
Drama and Language in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT This article presents an example of a project designed to get children of different ages working together and working for each other. The project relied quite heavily on children creating a dramatic context and the author shows how the dramatic element has the potential to affect their learning in positive ways. The provision of a shared make-believe common context is at the heart of children's symbolic play and provides for purposeful learning and specific language opportunities. As well as looking at the project, the article stresses the importance of appreciating the links between symbolic play and drama and the ways in which drama reaches beyond the experience of children's play.

Introduction

Dramatic activities in school are rooted in children's ability to create imaginary contexts in their play. Teachers use drama because it draws upon many of the features routinely present in children's symbolic play. This symbolic play is developed around a shared make-believe context, it is self-motivating and collaborative (see Bolton, 1992). Children inhabit play worlds which they have created and which provide opportunities for experiences that reach beyond their everyday lives. There is also a reflective quality to their play – they know they are playing and they are aware of their roles in their play. They are in control of their play and their involvement and it would be difficult for adults to step in to direct the course of their imaginings.

However, teachers should be doing more than providing opportunities for the children to carry on playing. Giving the children time, space and encouragement to engage in dramatic play is essential, but we need to know why it is essential and we need to know how to develop the children's play in worthwhile ways (Fleming, 1997). Symbolic play provides powerful learning opportunities: the self-motivating quality (children play because they want to play); the imaginative quality (the activity of constructing contexts beyond their

immediate, everyday experience); the collaborative quality and the sense of common purpose (the engagement with others in the production of a shared, imaginary context); and the reflective quality (the awareness of playing a part, the sense of delight in constructing the imaginary world). It is these qualities that teachers can draw upon and develop when they encourage children to present experience dramatically (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003).

Teachers can use these qualities by helping children to develop their play experiences and by directing their dramas towards clearly defined educational outcomes. For example, teachers can encourage children to explore their play worlds more deeply (helping the children to move, perhaps, from endless gun battles to a more thoughtful consideration of the effects of right and wrong) and they can use the learning opportunities provided by dramatic play to serve their own educational interests. Most teachers, for example, would probably want their children to be self-motivated in their learning and to be able to think imaginatively. They would like children to work purposefully and in ways which help them to realize their own intentions. They would like them to work collaboratively and to reflect upon their learning experiences. Drama, with its roots in symbolic play, provides a powerful means of supporting learning, and teachers of young children should take full advantage of this (Fleming, 2001). The shift from symbolic play to drama is partly aesthetic in that the reflective quality and the sense of self-awareness is emphasized, and partly functional in that good teachers can use the qualities of symbolic play in dramatic engagements to enrich the children's learning (see, for example, Neelands, 1992; Bolton, 1998).

The key to the value of drama is in the creation of a shared common make-believe context. It is a context created and 'lived through' (Bolton, 1998) by the participants and provides them with a sense of ownership and control. It requires appropriate and purposeful contributions which are sensitive to the developing dramatic situation. The creation of such a context depends upon the use of appropriate language even as the context provides the setting for talk and action. Language works in specific situations and to meet specific needs and interests, and it is the context which provides the background to all forms of language. Our language frames our identity and our relationships with others and the everyday school context can serve to constrain children's opportunities in language (Winston, 2001). The gift of providing alternative make-believe contexts is offered by drama and it brings with it the opportunity to use language in different ways.

Here is one example of a teaching context through which the children have been encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and encouraged to find ways of using their language effectively. It is not presented as a model, but rather as an opportunity for the reader to consider the ways in which children can be helped to feel at home with their language and their learning. It reflects the current interest in Speaking, Listening and Learning (DfES, 2003) and the shift towards more project-based work implied in the material produced

by the National Primary Strategy (see, for example, DfES, 2003). The project was managed by a language support teacher and I have drawn upon her account of what happened and raised a number of issues which seem to me significant. The reader may well react differently.

