Learning through dramatic play in infancy: A case study in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized the case study approach to explore how infants learn the world through dramatic play. Data were collected over three months in an infant classroom in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center by observation and interviews. Findings showed that all infant teachers were encouraged to learn and reflect on the Reggio Emilia approach (REA). Infant teachers’ of facilitating infants’ in dramatic play depended on their views of infants as eligible learners and “active partners”. Eventually, this case study put a particular emphasis on the Reggio Emilia approach to the development in infancy and considered dramatic play as a powerful tool to facilitate infants’ social, emotional development and other developments as well.

Key words: Interview, observation, Reggio Emilia approach, infancy, dramatic play.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have considered infancy as a significant period because they believed that what children experience, shape and gain at this stage can be influential in their later development throughout their whole lifespan (Freud, 1949; Bagdi and Vacca, 2005; Lamb et al., 2002). In a study conducted by Piaget in 1951, it was shown that infants could improve their cognitive development by interacting with the surroundings around them, and then, form their unique meaning-making process. In another study conducted by Lev Vygotsky (1980), it was also shown that the development of young children should not ignore the “social and cultural” aspects and this is line with Brenfenbrenner (1979), Piaget (1951), and Dewey (1897, 2007)’s perspectives. Thus, it seems that infants learn the world through interactions with the social elements.

Though infants cannot express themselves clearly to make others understand them, they are capable of making sense of the surroundings around them in their unique ways (Han et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2002; Piaget, 1951). Lamb et al. (2002) stressed the importance of the earliest years of children’s experiences as closely aligned with development from birth until the emergence of the first words occurs, and this is in line with Piaget (1951)’s perspectives. Thus, it is necessary to know how to provide qualified child care for infants.

There is a famous approach in early childhood education in both Italy and America which is called “Reggio Emilia approach (REA)”, and this approach focused more on infants and toddlers’ care (Gandini and Edwards, 2001). By exploring the “Reggio Emilia approach,” it is not hard to find out that environment in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child care center is full of freedom, and the classroom plans are child-centered. Young children have their rights to choose what they want to learn even in infancy (Gandini and Edwards, 2001).

By exploring the Reggio Emilia approach (REA), it is reasonable to believe that infants can learn best when the everything can be child-centered (Gandini and Edwards, 2001). Since the study of Piaget (1951) believed that infants
could develop their understandings and learn the world through various kinds of play activities, it is entirely reasonable to explore how infants learn the world through a specific play activity—"dramatic play" which provides children opportunities to learn and explore based on their individual needs and interests. Therefore, this study took a close look at how infants learn the world by observing the infants’ dramatic play time in infant classroom and exploring what the infant teacher and directors’ perspectives and practices of implementing dramatic play in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this case study is informed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Dewey (1897), Gandini and Edwards (2001), and Piaget (1951)’s perspectives. According to Dewey (1897), the true education process almost starts at birth and keeps shaping powers, saturating consciousness, forming habits, training ideas, and arousing feelings and emotions of every individual. Lamb et al. (2002), in a recent study, also tried to convince people to be aware that the significance of the earliest years’ experience of a child is critical and will affect their later development. Thus, the infancy period is a unique period, and education in infancy has a huge effect throughout one person’s lifespan.

A true education does not exist in isolation, and all education should proceed by participating in the social context (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 2007). In a study conducted in 1990, Dewey also indicated that human aspects were considered as important, and exploring the relationship between social elements and education is the center of the study. Dewey’s (1897; 2007) belief of education was supported by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) that the development of a person and the ecological environment in which they live are interconnected deeply. Lamb et al. (2002) emphasized the significant role of adults during infancy period. Thus, exploring all possible environment systems or social elements in a child’s life can help us have a better understanding of how a child develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1992, 1994; Dewey, 1897, 2007).

At present, a substantial number of studies have indicated that children learn and grow through play (Bennett-Armistead, 2009; Charman et al., 2000; Goldberg and Lewis, 1968; Piaget, 1951), and play is vital to cognitive development (Piaget, 1951; Piaget, 1962). Researchers believed that play helps children know themselves, understand the surroundings around them, express their thoughts, and enhance their learning (Christie, 1990; Lester and Russell, 2008). Therefore, in play, what infants do when they follow their ideas, in their way and for their reasons can help them build their mind, improve their creative thinking, and enhance their learning (Lester and Russell, 2008).

