USING GUIDED PLAY TO ENHANCE CHILDREN'S CONVERSATION, CREATIVITY AND COMPETENCE IN LITERACY

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Play is a significant medium for children's literacy development. As children engage in play activities, they are given opportunities and the motivation to show what they already know about reading and writing systems. Previous literature has shown that a literacy-rich environment increases the number of literacy activities available through play. The effect of materials appears to be enhanced by adult use of appropriate forms of scaffolding to encourage children to integrate literacy props into their play. Moreover, play intervention can facilitate children's literacy development and reveal different ways adults can interact with young children during such activities.

Introduction

Language and literacy are at the core of children's experience and, apparently, children's literacy skills build from their knowledge of spoken language. Competence in language allows young children to communicate with others, enables them to learn and grow, and enriches their lives. As Henniger (2002) indicated, young children engage in language and literacy learning without any direct instruction. While children play and communicate, they are learning intuitively how language works, practicing its many nuances, and gaining insights into the meaning of written language. The purpose of this paper is to expand upon how children's conversation, and their creativity and competence in literacy, can be enhanced through play activities.

Language is a method of oral or written communication with others. In this context, literacy influences language in written form. In other words, literacy is the competence to interpret the prospective message in symbols and use it to communicate with others. As children's early years are generally the sensitive period for language development, adults have to do all they can to assist children in acquiring linguistic competence (e.g., involve children in story-telling activities during bed time). As Henniger (2002) mentioned, one important way for adults to help children develop communicative competence is through informal conversations. For example, adults can show their interest by listening carefully and paying attention to what children are saying and doing, which encourages children's further discussion.

The contribution of play to children's literacy development has been much studied and, as a result, has prompted much research activity over several decades. That play and literacy share common boundaries in developing the minds of young children is an intriguing idea (Roskos & Christie, 2004). In other words, by engaging in joyful play activities, children also build
meaning or understanding, and develop skills closely associated with reading and writing competence. Moreover, Roskos and Christie (2004, p. 95) suggested that strong evidence exists that play: (a) serves literacy by providing settings that promote literacy activity, skills, and strategies; (b) provides a language experience that builds connections between oral and written modes of expression; and (c) provides opportunities to teach and learn literacy.

In the following parts of this article we discuss: (a) views of early literacy, (b) relationships between play and literacy, and (c) literacy and play in curricula.

**Views of Early Literacy**

Literacy is the ability to read and write. The development of literacy directly relates to language development. Although oral language accomplishes much communication, the ability to read and write extends possibilities to transmit and receive information (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001). Since children are the major audience for children's literature, this literature should appeal to their interests, needs, and reading preferences (Hancock, 2000). Basically, children's literature promotes an appreciation for the wonder of language, sparks the imagination, re-lives everyday experiences, and shares lives and information. For example, children's literature captures and shares the wonder of the written word and the appeal of well-chosen language which means, typically, capturing a poetic voice. Young children can celebrate familiar "Mother Goose" characters or identify with everyday experiences through a language-based adventure (Hancock, 2000). Also, young children particularly enjoy books that stimulate their imaginative powers and allow them to venture into the boundaries of the impossible. Following are two views of children's literature from historical and current perspectives.

**Historical View**

During the 20th century, children were considered to be non-readers before they entered school and began formal reading instruction (Searfoss, Readence, & Mallette, 2001). The reading behavior of young children before they entered school, where real reading was thought to begin, had received inadequate attention. In addition, the belief was that getting ready to read, or reading readiness, had its roots in the experiences of children before they came to school.

Basically, even in the 20th century, the reading readiness of young children was established by standardized tests with fixed cut-off scores that assigned young children to formal reading instruction if the scores were above the cut-off scores. For those not scoring high enough, more reading readiness was in order. Critics felt that the readiness factors tested were either not important to successful reading, or could best be developed by beginning reading instruction earlier, not delaying it (Searfoss et al., 2001). In addition, the historical view of reading and reading readiness kept many children from exactly what they needed—reading instruction and practice.