The Elves' Christmas Toy Factory

Three teachers decided to work together to help their children create and manage an elves' factory in a corner of the foundation classroom. This was linked with the tradition of giving presents at Christmas time and Santa's elves, and would provide an opportunity for the children to make presents for parents and caregivers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. The project was coordinated by the language support teacher, the foundation teacher and the teacher of a year four class. The teachers wanted to provide opportunities for the older children to support, and work with, the younger children, and they wanted the project to provide a background for purposeful language development. They were concerned to create an imaginary context which the children could develop and, subsequently, 'live through'.

Teachers and Collaborative Learning

The language support teacher was concerned to provide purposeful contexts for the children's talk and wanted to provide a situation in which children of different ages could work together to achieve common aims. The teacher of the foundation class wanted to provide experiences which enabled her children to use language to get help and support and wanted the opportunity for them to work in role. The teacher of the Year 4 class wanted her children to listen sensitively, to persuade, to instruct and to guide. They would not be in role, but would help the younger children to sustain and experience their roles.

When teachers decide to work together in the interests of the children's learning, they are presenting a model of cooperation that is likely to make an impression on the children. It may be much more effective than sitting children in groups and telling them to work together. If we believe in the power of collaborative learning, it ought to show in our work. These teachers felt that helping children to work in the interests of others, and through the support of others, would provide a clear purpose to their work and a motivation for learning.

Teaching Context

The teachers felt there was an opportunity to encourage the children to become involved in the planning of the project and at the same time to promote a liaison between the older and the younger children. The responsibility for the planning, building and directing of the elves' toy factory was given to the older children and their teacher (8-9 year-olds) and the responsibility for the day-to-

day managing of the factory and for the production of the toys was given to the younger children and their teacher (aged 5-6 years). Although the teachers were committed to collaboration, they also wanted sufficient flexibility to ensure that their children's work was not dominated by their responsibilities to the project. So, although there were clearly defined occasions when the two groups would work together, the focus of the project would regularly shift from one group to the other. Whilst the teachers were able to plan for many clearly defined language activities (opportunities for questioning, for seeking clarification, for describing, etc.), they felt they wanted to provide an opportunity for language to 'take care of itself' as the children set about the purposeful tasks of planning and managing the factory. Their concern was to suggest a context within which children could use language to realise their purposes. At every stage, language would drive the project, even as the children's language would be given life and meaning within the context of planning and running an elves' factory.

Planning with the Children

The most immediate way of putting children in touch with their learning is to involve them at some level in the planning of their learning. Generally speaking, teachers in this project found it easier and more rewarding to spend a few minutes talking about the way the morning might be organized rather than telling the children what to do. These children were excited by the planning of the project and they had plenty of suggestions to make.

Children Working Together

Encouraging children of different ages to work together may take some managing, but can be very valuable for everyone. Apart from offering the older children the chance to do something of lasting value in the school and helping them to take responsibility for another person, teachers are usually surprised at how sensitive and effective they are in their relationships with the younger children. They often turn out to be very good teachers. The important thing is the shared context and the children's appreciation of their roles within the project (Fleming, 2003).

Planning for Language

It is important to appreciate that providing contexts in which 'language can take care of itself' takes a lot of careful planning and sensitive management. Contexts do not take care of themselves and children need help and guidance if they are to take responsibility for sustaining the context of their work. The roles and responsibilities of the children were carefully defined beforehand and the two groups (the younger and the older children) had very different parts to play. The older children knew they had to respond to the requests of the younger children, and the younger children knew they had to make clear what they

wanted of the older children. Simply, the older children had to listen very carefully, and the younger children had to express their ideas very carefully. It is also clear that the teachers took care to identify 'defined language activities' which could reasonably be expected to contribute to the context (Peter, 1995). These were specified in terms of a range of talk opportunities, a variety of writing tasks and a list of the reading activities that would need to be carried out.

