



## Research & Policy

# Playing to Our Strengths: Finding Innovation in Children's and Teachers' Imaginative Expertise

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This article reviews recent research on young children's literacy learning, with a focus on innovative ideas that reclaim a long-standing ethos in early childhood education: child over curriculum.

**To teach young children** growing up in a world of rapid global change, early childhood education urgently needs expansive and engaging pedagogies that welcome increasingly diverse learners and help them develop the literacies needed to read, write, and produce meaning in contemporary times. Reflecting on innovation in early literacy education prompts questions such as:

- What is the current state of early literacy education and how would it change if we reimagined literacy learning on children's terms?
- Are we doing enough to nurture children as innovators, producers, and players in preschool and kindergarten? Are we providing learning opportunities that value children's developing abilities, their diversity as a resource, and their everyday experiences with new technologies?
- What innovations open possibilities for literacy teaching that can tap into the imaginative expertise of young children and teachers in early literacy education?

This article reviews recent research on young children's literacy learning, with a focus on innovative ideas that reclaim a long-standing ethos in early childhood education: child over curriculum. This

means the emphasis is on learning with the young child rather than teaching to cover the curriculum. I begin by reviewing early literacy studies that take a strength orientation to development, diversity, and technology in order to highlight fresh approaches that use play to activate children's imaginative expertise. In other words, this synthesis examines early literacy approaches that assume children are capable, curious, and active learners who learn through play, inquiry, and exploration and produce texts with technologies and resources that are in actual use in their families, communities, and cultures. I then discuss how to make space for innovative curriculum as well as provide suggestions for programs and policies that build on a strength orientation to teaching.

## Examining the Current State of Early Literacy Education

Over the last decade, kindergarten has become the new first grade (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016), and now the academic weight of compressed curriculum is pushing down into preschool where it is "crushing" younger and younger children (Christakis, 2016; Graue, Ryan, Nocera, Northey, & Wilinski, 2017; Hoffman, Paciga, & Teale, 2014). After two decades of accountability mandates, this

compression is not surprising. Educators are under pressure to produce immediate evidence of tangible results in early grades before time runs out, and children must pass literacy tests to progress to third grade (Allington & Pearson, 2011). Short-sighted pressure for test preparation forecloses long-term intellectual gains (Allington & Pearson, 2011; Hoffman, Paciga, & Teale, 2014) and shuts down opportunities for innovation and exploration in play-based learning, especially for children who are already marginalized in school. In a survey of over 2,500 kindergarten teachers, Bassok and colleagues (2016) found a dramatic increase in testing in the last decade, with about 30% of teachers now giving standardized tests at least once a month. Even more concerning, the weight of low-level drill and excessive testing falls heaviest on children of color or those living in poverty:

. . . our findings indicate that although changes to kindergarten classrooms were pervasive, in many cases they were more pronounced among schools serving high percentages of low-income and non-White children, particularly with respect to teacher expectations and didactic instruction. (Bassok et al., 2016, p.14)

Early literacy researchers have vigorously challenged the deficit thinking in reductive policies that obsess on what children don't know and can't do as well as those policies that impose a universal lock-step progression of development. (See Dyson, 2015, and Volk, 2017, for recent reviews and critiques.)

Deficit assumptions in teacher accountability discourses also construct gaps and shortfalls for early childhood teachers who are monitored through teacher evaluation policies. Strategies to teacher-proof the curriculum devalue teachers' professional knowledge and privilege standardized curricula designed by distant experts (Allington & Pearson, 2011). By contrast, curriculum and instruction developed *with* teachers can reflect their deep knowledge of students and their communities as well as provide relevant and responsive practices that build on the traditions of marginalized children. One early childhood teacher pointed out,

We can no longer teach just according to the ways of the White, middle class. If you are going to reach every

student in your classroom, you have to broaden your comfort zone and learn about the lives and communities of your students firsthand. We've been doing it your way long enough. (Long, Volk, Baines, & Tisdale, 2013, p. 419)

A long-standing ethos in early childhood pedagogy advocates teacher-designed, play-based, emergent curriculum that responds to young children's developing needs and interests and builds on their diverse social, cultural, and linguistic resources (Genishi & Dyson, 2014; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2017). Early childhood research across decades and disciplines supports active, child-centered curriculum and warns about the considerable costs when children cannot invent and collaborate due to play-deprived curricula and lack of imaginative space in school (Genishi & Dyson, 2014; Paley, 2004).

The restorative power of play that meets children on their own terms is dramatically illustrated by Buchholz's (2016) case study of a discouraged beginning reader who sat in silent resistance while a district-assigned interventionist repeatedly urged him to practice skills drills. Her promises of star stickers and warnings about the looming threat of an upcoming grade retention test were not enough to induce him to make more failed attempts at naming letters on a checklist. Moments later, after the interventionist left, play succeeded where drill could not. Noticing the boy dejectedly sitting alone, a friend came over and playfully engaged him in giggly and silly reading of a favorite book. Restored, he grabbed his writer's notebook and soon was sprawled on the floor with another friend, writing letters intently and dramatizing a book about favorite media characters. The once-discouraged reader was able to bounce back because his classroom teacher provided daily sustained periods for children to read, write, draw, and play in small groups. Early literacy curriculum must be expanded in time, space, and content to make room for teachers to teach and for all children to produce and play.

