

Making a Difference!

Linking Language, Literacy, and Play MEANS QUALITY OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

RESEARCH Profiles



Play is like a gold mine in its potential for facilitating literacy.

~Gretchen Owocki
Literacy Through Play (1999)

Recent national education policy decisions have resulted in a growing emphasis on the cognitive development of young children in the United States, to the detriment, some would say, of their physical, social, and emotional development. In particular, formal instruction in reading readiness is taking the place of play in many early childhood classrooms, and the demonstration of early literacy skills is emerging as the benchmark of successful early education programs.

No one doubts that language-rich and literacy-rich environments are essential to the optimal development of children. Many leading early childhood experts, however, are calling for caution in substituting literacy instruction in the place of play in the curricular activities of young children. Rather than viewing play as “noninstructional time,” we should perhaps consider well-planned, intentional play activities to be the “vehicle” for the development of literacy skills. Dramatic (or pretend) play is particularly valuable and meaningful in moving young children into the symbolic world of letters, sounds, and numbers, according to this way of thinking.

On the other hand, some educators, researchers, and policymakers have presented evidence that didactic, teacher-directed activities are the most promising vehicle for the successful acquisition of reading readiness skills among preschool children. In addition to an increase in experimental studies, recent years have seen the proliferation of literacy curricula, activity books, and computer software for this age group founded on the principle of direct instruction.

As a result of the explosion of interest in early literacy development, a large volume of professional literature now exists on the emergence of reading readiness skills, on appropriate instructional strategies, and on measurable readiness outcomes in the early childhood years. The sheer volume of available studies, books, and position statements makes a complete understanding of early literacy development unattainable for many practitioners in the field. In an effort to integrate current information on early literacy development into a more manageable form, the School Readiness Quality Initiative (SRQI) has undertaken the third in a series of Research Profiles, entitled *Making a Difference!*, on this topic. Previous Research Profiles have focused on the topics of high-quality programs (*Making a Difference! Research Profile #1: Quality Early Care and Education Means Quality Outcomes for Children*) and screening/assessment/ curriculum in early care and education (*Making a Difference! Research Profile #2: Best Practices in Screening, Assessment, and Curriculum Mean Quality Outcomes for Children*).

The Research Profiles are designed to synthesize existing research studies on topics of particular interest to the early care and education field. To develop Research Profile #3, the SRQI has joined with Dr. Pamela C. Phelps of the Creative Center for Childhood Research and Training (Tallahassee, FL) to examine relevant research on the fundamental inter-relationship among language, literacy and play in the lives of young children. Without making a final decision about the value of play versus direct instruction, the Profile will explore the ways in which purposeful play experiences support the development of early language and literacy skills.

This work has resulted in a set of written materials for dissemination in a statewide training seminar in central Florida in May, 2005. In addition to the narrative Research Profile itself, the materials include power point presentations and handouts to enable participants to share the information with others in their local communities. Targeted audience members for the seminar session are individuals occupying positions that will support them in using the materials in training sessions, classes, and workshops so that the information can reach broader groups of practitioners at the local level.