The Value of Preschool Play in Literacy Development

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In a spacious preschool classroom busy with young children's chatter, Bethany and Lilly gallop across the classroom with bright smiles on their faces as they ride pretend horses toward the barrel racecourse they have created out of cushions, pillows, and blocks. Initially, an observer might consider the girls' activity to be silly children's play. However, this familiar activity merits a closer look, and is, in fact, an example of playful learning. Seemingly an oxymoron, playful learning is a combination of freedom, exploration, curiosity, and experimentation that carries the potential for children to learn about the world around them (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009). Self-directed activities, such as Bethany and Lilly's pretend horse racing, are where children build independence, language, and social skills without adult supervision or guidance. Preschools abound with examples of such active, playful learning. In this article, the first author shares her experiences, observations, and insights gained from her work as a preschool educator and as a graduate student studying early literacy fundamentals. Together with her graduate school advisor, the second author, they explored how literacy learning evolves naturally and in authentic contexts. Their conversations resulted in this collaboration wherein they discuss the ways young children grow in language sophistication.

Introduction

Parents, caregivers, and teachers understand the importance of play for social development. In imaginative play, young children interact with their playmates to create and navigate interpersonal connections. While a vital part of early learning, play also supports language use and fluency, especially as early childhood educators introduce children to increasingly more complex spoken and written language (Morrow, 2020). Along with guided

instruction in early literacy skills, children benefit greatly from ample playtime to reinforce speech and literacy development (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009).

The argument for play-based preschool is grounded in child development theories and practitioners' wisdom. The outdated notion that learning must be rigid, organized, and teacher-directed created a false boundary separating play and learning (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013) and is replaced with new understandings supported by research that play and learning occur without teacher guidance (Wise Lindeman, 2013; Zosh, et al., 2018). Researchers (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001) have re-examined ideas about play and learning and recast them as "playful learning"—learning through play. In this article, free play (child-directed, self-initiated) and guided play (adult-facilitated with a specific learning goal) are discussed with examples taken from preschool settings that honor children's individuality and self-expression. These classrooms align with what the science of learning suggests: that children learn best when experiences are active, engaging, socially interactive, meaningful, and enjoyable (Huang, et al., 2025) and that choice empowers users to take an active role in the play experience (Guthrie, 2011).

The Setting for Playful Learning

Classrooms and other spaces can be transformed into playful learning landscapes that provide opportunities for language and learning. Scholars have been intrigued by the question of how children learn. Theorists, including Rousseau and Froebel, believed in the natural unfolding of a child and stressed the importance of play (Rusk & Scotland, 1979). They believed that adult guidance and a planned environment maximized the benefits of play. Froebel's strategies, including when the class sings songs and completes group activities, centered on concepts of shape, color, size, measurement, and comparison (Morrow, 2020). John Dewey's more child-centered curriculum focused on children's interests and learning through play in real-life settings

(Morrow, 2020). As a result, “classrooms are often organized with shelves that hold various sizes and shapes of blocks, toy trucks, and figures of people, scraps of fabric, and pipe cleaners (p. 16). Dewey’s influence can be seen in preschool and early education classes across the nation.

Oral Language Development

Playful learning encourages language fluency and vocabulary development. Language fluency, an essential component of preschool education, grows as children build basic grammar structures and vocabulary (Moats, 2010). During play, children are communicating with others, which allows them to expand their oral language and develop their use of spoken language to achieve specific goals (Morrow & Rand, 1991). Vocabulary expands when individuals are exposed to new circumstances. For example, in learning about crocheting, there are specific labels for concepts: crochet hook, chain, slipstitch, and variegated yarn. The initial crocheter finds that with practice, the at-first awkward steps become automated. “Casting on 20 stitches” is no longer a daunting task. Parallels can be drawn with preschool language learning. Phrases such as “we lining up here,” “let’s take turns using the ball,” and “listen when a friend is speaking” might be unfamiliar to some students, but such phrases and behaviors are essential to know for a community of young children sharing a learning space. Moats (2010) noted the features of language, including tone, vocabulary, inflection, facial expression, and eye contact. Children are not born with this knowledge; they must acquire it, and this acquisition occurs in natural contexts within home and other familiar environments. Preschoolers can explore and develop communication through play and interpersonal connection (Morrow & Rand, 1991).

