

## Literacy Activities in a Play Environment

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The literacy activities in a kindergarten play environment were examined. Five-year-old children in three kindergarten classrooms were interviewed about their concepts about reading and their activities were videotaped during their free choice play. The interviews and videotaped observations focused on literacy activities that promote reading and writing during the children's play. The teachers in the kindergarten classrooms provided a literate environment including writing centers, writing activities, and print labels. A qualitative analysis indicated that the children viewed reading as writing because they could read their own marks on the page. The observations showed a wide range of language or literacy components in activities, some directly taught by the teacher, others the result of careful planning and provisioning.

The concept of emergent literacy has provided the field with a different view of initial reading instruction for young children. A reading program for young children can develop literacy-oriented behaviors informally prior to the elementary grades which can facilitate initial reading instruction (Saracho, 1987). Research in language and literacy acquisition over the past two decades has suggested that such initial reading instruction should be offered in a natural context and should reflect the children's own language. The focus should be on the implicit practice of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and knowing. Process, product, and content are fused and the purposeful use of language is stressed over skill acquisition (Saracho, 1993).

Helping young children develop a rich vocabulary facilitates the process by which children learn to read. Time needs to be provided to these children in early childhood setting to engage in language activities, including reading during each school day. This time can

be used to enrich the children's vocabulary and to help them grasp the other significant elements of the written language.

There needs to be a core approach presented whereby children focus on the communication of written language, building upon their knowledge of the oral language. Children learn reading and writing in a meaningful context (Saracho, 1993). Literacy activities need to be embedded in the regular activities of the preprimary class. As a result of these activities, young children can learn about the purposes and ways to communicate through writing. Three- to five-year-old children are able to recognize that individuals write for a purpose. This knowledge allows them to express their ideas in some written form (Clay, 1991). Skills in writing help writers to determine the difference between print and nonprint, to learn specific writing features, to learn to write, to know and to understand the letters of the alphabet, and to learn the conventions of writing, such as left to right progression, top to bottom, upper- and lower-case letters, and punctuation (Fox & Saracho, 1990).

Children test their ideas in writing and reading by: (1) inventing and decorating letters, symbols, and words; (2) mixing drawing and writing; (3) inventing messages in various forms and shapes; and (4) continuing to use invented writing after they have begun to master conventional forms. Specifically, children experiment with writing to construct and refine their knowledge about written language. It is this experimentation that makes reading possible. In Marie Clay's (1979) words, "The child who engages in creative writing is manipulating the units of written language—letters, words, sentence types—and is likely to be gaining some awareness of how these can be combined to convey unspoken message" (pp. 142~143).

Young children learn the features and forms of written language through their exploration of print as a cultural object (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Studies on how children learn the features and forms of written language have contributed substantially to a growing understanding of the early phases of literacy development. The context or situation-of-use of written language serves to make encounters with print meaningful (Goodman, 1986; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Children need experiences with the written language to understand the functions of written language. Jacob (1984) described emerging conceptions of functions of written language in the play of Puerto Rican kindergarten children. For example, children pretended to construct and use shopping lists, buy goods with food stamps, and get prescriptions from a doctor. Similary, Roskors (1988) reported