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ABSTRACT
        Strong support from eminent educators such as Froebel and
Dewey and other scholars has led to play becoming a major component of early
childhood curricula. This paper draws on research studies to: (1) elaborate
on the nature of play and its function in children's overall development; (2)
discuss how children's play relates to their literacy learning; and (3)
propose practical suggestions for the use of play to promote early literacy
in preschool programs. Suggestions include allowing large time-blocks for
play, and creating informal learning situations in which children use
"reading" and "writing" for real purposes as an inherent part of their play.
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LET CHILDREN PLAY AND DEVELOP INTO READERS AND WRITERS OF THEIR OWN WORLDS

(Play to Promote Early Literacy)

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LET CHILDREN PLAY AND DEVELOP INTO READERS AND WRITERS

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As long ago as the nineteenth century, Froebel perceived the value of play as lying in the opportunities it provides for sensory experiences which, in turn, are foundation of intellectual development. More specifically, Froebel (1885), as quoted in Henniger (1991), once theorized that

> A child who plays capably, spontaneously, quietly, enduringly, even to the point of bodily fatigue, becomes certainly also a capable, quiet, enduring man, self-sacrificingly promoting his own and others' welfare (p.63).

Parallel to Froebel's "theory", Dewey (1962) had this to say

> Through their games they learn about the work and play of the grown-up world. Besides noting the elements which make up this world, they find out a good deal about the actions and processes that are necessary to keep it going (quoted in Henniger, 1991, p.63).

With such a strong support from those eminent educators and other scholars, play has been a major component of early childhood curriculums, especially those constructed on the basis of models inspired by Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Dewey (Nourot, 1993)

In the field of early childhood education researchers have conducted a great number of research studies to further examine things associated with those theories-- the "dynamics" of play and its relation to learning in general, and literacy acquisition in particular.

This article will (1) elaborate on the nature of play and its function in children's overall development, (2) discuss how children's play relates to their literacy learning, and (3) proposed practical suggestions for the use of play to promote early literacy in preschool programs.

A. The Nature of Play

Bruner's (1983) observational studies have shown that play is an inherent part of childhood life. It is a tool children use to make sense of and learn more about their world (Daiute, 1989). Play is a form of thought for children. In its complex forms, play is often characterized by the use of symbols to represent objects, ideas, and situations not present in the immediate time and place (Nourot & Hoorn, 1991). In line with this, Peterson (1992) contends that play can enrich the imagination, provide opportunities for developing originality, and strengthen the individual's ability to cope with problems and the unexpected. Citing Piaget (1962), Morrow and Rand (1991) posit that play can serve as a way of assimilating new information and consolidating past experience through symbolic means.

Upon reviewing a number of works by other researchers, Christie (1991) synthesized some qualities that generally characterize children's play: nonliterality (i.e., often times play has its own "logic", to use the term of Bruner, 1983), means over ends (i.e., children's attention is focused on the activity itself rather than on the goal of the play), positive effects (i.e., children in play are generally playful, filled with pleasures and joys), flexibility (when playing, children are especially apt to try more novel combinations of ideas and behaviors), voluntary (play is generally spontaneous and is voluntarily chosen by the children themselves), and internal control (i.e., in play the players are in control of what to do and how the events should go).

Play is a central part of childhood, and represents a major way of children's dealing with their inner and outer worlds.

1. Types of Play

Researchers and early childhood educators have categorized play in different ways. Some have used "alone versus with partners" as an organizer, resulting in different play types such as solitary, parallel, and group play (Christie & Wardle, 1992). Other experts, building on Piaget's classifications, have proposed other names of play. For instance, Christie (1972) citing Smilansky (1968), has proposed the following categories: (a) functional play, which is characterized by involvement of repetitive muscle movement with or without object (e.g., running and jumping; stacking and knocking down blocks; digging in a sand pit; and bouncing a ball against a wall); (b) constructive play, that involves the use of objects (e.g., blocks, logo, tinker toys) or materials (such as sand, play dough, clay, etc.) to build something; (c) dramatic play, that involves role-playing and/or make-believe transformations (e.g., pretending to be a doctor checking up blood tension of a doll being treated as a pretend patient; using a block of wood as a telephone set when making a phone call, etc.); and (d) games with rules, that involve recognizing, accepting, and conforming to some pre-established rules.

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A body of research studies reviewed by Christie (1991) have indicated that those cognitive categories follow children's chronological-developmental trends. For instance, functional play is found to be the most prevalent form of play during the first three years of life; constructive play and dramatic play are "popular" among children three-through-five years of age. Especially unique is dramatic play: it first appears between the ages of eighteen months to two years, increasing during the preschool years, reaching its peak about age six,and then, declining during middle childhood.

It seems that not all types of play are created equal. Research in early literacy and "peer culture" suggests that (social) dramatic play is of special importance to the children's literacy development because its symbolic and abstract nature, which is very compatible with the cognitive operations in literate behaviors (e.g., Benson, 1993; Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1993; Pallegrini, DeStefano, & Thompson, 1983; Roskos, 1988).

