

Reading, Writing, Playing, Learning

Finding the Sweet Spots in Kindergarten Literacy

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If we could travel back in time to Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, we might be able to shake the hand of Friedrich Froebel, the man who “invented” Kindergarten. Froebel first conceived of early childhood education as a garden where children could learn and play. His “children’s garden” focused on three areas of learning: toys such as building blocks for creative and constructive play; singing and dancing for healthy activity; and outdoor gardening for exploring the natural world.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Kindergarten instruction in North America was influenced by the work of John Dewey, who believed that education based on co-operative behavior and sharing and caring for one another was what was needed to nurture the citizens of the future (Packett & Diffily, 2004). He urged that manual training, nature-study, and art be given precedence over the traditional “three Rs,” and that there should be lots of opportunity for activities based on the children’s interests. The dramatic play, construct-and-create, and discover-and-explore centres found in so many Kindergartens over the past few generations are the result of Dewey’s influence.

For most of the history of Kindergarten, children were not expected to learn to read and write. From the 1930s to the 1960s, a philosophy based on “reading readiness” dominated Kindergarten instruction. Based on the principle that certain developmental markers had to be mastered before reading could take place, reading readiness advocates believed that it was not just unnecessary, but even damaging, to try to teach children to read before they were “ready.” That magical moment of readiness was determined to be six-and-a-half years of age, based on the results of the 1931 reading tests in Winnetka, Illinois (Morphett & Washburne, 1931). Therefore, actual reading instruction didn’t begin until the middle of first grade. Until that point, children were subjected to a range of exercises involving directionality, visual and auditory discrimination, and isolated letter work—anything but books.

In the mid-1960s, a reading revolution burst onto the scene. New Zealand researcher Marie Clay conducted an extensive study of the early reading behaviors of five-year-old Kindergarten students and concluded that young children could engage in letter and word identification, voice-print matching, and even self-monitoring. These were pretty radical ideas in an era when many people believed that reading instruction before the age of six-and-a-half was “futile if not deleterious” (Hiebert & Raphael, 1998, 5).

Perhaps, suggested Clay, the ability to make letter–sound connections is not the entry point into reading, but a medial step in a whole progression of behaviors leading to making meaning from print. In her 1967 doctoral dissertation, Marie Clay coined the term *emergent reading* to define the ongoing and developmental process of understanding and using written language from birth to independence.

This seminal research led to an increase in literacy activities in Kindergarten classrooms across North America. While read-alouds had always been an important part of the Kindergarten day, the shared-book approach (Holdaway, 1979) gave children the opportunity to view the print while listening to the story. Whole language advocates encouraged schools to immerse students in a print-rich environment and to integrate letter–sound instruction into experiences with connected print. Along with the housekeeping centres and puppet theatres and building blocks, teachers were encouraged to incorporate “literacy artifacts” such as books, notecards, and writing tools. Role-play reading and invented spelling were recognized as important steps on the journey to literacy. For the first time, kindergartners were expected to read and write as well as play.

Enter the National Reading Panel report of 2000 (NRP, 2000). This meta-analysis of the research on reading instruction concluded that systematic, synthetic phonics should be taught as early as possible. This study led to “No Child Left Behind,” an important Act of Congress in the US, which increased academic demands on kindergartners and required educators to use specific “scientifically based” literacy programs. Recess, thematic learning, dramatic play centres, and discovery were replaced by didactic teaching and prescriptive programs. In many schools, you were more likely to see children sitting in desks completing worksheets than playing with blocks or playdough.

Play-Based Learning

Today, the pedagogical pendulum seems to be swinging once again. While many schools still maintain a highly academic approach, others are looking to Europe for models of play-based learning. The renowned project-based programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy, have had a profound influence on early childhood education throughout North America. In these schools, children are viewed as active constructors of their own learning, learning that is conducted through experiences with touching, moving, listening, and watching, as well as interactions with other children, their environments, and the adults in their world.

As ever, teachers are left struggling to find the balance. How much explicit instruction is appropriate—or necessary? Can children learn essential foundational skills through play? In this book, we are striving to support teachers as they seek the “sweet spots” at which learning through discovery is optimal or instructional intervention is necessary.

