

**PLAY, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND LITERACY IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM**

by Jennifer Rea

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Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience to construct their own understandings of the world around them. Since the beginning of my teaching career I have always felt that it is important for young children to be active learners. More than fifty years ago, Piaget observed his three young children and concluded that all knowledge comes from action and that children actively acquire knowledge through interacting with the physical environment. Yet, in many Kindergarten classrooms play and experiential learning have been replaced by teacher-directed academic learning directed specifically toward the acquisition of literacy skills in general and phonics instruction in particular. In part prompted by the No Child Left Behind Act mandate requiring that all children read by third grade, literacy has become defined narrowly as a set of measurable skills necessary for reading and writing and has resulted in the formalized teaching of letters and sounds at younger ages, limiting time for play and exploratory learning.

In my fieldwork classroom I was fortunate to work with an experienced and gifted teacher, who is committed to teaching young children to become readers and writers. She uses the workshop approach to teaching reading and writing pioneered by Lucy Calkins and the Teacher's College at Columbia University. I am particularly interested in the workshop method of teaching literacy because it is based on the assumption that literacy learning grows out of experience; it is a process of "growing" meaning, taking "a seed idea and grow[ing] it into a speech, a story, a book" (Calkins, 1994, p.7). It is an approach to reading and writing that starts with the child's experiences and interest in communicating and sharing those experiences with others.

THE CLASSROOM

My first impression of the classroom was of a wonderfully "print-rich" environment, full of books in baskets for the children to select for independent reading and charts created by the children and the teacher listing things that good readers and writers do. However, in an early Fieldwork Journal entry I noted:

*I have not seen the children engaged in any sort of free choice activities, play or art work within the classroom. There are no blocks, dress-ups or sand. Returning to Carini's observation of the loss of play in Kindergarten programs and the tendency to increase the academic nature of the curriculum (Carini, 1986), I am prompted to ask, what is*

*lost when play is so reduced on the Kindergarten day? What is the role of play in the early development of literacy? What is the place of play, arts and crafts and dramatic play? (Fieldwork Journal, p.2)*

Although I was impressed to see children reading and writing independently for periods of up to forty-five minutes daily, I felt that something was missing. I did not observe opportunities for children to engage in other modes of learning, such as, imaginative play, art, crafts, block construction and design or exploration of science materials. The questions raised in my fieldwork journal have continued to occupy my thoughts and prompted the inquiry of this paper.

I am concerned that, in our haste to prepare young children for what we perceive to be the demands of schooling, we tend to focus on teaching academic skills, yet, in truth, these skills can be useful only when they are grounded in primary experience. Experiential learning is a fundamental aspect of “readiness” for future learning. Experimental activity with the physical world and the accompanying social interactions fosters curiosity and motivation to learn about the world as well as encouraging the formation of interests. It also creates empowered learners capable of identifying inconsistencies, carrying out their own investigations, and questioning what they see and are told. What’s more, a classroom that offers a choice of activities and encourages children to be self-determining provides a window into the children’s interests and preferred modes of learning. It enables the teacher/observer to learn about and respond to individual needs. Without primary experiences in the formative years how can we expect children to be able to make sense of and evaluate what they read? How can they appreciate the power of writing to go beyond simple reproductions of teacher-directed tasks, to develop thinking, express and communicate ideas and thereby participate in a classroom community of learners?

I would like to adopt the Calkins approach to literacy learning in my Kindergarten classroom, but in the light of my fieldwork experience I find myself posed with a dilemma: How can I balance the demands of such an all-encompassing approach to literacy teaching with the needs of young children to engage in other forms of active learning that I consider necessary to prepare them to be critical and creative readers and writers? I will reflect on fieldwork and Descriptive Review observations with several questions in mind: Why is experiential learning important? And, what might be the implications of an over-emphasis on literacy skills at the expense of active experiential learning and play?

#### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, PLAY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPOWERED LEARNERS

The following Fieldwork Journal entry describes a Kindergarten lesson that was designed to open a study of living things. This classroom investigation demonstrates the importance of thinking, talking and experimenting. The teacher and I wanted the investigation to be experiential and practical, to

provoke the children to ask questions. To start, I presented the children the simple basic question, “What is living and what is non-living?” and invited them to explore the basic physical attributes of life.