It is interesting and important to note that these 'language activities' were identified by taking account of the kinds of language experiences which would be helpful for the children, and the context which the activities were designed to present. The teachers had to be attentive to both in their planning. So the older children would be, for example, planning and designing and testing things out (and will be seen to do so as they use appropriate language and act in appropriate ways) and the younger children would be reading instructions, seeking advice and altering plans. The teachers and the children are guided by the context. It is the context which keeps them in touch with one another, the context which enables them to understand what is going on and the context which means they can make effective use of their language.

Teaching Context

The project started in the Foundation class and the teacher asked the children if they would like to make some Christmas presents and do so as Santa's Elves. Quite a lot of time would be spent at this stage describing the context (the elves' factory) and the way of working (seeking the help of the older children). When they were all in agreement, the younger children were asked what they would need in the corner of their classroom for it to be transformed into an elves' factory. They wanted toys to make and clothes to wear (hats, aprons and shoes 'that curl up at the toes'). They wanted more space to work in. They might have asked for tools to work with, machines and work benches. They might have wanted wrapping paper, address labels, stamps and sealing wax. They drew pictures to show how they wanted to look when dressed as elves and they made lists of the kinds of toys they would like to be able to make (airplanes, roller blades, cycles, strollers, automobiles, drums, dolls, helicopters, swords, ladders and spaceships).

The Context of Learning

This is the business of building a context (the elves' toy making factory) and time spent doing this is usually well spent. The more children are in touch with what is going on, the better will they be able to contribute. For some children the work in school is a mystery and all they can do is wait and see what happens next. The children here, however, are preparing the way for their learning. They are being guided into the context, and the teachers are doing this by making suggestions.

Teaching Context

Whilst some of the children felt they could easily manage these things themselves, it was generally agreed that the factory would be much better if they could have some help from older children. So the children took their pictures and their lists to the older children and asked for help in converting the corner. They explained the sort of things they wanted.

Teacher Management

It may be that the younger children needed a little encouragement from the teacher to agree that the elves' factory would be better for the help of older children. However, the teachers are responsible for the children's learning and they are providing the structure through which the learning might take place. There is a difference between telling the younger children to seek the help of the older children and discussing with them the advantages of working with help from the others. It is part of keeping the children involved at all stages of their learning and inviting them to take part in key decisions. The children were asked to consider how they could best prepare their requests for the older children. The pictures and the lists were adapted to take account of the new audience (the older children).

Support for Children in their Learning

The point at which a project like this is started is important. The teachers decided that they wanted the young children to initiate the work and so they were encouraged to seek the help of the older children. This was followed right through the project (as, for instance, when the elves returned some of the plans as unsatisfactory), and to the end (when the elves wrote to the older children thanking them for their contributions). The teachers wanted to shift the typical relationships which exist between children of different ages. They wanted to give extra rights to the younger children; they wanted the older children to respond. All this was done, of course, by managing the language opportunities.

Language

Even at this early stage, it is apparent that language plays the key part in any project of this kind. It is not only that opportunities are provided for the children to talk about what they want, to compile lists for others to read and to make verbal requests, but that for the project to succeed the participants must use language cooperatively and in order to bring about carefully defined and shared goals.

It is interesting to consider, for example, what happens when the younger children move from telling the teacher the kinds of things they would like if they were elves in a factory, to asking the older children for help by telling them what they want and expecting them to produce it. In both cases, the

language was purposeful and served the young children's interests, but whilst the talk with the teacher reflected the classroom context ('We could have ...' 'I think the elves would need some ...'), the talk with the older children became directive and was far from typical of foundation classrooms ('We want you to get us ...', 'Make sure you don't forget ...', 'When will it be ready?' and 'Don't be late'). The young children will have had plenty of experience of responding to the teacher's hypothetical questions, but now they are using their language to get things done and they are getting a taste of authority. Something happens when the children leave their classroom to meet with the older children and to persuade them to be helpful in quite specific ways, and something happens when the older children respond to this plea for help. They have shifted from using 'talk for teacher' to talking for themselves with strict purposes and intentions within a shared context.

