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Play and literacy development: The role of the teacher and classroom design

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Abstract

During the past decade, research has flourished on play and its relationship to children's learning and development (Bergen, 1987). When focusing on preschool age children, play has been seen as a leading influence on their development (Vygotsky, 1991). Recently researchers have begun to link play with literacy development (Hall, 1991). To understand play and literacy better, both terms will need to be carefully defined and their development examined.

PLAY AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF THE

TEACHER AND CLASSROOM DESIGN

A Graduate Project

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In Partial Fulfillment for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Lisa Kay Schmidt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

During the past decade, research has flourished on play and its relationship to children's learning and development (Bergen, 1987). When focusing on preschool age children, play has been seen as a leading influence on their development (Vygotsky, 1991). Recently researchers have begun to link play with literacy development (Hall, 1991). To understand play and literacy better, both terms will need to be carefully defined and their development examined.

Play

Play and the role it takes in children's development has interested educators, psychologists, and philosophers for years (Spodek et al., 1991). The definition of play has eluded researchers because of this term's inherent diversity and complexity. However, progress has been made in identifying factors that differentiate play from other behaviors (Christie, 1991b). Play has been described as children's work. At play they are self-motivated, absorbed by the activity, and challenged by tasks that arise through various play activities. Children gain satisfaction in play, this satisfaction causes them to

investigate new learning discoveries (Weininger, 1979).

In children's play the focus is on the process and not the end product (Sylva et al., 1976). Children derive pleasure from being the manipulator of objects (Piaget, 1951). In play there are no rules unless imposed by the player and they in turn have the control to change the rules at anytime. Children are able to feel mastery over play situations. They set realistic goals for themselves that help to develop feelings of self-worth; therefore, play is an integral part of children's development (Weininger, 1979).

The evolving process of play development occurs over several years. At each level of development, Piaget (1951) stated that the adaptation process is used in children's learning. This process involves both assimilation and accommodation. With the first dissociation between assimilation and accommodation play begins (Piaget, 1951). Piaget (1962) has discussed a level of play that coincides with stages of cognitive development. This level of play occurs during the preoperational stage of cognitive development. This stage is evident in most preschool

and kindergarten children. This level of play is defined as symbolic, dramatic, and pretend play. During this level of play, assimilation is dominant. Children begin to manipulate, change meanings, and personally modify reality. They imitate adults and adult roles while experimenting and using problem solving techniques.

Social development of play also occurs in stages according to Weininger (1979). The advancement through these stages of play is not age dependent; however, stages are sequential. Experiences in each of the stages allows for the progression to the next.

Young children, up to age five or six, engage in solitary play . During this stage children play in an egocentric fashion to meet their own needs. Following this first stage, play evolves to onlooker play. Here children observe others at play but do not join in; this is evident in preschool age children. This play expands into parallel play, where children sit side by side playing without any interaction. Parallel play often changes quickly to associative play. At this stage children begin to interact, but each child maintains her/his individual goals in play (Weininger, 1979).

In Weininger's (1979) highest level of play, cooperative play, children exchange ideas and actively participate in a group. Cooperative play may appear in preschool age children, but play will fluctuate between associative and cooperative play depending upon the player's mood.

Literacy

Traditionalists have defined literacy as the ability to read and write words in isolation or in simple stories (Pellegrini & Dresdan, 1991). A broader view, however, is that of the sociolinguistic perspective. According to this broader view, literacy has the following four aspects: (a) knowledge that written language communicates meanings, (b) recognition that written language has different functions, (c) interpretations of written and read symbols, and (d) involvement in all forms of communication (e.g. oral language, writing, reading, dance, music, play). From this perspective young children are thought to be knowledgeable about literacy before formal instruction (McGee & Richgels, 1990).

It is believed all preschool children are able to read and write at their own level (Ferreiro, 1990).

In accordance to this belief, Ferreiro (1990) outlined three main developmentally ordered levels of literacy competence. In level one, children search for criteria to differentiate between writing and drawing. The difference lies in line organization. In drawing, lines outline the object; whereas in writing, lines have nothing to do with the object's shape.

During level two, children look for graphic variations to support words having different meanings. They believe the length of a word is related to object size (Ferreiro, 1990).

