ENCYCLOPEDIA
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[Archived] Play and Early Literacy Development Comments on Christie and Roskos

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Introduction

Play as a means or context in early literacy development has been investigated intensively over the past two decades. Christie and Roskos[1] have examined this work and report that a connection exists between pretend play and literacy learning, and further that social and physical environmental factors can favorably influence both play quality and literacy acquisition during the early years. The co-authors note that knowledge gaps remain and that this area is richly fertile with hypotheses that require further research and theory construction. Moreover, their discussion of implications suggests that this research area enjoys dynamic communication with practice and policy in early development and education.

Research and Conclusions

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The authors suggest that the conceptual roots in the study of play and literacy relationships and the role of the environment can be traced to the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, such as in their writings about early symbolization and scaffolding. Although neither classical theorist attempted to explain how play exactly impacts language and literacy development during the early years, constructs found in their work like mental representations, transformational thinking, reflexive abstraction, and social interaction provide clues to help piece together the play-literacy nexus. “As if” thinking and narrative processes characterize both, suggesting a critical cognitive link between play and literacy. Research cited on setting variables, such as the presence of environmental print, literacy-enhanced props and adult mediation, and their influence on play quality, also can be traced to traditional child development theories (e.g., Piagetian, Vygotskian, Bronfenbrenner).

Christie and Roskos[1] cover many topics including reference to peer influence and a child’s comprehension strategies (e.g., self-checking) on play-literacy behaviours. They cogently and concisely focus on play process and play environment in answering two research questions: (1) the relation of play with early literacy development and (2) the relation of the physical and social environment and play-literacy behaviours. They did not attempt a general review of research on play and early literacy development. For example, they dealt with pretend play and did not consider other forms of play related to language and literacy skills, such as imaginary companion play or block play.[2,3] Widening the lens to include board games, construction/constructive play, receptive play (e.g., use of children’s books), etc. could have been judged impractical due to word count limitation. Also, little basic research on these other forms of play exist that would help in answering their two research questions. Nevertheless, certainly the context, if not the content of these other types of play, creates opportunities for language and literacy behaviours, which enriches or reinforces skills and the motivation or interest in expressing them.

Also, research on the topic has been influenced by theorists other than Piaget and Vygotsky. For example, Bakhtin’s dialogic view of language and the concept of heteroglossia – multiple ways of speaking in a social situation – has been inspirational. Bakhtin’s perspective on self-identity and language, and the socio-cultural framework in general, is seen in a whole track of interpretive or qualitative studies relevant to the play and literacy knowledge base.[4,5] For instance, Keith Sawyer’s research on pretend play with peers and improvisation suggests the value of play for conversational skills and communicational competence.[6] Including such studies in the information base implies a broadened view of early literacy.

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The field needs to expand and deepen theory and research on play and literacy, as suggested by Christie and Roskos.[1] In addition to controlled experiments, use of statistical path models, and longitudinal research, the field needs disciplined inquiry from the socio-cultural perspective, case studies and ethnographies to more fully understand play and literacy across home, school and community settings. Technological innovations make continued demands for multi-media literacy; research needs to be done on this as well as in relation to multicultural identities and bilingual language learners. What to study has become ever more complex and important for education and understanding development.

Implications for Development and Policy

The co-authors conclude that play can enhance literacy and recommend its inclusion in a balanced, networked curriculum. Play should not be a "stand alone" activity. Direct instruction in core early literacy skills is advised to complement play-related strategies, supposedly at least for children at risk for reading and school failure. Christie and Roskos's[1] call for play/literacy integration in early education is shared by others in the field working on a pedagogy of play.[7,8,9] This work develops techniques such as thematic-fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, play worlds, story-telling and story-enactment, improvisation, creative dramatic, art play and music play. Early literacy goals with play pedagogy are incorporated into a more comprehensive set of early education goals. Play pedagogy research seeks to contribute to early education to stop the back and forth pendulum swings between free play and direct instruction and other formal methods. Play pedagogy researchers avoid a narrow view or literacy learning (e.g., decoding) and an exclusive focus on literacy development, opting instead for a whole child approach, which targets as well the child's creativity, imagination, self-discovery, persistence, and positive attitudes and interest in reading.

Alarm is increasingly sounded about the demise of play in early education. The Alliance for Childhood's report Crisis in Kindergarten attests to the extent of the problem.[10] Organizations such as the Society for Research in Child Development and the National Association for the Education of Young Children are working together to present the research evidence that shows how critically important play is during the preschool years.[11] Play/early literacy research informs the design of educational play. But keep in mind that educational play differs from everyday play, with educational play called functional or adult-centric play by David Elkind and everyday or "true" play called experiential or child-centric play.[12] Certainly both kinds of play serve early literacy development.

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And the two are not necessarily oppositional. Play usually is intrinsically motivated and individually considered. But this is not always so. Educational play is relationally motivated and involves the teacher and classmates. Teachers and parents can enter the play worlds of young children easily and with profit when done right. They can harness play to serve literacy learning (and harness literacy learning to promote higher quality play). Still, play's primary purpose is not something else; it is more play and better play in itself.

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