difficult concept for preschool children. Developmentally they are in a stage where their needs must be immediately met and often are reactive if this does not occur. When children demonstrate inadequate regulation, skills they are at risk for increased peer rejection (Stanton-Chapman, 2015). This peer rejection can lead to feelings of social inadequacy, thus intensifying disruptive behaviors, amplifying withdrawal, and decreasing the importance of participating in learning and gaining important academic skills. However, dramatic play provides a magnitude of opportunities for children to cultivate their emotional regulation skills and for teachers to scaffold successful interactions. In order for successful dramatic play scenarios to progress children must work together to decide upon roles and agree to the rules of those roles. Participation in the division of these roles and then following the agreed upon rules provides opportunities to resolve conflicts and thus builds strategies for problem solving (Ashiabi, 2007). Lastly, Ashiabi (2007) states that

“cooperation while engaged in sociodramatic play appears to generalize to other areas of interaction as well. Rosen (1974) reported that children trained in sociodramatic play showed improvements in the ability to work with other children on a task, and improved their ability to take the perspectives of other children when those wants and preferences differed from their own” (p. 202)

### **Historical Perspective**

One of the first advocates for the importance of play was the Greek Philosopher Plato. “Plato in his *Laws* mentioned that play can be a medium for fostering various

types of learning. In making a case for the importance of play as a medium through which children learned, he argued that children's play (paidia) was important in helping children develop basic habits of character (paideia)" (Bergen, 2015, p. 111).

Ever since Plato published this theory about the significant impact play has for fostering learning, theorists have continued to research the impact various types of play interactions have on overall child development. One of the most notable theorists on the importance of play in early childhood development was Lev Vygotsky. During a 1993 speech Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed that dramatic play experiences in early childhood provided children with opportunities to develop the foundation necessary for later, higher mental functions (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Vygotsky believed that "one of the accomplishments of the preschool years that children overcome their impulsive, reactive behavior and thus become capable of intentional behavior, an accomplishment critical for the development of higher mental functions" (Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p. 374).

Vygotsky believed that requirements for successful dramatic play demonstrated that children are capable of increased mature behaviors compared to what they demonstrate in everyday situations. He stated that "in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developed forms in a condensed form, in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the head of his normal behavior" (Davidson Films Inc., 1996).

In addition, Vygotsky believed that during sociodramatic play preschool children are developing awareness and understanding the importance of various sign and symbol systems in their daily lives. This includes understanding the meaning behind a gesture or

certain remark, as well as recognizing that drawings or written symbols carry meaning, and by following the rules or roles laid out then play will continue. This awareness and understanding increases readiness for what they will encounter later in school (Bodrova & Leong, 2015).

Another notable theorist about the importance of play in early childhood development was Jean Piaget. Piaget proposed that play is “a manifestation of the child’s ability to represent things symbolically and indicated the dominance of assimilations in the child’s mental process” (Davidson Films Inc., 1996). Piaget suggested that there were three different stages of play. Children first experience functional play in which act out every day occurrences. Next, they progress in to the stage of symbolic play, where they learn how to act out fantasy roles. During this stage of symbolic play Piaget believed that children had yet to understand the concept of rules, and in fact play with rules occurred during the final stage of play (Davidson Films Inc., 1996).

Piaget’s theory that children lacked the ability to develop and follow rules during dramatic play differed significantly from Vygotsky’s theory that symbolic play increased awareness of the importance of rules and roles. Although there was this variance in the stages and development of play both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasize how crucial symbolic play is in building and developing fundamental skills necessary for children to experience both academic and social success.

### **Opposing Viewpoints**

Even with the substantial data reinforcing the benefits of play from notable researchers such as Vygotsky and Piaget, along with modern child development theorists and majority of early childhood educators still supporting the importance of play

opportunities in the preschool classroom, educators are experiencing increasing pressure from opponents. In today's society, politicians and parents are demanding more assessable and concrete academic results from the preschool education system (Elkind, 2008). Opponents are concerned that play in the classroom lacks assessments that provide numerical data. Because play is a personal experience that varies between individuals, gathering results based on specific standards is more difficult than focusing on teacher-directed instruction that can assess students on standardized results, such as though the use of Common Core Standards (Elkind, 2008).