Teaching Context

Fortunately, the older children liked the idea and they were filled with enthusiasm and they did respond. They set to work to meet the younger children's requirements. They visited the foundation classroom and made a note of the equipment and space available and then they left, promising to return shortly. The younger children waited to see what would happen. Back in their own classroom the older children were asked by the class teacher to talk about what they had seen, and decide what could be used and what had to be discarded. They decided that the clothes horse, the cradle, the round table and the clothes tray were not appropriate for a factory. They produced plans of the factory which they took back to the foundation classroom to see if they would work. They were able to do this whilst the younger children were out watching television. With the guidance of the teacher, the most appropriate of these plans was agreed by a majority decision of the older children, who then returned to their classroom to prepare the factory. This meant making good use of the furniture available in the foundation classroom, but also ensuring that the factory area was bright and colourful and a pleasant and safe place to be. Wallpaper was produced, posters were designed stressing health and safety aspects ('NO SMOKING HERE', 'DANGER HEAVY TOOLS') and signs prepared to help develop the context ('TEA ROOM STAFF ONLY', 'SANTA'S HOT-LINE').

Appropriate Language

When the children know what is going on, when they are in touch with the context of their language and their actions and when what they say and write contributes to that context, their language is purposeful and appropriate. It is doing what language should do and these children are making good use of language. They are also being encouraged to develop the physical context of the factory and this means drawing upon existing materials in the everyday

world of the foundation classroom and transforming them into objects that will function in the make-believe context of the elves' factory.

Teaching Context

The older children then turned their attention to the toys which the foundation children as elves would have to make. They had to design toys which could be made out of everyday discarded materials such as cereal boxes, plastic bottles, wire coat-hangers, cardboard tubes, bubble-wrap – all things that would be readily available within most households. In addition, they had consumable stock available in the school (coloured card, split pins, felt, glue, clear plastic, cones and so forth). Their designs had to show the kind of materials needed and how they had to be used in the toy. They used these materials to produce prototype toys which were examined by the group with a view to deciding which were most suitable for the young children to construct. In the end, six of the experimental toys were selected. Some of them had to be modified so that the group could be confident that they had a selection which would be challenging to make but also manageable for the young children. Further practical testing of their ideas was carried out in their own classroom and suggestions for alterations were reviewed and discussed. Finally, the children produced manuals (The Bicycle Book, Making Drums, Helicopter Plan, The Spaceship Manual) to help the elves construct the toys.

Providing Rich Contexts

These children are working to a purpose and all of their constructions, all of their plans and tests, reflect their concerns for the younger children and their roles as elves. It is at times like this that children can forget they are in school and teachers should work quite hard to get children into situations where they can be absorbed by the task and almost unaware of the school context. So much seems to depend on children seeing the value in their work. So much depends on the work being purposeful for the children. So much depends upon the context.

Forms of Writing

It is fascinating to see children struggling to prepare manuals which by their nature must reflect a transmission model of reading. The authors have got to focus clearly on the toy described by the manual and the sequence of actions required to construct it. They have got to encode these instructions in such a way that the reader (a much younger child with far less reading experience) can interpret them and act upon them. They will be struggling with one of the tensions in language as they seek to take account of the objects and procedures described, and the reader, who must understand the description. It is their language and the way they use their language which will bring the two

together (or, of course, keep them apart). This is a real task, it is challenging and demanding and very worthwhile.

Teaching Context

The plans and instructions had to be accessible to the young children and were carefully produced to take account, for example, of number, patterning, sequencing, location and directionality. They drew round the available shapes to produce plans and they used colour coding to help the elves decide on the correct sequence in the construction. They worked to provide reading materials which were attractive, interesting, accessible and rewarding.

Purposeful Tasks

There had to be a lot of discussion, a lot of redrafting and redrawing and a lot of testing and trialling. They had to get it right, or else the elves would be unable to cope and there would be no toys produced in the factory. The purpose which described the task and made it meaningful also provided the motivation to keep improving the design of the toys and the instruction manuals. Everything had to work for the toy-makers. There was also an opportunity for the teacher to guide them in the later stages of this work and to help to ensure that their instructions would work.

