

Play and Literacy in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Abstract: Recent research shows that play is being replaced in early childhood classrooms by direct instruction, due to academic accountability and other pressures (Lynch, 2015). This manuscript shares some of the many benefits of play in the classroom on young children. Many recent studies have shown that play is a developmentally appropriate way to teach and practice literacy skills with early childhood students, while helping them to become successful emergent readers. This article will examine different ways that play can be used to instruct and reinforce literacy skills with emergent and at-risk readers.

Introduction

In the past decade, there has been a variety of research conducted that shows the benefits of play in the classroom. Play can be beneficial to children in the five developmental domains: physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language. Through play children practice empathy and learn the social skills of taking turns and self-regulation. They are able to explore new materials and construct knowledge, and they also further their verbal skills (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). In addition, play gives children a safe way to experiment with new things (Lynch, 2015).

Although there is a great wealth of research on the benefits of play, there has been a decline in the amount of play in early childhood classrooms (Lynch, 2015). This is partly due to a number of pressures that are put on early childhood educators. There are an increasing number of academic standards and more accountability has been demanded of teachers as a result of government policies (Pyle & DeLuca, 2016). Some administrators, who may not have experience with young children, can be too focused on academic success or testing. There is also an emphasis on meeting reading goals, despite the fact that not all such goals are age appropriate. In addition to these outside pressures, many teachers struggle with balancing academic learning and accountability with developmentally appropriate activities (Pyle et al., 2018). In addition, teachers sometimes feel pressure from parents. For example, some parents believe that their child is not learning if they are not doing pencil and paper work (Lynch, 2015).

Luckily, play has been shown to be both developmentally and age appropriate, while also being a proven tool to teach and reinforce many physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language skills (Pyle et al., 2018). Play can be used in early childhood classrooms in many different ways. Since play has typically encompassed at least thirty percent of a preschoolers' school day (McLeod, Hardy & Kaiser, 2017), time spent in play is important for reinforcing academic skills. While play can be used to support learning in many content areas, this article looks specifically at ways that play and literacy can be integrated and some of the benefits that follow. It discusses a range of strategies for using play to teach and practice literacy skills with emergent and at-risk readers.

Guided Play and Literacy

Early literacy skills are an important element of early childhood classrooms and should be developed with emergent readers. Emergent readers include students in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Literacy in the classroom encompasses components including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension. Emergent readers can develop these skills in many ways, either while taking an active or passive role. However, when a teacher takes a very active role, it often results in the child taking a passive role, and having students take a passive role may result in inattention and slower progress (Weisberg, Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013).

Instead of just having an active teacher, both the teacher and the students should take an active role during literacy instruction and the play activities that follow. Guided play, which is half way between direct instruction and free play, should have learning goals, be child-centered, and allow for the teacher to provide support and scaffolding (Weisberg et al., 2013). Educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky's beliefs support these practices. He believed that children should interact with more knowledgeable people in order to learn (Pyle et al., 2018). Many studies have shown that reading and writing skills can be taught through guided play. This is a developmentally appropriate way to teach literacy skills, is enjoyable for young students, and can produce positive results.

Vocabulary Development

Working with Emergent Readers

Reading books out loud is a common activity in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms. Read alouds were also used as a literacy strategy in many of the studies discussed in this article. The children's books can be either fiction or non-fiction. Following an active learning approach, however, suggests that reading a story to students and simply asking them questions should not be the extent to which books are used in the classroom. Allowing time to play after reading as a way to extend the story has additional benefits (Massey, 2012). This play can be organized to help students practice a number of literacy skills, including vocabulary development.

For example, one way to develop students' pre-reading skills is to expose students to new vocabulary intentionally during a story. While reading high quality literature, the teacher can make connections to students' lives, analyze word meaning, or ask students to make predictions (Massey, 2012). After reading, the teacher can provide play activities that connect to the story and the new vocabulary words.

If the teacher is present during play, he or she can scaffold the language and encourage the use of the new words (Massey, 2012). Wasik and Jacobi-Vessels (2017) argues that "when book reading, which targets specific vocabulary words, is accompanied by opportunities for children to play and use the words in center activities, word learning increases" (p. 772). The teacher should be present during those play opportunities to ask questions that encourage students to use the vocabulary. In this situation, both the teacher and student take an active role.

Working With At-Risk Readers

Children who are at-risk and need a lot of language support at school can be helped by being provided with books that focus on targeted vocabulary words (McLeod et al., 2017). Vocabulary development is a valuable skill to work on because in early childhood it “is strongly predictive of later reading and academic skills” (McLeod et al., 2017, p. 147).

In a study done by McLeod, Hardy, and Kaiser (2017) with at-risk preschoolers, children were read picture books that included focused-on vocabulary words. After listening to the stories read aloud, the children were given a chance to play with toys that went along with the words used in the books. While allowing the children to direct the play, the adult was present to provide prompts and to ask open-ended questions that promoted the use of the new words. After a number of follow up sessions with the same toys, the children used several of the words during play without prompting by the teacher. Their vocabulary had grown. This study shows another way that reading stories and play can be tied together.

