

Make It Meaningful!

Emergent Literacy in the Kindergarten Years

Building on their workshop presented at the ECEBC conference, these educators explore how one can foster an environment that supports emergent literacy development in a Reggio Emilia-inspired kindergarten classroom.

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Introduction

As many ECEs know, the Reggio Emilia philosophy was developed for preschool and primary-age children by the educators and parents in the region of Reggio Emilia, a small city situated in Northern Italy. Through the development of this approach over the past 60 years, many key elements have emerged, which have come to be known as the defining principles. These principles include an emergent curriculum, project work, representation, documentation, importance of environment, and teachers as researchers (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 1998, p. 325). The educators of Reggio Emilia believe that “young children are powerful, active, competent protagonists of their own growth...with the right to speak from their own perspective, and to act with others on the basis of their own particular experience and level of consciousness” (Edwards et al., 1998, p.180). The overarching belief of Reggio Emilia can be connected to the metaphor “The Hundred Languages of Children.” Children are understood to be capable individuals that come to us with a wealth of valuable experiences and knowledge and should be supported in communicating their ideas in a variety of ways.

In an emergent program, children act as the protagonists of their own educational journeys and are given freedom to construct their own learning and deepen their understanding through authentic experiences. In our Canadian context, where curricular pressures for kindergarten teachers exist, educators may often feel comfortable aligning the structure of Reggio Emilia in the areas of science, art, and mathematics. However, when it comes to literacy, the pressure to use traditional practices such as teacher-directed instruction and prescriptive programming persists. Benchmarks and milestones can drive the focus of a program, which is reflective of the pressure put upon teachers for accountability.

A study out of Columbia University, as referenced in a keynote address by Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek (November 2011) compared two groups of children aged four through eight who were in either a prescriptive program that focused on academic milestones or a play-based program. Results showed that by age eight, no academic differences were evident. However, children in the prescriptive program demonstrated higher levels of anxiety and were less creative. This study is one example that reaffirms our belief in play-based

programming. Although we know that this type of program is best suited for early learners, we can be challenged as educators to meet this balance between our beliefs and curricular expectations. In our experiences of working with three-to-six-year-old students, we have found that it is possible to foster an environment where play and an emergent curriculum are also inclusive of emergent literacy development. Literacy can and does develop naturally in a classroom environment that is purposeful in its organization and where depth of thinking is supported.

The Environment

The environment is thought to act as the third teacher because it is “alive, it has its own identity, and it speaks for itself” (Boyd Cadwell, 1997, p. 102). This is a place that is laid out thoughtfully, inspiring learners to engage in exploration and discovery. The Reggio-inspired classroom is highly organized and divided into a number of small spaces, where students are free to work independently or collaboratively. The materials are placed intentionally to inspire investigation and creativity and are easily accessible to the children. Elements within the space evolve as children

evolve, thereby allowing the space to be flexible and to meet the needs of the children.

As educators who are inspired by Reggio Emilia, we believe that it is important to create a classroom environment where children are invited to demonstrate their understanding and their thinking through countless opportunities. The classroom is organized into eight defined spaces where children have the opportunity to explore nature, dramatic play, light and shadow, sand and water, mathematical manipulatives, graphic communication, paint, clay, and a variety of materials to construct with. The vehicle that they choose to express their understanding is valued, celebrated, and made visible through documentation of learning. As children develop over the course of kindergarten, their learning emerges throughout their playful inquiries in each space. Within these spaces, materials such as books, letters, print, names, and a variety of writing tools are placed purposefully to support and facilitate the development of literacy. Painting a picture, arranging materials with the purpose of telling a story, or putting words on paper, all support emergent literacy development through rich and authentic experiences. As a provocation, teachers inspire children to engage in meaningful projects that support their development of literacy.

Authentic Experiences in the Classroom

Working with Found Materials

Oral language is the foundation of all literacy development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). A Reggio-inspired classroom envi-

ronment facilitates opportunities to collaborate with others, develop and challenge theories, and reflects a strong belief in the importance of valuing the voice of the child. Project work that emerges from student interests supports and showcases growth in oral language, reading, and writing.

A project inspired by the book *Beautiful Stuff* written by Cathy Weisman Topal and Lella Gandini illustrates how oral language development in participating kindergarten students can develop and be enriched. Through collecting, sharing, and working with found materials, students participated in a variety of encounters that were initiated by the students and facilitated by the teachers. One documented encounter highlighted the opportunity for oral language development through the arrangement of “beautiful stuff.”

