

Preschool

Insights & Research

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYFUL LITERACY EXPERIENCES

“This always seemed the scariest part of being a new teacher – starting the kids on the road to reading and writing. There was such a huge focus on it and we all know its fundamental to these children growing up to be responsible citizens.”

– Lauren, newly qualified preschool teacher

“We make the story while [the teacher] reads it. It’s really, really fun.”

– Mo, 6 years

Lauren is a new teacher. She has a shelf full of picture books and age-appropriate reference books for the children in her class. She spends an hour a day just reading with them. It wasn’t until her second term in school that she observed a literacy session in another school. “She was building with the children. They made the story while she read it to them. They used all kinds of materials, but mainly it was building blocks, toys and a play mat they had lying around the classroom.” Lauren’s eyes were opened to a whole world of literacy experiences her pre-schoolers could be having. Lauren decided on a framework for her next literacy session:

- She read a story with the class, as normal.
- Each child had to collect items from around the room that matched things they heard in the story.
- Either individually or in pairs, the children modelled a part of the story using the things they had found.
- Lauren took a picture of their model while the children wrote or drew a picture about the story.

Of course, for the children in Lauren’s class, the *writing* was early mark-making. However, she noticed they were incentivised to try writing something. She noted that they had taken ownership of the literacy experience, and they were having fun. They were able to be playful in their approach, to collect their favourite toys and other items to tell their own version of the story. She documented the discussions the children were having. She noticed two keys things.

- The children could retell the story with greater detail. They used the real-life storyboard as an aid to their memory.
- They were far more focused on every aspect of literacy. Some attempted writing for the first time, having previously resisted.

Lauren was delighted with the flurry of activity that happened around the classroom during these literacy sessions. The children were active participants in the telling of these stories, not simply passive listeners. With this activity, Lauren saw an increase in storytelling, use of language, and sharing of ideas among the children. There was also an appreciation of each other’s work, since the children delighted in *visiting* the scenes created around the classroom.

The classroom abounds with posters of instructions for everything from washing your hands, to writing your name, to lining up for recess. These sets of instructions were created in the same way. Children discussed what needed to be said and then found items around the classroom that displayed those points. They then ordered the items that had been found to make a proper set of instructions. For Lauren, it was just as important that the children learned about non-fictional writing as they did storytelling. The posters in her room show a wonderful mix of the two genres. For example, the poster about lining up provides the list of commands from the point-of-view of a knight and princess (spoiler: the princess is invited to line up first!).

What does the research say?

The Play, Learning and Narrative Skills (PLaNS) project, driven by Cambridge University's Faculty of Education was set up to research the influence of a playful learning approach on the narrative and writing skills of young learners. The PLaNS research measured the impact of playful learning in literacy across a school year, accounting for a range of skills: writing, oral narrative skills, vocabulary, self-regulation and creativity. Both the children and teachers were observed as part of the project.

The research found that children provided with playful literacy experiences are able to construct clearer narratives, in both fictional and non-fictional forms. The research team were concerned that children otherwise do not always master these skills, which has later implications for their oral and written skills.

The PLaNS research provides useful tips for linking playful literacy activities to storytelling and writing. Suggestions include: physically attaching vocabulary to what the children have built, ask children to write down or otherwise document their exciting words, ask children to explain their creations, take photos of what has been created to aid memory, for example.

What the teachers say

"I know my children are ready to move forward with their literacy. They are confident to tell stories, not just listen to them. Parents tell me the children want to be part of the ritual of reading a bedtime story. They don't just listen any more. They create and tell the story for themselves. This has motivated them to try writing that story, in whatever basic form. They just wouldn't be at this point if they hadn't had the chance to be playful with their storytelling. Now I know they can go up to 'big school' and be ready to read and write stories with this solid foundation. Hopefully they are hooked for life on literacy. Before this term, that was my single biggest concern." Lauren, new preschool teacher.

References

Whitebread, D. and Basilio, M. Playful Writing. Building stories together to inspire young writers: a teacher handbook (Cambridge University and LEGO Foundation)