"Dramatic play" is considered as a type of play activities in which children can absorb new information, and learn the world by imitating what they imagine and want to express based on their interests. Other researchers provided other definitions of this type of play, such as pretend play, imitative play, symbolic play and imaginative play (Bennett-Armistead, 2009). However, in this study, this play can be defined as "dramatic play" which touches the contents of pretend play, imitative play, symbolic play and imaginative play. The nature of this kind of play activity is in line with Reggio Emilia approach (REA) that infants can learn best when they can choose what they want to learn (Gandini and Edwards, 2001).

As early as 1957, Bost and Martin have indicated that "dramatic play" can be a "bridge between reality and fantasy" for young children. They also believed that it could provide abundant resources and help early childhood educators be equipped with useful skills to better facilitate young children’s development (Dinapoli, 2009; Han et al., 2015; Piaget, 1951; Piaget, 1962). In infant classrooms, many activities can be considered as dramatic play, such as reading a storybook aloud and role-play. When young children do the dramatic play, they get a good opportunity to experience a different life, to know about the real world, and to improve their learning outcomes. In a study conducted by Bennett-Armistead (2009), it was reported that dramatic play provides children rich opportunities to gain understandings of how the world works. Other researchers also indicated that dramatic play allows young children to get a chance to act out their imaginary world by learning from the real world (Bost and Martin, 1957; Dinapoli, 2009).

All these studies highly recommended implementing dramatic play because they believed that it is useful to facilitate the development of children, such as supporting intellectual and language skills.

Research questions

Despite an increasing number of researchers have already proved that dramatic play is considered as a useful strategy to facilitate young children’s growth in many ways, such as developing emotional aptitude, symbolic development, social development, cognitive development, writing/spelling development (Boyle et al., 2009; Drenten et al., 2008; Farver and Wimbarti, 1995; Mendoza and Katz, 2008; Morelock et al, 2003), very few researches have focused on the importance of dramatic play in infancy period. It is reasonable to assume that promoting and
implementing projects to do the dramatic play may not be easy, mostly because of two reasons: a) different infants have various individual interests; b) infants cannot focus on one thing for a long time. Therefore, there is an urgent need to conduct this case study to understand how infants can learn the world better through dramatic play in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What and how did infants do in dramatic play activities?
2. How teachers interact with infants in the dramatic play activities?
3. How infant teachers and directors perceive the dramatic play? And why?
4. Is there any challenging time for implementing the dramatic play?

By exploring the interactions between infants and infant teachers, the perspectives and practices of infant teachers and directors on implementing dramatic play, answers from the research questions provided an in-depth description of how infants learn the world through dramatic play, what the infant teachers and directors’ belief of dramatic play, and how infant teachers and director find ways to facilitate infants’ social and emotional development through dramatic play.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study used a case study format to provide an in-depth description of how infants learn the world through dramatic play in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center and thus to further the understanding of how infant teachers and director’s belief and practice dramatic play. This study chose to use this qualitative research method to explore this topic because qualitative research is based on validity which refers to the meaning that is deduced from the scores rather than the score itself (Messick, 1995) and help researchers gain more in-depth descriptions of a complicated and multilayered context (Creswell, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Messick, 1995; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Unlike the quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on a small sample but gains a deeper understanding of one phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Qualitative research provides ways to dig out any possible clue related to the topic, and it is believed to be a more superior way of collecting the detailed and in-depth data needed, and thus, can absorb rich descriptive information on the participants’ perspectives and practices in this study (Creswell, 2007; Messick, 1995; Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

According to Yin (2003), using case study enables the researcher to have a better understanding of “why” and “how” questions by direct observation of the events and interviews of the participants involved in the setting. Thus, this qualitative case study chose to observe one infant classroom over three months to explore how infants learn and carry out in-depth interview with one infant teacher and the director of the center to understand infant teachers and administrators perspectives and practices of dramatic play.

**Setting and participants**

This qualitative case study used “purposeful sampling” which is popular for selecting the specific case or setting (Patton, 1990). A Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center which is also a university-based setting was selected purposefully. The Reggio Emilia approach (REA) is popular in Italy and is becoming increasingly popular in America. This approach put all emphasis on the importance of young children’s education, especially for infants and toddlers care. Numerous researchers have indicated that the Reggio Emilia approach is child-centered, and the environment of a Reggio Emilia-inspired setting is full of freedom and flexibility (Bond, 2015). Some reasons contributed to the choice of this setting, such as the curriculum for infants is children-oriented, plenty of time for dramatic play, and caring for infants’ based on individual interest and needs. Infant teachers in this setting also took notes about infants’ behaviors related to individual needs and interests, and then, designed the lesson plans based on what they saw, heard, and reflected. All these reasons are supported by the Reggio Emilia approach (REA). Gandini and Edwards (2001) believed that young children’s learning is based on the relationship with other adults and children, and each child is unique (Piaget, 1969). Thus this setting and participants were chosen purposefully.

