

Except for when she had to look after her one-year-old cousin, wash clothes or scrub utensils, 5-year-old Mona was always outside her house, playing. One could easily identify Mona's actions as some form of play, be it by herself or with her other playmates. For someone who generally shied away from having any kind of conversation with me, I saw words flow like water from Mona's mouth whenever she argued and negotiated with her playmates about taking turns with the jump-rope.

Mona built make-believe worlds and transformed from one thing into another, while still retaining a good bit of herself – a giant old tree to an angry fruit vendor to a lazy doobi (buffalo in Bhili language) in the river and so on. She uninhibitedly produced sounds of animals and birds. Her body was free and fluid, moving in whichever way she wanted it to, as opposed to how she might be expected to seat and present herself in a classroom or while she was under the watch of elders and teachers. More than anything, her presence in her own play could be felt.

Learning ought to be a liberating process for children, in the sense that it should make room for everything, from confusion to clarity and all things in between. It is debatable as to whether there is a better vehicle than play to facilitate this sort of learning process. Buzzwords such as activity-based learning, joyful/playful learning, used frequently in the domain of education, all essentially talk about the need to have play at the centre of pedagogy.

We have often come across the idea that children make sense of their world through play and that it helps to bring to the surface, much of their latent potential. Out of the many skills which children acquire naturally through play, I would like to share my thoughts on how the area of language development is linked to imaginative, pretend play in young children. My limited understanding of this was developed further through my interactions with young children during the community-based engagement in the post-lockdown phase of 2020 when the Madhya Pradesh government started a programme aimed at resuming teaching at the

village/community level, while regular schools remained closed. These engagements were carried out in small groups, in village Shahbaspura (where the majority population comprises the Bhil tribe), usually in a common area that was easily accessible to children.

We know that child-led pretend play<sup>1</sup> is believed to be valuable in itself, and that several psychologists, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky among them, and researchers in the domain of early childhood education have discussed at length its contribution to the social, emotional and cognitive development of children. I wanted to explore how imaginative play, when extended to a guided environment with an adult facilitator, could support the development of language competencies. In this piece, I discuss the learnings from my observations of young children engaging in imaginative play.

## **Mona's make-believe world**

One of my favourite memories of Mona is of the day when I walked in on her 'being' a bird, playing by herself. Arms spread out and wide, she pretended to glide through the sky. Then at once, she brought a closed fist to her forehead, as though to suggest that something flew by and hit her. Our little bird was knocked down. She lay on the ground as still as she could be, with her tongue slightly sticking out, adding some comic relief to her act. By now, I had already predicted what would happen in her story – a kind-hearted creature would come and rescue our bird from her plight. But what I witnessed caught me by surprise. Other young children started to join Mona's act, lifting the bird (Mona), carrying her around and cheering in celebration. Her older brother, Baadal, pretended to remove the feathers from the bird and all the children together placed her on a *charpai* (woven bed) and announced that they were going to cook her for lunch. Mona could no longer hold her laughter and burst out giggling, bringing the pretend play to an end. Only much later did she and the other children in the village explain to me how it was very common for the boys of the Bhil community to shoot birds and rabbits with their slings for meat – a cultural practice that

continues among this archer tribe. This instance goes on to show that young children, in their unique ways, using their own body and voice, are always retelling stories from their everyday lives in one form or the other.

It goes without saying that the story they had together woven, held great cultural significance. Moreover, it was not merely an imitation of their reality but an interpretation of it; what they presented was a slice of the life they lived, peppered with imagination.

Observing Mona and her friends create and function in their own imagined world had me thinking about how emotional connection and imaginative involvement during play allows scope for free, uninhibited talk. It further encouraged me to think of ways in which to incorporate such forms of play in order to make language learning more anxiety-free and fun.

### **Guided intervention**

Following this, a guided intervention was planned which aimed at using imaginative/dramatic play to enable children to actively participate in meaningful language experiences. This was tried out with a group of children, mainly *anganwadi* goers and I-III graders, who either had no or very little exposure to schooling.

The first part of the intervention involved describing broadly a situation to the group through conversation and talk and asking the children to behave in a given situation in the way they wanted to. It was ensured that the situations given were familiar and contextually relevant to them, for instance, a rainy day, the jungle, bazaar, evening at the *mela* etc. When the situation of a rainy day was given, it was interesting to see how the many meanings of a single situation were brought out with each child responding to it differently. Some ran and pretended to take shelter under a roof, some used sticks for umbrellas, some reached out their hands as though to embrace the rain, and there were also some who pretended to clear out clogged water from the house. Some children played by themselves, while others figured things out together. Some did their act in silence, whereas others used sounds and dialogues.

After indulging in these play situations for about 15 minutes, we would gather to talk about each person's act. This attempt was to initiate them into the practice of self-reflection, even if it was just as much as a line or two. Over one week, they slowly

warmed up to the practice, sharing more than they did earlier. With some amount of scaffolding through open-ended questions, emphasis on vocabulary, encouragement and appreciation of their narration, children were seen to employ the following while retelling their act, which seems to hold some relevance in the context of language learning:

#### *Use of onomatopoeia*

The way children talked about the sounds they naturally associated with the things around them, such as thunder and rain, and the rustling of leaves created opportunities to discuss these in greater detail. As a group, we discussed how 'normal' rain sounds different from the rain that falls on rooftops or how an angry dog sounds different from an injured dog.

#### *Putting themselves in the shoes of others*

While playing out these situations, they were essentially trying to embody characteristics and features of another person, creature or thing. For instance, the child who played the role of lightning, chased the others around and threatened to *strike* them which was an imaginable and original metaphor of how lightning works and can make one feel.

#### *Narrating their act in a sequence*

The children would sometimes share personal experiences in the form of stories related to their act. The girl, who pretended to drain water from the house during the rainy-day situation, narrated the real incident which her act was based upon, during her sharing.

These observations suggest how imaginative play of this nature can lay the foundation to developing various literary and linguistic skills, such as narrative ability, the use of complex language (talking of the past, future) understanding literary devices (monologues, metaphors, analogies), symbolic representation and interpersonal communication.

### **In summary**

This guided form of imaginative play was later extended to other group activities where one group played out the scene and the other only observed and shared their interpretations of it. It was also tried out as a means to introduce them to new children's books since stories that are experienced through enactment are better retained in memory. Children's responses, narratives, newly learnt vocabulary were all written down and drawn on

charts that could be revisited. As the writings on these charts were easily recognisable and held meaning at a personal level, children (II and III graders) were able to decode these faster.

In conclusion, one could say that while it is important that children have their own worldviews,

it is equally important that they have the means and space to voice their worldviews. Imaginative play, in this context, can act as an appropriate tool to facilitate this, while at the same time, providing adults with a lens with which to understand children.

*\*Names have been changed to protect identities.*

#### **Endnotes**

- i Pretend play, also known as imaginative play or symbolic play, starts in early childhood and involves the child creating make-believe realities and enacting different people, animals, or places. Objects around them are used as symbols to represent their imagined realities.



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