Strategies

Play Using Props

Another way to engage children during a read aloud is by using props. The teacher can use puppets or other props while reading, especially with fictional stories. After reading a story, children can be given an opportunity to play with the props to reenact the story, portray characters, sequence events, discuss the story, or retell the story in their own way. Having a teacher present during this play time allows the teacher to model retelling skills or ask prompting questions (Massey, 2012). The teacher should focus on to guiding the children during playtime, rather than directing the play.

Using props during play can help develop a child’s vocabulary and oral language. The children can use both pretend and non-pretend talk. Non-pretend talk includes naming, counting, or labeling objects. It can be used when a child asks another student for a puppet, crown, or magic wand, for example. Pretend talk involves giving an inanimate object thoughts or feelings, or having one object represent another (Massey, 2012). This is done frequently when children play pretend. This opportunity to talk about stories through play is valuable to a child’s future successes because “literacy success relies heavily on early language development that can be developed through play” (Moedt & Holmes, 2018, p. 2).

Allowing children to play with retelling props has useful effects on students’ comprehension, sequencing, and language skills. It also helps them to better remember information about characters and the setting (Moedt & Holmes, 2018). Moedt and Holmes’s study of forty-two kindergarteners split the class into two groups. Both groups of children were read the same story and later asked to draw a picture about the story and retell some information. Half of the students had a chance to play with story props between listening to the book and completing the assessment. The children who had time to play before drawing performed much better on the

assessment than the students who did not have the opportunity to play with retelling props.

Figure 1. Props that can be used to retell a story during play.

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Dramatic Play

Emergent readers also have the opportunity to learn early reading and writing skills through dramatic play. Early childhood classrooms can include a number of pretend settings such as a veterinarian's office, a flower shop, an apple stand, or a restaurant. These play settings allow children to take orders and write them down on a notepad, to reference informational books about animals, to order from menus that include words and pictures, to ask customers to pay for items, or to use other writing tools and resources (Pyle, 2018). These fun settings give many opportunities for literacy development.

To use dramatic play to support literacy, the teacher should be present and active. The teacher should first provide an environment that is print-rich and should also provide materials for the children that help with literacy engagement. This could include providing books that align with current themes, or providing clipboards and pencils, menus with words and pictures, signs, or plastic magnet letters (Pyle et al., 2018). The teacher should also be present to prompt language and conversations. He or she can also encourage self-invented spelling.

Games and Literacy

Students may also benefit from playing games in the classroom that reinforce literacy skills. For example, after teaching a new concept, the teacher can introduce a game that reinforces the concept, such as initial sounds (Cavanaugh, Clemence, Teale, Rule & Montgomery, 2016). Playing a game not only allows for practice of literacy skills, but also for the practice of social skills including turn-taking, teamwork, and rule-following.

Young students can also be given the chance to make up their own literacy games. If students are provided with materials, are supervised, and are encouraged to play their games, they often remain on task, all while having fun. In a study completed by Cavanaugh and colleagues (2016), a group of students were given a chance to create their own literacy game in their classroom, with some guidance from their teacher. The group that created their own game did better on assessments than another group who played a game that had been provided to them. They took owner-

ship of the game and learned more from it as a result. Several of the children even brought their new game and skills into the classroom's free playtime.



Benefits to Oral Language Development

Play does not only support comprehension and vocabulary skills, but also supports a child's language development. Peterson (2017) has shown that "oral communication skills are fundamental to the development of literacy and essential for thinking and learning" (p. 37). Children communicate orally constantly during play. While studying students in a kindergarten and first grade classroom, Peterson identified eighteen ways that children use oral language during play. They ask for help, describe what they are doing, make observations, direct their peers, negotiate, talk to problem solve, as well as many other uses.

Play offers opportunities for children to communicate with each other and also with adults. This especially is true when compared to a classroom where the teacher utilizes direct instruction and one in which the students are passive. Children who have frequent language exchanges with adults have a more developed vocabulary and better language skills. Children who have poor language skills sometimes are rejected by their peers and also tend to have more behavior problems (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2017). Allowing students to be actively playing, talking, and listening in their classroom is a way to help with this skill.

Conclusion

Play should be a part of every early childhood classroom. If it is used properly, it can be beneficial to both teaching and reinforcing early literacy skills. Play allows both the teacher and the students to take an active role. Students participate in developmentally appropriate and engaging activities. The teacher plans and prepares for the playtime, while also providing support and scaffolding.

There are a variety of methods that a teacher can use to support literacy through play. For example, after listening to a story, children can play with props to strengthen their retelling and comprehension skills. Teachers can provide toys to go with stories that introduce new vocabulary to at-risk students. Dramatic play areas can be provided that allow for imagination, discussions, writing, and socialization skills. Students can make up and play games to practice new skills. By utilizing these

developmentally appropriate activities in the early childhood classroom, teachers can support emergent and at-risk readers in developing and strengthening their literacy skills.

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