This university-based center is Reggio Emilia-inspired and includes two infant classrooms, and each room had six infants. Two full-time infant teachers and four student teachers assisted everyday according to the shift timetable in each infant classroom. This study mainly interviewed one head teacher in one infant classroom. All infant teachers attended a meeting which was assigned to introduce the purpose of this study. One infant head teacher Kelly shared inquires toward this topic and would like to participate in this study. Since the purpose of the study is to explore how infants learn the world through dramatic play, a weekly schedule for this selected infant classroom was required. Thus, it was easy to decide the best time for observation based on the schedule. The infants who were able to walk by themselves and what they want to explore and learn based on their interests and needs were observed. There were four infants: Gelin, Kate,
Maya, and Colin. In particular, the unique nature of infancy period promotes the role of adults as a significant part of infants’ development (Lamb et al., 2002; Piaget, 1951). Thus, this study also explored infant teachers and director’s beliefs and practices toward infants’ dramatic play.

Data sources

Various methods were utilized in data collection section. They were interviews, observations, timetable for the selected infant classroom and documents (journals). The observation began on the first Monday after this study got the IRB approval and took place over three months. This study performed the nonparticipant observation, and the selected infant classroom was observed based on the schedule on the timetable. There are three main themes: a) infant-oriented dramatic play; b) dramatic play which was planned by infant teachers; c) infant-teachers’ interaction in dramatic play; d) the administrator’s perspectives of dramatic play. Thus, according to the schedule that infant teacher provided, three days a week were observed; during the morning time from 9:30 to 12:00 and the afternoon time from 1:45 to 4:15. The observation notes were taken through running records, including how infants and infant teachers interacted with each other in dramatic play time. Thereafter, the field notes were stored in the computer with the Microsoft Word format. All data were stored in personal computer with a password.

Creswell (2007) believed that it is essential to ensure the accuracy of findings and interpretations because how the researcher interprets the findings, and the researcher’s personal beliefs or bias will shape the interpretation, thereby affecting the accuracy of the result. Thus, to ensure the accuracy of this study, “triangulation, member checking, and external audit” were used (Creswell, 2007).

During the process of interpretation, triangulation was used to examine sources and find evidence to support each theme. Then, member checking was used to check the interpretations with participants to know if it was interpreted correctly (Creswell, 2007). At last, external audit strategy was used. An outsider of this area was asked to read the work to obtain feedback, and to make sure that others can understand this study. Besides, the data were read and re-read by the researcher to make sure that all themes for this study were obtained.

Each participant was interviewed one time at the end of the observation period. All interview questions were related to participants’ beliefs and practices of dramatic play in infancy. During the interview process, also notes were taken, and what the interviewees said was reflected on. For clarity purpose during the interview process, they were asked to provide a specific example or explain it a little bit more. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions of interviews were written in the Microsoft Word format and stored in the computer with a password.

Data analysis

At the very beginning of data analysis, the researcher organized the Microsoft Words documents according to the time, and each theme was labeled with name and date. For example, the meaning of the infant Maya’s episode EP 13 was Maya’s 13th episode from the first day of observation in data collection period.

Secondly, the researcher read and re-read all the observation field notes, interview transcriptions, and daily reflections. Time was taken to explore how infants learn the world by interacting with infant teachers in dramatic play, and how infant teachers would like to facilitate the development of infants through dramatic play. Since each infant is unique (Piaget, 1951), episodes of these four infants were divided into four different documents.

At last, the researcher used “cross-case analysis” (Merriam, 1998) to check the similar theme among all four infants’ files, and then, another file was created for the similar themes.

FINDINGS

Findings were extracted from the observation field notes, interview episodes, and related documents collected. All findings provided an in-depth description of what and how infants learned through dramatic play and also revealed how infant teachers perceive the role of “dramatic play” in the development in infancy. Answers to the research questions revealed different themes including a) the reason for choosing to do the dramatic play; b) child-centered dramatic play or prepared dramatic play by infant teachers; c) the infant teacher and director’s beliefs and practices on dramatic play; d) the successful or challenging time for implementing dramatic play in the infant classrooms.

