Play and Literacy in Literacy Centres: Language and Literacy Development in a Literacy-Rich Environment

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Abstract

For children, play is the preferred way of exploring and understanding the world. However, while educational games are often used to foster literacy skills and are well-established in the field of child literacy, the role of play in literacy education is often underestimated. In this regard, Literacy Centres offer children an opportunity to explore literacy in a playful manner.

1. Play and Literacy

The relationship between play and literacy has been a significant area of research for several decades, particularly within English-speaking academic traditions. One of the most influential figures in this field was James Christie (1991), whose pioneering work shaped the way we understand the role of play in early literacy development. His work helped to establish a foundational understanding of how play can facilitate literacy skills, and it has since become a core area of early childhood education research (cf. Davidson, 1996, Owocki, 1999, Roskos & Christie, 2001; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Han & Johnson, 2021).

James Christie emphasized that dramatic play is an effective way to enhance children's literacy development, as it provides opportunities for children to use language in new and creative ways, expanding their vocabulary and storytelling abilities. In dramatic play, children take on various roles and

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enact different scenarios, often using props or actions to represent real-world objects and events. This type of play encourages children to use language in meaningful contexts, which in turn helps them practice new words and phrases. For example, when children play "store" or "doctor," they are exposed to specific vocabulary associated with those roles, such as "cash register," "prescription," or "patient." These activities not only enhance their understanding of words but also foster children's ability to create and understand narratives. Children actively engage in shaping the role. In dramatic play, they internalise the character they portray, living out the role within the safe confines of fiction, and can experiment with it. According to Vygotsky, this construction of a social context allows children to perform at a higher level in play than they could alone. In other words, in dramatic play, children act within their zone of proximal development.

The term emergent literacy refers to the early stages of literacy development, where children begin to engage with written language even before they can read or write conventionally. Emergent literacy is not limited to learning the alphabet or phonics but encompasses the broad range of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that children acquire as they begin to interact with their sociocultural environment, especially in the context of literacy-rich environments (Neaum, 2021).

The development of emergent literacy unfolds in stages, with children first experimenting with the basic concepts of print, such as the direction of reading and the distinction between letters and pictures. At this stage, pretend reading and writing are common. Pretend reading occurs when children mimic reading by "reading" aloud from a book, even though they may not yet be able to decode the words (Purcell-Gates 2001; Wittmer 2021; Strozyk, 2023). This act of pretending is a critical early literacy milestone, as it reflects an emerging awareness that reading has meaning and can be an enjoyable activity. Similarly, children engage in pretend writing, where they may scribble on paper, attributing meaning to their marks, such as saying "This is my letter to Grandma!" These early attempts are symbolic, as children use marks to represent writing before they have mastered the formal writing system. These practices are typically considered pre-literal or symbolic strategies, as children experiment with the idea of writing and reading without yet knowing the full structure of language.

Morrow (1990), like other researchers, argued that dramatic play could significantly contribute to the development of emerging literacy skills in young children. Specifically, she suggested that the creation of storylines and the use of a more sophisticated vocabulary during dramatic play could enhance textual development. In line with this, Morrow, along with Neuman and Roskos (1991; 1992; 1997), sought to introduce authentic materials and initiate realistic reading and writing activities within the context of dramatic play.

2. Thematic Role Play: The Literacy Centre

Literacy Centres are intentionally designed spaces within early childhood education that integrate play and literacy development. While these Centres are often seen as reading and writing areas, they more comprehensively encompass role-playing scenarios, such as running a store or acting as doctors, with authentic literacy materials like books, writing tools, and visual aids. This immersive environment fosters language and literacy development by situating learning in real-world contexts. Purcell-Gates' concept of Authentic Literacy aligns with this framework, suggesting that literacy learning is most effective in meaningful contexts (Purcell-Gates, 2001; Duke et al. 2006). Research indicates that, in Literacy Centres, children engage in functional literacy tasks, deepening their understanding of the role of language. Children frequently use the term "real" to describe their experiences, often saying that the play in the Literacy Centre felt "real" – meaning it had an authentic quality.

A literacy centre is guided by methodological principles and a flow chart. Kammermeyer (2007) and subsequently Großer & King (2008) distinguish three phases: preparation, realisation and finally, reflection. The phases before and after the actual play phase are particularly important and can be organised in different steps (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Process flow of a literacy centre (adapted from Großer, 2011; Großer & King, 2008; with slight modifications)

Preparation	1. Choice of theme or subject of the dramatic play activity. 2. Introduction and Exploration of the Topic: - Communicate with and involve parents in the process. - Observe practical applications and contexts related to the topic. - Gather relevant materials to support the role-play activity. - Set up the Literacy Centre, ensuring it is equipped with appropriate resources. 3. Development and Practice of Scripts: Create scripts for role-play.
Realisation	4. Conducting Dramatic Play: Children engage in play based on the chosen topic. - Adult involvement can promote learning, but it must be balanced.
Reflection	5. Reflection with Children: Discuss the experience with children to promote awareness of their learning. 6. Reflection with the Educator Team: Reflect collectively on the activity and its outcomes. 7. Material Review: Assess the materials used. 8. Linking to Broader Educational Goals: Connect literacy activities with other early childhood learning objectives.

