

Imagination:

The Connection Between Writing and Play

Encourage children to write about what they know best—the rich fantasy worlds they create in play.

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*Let not young souls be smothered out
before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt
their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes
grow dull,
It's poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-
eyed. . . .*

—VACHEL LINDSAY

There once was a group of children stranded on an old boat at sea. Attacked by pirates, their defense was reckless and heroic. In the midst of the struggle, the youngest child fell overboard. "A whale, a killer whale!" the lookout suddenly cried. Climbing to the edge of the boat, one of the boys motioned everyone else away. "I'll save her!" he roared, diving into the waves.

As a young teacher, I witnessed these "quaint deeds" on the playground of my first school, and something about children, education, and schools crystal-

lized for me. The energy, excitement, and involvement in that game ought to be happening inside the classroom too, I thought. Here was a tremendous resource for education, lying virtually untapped.

Albert Cullum, I was to discover later, had been tapping this particular source for years. In his book, *Push Back the Desks* (1967), he describes a teaching strategy that uses the enthusiasm and energy present on that stranded ship. His method was to infuse an element of imaginative or dramatic play into the activities in his classroom. In social studies, one of Cullum's fifth graders "becomes" Teddy Roosevelt and gives his State of the Union address to the assembled Congressmen. In geography, first graders "climb" the Rockies,



"swim" the Mississippi, and fill canteens for the "trip" across the Mohave Desert. In poetry class, lights are dimmed and, in the quiet presence of a pot of dry ice, one of the girls calls up the spirit of Edna St. Vincent Millay. In project after project, Cullum reports the intense emotional involvement of the children, the enthusiasm, the excitement, and above all, *how much they learned*. Cullum harnessed the power of play.

Piaget, Freud, and Bettelheim, along with many others, attest to the importance of play, and particularly dramatic or imaginative play, in the development of children. Links have been drawn between play and several developmental areas: cognitive growth, language acquisition, problem solving, and socialization. Freyberg (1973) notes that

Marshall and Hahn (1967), Smilansky (1968), and the present investigator have successfully engaged in training imaginative play in young children and observed gains associated with cognitive development.

In a study by Pellegrini (1980),

Significant main effect of play on language achievement was found. The means for social dramatic play were significantly larger than means for both of the other play categories.

Martin (1978) comes to similar conclusions in the area of problem solving. These studies and more point to the fact that play has an effect on learning. As Götz (1977) put it, "It is through play that much of the work of childhood is done."

Play in School

If play is crucial to learning, does it follow that we have to have it in the classroom? Don't children get enough of it at recess and at home? Tyler (1976) writes

It is generally assumed that everybody knows how to play and everybody wants to play. Unfortunately, neither of these assumptions is true, particularly for imaginative or creative play.... Clearly, spontaneous, imaginative play does not come naturally to children but is to a large extent influenced by their immediate surroundings and the adults close to them.

Research shows that today's children, at least in part because of television, are



playing less and less. It also shows that

children from deprived backgrounds play far less effectively than their more privileged peers. Burton White of Harvard found that middle-class children engaged in role-playing or dramatic play five times more often than lower-class children (Pines, 1969). The need for play in school, even a kind of teaching of play, seems clearly justified.

The area of language arts is a natural place to incorporate imaginative play into the curriculum. The link between play and language learning is clearly documented. Also, language arts, if taken to mean primarily "writing," is a subject in which we especially want to encourage children's imaginations.

Following this reasoning, I chose to take something like that scene of bravery on the high seas and plunk it down in the middle of my language arts class. I wanted to provide an opportunity for the children to create an indoor "play" in which they lived and breathed their roles as they did on the playground. The difference would be that the playing would be physically more controlled, with some acting out, but also with a good deal of talking and writing that would grow out of the story the children were creating. In this way, I hoped to encourage play, particularly imaginative play, and to encourage writing. In fulfillment of these two goals, a project called "The Town" was born.

