Role Play and Writing in a Northern Rural Canadian Kindergarten Classroom

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Role Play and Writing in a Northern Rural Canadian Kindergarten Classroom


In this paper we describe how a kindergarten teacher used role play to support young students’ literacy. Aligning her teaching approach with a theory of writing as a situated social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), Kelsey takes up roles that show how scribbles, drawings and print texts can be used to carry out social purposes within authentic social contexts (Anning, 2003; Dyson, 2001; Kress, 1997/2005; Lancaster, 2007; Mackenzie, 2011). Kelsey, one of the authors of this paper, has found abundant space in daily classroom activities for students to create scribbled/drawn/print texts intended to represent something significant to them.

We were interested in examining Kelsey’s roles and her students’ writing in order to gain a deeper understanding of roles that teachers can take to support students’ writing. We were also interested in what students do with texts when their teacher takes up these roles. We begin with a brief synthesis of research on early years writing and drama, then describe Kelsey’s community and classroom context and the methods for gathering and analyzing data. Our findings and conclusions are organized in terms of teacher roles and children’s understandings about print and we conclude with implications for teachers who wish to take up dramatic roles to teach writing.

**Drama and Writing**

Kelsey’s use of dramatic play to teaching writing is supported by studies showing the contributions of drama to students’ literacy (Anderson, 2012; Cer, 2017; Harden, 2015; Peterson, 2015a, 2015b; Peterson & Portier, 2016). In dramatic play, students create roles for themselves and story lines in a manner similar to the creation of characters and plots when writing
narratives, thus developing story schemas (Rowe, 2009). Also, when enacting the dramatic play narrative, students use the language of dialogue (between peers who are in role) and of narration (in their explanations of the roles and of what is happening in dramatic play) that they use in narrative writing (Cer, 2017). Comparisons of fourth-grade students’ writing pre- and post-drama intervention showed that involvement in role play arising from a folk tale led to greater productivity in the number of words used and specificity of vocabulary used in their follow-up writing (Anderson, 2012). Additionally, researchers theorize that the practice of creating pretend situations and taking up roles within dramatic play involves the same kind of symbolic thinking that is involved in writing (Pellegrini & van Ryzin, 2009). Learning to write, which involves learning to represent objects and ideas symbolically, is supported by the thinking involved in students’ assignment of roles and other meanings to objects, people and actions in dramatic play (Vygotsky, 1978).

Dramatic play also provides authentic contexts for writing that follows the play, as the play “deepens students’ reservoirs of knowledge and experience so that they have a ready source of ideas for their writing” (Peterson, 2015, pp. 22-23) and provides “scaffolding for students to mentally represent concepts and ideas” (Anderson, 2012, p. 973). Writing may be part of the play, as well. In an effort to resolve a problem, authenticate a role that has been taken up, or to further the narrative in other ways, students may find that written texts are needed. These texts may be advertisements, letters, brochures, questionnaires, petitions, proclamations, announcements, poems, or any of the text forms that the broader society has created to address real-life issues the parallel those in the dramatic play narrative (Booth, 2005).

The activity described in this paper is an example of what Booth (2005) calls story drama. The starting points of story drama, defined as “improvised role play stimulated by a story” (p. 8), can
be a story read from a book or told by a teacher/storyteller. Story drama can also start with an imagined story whose characters and initiating event are introduced by the teacher. Together, teacher and students co-construct characters’ motivations and personalities and carry the narrative forward, creating and resolving conflicts. Students’ engagement in the unfolding story involves small-group or whole-group interactions with the teacher in role or coaching on the side. Students may create multimodal texts that mediate actions and events in the story drama. Students participate in their own way, drawing on background knowledge and experience and their imagination (Barrs, Barton & Booth, 2012; Booth, 2005).

**Context**

The story drama activities described in this paper involved Kelsey and her four kindergarten students, three boys and a girl, in a northern rural Canadian school in Deerview (all names except for Kelsey’s are pseudonyms). Kelsey initiated this activity in her fifth year of teaching. The students, five years old at the time they started kindergarten, arrived by school bus for full days on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Deerview, with a population of less than 400 residents, is a remote northern Canadian town with a K-6 school that has approximately 60 students and four teachers in four classes: kindergarten, grades 1-2, grades 3-4 and grades 5-6. There are 16-20 students in the combined grades classes. There is a deep sense of community and teachers and students have strong parent support for any initiative. Rural schools are often characterized by close teacher and family relationships (Vaughn & Saul, 2013) which is true in Kelsey’s classroom. We recognize that this context may not be common to that of many primary teachers, but hope that journal readers will find Kelsey’s practices to be readily adaptable to their classroom contexts.
Method

