

What Works? Research into Practice

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Supporting Early Literacy Learning Through Play

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Tips for Teaching Literacy Through Play

Play is central to children's learning and needs to take a principal place in our pedagogy and our classroom set-up.

- Make time for play.
- Treat your classroom as a third teacher and set up the classroom for literacy.
- Assess children involved in play through "kidwatching," direct observation, and pedagogical documentation.

We need to regain the wonder and amazement we once had about our students' remarkable literacy abilities. How can educators support and enhance children's literacies learning and use through a play-based approach?

A Research Vignette

A young boy notices three girls playing with blocks.

"They are really telling a story over there. They even went back for days. They are using the materials and the animals to tell a story. You can tell a story different ways."

He glances over and sees another girl.

"She is telling a story about her family. She used materials and labels for the people in her family."

Then he looks over to the stage area.

"You can tell stories by acting it out, too. They are telling Robert Munsch stories. I did that yesterday."

(Excerpt from Research Notes, May 7, 2015)

The children I have worked with are naturally interested in and excited by literacy and are acutely aware of its importance. Children understand that the heart of literacy is communication in its many forms. As literate adults, we often forget that for children literacy is new. Children need to invent their own literacy and be allowed to decide how it works.^{1,2,3} Children acquire oral language without

direct instruction, but when it comes to reading, writing, and math, we somehow think that it needs to be taught only through direct instruction and be rule driven. At the kindergarten level, this type of teaching may limit children's opportunities to communicate, understand the world, and become literate on their own terms and for their own purposes.^{2,3} As illustrated in the opening vignette, for children, literacy is far greater than just reading and writing; it is any method used to communicate and understand the world.

The Research Findings

The Importance of Play

Play is an intrinsic, evolutionary, and synergistic activity,^{4,5} and its value in young children's learning has long been recognized.^{2,4,5,6} Play is already strongly encouraged in the Ontario Early Learning Kindergarten Program⁶ and is seen as essential for kindergarteners. However, constrained by their own perception of curricular expectations, educators may feel pressured to have children reading and writing in ways that look conventional and as a result feel compelled to use direct instruction to teach. And yet, play is essential to the literacy learning of younger students.^{2,4,5} Play is the work of children; children learn best through play.⁵ As they role-play being literate adults, children function at a high level of proximal development.²

Play and Literacy

The link between play and literacy is one of the most researched areas within the field of early literacy. Play supports the use and understanding of symbolic representation and oral language while providing opportunities for children to demonstrate and expand what they know. There is strong consensus that play is powerful for learning and essential for literacy learning.⁴

While observing children's play, I have noticed their ability to turn anything into dramatic play: play in the block centre becomes building "a dog house for the puppies" or creating a maze for "going on a bear hunt"; and math manipulatives become "jewels for the princess" or "guys for the Legos."

We know that oral-language use is closely related to reading and writing and this type of play needs to be seen for what it is: literate behaviour.¹

When children play, they are working "a head taller [than themselves] ... Play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development"² (p. 102). This creates an ideal place for literacy learning. One simple way to maximize literacy learning during play is through the addition of literacy materials to encourage literacy play. Through the inclusion of materials such as clipboards, play dough, calendars, flyers, and other literacy materials throughout the classroom, children's uses and understanding of literacies increase significantly.^{3,7,8,9} These materials allow children to use language in meaningful ways that reflect how they see adults using literacies.

The Educator's Role

For the longest time it was thought that play was the realm of children and that adults should not interfere; we now know that adults can and should be a part of children's play and that adults are just as important as other children when it comes to learning new skills and figuring things out. When educators are respectful and join in their students' play, instead of imposing their understanding of play, the learning that happens can be powerful.^{2,8,9} Educators need to interact with their students by modelling possible ways to use the literacy materials they have introduced and through asking children questions that encourage the use of literacies. However, an educator's role extends beyond engaging students in play; he or she needs to create a classroom that also respects and encourages play.⁵

In order for children to develop in their literacy learning, it is vital that they have opportunities to engage in literate play – something they cannot do if their day is filled with instruction.^{4,5} Teachers need to provide children time to play along with a wide variety of open-ended and literacy-focused materials for use during play.