Kelly

Kelly is the head teacher in infant classroom 105. She highly believed dramatic play as a prominent tool in her infant classroom because she found out that dramatic play is critical for infants’ social and emotional development based on her experiences with infants in dramatic play activities. She also considered her role as a facilitator in the dramatic play activities.
From Kelly’s point of view, she firmly believed that infants in such young age have their interests and can learn things through all their senses, and she highly respected infants’ ability. She considered dramatic play as a significant tool to support infants’ development in all areas, because “the children can make connections to the real world situation” and “mimic actions as they have seen” during this process. She deemed that dramatic play helps contribute to infants’ social and emotional development:

When they [infants] are just observing other children do it, make connections between their actions within the play to the real-world situation, and mimic those actions as they have seen adults do, and then, helps contribute to their social development. (Interview with Kelly)

The following example provided a rich description of an infant who was mimicking actions as they have seen:

After the nap time in the afternoon, Gelin walked around the room and watched other peers for a while. Emily went to her and asked, “Gelin, what are you doing?” Gelin didn’t answer, and picked up a block. Then, she also found a scarf on the floor. After she found these two things, she went to Emily without saying anything. Emily smiled and asked her, “Hi, Gelin, you found a beautiful scarf, do you want me to help you wear it on?” Gelin nodded her head and smiled, shyly. Then Emily asked, “What do you want to do?” Gelin still did not talk. She smiled again and turned around to a toy cart. She considered the block as a purse, and she pretended to get something from the block, and handled to Emily. Then she picked up something on the floor and put all these things into the toy cart. [EP 28]

Gelin likes using other things like a purse, and pretends to buy things. We shared this with her mom, and mom said they always took her to the markets. (Informal conversation)

We learned the Reggio Emilia approach and we found out that teachers should not always say “no” to young children, however, we did sometimes. So, there are some misunderstandings between what we learned and what we implemented in the classroom. (Informal conversation)

Gelin’s interest was gained from her experiences at home and extended by Emily’s facilitation in the child care center. For Emily, she considered her role as a facilitator and model in the dramatic play, and she believed children could have a better development by adults’ supporting because young children can feel confident about what they are doing, and would like to do more with this activity:

It helps them grow, and emotionally it satisfied them, and makes them happy because they feel confident about what they are doing, and they feel proud about their actions. (Interview with Kelly)

I think it helps boost their confidence and it helps provide more ideas to them on how to express their feelings as well as work with peers on a social level and in an appropriate way. (Interview with Kelly)

Then, Kelly provided an example of what they observed, and how they interacted with the infants. She considered her role as a model and facilitator for infants in the dramatic play activity:

We [infant teachers] are definitely a model, and in fact that they see everyday our daily routines about cleaning, or helping take care of the younger children, they young babies, so with that, we model it, and then, the children want to do it themselves. (Interview with Kelly)

If we [infant teachers] are feeding a younger child, and they [infants] want to help hold that bottle, we will give them the baby doll with a bottle. So they can feel they are completing the same action and helping us feed another child. OR if we [infant teachers] are bouncing on big yoga balls, the children have the smaller balls, and they will start bouncing on those. (Interview with Kelly)

And we [infant teachers] facilitate them and taking a small step further. ……We [infant teachers] use it [dramatic play] when children want to help, and want to be a part of what we [infant teachers] are doing……I think it [dramatic play] comes from observing children and their interests. (Interview with Kelly)

We [infant teachers] are there to facilitate their conversations and actions and teaching them. (Interview with Kelly)

Kelly’s view of dramatic play as a learning opportunity could always be found in her infant classrooms. She constantly supported infants’ dramatic play by verbal suggestions and modeled them by actions. When infants showed they are interested in one kind of dramatic play, Kelly would like to model them, make suggestions, and facilitate them in the dramatic play. The following example
Teacher Emily stood in the center of the classroom after the nap time. Infant Maya held a baby doll and played with it. She wrapped the baby, patted the baby, and then, handed the baby to Kelly and said, “Can you help me hold the baby?” Emily smiled and replied, “Yes, what should I do?” Maya repeated, “Baby, baby, hold!” Maya wandered around the classroom and looked for something particular. Then, Emily asked Maya, “What are you looking for?” Maya answered, “Feed.” Emily kept asking, “What do you want to feed? Milk, or food?” Maya ran to a place suddenly, and she got back with a bottle and a block. Emily kept posting questions, “What do you like to feed your baby?” Maya said, “Bottle.” Emily asked again, “Bottle? Milk?” Maya nodded her head and crouched down to get her baby back from Emily’s arms. Then, Maya fed milk to her baby doll, and then, she talked to the baby, “More?” She replied this question by herself, “All done!” Last, she wrapped the baby with a scarf and wandered around the room with the baby. (EP 13)

During this dramatic play, Emily chose to use what the children experienced in the infant classroom everyday to guide them through questions. Her engagement promoted the dramatic play activity quality and extended their interests.

