The Importance of Utilizing Play to Promote Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Environments

Terisa Scrabeck
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Terisa Scrabeck

Terisa Scrabeck received her Elementary Education Master of Science degree in the Spring of 2020 from Mankato State University. Terisa has 14 years of experience working in the educational field. She worked as a Kindergarten Title I Paraprofessional for 7 years at Fillmore Central Elementary School where she decided to pursue her teaching degree in Elementary Education. Once she received her teaching degree, she taught 2 years in Title I and has taught the remaining 5 years in Kindergarten at Fillmore Central Elementary School. Terisa loves working in the education field and working with students at the lower grade levels.

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Abstract

There is no question that play is important in the lives of children at home and at school. Unfortunately, the amount of play in early childhood classrooms continues to diminish. Teachers are under pressure to meet high academic expectations so they are spending more time on instruction and testing instead of play. Children enjoy play and it improves many different skills, like literacy. Children develop knowledge of literacy as they engage with print. Therefore, literacy can be developed through different types of play, including well-defined enriched literacy play settings and adult role models. The importance of utilizing play to promote emergent literacy is described. Techniques and that can promote early literacy in early childhood classroom are provided.

*Keywords:* literacy, play, early childhood education
There have been drastic changes in early childhood education over the last few decades. As a result, traditional early childhood classrooms that included play, discovery, art, music, and developing social skills are becoming a thing of the past (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play is being replaced and is now thought of as low importance or even a waste of time (Nicolopolou, 2010). These changes have occurred because many early childhood educators are under great pressure to meet expectations that may be inappropriate for young children, which can result in environments that are not acceptable for their age levels (Miller & Almon, 2009). Moreover, the academic standards that are required for early childhood classrooms are developmentally inappropriate as more time is spent on instruction and testing in literature and math (Nicolopolou, 2010).

Early childhood classrooms should be a place where young children can learn through play (Miller & Almon, 2009). When kindergarten was initially created, it was to be a playful place for students to develop, learn, and grow (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). However, kindergarten is now often five days a week all day long. Kindergarten classrooms are devoting four to six times more time in literacy and math than before with less time in play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Play can improve social skills, self-regulation skills, and mathematics (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Play has also shown to improve oral language development, vocabulary development, comprehension, reading proficiency along with connections to semantic organization and re-telling skills (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Not only does play improve the above skills, play has been found to positively aid in children’s progress and growth across the five developmental domains that are: physical, language, social, emotional and cognitive (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). The five
developmental domains influenced by play includes growth in fine and gross motor skills, verbal skills which leads to an increase in vocabulary and language comprehension, social and emotional abilities such as empathy and cooperation, and problem solving and different types of thinking (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

With all of the skills that children can learn from play, it is important to remember that children start learning literacy at a young age. This is a time when children are curious and attempt to make sense of the world through the use of play and many different literacy skills begin to develop (Neuman, 2019). When play is included in early childhood curriculums, it can help develop a sense of identity along with providing children an understanding of their world (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Children can also learn to make meaning through pretend play, drawing, and conversations with each other. Play aids children to interpret and make sense of reading and writing even before learning the skills that are connected with print (Neuman, 2019).

Play can offer children a valuable background for learning crucial literacy concepts and skills (Christie & Roskos, 2013). Emergent and early literacy skills can start developing through play at school (Roskos and Neuman, 1993). For example, literacy goals can be achieved such as making predictions about writing and reading and then including the literacy information to further learning (Roskos & Christie, 2002). Play can also provide experiences in which students are in involved in social routines and skills that can be connected to reading and writing (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). This is important since children discover early in life written language that is developed through both social and cultural worlds (Neuman & Roskos, 1997).
While all of the skills that children can learn in the early childhood years are important, so is the setting and materials included in the classroom. The setting and materials included in the classroom are important as they expose children to different literacy skills as they play. The range of literacy opportunities in play environments and the design of the play environment are both equally important to help encourage literacy learning in the classroom (Neuman and Roskos, 1992). Enriched environments and providing literacy tools are beneficial during play in the classroom (Neuman and Roskos, 1991). There are different ways to include all of the elements needed during play to help students with literacy (Neuman and Roskos, 1992; Neuman and Roskos, 1991; Morrow, 1990; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2002; Neuman, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to encourage educators to include play in early childhood classrooms to help promote literacy and to describe ways that they might do so.

Play in Early Childhood Classrooms

Throughout the years, there have been theorists who have discussed the relationship between play and literacy. The Piagetian View, from Jean Piaget, explains the mental processes involved in social pretend play that helps develop cognitive skills such as symbolic representation and emerging literacy skills (Christie & Roskos, 2013). The skills that can develop from pretend play include learning related to reading and writing (Tsao, 2008). Piagetian Theory specifies that children will practice and decipher symbols and develop mental resources through play that will aid in written language and comprehension (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Piaget asserted that pretend play is not a “leading activity” but a “following activity” that allows students to practice and combine
any literacy skills that they have already learned in the classroom (Roskos & Christie, 2013).

