

Literacy and Language Development

Supporting Literacy-Related Play: Roles for Teachers of Young Children

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers (Roskos & Newman, 1998; Saracho, 1993; Saracho & Spodek, 1996) support the contention that beginning reading instruction should occur in a natural context, where the determined use of language and literacy replaces the drill and practice of skill acquisition (Saracho, 1993). This process can easily be used for beginning reading instruction and presented in children's play environments. According to the National Research Council (1998), teachers are able to encourage language and literacy growth using play-based literacy instruction when they:

- allow enough time and space for play in the classroom,
- provide the needed material resources,
- develop children's background knowledge for the play setting,
- scaffold the rehearsals of dramatic retellings, and
- become involved in play settings as to guide the children's attention and learning through modeling and interaction. (p. 184)

Children's acquisition of literacy emerges when their play experiences nurture their understanding about the purposes and characteristics of print. For example, when they (a) play with language and thinking or (b) analyze the meaning of literacy and its medium, they discover the meaning about print (Roskos & Newman, 1998).

Studies demonstrate a relationship between children's literacy development and play (Jacob, 1984; Roskos & Newman, 1998; Saracho & Spodek, 1996). Jacob delineates how kindergarten children discover the uses of written language when they engage in play. For instance, Woodward (1984) demonstrates that during play, children compose shopping lists, use food stamps to purchase goods, and obtain prescriptions from a doctor. Vukelich (1994) confirms that children who play in a print-rich environment are able to identify words from a list that excludes graphics and the play context. Roskos (1988) assumes that children apply reading and writing to substantiate their pretend play, express themselves, and document information within play events. Neuman and Roskos (1989) conclude that children apply the

functions of literacy when they are (a) exploring their environment, (b) interacting with others, (c) expressing themselves, (d) confirming incidents, and (e) transacting with text. Saracho and Spodek (1996) describe how teachers in kindergarten classrooms provide a play environment with a language or literacy component integrated in the children's play activities (e.g., writing centers, writing activities, print labels) that differentiates between print and nonprint and motivates children to invent symbols and messages. Hence, the teachers take up important roles in children's emergent literacy, especially during their spontaneous play. A sparse number of studies (Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Schrader, 1990; Vukelich, 1989) analyze the adult's behaviors in literacy-related play, but studies that center specifically on the teacher's role in the children's literacy-related play have been neglected and need to be conducted. The purpose of this study is to investigate which are the roles that teachers display in young children's literacy-related play.

METHODOLOGY

Population

The population consisted of five kindergarten teachers and their classroom children. The teachers' professional experiences included 2–11 years of teaching experience, a bachelor's educational degree, and a state kindergarten endorsement. They integrated language, reading, and writing concepts in the children's spontaneous play.

Measurement Materials and Analysis

The teachers' actions and interactions were systematically observed and videotaped during the kindergarten children's play for a 5-month period. To categorize the roles of the teachers in a literacy-play environment, episodes were identified and transcribed from a series of