



## Preschool teachers' questioning in sociodramatic play



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### ABSTRACT

This descriptive study used sequential analysis to examine preschool teachers' use of questions as they participated in their children's sociodramatic play and the children's responsiveness to their teachers' questions. Eleven teachers in a Head Start program were videotaped while the teachers interacted with their children in the classrooms' dramatic play center. The analyses indicated that the majority of the teachers used more closed-ended than open-ended questions and that the children were more verbally responsive to open-ended questions than to closed-ended questions in two play modes, pretend- and non-pretend-play modes. In addition, the children responded more frequently to both kinds of questions, open-ended and closed-ended, than to their teachers' non-question comments or prompts. The findings suggest a need for a future study investigating teachers' questions in children's sociodramatic play in various play contexts.

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### 1. Introduction

Teachers' language use in preschool contexts has been a topic of interest to several researchers who have investigated strategies preschool teachers use to enhance children's oral language development (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson, Hofer, Barnes, & Grifenhagen, 2014). Teachers' verbal interactions with their preschoolers in their classrooms have been investigated by several researchers. This research identified conversation as an important tool for promoting preschoolers' oral language development (Bond & Wasik, 2009; Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson, McCabe, Anastopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; Gest, Holland-Coviello, Welsh, Eicher-Catt, & Gill, 2006; Peterson & French, 2008; Snow, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999; Williams, Mastergeorge, & Ontai, 2010). Engaging children in educationally meaningful conversations is many educators' goal (Boyd & Galda, 2011; Hayes & Matusov, 2005), as conversation is considered to be a means of knowledge building and learning (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Questioning is considered to be one of the important strategies that educators use to engage children in conversation (de Rivera, Girolametto, Greenberg, & Weitzman, 2005; Harlen, 1999).

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Research has found that preschool teachers' language use differs across different classroom contexts such as storybook reading, center activities (e.g., blocks, dramatic play, science, and library), and mealtime (Dickinson, 2001; Dickinson et al., 2014; Dickinson, Darrow, & Tinubu, 2008; Gest et al., 2006; Kontos, 1999). This research has focused on the types, quality, and/or quantity of teachers' verbal interactions with the children, typically within a single context. Preschool teachers' questioning has rarely been studied across different contexts.

Sociodramatic play in the dramatic play center is one of the important contexts in preschool classroom that supports children's oral language development (Christie & Enz, 1992; Combs, 2010; Garvey, 1974; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Krizek, 2011; Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, & Palmquist, 2013; Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Smilansky, 1968; Vygotsky, 1967; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Teacher-facilitated sociodramatic play, specifically, has been identified as a key means for supporting children's language and literacy development (Christie & Enz, 1992; Combs, 2010; Enz & Christie, 1993; Gest et al., 2006; Kontos, 1999; Krizek, 2011; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Smilansky, 1968). Teachers' questioning, however, has not been analyzed in sociodramatic play.

In this paper, we report our language analyses of how teachers used questions when they participated in their preschoolers' sociodramatic play. We analyzed question types in teachers' utterances. Then we sought to connect our findings of teachers' question use with teachers' different roles documented in previous studies (Enz & Christie, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

### 1.1. Teachers' participation in sociodramatic play

Teachers' participation in children's sociodramatic play has been studied by several researchers. While there are a number of studies on teachers' roles in children's play in general (Einarsdottir, 1998; Jung, 2013; Kemple, 1996; Kontos, 1999; Saracho, 2002), this review will focus on teachers' roles in sociodramatic play.

*Language facilitating.* Teachers can facilitate children's sociodramatic play by helping children sustain their play and enact the play roles appropriately, particularly using language appropriate to the play's theme (Smilansky, 1968), as adults are considered to be more supportive play partners than are peers in sociodramatic play contexts (Tudge & Rogoff, 1989). Teachers can help the children with play materials and props in order to create appropriate theme-related sociodramatic play (stage manager role), function in a director role or in a co-player role (Enz & Christie, 1993). It is typical for many teachers to control the play theme, play props, and play-role assignments. Often, while engaged with their children in play, the teachers use teacher-like talk instead of pretend talk. Even when the teachers assume the onlooker role, where they monitor the children's play in an unobtrusive way, the teachers use their language to acknowledge what the children are doing and to express appreciation for their play (Enz & Christie, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993). Enz and Christie (1993) found that the stage manager role encourages meta-play conversation (conversation about the play, not in the pretend play mode) between the teachers and their children. In addition, teachers can assume either a play leader role or co-player role (Enz & Christie, 1993). The difference between the co-player role and the play leader role is the degree of control over the course of the play. In the play leader role, teachers indirectly direct and redirect the children's play still using pretend talk. The teachers arrange the play settings and initiate the literacy-related play. Teachers influence the play plots by introducing new elements into the play to facilitate the play as a play leader. In contrast, in the co-player role, teachers take a minimal play role. The co-player role encourages the children's meta- and pretend play conversation, while the play leader role supports improving the quality of the sociodramatic play including detailed characterization and sophisticated plot development. In the director role, children simply repeat some of the teachers' pretend behaviors.

