

The Role of Poetry and Stories of Young Children in their Process of Learning

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In the contemporary society children develop special abilities to ask questions, to doubt, and to wonder, that enhances development of their symbolic thinking that in turn help them in the learning process.

This article includes analysis of the link between symbolic thinking and the child's process of learning. The inquiry is guided by the themes developed by children in poetry as a way of expressing their understanding of the world. It is illustrated by the poems published in the newsletters of the Canadian prairies' elementary schools in Winnipeg. The studies are supported by a review of the research showing that development of symbolic thinking is crucial in helping children to learn.

It is asserted that the questions asked by children in their poems guide us to their future and ours.

In the research of Moore (1981), it is emphasized that "young children come to school as essentially poetic human beings". She stated, "Many years ago I became aware that poetry is a natural language of young children. All children seem to be born poets" (p. 30).

Wituckie (1970), who also analyzed poetry in the elementary school, asserted that poetry is necessary at school. It develops a child's imagination and abilities to express feelings and beauty. Poems may stimulate our imagination and creativity. According to Wituckie(1970) poetry is a new, imaginative way of seeing, and her belief in poetry is likewise a belief in children - young people who bring so much to poetry and can take so much from it. (p.64)

I can fly (by Olga 9)
I can fly like birds up high
Above my head.
I love they wings and the colour of the sky.
Here and there

the birds are every where
And when I fly I sing certain lullaby.

In the literature we found a very strong assertion that language is the prime symbolic medium. This is supported by Deri (1983), Gardner (1979), Olson (1991), and Schmidt (1973).

According to Olson (1991), language is used for representing the world; it makes it possible to reflect on and to become aware of the world (p.265).

Piaget (1962) stressed that at about the age of 2 the child discovers the symbolic nature of language when he/she figures out that everything has a name.

Yet, there are different approaches to language acquisition and the thinking process. Chomsky's (1980) theory (innatism) is opposed to that of Piaget (generative) or social psychologists such as Henle (1965) and Vygotsky (1962). For example, Chomsky believed that linguistic structures are hereditary and the role of culture and knowledge is not a basic one.

As Chomsky (1986) stated, "The problem, then, is to determine the innate endowment that serves to bridge the gap between experience and knowledge attained-or cognitive systems attained.[.....] We are thus in a good position to ascertain the nature of the

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biological endowment that constitutes the human "language faculty", the innate component of mind/brain that yields knowledge of language when presented with linguistic experience and that converts experience to a system of knowledge" (p.XXVI).

For Piaget, language is a product of progressive construction of thoughts that reach deeper than the linguistic verbal reality. As language is only a particular form of the symbolic function and as the individual symbol is certainly simpler than the collective sign, it is permissible to conclude that thought precedes language and that language confines itself to profoundly transforming thought by helping it to attain its forms of equilibrium by means of a more advanced schematization and a more mobile abstraction (p.92)..[...].As Piaget (1968) emphasized . "There are no innate structures: every structure presupposes a construction" (p.150).

Henle (1965) stressed the social character of language as an historical phenomenon. He reasoned that to learn a language a person must form the concepts expressed by it or in it. These concepts are historically determined and arise not within individual experience, with its limited environment, but have arisen out of the cumulative experiences of many individuals, within a presumably wider environment. For Vygotsky (1960) language and thoughts are not dependent or connected by the same roots. The connections develop during evolution: "We found no specific interdependence between the genetic roots of thought and word. [...]"

A prelinguistic period in thought and preintellectual period in speech undoubtedly exist also in the development of the child. Thought and word are not connected by a primary bond. A connection originates, changes, and grows in the course of the evolution of thinking and speech". (p.119)

The symbolic character of language is clearly demonstrated in metaphors and poetry used and written by children at school. In the research on metaphors conducted by

Gardner (1972) it was stressed that metaphoric activities are integral to learning, although with age metaphors become less action oriented and more perceptually grounded. In his definition, a metaphor is an utterance in which an object is deliberately given the name of something else to which it bears some resemblance.

For example: A 26-month-old child runs up to one of her parents with a yellow plastic baseball bat, and with a look of delight, exclaims, "Corn, corn!". Previously she learned the object was called a bat, and she does not really believe that "corn" is its real name (Gardner and Wolf 1972 p.40). This child found a resemblance between the baseball bat and a cob of corn by the similar attributes of the shape and color. She was able to discover that a baseball bat can represent corn, through the use of symbolic thoughts and the concept of the baseball bat.

In the children's poetry we can find their understanding of symbols given by adults. Earth by Connie (Grade 4)

Peace on earth, that's all it takes
Just say you love and you will make.
If you hate, you still love
You will love like a dove.
A dove that flies way up high
Right up there in the sky.
If you find a dove up high
You will see the symbol fly.
PEACE !

The questions commonly asked by the young children are such as : Is Santa Clause real ? Where does the tooth fairy live?

WHAT IS A RAINBOW MADE OF by Kara (Grade 4)

Is a rainbow made of cloud and dust?
Is a rainbow made of someone's trust?
Is a rainbow made of dove?
Is a rainbow made of love?
What is a rainbow made of ?