**Current View**

The concepts of reading and reading instruction have undergone profound changes in recent years. The current view of early childhood literacy legitimizes the
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reading and writing young children attempt before they are of school age (Searfoss et al., 2001). For example, young children often acquire books and imitate adults by turning pages and reading aloud. Sometimes the books are upside down and the oral renditions of the stories only loosely relate to the printed versions. This is considered real reading in the minds of young children.

In another aspect, early literacy is a time for young children to explore and discover the world that, in this period of children's literacy development, requires teachers' intervention. Therefore, teachers need to accelerate children's literacy early on, before young children begin to fail at learning reading. Moreover, the current thought on children's literacy is from a socio-cultural perspective, which assumes that learning is a social process. In other words, children's developing literacy occurs in a social setting through processes of scaffolding. Scaffolding is the basis of Vygotsky's notion of Zone of Proximal Development (often abbreviated as ZPD) (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). That is to say, teachers' scaffolding can occur in the course of play in literacy-enriched settings.

Another current view of early childhood literacy that also deserves to be mentioned is Emergent Literacy. Through early exposure to reading and writing, young children learn many things about written language (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2007). For example, they learn that the representations of spoken language occur in consistent ways in written language and that written language includes some predictable elements and conventions. In emergent literacy, the basic idea is that learning to read and write has much in common with oral language development (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2007). This approach promotes the idea that children begin learning about reading and writing in infancy. With appropriate materials and supportive adults, young children construct knowledge about print and gradually become more literate.

Relationships between Play and Literacy

In reviewing the development of childhood literacy, it became clear that many different types of play can effectively stimulate literacy. A complex set of attitudes, expectations, feelings, and behaviors also found in children's play supports literacy (Bowman, 2004). In another aspect, play can offer ideal experiences for children to integrate literacy into their understandings. Opportunities to use tools associated with literacy before starting formal instruction seem to advance children's understanding of the reading and writing processes. Generally, Piaget's and Vygotsky's perspectives provide views of the relationships between play and literacy.

According to the research of Roskos and Christie (2004), research on play and literacy conducted in the late 1970s to early 1980s was primarily grounded in theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, which emphasized the cognitive connections between play and literacy. These views of Piaget and Vygotsky are discussed below.

The Piagetian View

Based on Piaget's theory, a cognitive perspective on play and literacy was explored focusing on mental processes that link play with reading and writing (Roskos
This cognitive link raises the possibility that engaging in make-believe play may develop cognitive skills that facilitate children's learning related to reading and writing. When children first imitate what they see, they say what they remember. This work of memory is at the root of pretend play. Yet, the interface between play and literacy is that children must recall facts and experiences held in memory to make new contextual meanings, which is at the level of representation (Roskos & Christie, 2004).

The Vygotskian View

A sociocultural view of the literacy-play relationship, which developed from Vygotsky's sociocultural development theory, considers the influences of culture and social understandings on children's play and their incorporation into literacy activity (Roskos & Christie, 2000). In this context, Vygotsky emphasized the social interactions between individuals as the sources for building children's literacy knowledge. Thus, play provides opportunities to expose children to literacy concepts and skills. Play also promotes elaboration of literate thinking through more complex social exchanges (Roskos & Christie, 2004). In pretend play, the need for coordinated social actions with others gives rise to opportunities that involve literate ways of thinking as well as the use of literacy knowledge and skills.

Literacy and Play in the Curricula

The literacy-enriched environment in play results in increased amounts of literacy activities during play. The effect of materials appears to be enhanced when adults use appropriate forms of scaffolding to encourage children to integrate literacy props into their play (Einarsdottir, 2000). Moreover, play intervention can facilitate children's literacy development and reveal different ways adults can interact with young children during the activities.

After the review of the selected current theories, the two models/curricula discussed next focus on play intervention in children's literacy development. These are Roskos and Neuman's literacy play mode and storybook-based curricula.