Teaching Context

When all was ready the parts and the instructions were put into containers to be delivered to the factory as boxed kits. At the same time, a general request was put out to the whole school for items needed for producing the toys. This meant that stocks of raw materials were soon built up and could be passed to the factory. However, before the factory could start production the elves would need to be properly clothed. The foundation children had the circumference of their heads measured by the older children and the results were fed into the computer so that an average head size could be established. One group of children was given the task of designing elfish hats which had to meet quite stringent criteria (maximum height of 35 centimeters, adjustable for different head sizes, and durability). Eight designs were produced and presented to the foundation class, who were asked to choose the one which most nearly met their requirements.

Edging into the Learning Context

At this stage the young children have little to do except get on with their usual work and wait. When they are involved it is just to have their heads measured and the reader might begin to think that there is more in this for the older children than for the younger children. Nevertheless, the measuring activity

would have done a lot for them. It helped them to realize that something was going to happen, that they were still the centre of things and it helped them to begin the process of building belief in the make-believe context. They could feel themselves being put in place as elves as they had themselves measured for elfish clothes. It also gave them the chance to exercise their authority as they decided which design suited them best and instructed the older children to get on with producing the hats.

In coming to terms with their role, they were beginning to appreciate more clearly the power they enjoyed. The older children were concerned to get things right for them. The young children were encouraged to feel that the elves' factory would be built and they could tell that decisions were being taken with a mind to achieving particular outcomes. The hats which the older children produced were designed to meet the foundation children's requirements and this encouraged the younger children to be rather more assertive when giving instructions for aprons, shoes and badges. They were able to take the initiative by taking advantage of the older children's concerns to meet their interests. Furthermore, of course, their time would come once the factory was handed over and mass production started.

A description of the hat making activity by one of the older children (presented later as a written account of part of the project) shows how concerned they were that the hats should work for the elves:

We made four cardboard templates of Dean's hat and cut out a felt pattern – blue, red, yellow and green. First we glued the felt to the cardboard and then we glued the hat in a cone shape. The join was not very neat so we decorated it with a different coloured braid. Joanne, Ashleigh, Lorraine and Emma went down to foundation class to check the hats were the right size. Straps were cut out 3 cms by 46 cms. Andrew suggested cutting the side of the hat for the strap to thread through. This worked well and was firm enough to keep the strap at the correct size. We added a tab and the face of an elf for decoration.

The older children wanted the hats to be good and they showed the young children they wanted them to be good. They showed them they cared. This concern helped them to overcome some of the disappointment the elves must have felt when they were offered bows for their shoes in place of curly toes. It seems that the shoes were too much for the ingenuity and dexterity of these able and inventive children but there was not much which defeated them. All of this gave the younger children plenty to talk about, though they never could understand why the curly toes could not be made.

Teaching Context

When everything was ready and the teacher was satisfied that everything was ready, and when the younger children had begun to wonder whether the

factory would ever be finished, a group of the older children arrived and set about transforming a corner of the classroom into the elves' factory. The furniture was shifted, tables and walls were covered in patterned paper, the posters and signs were put up and the children were given their toys and their clothes. The factory was declared open. The older children stayed for a while to help them get the working of the factory under way. They showed them how to operate a clocking on system for the different shifts and how to fill in job cards when they finished a toy. They were shown some of the rules of the factory and were helped to set up a packing department in which they could produce their own designs of wrapping paper. The older children were motivated to help the younger children and took pleasure in helping them to set up a factory in which they could learn and enjoy themselves. They shared clearly defined intentions and the work was seen to be purposeful and worthwhile. Once the factory was established the older children could take a step back and leave it to the younger ones to manage. They could wait to see what happened.

