engaging young writers
Preschool–Grade 1

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"You get the tent and I’ll get the other stuff,” said Jack.

“Let’s put the tent over here,” Deshawn said.

“OK. I’ll start the fire,” Jack said.

If you were just listening to Jack and Deshawn, you might think they were in the middle of a forest, but they were in a preschool class on a typical day in February. Their class had read several books in which the characters go camping. This led to a lot of conversation about camping and sleeping bags, so the children naturally started playing camping in the dramatic play area of the classroom. Each day their play followed a similar script. Their play also evolved over time with each retelling, becoming more sophisticated and detailed.

Similar dramatic play scenarios occur each day in the classrooms, playgrounds, and homes of young children. With a gentle nudge from a teacher, these acted-out stories can be books waiting to be written. The lure of stories, whether in dramatic play or in favorite books that have been read in class, provides powerful entry points for young writers in preschool and the primary grades.

There is a natural connection between the stories that children play and stories they have read or have heard during read-aloud. Sometimes their dramatic play is sparked by stories they know or favorite books. The combination of engaging in dramatic play, hearing stories read frequently in classrooms, and learning to write provides many opportunities for teachers to use these experiences to build on and support children’s development as writers. As children play stories, hear stories, and start to write stories, they are creating an understanding of the concept of story.

In this chapter we’ll consider the story entry points of dramatic play and favorite read-alouds. First, let’s consider stories that children create themselves in dramatic play.
The Importance of Dramatic Play

The importance of dramatic play in early childhood is well documented (Bodrova and Leong 1996; Neuman and Roskos 2007; Owocki 1999, 2001; Bennett-Armistead, Duke, and Moses 2005). Yet children have fewer and fewer opportunities for rich, meaningful play at school at a time when they need it most. “According to Vygotsky (1966), pretend play is the leading activity of the preschool and kindergarten period because it leads to developmental accomplishments, such as imagination, higher-level thinking (e.g., problem solving), and self regulation. Taking away playtime may actually stunt motivation and growth such that children gain less—not more—from instruction (Panksepp, 1998)” (Neuman and Roskos 2007, 88).

Dramatic play supports children’s development in numerous ways. As Armistead-Bennett, Duke, and Moses (2005, 109) point out, play allows children to

- experiment with familiar and unfamiliar roles, which helps them reinforce and consolidate their knowledge
- work through issues that are troubling them
- play with concepts and ideas to make them their own
- build literacy in ways that other classroom activities do not

Play provides opportunities for children to solve problems and develop problem-solving abilities and strategies. Vivian Paley states in *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, “Let me study your play and figure out how play helps you solve your problems. Play contains your questions, and I must know what questions you are asking before mine will be useful. . . . You must invent your own literature if you are to connect your ideas to the ideas of others” (1990, 18). Children’s problem-solving abilities are strengthened when teachers observe children’s play and notice problem-solving strategies and act on problem-solving needs.

Problem solving also fosters growth in children’s language. “Children need to learn language, to hear sounds, to know the alphabet, to grasp basic print concepts, and to become interested in print. Play in early childhood supports this intellectual work. It provides a ‘zone’ where children can practice established skills but also reach new ones in flexible and enjoyable ways” (Neuman and Roskos 2007, 88).

Children at early ages engage in various kinds of dramatic play. They create play situations in which they act out stories themselves and take on a variety of roles. Dramatic play also encompasses stories acted out with materials such as action figures, blocks, and cars. For the purposes of this book, I use the phrase
dramatic play to broadly encompass all of these kinds of play. Basically I consider as dramatic play any experiences where children are acting out a story in some way, whether they are the actors or whether they’re using some sort of stand-in.

Children’s dramatic play connects storytelling and writing quite naturally. It is not uncommon for children to tell stories based on pictures they draw. Children will draw or paint a picture and then tell an elaborate story about their picture, usually with much more detail than is represented on the page.