Toys that replicate actual familiar items encourage vocabulary development and are ubiquitous in preschools. Preschool providers facilitate vocabulary development with themed toys, such as kitchen set-ups, mock grocery stores, veterinary clinics with stuffed animals

needing care, and construction areas with plastic tools and hard hats. In these play situations, children use purposeful, context-specific communication with each other (Morrow & Rand, 1991). For example, my preschoolers have a play kitchen with plastic food items, a doll house with miniature furniture, and a work bench with a toolbox full of plastic tools. Specific target words that are part of the make-believe play are used—for example, "chef," "hostess," "waiter," and "server." Sometimes I join the play as a co-participant to prompt additional words. I have found children acquire language more deeply when vocabulary is learned in a meaningful, contextualized, and engaging environment rather than through de-contextualized activities, such as flashcards. Indeed, these spaces encourage my young charges to engage in dynamic play that interweaves with personal experiences within their lives. Research by Wise Lindeman (2008) indicated that guided play significantly outperforms completely free play and is equally or more effective than direct instruction for teaching young children expressive vocabulary.

Plastic or wooden blocks are a staple in most preschool settings. Playful learning opportunities abound as children engage in guided construction when a teacher offers open-ended challenges, such as, "Can you build a bridge to get from this house to that cabin on the other side of the river?" In this instance, rather than just stacking blocks aimlessly, children use spatial and geometrical vocabulary—below, above, underneath, parallel, or farther—to express their thinking (Wise Lindeman, 2013). Additionally, block users experience the concepts of gravity and balance firsthand. If the tower of stacked blocks collapses, they must shift plans and try a new configuration, thus demonstrating spatial reasoning and problem solving. Studies on young children's cognitive development support guided block play to enhance spatial vocabulary and reasoning (Hirsh-Pasek, et al, 2009; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

I have observed how children negotiate rules for games. They work together to discuss who goes first, who is the cook and who is the server, when to switch roles, and how to share play artifacts or equipment, such as balls and jump ropes. I have even seen children barter for play materials. Rand and Morrow (2021) confirm that play situations such as these promote increasingly dynamic, complex verbal communication between preschoolers that reinforces and develops fluency. Effective adult assistance can help children learn to negotiate these communications. When teachers make suggestions or observations, they provide options for the interactions. While many language skills are being practiced and used, the social development of casual communication during play also supports emerging literacy skills (Moats, 2010).

Dramatic play, including when children dress up or use costumes—masks, vintage clothing, themed clothing (clown costumes or Western wear), or even something as simple as hats, scarves, and bandanas—invite youngsters to use their imaginations. In these situations, young children use language, selecting words to convey their feelings, and learn from their peers. Dramatic play also promotes creative engagement with story building and awareness. Between the ages of four and six, children are the most likely to engage in dramatic play with playmates (Christie, 1990; Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009). Children may assign roles and act out parts, indicate beginning, action scenes, and often even an ending (Roskos, 2008). Participants may mark the beginning with indicators such as “once upon a time” or describe an introductory scene, mimicking settings they already know (Roskos, 2008). This linguistic transfer from having heard stories read aloud confirms the importance of sharing stories with young listeners. Word learning grows and deepens with opportunities to hear, experience, and use language.