The Vygotskian View, from Lee S. Vygotsky, is undergirded by the belief that social interactions between adults and peers can provide opportunities for literacy practices during play (Tsao, 2008). Vygotsky maintained that children need scaffolding from an adult to extend higher levels of learning but when children are active during play, they can develop their own self-help abilities (Roskos & Christie, 2011). He contended that pretend play is a “leading activity” not a “following activity”, that creates a zone of proximal development in which aids in developmental change. This developmental change is fundamental to literacy as it helps in the progress for students to learn how to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2013).

**Play Supports Literacy Development**

Educators have been wrestling with the questions of whether play based learning can help promote emergent literacy for many decades (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Whether play based learning has influenced literacy development has been studied and researched over numerous decades (Tsao, 2008). There have been different research studies that suggest that children’s play in early childhood years can support their literacy development (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Research has suggested that in a literacy enriched play environment, children can become engaged in reading and writing activities that can be associated with literacy development that can help foster literacy behaviors (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). Children have opportunities to interact literacy concepts, objects, and processes when an environment for play is intentionally developed (Roskos & Christie, 2011).
Literacy Enriched Play

It is important to include literacy enriched play environments in early childhood classrooms to help support literacy behaviors (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Play enriched classrooms use familiar literature objects and other familiar contexts to support engagement with literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). This is an effective approach, because when children engage in literacy rich play environments, they have a tendency to read and write during play (Pyle, Priuletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

**Materials.** Literacy enriched play environments include many choices of literacy materials for the children to use. When children have multiple choices of literacy materials in a classroom during play, it can help promote their literacy interactions (Roskos & Christie, 2011). The literacy materials that should be included in the play environment need to help children communicate and practice different reading skills. These literacy materials help develop concepts of print, letter knowledge (names and sounds), word reading and emergent reading (Roskos and Christie, 2013).

**Physical arrangement.** The physical design of the play centers is also important to literacy. It is important for teachers to provide well-designed physical spaces to help support literacy development (Morrow, 1990). The physical design of a play environment should offer many literacy opportunities to students and aid in their development of literacy skills (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Play spaces that are small, intimate, and well organized have shown to improve play activities and help students stay on task. If the physical play environment is well-designed, play can help develop reading and writing which can lead to literacy engagement (Neuman & Roskos, 1990).

**The Role of the Adult in Play with Learning**
Although a literacy enriched and well-designed play environment is vital to students developing literacy skills, there are times when adult involvement and planning is necessary to help ensure that literacy learning is occurring (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018). It is essential that a teacher plays an important role in guiding students in play and being a role model during play (Morrow, 1990). This will allow the students to learn on higher levels than if they are learning on his or her own all of the time (Morrow, 1990). The teacher should act as an observer, participant and trainer. For example, teachers should watch quietly while encouraging students supportively “on the side”, become directly involved in the play while gently guiding students towards literacy objects and materials and/or deliberately take steps to plan and model play to teach new or different literacy skills. This approach often inspires and encourages students to learn different literacy skills as they observe a play activity (Roskos and Neuman, 1993). When a teacher is involved during play, children are often more productive and learn specific literacy skills (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018).

Guided play is one form of play where the teacher includes purposeful and directed learning to play activities to meet a specific standard of literacy learning (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Examples of guided play include a teacher creating a literacy-oriented play theme that includes literacy objects that the teacher has deliberately selected. The teacher then models literacy behaviors and “how to” play to guide the students to learn assorted literacy skills that the teacher has developed as a goal (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). Guided play has shown to be beneficial to children’s academic learning, including literacy (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018). The teacher should scaffold learning into students play to help learn literacy skills (Pyle, Poliszczuk, &
Danniels, 2018). Some of the literacy skills that can be taught through guided play include phonemic awareness, writing skills, reading, and vocabulary (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018).

**Integrating Play into the Classroom**

There are different ways to think or identify play-based learning in the classroom. One way is called Free Play or Open-ended Play in which the children are allowed to learn through playful exploration, experimentation and interaction with peers (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). The teacher has little interaction with the students during this type of play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). The activities in Free Play or Open-ended Play are selected by the students and are child guided (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018).