Ferreiro (1990) divided the third level into the following sublevels- syllabic, syllabic-alphabetic, and alphabetic. Children's progression is on a continuum of these sublevels. The continuum begins with children connecting the number of sounds heard in words, and ends when they correctly use the alphabetic letters to match sounds.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this review is to give an overview of how free play and literacy are used with preschool age children. Also, this study will investigate the teacher's role in enhancing literacy development during free play. Furthermore, appropriate classroom

design that encourages the development of literate behaviors will be defined.

The purposes of this study will be achieved by answering the following questions:

1. What types of literacy experiences are developmentally appropriate for 4- and 5- year-old children?

2. Which play centers and print materials enrich literacy development?

3. What classroom designs will best promote literate behaviors in preschool age children?

4. Should the teacher intervene in free play of preschool children?

5. What types of intervention by the teacher assists literacy development?

Need for the Study

Goodman (1990) has observed that " In the past 20 years researchers and scholars...have concluded that children come to know literacy through their daily and mundane experiences in their particular social, cultural, religious, economic, linguistic, and literate societies" (p. 115). Hall (1991) on the other hand, recognized that "play provides a context within which emergence of literacy can be manifested

and explored" (p. 20). This paper will help educators
realize the relationship between literacy and play.
It will also outline appropriate approaches for
teacher intervention and guidelines for the design of
various play environments that will help educators to
encourage literate behaviors in preschool students.

Definitions

assimilation: the act of taking into the mind and
throughly understanding

accommodation: the act of making fit, suitable, bring
to accord or aggreement, or adapt to oneself

dissociation: the act of separation from union with
another or disconnecting

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Play and Literacy

Researchers have recognized play as an ideal medium for cognitive development (Christie, 1991a; Hall, 1991; Morrow & Rand, 1991b; Pellegrini & Dresdan, 1991). Hall (1991) identified play as a basic cognitive activity that prepares children for literacy. Play offers children a context in which to use literacy materials at their individual level and in a developmentally appropriate way that meets children's specific needs (Bredekamp, 1990). Bowman (1990) viewed play as "a window on a child's understanding of the world" (p. 105). Through play children demonstrate what they know about literacy. Play experiences allow individuals to increase their literate knowledge base (Hall, 1991; Spodek & Saracho, 1987).

During play the language children use leads to the type of language they apply in reading and writing (Hall, 1991; Levy, 1984). Children begin by playing with objects and use symbols to express themselves. They gradually develop an understanding of written symbols (Vygotsky, 1978). Morrow and Rand (1991a)

stated, "Play allows children active involvement essential for practice, elaboration, and extending of emerging literacy abilities" (p. 146). Researchers have agreed dramatic play is the best play medium for development of literacy (Christie, 1991a; Hall, 1991; Schrader, 1991).

Dramatic play has been the focus of recent play research (Christie, 1991a; Morrow & Rand, 1991b; Schrader, 1990; Schrader, 1991). During Piaget's (1962) preoperational stage of development, dramatic play is prevalent. Other terms used to describe this play level include sociodramatic, symbolic, pretend, fantasy, and make-believe play (Christie, 1991b). The term dramatic play is the most encompassing and will be used in this review. Christie (1991b) defines dramatic play as "... the type of play in which children use make believe transformations and role-playing to act out scripts and stories" (p. 27).

Dramatic play gives children a rich opportunity to explore literacy concepts and develop literacy skills. Language abilities, story comprehension, and early writing competencies are developed in this meaningful context (Morrow & Rand, 1991b). By incorporating reading and writing into dramatic play

episodes, children increase their use of print
materials (Morrow & Rand, 1991b; Schrader, 1991).

Dramatic play also encourages children to use
associative and cooperative levels of social play
(Weininger, 1979). During these two levels of social
play children develop basic language and literacy
skills that are meaningful to them (Levy, 1984). Play
activities are considered developmentally appropriate
when they are child initiated, relevant to his or her
experiences and age, and correlate with the child's
levels of development (Bredekamp, 1990). This
describes dramatic play of 4- and 5-year olds.

Classroom Design

Children are naturally curious about print
materials (Hall, 1991). Christie (1991b) noted "Early
childhood educators have long been aware that
children's play is affected by available materials"
(p. 35). Yet educators typically spend little time
and consideration on the planning of classroom design
and props (Morrow & Rand 1991b).

Classroom design and the materials incorporated
into play centers need to be carefully planned in
early childhood programs (Christie, 1991a; Morrow &
Rand, 1989; Morrow & Rand 1990; Neuman & Roskos,

1991b; Ramsey & Reid, 1988; Vukelich, 1990).