The story drama activity described in our paper was recorded by an iPod that Kelsey set up on a tripod during the activities. Sixty minutes of video were transcribed by graduate students at one author’s university. This study is one branch of the overall action research project in which Kelsey and five other K-1 teachers from her northern school division participated. Our analysis draws upon grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser, 1992), as Kelsey and the other author of this paper, a university professor, analyzed the transcripts inductively to determine the types of roles that Kelsey took up to support her students’ literacy. Together, we analyzed the texts that students created throughout the story drama in terms of what they show about the students’ understandings about print and textual meaning-making. We identified the marks/scribbles/letters/words that children had written with communicative intent and the children’s writing practices. We also identified the intended messages in scribbles and drawings, as expressed in students’ reading to Kelsey of non-print texts (e.g., Gregory voiced the message of a character and the sound effects of Superman’s laser attacking the tree monster in his drawing).

Findings: Kelsey’s Roles and Students’ Writing

Kelsey began by using explicit teaching methods that included asking questions, explaining, and modeling writing processes (e.g., Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Coker, 2007). She then followed the students’ lead, when they created a pretend context, and took up roles where print texts were important to carrying the narrative forward. Her roles and the students’ meaning-making are described in the following.
Setting the Scene by Taking a Teacher Role

Kelsey and her students identified St. Patrick’s Day on the class calendar during the morning calendar time in the beginning of March, creating a sense of anticipation about leprechauns. This sparked a discussion about what leprechauns are, where they live, and why they have a reputation of always chasing after gold. Together, Kelsey and her students generated words, such as leprechaun, gold and rainbow, stretching out the sounds together (Clay, 1991/2015) and sharing the pen in order to write them on the class word wall for students to consult later in their writing (Cunningham, 2016).

Students discussed what they observed about leprechauns—that they were good creatures with a weakness for gold but could also be seen as wicked creatures with a bad habit of stealing. They pondered whether leprechauns are fictional or truly do exist. Kelsey’s role started to change when her students came up with the idea of creating leprechaun traps in hopes of catching a leprechaun. Students reasoned that they if they could catch a leprechaun in their trap, they could discover more about leprechauns and might be granted wishes by the leprechauns in return for their release. Going along with her students’ pretend play, Kelsey wrote a note in each student’s agenda, so parents could help their child make a leprechaun trap at home. Students were to bring their leprechaun traps to school on March 13th.

Imaginative Roles with Teacher Intentions

Students set up their leprechaun traps on March 13th at the end of the school day. The traps were cylinders (such as potato chip containers) that had a hole in one end and were decorated to entice the leprechauns. Students set up their leprechaun traps in strategic places around the room where they thought that leprechauns might visit. After they left the school, Kelsey took up a role as a group of leprechauns who were outraged at the thought of being trapped by kindergarten
students. When the students arrived at school on March 15th, they found their classroom had been vandalized! Tables were flipped upside down, chairs were stacked, toys were thrown around the room and all the leprechaun traps were empty. Some were even suspended from the ceiling. Amongst the disarray a student noticed there was a letter signed by the leprechauns.

Going back to her role as a kindergarten teacher who believes in leprechauns, Kelsey followed students’ lead as they noticed the destruction caused by the leprechauns and then read the leprechauns’ letter together with her. The letter explained that the leprechauns had messed up their classroom, had taken all the gold from the students’ traps, and had stolen the classroom’s only sparkly green wax crayon. Some of the words in the letter used invented spelling. The intention of including these errors in the leprechauns’ letter was to show the students the importance of focusing on the message in their writing. Kelsey took the role of leprechauns who were beginning writers, just as the kindergarten students were. Kelsey as leprechaun was able to communicate her message with the knowledge she had about print. Kelsey wanted her students to see themselves as writers whose kindergarten classroom was a safe space for using what they knew and experimenting with the understandings that were being shaped. While in role as a group of mischievous leprechauns, Kelsey’s actions were guided by the literacy goals she had set as the students’ teacher.