Evergreen Valley Created

To begin, we built an actual replica of a town and its surroundings. The first step was to plan the town's geography. Were there mountains nearby? Was there a river, an ocean, a desert? Were there farms on the outskirts? Physical features were painted onto a large piece of cardboard or built up with papier-mâché. All the landmarks were given names so that later on we could talk about places in and around the town without confusion. Once the setting was established, the children decided on a time frame. Evergreen Valley, created by a group of third through sixth graders, was set in the United States around 1880.

What should be in Evergreen Valley? Keeping in mind the date and the setting, the children built an opera house, hotel, school, post office, pet shop, general store, several family homes, two fairy huts, and a volcano where one of the town's witches lived. They constructed these mostly out of small cardboard boxes, paper, and paint, and set them down along the town square and the country roads they had drawn on the cardboard ground. This model was a vital part of the playing that came later. It helped the children envision the world they were creating and gave them something concrete to play with. They embellished the town as time went on, adding buildings, trees, little people, and so on.



As the children worked on the buildings, they began to talk about the people who would live there. Sara decided her mansion would be the home of Mr. Dayton, the mayor, and his family. Maria invented Ms. Crabgrass, the schoolteacher, as she worked on the school. Their talk was a natural lead-in to the next part of the project, writing up the characters who would populate the town.

Creating characters is central to the creation of an imaginary world. In Evergreen Valley, each child invented and described one or more characters they would represent, or act out, for the rest of the project. Sara became the Daytons, and Maria, Ms. Crabgrass.

As they wrote about their characters, the children were bombarded by questions. "Know everything there is to know about your character," I told them. "What size are his feet? What shape is his nose? Who does he live with? What's he most afraid of?" I wanted them to envision each character with a specific personality and a full range of physical traits. The key phrase for this part of the project was, "Think in terms of details!"

As fully fleshed characters emerged from the children's writing, relationships between them developed. Rachel first thought up Evergreen Valley's policewoman, Bertha Smith. Later, in consultation with Sara (alias Mayor Dayton and family), Rachel evolved this character sketch:

Mrs. Bertha Smith is a stocky woman, "and very against the new movement," therefore hates Gwendolyn Dayton, who, as Bertha says, "thinks she's the top of the world." Even though Bertha absolutely hates Gwendolyn, she is secretly in love with Rupert, Gwendolyn's twin brother. The only problem with this lovely romance is that she is 48 and he is 18.

Another character, a witch, was written up in this way:

Millie Dookley lives on Moonshine Mt. in a small but elegant house. She is at war with the Cripple witch. Every month or so she goes down to the town and creates mischief. . . . Her best—and only—friend is Jenny Olson. It is from her that she collects most of her information about the town.

To encourage these stories to grow, the next step was to set up a post office—a box, a mail carrier, and a delivery time. "Write a letter from your character to any other character in the room. If you're not sure who to write to, look at the list of characters on the bulletin board." Letters are a natural vehicle for combining play with writing. Everyone loves to get mail.

Dear Gwendolyn,

Meet me at the river at nine o'clock. I have something very important to tell you.

Yours forever,
Johnny

Dear Mayor,

If you don't send me \$1,000 immediately, I will blow up my volcano and your town will be destroyed.

Signed,
Nipple
Cripple
Witch

Dear Bertha,

I think I know where the mayor has disappeared to. What will you give me if I tell you?

Thomas Mossgrower

Plots hatch in the mail, and events and relationships become more and more complex.

When the news got too involved to keep up with by mail, a newspaper was started. The *Evergreen Nevergreen News* may not go down in journalistic history, but it did make children read and write . . . and laugh. Headlines!

"The Mayor Is Missing!"

Mr. F. M. Dayton has been missing for ten days. Poor Mrs. Dayton is frantic. She says the last time she saw him was at 10:13 on February 4. If you have any information about his whereabouts . . .

News break:

Mayor Dayton reported running out of Evergreen with leaves coming out of his pockets. Don't panic, Mrs. Dayton. He was smiling!