2.1 Preparing a Literacy Centre

During the preparation phase (see Table 1), educators collaborate with the children to select a theme ("topic selection"). The theme should stem from the children's real-world experiences and be meaningful to them. It may emerge organically, for example, when children explore the professions of their parents (Großer, 2021). This approach can lead children to engage in unique Literacy Centres, such as an architecture office (Sörensen, 2009). Alternatively,

Themes can be initiated externally. Common Literacy Centre topics include bank, post office, veterinary clinic, hair salon, restaurant, bakery, ice cream parlor, etc. (see Table 2). The key in this phase is ensuring that the children actively participate in the theme selection process.

Once the theme is chosen, the next step is to connect it to each child's personal life. Through dialogues with the children and shared reading of books, prior knowledge, experiences, and concepts can be activated, sparking conversations among the children. Parents should also be informed about the upcoming Literacy Centre.

Following this is the exploration phase. Visits to real-world environments allow children to observe various professionals – such as veterinarians, receptionists, florists, and mechanics – in their daily work settings. These professionals explain their tasks, and children observe them engaging in a range of reading and writing activities. Children become aware of literacy practices that may have previously gone unnoticed in their everyday lives, which they later integrate into their play (Großer, 2011). They learn, for instance, that patient records are maintained, bills are issued, appointments are scheduled, order lists are followed, and incoming goods are verified against delivery slips. Through these experiences, children are introduced to a "world behind the world," expanding their knowledge of real-world processes.

After the excursions, a reflection session is held where children recall and discuss their experiences and observations. As Großer and King (2008) emphasize, it is essential that the children's suggestions are recorded on posters, symbolically documenting their contributions. The quality of the play benefits from careful planning and debriefing of these explorations.

As the play takes shape, it is useful to give the Literacy Centre a name. Children gather name suggestions on a poster and vote democratically. During this process, children engage in argument-based discussions, actively listening, responding to others' suggestions, and compromising to find a consensus. For instance, the chosen theme of "gardening" could result in the Literacy Centre being named "Flower Paradise."

Based on impressions from the explorations, the materials for the Literacy Centre are gathered and set up. These materials serve as "props" designed to encourage reading and writing activities. The materials should be authentic, appropriate, and useful (Neuman & Roskos, 1991). Many such materials can

be brought back from the excursions. Parents are also invited to actively support the Literacy Centre by providing everyday materials, thereby fostering thematic conversations between children and parents.

The children's involvement in selecting the materials for the Literacy Centre is key. Children take responsibility for their project from the very beginning (Großer & King, 2008). While extensive preparation lists are available in the United States, which include complete inventories for specific play themes (Cox & West, 2004; Walcavich & Bauer, 2007; Campo-Stallone, 2008), such lists should primarily serve as suggestions for educators. The critical factor is how children in a particular group relate to a theme and decide what to add based on their own ideas. The children should discuss, weigh their options, and make collective decisions – whether it is about which dishes belong on the menu, how much a meal should cost, or who will take on which role.

After collecting and creating the materials, the Literacy Centre is set up, a play area equipped with props and play inventory. A practical approach includes agreements with the children on the rules for the Literacy Centre and how it will be used. Morrow (2002) recommends a maximum of 5–6 children at a time, with organization facilitated by the daily schedule and activity cards.

Useful examples of Literacy Centres can be found in the reports by Großer (2021), Großer & King (2007), and Sörensen (2009). These contexts can represent various aspects of daily life, such as a bank, a store (e.g., supermarket, bakery, or sporting goods shop), restaurants, a cinema, a post office, a library, or even a construction site or workshop.

The following examples illustrate how these contexts can be linked to relevant materials and reading/writing activities.

Table 2 –Possible Materials and Activities for a Themed Role Play

Context (literacy practice)	Possible Materials (literacy props)	Possible Activities (literacy events)
Bank	Deposit slips, bank or credit cards, account statements, fee schedules, savings books, calculators.	Filling out deposit slips, checking account statements, calculating balances, requesting credit cards, planning savings goals, confirming payments, taking notes on banking transactions.
Ice cream parlor	Ice cream menu, counter with various ice cream scoops, price tags, labels for ice cream flavors, order forms, customer loyalty cards, paper napkins with branding, ice cream cone wrappers, promotional posters.	Writing customer orders (cone or cup choice), marking favorite flavors on a menu, filling out order forms, checking prices, writing down customer preferences, creating an ice cream shop menu, labelling new ice cream flavors, and taking inventory. Creating promotional signs for special offers.
Pizzeria	Menus, order slips, reservation book, kitchen tickets, ads, customer feedback cards, notepads, receipts	Taking orders, preparing bills, designing menus, creating shopping lists for ingredients, managing guestbooks or feedback forms, noting customer special requests, planning reservations.