*I wondered how to start the investigation and decided to set the scene. I asked the children to imagine that someone came to earth from another planet and wanted to know what life was. What would they tell them? If they asked “What is living and what is non-living?” what would we show them?*

*I was surprised when one child quickly noticed “that’s like fiction and non-fiction”. The children were able to think of several sources of information that might help us answer the alien visitor’s questions including asking someone who might know, looking on the computer, finding out in a book or going outside to look at things. I decided to start the discussion by looking at a book titled “Living and Non-living”; however, this raised more questions than it answered and the children began to disagree with each other. Looking at a picture of a fire one child said that fire is non-living but another disagreed, “Fire is living because it needs air.”*

*I asked the children again if they could show the extra-terrestrial visitor what was living and what was non-living. We decided that it would be helpful to take a walk and look outside for living and non-living things. I asked the children to work in pairs so that they could talk about their observations. I reminded them that they may agree or disagree with each other and that they would have to figure out whether something was living or non-living together.*

*After taking a walk around the school, the children gathered in the classroom to discuss their findings. One child thought that a car was living, “It can move and it needs air,” he explained. Another disagreed saying, “The car only moves because it had a driver.” We all agreed that a tree is a living thing because it grows but what about a building? Could a building grow? A child said that a building had to be built by someone, “It can’t build itself, so it’s non-living.”*

*We were able to generate some rules about living things but there was still a lot of uncertainty and disagreement. It seemed that many living and non-living things share common attributes such as needing air (Fieldwork Journal, 3/26/07).*

The question “What is living and what is non-living?” was deceptively simple. I felt somewhat uncomfortable as the teacher because I was not sure that I would be able to answer the children’s questions. Yet, as the lesson developed and I listened to the children’s observations and explanations, I began to feel that the process of questioning and the uncertainty were important and necessary. Duckworth describes the role of the teacher as an instigator and observer, setting up the learning situation and then stepping back. She added, “My focus is on what they [the students] see and how they

make sense of it..." (Duckworth, 1996, p.113). The teacher does not have to explain or tell but rather observe the way in which the student looks, experiments, and through their own questioning, develops their thinking about the way the world works. Duckworth asserts, "As a student of Piaget, I was convinced that people must construct their own knowledge and must assimilate new experiences in ways that make sense to them. I knew that more often than not, telling students what we want them to know leaves them cold." Furthermore, by putting students (of all ages) in contact with the "real thing, not books or lectures about it", allows them to "notice what is interesting" (Duckworth 1996, p.111-113).

I was interested to observe the children disagree with each other and reconsider their ideas after looking again and listening to each other. One child disagreed with the book, asserting that fire was living because it needs air. This response illustrated the important relationship between the children's experiential understanding of the living world and their ability to critically evaluate and understand what they read.

Out of my uncertainty about this lesson emerged a sense of the fundamental value of raising questions without having answers. Through the characteristic experimental learning process of questioning, observing, explanation and further questioning, the classroom community is strengthened through cooperative construction of meaning. And, when teachers do not give the answers to questions and admit that they do not know the answers, children are empowered as thinkers and investigators.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CURIOSITY AND INTEREST

*I walked into the classroom this week and was greeted by a group of children who had been waiting for me to arrive, "I've made a picture of flowers for you out of cut-up paper because we talked about flowers and seeds last week," "I've started a seed collection, I have two already," "I've got a root in my bag. Can I show the class?" (Fieldwork Journal 4/6/07)*

These excited greetings were signs that the activities and talk about flowers, fruits, and seeds of the previous week had stimulated these children's curiosity and their enthusiasm was catching. The children had opened different fruits, made drawings and counted seeds, a messy but exciting lesson of discovery and exploration of every-day objects. Each child expressed their engagement in our investigation in a different way: one was inspired to create a piece of art; one was motivated to search for different kinds of seeds; another had found a root that would, at any other time, not have attracted special attention, but which had suddenly become a meaningful object of interest to share with classmates. These children were motivated by curiosity to take the ideas from the lesson beyond the classroom and continue thinking, investigating and creating at home.