There is a quite natural integration of writing that takes place in many early childhood classrooms simply by placing writing materials in dramatic play areas. For example:

- The phone “rings” in the dramatic play area and a child picks up a pen and writes a phone message on a notepad next to the phone.
- When children are playing restaurant, they might order from menus written by classmates, with one of the children taking on the role of the waiter and writing down everyone’s orders on a notepad.
- Children playing post office use letters, stamps, and envelopes to write letters to their friends.
- Children building a zoo out of blocks and plastic animals use paper and markers from a bin placed in the construction area to make signs for each of the animals in their zoo.
- A child uses random strings of letters to write a sign for the grocery store in the dramatic play area.
- A child picks up a clipboard with paper on it at the science center so she can record her observations of the class tadpole, using drawing and writing.

There are several ways that this type of integration of writing and play support children’s writing development. Neuman and Roskos (2007, 84) offer these examples:

- Dramatic play provides opportunities for writing within the play environment.
- Dramatic play provides more frequent opportunities to write.
- Dramatic play provides a jumping-off place for writing compositions.

It is this third purpose that can be mined by teachers for a greater impact on children’s writing when children are in a bookmaking environment. When book-
making is a regular part of the classroom environment, then the types of compositions children create are not limited to pictures and oral retellings, play logs, or language experience charts (Neuman and Roskos 2007, 93) but can also make use of their dramatic play experience as a springboard to making books. The book-making experience uses skills such as retelling and drawing but nudges the child to a more complex level of thinking and composition.

This integration of natural writing into dramatic play environments should be very common in preschool classrooms, assuming that play is already a part of the preschool class. It can be easily supported by placing writing materials in the different play environments and demonstrating how they can be used as teachers engage in dramatic play with children. Integrating writing into dramatic play should happen naturally in preschool classrooms. Once incorporated, the next natural step is for children to write and make books about their dramatic play.

It is important to remember that some types of dramatic play are more beneficial than others. Some dramatic play can become overly silly, unkind, or remain at a surface level. Other dramatic play is very complex with self-defined roles and expectations. Teachers can help raise the quality of dramatic play by asking questions and making suggestions without taking over the play scenario. There is a fine line between support that nurtures play and support that becomes overly directive and takes the joy out of the play. When teachers see high-quality play, they can make a connection between the stories within children’s play and the stories they write.

**Supports for Dramatic Play**

Dramatic play becomes more meaningful and beneficial when teachers take action to support children’s dramatic play. There are several ways teachers can show students that we value dramatic play and several ways that we can support play in becoming a rich literacy experience.

- **Time.** By simply making time for dramatic play in the classroom, a teacher communicates the value of dramatic play to children. In many kindergarten and first-grade classrooms it has become more and more difficult to carve out time for dramatic play even in center time. Sadly, in some preschool classes this is also the case. By having dramatic play as a choice during a portion of the day, teachers show that they understand its importance.

- **Teacher participation.** If dramatic play is occurring in the classroom it is more likely to be productive if the teacher is involved in the play in some way. If a teacher has no involvement in the play, then he is communicating that
the play isn’t as important as other activities. Teachers don’t have to spend huge amounts of time in dramatic play, but if they listen to children’s play and make suggestions, the play will become more complex and purposeful. Even simply spending time writing down what children are saying in dramatic play will show students that we think their words are important.

Sharing. Teachers can raise the value of high-quality dramatic play in classrooms simply by talking about children’s play with them, especially at group meeting or share times. At the end of the day in preschool teachers and students often talk about what students did during the day, including sharing books children made that day. Even though there may not be a tangible product after dramatic play, children can share their dramatic play stories at the end of the day the same way they would share a book. Digital pictures taken by the teacher can be a great support for students in retelling their dramatic play.

Connections. Teachers increase the value of dramatic play if they help connect children’s dramatic play to other areas in the classroom. Suggesting that children paint a picture in the art center or write a book about their play helps them think more deeply about their play.

**Story Entry Point: Linking Dramatic Play and Writing in Preschool**

“Hurry, the alarm is going. We need to get in the truck,” yelled Scott to his fellow firefighters. A group of five preschoolers scurried to get their firefighting supplies together and pile into their cardboard fire truck. Off they went to put out a fire.

This scene is similar to one that plays out in many preschool classes. For several weeks these children had been learning about fire safety and studying what firefighters do. Firefighters visited their school and the children asked them exhaustive questions about their jobs. They read books about fire trucks and fire stations as a whole class, and they also had ample opportunity to explore these books on their own. Over several weeks, they learned a lot about firefighters. As three- and four-year-olds go, they were firefighting experts.