The basic concepts of childhood are a specific way of seeing, perceiving and un-

derstanding. Birds by Charlene (Grade 6)
As you hear the singing
in the morning
You hear your own orchestra
in your backyard.
You think of men in little suits,
But when you look outside,
It is no opera singing
It is just a little bird As gentle as can be.

As Goodman (19) emphasized: the culture of childhood, like all cultures, is learned, shared, and transmitted. That is accomplished by imitation that is one aspect of child's symbolism, and which according to Blow (1894) and Piaget (1962) led to SYMBOLIC THOUGHT. Children imitate each other, and they are perfect copiers: "Marta (Grade 3) who is playing piano telling to her Mom: When I woke up in the morning I saw my bear moving and the dolls talking, and I saw Mozart standing by my drawer.

Olga (Kindergarden) listened and said: Do you know what? When I woke up in the morning I saw my violin talking (she is playing violin), and I saw Mozart in my room."

When the two year old child imitates using THE CONCEPT, the child symbolically expresses his/her feelings, desire, needs.

Children are using their symbolic thinking when they learn new things, when they create and discover new matches between their internal world (of thoughts and feelings) and external worlds, and express themselves by the words, pictures, and gestures.

Children's knowledge is related to their understanding of events and ideas which are symbolically expressed.

Solar System by Hersh (Grade 6)
The Sun is our light,
and the moon our satellite.
Our Earth is blue,
also green.
Venus was thought as a swampy scene.

Saturn is large with a very big ring,
It sparkles and grows with a little zing,
Jupiter is big,
With a swirling red spot,
Mercury is warm, very hot.
Uranus, Neptune and Pluto, too
are big and small but at the back of the group.

Authors such as Glucksberg (1967), Piaget (1979), Markey (1978) stressed that children's language is a primary medium for symbolic behavior. Language influences perception, memory, attention and learning. Symbolic character of language is manifested in the tendency to become metaphorical.

Early In The Morning by Charlene (Grade 6)

Early in the morning before the sun shall rise.... a quietness, a stillness shall come before your eyes- and the only sounds that can be heard are sounds of stillness cries..... The sound of water silent rippling to the bank..... the sound of seagulls calling to each other from a distance.... the sound of rushes, rustling wind.... a quietness..... a stillness.

There is a phenomenon related to the language and thoughts of children. Language is very personal in the way of formulation of their thoughts and it reflects children's knowledge and experience. It is related to the culture and associated with specific norms, values and beliefs.

Goodman (1970) stressed that it is in the nature of children to learn language along with other fundamentals of a culture, and this process is as natural as learning how to walk.

In contemporary society children are developing special abilities to ask questions, to doubt and to wonder. Those questions asked by our children reflect their knowledge about the entire world and guide us to theirs and to our future.

*Symbolization and the Process
of Learning*

Authors such as Crowder (1976), Potter (1979), DeLoache (1991), while investigating the process of learning focus on the various aspects related to symbol learning, and understanding, since comprehension of symbols and concept recognition is a complex process.

Crowder (1976) emphasized that the first step in the learning of symbols is to connect symbols with the appropriate concept. What can create difficulty is thinking of symbols as separate from the concept, for example, to understand that the number two can represent two different things; two apples or two cookies, etc.

The most important point, which Crowder (1976) calls the "first stage of symbol comprehension", is to recognize what object or entity a symbol represents. Another difficulty may arise when a person has recognized that the symbol and its concept are not identical. This problem was also noted in the research of Potter (1979). She focused on the problem of children's recognition of differences between symbol and concept, and used the relationship among objects, names and ideas. The example given was a chair, the real object, the written word "chair" and the idea of a chair.

She concluded that there are three major aspects of symbol comprehension: recognition that a given symbol refers to a particular object; discrimination between the symbol and the object itself; and interpretation of the similarities and differences between the symbol and the object.

Also the studies of DeLoache (1991) showed that 2 1/2 year-old children have difficulty in finding the correspondence between a model of a hidden object and similar representation in reality. In DeLoache's (1991) experiments, a small object was hidden, creating the representation of a real scene. A child was asked to find a real object hidden in the room in the same

place as the representative scene suggested. Dual representation required from the child an understanding of different symbolic systems and abilities to discover the link between a model and reality. The experiment was repeated with the three-years-olds and the results showed that 77% knew where to find the hidden object. The result with 2 1/2 year-olds was 15%. According to DeLoache (1991), "2 1/2 year olds did so poorly because they did not represent the model in two different ways at the same time.[...] They failed to represent its other, abstract, nature, that is, that the model stood for the room. Thinking of the model only as an interesting object, they failed to appreciate its relation to the room; as a consequence, they did not understand that what they saw happen in the model had implications for the unseen event in the room" (p.737). The same experiment was repeated with a picture of the room and model, and the results showed the superiority of exercise with picture over the model. Children found an object more easily from the picture than from the model. However, if children had more experience with the picture than with the model, they performed better-89% error less retrieval. She assumed that experience with one symbolic system may help children to learn other symbolic systems.