A favorite activity of my students that illustrates language use is “moms and kittens.” Two children are assigned to be kittens, while the third is the mom. The mom is usually played

by a child who serves as the narrator, defining scenes and controlling actions. The "mom" introduces the setting or describes what is going to happen, and those assigned to be kittens assume their roles and talk in a sing-song tone with meows. The children experiment with conflict and resolution while attempting to help a sick kitten or defeat the bad guy, often played by a fourth student who joins the group. They will even incorporate scribble writing and make-believe reading into the scenes if given the tools to do so. Dramatic play allows children to explore stories and literacy in a creative format (Roskos, 2008). Children who are adept in dramatic play are often the risk-takers in writing and use a more extensive vocabulary compared to their peers who do not engage in dramatic play (Christie, 1990). I have noticed that children with a more expansive vocabulary choose dramatic play with more complex themes. Dramatic free play contributes to young children's literacy development as they explore story creation and have fun using language in meaningful contexts.

Concepts About Print and Authentic Purposes for Writing

The National Center for Family Literacy (2004) provides guidelines about scientifically-based research, which identifies those foundational emergent literacy skills that predict success in reading and writing. Skills include alphabet knowledge; knowledge of books, including words used in talking about books (title, author, cover, print, and pictures); and visual processing, or the ability to match or discriminate visually presented symbols (Fisher, et al., 2023). The more opportunities children have to explore print in varied contexts, the greater their potential for language development.

Early writing exploration manifests in children's growing awareness that print—even scribbles—carries meaning. Scribble writing, the initial developmental stage that leads to conventional spelling, teaches children that print conveys a message (Savage, 2011). For

example, when children play “restaurant” and take pretend orders from customers, they are learning about print awareness (Morrow, 2020). In mimicking what wait staff do at restaurants, children are showing their early understanding of how writing conveys meaning. Scribble writing serves as a way children explore written expression and functions as an important aspect of literacy interaction for young children in building language skills. They imitate the writing circumstances they see in their everyday experiences (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2015), and when encouraged, recreate the behavior they see (Morrow, 2020; Roskos, 2008). Adults smile indulgently when young children imitate the functional writing that grown-ups in their world do as part of their daily routine: writing notes, grocery lists, and messages (Gentry & Gillet, 2003; Savage, 2011; Shulzby & Teale, 1985). But this is not just cute behavior; these imitations serve as important baby steps toward more refined understanding of print conventions and why we write.

In my preschool classroom, I have witnessed young learners making pretend grocery lists, planning meals with colored index “recipe cards,” writing notes to friends, writing and sending pretend work emails, and even pretending to take notes as a doctor or nurse would do. In all these situations, children are imitating the behavior of readers and writers; the greater their linguistic knowledge, the more complex the play experiences become (Morrow, 2020; Roskos, 2008). As children progress in learning about English linguistic fundamentals, they can recreate the letters of the alphabet more accurately and begin to play with phonemic approximations as they explore early phonics knowledge and invented spelling (Moats, 2010; Roskos & Christie, 2002). In my classroom, my youngest three-year-olds are experimenting with scribbles, the four-year-olds are exploring with letter placement and spacing, and the more advanced five-year-olds are beginning to learn to spell short words by experimenting with phonetic sounds and written

representation. Providing a literacy enriched environment where children have access to writing materials, a teacher can structure an environment which invites learners to explore print and words (Morrow & Rand, 2026, p. 401). Writing isn't a formulaic skill like adding fractions or subtracting three-digit numerals. Like reading, encoding is a way of learning accomplished over time (Fisher, et al., 2023; Wexler, 2025). Even something as simple as labeling a picture with a word or constructing a short sentence provides users with an opportunity to deepen their understanding of print conventions. As a preschool teacher, I have seen how children grow in sophistication from simple scribbling to writing words that match the alphabetic code. Their smiles and gleeful expressions manifest their joy in these accomplishments.