After reading the leprechauns’ letter, the students were scandalized that the leprechauns would take the special crayon. They leaped at Kelsey’s invitation to write back to the leprechauns. Kelsey took up a literacy teacher’s role during this writing and drawing process, pointing out to students’ different visual aides in the classroom, such as the word wall, and alphabet posters, and helping match sounds to letters using sound and action letter prompts from a commercial program Kelsey used to help students learn and remember the sounds of letters (Stone, 2002).
While the students were writing their letters, Kelsey announced that she was starting her own letter. In this respect, Kelsey was taking up a role as a kindergarten student who was writing her own letter to the leprechauns. She used a think-aloud process to model potential writing practices that students could take up in their writing. Kelsey started by asking: “What do I want to say? Oh I know! I’ll tell the leprechauns that I’m sorry about the traps, but mad that they messed up our room.” She began with scribble writing, voicing what she wanted to say but, in her role as a kindergarten student, was unable to write the word, sorry. Her intention was to model to the students that she was mostly concerned about conveying a message and would use whatever knowledge about print that she was able to bring to the writing situation. When, in her role as a kindergarten student, Kelsey commented, “Oh, I think I can spell/write this word,” and began very slowly sounding out the letters for the word, mad. Sometimes she acted confused, saying, “I wonder what letter says /m/? Hmm what says /m/?” until a student offered up the correct letter.

Early in the school year, when Kelsey began taking up a role as a kindergarten student while her students wrote, the students responded to such questions by saying, “You know how to spell it, you’re an adult” or by waiting hopefully for Kelsey to answer her own question. Kelsey responded to these comments by guiding the student through a strategy until they could answer her initial question. After a month of Kelsey continuing this role as a kindergarten student, the students started to suspend their disbelief and worked on writing the letters for particular sounds with her.

**Students’ Written Communication with the Leprechauns**

All of the students copied the word leprechaun in their letter, using a card from the classroom word wall, the class-composed letter, or the leprechauns’ letter as a reference. For other words, students used the strategies Kelsey had modeled while in role as a kindergarten student. Derek’s
story, for example, contained spaces between words that he had carefully sounded out (see Figure 1) and a drawing on a separate page. He read his story to Kelsey while pointing to each word: “A leprechaun messed up our classroom.”

Figure 1: Derek’s writing and drawing

Derek proceeded to complete his drawing. Once his drawing was finished, he wanted to continue with his writing. There was not much time left before recess was to begin, however, so he chose to finish his writing with scribble writing. His scribble writing had spaces in between each scribble “word.” He read his scribbled words to his teacher, saying, “The leprechauns are so mad that they took our sparkly green crayon.”

Kieffer also sounded out each word quietly to himself while writing. He appeared to use uppercase letters to indicate the start of some new words, and always used uppercase for any letter a. As shown in Figure 2, Kieffer also used an image to communicate meaning by drawing a heart instead of writing love.
He read a portion of what he has written so far to the teacher “From Kieffer, I love leprechauns. I would like to be a leprechaun but never mess up our classroom. But never mess up our
classroom,” while pointing to each word. Kieffer added, “That’s my wish,” referring to the wish one would get after catching a leprechaun, according to leprechaun stories the class had read.

Beatrice was very enthusiastic about the activity, initially writing *ALCO* as she attempted to sound out the word, *leprechaun*. She gave up on this process and copied the word from the whiteboard (see Figure 3 for Beatrice’s writing and drawing).

Figure 3: Beatrice’s writing and drawing
The remainder of her letter was scribble writing, which she eagerly read to Kelsey after completing the letter: “I did not like, how you messed up our classroom…. You are not gonna mess up our room again and you’ll regret it!” She declared afterwards that her note was a threat to the leprechauns. Her picture, like Kieffer’s, represented what she would wish for if she ever caught a leprechaun: to be queen.

Gregory initially voiced his plan to write “Ha ha ha, Im going to make a trap, and none of them will get out!” He then began sounding out the words of his intended sentence, pointing to each word when reading his writing to Kelsey: “Never, ha ha ha leprechauns, you never will, never, you never play with.”
Gregory’s letter, as shown in Figure 4, initially contained appropriate spacing between words but after the word “with” the words became increasingly close together. He spelled the word “play” as “pra”, consistent with the way he pronounced the word. He labeled the parts in his picture: Gregory was Superman, a tree monster and a guy that is saying “Yayyy Superman’s here!” He also used onomatopoeia to describe the sound made by the laser from his eyes towards the tree monster.
Teacher’s Roles Supporting Students’ Literacy through Story Drama