Interview with Wilma Patrick, pet shop owner:

Well, I can't say it is true, but I saw Mayor Dayton wandering around the back of my shop the day before he was found missing. That's where I keep my 26-pound cat in the window. He was knocking on the window as I've told him not to. Now that's pretty thick glass, and I'm not saying what I think is true. . . .

Mayor Dayton was eventually ransomed. On his return home, his wife refused to give back the mayoralty and tried to hire him out as a butler. He became the dogcatcher instead.

The Late Great Nothing Terrific Railroad story line, hatched by two clever parents, was even more successful. The town had to defend itself against takeover by railroad barons. Letters to the editor of the *Evergreen Nevergreen News* poured in. Town meetings were held to plan strategies and to draft answers to the railroad. Bertha, Gwendolyn, Ms. Crabtree, and others gave their opinions. A plan was finally adopted in which the town tried to claim the historical significance of certain buildings on four points: Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* there, the Continental Congress met in Evergreen City Hall, George Washington bought boots at the general store, and Jefferson's body was lying in the

attic of the Evergreen Hotel. With understandable skepticism, the railroad barons announced they were coming to Evergreen to see for themselves. They arrived on the appointed day in black suits, top hats, and wigs.

The latter part of the project was fascinating to observe because it showed how involved in fantasy play even fifth and sixth graders can become. As the project unfolded, the children identified more and more with their "town" personae. Every letter from the railroad was met with real indignation, and it became urgent that the town be saved. There were times when the line between reality and fantasy nearly disappeared for some children.

Was This Play?

The goals of the project were to encourage both writing and play. Were they met? Is what I have described really play? Obviously, this was not pure or "free" play. Goals were established and writing was encouraged, even insisted on. If left alone, the children would probably have stuck more to "acting it out." If it was not play in its purest form, however, it had, as Götz (1977) suggests, "the attitudes and realities characteristic of play": open-endedness, flexibility, and a content that came from the children. It also included acting out in the delivery of mail, in town meetings, and in special events for which everyone came to school in costume: election day, the town picnic, and the meeting with the railroad barons. This was true dramatic or imaginative play in that the children created together a fantasy world in which they lived, briefly, lives other than their own.

As for the writing, it included the character sketches, letters, and news articles as well as other aspects of the newspaper: Dear Blabby, fashion news, a society page, a town census, a natural history column, and a poetry contest. All of the writing grew naturally out of the life of the town. It was motivated by issues that seemed real and important to the children and thus was carried out with a great deal of energy and purpose. As far as the class was concerned, the writing was all part of the game. □

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CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

We are tentatively planning the following theme issues of *Educational Leadership* in 1983-84:

Month	Theme	Including	Deadlines for Manuscripts
September	Preparing for the Future	Curriculum and organizational changes needed to prepare students for the future. Impact of technology. Examples of effective school planning.	May 1, 1983
October	Higher Standards	Examples of success in raising performance standards. Consideration of the relationship between standards and quality education. Effects on equity.	June 1, 1983
November	New Directions for Secondary Education	Analysis and interpretation of reports from major current studies of U.S. high schools.	July 1, 1983
December-January	Mathematical and Scientific Literacy for the High-Tech Society	Content of mathematics, science, and other courses needed for citizenship and career success when today's students are adults. Reports of curriculum changes and new programs.	August 1, 1983
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Themes of the March and May issues, if any, will be selected later.

All issues also include non-theme articles, so manuscripts on other aspects of curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in elementary and secondary education are always welcome.

Papers should be written in direct, readable style and be as brief as possible (five to ten typed pages double-spaced). We reserve the right to edit for brevity, clarity, and consistency of style.

References may be cited as footnotes or listed in bibliographic form at the end of the article. For examples of either style, refer to a recent issue or to Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers* (University of Chicago Press). Double-space everything, including quotations and footnotes.

Please send two copies. Rejected manuscripts are not returned unless the author provides a self-addressed envelope with the necessary postage.

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