Theatrical Journey Playbook
Introducing Science to Early Learners through Guided Pretend Play

By
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Introduction
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A PreK Curriculum Enhancement
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SECTION 1

Introductions

Journey Guide Elizabeth and the Team of Butterfly Scientists
Introduction to the Theatrical Journey Project

“Oh dear—Teddy is sick! Let’s put on our doctor coats and our nursing hats and let’s help Teddy get better.”
“Who has the stethoscope to listen to Teddy’s heart?
Who has the thermometer to take Teddy’s temperature?”

by Eileen Wasow, MA

Children are gathered around Elizabeth Bruce, the facilitator of this language-rich play experience, which she calls a theatrical journey, and journey is a perfect metaphor for what happens with the three- to five-year-olds who participate in this program. As with all special metaphors, the children are transformed through play. They are carried to a special place through this theatrical journey, where they can bring into focus a view of the world that we as adults too often lose—a view of the world that is open to creativity, where there is an absence of judgment and a respect for each person’s voice.

Elizabeth started The Theatrical Journey Project about five years ago, as an outgrowth of early work she did with Sanctuary Theatre as well as a pretend play project at CentroNia initiated by the late Oran Sandel, former Artistic Director of Living Stage Theatre Company. She recognized and understood that children have a deep need for play—not the ready-made play that takes place in pre-fab play corners with plastic child-sized play kitchens. The kind of play that Elizabeth envisioned, that she knew children hungered for, was the play that nurtured their imagination and promoted their thinking and problem-solving skills.

Importance of Rituals

The rituals for the Theatrical Journey connect to things children love: putting on costumes, (hence the doctor’s coat or putting on the veterinarian hats) and using props such as a play x-ray machine, or a play microscope. Well, you might be asking, why not use the real thing? I think the leap into an imaginative world is more complete when the children imbue the mirror on a stick with rich healing powers; and when their dear Teddy is sick and they can use a make-believe thermometer that they themselves have made. At each step along the Theatrical Journey pathway, children are empowered to create solutions, build on experiences they know from their own lives and to find their own voices.
Play as a Pathway to Learning
We have long known that play is an important pathway to learning for young children. Recent research confirms that as children interact with the world around them, they are making new connections in their brains. These new connections help them to grow their sense of language and their sense of number. It helps them learn to experiment, to ask questions and to begin to come up with their own solutions. Play is the child’s way of learning to read the world, of learning to make sense of things in their own minds. As they play, they are drawing on their own feelings, their questions and even their own fears. Play helps reduce these questions, feelings and fears into child-sized bites. Taking turns helps children learn to be good observers, and they begin to have the capacity to empathize with others who may be experiencing a similar problem. Elizabeth’s questions and prompts help lend structure to the play, but it is the children who are expanding their sense of what is possible, as they cheerfully add their own ideas into the heady mix of solutions.

Introduction of New Words and Concepts through Play and Art
One of the lovely things that happens over time, as children visit and revisit similar themes over the course of the year, is that their play deepens and their language becomes richer. They begin to repeat the questions that they have heard Elizabeth use. Then, more and more often, they try out new ideas and new words with their playmates. For second language learners, this is an especially important way to become more comfortable and more confident using a new language. You get to try it out over time and in a context where you won’t be judged. This art of language practicing is often accompanied by self-talk, where children begin to use

The Doctors sterilize the patient’s back before the allergy scratch test.
new phrases and concepts on their own. You can hear them repeating words to themselves, like different body parts “heart, brain, foot, stomach,” or words that represent the different tools that doctors and nurses use—“stethoscope, band-aid, temperature, thermometer, prescription.”

**Role Playing and Taking Turns**

We learn from research that the prefrontal cortex part of the brain is responsible for decision making, for our working memory, for learning to manage impulse control and for developing one’s attention span. For most young three- to five-year-olds, learning to use the prefrontal cortex too often takes place through daily reminders, rewards and punishments, or even shaming children. Adults tell children to pay attention as they go about their daily tasks, they need to keep their hands to themselves, they need to remember the rules of the classroom or they may need to sit apart from the rest of the class in a “time-out chair”. The Theatrical Journey as developed by Elizabeth Bruce takes a different tack on how to develop the “executive functions” of the brain. Here, in the context of play, children develop their attention spans naturally because they are invested in the task at hand and answering the questions to solve a problem: “What is Teddy’s temperature?”; “What do you see in the Petri dish?”; “What do the bacteria look like?” They learn to manage their impulses and emotions through problem-solving and through taking turns. They develop their working memory by drawing on previous play situations and stories, while also adding their own narratives. This more natural and supportive approach to stimulating the prefrontal cortex of the brain invites positive engagement in learning so that the children have time during the Theatrical Journey to reflect, analyze, plan and manage their feelings of excitement, confusion or even joy in learning.