*Language modeling.* Teachers can create language-rich environments within sociodramatic play contexts (Krzek, 2011). Adults use more advanced vocabulary words than they use with their children in non-play situations and extend children's pretend play using pretend talk (Gest et al., 2006). When the teachers function as a player, the teachers participate in the children's play by taking a play character's role (e.g., doctor, patient, and nurse in doctor's office play) and using pretend talk consistent with the play character's role (Enz & Christie, 1993; Roskos & Neuman, 1993). By doing so, the teachers can provide the children with advanced language examples. In addition, adults' pretend talk is often used to provide children with linguistic challenges (Gest et al., 2006; Kontos, 1999).

### 1.2. Teachers' questioning

Some researchers have investigated the impact of teachers' use of open-ended questions on children's language. Whitehurst and his colleagues (1994), for example, studied the effectiveness of dialogic reading, an interactive book reading strategy. In their study, teachers in child care programs and parents were trained to use the dialogic reading strategy. Teachers' use of open-ended questions was encouraged as an important component of the dialogic reading intervention. The researchers found that the dialogic reading strategy supported the children's development of expressive vocabulary. Similarly, Wasik, Bond, and Hindman (2006) studied the effectiveness of training and coaching Head Start teachers to use

more open-ended questions during storybook reading. Like Whitehurst and his colleagues, Wasik and her colleagues (2006) results indicated that the children of the teachers in the intervention group earned higher scores on the receptive and expressive vocabulary measures than their control group peers. Still other researchers have investigated teachers' use of open-ended questions in science activities. For example, Lee, Kinzie, and Whittaker (2012) provided preschool teachers with technology-enhanced professional development and discovered that the children of the teachers in the treatment group who used more open-ended questions during science activities scored higher than the children of the teachers in the control group on the language productivity measures (i.e., lexical diversity and syntactic complexity).

There are a few published research studies that shed light on the research topic that the current study sought to understand, preschool teachers' question use in sociodramatic play. For instance, de Rivera and colleagues (2005) examined the effectiveness of four preschool teachers' different questioning types (e.g., open-ended versus closed-ended and topic-initiating [topic is initiated by the teacher] versus topic-continuing [topic is initiated by children and continued by teacher]) during free play times (not limited to teacher-child interactions in sociodramatic play). They calculated children's response rate and complexity of response to open-ended questions and to closed-ended questions. Their findings indicated that open-ended and topic-continuing questions were related to children's multiword responses.

Another study narrowed the focus to sociodramatic play. Combs (2010) studied the effectiveness of a professional development program that used strategies from the speech-language pathology (SLP) field known to be effective at increasing young children's language skills. The teachers in the experimental group were trained to use three SLP strategies when they interacted with their children in sociodramatic play: target vocabulary words; open-ended questions; and repeating, expanding, and extending children's utterances. Combs' teacher outcome data included the frequency of target vocabulary use, open-ended questions, and expansion or extension responses, and child outcome data included lexical diversity, target vocabulary frequency, and mean length of utterances. Combs demonstrated that through professional development, teachers could significantly increase their use of the open-ended questions and expansion or extension responses. Unfortunately, she discovered that the teachers' use of these SLP strategies resulted in the teachers spending most of the play sessions questioning the children instead of interacting with them in play and failed to encourage the children to talk. Consequently, she concluded that teachers' use of open-ended questions was inappropriate in sociodramatic play contexts.

In sum, researchers have rarely investigated teachers' question use in sociodramatic play. While some researchers have considered the benefits of teachers' use of questions in contexts other than sociodramatic play, others have questioned the appropriateness of teachers' use of questions in sociodramatic play. Much is still unknown concerning how teachers' use of questions in sociodramatic play is related to children's language productivity. For instance, it remains unclear how teachers' questions (open-ended and closed-ended) and question use is related to children's language productivity. The current study sought to investigate the relationship between teachers' questions in sociodramatic play and children's language productivity. In addition, the relationship between teachers' question use and the roles the teachers assumed in sociodramatic play was analyzed.

The current study was guided by following research questions:

1. How do teachers use questions, comments, and prompts during sociodramatic play?

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