The Implications for Teaching

What is the point of literacy instruction? Why is it important for children? How we answer these questions will, and should, guide our literacy instruction.

Excessive emphasis on the conventions of print, while often unintentional, limits what is possible and therefore can discourage the amount of reading/writing the children do. If there is one thing that we know about literacy development, it is that the more you read, write, and talk, the better at them you become. We need to remove all roadblocks to children seeing themselves as literate. We need to regain the wonder and amazement we once had about our students' remarkable literacy abilities.⁷ Literacy should be fun, exciting, and powerful in our classrooms, as we create environments where students want to engage with language and are excited by the possibilities.

Make Time for Play

- Set aside large blocks of time in the day for play.
- Support learning through play by extending this time into the largest blocks possible, so children can dig deeply and really explore ideas they are investigating.

Play is social; it encourages language use and experimentation and develops children's oral language skills. The more children play, the more time there is for talk. Thus, play is central to children's learning and needs to take a principal place in our pedagogy and our classroom set-up. The busy hum of a classroom is literacy learning in action.

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Set up the Classroom for Literacy

- Think of the classroom as the third teacher.¹⁰
- Encourage the use of literacies during play.
- Include literacy play centres in the classroom, such as a book corner, writing centre, or a dramatic play centre.⁶ Centres like these have direct benefits for literacy learning and use.
- Add literacy materials to other activity centres to expand the number and variety of opportunities for children to engage in literacy learning. This can be as simple as adding a few books and writing materials themed around the way the students are using specific centres.
- Rely on these materials and trust that children will learn with much less direct instruction and much more support from the resources, their peers, and conversations with their teacher.
- Use the children's areas of interest to drive the transformation of a dramatic play centre into, for example, a flower shop, hospital, or coffee shop. Such transformations offer great opportunities for language play and require research on the part of the children: What types of flowers to sell? How do people behave in these various settings? What types of people go to these places?
- Extend the learning by taking a box of books outside related to what the children are wondering about – along with clipboards, sidewalk chalk, and other material – to support dramatic play and encourage students to engage in literate activities during outdoor play.
- Schedule literacy walks in the community to look for the formal and informal ways people communicate with each other. This encourages students to recognize and read the language that is everywhere.
- Invite parents into your classroom so that they can see the natural connections between literacy and play.
- Don't limit dramatic play to the drama centre. Dramatic play offers opportunities for children to interact using a variety of discourses,⁸ reading, writing, and a variety of communication modes.^{1,2}

Given the opportunity, children can and do transform much of their play into dramatic play; it is up to us to identify and support this literate behaviour. In such settings, literacy is not just used, but loved. Literacy becomes more than just a skill; it is something that our students can use to transform their lives.^{8,9}

Document Play-Based Literacy Learning

- Assess children involved in play through “kidwatching,”³ direct observation, and pedagogical documentation.
- Carefully document students’ learning through anecdotal notes, texts produced by the children, and photographs and video of the students engaging in literate activity and of the resulting artifacts.
- Use these assessments to help differentiate literacy support and instruction on an ongoing basis, make pedagogical decisions, and track student progress throughout the year.

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Final Thoughts

As illustrated in the opening vignette, children use play to invent stories and explore literacies in complex and meaningful ways. The research strongly suggests that play-based literacy instruction is what is best for students’ literacy learning. We need to make literacy fun, exciting, and transformative for students. We need to make time for play so that children can talk and support each other in their literate play. Talk is essential for literacy learning and play is the best way for students to explore, learn, and engage with literacies. In setting up the classroom for literacy learning through play, educators make an essential contribution to each child’s growth as a literacy learner.

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