It is important to notice that each child responded to his or her experience in the classroom in a unique way. For this reason, it is essential for teachers to provide many different avenues of expression to young learners, in addition to writing.

#### NAOMI: AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

My Descriptive Review case study focused on a Kindergarten child who was not yet ready to write or even to learn letters and sounds. We realized how much she needs opportunities to become involved in the learning world of the classroom. The following excerpts from the Descriptive Review of Naomi present observations that illustrate the difficulties related to reading and writing she faced in the classroom and which prompted the focusing question: How can we help Naomi achieve basic skills, independence and integration into the classroom community?

*One morning during Independent Reading time, her books were out but she was half-turned away from the table. I asked "What are you doing?" Naomi replied defensively, "I didn't do nothing". I continued "What should you be doing, Naomi?" and she gestured toward the books but made no effort to turn to face them.*

*Without any provocation he [Anthony] told me, looking across the room at Naomi and the teacher, "Naomi can't read and she makes trouble for all the other kids in the class." "She bothers us," he added. I asked him to think about his words and consider whether they were kind. "But it's true!" he exclaimed. (Descriptive Review of a Kindergarten Student: Naomi. 4/13/07)*

Naomi is not yet ready for routine Reading and Writing Workshops that last for up to forty-five minutes daily, and she struggles to engage in the reading and writing tasks that she is required to do. Instead, Naomi would benefit from the social interaction of play experiences in order to help her develop the social skills she needs to become a participating member of her classroom community. Anthony would also benefit from play experiences and interactions with other children in different situations in order to challenge his firmly held judgments about his peers. Naomi needs a broader scope for activity and self-expression that will enable her to make a contribution to the classroom community. I noticed that she enjoyed and sought out construction activities, painting and music. The Descriptive Review group made recommendations to draw on these interests to provide Naomi with important opportunities for learning social skills as well as possible ways of engaging and teaching Naomi. In addition, experiential activities could be employed to create a bridge from Naomi's world to the classroom, offering her ways to express herself and positively contribute to classroom community.

*In writing workshop Naomi takes papers and staples them together in a hurried manner. Her drawings are quickly done with colors added in quick dashes or scribbles. As she works she talks to herself about the pictures and writes a string of letters to tell the brief story.... Naomi can point and plan up to three sentences but is unable to sustain the word building effort to write more than one of them. This process requires teacher support to help her hear sounds in words or to use the word wall words to support her writing. After one sentence Naomi is usually unable to sustain effort and her natural impulse is to say that the story is done and move onto another paper. (Descriptive Review of a Kindergarten Student: Naomi 4/13/07)*

Before Naomi can be expected to engage in writing, she needs primary experiences to develop her vocabulary and verbal abilities that are the foundation of writing. Vygotsky (1978) described the connection between play and symbolic representation which prepares the child for abstract and imaginative thought. He observed that play accelerates the development of three basic language functions: communication, expression and reasoning.

Through the process of observation and Descriptive Review I began to change my thinking about Naomi and it occurred to me that Naomi's distractibility may be due to the inappropriateness of what we were expecting of her within the classroom.

*As a result of observing Naomi for the purpose of the Descriptive Review I changed my thinking about Naomi's behavior; I began to see her from "another angle" as a more complex learner. Naomi had been a difficult student to teach and I was repeatedly challenged by her distracted behaviors and her careless attitude toward her work. Yet, through the process of Descriptive Review I began to appreciate Naomi's strong motivation to control her environment and considered it a strength that could be harnessed rather than a negative characteristic that had to be managed and controlled.*

(Descriptive Review of a Kindergarten Student: Naomi 4/13/07)

Rather than try to force Naomi to conform, I should step back and reconsider her needs and strengths starting with finding ways to let her experience a sense of control over her learning. Naomi needs opportunities to exercise freedom and explore her interests. My observation of Naomi reminded me that choice is an important aspect of play and experiential learning. When children are able to exercise choice in the classroom, they become self-determining and are stimulated to develop personal interests.

