ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Writing as Part of Culturally Relevant Play Supports Overall Literacy

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Introduction

Young children's literacy learning is enhanced when formal instruction about phonics and letter formation goes hand-in-hand with opportunities for children to write texts as part of play that reflects local cultures and worldviews. Reflective of children's efforts to communicate with others and accomplish social purposes, texts that are considered to be early writing could include drawings, scribbles and lines, as well as letters, words, phrases and sentences.

Subject

Over a number of decades, research examining young children's writing has been underpinned by a view of writing as a social practice,[1,2] where children create and communicate meaning using the symbols of a culture's written system. As such, learning to write involves more than learning spelling, grammar and punctuation. Children must also develop understandings about cultural expectations for communicating through written texts, such as the characteristics of particular types of texts (e.g., emails to friends have a less formal tone and may use emotional

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symbols such as emojis, that would not be appropriate in letters accompanying a job application).[3,4]

To learn these concepts about written text, children need opportunities to write in authentic, culturally respectful contexts[5] that reflect the local culture and worldview of the places where children live.[6]

Problems

Problems arise from disconnects between research and practice in the teaching of writing in early childhood settings. Two commonly-identified disconnects are as follows:

1. Despite research showing that early writing contributes to foundational knowledge for reading,[7] teachers in early years settings devote far more classroom hours to teaching reading than writing,[8,9] and
2. Approaches to early years writing instruction often emphasize teaching discrete skills and concepts, detaching writing from its meaningfulness in children's and adults' literate lives.[10]

Research Context

Given the problems identified above, it is important for policy makers, teachers and parents to have access to a wide corpus of research that examines culturally relevant teaching for diverse populations of children.

An important body of research, developed over decades, has involved observations of young children creating texts by scribbling, drawing, making marks and letter-like forms, as well as by writing letters and words.[11,12,13] In the process of creating written texts, children test out hypotheses about various aspects of texts, such as:

- how meaning can be communicated symbolically on a page or screen;
- letter-sound relationships;
- how words go together in sentences; and
- the direction that words go on a page.

Broader application of this research in early learning settings would deter educators and parents from the all-too-common practice of asking children to copy words and messages from adult-

created models. Instead, there would be abundant opportunities for children to create their own texts. The act of composing is far more cognitively demanding, requiring children to draw on print knowledge than does the act of copying.[7] When creating their own texts, children must generate content to communicate, drawing on background knowledge about the intended audience's interests and needs as well as what they know about the topic and appropriate words to convey the intended meaning. All of this cognitive activity accompanies their thinking about how many and which sounds are in words that children want to write.[3,4] Children are more motivated to do this thinking and the physical work involved in writing or typing letters if they are writing in authentic contexts, such as play.[14]

Key Research Questions

How does play support young children's writing development? Why should place be given consideration when creating literacy learning experiences for young children?

Recent Research Results

The abstract thought required to read and write is also a requirement of participation in dramatic play.[15,16] In a similar manner to the representation of meaning in printed words, children assign meaning to objects in play (e.g., a block may be designated as a car for a child to move about as if the "car" were driving on a road). In other words, dramatic play and writing involve similar kinds of symbolic thinking. Children are developing the kinds of thinking that are foundational to reading and writing when engaged in dramatic play.

In play settings, children can draw inspiration from a wide range of print they've seen in their environment, such as labels in stores, or road signs, which they can recreate in a sandbox when playing with trucks, for example. Children also expand their vocabulary and ways of putting words together in sentences (syntax) as they encounter language used in context by peers and adults in play.

Play-based writing is very motivational, as children come to see what they can do with print in everyday life. In the process, children develop a strong identity as writers. As others respond to the texts they create in play settings, children develop confidence that they have something worthwhile to communicate. Additionally, children have a reason for improving their spelling, punctuation and grammar when they write texts in play, as they want their readers to be able to make sense of what they write.[17]

Play-based writing also provides contexts for children to write about what they know—what is important to them in their local environments. Young children's writing development is supported when the activities, interactions, texts, and worldviews of their families and communities are valued by being part of the curriculum. Taking up Indigenous worldviews, for example, typically involves highlighting for children the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life. Making these connections is viewed as foundational to children's meaning-making in all areas, including literacy.[18]

Research Gaps

Much of the research on young children's literacy learning is conducted in urban and suburban communities. Results are generalized to rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities without consideration of the ways in which place influences the types of interactions, values, worldviews, and experiences that shape children's identities and their learning.[19]

This research gap is particularly noticeable in research examining culturally relevant practices for Indigenous children. Given that schools have a long history of failing to support Indigenous children's learning and overall well-being, research that takes up local Indigenous worldviews within participating Indigenous communities is needed.[20,21] Researchers must carry out research with humility and with respect for the local cultures, consulting frequently with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and other community members to ensure that local perspectives are reflected in data collection and interpretations of the data.[22]

Conclusions

Dramatic play provides opportunities for children to draw upon knowledge and experience of their local communities to create meaningful texts. Children learn about the social uses of written text in everyday life and test out hypotheses about print through having multiple opportunities to create texts. In addition, children encounter vocabulary used in context that can later be accessed in their writing and reading. In this way, play is an authentic context for young children's overall literacy development.

Views of cultural relevance in literacy teaching should be expanded to include the places where children live. Children are more likely to create literate identities when they feel a strong sense of pride in who they are as children from a particular place.[23,21] Within Indigenous communities, this means taking up Indigenous knowledges, typically about relationships with the land, and

honouring the languages and land-based teachings of the children's communities.[24]

Implications for Parents, Services, and Policy

A starting point for applying the research is for adults to invite children to create texts and then to respond to whatever texts children create to communicate meaning, accepting them as legitimate written texts. By doing this, adults support children's creations of literate identities.[25]

Providing authentic contexts for writing is especially important to support children's understanding of the meaningfulness of print in everyday life. Along with creating types of texts that are used in particular contexts, adults can model writing processes that children can imitate when creating their own texts (e.g., saying words slowly to emphasize sounds that must be represented by letters).

A final implication is to broaden understandings of relevant literacy instruction to include the local cultures and worldviews of places where children live. Policy and literacy teaching in an early learning setting should start with an assumption of heterogeneity across urban, rural and suburban children's and families' ways of being and interacting in their worlds. An important first step in acting on this assumption will be to develop policies and practices after consulting with educators and educational leaders within and beyond the large urban centers that house research and training institutions, and government curriculum development offices.

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