From Everyday to Dramatic Contexts

The moment at which a presented context takes on a life of its own is always interesting. Until this time the children had been mostly preparing for drama. They had been working on the context, making sure that everyone developed a shared view of the situation they were going to create and that there was plenty of stuff produced to help them to engage with the context. In all of their talk and discussion about the factory, in the measuring and in their making of posters, in their manuals, they were preparing for the dramatic context. They were preparing as they engaged in these tasks and as they produced artifacts (properties) which could work to indicate the context. Some of the younger children had felt a bit elfish as they were measured for their clothes, but generally speaking, there had been little dramatic engagement before this point.

Now they were to stop preparing for the drama and shift into presenting the drama as they walked through the factory door and clocked on. They had to stop getting ready for the drama and get on with the drama. Interestingly, they created for themselves a stage in the drama which could be called 'trying out the drama.' Within the dramatic context of the elves' factory they created a 'hand over' time during which the older children showed the young ones how to operate the factory. At the same time, they supported them into their roles as elves. The young children learned to present the dramatic context, and their roles within the context, as they learned to operate the factory. It was quite clever.

The young children worked in the factory in 'shifts' of about six children supported (in the early stages) by a small group of Year 4 children who were attached to each shift.

For the foundation children the motivation to get involved was provided through the work done by the older children in developing a context which

was meaningful and real. They had a factory and they had their elfish clothes. They also had a task. These things enabled them to get production under way and to bring the factory to life. To do this they had to produce toys.

Teaching Context

The elves had detailed plans and instructions which had been drawn and written for them by the older children. The instruction manuals had been thoughtfully produced and carefully trialled, but it was only in the factory that the younger children were able to use them. Not all of the elves could manage all of the tasks. Sometimes, the instructions were too complicated or demanded a level of literacy which the younger children did not possess. Sometimes, the manipulative tasks required in producing the toys according to the instructions were beyond the ability of the children. Sometimes, the instructions were inadequately written or confusing and, sometimes, even the most carefully followed instructions resulted in the production of quite a disappointing toy.

Keeping the Dramatic Context Going

This could have destroyed the drama at once. After all, the elves' factory depended on the participants producing elvish toys in elfish ways. The difficulties they encountered in producing the toys would have threatened their roles as elves.

The teachers talked with the children outside the dramatic context. They explained that some of the toys and instructions were of a poor quality and that they, as the elves, should not blame themselves for not being able to make these toys. Even the most experienced of elves would have struggled. They suggested that they take full responsibility for the factory, that they choose only the best toys to make and that they redesign the poorer ones.

Teaching Context

In a short time the elves took over the factory. With quite a lot of help and guidance by the class teachers, they rejected the inferior products, rewrote the manuals and developed the best toys designed by the older children. The good lines were produced in quantity and the factory became more efficient as the elves' skill base improved. The range of toys was widened and in a short while the elves were able to take new and developed ideas back to the older children.

Children Getting on Top of their Learning

It is important to appreciate that as the children took over the dramatic context so they were able to take over the factory as a 'going concern'. In mastering the skills they mastered the context and were able to follow the course set down by the older children. As they grew into their parts, they grew in confidence and

their contributions on every level were enhanced. They developed the dramatic context and with it the scope for learning and the opportunities for language. They talked on the phone to Santa, discussed the plans given to them, sent requests for advice to the older children, suggested improvements and redrew some of the designs. They prepared records of production, complained about shortages of materials and unrealistic deadlines and made decisions about appropriate toys for particular children. They made changes in the factory layout and produced new notices to cover unforeseen events. They wrote letters and made a card to thank the older children for helping them to get going (but also pointing out some of the errors the older children had made!) They developed the dramatic context through their language and the developing context enriched their language. They had taken over the context.