Context (literacy practice)	Possible Materials (literacy props)	Possible Activities (literacy events)
Veterinary Clinic	Stuffed animals (representing pets), stethoscope, medical forms, appointment book, prescription pads, informational brochures on pet care, vaccination cards, X-ray images, examination tools, computer, and signage for clinic hours or treatment rooms.	Filling in the appointment book, noting pet names and conditions, documenting symptoms, treatments, and vaccination records, providing brochures about pet care, writing receipts, filling out insurance forms, and maintaining patient files.
Hairdresser	Hair styling magazines, price lists, appointment planner, scissors, rollers, client cards, etc.	Scheduling appointments (written confirmation), noting specific hairstyles or treatments, reading catalogs, creating invoices or receipts,
Bakery	Price list for bread and pastries, order forms, delivery calendar, recipe cards, shopping lists.	Writing down customer orders, planning orders (e.g., for seasonal events or holidays), creating shopping lists, preparing recipe notes, pricing items, labeling baked goods.
Construction Site	Construction plans, tools, material lists, safety guidelines, construction logs, blueprints	Reading construction plans, following safety guidelines, filling out construction logs, writing material lists, labeling tools and materials, creating inventory lists, noting the completion of construction phases, updating blueprints with modifications, and tracking progress through checklists.

These examples illustrate not only the use of everyday materials in a Literacy Centre but also the link between reading skills, writing skills, and practical applications in a contextualized setting.

In addition to the physical setup of a literacy Centre, it is essential to create a social environment that promotes language learning, where children are exposed to language patterns they may not encounter in their everyday communication. Literacy Centres provide opportunities for children to engage in structured dialogues – scripts that reflect real-world situations. For instance, at a restaurant, a typical interaction might be:

> Hi there! Would you like something to eat? Can I get you a menu? Sure, thanks. – What pizza would you recommend? – Our house special is really popular. Everyone loves it! – Sounds great! I'll go with that. Thanks!

Similarly, at a veterinary clinic, children might role-play this dialogue:

> Mrs. Müller, hi! What seems to be the problem with your rabbit? – It's stopped eating. – Oh no, how long has this been going on? – About a week now. – Alright. Please give it two drops of this medicine once a day. I'll write you a prescription. – Thanks so much, doctor!

These interactions introduce children to new vocabulary and offer them the chance to practice more formal or specialized speech registers. By interacting with these structured dialogues, children learn to use language in ways they may not typically encounter in their everyday conversations. This exposure not only builds their vocabulary but also helps them navigate different social situations by using appropriate language structures. By practicing these language patterns, children develop a deeper understanding of how language functions in diverse contexts, enriching both their expressive and receptive language skills.

2.2 Conducting a Literacy Centre (Play Phase)

During the implementation phase (see Table 1), the educator's role is essential. As emphasized by Morrow (1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991), the active involvement of educators significantly shapes children's engagement with literacy activities. Studies have shown that children's reading and writing behaviour is observed more frequently and in more diverse ways when educators actively participate in the play. Christie and Enz (1992) also explored the differing impacts of structured play settings on literacy engagement among preschool children. Their research indicated that simply providing literacy-related materials tied to specific themes was less effective than environments where adults were actively involved. In these settings, educators encouraged children's interaction with literacy materials by offering suggestions and modelling use within play scenarios. Furthermore, Christie and Enz found that such adult-supported engagement had a more enduring influence, with sustained literacy behaviours particularly evident in the group where children's play was scaffolded by adult participation.

Three primary roles can be identified for educators in this context (Davidson, 1996; Großer & King, 2008; Roskos & Neuman, 1993). As an observer, the educator watches from the sidelines, supporting the play with affirming gestures or brief comments to keep it moving. This role also allows for observing and documenting the children's learning and development. In the role of a co-player, the educator takes on a character but lets the children take the lead in the primary roles. This approach gives the educator the chance to introduce small variations, enriching the play and adding new layers. As a game leader, the educator takes a more active role in guiding the play, especially when the game loses momentum. In such cases, the educator can introduce new ideas, materials, or actions. For example, Großer and King (2007) describe a situation in a supermarket setting where a conflict is resolved by calling in the store manager. This type of intervention helps shift perspectives and encourages problem-solving.

