

Journey to Literacy:

No Worksheets Required

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Introduction: Beyond Worksheets to Learning Centres

Today's Kindergarten classrooms welcome children that are part of a rapidly changing world, accompanied by exploding technology. Teachers must meet that challenge and provide all children with an inviting environment which honors their individual differences, respects their developmental levels, and stimulates them to learn.

Certain trends in teaching run counter to meeting this challenge. In light of the current emphasis on early literacy development — as well as the pressure of extensive curriculum expectations — many Kindergarten teachers have resorted to using worksheets and issuing teacher-directed tasks. They have adopted these approaches instead of relying on the play-based, centre-based programs that, we know, help children to thrive.

A focus on worksheets and teacher-directed tasks overlooks the reality that, for children, play is their work. All play embraces the fact that children's learning is dynamic, messy, and uneven. Play honors the fact that children progress through a series of developmental stages, while teacher-directed worksheet challenges do not — they do not lend themselves to being individualized. Young learners learn best when they are actively engaged, as in play. They learn by doing.

Children engage in different kinds of play — self-directed, organizational, and educational — and taking part only in self-directed play and organizational play is not enough for them. When engaged in *self-directed* play such as building a fort in the basement, children create the structure and the rules for the activity. In *organizational* play in the local playground — for example, a soccer game — children are provided with the rules and structure. In *educational* play, in the Kindergarten classroom, the teacher structures the environment to ensure that optimal learning will take place. We have found that the creation of several learning centres is the best way to achieve this.

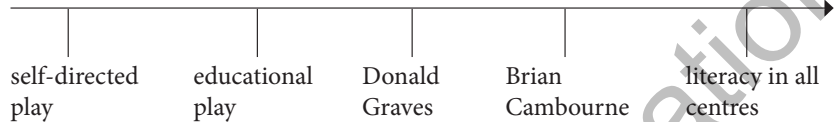
Educational Play: Social Aspects

Children approach educational play in different ways. While playing, some children concentrate on their own activity, having no social interaction with their peers or teachers (solitary play). Others play side by side, sharing the space, but using their own activity with their own materials (parallel play). Still others share materials and work in concert with their peers, planning together, sharing the thinking, doing, and problem-solving (co-operative play).

In developing this book, our intent has been to provide many practical ideas that we have successfully used to infuse literacy activities into the traditional centres of our Kindergarten classrooms: these include the Sand, Water, and Construction centres. We want to support teachers as they move beyond worksheets. Teachers already using a centres approach will find ideas to enhance literacy learning in their Kindergarten classrooms. We will also offer answers to such questions as these: “How do children learn to read and write while playing?” “How do teachers structure the play so that children of all backgrounds and abilities can meet with success?” “What kind of environment needs to be created so that children will be excited about reading and writing?” “How does one teacher manage all these different interests and developmental levels?” These are all questions that reflective practitioners ask in their quest to provide effective programs for young learners.

The Constant in Our Journey as Educators: Play

Our journey as educators has been influenced by many great teachers and educational thinkers. We have learned and grown beside our students, and over the years, we have thoughtfully altered our programs to better serve their changing needs. Despite these changes, our basic philosophy of “Play” has remained the same. What is different is that, over time, we have more fully recognized the relationship between play and literacy. The chart below briefly outlines our journey.



Self-directed play

At the beginning of our careers, our Kindergartens focused on self-directed play. Our teaching emphasis was on children having a positive beginning to school and building a good attitude and a strong foundation for later learning. We provided the children with a variety of experiences and activities, for example, drawing and painting, as well as using building toys, stacking toys, puzzles, bin toys (Brio railroad set), a sandbox with a pail and shovel, a water table with boats, and a dollhouse. The children were free to follow their own learning while we circulated throughout the classroom and talked with the children about their play. There was little evidence of print in the environment, and we read to the children only at Storytime.