In addition, preschool programs have seen a rise in push back from parents and their beliefs' of the role of play in preschool curriculum. Some parents believe there are more important ways for their children to be spending their time versus time wasted engaging in fantasy worlds and playing house. Ashiabi, 2007 states that data from a National Center for Education Statistics report discovered that "most parents believed that knowledge of letters of the alphabet, ability to count to 20 or more, and usage of pencils and paintbrushes were very important/essential, whereas few teachers held those beliefs. Specifically, parents were six times more likely than teachers to rate counting as very important/essential" and "parents were eight times more likely than teachers to rate alphabet knowledge as very important/essential" (Ashiabi, 2007, p. 199). This increasing focus and value is being placed on specific academic skills gained in the classroom in combination with adult-directed structured activities, such as organized sports and activities, are rising in value and decreasing opportunities for child-directed engagement (Elkind, 2008). Even though the demands for concrete data and threats of funding cuts are increasing with each passing year "with good reason, early childhood teachers are

concerned about trading practices that contribute to the long-term growth and development of young children for the short-lived success of teaching narrowly defined literacy skills” (Bodrova, Leong, & Paynter, 1999, p. 43).

### **Impact**

According to Bodrova, Leong, and Paynter (1999) early childhood students are at the developmental stage where attention spans are brief and completing a task the first time asked is demanding. They state that “most preschoolers and many kindergarteners cannot follow direction or sustain attention throughout the activity; their reactive and impulsive behavior may be such that they attend intermittently” (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, 1999, p. 44). If typically developing preschool and kindergarten students experience challenges controlling behavior, think of the social and educational impact on students with behavioral deficits.

Academics and school readiness take a back burner for students unable to self-regulate their emotions and appropriately express their needs. Students retain information best when they are provided with repeated exposure to the information and are able to make meaningful connections to the content. However, when students lack the vital skills of emotional expression, emotional understanding, and emotional/self regulation, they experience a decreased ability to stay actively involved in their learning. Thus, these students experience a delay of vital academic skills necessary for success (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). According to Poulou (2013) “nowadays, mental health problems affects up to 20% of children in modern western societies, including preschool-aged children” (p. 225). In addition, researchers McCabe and Altamura (2011) have found that “children who fail to develop adequate social-emotional competence are more

likely to develop early-onset behavior problems, and up to 50% will exhibit a more significant clinical disorder when older” (p.517). This is an alarming increase in mental health issues, especially for the society’s youngest learners, who often lack the vocabulary and skills necessary to ask for help.

When these preschool students with behavioral deficits progress through the elementary grades, they are often judged by educators as difficult to teach due to the lack of classroom cooperation as well as a lack of self-control (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Their classroom teachers often lack the appropriate background knowledge and skills needed to effectively address these various behavioral needs, thus these students often end up in behavior disorder or special needs classrooms when early intervention strategies for these social skill deficits would have drastically improved these students’ educational outcomes. A study by Nelson, Westhues, and MacLeod (2003) found that interventions for social-emotional skills for preschool students demonstrated continued positive effects, especially when followed up during grades kindergarten through eighth grade (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). “Early intervention of social-emotional problems helps to prevent more serious psychopathology in the future, and fostering social competence and emotional adjustment in preschool children can serve to inoculate against future stressors and challenges that children encounter in grade school” (McCabe & Altamura, 2011, p. 513). Although data has proven the impact behavior has on social-emotional development and a child’s ability to succeed in school, teachers continuously encounter challenges in providing effective intervention strategies.

### **Future Implications**

As stated previously, when students with behavioral deficits progress through the elementary grades they are often judged by educators as difficult to teach due to the lack of classroom cooperation as well as a lack of self-control (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Thus, early childhood educators play a vital role in creating and influencing interactions that promote positive social-emotional development and a foundation for later academic success. One implication of this research is early childhood teachers must become aware of the barriers they place on play in their classroom. Early childhood educators ought to recognize their personal attitude and beliefs towards play. Teachers' ideas and perceptions about preschool curriculum are shaped and cemented long before entering their own classroom. College coursework and exposure to various frameworks significantly affect personal perceptions about the importance of play in preschool curriculum. A study by Sherwood and Reifel (2013) discovered that "while pre-service teachers have positive perception about play, they generally believed that play is not essential in children's learning" (Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 300). However, in this same study Sherwood and Reifel (2013) found there was a "significant association between students taking a play-related course and their intention to integrate play in their practices" (Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 302). According to researchers Jung and Jin (2014), "studies have shown that future professionals are unsure about how to promote and participate in children's play and feel insecure about the teaching effectiveness play activities. Therefore, it generates some degree of apprehension for future professionals as they consider play in the curriculum" (Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 305). Thus, educators must reflect on their learning, previous experiences with play, and their personal values to fully understand the potential impact this will have in preschool children's exposure to vital play opportunities.

