

Book Review: Elizabeth Coffman's *Dramatic Play in the Early Years*

Reviewed by Amanda Stewart

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"Pretend that we're ..."—a phrase so deeply associated with children's play that it could be a contender for the slogan of childhood. Its ubiquity clearly illustrates that children possess an inherent affinity and aptitude for dramatic play. As Landreth (2012) writes, "Unlike adults, whose natural medium of communication is verbalization, the natural medium of communication for children is play and activity" (p. 7). In *Dramatic Play in the Early Years* (Routledge, 2015), Elizabeth Coffman provides a step-by-step guide for teachers on how to engage with children in co-constructing dramatic play experiences.

Dramatic play functions as both a creative expression and a learning tool that is developmentally appropriate for children. When employed in the classroom, dramatic play can act as a catalyst for the development of critical thinking skills, social construction of understanding, social-emotional learning, active academic engagement, and student-driven emergent curriculum.

Coffman is quick to point out that dramatic play and dramatic performance are not the same. Dramatic play, as it is discussed in this book, refers to a specific type of imaginative play, one that is facilitated by an adult and utilized as a learning tool. It is different from the kind of dramatic play that children may engage with in the absence of adults. In Coffman's dramatic play, "the story is investigated collaboratively, with the teacher co-constructing the unfolding of the story as she listens to the children, initiating the central tensions to be explored, stopping and starting as the story develops to consider the next steps" (p. 8). In their role as co-constructors of learning, teachers engage in active listening as they allow their students' ideas to drive the story's direction. Pointedly, the author acknowledges the urge felt by some adults and older children to move the experience of dramatic play into something that more closely resembles performance, and quickly cautions against it. Advocating process over product, she asserts that dramatic play

is about planning play experiences not just for, but with children that will invite them to explore and try out many situations in order to grow their own ideas and perceptions and develop empathy for, and understanding of others and, indeed themselves. (p. 18)

References to empathy and perspective taking are woven throughout the text and are heralded as the intention behind many types of dramatic play. Coffman states: "The difference between storytelling and dramatic play is the children becoming the story, living the lives of the characters or animals, bumping up against the issues and tensions the that story brings into the foreground" (p. 7). The idea of using story as a vehicle for perspective taking is far from new. Writing about the nature of narrative in autobiography, Jerome Bruner (2004) states: "Any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told" (p. 709). In line with Bruner's thinking, Coffman describes dramatic play as "living through the story" (p. 7). She argues that dramatic play allows children to practice taking on perspectives and experiences far different from their own lives.

Despite the author's multitude of references to perspective taking, social justice was mentioned only once in the text. I was disappointed that Coffman missed the opportunity to explicitly state, and further develop, how dramatic play could be used to illustrate issues of social justice. With emphasis on multiple perspectives and connecting emotionally with the lived experience of various characters, dramatic play is a natural partner to social justice education that is, unfortunately, not manifested in the text.

Co-construction of dramatic play necessitates a trust between teacher and student and a commitment to investigating emergent experience. In exploring these ideas, Coffman roots her work in the Reggio Emilia approach and social-constructivist theory. Loris Malaguzzi (1994) pioneer of the Reggio Emilia approach, asserts:

Each one of us needs to be able to play with the things that are coming out of the world of children. Each one of us needs to have curiosity, and we need to be able to try something new based on the ideas that we collect from the children as they go along. Life

has to be somewhat agitated and upset, a bit restless, somewhat unknown. (p. 53)

Viewing children as competent and capable, Coffman advocates for teachers to trust in their students' ability to engage in meaningful dramatic play experiences, but she also makes it clear that teachers must have faith in themselves that they can handle something "a bit restless, somewhat unknown" and effectively manage emergent curriculum that occurs within the dramatic play experience in order to become co-creators alongside their students.

Emergent play experiences, as Coffman suggests, can provoke anxiety in teachers who are used to controlling outcomes. She notes: "Risks taken in dramatic play are often the teacher's risks rather than the children's. It may feel risky to address big issues not normally discussed in the classroom" (p. 12). "Big issues" are often of great interest to children, and more often than not are shied away from by teachers. Topics such as war, climate change, and human suffering can feel like ideas we need to shelter children from. However, dramatic play offers a powerful tool to engage children with these topics in developmentally appropriate ways by giving "children an opportunity to explore and experience situations in a safe environment that is 'not for real'" (p. 18). Allowing students to explore challenging issues in a safe environment helps them build empathy for others and offers them an opportunity to practice identifying and processing emotions, key elements of social-emotional learning. As Coffman notes,

the 'not for real' aspect of play allows you and the children to examine all sides of the story: to look between the lines, take a different approach, try out someone else's experience, 'walk in another person's shoes,' and move back and forth in time. (p. 18)

Addressed throughout the text are common concerns and potential pitfalls teachers are likely to develop when engaging in dramatic play with children. One of the book's strengths is the way the author acknowledges potential anxieties for teachers while simultaneously providing them with strategies to manage their own expectations and nerves. She states:

The open-ended process requires you to take an open stance, listening, observing, being curious about the children's response, and wondering what will come next. It is important for you to see dramatic play as a step-by-step lived experience. Seldom is this kind of drama played out from the beginning to end without discussion, trial and error, reflection, research, and practice. (p. 27)

The author's wealth of experience, as evidenced through the documented classroom experiences in the text, allows her to identify areas where teachers are likely to find the process of dramatic play dynamic and unpredictable, and she makes suggestions for managing challenging situations.