The emphasis was on expanding the children’s oral language and listening skills. The children worked independently or in small groups at activities of their own choosing where they were encouraged to talk, listen, describe, question, and co-operate. Our role was to respond to the children’s interests and questions — we rarely intruded into the play. The children were free to visit all areas in an unstructured manner. The books we read to them were generally stories for enjoyment; rarely were they non-fiction, poetry, or Big Books. Our selections were unconnected to the children’s play.

At this time, some of our colleagues used a different strategy. They would assign a teacher-directed task for all the children to complete during a “work” period. When the children had completed this “work,” they were free to play with toys in a self-directed manner. They thereby gained a “play” period.

Moving towards educational play

As we continued to reflect on our practice, we realized we needed to modify our programs so that they better reflected educational play. We needed to take a more active role in structuring the play. At this time, we adopted a centres approach to expand the children’s experiences in the classroom. For example, at the sandbox, we added a table or shelf that held additional props to extend the children’s play and discovery (e.g., measuring cups, moulds, and scales). We also made these additions to the Water centre and to the House centre.

At this time in our practice, we would create Interest centres, usually one at a time. Each lasted for as long as it held student interest, which could be for a few days or weeks. We introduced a variety of materials related to a particular interest the children had expressed. For example, if the children showed an interest in turtles, we would gather a turtle puzzle, a real turtle, and a few books about

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turtles and then encourage children to paint, draw, or make their versions of turtles at the Visual Arts centre. Other children could refer to the materials from the Interest centre table to make habitats in the Sand centre. Our goal at the Interest centre was to help children make connections between real objects (concrete), pictures and models (semi-abstract), and books (abstract). We did this because the children were at many different stages of development and this practice honored all their levels.

As interest grew and more questions arose, the Interest centre sometimes transformed into something of broader context. For example, the turtle interest could expand into a focus on ponds. More sensory, concrete, semi-abstract, and abstract materials would then be added. As a result, many more children found an aspect of the topic to be excited about. With this experiential educational play approach, the children were now able to make more meaningful connections to their learning and relate it to their own experiences.

In responding to an interest that the children had expressed, we rejected a manner of teaching adopted by some of our colleagues: providing pre-cut materials for prescribed and teacher-directed themes, for example, a paper plate, green paint, and googly eyes for a turtle. We preferred to introduce to the Visual Arts centre a wide range of materials that supported an interest, for example, cotton batten for snow and feathers for birds. We did this because we thought that the children, not the teacher, should do the thinking, planning, and problem solving. We recognized that by doing most of the work, the teacher would be setting up some children to fail, as not all were at the developmental level that allowed them to successfully reproduce a teacher's model.

We wrote *for* the children and we read *for* them. We read aloud stories about the interest, for example, dinosaurs. We then added these stories to the Reading centre. Children also wanted to tell their own stories. We acted as scribes, writing out the captions and stories they dictated to us.

At this time, we did not yet see the centres in the room as a rich source of literacy learning. Instead, we viewed the learning at the centres as an opportunity for the children to experience new ideas, expand their knowledge, make connections, and work co-operatively rather than in an isolated and parallel manner. We still concentrated on oral language and listening skills to the exclusion of reading and writing — there was little or no print in the environment.

Finding support in the work of Donald Graves

The time came when we recognized that reading and writing instruction could no longer be reserved for Grade 1. We needed to recognize the varying competencies of four and five year-olds when they entered school. Some children came to school already reading, while others were still struggling to recognize their own names or letters of the alphabet. For those children who were capable of storytelling, we acted as a scribe, writing down dictated stories about their drawings and paintings. We encouraged the children to read their own compositions. As the children became aware of print and showed an interest in reading relevant words such as *mommy*, *daddy*, *dog*, and *cat*, we wrote these words on individual cards, creating a personal word box. We asked them to use these words to fill in any blanks and complete their dictated stories — they enjoyed “reading” these stories. Becoming frustrated by the lack of easy-to-read, repetitive pattern books, we began to make our own class booklets and charts.

The work of Donald Graves came to influence our thinking. Graves argued that children went through a series of developmental stages as they learned to

write. He suggested that, given the opportunity to write, children would naturally write. We agreed that many children had a wealth of understanding about environmental print long before they came to school. Many knew and read their street sign, a Stop sign, and the names of their mom, dad, and siblings.