2. Functions of Play

According to Arnaud (1974), play can serve, at least, nine functions in the educative process: (a) as an energizer and organizer of cognitive learning; (b) as a reducer of anxiety and emotional turmoil; (c) a way of lessening "egocentrism"; (d) as a way of "readying" children's acceptance of the arbitrary nature of other symbolizations such as those governing reading and writing acts; (e) as a channel for energy release which is vital to children's physical development; (f) as a medium for exploratory and trial-and-error activities; (g) as a way of rehearsing problem-solving; (h) as a medium for self-expressions; and (i) as a medium to enable children to organize different experiences, integrate and make sense out of them and store them to add to children's schemata.

Building on what Arnaud has proposed, it seems safe to characterize children's play as potentially having positive effects on the players' cognitive, affective, social, and physical development.

B. Play and Literacy Learning

As suggested in the preceding section, although all aspects of development resulting from children's engagement in different types of play would influence their literacy development, some types of play would impact on the development more directly than the other. In this case, sociodramatic or pretend play is the most closely related with literacy learning (Roskos, 1988).

A great number of empirical studies support this conclusion. For instance, in her observational study of eight children ages 4 and 5 years in a natural setting where the children were engaged in sustained pretend play, Roskos (1988) noted that those young children acted

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like readers and writers. More specifically, from the analysis of 1,860 minutes of the eight children's sustained pretend play (which was videotaped over six months), the researcher found 41 cohesive episodes, each contained essential story elements. That is, present in each episode were story elements such as a "setting" (including time, place, location, characters, and a goal or central concern), specific events constituting plots, and a "kind of resolution" (p.563). Results of further analysis of Roskos' study have revealed that during the process, when the children were scripting out their pretend play episodes, they engaged in a story-making process. The story they used here reflects a variety of functions: to bring meaning to their pretend play; to organize the play and its players; to enable structuring, coordinating and sustaining the play talk with the actions (the who, what, when, where, and why of the enterprise), and to bring both personal as well as shared meaning to the play.

From the data of the same research, Roskos also found that in the videotaped children's pretend play there were a significant number of literacy(like) activities. That is, 450 distinct reading and writing acts were observed as each of the children was "acting out" their respective roles-- e.g., acting like reading favorite books to pretend babies, scribbling or drawing horizontal lines to pretend to write a phone message, to prepare a shopping list, to issue a check, etc.

On the basis of their empirical study on longitudinal relations among preschoolers' symbolic play, metalinguistic verbs, and emergent literacy, Pellegrini and Galda (1991) suggested that the metalinguistic verbs that characterize preschoolers' symbolic play parallel the acquisition of the concept of prints; the level of abstraction in symbolic play can predict preschoolers' emergent writing status. According to these researchers, early writing is a representational act whose competence has its root in make-believe play. Also early reading, whose processing requires the use of metalinguistic verbs, is facilitated by children's symbolic play because the basic process of making sense of decontextualized text shares the same "cognitive operation" as that of symbolic play.

Harste, Woodward, and Burk (1984), as cited in Hall (1991), have argued that literacy development has to do with experience-- especially the experience of freely negotiating, taking risks, fine-tuning, and having genuine intentions where literacy is concerned. This situation nicely fits the nature of play, which, as suggested in the preceding section, is almost always a process of experimentation, risk-taking, and negotiation in purposeful and intentional ways.

In sum, the relationship between play and emergence of literacy can be formulated as the following. First, the cognitive operations inherent to children's play can function as preparation for more complex cognitive activities such as those involved in reading and writing acts. Second, the symbolic behavior, as reflected in children's play, is related to the understanding of representational system like written language. Third, as evident in Rosko's study and the work

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of Pellegrini, DeStefano, and Thompson (and similar works of other scholars), linguistic behavior of the children in play is similar to literate language.

Since life experience is the stuff out of which pretend play is spun, all literacy routines that children observe and experience will find their way into children's play. The play that the children construct would, in turn, make the literacy(like) activity meaningful to them.

D. Endnotes and Suggestions

As suggested in the preceding section, children's engagement in (pretend) play may result in an atmosphere conducive to learning. Or, in the words of Bruner (1972),

> Play appears to serve several centrally important functions. First, it is a means of minimizing the consequences of one's actions and of learning, therefore, in a less risky situation....Second, play provides an excellent opportunity to try combinations of behavior that would, under functional pressure, never be tried (p.693).

As Vygotsky's (1978) general learning theory suggests, children would acquire literacy skills and literate disposition as a result of transactions with a literate (social, physical, psychological, and ideological) environment as the children engage in purposeful social interactions with knowledgeable members of the culture and/or their own peers. Consistent with this social constructivist theory, Dyson (1990) has posited that like the adults surrounding them, children invest certain types of forms--movements, lines, sounds-- with meaning and, therefore, they are in the position to begin to use the movements of play, the lines of drawing, and the sounds of language to symbolize the objects, people, events, and ideas that constitute their world.