The teachers managed the project from beginning to end and, of course, we have only had the smallest glimpse of the way it developed in this account. But whilst the teachers managed the work around the elves' factory, the children gave it life and the dramatic elements developed in ways which no one could have expected. The teachers got their 'defined language activities' out of the project but they got much more as well. They watched the children as, through their roles in the drama and through their use of language, they asserted their rights. The children and the teachers engaged in this work had the opportunity to use their language effectively. They used language to change their experience of the world, they used language to get things done, and they used language to good purpose.

We should consider what the older children provided for the younger ones when they set up the elves' factory. They were attentive to the wishes of the foundation children and this enabled them to produce a context in which the younger children could immediately feel comfortable and at home. It was tailor-made to reflect their expectations. It was both meaningful and relevant. It was also interesting. Because the context was familiar, explicable and inviting, the elves found it easy to get actively involved. In order to produce successful toys, the elves had to follow instructions. They had to interpret documents and this led them to discuss difficulties, consider alternatives, suggest possibilities, describe activities, seek clarification, question answers, challenge suggestions, develop hypotheses and so forth.

The younger children made good use of language and they could do so because the situation was non-threatening and because the models provided by the older children could be challenged (as they might not have been had they come from the teacher). The older children provided sympathetic support and encouragement and made the younger ones feel important. They helped them to manage demanding tasks successfully and they gave them the opportunity to enjoy a sense of achievement. They also gave them the space to question.

The older children did all of this because they were motivated by the younger children's interest and by the knowledge that what they were doing was an important part of the children's education. For the older children it was a real context (working for the infant children); for the younger children it

represented a movement from a real context (telling the older children what they wanted) to a dramatic context (living through the elves' factory).

The important point is, of course, that the language is just as purposeful in the make-believe as it is in the everyday context and this should help us to see how dramatic engagements of this kind provide the opportunity for real language development. It should also help us to see that children working within a common project are treating the experience quite differently and understanding it from different perspectives. It is the work done (largely through their use of language) to help the participants feel they are engaged in a shared experience which is important, the work done to make life meaningful.

This example of cooperative learning between groups of children provided each of them with the opportunity to develop their language by working together at purposeful tasks. The children who set up the factory and the children who worked in the factory knew what was happening and they could use the context (in different ways) to make appropriate contributions. The contexts (real and imaginary) provided the background to their language even as they were developed through the language and the actions of the children. The foundation class teacher relied upon the children's interactions with one another within clearly defined and well-appreciated contexts to generate rich language opportunities. The children responded impressively and their language worked to elaborate, refine and redefine the contexts.

The teacher managed the structures through which the role play experience could be developed. From time to time she entered the factory and engaged the working elves in conversations. When she did so, the teacher had to intervene in ways which were sensitive to the context developed by the children and sensitive to their roles within the factory. She could be a visitor, someone thinking of applying for a job or even a factory inspector, but she could not be a teacher (without threatening the context), and that put constraints on the way she could engage with the children. It meant that she had to suit her contributions to the children's world, that she had to talk and act in ways which maintained and elaborated the make-believe reality. She had to teach through the drama. It meant as well that the children had to respond to her as someone wondering, for example, whether to apply for a job and with plenty of questions about working conditions. It meant they had to respond appropriately to a prospective employee and not to a teacher.

However, and in spite of these helpful and challenging interventions, the teacher felt strongly that the most important gains in terms of the children's language development came from the interactions developed between the elves, as they managed the presentation of the factory, and between the older and younger children, as they worked to get things under way. The teachers in their detailed planning provided the opportunities for the children to look after their language development. They did this by presenting them with contexts (helping the young children and working in an elves' factory) which the children could inhabit and then take over. They supported them by engaging directly with the

children in the elves' factory and by challenging them to reach for new levels of understanding.

Conclusion

It is important that the children are talking, listening, reading and writing. It is important that they are using their language to plan, prepare, question, explain, challenge and wonder. But what is really important is that the children are responsible for maintaining the contexts of their learning. When this occurs they feel 'at home' and they feel they can talk and act appropriately and without reference to the teacher. They can act appropriately because they know what they are trying to achieve and all that they are doing is described by their intentions.

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