Kindergarten teachers have long found themselves caught in the tension between “child-centred” and “academically oriented” instruction. Play is the primary means by which young children make sense of their world and the social, physical, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive benefits of play are myriad. On the other hand, researchers like Judith Schickedanz (2004) caution that certain foundational literacy concepts such as letter names or initial consonants are often not “discoverable” and must be taught, especially to children who come to school with few literacy experiences. Obviously there is room for both in the Kindergarten curriculum. As Kagan and Lowenstein argue, “Diverse strategies that combine play and more structured efforts are effective accelerators of children’s readiness for school and long term development” (2004, 72).

In fact, there is a wide spectrum between free play and didactic instruction. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and her colleagues (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013) define a midpoint they call guided play, which involves creating structured environments to stimulate children’s natural curiosity, discovery, and exploration while meeting specific curricular goals. Tools and tasks are carefully designed to allow students to explore and construct their own knowledge, with the support of sensitive questions and prompts from the teacher to guide the learning.

In her study of learning models in Kindergarten classrooms, Jennifer Russell (2011) observed that the majority of activities focused on academic goals but employed child-centred techniques such as constructivist learning and manipulating concrete materials. Even teacher-directed events often reflected playful overtones, such as games to reinforce letter–sound connections or high-frequency words. It all boils down to developmentally appropriate practice.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Kindergartners—and all children, for that matter—are best served by teaching that is appropriate to their developmental stage and sensitive to their individuality. At its foundation, developmentally appropriate practice is just good teaching. It is instruction that meets each child where he or she is on the learning continuum, then continuously scaffolds him or her to higher and higher levels of proficiency.

In 1986, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released its first position statement on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), in an effort to consolidate the rapidly emerging research on early literacy instruction. This position statement advocated a child-centred, play-oriented environment that offered children opportunities to explore literacy—if they chose to—with minimal teacher intervention. Some researchers determined that students in these types of environments were more motivated to learn and more confident about their own abilities (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995) and demonstrated higher achievement in later grades (Marcon, 2002). Others argued that the research behind developmentally appropriate practice was flawed and found no evidence that DAP improved either social or academic outcomes (Van Horn, Karlin, Ramey, Aldridge, & Snyder, 2005).

Prompted by a changing world of student demographics, increased expectations for student (and teacher) performance, and concern for children at risk of academic failure, the NAEYC issued a revised edition of its position statement on DAP in 2009. While maintaining its original belief in a constructivist, child-centred philosophy, the NAEYC also acknowledged the need for a balance of explicit instruction and modeling of critical skills.

In today's Kindergarten, it is generally agreed that children need more than just incidental experiences with print. The National Reading Panel (2000) advised that reading instruction should begin as early as possible, especially for vulnerable children who have not had rich experiences with print in the language of their school. The National Strategy for Early Literacy (Canadian Language and Literacy Network, 2009) asserts that most literacy challenges can be prevented through a mix of: a) effective instruction; b) early learning experience; c) systematic assessment to identify specific needs; and d) appropriate targeted intervention.

Dorothy Strickland (2008), a member of the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), encourages a “peaceful coexistence” between developmentally appropriate practice and pressure to address the achievement gap that exists between our most vulnerable children and those that are more advantaged. She identifies three key characteristics of this balanced teaching:

1. It must be engaging and motivational, tapping into student interests;
2. It must be differentiated, stretching each child from where he or she is today to where he or she can be; and
3. It must involve explicit teaching with opportunities for guided practice in essential concepts and skills.

Today's developmentally appropriate Kindergarten classroom is likely to include both direct instruction and unstructured play—and a myriad of activities in between. The classroom is full of print and other literacy artifacts that children are sometimes free to explore independently, sometimes invited to navigate with

Whole class instruction should be brief, intentional, and multilevel.

teacher guidance, and sometimes taught directly and explicitly. There are many opportunities for children to interact, plan, question, explain, problem-solve, and tell stories with one another and with the teacher. Children receive plenty of individual and small-group instruction targeted to their diverse needs and learning goals. There is a minimum of whole-class instruction; when it occurs, it is brief, intentional, and multilevel.

The NAEYC's 2009 position statement reminds us to think of developmentally appropriate practice not as "either/or" but as "both/and." Children must experience *both* explicit instruction *and* opportunities for free exploration and discovery. They benefit from *both* teacher-directed activities *and* spontaneous play. They thrive on *both* opportunities for choice and self-direction *and* clearly defined parameters for accepted behavior. They need *both* a positive image of themselves *and* a healthy respect for others who might be different from them.