Consequently, we introduced a Drawing/Writing centre and began to encourage the children to write for themselves. We provided alphabet cards for reference and individual direct instruction at the centre. We encouraged the children to write on topics of their choice and to add meaningful captions on their work. When conferencing with the children, we were astounded by how many of them could write and how much they could compose. Their writing flourished, and they willingly and enthusiastically read aloud their work. At that time, the literacy learning in our classrooms began to include not only listening and speaking but reading and writing, too.

The impact of Brian Cambourne's work

Our Kindergarten programs grew and changed again when we were introduced to Brian Cambourne's work in *The Whole Story*.

Cambourne identified significant conditions that were present when children were successfully learning to talk. He taught us that learners require opportunity, demonstration, choice, instruction, practice, timely feedback, and a chance to make and learn from mistakes. We understood the importance of the learner taking responsibility for the learning, but more significantly, we learned the importance of the learner seeing the need for the learning.

Engagement is the culmination of all Cambourne's conditions of learning. Children become truly engaged in their learning when all the conditions are present. The following are Cambourne's seven conditions:

1. **Responsibility:** Encourage children to take responsibility and ownership for their own learning by making choices and decisions about their work and learning.
2. **Immersion:** Immerse children in a print-rich environment full of meaningful literacy materials and experiences.
3. **Expectation:** Expect that all children can and will succeed.
4. **Demonstration:** Provide demonstrations to help ensure that children have many opportunities to experience a variety of instructional techniques, such as modelling, observing, and direct instruction, as well as referring to books and other materials for information (e.g., a newspaper to find a movie).
5. **Use and Practice:** Provide regular opportunities for students to use their developing skills. Doing so makes improvement and consolidation possible.
6. **Approximation:** Since children have different abilities and skills, all their efforts are respected and encouraged. Children are invited to take risks, to "have a go," to move towards increasingly accurate conventions and skills. They are not all expected to do the same thing at the same time. Differences are expected and do not stand out for critical evaluation or comparison.
7. **Feedback/Positive Response:** Offer encouragement so that developing learners will continue to take risks and make further attempts with the learning. This encouragement might include oral comments, written messages, or constructive suggestions that will provide immediate incentive for children to keep striving.

Literacy in all the centres

As we reflected on Cambourne's work, we saw how his principles of learning could apply to *all* learning and that they would be valuable in creating Kindergarten classrooms with a strong literacy focus. We were excited by the fact that we could easily integrate Cambourne's learning conditions into our play-based Kindergarten programs. Into every centre in the classroom, we infused a wide range of literacy experiences, drawing upon books, photographs, authentic artifacts, and recording materials. We began to link our read-aloud times, Shared Reading times, Shared Writing times, and Borrow-a-Book program to the work at the centres.

We developed extensions at the permanent centres. These were based on our observations of what the children expressed interest in as they played. For example, a child might bring in a picture of a new baby, and many children in the class might begin to talk about their siblings. This occasion could lead to the Home/Dramatic Play centre being turned into a nursery in a hospital. Of course, not all the children were expected to work at any given extension. Many still followed their own interests and projects. However, when the extension came from the children and ownership was taken, other children often became excited about the new props and additions.

We found that the content of an extension did not really matter. All content offers opportunities for the development of literacy skills (listening, describing, questioning, sharing, viewing, retelling, reflecting, relating, and recording). What is key is that the children find relevance in the learning and that the teacher provides a variety of materials and experiences that honor their developmental levels, for example,

- concrete materials (e.g., a real apple to represent an apple) for children in the manipulative stage
- semi-abstract materials (e.g., pictures, photographs, and models) for children in the representational stage
- abstract materials (e.g., texts, CDs, and charts) for children in the abstract stage

Thanks to our understanding of Cambourne's perspective, and the need to make literacy learning relevant, the Kindergarten environment had become rich in literacy learning.

The Limitations of Worksheets

By infusing literacy activities into every facet of our program, we were able to demonstrate to parents, other teachers, and administrators that we had no need to resort to worksheets to help children develop their literacy skills.