Children's prior knowledge of print materials and their daily real-life experiences are the basis of decisions made concerning physical arrangement and selection of materials (Morrow & Rand, 1991b; Neuman & Roskos, 1990b). Parents of preschoolers can supply knowledge of children's background experiences. Children's prior experiences personalize play and give it a realistic base (Vukelich, 1991). Room arrangement, realism of props, and the type of print related materials used affect the children's socialization and cognitive growth (Christie, 1991a). Play centers with familiar realistic print materials encourage literacy activities (Neuman & Roskos, 1990a).

Preschool classrooms can be created to encourage literate behaviors. When considering room arrangement and props to be included, the following criteria set by Neuman and Roskos (1989) should be considered. The items need to be (a) familiar to children from their own environment, (b) understandable to children of their use, and (c) choosen naturally by children to play with.

Arrangement of play centers should be defined

with clear boundaries (Christie, 1991b; Ramsey & Reid,
1988; Neuman & Roskos, 1990b). Centers that have
partitions control noise levels, distractions, and
disruptions better than open spaces, (Ramsey & Reid,
1988), however, play areas need to be spacious. One
center should comfortably accommodate four to five
children (Christie, 1991b). Centers with correlating
themes should be set adjacent to each other to
encourage interaction and movement between centers
(Christie, 1991b). Dramatic theme centers, library
areas, and construction centers (Allgeier, 1991) best
lend themselves to literate behaviors when print
materials have been incorporated (Christie, 1991b;
Morrow & Rand, 1991a).

Figure 1, found in the appendix, is an example of
a suggested classroom design.

Housekeeping and changeable theme centers give
children opportunities to explore and interact in
realistic role-play activities. The infusion of print
materials increases the frequency of realistic role-
play and enhances the play theme (Christie, 1991b).
Play settings that contain theme-related, functional
print materials should derive meaning from either
children's real life experiences or school

incorporated encounters such as field trips and guest speakers (Schrader, 1990; Vukelich, 1990). Centers that represent common real-life literacy themes will encourage children's own creative use of print materials (Neuman & Roskos, 1990b). Examples of real life themes include kitchen/housekeeping, office, post office, library, store, restaurant, veterinarian office, and service station (Morrow, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991b; Neuman & Roskos, 1989).

Figure 2, found in the appendix, is a list of dramatic themes and literacy props.

Library corners also need to be designed to stimulate interest and active involvement with books. Well stocked library centers encourage more interaction with reading materials (Christie, 1991a; Morrow & Rand, 1991b). Library centers with comfortable and intriguing reading areas invite children to engage in literate behaviors (Morrow & Rand, 1991b).

Allgeier (1991) found literate behaviors increased in block construction areas when print materials were also included. Children interacted with written forms of literacy to convey meaning during play episodes.

Although, classroom design and print materials can promote literate behaviors, this alone does not ensure development of literacy. Teacher guided intervention is needed to help children incorporate print materials into the play theme (Morrow & Rand, 1991a; Schrader, 1991). As Morrow and Rand (1991b) stated, "the teacher is extremely important in promoting optimal literacy activities during play" (p. 401).

Teacher's Role

The teacher is a critical aspect of the play curriculum. Teachers become both facilitators and participants to promote play (Saracho, 1991). Through play experiences teachers can observe each child's level of literacy development (Roskos, 1988). After observations are made, the adult can then intervene and focus on the child's own process of learning (Schrader, 1991). When children are required to accommodate new information, appropriate teacher intervention can enhance their play episodes (Williamson & Silvern, 1991). Through interaction they can encourage children to go beyond their present level of development (Schrader, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, activities done by children with assistance

today will be those independent activities of tomorrow
(Vygotsky, 1978).

Teacher intervention can foster play development
but the adult needs to be cautious not to disrupt play
(Ramsey & Reid, 1988). During play, literacy
activities need to be child initiated and directed
(Schnickedanz et al., 1990). When adult involvement
is poorly timed or too aggressive it interrupts
childrens' play (Christie, 1991b). When youngsters
lose control of the play activity or it becomes
unenjoyable for them, it ceases to be play and is no
longer productive (Hall, 1991); however, well planned
intervention can be rewarding for both children and
their teachers (Christie, 1991b).

Teachers initiate children's play when they
design play centers that attract student participation
and when they allow children adequate time to develop
play themes (Saracho, 1991). Christie (1991b) noted
the ideal play situation allows at least 30 minutes of
free play per day.