Later, she particularly explained the reason for performing a dramatic play at that moment by providing a rich description of an example.

......We [infant teachers] noticed that the older children really took an interest in the younger child, want to give that child a bottle, want to help that child to sleep, so we start off, just bringing baby dolls and show them [infants] how to handle a baby safely, gently and carefully. And then introducing the bottles to the baby doll that they could feed the baby doll, and when they want to help even further with that, we took the next step being in blankets, and teaching those children how to swaddle the baby doll and wrap up the baby doll, and carry that baby doll around, and from there, it was turning into diapers. (Interview with Kelly)

Challenges

She also encountered challenges because sometimes she did not know when the children are able yet to mimic and how to introduce the idea of fun games to get the children excited and interested in activities. However, she found ways to deal with these challenges by cooperating with her peers and figured out the infants’ interests to better facilitate their development:

Taking a step by step, and collaborating with my co-workers, my colleagues, and talking about different ideas because you can take it in many different directions. ......Whether they [infants] are interested in the real world situation or they are just interested in baby dolls, ......realize it, or they [infants] might think they are really helping that baby doll. (Interview with Kelly)

But if they [infants] are not interested in that, we will not offer it. (Interview with Kelly)

Though there are challenges to do the dramatic play, she expressed how enjoyable it is to use dramatic play and interact with children in it.

I enjoy doing dramatic play...... I think it helps, lean them into more realistic world......It shows the children are capable and confident because some people who might not know this age group that we work with are capable of mimicking such activities......The younger children are watching us [infant teachers], we don’t even realize it because all of the sudden, they are talking on the phone, or walking a baby doll. (Interview with Kelly)

Above all, she preferred to use dramatic play based on infants’ interests. She would like to find ways to facilitate infants’ learning by modeling and interacting. The most important one is knowing children’s interests by observing them, and all the activities should be child-centered.

Lily

Lily is the director of the selected child development center. Despite being the director, she viewed her role as a teacher and believed that dramatic play could encourage development in many areas: social and emotional development, and cognitive development. Thus, she highly believed that dramatic play is critical in the development in infancy.

It [dramatic play] builds self-confidence, and it’s open-ended and fun. (Interview with Lily)

Everything that we do in the dramatic play builds
the social, emotional skills, they create the positive interactions and sharing, finding empathy for others (Interview with Lily)

Lily believed that infants could learn the world through all their senses in such young age, and dramatic play is a useful method. Since this setting was Reggio Emilia-inspired, teachers were all asked to learn and reflect on the Reggio Emilia approach (REA).

It [dramatic play] is a great way to encourage infant development in all areas by using all of their senses......They can touch, feel, taste the whole new things around them. (Interview with Lily)

I think the dramatic play encourages development in all areas; it increases their social skills, their emotional, well-being, their cognitive developments, and it encourages language, sensory, fine and gross motor skills. I think it just hits every development. (Interview with Lily)

We are Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center, but there are misunderstandings. Teachers all did reflections on Reggio Emilia approach and their instructional skills. (Informal conversation)

Since Lily viewed her role as teacher, a facilitator in the infant classroom, she believed that it is critical that infant teachers should facilitate infants’ development by knowing the children’s interests because she found that infants can get bored easily.

If the kids were bored, they wouldn’t want to play there. (Interview with Lily).