We recommend a viable alternative to worksheets: either blank sheets or templates. Worksheets, either commercially purchased or teacher-made, paper-and-pencil assignments, often include many extraneous instructions, illustrations, and titles. They typically require the learner to connect ideas, complete a blank, circle the correct answer, copy the text, or match images and letters. In contrast, teachers can make use of blank pieces of paper or templates, which are bridges between blank sheets and worksheets. A template has an organized

format designed by the teacher and provides the children with the opportunity to add their ideas and knowledge to the organizer (e.g., a T-chart, a tally, a word web). (See Appendix A: Ways to Record Ideas.)

When we examined the practice of using worksheets versus blank sheets or templates, we found the following comparison:

Worksheet	Blank Piece of Paper or Template
Provides a limited opportunity for diagnosis to guide future teaching. (For example: If the child is required only to circle all the <i>cs</i> , then the child's knowledge of vowels cannot be diagnosed.)	Provides a broader opportunity for diagnosis to guide future teaching. (For example: If the child writes, "I LV CTS," then the teacher knows that the next step in this child's learning might include a vowel mini-lesson.)
Generally focuses on only one skill (e.g., connecting pictures with letters or circling one word or filling in a blank).	Focuses on a variety of skills and knowledge (e.g., practising spacing, making connections with all of the sound symbols, focusing on directionality of print).
Driven by the teacher. (For example: The teacher makes a sheet where children must connect the picture of a cat with the letter <i>c</i> .)	Driven by the learner. (For example: The learner has the opportunity to solve a problem and make decisions.)
The teacher does the thinking, problem solving, and most of the work — the learner is passive.	The student does all the thinking, problem solving, and work, and is actively engaged in the learning process.
Narrow, since everyone does the same task and generally there is only one right answer and the rest of the responses are wrong. Too difficult for some; too easy for others.	Differentiated, so everyone can work at their own level and, therefore, appropriate for all.
Boring for some and interesting for only a few.	Interesting, challenging, and relevant to all.
Addresses one developmental level.	Addresses many different levels as the task can be approached by children of different abilities (e.g., a string of letters, captions, or sentences)
Often requires only one response.	Invites multiple responses.
Demonstrates limited picture of child's knowledge.	Demonstrates a broad picture of the child's individual skills.
Provides limited opportunities for oral language.	Provides a myriad of opportunities for oral language.

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Allows no ownership.	Allows ownership because the content is the children's choice.
Often involves copying teacher's work (e.g., printing letter <i>b</i> over and over again).	Involves practising many literacy skills (e.g., letter formation, sound-symbol relationship, purpose for writing).
Closed.	Open-ended.
Learner works alone.	Learner can work collaboratively.
Often requires the adult to read/reread the instructions. Directions are often unclear, requiring interpretation or instructions (For example: Illustrations are often confusing — an alligator or a crocodile?)	Requires less adult assistance. The children create any illustrations that are necessary.
Can't be extended. When the child is finished, there is nothing left to do but perhaps color on the back of the sheet.	Can be extended.
Takes a short time to complete.	Requires more focus and attention; therefore, the child can spend as long as is necessary to complete the task appropriately.

Thus, we saw worksheets as having limited use for diagnosing future teaching points and developing individual literacy skills — these fit into a more teacher-directed Kindergarten program. By contrast, templates or blank sheets provided more opportunity for differentiated response and instruction. They fit well into a play-based, centre-based Kindergarten program.

The chapters that follow offer specific, open-ended literacy activities, titles of effective books to share with children, names of wonderful authors to introduce to the class, and suggestions for useful templates, games, and materials. All of the literacy opportunities are presented as a richer alternative to worksheets. This book also identifies questions to consider when setting up each learning centre. Finally, it outlines developmental mileposts to guide teacher observations and document the progress of the children at play.

Teachers can move beyond the limits of worksheets and pre-cut art projects to foster meaningful learning. They can honor the children's individual developmental levels and their need to learn through play. This book, based on much seasoned experience and reflective practice, will help teachers do that successfully.