Roskos and Neuman's Literacy Play Model

Roskos and Neuman developed a play intervention model that focuses specifically on literacy (Frost et al., 2001). The Roskos and Neuman literacy play model assumed children usually engage in literacy routines, such as reading and writing actions observed in the real world during social-dramatic play. For example, during make-believe play, children write down a grocery list just as they have seen adults do. As Roskos and Neuman concluded, "The social-dramatic play is an ideal context for children to practice functional uses of print" (Roskos and Neuman, as cited in Frost et al., 2001, p. 317).

As play has an important role within children's learning process, teachers working with this approach need to create social-dramatic play centers in the classroom. In other words, when implementing Roskos and Neuman's literacy play model, teachers are able to enhance literacy play through thoughtful interventions that place an emphasis on adult modeling. Meanwhile, other strategies teachers can use include providing props, modeling children's use, and encouraging peer interaction when they notice that a child is having trouble reading...
letters.

*Storybook-based Curricula*

Storybook-based curricula were originally developed by early interventionists and speech-language pathologists who aimed to treat preschool children enrolled in the Intensive Language Program (Hookham, 2006). These curricula are designed to promote language development and pre-literacy for children ages 2–6 years in settings such as early intervention programs, preschool, kindergarten, and speech-language therapy programs.

One significant characteristic of the storybook-based curricula is its attempt to strike balances between structured and unstructured play so as to maximize learning (Hookham, 2006). As a result, storybook-based curricula are able to develop effectively literacy skills not only with normal children but also with children with special needs. Meanwhile, parent involvement is also encouraged in the storybook-based curricula. Through letters sent home, the child can do “carryover” activities at home with parents to strengthen the new skills.

Storybook-based curricula encourage young children to participate actively in a literacy-rich environment of playful activities that foster cognitive, language, social, and motor development (Linder, 1999). These curricula provide teachers a whole school year of activities that encourage play with spoken language. A typical “storybook-based classroom” requires an activity book, a videotape, and “storybook bags” for teachers, as well as copies of sample lesson plans for each story used (Hookham, 2006). When conducting a storybook-based curriculum, the centers or areas of the classroom (basically literacy centers) include places for reading the story, dramatizing the story, and engaging in sensory and motor play.

**Conclusion**

Supporting literacy learning requires adults to possess an understanding of literacy development, which refers to the importance of print-rich environments in learning to read and write, recognition of the role of play in literacy learning, and the crucial importance of reading to children. Also of equal importance is that children’s books ought to be selected to match children’s interests and developmental abilities. Play is surely a significant medium for children to learn in this regard.

Play that involves literacy allows children to show what they already know about the reading and writing system (Miller, 1998). No doubt play offers children opportunities to practice and refine social, cognitive, and literacy skills since, apparently, a number of characteristics of play provide special motivation and opportunities for young children’s literacy learning (Rowe, 2000). Moreover, pretend play and dramatic play provide specific opportunities for children’s meaningful involvement in literacy development. Pretend play has a crucial role in young children’s literacy development, because children’s use of pretend talk and symbolism relate to literacy. Another aspect, dramatic play, which includes role play and make-believe acts, supports the development of literate, oral language because young children are motivated to generate explicit and elaborated language for their play (Frost et al., 2001).
When the relationships between play and literacy are recapitulated, based on research studies, attention should be paid to adults' roles in literacy-aimed play activities to make a meaningful connection. As teachers make suggestions, ask open-ended questions, and use elaborated language, young children may play at higher levels, stay on task, and solve more problems. Moreover, adult support and participation in play facilitates literacy development by providing materials and interactive feedback. In addition, in the classroom, teachers engage in children's literacy play by observing, encouraging the use of literacy activities, taking leadership roles by introducing specific literacy props, and modeling how children can incorporate literacy activities into their play. In sum, children will prepare for success in the formal reading and writing instruction while being involved in literacy play activities.

References