Another type of play-based learning is Modeled Play in which the teacher explains, illustrates and demonstrates different resources or materials to be used during play that will help aid in learning a concept or skill that a teacher has chosen (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). After the teacher has modeled the concept or skill, the teacher will have little interaction during the play time and allow the children to learn from the modeled play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

Another type of play is called Purposefully Framed Play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). This type of play is where the teacher has specific material and resources connected to a specific learning concept that is to be discovered through play-based learning. There is Open-ended Play, Modeled Play and teach-child interactions in this type of play due to the teacher providing materials, modeling how to use the
materials, initiating a discussion and actually participating in the Open-ended play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

The last type of play-based learning is called Guided Play. The teacher has a goal that is linked to the curriculum for the students to learn and has an active role in this type of play-based learning. The teacher scaffolds academic learning throughout the play activities while asking questions and providing feedback. While focusing on the learning goal, the teacher becomes an active coplayer and leader during play. However, the teacher will need to remember to be active in a playful manner during Guided Play (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018).

These types of play-based learning are important since they can provide different opportunities to increase developmental competencies including personal skills, self-regulation skills and social skills along with academic learning that are connected to language and literacy development (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). A balanced approach that can offer all of the types of play, Free Play or Open-ended Play, Modeled Play, Purposefully Framed Play and Guided Play is considered beneficial to literacy learning (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Therefore, teachers should consider implementing a balanced approach to help promote literacy learning in play environments.

**Designing a Physical Play Setting in the Classroom**

The physical setting in a classroom is important to consider while designing play spaces in the classroom and has been shown to have a substantial influence on the play behaviors of children (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). The play area can have an impact on children’s play activities and attitudes if it is set up with the purpose of using it for active
and engaging learning (Morrow, 1990). A teacher should keep in mind that through the design of the classroom, the physical space should be used for thoughtful literacy learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2011).

There are many different features to think of while designing the physical space to support literacy during play. The play area should be a small, intimate space that students can move easily around in to interact and perform different literacy tasks (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Roskos & Neuman, 2011). A distinct play setting that is separate from the main classroom by the use of shelves, carts or dividers is preferred (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Classrooms that are carefully designed with smaller spaces help children become more creative and use more language-related activities along with more explorative behavior, more social interaction and cooperation than in a room that is not carefully designed (Morrow, 1990).

Different play areas can be included in the design such as a post office center, kitchen/restaurant center, office center, doctor office, grocery store and library area for a few examples. These different play areas should be arranged so that the students can shift between different play areas easily while not become easily distracted by other noisy areas, such as the block area or art area. These areas will be discovery areas where students will engage in learning while pretending to be librarians, cooks, postal and office workers and other types of roles associated with the designated play area (Neuman, 2019). These different play areas are designed to help encourage children to become productive and creative in different literacy skills such as reading and writing (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). While students are playing in the different themed areas, they will be interacting with the literacy materials and objects that are included in each area and
having conversations with adults and peers which help develop literacy knowledge (Neuman and Roskos, 1991).

Creating a Literacy-Enriched Play Setting

Once the physical design of a play area is organized, it is equally important to include these play areas with a large variety of different literacy resources (Roskos and Christie, 2013). Literacy-enriched play areas can help children develop knowledge that supports learning how to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

**Literacy materials and props.** Each of these play areas should have a supply of literacy materials for both reading and writing that are related to the theme of the play area including literacy props (Christie & Roskos, 2013). The literacy props need to be appropriate, safe, authentic, and serve a function for each themed play area (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). For example, the kitchen/restaurant play area could have different literacy objects such as menus, ordering pads, coupons, cookbooks, employee nametags and pencils (Roskos & Christie, 2002; Roskos & Christie, 2011). The post office could include different props that would be related to mailing a letter such as stationery, envelopes, stamps and pencils. A teacher should add paper to the themed play areas including different types of paper such as lined paper, unlined paper, different designed stationery and different sized notepads.

Different wall signs around the various themed play areas should be added to further expand literacy experiences in the play areas (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Dress-up clothing for each themed play area can be added to encourage children to act out the roles of each area. This can add to authenticity of the play and help develop social interaction to aid in collaborative literacy learning (Roskos & Christie, 2002). The themed play area
needs to be safe. Do not include things with sharp points or anything that could cause
injuries (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). All of these different types of literacy props are used
to help support and prompt children’s literacy connections. These types of literacy
objects need to be realistic to the play area and aid to the development of literacy
behaviors and learning (Roskos & Christie, 2002). Literacy becomes interactive and part
of the play flow through the use of these literacy props and themed play areas (Neuman

While adding literacy materials to the play area, you should include materials that
give students opportunities to practice different reading and writing readiness skills.
These skills include concepts about print, letter knowledge (letter names and sounds),
word reading, emergent writing, vocabulary, and language comprehension (Roskos &
Christie, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009). Using different literacy-enriched play areas,
students can gain knowledge about functions about writing, recognize play-related print
and know how to use different comprehension strategies including self-checking and self-
correction (Christie and Roskos, 2013). Researchers have also found that through the use
of play other skills can develop in children such as verbalization, attention span,
imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies,
cooperation, empathy and group participation which are all valuable skills to aid in
literacy learning (Miller & Almon, 2009).