For instance, if the child is very interested in baby dolls, but it was always just trying to feed the baby doll, the teacher might have the play by “offering a diaper” to a child or offer “a blanket.” (Interview with Lily)

A teacher and an adult’s role in the dramatic play is just help the child extend their thoughts, and learn more about whatever it is, the real world. (Interview with Lily)

Challenges

Though she had successful experiences with using dramatic play in the infant classrooms, she also met some challenges. She provided some examples of how infant develop their skills by dramatic play successfully, and she also shared some thoughts about the challenges:

For instance, if they are plying with the scarf, you [infant teachers] might say, “what color is your scarf?” so you are extending their language, adding adjectives to their languages. (Interview with Lily)

For the gross motor, in the infant room, if you put something that is interesting here, and the child is further away, they have to go over to, so they are encouraging movement by putting things at a reasonable place, to grab their attention. This encourages them to move. (Interview with Lily)

For fine motor development, using utensils, if you set a table that is interesting to the children, and they would like to come over and pretend to be eating, so that encourages fine motor development. (Interview with Lily)

I think one challenge of using dramatic play is keeping it fresh, keep the ideas fun, and the stuff in the room are getting old. (Interview with Lily)

If you don’t rotate and challenge, change the materials, or add the items that to extend the play, the kids can get bored. And they don’t want to play with those things any more. So you have to observe their interests. (Interview with Lily)

She found out that knowing the children’s interest is the key. Thus, she believed that the weekly teachers’ meeting is important because all teachers can share their ideas to find out ways that can help children stay engaged in the dramatic play and learn what they are interested in.

The teachers plan on a weekly basis since they are observing the children and interacting with the materials and know what their interests are. And then, they plan to make changes to the dramatic play and the other area of a room to ensure that the children stay engaged with the materials and learn. They have to discuss it. (Interview with Lily)

I mean our [the child development center] philosophy is the Reggio Emilia approach, and so it promotes learning through the child’s interest and teacher’s facilitation using the environment to provide the rich activities for the kids and observations are made on the children’s interests and the dramatic play areas so that the environment can be to ensure learning the
interests. (Interview with Lily)

I think it [dramatic play] is just very open-ended, and it can be changed easily to carry the interests of the children, and its model back to the life experiences, and the children are very engaged. For me, in particular, I always preferred to dress up. (Interview with Lily)

In conclusion, she preferred to use dramatic play because she believed that there are a lot of advantages.

Cross-case analysis

Though infant teacher and the director had different experiences, they all indicated that dramatic play is helpful and facilitate infants’ development in all areas. Her active engagement in the dramatic play extends the infants’ learning and interests. The director Lily also pointed out that the philosophy of this child development center is the Reggio Emilia approach which promotes learning through the child’s interests and teachers’ facilitation. Based on the findings, it is easy to determine that infant teachers Kelly supported infants in the dramatic play activity by modeling, but she did not change anything. Both Kelly and Lily deemed that their role as a facilitator would help infants extend their learning and better support their growth and development.

By performing a cross-case analysis, it is obvious that both Kelly and Lily considered infants’ needs and interests as the priority. With this awareness, they would like to find ways to know individual infant’s needs and interests and better support them in the dramatic play. They all believed that infant teacher meeting was important and collaborating fresh ideas make their setting stand out.

DISCUSSION

Both infant teacher and the director of the chosen child development center considered infants as “capable learners” which is not in line with the traditional view of infants any more. Both infant teachers and the director shared common views on the significance of dramatic play, and believe their role as a “facilitator” in the dramatic play can support children’s development by verbal suggestions and modeling which is in line with the Bronfenbrenner’s theory of the development of a person and the ecological environment in which they live are interconnected deeply.

The content of dramatic play in the infant classroom was controlled by infants’ interests which is in line with Gandini and Edwards (2001)’s theory, which indicated that infants could learn the best when they can choose what they want to learn. Moreover, Piaget (1951) believed that any play activities should be considered as a learning opportunity for children to explore and have fun, not only teach them work skills. Support and modeling from other adults would not change the content of the dramatic play, but enrich the content and extend the time of dramatic play.

The findings also showed that teachers were all asked to learn and reflect on the Reggio Emilia approach (REA). Though there might be a little difference between the learning and real-world implementation, what they did in the infant classroom could still be considered as Reggio Emilia-inspired and made this center stand out from other child care setting. In general, it seems that facilitator’s role in the dramatic play can better help infants develop almost every aspect when they hold a positive attitude towards infants’ learning ability and respect infants’ interests. Eventually, it is reasonable to consider dramatic play as a powerful tool to facilitate infants’ social, emotional development and other developments as well.

LIMITATIONS

Since this case study chose the setting by “purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990), what was explored in this particular setting may be different from other child care setting, such as the teaching philosophy of the center, the infants’ family background and infant teachers’ backgrounds. Thus, the results of this study may not be used in other child care settings. For future research on how infants learn through dramatic play, a larger sample of participants among different child care settings should be investigated. Though this study has limitations, the findings can provide valuable viewpoints to others who are interested in development in infancy.

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