In seven chapters and an introduction, Coffman outlines the major aspects for utilizing dramatic play as a tool for teaching and learning. Looking beyond theory toward active practice, each chapter begins with an exploration of theory before presenting actionable strategies for investigating dramatic play with students. The book explores the essential elements of dramatic play while grounding the text in actual practices and descriptions of experience that serve as a road map for implementing dramatic play in the classroom.

"Chapter One: The Creative Process" attempts to demystify the creative process by describing four stages of the creative process (preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification) and providing concrete examples of how a teacher can craft an invitation for students to engage in co-creating a dramatic play experience.

In "Chapter Two: Beginning Dramatic Play," Coffman focuses on ways to help students engage deeply in the dramatic play experience through activities and exercises that prepare them to willingly suspend their disbelief. She also highlights the importance of pausing, which "is important in dramatic play as play itself" (p. 23), and suggests multiple ways to utilize pauses to enhance children's comprehension and engagement with the experience.

"Chapter Three: The Importance of Practice" highlights ways to help students (and teachers) prepare for and practice the skills and mindset needed to delve deeply into dramatic play. Also described is the practice of side-coaching, where the teacher "co-imagines with the children by describing aloud the who, what, where, and when of their emerging story" (p. 34).

In "Chapter Four: Building Belief" Coffman describes multiple approaches to help students build belief in their dramatic exploration. According to her, "all dramatic processes require both a willing suspension of disbelief and an active effort to promote believability" (p. 41). Therefore, "children entering into imaginative play may need to explore a variety of ways to build belief in order to participate fully in the unfolding story" (p. 41). Outlining several concrete activities for belief building, Coffman prepares teachers with strategies to engage a range of students, from eager six-year-olds to reluctant preteens.

“Chapter Five: Finding the Story” delves into how a teacher works as a co-constructor in creating an experience. When utilizing dramatic play as a learning tool, Coffman writes, “the adult is very present as co-constructor in both the planning and the guiding. The response and much of the direction, however, come from the children” (p. 53). She asserts that the key to successful co-construction is the teacher’s intentionality, and this chapter outlines how to identify an intention or goal and then choose a story that is ripe for exploration.

In “Chapter Six: Playing Inside the Curriculum” Coffman acknowledges the constraints that teachers are under in terms of content. She aims to help teachers find ways to use dramatic play to fulfill curricular goals, suggesting that teachers “often forget the emotional aspects buried in stories in science (e.g., the impact of a dwindling resource) and in social studies” (p. 64). Coffman seeks to highlight how dramatic play can be interwoven into any curriculum and can heighten children’s enthusiasm for a topic. This chapter explains how to establish a “framework for investigation” and outlines questions teachers can use to effectively build a curriculum-based dramatic play experience. Coffman uses rich and varied examples to highlight the elements of a framework.

“Chapter Seven: Teacher in Role” suggests two ways teachers can engage in co-constructing a story from inside the play experience. The first, formal role, occurs when the teacher “tells the story from inside a character’s particular point of view” (p. 85) and is, in many ways, a monologue performed by the teacher. This role may involve telling a story from one perspective or taking on multiple perspectives in the same story. When a teacher is in formal role, their intention is to help students build empathy for a character and/or view an event from multiple perspectives. In the second, interactive role, “the teacher takes on a character or plans a character with the students in order to engage the children in problem solving” (p. 85). This role involves playing directly with the children as you guide their experience from within the story.

Coffman ends each chapter with a brief bulleted summary. Instead of simply reiterating the information from the chapter, the list acts as a set of action items for teachers and contains a mix of activities, mindsets, and strategies for teachers to employ. These helpful summaries allow teachers to easily access information on their role in dramatic play. Interspersed throughout the chapters are firsthand accounts of the author’s experiences engaging in dramatic play with various groups of children. Through these stories, she not only illustrates key elements of dramatic play in context, but also indicates how children at different developmental stages will engage differently with this type of play. It is rare to see a text so firmly based in the Reggio Emilia approach that refers to working with students in grade 3 and above. In highlighting her work with students in all elementary grades, Coffman has produced a book that is a rare gem for upper-grade teachers in social-constructivist or emergent-curriculum schools.

Dramatic Play in the Early Years is written in a straightforward, conversational style that engages readers both as colleagues and as learners. Filled with step-by-step instructions, detailed examples of dramatic play experiences, and strategies for teachers and students alike, this book may inspire curious beginners or reignite the enthusiasm of seasoned dramatists. It is certainly one I will return to for guidance as I explore dramatic play with children.

Works Cited

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