The Teacher’s Role
Once the physical play setting is organized and includes an abundant amount of literacy resources and props, the teacher should determine what their role is in the play environment. A teacher plays a vital role in guiding students during play in the classroom and although a literacy enriched play environment is significant for learning, teacher involvement and interaction is also significant in play-based learning (Morrow, 1990; Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

Teachers’ beliefs in the role that play can affect learning in the classroom will influence how they apply play in their classrooms (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). If a teacher believes that play can help support and develop academic learning, the teacher will become more involved in their role to include play in the classroom using the different types of play to learn different skills in reading and writing (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). A teacher can significantly influence students’ development of literacy behaviors and skills (Roskos & Neuman, 1993) by providing the necessary materials and interactive feedback.

A teacher should be an observer and encourager of literacy play (Tsao, 2008). A teacher should also demonstrate a variety of literacy practices to help develop meaning to students’ reading and writing (Neuman and Roskos, 1990). A teacher needs to make sure to schedule enough time for children to play in order to develop literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2002).

**The Onlooker.** Teachers can take on different literacy-assisting roles during play-based learning. One role is called The Onlooker (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). The teacher remains outside of the play area and oversees how the children are playing while intermittently responding nonverbally and verbally to children’s literacy efforts during
play. The teacher is supporting literacy-related play while giving positive and supporting responses to the students about their reading and writing learning experiences (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

**The Player.** Another role that a teacher can take on is as The Player. The teacher is directly involved with the children in the literacy-related play becoming an active participant and member of the play experiences. In this role, the teacher will need to communicate interest in playing and ask to play right along with the students. During play the teacher will persuade students to use literacy objects and materials while encouraging children’s self-expression along with encouragement to continue to with their literacy-related play (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

**The Leader.** The last role for a teacher is The Leader. As The Leader, a teacher plans how to implement different literacy props and arrange the play environment for a specific literacy enriched play theme. The teacher is directly involved in the play, models how to play and is actually teaching literacy-related concepts. This role can be compared to being “a coach” which entails demonstrating, giving exact directions and encouraging learning different skills. All of these roles are important in a literacy-enriched play environment due to the influence that teachers have on children’s literacy-related play (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

**The Future of Play to Promote Early Literacy**

Incorporating play in early childhood classrooms to help promote literacy and to give teachers some resources and ideas of how this can be accomplished is important, because children start learning through play at a young age. Play influences children’s academic development while allowing children to discover themselves and the world.
around them (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). With play, children can start to develop literacy skills earlier in their early childhood school years. Students who develop these literacy skills earlier often have better success in academic learning in the early years and later in school (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

Play has been shown to improve a large range of skills in literacy and in other areas as well. These skills can include, oral language development, vocabulary development, comprehension, reading proficiency along with connections to semantic organization, re-telling skills, social skills, self-regulation skills and mathematics (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Play has also been shown to aid in children’s progress and growth across the five domains of learning that are: physical, language, social, emotional and cognitive (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

Since there is such a large range of skills that can be developed and improved through play, it is vital that teachers incorporate different resources and strategies in the classroom for play to help with literacy. The classroom environment can be a challenge for teachers to create but a well-designed classroom space can help promote learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2011). The physical setting in a classroom has been shown to have a substantial influence on the play behaviors of children (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). The play areas should be well-defined with smaller spaces that are separate from the main classroom (Roskos and Christie, 2011). The different play areas can be centered around different themes that allow the students to pretend, discover and engage in learning during play (Neuman, 2019). The play areas should be equipped with a large variety of literacy-enriched resources (Roskos & Christie, 2013). Included in these resources are literacy props that aid to the authenticity of play and encourage children to act out the
roles of each themed area (Roskos & Christie, 2011). These literacy props are used to help support and encourage children’s literacy development (Roskos & Christie, 2002).

Although the classroom environment, physical setting and resources in play areas are important, so is the teacher’s role in play. A teacher has a significant role in supporting all of the needs of the students during their play times in the classroom. A teacher has different roles that support and help students develop literacy skills including being an Onlooker, Player and Leader. All of these roles are important in literacy-enriched play environments to help students develop a variety of literacy skills (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

Although there has been research that has shown the benefits of including play in the classroom to help promote literacy, early childhood educators are under great pressure to meet expectations that are inappropriate for young children so they struggle to find the time and resources to promote play in the classroom (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play is being replaced and is becoming a thing of the past (Nicolopolou, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). There needs to be a change in early childhood classrooms across the country. Children are born to learn through play. We need to return to having early childhood classrooms be a place where children can learn, develop and grow through play.
References