During the play phase, it can also be beneficial to invite parents or other community members to participate. One effective way to involve them is by hosting an event at the start or end of the Literacy Centre. For example, in the "Flower Paradise", children could sell the flowers or plants they have made

or grown. Similarly, in the "Gelato Roma", children could sell ice cream they have made together in the kitchen on a summer day. This approach not only enhances the learning experience but also connects the children's play to real-world literacy practices and fosters a sense of community.

2.3 Reflecting on a Literacy Centre

To make the experiences associated with the Literacy Centre truly meaningful, it's crucial to reflect on them with the children and document the process, either through written records or photographs. These reflective moments can be woven throughout the entire Literacy Centre experience. At the conclusion, the documentation could take the form of a book or brochure, which would be made available to the children. This would encourage them to revisit and articulate their experiences. A video recording of the process can also be created, reproduced, and shared with the children to take home, fostering similar discussions with their families.

In addition to documenting the children's reflections, it's valuable to hold a group discussion at the end of the Literacy Centre: What did the children think of the experience? What did they enjoy the most, and what could have been better? What new things did they learn? What topics would they like to explore in future Literacy Centres? This helps children practice expressing both appreciation and critique, while also giving them a chance to collaborate on ideas and problem-solving. The involvement of adult educational professionals can promote learning, but it must be measured in order to avoid undermining children's self-regulation and enjoyment of play.

Finally, it's important to conduct a reflection session with the teaching team, which should include educators who may not have been directly involved in the Literacy Centre due to organizational reasons (Großer & King, 2008). The team should consider the overall impact of the project: How did it affect the daily routine of the kindergarten? Were the themes and activities successful in engaging the children in reading and writing? What aspects sparked the children's interest, and what did not? These reflections also provide a valuable opportunity to document observations of the children's development, perhaps through learning stories (Carr, 2001).

3. Literacy Centres in Diverse Educational Contexts

Symbolic play is widely recognized for its significant contribution to the development of narrative skills, which are essential for both listening and reading comprehension (Andresen, 2011). Literate behaviours tend to occur more frequently in supportive literacy environments, and there is strong evidence that literacy-enriched play settings increase children's narrative abilities and print awareness. While several studies report positive effects on print knowledge and functional writing, a meta-analysis by Roskos et al. (2010) highlights both consistent and variable outcomes. What remains unclear is which factors make such environments effective across diverse educational and social contexts (Roskos, 2019). Roskos et al. (2010) call for further research, particularly on play-based approaches that support motivational and emotional learning but are more difficult to assess than purely cognitive methods.

Children's enthusiasm for Literacy Centres can be explained through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and social connectedness in learning. Dramatic play allows children to construct their own scenarios and use emerging reading and writing skills meaningfully in real-life contexts. These activities foster interaction, communication, and collaboration, with educators playing a key supporting role (Morrow, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Christie & Enz, 1992; Rand & Morrow, 2021).

Despite growing focus on systematic instruction, play-based literacy strategies remain essential for comprehensive development. Justice and Pullen (2003) classify literacy-enriched play alongside Dialogic Reading and phonological awareness programmes as foundational for emergent literacy. Rand and Morrow (2021) stress the need for play as a counterbalance to the narrowing focus on phonics-based instruction. Phonics is grounded in essential competencies (Neaum, 2021), and Morrow (2020) argues that play is undervalued, especially in early grades. She advocates for its integration into teaching to promote problem-solving and language development, also recommending the use of digital media for added relevance. Geyer (2021) supports this with a promising model combining thematic Literacy Centres and a phoneme–grapheme chart, a widely used tool in German schools.

However, implementing guided play requires targeted teacher training, as many educators perceive it as too unstructured or difficult to manage (Pyle et al., 2018).

Literacy Centres have so far been implemented primarily in English-speaking countries (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), while they remain largely unknown in Italy and German-speaking countries. In contrast, literacy-rich play is common in German-speaking Switzerland, though not explicitly labelled as Literacy Centres (Sörensen, 2009). This practice reflects the Swiss curriculum, which spans ages 4–8 in its first cycle, and lacks a strict divide between kindergarten and school – unlike Germany, Austria, and Italy, where such a separation reflects different educational philosophies and notions of childhood. This structural difference may explain why German research has largely focused on kindergartens, with schools rarely included (Kammermeyer, 2007; Großer & King, 2008). The current expansion of full-day schools in Germany could offer an opportunity to implement more holistic literacy approaches, incorporating play-based formats and introducing Literacy Centres into school settings.

A notable gap in current research concerns the role of play-oriented Literacy Centres in multilingual contexts. South Tyrol and Luxembourg provide ideal conditions for bilingual Centres that support both literacy development and multilingualism. In South Tyrol, German- and Italian-speaking institutions operate side by side, but bilingual education remains limited. Its expansion would require a substantial policy shift within the current educational framework.

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