We believe that our paper contributes to understandings about literacy teaching in early childhood settings by showing how story drama (Booth, 2005) can support students’ literacy. In the leprechaun story drama experience, Kelsey took up various roles—some that were recognizable as teacher roles and some that were pretend roles—to create contexts for students’ writing and drawing. Kelsey’s imaginary roles (e.g., as a teacher who believes in leprechauns and as a competent five-year-old writer) provided a “concrete link to the students’ world experiences” (Rowe, 2009, p. 44). She voiced and expressed nonverbally her own emotional responses to the leprechauns’ vandalism of the class and encouraged students’ emotional responses. The students drew on these interactions, which connected ways of interacting with others that they had learned in their real lives with the possible ways of interacting with the imaginary leprechauns, as they explored ways of using print and drawings to contribute to the leprechaun narrative. Kelsey also talked through the cognitive and social challenges of using print and drawings to communicate with the pretend leprechauns. She modeled ways to use written symbols to represent ideas, considering relationships and cultural expectations when writing letters to someone. Taking the perspective of a child, Kelsey built on the knowledge about print and about interacting with others through texts that she had observed in her students’ classroom activities in order to scaffold their creation of meaningful texts within the pretend leprechaun narrative.

Kelsey took up the pretend roles with what we call a “teacherly intention,” as the teacher pretending to believe in leprechauns offered textual responses to the narrative of the naughty leprechauns vandalizing the class. As the pretend five-year-old child, Kelsey modeled ways with print and drawings that the students could take up in their own text creation. Even as the
l缘merauns, whose presence was known through the mess she had left in the classroom and the theft of a favourite crayon, Kelsey’s teacher intentions were “teacherly”. The leprechaun left a note to the students; one with emergent writers’ spellings that could be appreciated for the effort and success in communicating a message to the class and that could be edited to show students the conventional spellings.

Students’ texts reflected their hypotheses about print (Clay, 1998/2014) and about symbolic representation using scribbles, drawings and print for meaning-making purposes (Anning, 2003; Kress, 1997/2005; Lancaster, 2007). Students used their knowledge of letter-sound relationships, and understandings of the meaningfulness of written/scribbled/drawn texts to communicate with others. Some parts of their written responses to the leprechauns included letters and words and drawings. When they were unsure of letter-sound relationships or unable to find the words in environmental print, they used scribbles. Regardless of the symbolic representation used in students’ texts, they confidently read the intended messages to Kelsey, showing that the texts had meaning within the dramatic play context involving the class-destroying and letter-writing leprechauns.

Implications for Primary Classrooms

Kelsey’s story drama example shows that the teacher may take the role of instructor or of a fellow student voicing her thoughts as she creates texts. These roles support students’ understandings of the meaningfulness of print and other concepts about print (Clay, 1998/2014). Teachers may also serve as a narrator who provides contextual information needed to stimulate the story drama, or may take a role that invites students’ participation in the story drama and in meaning-making through creating texts that further the narrative (Booth, 2005). Teachers can
adapt these types of roles in any context that fits with their state’s curriculum topics and with themes relevant to their students’ lives.

Teachers might identify possible story drama contexts based upon a story from a favorite book, upon community or school events, holidays or a content area topic. They might highlight types of texts that students could create in response to a problem or invitation created in the story drama. For example, Sparkles, the fire safety dog, (Firehouse Dog Publishing, 2008-2011) could visit the classroom and leave a letter with a request for fire safety plans for the classroom and the school as a way to integrate health and writing. If the school has a track and field day, prior to the event, the teacher could take the role of a local news reporter asking children about the events in which they will participate. The teacher could ask students to take photographs or draw pictures of themselves/their peers at the event and write captions for the pictures to be included in the newspaper’s report of the event. The teacher-in-role approach can be used in science, as well. The teacher might take the role of a municipal staff member responsible for the recycling program who visits the class with information about what to recycle and what happens to recycled plastic, glass, paper, etc. The “municipal staff person” might invite students to create posters and information brochures that the municipality could use to inform community members about recycling and ensure better compliance. As a final example, teachers might extend the leprechaun theme by creating a context where students create maps as they take part in a treasure hunt. The leprechauns might write that they have left treasure for the students to find and provide clues about the location of the treasure. Students could create maps of the classroom, of the school or of the playground for the students and mark where the leprechauns indicate that treasure will be found.
We recognize that the small class size and the high level of community support enjoyed by Kelsey as she took up roles in the leprechaun story drama may reflect the teaching contexts of very few teachers. In spite of this rather unique situation, we hope that other teachers will find in Kelsey’s classroom practice some possibilities for teaching writing through taking up roles in story drama contexts.

**References**


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