To promote literacy during play teachers have
used either an extending or redirecting style of
intervention (Tamburrini, 1986). To extend play the
teacher identifies the children's goal and intercedes

only when it enhances their learning (Saracho, 1991).

During the extending style teachers (a) introduce new

materials, (b) explain or model the use of print

materials, or (c) participate in play by taking on a

role or questioning children. Morrow & Rand (1991a)

suggest teachers invite children to help set up new

theme centers and take time to explain the props.

Teachers should demonstrate their appropriate uses.

Vukelich (1991) noted that children spend more time in

dramatic play when adults model appropriate uses of

print materials. When extending children's play,

literate behaviors increase; the main goal is,

however, to leave control of the play in the hands of

the children (Ramsey & Reid, 1988; Saracho, 1991).

In the redirecting style, the teacher tries to

change the focus of the children's play to fit

curricular needs. The adult leads children's play

into other kinds of non play activities (Saracho,

1991). Redirecting disrupts the play episode and does

not focus on the children's learning processes

(Schrader, 1990).

Schrader (1991) noted that the extending style of

interaction was more effective than the redirecting

style of interaction. During redirecting, children's

play, goals were interrupted and play was at risk of becoming non-play. Extending interaction style, on the other hand, was truer to the children's focus and level of development. Therefore, teachers must be aware of their own style of intervention and how it affects children's literacy development during play (Saracho, 1991).

CHAPTER III

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

<u>Summary</u>

The review demonstrates how literacy and free play are used with preschool age children. The review also reveals ways in which teachers can enhance development of literacy through adult intervention and appropriate classroom design.

The first question addressed in this review dealt with types of developmentally appropriate literacy experiences for 4- and 5-year old children. Dramatic play is found to be the most natural setting in which children can experiment with print materials at their own level of literacy development. Children initiate the practice and manipulation of the literate materials which have personal meaning to them.

The second question addressed in this review identified play centers and print materials used to enrich literacy development. Dramatic theme centers which draw on the children's own knowledge bases are found to encourage frequent and sustained literate behaviors. Print materials which are incorporated into play settings familiar to children should have realistic purposes that are related to the play theme.

The classroom should also contain a well-stocked, comfortable library center and a block area supplied with print materials.

The third question focuses on which classroom design will best promote literate behavior in 4- and 5-year olds. Sharply-defined spacious play centers with correlating themes located adjacent to one another were found to encourage realistic role play.

The fourth and fifth questions deal with the role of the teacher during free play and the type of intervention by the teacher that would assist literacy development. The teacher must facilitate the play through classroom design, observation, adequate time allotment, modeling of literate behaviors, and participation in role play without disrupting or controlling the play episodes. The teacher must also be sensitive to the children's purpose and use extending intervention techniques to enhance the children's own goal in play.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Natural literacy development occurs during 4- and 5-year olds' free play.

2. Print materials integrated into play centers increase children's literate behaviors.

3. Well-defined, spacious play centers enhance the quality of children's play.

4. Dramatic theme centers, library areas, and construction centers that include print materials should be established as a part of the preschool curriculum and classroom design.

5. Teachers play an important role in extending children's literacy through subtle participation and introduction of new print materials.

Recommendations

Early childhood educators need to become aware of the role dramatic play has in the development of literacy. Teachers of 4- and 5-year olds need to prepare classroom environments that will encourage realistic, literate behaviors through free play. The development of dramatic theme centers and props should be based on students' prior knowledge and real life experiences. Teachers also need to be educated to observe children's play and intervene to enhance literacy development. When early childhood educators understand the inherent role of play in children's development, they will have a powerful medium for the

discovery and exploration of literacy.