To Crowder (1976) there are other aspects in the process of learning called "decalage", that is, a time lag in the appearance or cognitive process (p.69). He distinguished two types of decalage: horizontal, as when the child uses the same process of thinking (for example, thinks how to describe the "cat") and just varies the material (after describing a cat he must describe a dog); and vertical, which refers to the scale of age. For instance, "What a child learns at the age of 7 in action, he must restructure at the age of 11 in verbal thought." For example: counting of real objects is replaced by abstract counting of numbers. (p.68)

During the process of child development some problems are created by the discrepancies between different feelings, different information about same event, and different behavior of people. The child must solve those problems and decide how to act, decide which information is correct and why. Discrepancies such as different information about the events, or different opinions about the results of experimentation occurring in the process of learning, can be resolved with symbol creation. From this point the process of development is propelled, when discrepancies between the existing state of the child and the demands from the environment are resolved. Resolving these conflicts involves at least three strategies: (a) accessing alternatives, (b) anticipating outcomes, and (c) reconstructing past experience. Each of these strategies requires the individual to create symbols, which are "mental representation(s) of choices or decisions, since the total event is not observable at the present." (Crowder, 1976, p.70) For example: solving the problem of the names of the animals seen in the forest requires a review of information from different sources (books, visits to the ZOO, etc.).

The research of Glucksberg (1966) considered the problem of concept formation and symbolic activities which influence the process of learning.

He stressed that "a concept involves both generalization and discrimination. Certain relevant attributes, or features, of an object or event must be discriminated from the irrelevant attributes. Then this must be generalized to all other members of the same category, or concept. Generalization plus discrimination, constitute the abstraction necessary for concept development" (Glusberg 1967, p.13).

Glucksberg (1967) remarked that because language is a primary medium for symbolic behavior, it can influence attention, identification, and perception as well as memory. He illustrated this with an

example of research done by Koltsova (1958) with the concepts "doll" and "book" which showed that it is easier to remember material with symbolic connotation. In this experiment, ten 19- and 20-month-old children were trained in the concept "doll" or "book". They were given different stimulation. The training consisted of showing each child a particular doll. Half of the children used as subject in this study were given just three types of verbal instruction when the doll was shown such as "Here is a doll", etc. The other half of children were given thirty different instructions such as "Feed the doll". The results showed that training that included a variety of behaviors, verbal and motor, was superior to that which used only one verbal and one motor response. The children in second group asked to select doll did pick up the doll from a number of toys. In the first group children were able to select the doll; however, they also selected other toys that were not dolls. This experiment also demonstrated that problem solving involves symbolic thinking, because varied experience with examples of an abstract concept facilitated learning. An example given was the word "food", which can be represented by real food, symbolically by the word "food", or by actions connected with food such as eating, preparing food, etc. Novel ways of reacting and the habit of presenting a problem in different ways help in understanding of the problem.

The research of LePage and Mills (1990) showed that pre-reading activities in which children are exposed to picture-symbols improve preschool children's attitudes toward reading. The study included two groups of children (4 years and 5 years old) divided into experimental and control groups. The groups attitude toward reading was tested and pre- and post-tests were administered. The instructions for the experimental group were implemented three times a week for 30 minutes. In the first 15 minutes the teacher used flash-cards forming picture sentence

and books with picture-symbol story. The teacher read a book to the children, then read a part of each sentence and asked children to complete the sentence by reading picture words. Next children played with food and did ZOO activities including picture-symbols. The post-test score from the Primary Pupil Reading Attitude Inventory showed 34% increase in reading activities in the experimental group and no change in the control group.

This can be explained by the fact that decoding pictorial symbols is similar to decoding printed symbols, since both processes are linked by the same idea. They make printed or pictorial symbols meaningful (according to the previous experience) to the decoder.

Conclusion

Bruner and Olson (1977-1978) emphasized that learning can occur through experience, self-initiated action or direct knowledge, or through symbolically coded information transmitted by textual media. They pointed out three modes of experiencing: (a) active, (b) iconic and (c) symbolic. The first is related to knowledge from direct action, the second to imitation of the observation of models, and the third to knowledge specified in a symbol system (Bruner and Olson 1977-78, p.4). As they stressed, human's are able to learn by the observation of someone else's action. For example, children learn by observing adults' behavior and symbolically expressing what they see in play. These three modes correspond to three ways of interacting and constructing the world: by acting upon it, by observing it, and by being told or reading about it by experience coded in text. He concluded that in the modern society learning through the text is dominant mode of learning.

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The experience with one symbolic system such as written language helps children to learn other symbolic systems.

Writing poetry and stories helps children to develop "symbolic thinking" and abstraction necessary for example to understand mathematics.

Generalization and discrepancies that we find in children literary work are basic skills in learning.

In contemporary society children are developing special abilities to ask questions, to doubt and to wonder. Those questions asked by our children reflect their knowledge about the entire world and guide us to theirs and to our future.

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