Anne McGill-Franzen (2006) asserts, "If we are to improve literacy ... we have to embrace the belief that teaching reading to five year olds can be a school experience that's every bit as playful, imaginative, inquiry-driven and developmentally appropriate as anything John Dewey or Jean Piaget might have dreamed up." (16)

When moving towards establishing a play-based Kindergarten classroom, I worried about how to address curriculum outcomes within an environment that allowed the students to explore and understand concepts and skills through play. I understood and valued the experiences that students could explore through play but was uncertain how the academic outcomes would be realized when the play was organized and initiated solely by the children. I came to realize that I, as the teacher, had an important role in developing and organizing opportunities for learning within my classroom. I needed to create playful experiences for students to engage in concept and skill practice. I moved away from independent practice with paper and pencil activities and toward a centre-based approach that allowed for interaction between students, materials, and skills/concepts. I carefully chose playful materials for the students to utilize at the centres so that student engagement and time on task was maximized (i.e., bean bags, bingo dobbers, giant die, smelly markers, magnetic wands, toy cars). What five-year-old would not want to throw a bean bag at a hopscotch grid taped to the floor to practice naming alphabet letters, practice letter sounds, or read the sight words they are learning? I began to think as a five-year-old and pay attention to what materials, formats, and experiences were appealing to them. There were plenty of ideas that at first seemed interesting and relevant but when put into practice were less than successful; however, these provided me with opportunities to reflect and refine my practice.

Shauna Lothrop, Kindergarten teacher

Reading and Writing All Day Long

We have long recognized the importance of filling children's world with print. That's why we teachers used to spend precious time and money creating elaborate bulletin boards, listing classroom "rules," and labeling everything in the room from the windows to the hamster cage. But too often that environmental print has lacked purpose, ignored by children at best and a distraction at worst.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) has cautioned against cluttering the classroom environment with purposeless print that tunes children out rather than engages them. Environmental print is just wall-paper unless it promotes student learning.

That's why today's Kindergarten is filled with environmental print that is created and usually initiated by the students themselves. Charts, signs, labels, directions, warnings, and instructions are just a few of the types of print that children create to send messages to others, record information, and document their own learning.

Walk into one of the classrooms in Donna-Lynn's district and you'll be surrounded by print. Not prefabricated bulletin board letters or careful teacher labels, but children's writing in all its many forms. A sign on the light table says, in invented spelling, "I mixed green and blue and it made turquoise." A sheet taped to a Straws and Connectors™ construction says, "This is a mouse hotel." Paper ghosts swing from a clothes rack labeled "Haunted House." The attendance sign-in sheet next to the door features kid-written names reflecting various stages of development. This is a classroom in which writing reigns. A bulletin board displays an alphabet zoo. There are wonder walls and experience charts on which teachers record the students' ideas and questions. There's a traditional writing corner with postcards, different sizes of sheets of paper, and various writing utensils for children to write letters and messages and stories.

The children in Donna-Lynn's district know that writing is an important tool for giving instructions or sending messages to others. But it's also an important tool for documenting their learning, recording their thinking, and remembering their ideas. Long after the mouse hotel is disassembled and the haunted house is converted into something else, these students will have their drawings and/or writing to help them remember what they made, what they thought, and what they learned.

Environmental print also helps young learners see how important writing is in our world—all day, every day. Print tells us how to drive safely and when it's okay to cross the street; it tells us what's on television and where to find our favorite shows; it tells us how many scoops of sugar to put into our cookie batter and how to get to an unfamiliar place.

Thirty years ago, Jerome Harste (1984) and his colleagues reported that children as young as eighteen months old could identify the labels on familiar cereal, toothpaste, and fast-food packaging. These early experiences with the print in their world help children develop the understanding that abstract symbols can represent concrete ideas. At first, children recognize words as pictograms—the logo on the candy wrapper or the traffic sign—and don't make the connection to the individual letters S-T-O-P in a different context. But they start to develop the understanding that those squiggles called letters are put together in certain ways to make words and that the letters C-R-E-S-T say the same thing whether they're imprinted on a toothpaste tube or handwritten on a piece of paper. That's when familiar environmental print can be a useful tool in helping children print new words; recognizing, for example, *sting* has the same beginning sound as a known word *stop*.

Getting children to create their own print environment helps them use letters and sounds in meaningful, authentic ways. It reinforces that their voices are heard and that their ideas are important. It helps them learn and remember their ideas.