Another implication research on the importance of social dramatic play imparts is the crucial role classroom adults have on establishing a positive climate for play and learning. Stanton-Chapman (2015) emphasizes four important roles that teachers take in order to promote successful development in their students. The first role that teachers must take in order to scaffold their students' positive social- emotional development is to create and promote the classroom environment for positive play opportunities. The classroom is to be a welcoming and caring environment where students feel empowered to test out new concepts and ideas in a safe way. Research has demonstrated that “denying children a space to play in certain ways means they are left believing school is not a place for them” (Mraz, Procelli, & Tyler, 2016, p. 22). Teachers must ensure that their classroom is designed in a way that is inclusive of all children, no matter their level of needs. This ranges from developmentally appropriate materials, flexible spacing, and incorporating student interests and background experiences. These classroom strategies support all children in experiencing meaningful and engaging social interactions.

Another role that teachers must undertake is acting as a skills coach. Preschool children enter the classroom with significantly varying background experiences. Children with culturally diverse upbringings or at-risk children often have little to no exposure to the themes that are often implemented in the early childhood classroom (Stanton-Chapman, 2015). For instance, low-socioeconomic city kids may lack the opportunities and resources to explore nature parks and go camping and children from different cultures may have alternative vocabulary words for an object that create confusion, conflict, and a break down in the play interaction. Thus, when this theme comes up, these students may lack the proper vocabulary or understanding of how to

interact with the materials and their peers in a way that continues the interactions. This is where the teacher can help coach a child through assessing their understanding and then providing direct instruction of a skill during the play interaction.

In addition, a third strategy that teachers must implement for positive social development during play interactions is providing feedback. Vorkapić and Katić (2015) state that “commending a child has a strong reinforcement effect, and represents a verbal tool for creating and encouraging desirable and positive behaviors in children” (p. 126). Children can experience substantially different expectations in their home environment versus their classroom. The structure and number of other children all interacting and learning within the same classroom requires certain social interaction skills such as turn taking and empathy that may not occur in the home. Thus, children struggling with various types of behavioral deficits often receive mixed messages about behavioral expectations and positive teacher reinforcement can help clear up any confusion and promote the desired actions.

A final role that teachers must employ in order to promote successful interactions and social/emotional development in their students is successfully exiting the play situation. Circumstances will arise when teacher intervention is necessary to help students resolve conflicts and build strategies for problem solving, however, teachers risk diminishing the importance of these skills by taking over the play scenario. Provide the intervention strategy for the specific skill deficit that is occurring and encourage the students how to use problem-solving skills if this happens again. The teacher only stays long enough to observe that the intervention is working and then exits in an appropriate manner that does not disrupt the interaction. Kontos (1999) coined the term early

childhood error. As quoted in Stanton-Chapman (2015) Kontos described the early childhood error as “when early childhood educators prepare an appropriate, stimulating environment for young children but then stand back and fail to follow-up with guidance scaffolding or supportive responsive interactions with children as they play” (Stanton-Chapman, 2015, p. 100). Therefore, it is of utmost importance teachers understand the significance of these roles. Learning when and how to use each strategy effectively will promote positive peer interactions, decrease the likelihood of future social and emotional deficits in children, and increase the probability for students to experience academic and social success.

Overall, any non- early childhood educator that walks into a preschool room will observe children engaging in various center activities and inaccurately jump to the conclusion that precious time is being wasted on play versus direct academic instruction. However, as Hatcher and Petty (2004), stated “much of what is absolutely essential about play is initially invisible to the eye of the casual observer. With just the right perspective the deep thought that accompanies children’s play can become visible and, once evident, celebrated and enhanced” (p. 82). Teachers understand and appreciate the panoramic view that is occurring: children engaging in multifaceted sociodramatic play interactions that will ultimately serve as the vital foundation for their future success.

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