The theories cited above should enable the creation of learning environment that would support children's natural inclination for play and literacy learning. This is possible because play can provide a context within which the emergence of literacy can be manifested and explored. The emergent literacy, in turn, enriches the play, supporting the development and processing of experiential knowledge. In other words, to ensure the mutually-supportive nature of play-and-literacy connections, the young children should be provided with literacy-rich play opportunities.

In order to make this happen, the following suggestions are proposed.

- *Provide children with ample play materials and equipments; allow them large time-blocks for play; and help them enrich the content of their play experience.*

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If we want young children to creatively play and freely express their thoughts and imagination, we need to make available for them ample play materials and equipments (e.g., housekeeping props, dress-up cloths, dolls, toy cars and other vehicle; scissors, paints, crayons, paper; beads, puzzles, small blocks/ manipulatives, etc.). Empirical studies reviewed by Christie (1991) have indicated that availability of various materials and equipments encourage children to explore a variety of play types; that different materials encourage different cognitive levels of play. Large blocks of time for play need to be allotted to ensure that the children can develop their play to the limit of their imagination. Research by Christie & Wardle (1992) has clearly demonstrated that longer play periods encourage children to engage in higher social and cognitive forms of play-- because with large time-blocks allotments children will be able to recruit fellow players and to engage in negotiations necessary for cooperative play, that result in an increased group play in general and in group-dynamics in particular.

Teachers' selective contribution to children's play can also make the play richer. "Selective contribution" here means that, in order not to dominate the children's play, the teacher's "intervention" should be limited to suggestions, comments, questions, and demonstrations (Schrader, 1991). Whereas adults' "participation" in children's learning gains strong support from Vygotsky (as noted in the preceding section), teachers' failure in "reading the right moment for contribution" (e.g., teachers being too dominating. God forbid!) can destroy the authenticity of the children's play. If, for some reason, the children feel that the play is not theirs, the play will lose its power as a learning tool (Peterson, 1992).

- *Create an informal learning situation that would involve children in using "reading" and "writing" for real purposes as inherent part of their play.*

One possible play activity for this particular situation is role-playing in pretend contexts such as a grocery store, post office, restaurant, etc. Social (dramatic) play like this will engage young children in their favorite play while, at the same time, acting out literacy behavior-- e.g., reading fliers or written advertisements, and writing shopping lists; writing letters and reading lists of postal service charges or stamps; reading menus and writing an order of their favorite food, etc.

When conducted in meaningful fashion, this "literacy rehearsal" can foster children's emergent literacy.

- *Foster children's awareness of the functionality of reading and writing.*

Together with children, the teacher might want to write on a piece of large construction paper the names, phone numbers, and birthdates of every individual in the group. After this, the teacher might get the children involved in talking about the values of being able to read and write their own names, and then follow up this conscious-raising literacy activity with children's writing labels and signs to be posted in the classroom environment. Also relevant here is the use of the "list of children's names" that has just been made. For example, the teacher

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might want to use the list as a guide for ordering children's turns for a personal story-telling activity-- where each individual child is invited to share her/his personal story to the group.

Meaningful reading-writing (and storying) activities of this kind can increase children's awareness of the use of literacy acts such as reading and writing.

- *Facilitate children's conceptual development.*

One way to facilitate children's conceptual development is by involving them in a wide range of activities, including field trips, hands-on projects, science experience, and giving them opportunities to examine cultural/literacy objects and artifacts. To help children "internalize" their new experiences, a follow-up activity is in order. A group talk and/or role-play might serve the purpose.

Experiences such as those outlined above can promote children's conceptual development in general and vocabulary enrichment in particular, which is important for their future schooling experience.

- *Provide children with many opportunities to use various media of arts-- to (role)play, draw, write, dance, and dramatize stories.*

Children's engagement in all of those media of expression--that basically involves symbol-making-- would allow them to transform and elaborate on their experiences. According to Dyson (1990), this particular mode of activity represents one of the children's major ways of learning about their world and about each other.
Give children some options to allow for their personal inclinations.

Teachers need to make available for the children a variety of literacy-rich play formats and symbolic products (e.g., poems, pictures, songs, stories, etc.). The activity format should also allow some options, including the possibilities for individuals to choose whether they would join with others or pursue their own agendas.

This kind of arrangement would encourage children to consciously make a personal decision. Dyson (1990) suggests that the tensions between the need for social connection and personal voice-- that would necessarily result from this "open-ended" arrangement-- would promote self-expression: the shaping of inner worlds through outer forms.

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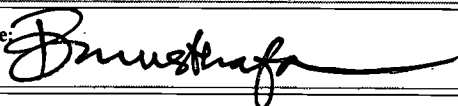| Author(s): Bachrudin Musthafa, PhD.	
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