**Relevance for the Growth and Learning for Each Child**

If you observe or watch a video of a Theatrical Journey in action, you see how Elizabeth is working to develop relationships with the children. You see how she gets the children ready to participate; how she preps them to use their imaginations to enter the journey; how she sets the scene with the various props and tools; how she pays close attention to naming the world that the children are about enter. The children trust that Elizabeth will not only carry them out on the Theatrical Journey, but that she will also bring them back. This process of building relationships is not just another fun aspect of the Journey approach—it is deeply connected to the learning process for children. It is something that is special to the world of learning for children and, unfortunately, too often overlooked by mainstream educational approaches with young children: namely the Journey approach understands that learning grows out of warm and trusting relationships. This is how children develop empathy, and how they learn to understand another person’s perspective—they see it modeled first by a trusting adult and then, securely supported, they can try it out for themselves.

Learning for young children is also rooted in the family and in each child’s culture. By drawing on the children’s family experiences by asking questions such as “what happened when you went to the doctor, Ramón?” Elizabeth helps the children find a new venue to process and revisit something emotional like a visit to the doctor. Now they have a new language to make sense of their experiences and in turn, can take these stories back into their homes, to share with siblings or with their parents.
Leadership and Constructivist Education

Constructivist education asks children to build meaning about the world around them, and the Theatrical Journey achieves this in the best of ways: through role playing, through problem-solving and by inviting the children to use their imaginations as they give shape to each play journey. They learn to use new words relevant for future language learning. They learn to use new concepts, which will come in handy for future math and science learning. Most importantly, they begin to see themselves as leaders, who are taking a big leap out into the world of learning. This confidence will stay with them as they encounter new learning experiences, and with each new challenge, they won’t necessarily remember when they took Teddy’s temperature. What they will remember will be the feeling of confidence in themselves as learners and that by itself is quite a gift.

Eileen Wasow has dedicated over 30 years of her life to the field of early child development. In her role at CentroNía, a bilingual, multicultural community education center located in Washington, DC, she worked with the Center’s Directors to develop and implement high quality programs for children, youth and families. Prior to joining CentroNía, Eileen served as Associate Dean in the Division of Continuing Education at Bank Street College of Education in New York City, where she worked as an instructor in the Graduate School and as a preschool teacher. She is also the author of “Ana’s Day”, a bilingual children’s book based on the work of artisans from Ocumicho in the state of Michoacán, Mexico.

Her knowledge of educational content and organizational management provides a unique combination of skills that lend themselves to institutional excellence.

Eileen obtained her certification as a Family Therapist from the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in 1988 and holds a master’s degree from New York University with a specialization in Early Childhood Education.
Journey of the Sick Teddy Bear

Act 1: Take a Throat Swab

After the Enter the Journey-Space Rituals are complete, the early learners discover that the Teddy Bear is sick. They become doctors and the Teddy Bear becomes their patient. The Teddy Bear Doctors examine the Teddy Bear. They look at her eyes and ears. They listen to the Teddy Bear’s heart. Finally, they look in the Teddy Bear’s throat. They see a swelling in the throat and take a bacteria swab. They put the results of that swab into a Petri dish. They put the Petri dish into the incubation oven. They will have to wait for the results.

Journey of the Sick Teddy Bear—Fill out the Teddy Bear’s chart.
**PROPS & MATERIALS**

**Pre-Set**
- Cell phones

**Pre-Set**
- Plastic table cover
- Doctor lab coats
- Doctor headbands
- Teddy Bears
- Teddy Bear examination tables
  - (geo-mirrors) – optional
- Teddy Bear charts
- Pencils

**Ready to Distribute**
- Stethoscopes
- Thermometers (red craft sticks with temperature markings)
- Magnifying glasses
- Ear/eye scopes (mini-flashlights)
- Tongue depressors
- Petri dishes (empty)
- Blankets (handkerchiefs)
- Incubation oven (tray or bin lid)

**VOCABULARY**

Antibiotic, bacteria, chart, culture, dose, examination table, germs, incubate, incubation oven, laboratory, magnification, magnified, medical report, medicine applicator, microorganism, microscope, patient, Petri dish, prescription, specimen, stethoscope, swab, temperature, thermometer, throat swab

**Entering the Journey-Space Rituals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIONS – DISCOVERING THE PROBLEM</th>
<th>SAMPLE DIALOGUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Journey Guide rings the phone and distributes the cell phones to the early learners. She answers the cell phone.</td>
<td>It’s the Teddy Bear’s family! The Teddy Bear is sick! They need some Teddy Bear Doctors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is anyone here a Teddy Bear Doctor?</td>
<td>Yes! Let’s go to the Teddy Bear Doctor’s office.</td>
</tr>
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