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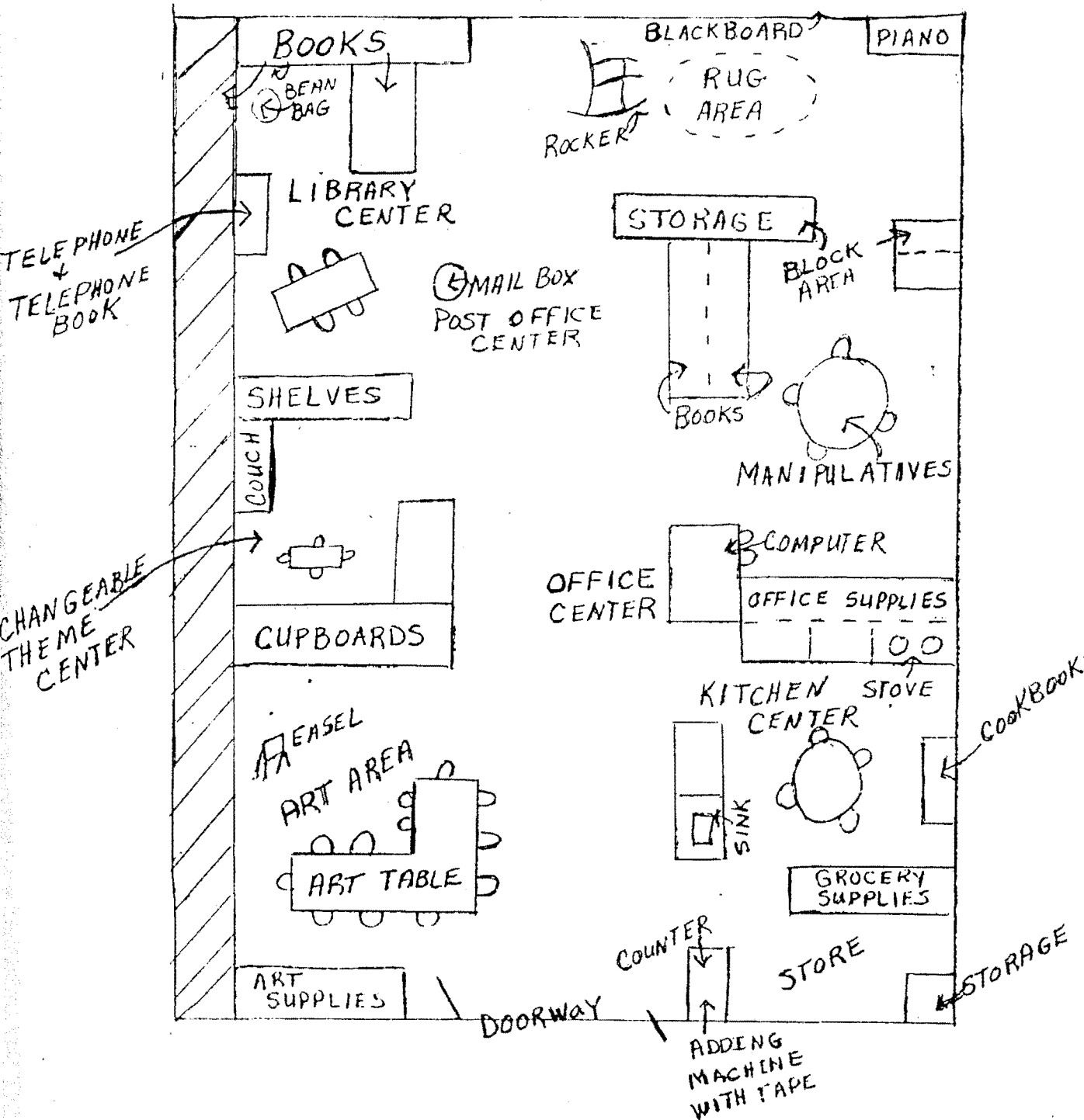# Appendix

Figure 1

Classroom Design

Figure 2

Literacy Props to Enhance Play Centers

Play Center	Literacy Props
Kitchen	Books to read to dolls/animals
	Telephone books
	A real telephone book
	Emergency number decals
	Cookbook
	Blank recipe cards
	Personal stationery
	Food coupons
	Grocery store ads
	Play money
	Empty grocery containers
	Small message board
	Calendars
	Notepads of assorted
	Pens, pencils, markers
Office	Calendars
	Appointment books
	Message pads
	Open/close signs

Books, pamplets,
magazines

File folders

In/out trays

Index cards

Business cards

Assorted forms

Play money

Ledger sheets

Keyboard

Clipboard

Post-its/address labels

Pens, pencils, markers

Post office   Envelopes of various
                                sizes

                                Assorted forms

                                Stationery

                                Pens, pencils, markers

                                Stickers, stars, stamps,

                                Stamp pads

                                Post office mailbox

                                Tote bag for mail

                                Computer address labels

                                Calendars

Small drawer tray

Posters/signs about mailing

Library
                                            Library return cards

Stamps for marking books

Variety of children's books

Bookmarks

Pens, pencils, markers

Paper of assorted sizes

Sign-in/sign-out sheet

Stickers

ABC index cards

Telephone

Telephone book

Calendars

Posters of children's books

File folders