Another way to learn about print is with daily book sharing and reading experiences. Not only do young children see how books are positioned and how pages are turned, but they can observe the directionality of print, from left to right, top to bottom. Also, young children can identify letters in book titles and learn how letters build words that convey meaning. When they understand print concepts—the title, author, where to find words on a page, the first line of a story —they are demonstrating their understanding of how print in the text works (Fisher, et al., 2023, p. 209). Preschool children may not yet be able to identify words outside of context, but they do understand that print has meaning when it can be deciphered (Share & Gur, 2026). At first, preschoolers need the assistance of adults or pictographs to provide the context (Share & Gur, 2026). But then, beginning at the age of two, children slowly build print awareness skills; this knowledge grows in sophistication with exposure, guided instruction, and opportunities to practice (Share & Gur, 2026). As children's skills grow, they begin to use letter recognition and phonological awareness to recognize words outside of direct context or to more carefully define

them in context (Fisher, et al., 2023: Share & Gur, 2026). Print awareness, a crucial developmental signpost, gets reinforced with playtime activities (Hirsh-Pasek, at al., 2009).

Children's engagement with print and literacy in a play format allows them to explore and discover patterns in print that contribute to their literacy development (Fisher, et al., 2023). Little ones will often imitate the reading habit that adults exhibit (Roskos, 1988, p. 564). Pointing to pictures in books and talking about the story invites the listener to interpret the context to assign meaning to print (Share & Gur, 2026). Acting like readers and writers can help reinforce the direct learning concepts that children are introduced to by adults (Roskos, 1988).

In my preschool classroom, children sit in comfortable places and read books of their choice. For some, this means looking at illustrations; others invent a story as they turn the pages. Their imitation of the actions of the readers in their own life is a crucial early phase in their developmental literacy journey. My preschoolers regularly incorporate books into their play activities. I have witnessed some of my youngsters pretending to read good night stories to babies or pretending to be their mom and reading to dolls before they go to bed. I have also seen my students take ideas from picture books and incorporate these into dramatic play scenarios. In these instances, the children use actual print and behave like readers, reinforcing the concepts that teachers and parents introduce. Neumann and Roskos (1990) observed that literacy is a binding agent of play, adhering the participants to a coherent theme. My experiences serve as confirmation that encouraging children to interact with print and reading during play reinforces concepts and replicates the actions of readers.

However, play cannot be the only approach to literacy learning; it is important to include age-appropriate instruction and then provide opportunities to practice what has been introduced (Goodwin, et al., 2012). Reading stories to children and allowing them to interact by tracing

letters, replicating print, or recognizing print are methods I use that have yielded positive results. When students eagerly show me a word they have learned, I am able to provide confirmation and encouragement. This style of teaching builds the framework for early learning of the sound-letter structures of English (Roskos & Christie, 2026).

Conclusion

Play, a signature preschool activity integral to early literacy development, enjoys new-found respect as a legitimate form of learning and cognitive development. Oral language exploration, dramatic play, print awareness, book handling skills, and scribble writing are aspects of preschools that are foundational to literacy development (Fisher, et al., 2023). Playful learning invites young children to explore and become curious (Moats, 2010). Nowadays, play is recognized as a vital part of the preschool experience, and early childhood educators have convincingly demonstrated play in preschools merits respect and recognition as a developmental literacy milestone (Kirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009). A report by the American Academy of Pediatrics (Yogman et al., 2018) emphasized that play directly alters brain structure and function, promoting executive function rather than rote content mastery. Creating those spaces that invite literacy and language exploration can be accomplished in classrooms that prioritize play. Research consistently shows that integrating play into a preschooler's routine optimizes brain architecture and prepares them for lifelong academic success (Hirsch-Pasek, et al., 2009; Wise Lindeman, 2013). Play acts as a brain-building exercise that develops executive functions like working memory, self-control, and flexible thinking (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Instead of passively memorizing rules, children actively test hypotheses and adapt to changing conditions in real-time. Brittany and Lilly, mentioned in the opening vignette, are not merely galloping on their play horses; they are also using language and imaginative play to construct the parameters

of their game and communicate with each other. Teachers create those kinds of learning and play spaces so that children like Bethany and Lilly have stimulating, safe, fun, and dynamic opportunities to learn literacy fundamentals.

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