Not all Kindergarten children will be at the same stage of readiness to write at the same time. Drawing, scribbling, using invented spelling, and copying words from around the room must be accepted according to the child's stage of development. Only the teacher knows which children to nudge, which to support, and which to celebrate just where they are. But if we are to expect children to use reading and writing to learn, we need to provide them with opportunities for learning to read and write. That's where explicit instruction comes in.

The skills and attitudes that children acquire in Kindergarten will have a significant impact on their learning for years to come. In this book, we've attempted to provide a bridge between learning environments where children are free to interact with others, take risks, and make decisions about their own learning—and systematic instruction and practice in the skills and strategies of literate citizens. In the first section of the book, we share thoughts about what play and inquiry have to do with literacy, how the classroom environment, both indoors and outside, affects learning, and the importance of oral language development to all facets of learning. The second section of the book focuses on explicit literacy instruction: our children can't *read and write to learn* unless they have opportunities to *learn to read and write*. After much deliberation, we've decided to conclude the book with a chapter about celebrating diversity. It might be argued that addressing the needs of our most vulnerable children should have been the first chapter of the book rather than the last. However, research tells us that our at-risk learners need the same good instruction that the other students need, but they need it even more. That's why we chose to discuss best practices earlier in the book.

We recognize that this book is just a snapshot of effective practices in today's Kindergarten classrooms. There are many books that provide more detail on every one of the practices outlined here. (Lori has written some of them herself.) But, we trust that teachers will find some information that reinforces their own beliefs and practices, some ideas to supplement their Kindergarten programs, and, most importantly, some information that will lead them to further exploration, research, and experimentation.

We are delighted that several of our teacher-colleagues have been willing to share some of their stories and you'll find them throughout the pages of this book.

As the authors, we have experienced the same growing pains as many of our colleagues in the field. Both of us come from a traditional Kindergarten background. Lori was an early advocate of explicit literacy instruction in Kindergarten. Donna-Lynn was a leader in the full-day Kindergarten initiative in Ontario schools and is well-grounded in play-based learning. Most of the material in this book involved intense discussion, plenty of laughter, and lots of give-and-take as we struggled to find the "sweet spots" at which child-centered discovery and teacher-guided instruction co-ordinated most effectively. But, for both of us, it always boiled down to one thing: what's in the best interests of the children? That was always our guiding principle. And we learned to share our toys and play nicely in the sandbox. This book is the result.

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Play-Based Learning in a Culture of Inquiry

Anyone who's ever been a kid knows what play is, right? Well, not necessarily. We can all recognize play when we see it, but explaining it is a lot trickier. Play is a complex set of behaviors that is actually quite difficult to define. It's generally accepted that an activity can be considered more or less playful, depending on the extent to which it is: pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, process-oriented, freely chosen, actively engaging the mind and/or body, and involving imagination or make-believe (Krasnor & Pepler, 1980; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). In other words, running on the playground pretending to be superheroes and sitting on the floor sorting alphabet letters could both be considered "play," but would fall on different points on the "play spectrum."

Although purists maintain that true play exists without external motivation or adult intervention, there is increasing evidence that "guided play" can contribute significantly to learning (Weisberg et al., 2013). Guided play sits halfway between free play and direct instruction, with adult-scaffolded learning objectives incorporated into child-directed activity. "In guided play, teachers might enhance children's exploration and learning by commenting on their discoveries, co-playing along with the children, asking open-ended questions about what the children are finding or exploring the materials in ways that children might not have thought to do. Guided play always sees the child as an active collaborator in the process of learning, and not merely as a recipient of information" (105).

For example, sometimes children might be given an opportunity to play freely with a set of magnets. Or they might be invited to identify which objects are attracted by a magnet and which are not, and guided to construct generalizations about what makes an object magnetic. Although the latter example is extrinsically motivated and not freely chosen, it can still be fun, active, and engaging for children—playful learning, in other words. Most importantly, each activity is child-oriented—geared to the child's own interests and engagement. There is room for both types of play in today's Kindergarten classroom. In fact, one study which invited children to engage freely in object play before being asked to use those objects to solve a problem suggests that the previous examples with magnets might be even more effective if the children had an opportunity to play freely with the magnets before being asked to interact with them in a more directed way.

Although play is an important end in itself for children, it is also a means to other ends. Through play, children learn to co-operate and compromise, to lead and to follow. By pretending to be a parent or a baby, a firefighter or a teacher, children practice the norms of the culture in which they live. Play has been shown to have an impact on understanding the perspectives of others—an important foundation of empathy and social acceptance.