With so much knowledge developed about firefighting, it’s not surprising that they had created a fire station in their classroom in the dramatic play area, complete with a variety of props and a cardboard-box fire truck. On the day I was in their class I watched a group of children play for quite some time in this area.
They had created a fairly complex story to act out. Children had different roles and a predictable plot played out as I looked on. Kids were sitting around waiting, when suddenly Scott answered the phone. He announced that there was a fire and they all rushed to put on coats and hats. They ignored one child’s suggestion to stop and get pizza on the way and hurried to put out the fire.

In watching this scene, it was obvious that they had lived this story before and knew how the story should progress. The fact that this group of children knew this story so well made it a prime candidate to turn into a book. So, as they were returning home from a hard day of firefighting, I started to talk with them about what they had just done. I asked them questions about how they had put out the fire and how they had learned so much about firefighters. They eagerly shared their knowledge. Finally, I sprung the question:

“Do you think you could make a book about what you just did?”

“Yes,” four children enthusiastically responded.

“No,” said Dylan, who was more interested in continuing to play.

That type of reaction is common for several reasons. First, when children know a story well and have already lived it, sharing their story on paper is a much easier and more interesting endeavor. It’s also not uncommon for children to choose not to write a book. Perhaps it wasn’t what Dylan wasn’t interested in doing right then. Perhaps he had made a book the day before. Whatever the reason, if I’d pushed too hard I would have reduced his potential energy for making a book.

As it turned out, I didn’t need to push at all. As soon as Dylan saw that his friends were going to make books, he decided to join them, which isn’t surprising, since for young children writing is a very social process. If several children are at the writing center, they are often joined by several others, in the same way that if two children are playing fire station, they often attract the interest and participation of a few other children.

This group of children didn’t bother to take off their firefighting hats and coats—they immediately got busy making books. It was easy to see that making books was a normal part of what they did in their class, so they didn’t need much support to get going. They worked on their books for ten minutes or so until it was time to clean up. Their books represented the typical range of books we’d see written by young children, and they looked like they were written by three- and four-year-old children. Books like Dylan’s in Figure 5.1 provide us with clear ideas about how and where to nudge students’ composition or word-making development. For example, I could choose to help Dylan add details to his illustrations, or I could ask him to add words in his own approximated way, or I could help him incorporate some story language into his reading of his book.
FIG. 5.1  Dylan’s Book About Firefighting

1. Dylan

2. These are the fire hoses.

3. The water goes on the fire.

4. This is the fireman.

5. The water goes on the fire.
There are several things that are useful to understand about this dramatic play scenario in thinking about transferring stories from dramatic play into bookmaking:

- Children’s energy for writing was high. It didn’t take a lot of nudging to get them started and to sustain their efforts.
- They were in an environment where the suggestion to go make a book occurred naturally and frequently.
- More-reluctant writers were drawn into the writing experience in natural, unforced ways.
- The writing experience was relatively easy for them since they were writing about something they knew well, something they had already lived. Basically, their books were written before they came to the writing center.
- The goal wasn’t for the children to accurately re-create the exact sequence of events in their play. There wasn’t even an expectation that their books should be written as stories. Their books could have been written just as easily as list books telling all about firefighting equipment (e.g., This is a fire truck. This is the hose.) or the story of putting out a fire (e.g., We got in the fire truck. We drove to the fire.). As expected, their books had a very approximated quality to them.

Certainly more energy and thinking were invested by these children in their stories than if they had colored in a photocopied picture of a fire truck book or simply created a class book about fire safety, for example. In preschool classrooms there should be ample opportunity for rich, purposeful dramatic play that is supported by teachers and can lead to rich writing experiences.

**Dramatic Play in the Primary Grades**

In today’s world, academics are pushed at increasingly early ages, and dramatic play in kindergarten or first grade can unfortunately be pushed aside. “Many preschools and kindergartens have reduced or even eliminated playtime from their schedules in favor of more structured language and literacy lessons (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004)” (Neuman and Roskos 2007, 87). In my experience, primary-grade teachers who don’t nurture active dramatic play that supports writing work in their classrooms tend to fall into one several categories:

- Teachers who don’t have any dramatic play opportunities in classrooms either because they have been squeezed out by the push for academic standards or because the teachers don’t see value in them.
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