#### OBSERVING ACTIVE LEARNERS: A WINDOW ON LEARNING

Play is important, not just because it engages children in learning, promotes social competence, and develops abstract and creative thinking, but

also because it serves as a window into the child's thinking. The National Association for the Education of Young Children made a statement that, "Play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development" (NAEYC, 1996). Play is important because of what it tells the teacher about the child; the child at play reveals concerns and interests, language and social skills and ways of thinking about the world. Carini states that "play is closely related to storytelling as a way of making sense of experience...attending to play provides rich access to children's strengths and formative powers" (Carini, 1986, pp.14).

The role of the teacher as observer is at the heart of the process of Descriptive Review. Through the process of Descriptive Review, the teacher's observations of the child are deepened through collaboration with other teachers or adults. This process of learning about the child, based upon observation, questioning and collaborative meaning-making is itself an example of the kind of experiential learning that we see in play. In the social context of the group, the teacher's knowledge of the child's modes of learning and interests is extended and enriched, just as in play the child's learning is enhanced by social interactions, pushing her beyond the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

The assumption underlying the process of Descriptive Review is that a child's learning is enhanced when his or her interests are engaged; therefore, it is the teacher's goal "to teach from strength ... in the light of the child's preferred learning mode, according to the shape of his or her thought, and with attention to what is of deep interest and value to the child" (Carini, 1986, pp.6). In order to determine these strengths and interests, the child must be "rendered visible" through the teacher's purposeful observation of the child in various educational and social settings. Moreover, within the classroom, the child must be offered opportunities to discover his or her own interests and to pursue them through play and exploratory learning; he or she must be given the opportunity to make choices. The teacher's role is not just to observe, but to create an environment that "provides the child with the opportunity to make choices and state preferences... to engage with a range of media and materials to which the child can give shape and form..." (Carini, 1986, p.7).

#### ACHIEVING A BALANCE

Returning to my dilemma concerning the balancing of literacy activity and experiential learning and play in the classroom, it is important to distinguish different methods of viewing and teaching literacy. The formal academic view of literacy, regards reading and writing in terms of distinct, isolated skills that require direct teaching and practice. In contrast, Lucy Calkins conception of literacy places the reading and writing workshops at the center of literacy activity in the classroom and "begins with helping children want the life of the reader and to envision that life for themselves" (Calkins, 2001, pp.9). The workshop method of teaching reading and writing is itself an experiential form of learning, based upon the child developing literacy skills in

the context of a meaningful community of readers and writers. However, although this approach to teaching literacy, like play, fosters social interaction, communication, curiosity, choice, exploration of books, development of interests and critical and creative thinking and is preferable to programs that teach isolated literacy skill, it nevertheless diverts significant amounts of classroom time to literacy.

In a review of research on play and literacy, Roskos and Christie conclude that the “preoccupation with literacy may, in fact, inhibit the growth of hybrid environment in which a richly layered network of situations creates conditions for complex learning” (Roskos & Christie, In Zigler, Singer & Bishop-Josef, 2004, p. 111). An over-emphasis on literacy activities in the Kindergarten classroom may result in a loss of play and experiential learning, which will affect the development of all children. Those who are not ready to read or write may find themselves struggling to participate in the classroom community as well as missing important play experiences. However, for all children self-determination and discovery of interests through exploratory activity (play) also encourages the essential development of a sense of self as a powerful agent in the process of learning.

“Developmentally appropriate programs provide opportunities for children to broaden and deepen their behavioral knowledge by providing a variety of firsthand experiences and by helping children acquire symbolic knowledge through representing their experiences in a variety of media, such as drawing, painting, construction of models, dramatic play, verbal and written descriptions” (Katz, 1995). Manipulation of the physical world and imaginative play in the social context of the classroom establish the critical and intuitive faculties upon which future literacy learning is founded (Bruner, 1963). Without this foundation there is a danger that our children will grow up without knowing what they are interested in and look to others to direct them.

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