Ava sat down in front of a variety of sorted materials. She carefully

selected pieces from the collection and placed them intentionally on a white canvas. She quietly studied her arrangement, positioning and repositioning until she was satisfied with her work. When asked, she slowly began to describe the story that inspired her design.

“That’s the mom and that’s the dad and these are all the sisters and this is their house. This is Koala and he always wakes up before his family. This is his table and this is his cake with sparkles on it and all the stones are his chairs. This ribbon is the door. This is the baby and after Koala’s birthday it is baby’s birthday. The straw is like a gate so it can open like this when people want to go out...”

This experience demonstrated Ava’s developing understanding of story. As she worked with the materials, she developed characters, a setting, and the beginnings of a plot. This photographed image below was given to her to take home and was placed on her refrigerator. Her



Ava’s transformation of found materials



Co-construction of an alphabet

mother later shared that the story of Koala and baby continued to evolve as Ava extended her ideas outside of the classroom.

Co-Construction of an Alphabet

The development of oral language strengthens children's phonological awareness (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2001). Through daily conversations and storytelling, as described in Ava's example, children are developing an understanding of how phonemes work together to make words. Recognizing the importance of developing essential skills for reading and writing, we were conflicted as to how we would present letters and sounds to students in a way that was both meaningful and student-driven. An article entitled "Letting Go of 'Letter of the Week,'" by Bell and Jarvis (2002), supported us as we explored the alphabet with students.

Bell and Jarvis (2002) discuss the importance of making all letters of the alphabet accessible authentically rather than introducing isolated letters and sounds sequentially. We began by introducing each child's written name and identifying as a group the first letter and sound.

Once familiar with each name in the class, we proceeded to co-construct an alphabet with the students. We wanted to engage them in all aspects of the development of this project, from first painting a background with watercolours, to attaching letters to each card, then ordering the letters as a group, proceeding to photograph environmental images, and having students determine their placement on the alphabet.

With the background intact, photographs of the children's faces acted as a provocation in order to make this a relevant and meaningful experience. Students discussed what letter each photograph should be placed on the alphabet based on the beginning sound of each name. This proved to be an effective strategy as they brought with them a strong connection to their name and the names of friends. After this experience, the children instinctively associated F with Fiona, which is a meaningful connection for them, as it is the name of their friend. Environmental images were then photographed at the request of the children. At lunchtime, Marta exclaimed, "L! Lunchbox! We need to take a photograph of the lunchbox and put it on the L!" As the students collaborated in building their alphabet, they in turn built upon their phonemic awareness and extended their language development.

By giving children access to all letters and sounds and not limiting them to one letter a week, they were granted the freedom to engage, explore, and express themselves in many authentic ways. The alphabet they constructed was posted at student eye level and acted as a key resource to them in their spontaneous reading and writing.

Spontaneous Writing

Spontaneous opportunities for writing are abundant within the projects that emerge throughout the year. Writing materials are placed systematically throughout the room to encourage emergent writing at each centre. As children develop their understanding of print, they initiate writing with markings, symbols, and letters for the purpose of conveying a message. A demonstration of understanding emerged at the space for building and constructing where the students began writing labels on sticky notes for what they had built.

Teacher: "Can you tell me what you're doing here?"

Emily: "We're making cat's houses."

Teacher: "What is all the writing for?"

Moira: "So people know what the kitty-cats' names are, like little signs."

Emily: "That is their names," (pointing to them)

Teacher: "Why is it there?"

Moira: "So that we know who they are, the writing tells us that."

The students used their knowledge and approximations of letters and phonemes to print the names they had chosen to label their "cat homes." This is one example of many that demonstrates how thinking becomes visible within a classroom that supports free and spontaneous writing.

Conclusion

"Emergent literacy is based on the idea that children learn literacy as they come to it, rather than as it comes to them" (Bardige and Segal, 2005). The environment acts as the third teacher, providing authentic experiences in defined spaces that house materials to support literacy development. Children find literacy in a variety of developmentally ap-



Emily carefully places her labels for cat homes.

appropriate ways, such as organizing found materials to inspire storytelling, co-constructing an alphabet to develop phonemic awareness, and building and labelling elaborate structures. These examples illustrate the intentional and purposeful ways that children communicate their thoughts and ideas. Teachers act as facilitators of learning as they push for depth of understanding and inspire children through provocations. Literacy permeates the space and is made meaningful through authentic opportunities that support its development.

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