In the next section, I review recent research on expansive approaches to early literacy that take a strength-based perspective on young children's play and imaginative production in cultural worlds.

## Seeing Children's Strengths in Diversity, Development, and Technology

Play-based pedagogies expand learning, follow the developing child's lead, and draw from the depth of children's communities, cultural resources, and life experiences as a natural foundation for learning. Most important, when children are invited to play the worlds they know, they are positioned as experts who bring cultural experiences that can enrich the stories they read, write, and play (Göncü, 1999). Through play, children write not with pencils or keyboards, but with bodies and things. Play is a literacy, written with bodies to produce an enacted story that is read and negotiated collectively among players according to their individual histories of experiences (Wohlwend, 2011). Play makes curricula relevant and responsive to children's lives and cultures as players work to agree upon the meanings and rules for the imaginary worlds they are collectively producing. When children pretend together, they create a child-governed space where they can explore what they know and stretch what they can do (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). In this way, play enacts a strength orientation to the diversity in children's worlds.

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### Diversity

In contrast to a deficit orientation, a strength orientation is exemplified by the influential concept *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Moll and colleagues visited families at home to document and recognize the range of household literacies that make up important cultural repertoires and resources for reading and writing at school. Ethnographic research (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Street, 1995)

shows the diversity of literacies that are culturally embedded in everyday ways of knowing and making meaning with the ordinary stuff of family life (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). In this view, literacies are situated in communities and cultural contexts and enacted as social practices that people use to carry out daily activities (Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

Play brings children's ideas to life when they pretend everyday practices with ordinary stuff, inspiring innovation that does not require expensive materials or technologies. For example, in Thiel's study of a rural under-resourced community center, kindergartners actively and inventively drew from their popular culture knowledge to create superhero play texts and costumes from scraps of fabric.

(Uncut and unsewn), the children's superhero attire was not bound by the predetermined limits that come in prepackaged, store bought costumes. Instead, the boys were able to listen to and experience the vitality of the fabric through their own intellectual lenses and creative theories. (2015b, p. 121)

Through play, children learn literacies within daily family life in order to participate in literacy events—not just bedtime stories (Heath, 1982), but ordinary activities such as grocery shopping (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), video game play (Lewis, 2009), or television viewing (Medina, Costa, & Soto, 2017).

### Development

A strength orientation to development recognizes that play promotes growth along multiple and unique pathways (Dyson, 1990; Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004) through a commitment to help young children grow from where they are. This perspective views young children not as immature learners, but as already capable and intentional producers with immediate goals and valid social purposes (Meyer & Whitmore, 2016). For example, disability studies challenge the notion of normalcy and reveal the creativity of children categorized as special needs. In one kindergarten, a play-based curriculum made space for alternate ways of participating and created a more inclusive space (Yoon, Llerena, & Brooks, 2016). Examination of play vignettes illustrated

how two boys diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder orchestrated characters, story action, drawing, and animation while preserving coherent storylines and negotiating their divergent ideas for a Star Wars scenario. They used humor and spontaneous role play to engage other players. The researchers note that, “Lucas’s play, while unpredictable, always followed a social trajectory—inherent in his play was responsiveness, attention to the ongoing (inter) actions, and a deep understanding of social cues and intentions” (Yoon, Llerena, & Brooks, 2016, p. 12). This study disrupts the notion that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder are asocial non-players by showing children effectively improvising flexibly with their bodies, toys, and ordinary classroom materials; actively engaging other players and navigating social situations by making room for others in their play scenario; and orchestrating a complex mixture of social and semiotic intentions to create engaging stories.

A developmental focus on what children can do reveals that their bodies are an important means of meaning making. Whitmore (2015) notes that, “Children’s bodies are often an unrecognized and untapped symbol system in early literacy learning.” In a dramatic replaying of “Jack and the Beanstalk” in an urban preschool, children were supported in using their bodies to more deeply engage story meanings by teachers who joined in as co-players to lead the narrative:

“When I count to three, you’ll be in Jack’s bed. One, you can feel the soft pillows under your head. Two, you can hear the wind blowing outside. Three, you can feel the soft blankets over you.” Mother speaks next. “Good morning children! Did you have a good sleep? Are you hungry for breakfast?” “Yes,” the children respond, as they stretch and rub the sleep out of their eyes. They are now the brothers and sisters of Jack, the character well known for his trips up and down an enormous beanstalk. With [the teacher’s] soft-spoken words, preschoolers imaginatively leave their classroom behind to enter the world of pretend. (Whitmore, 2015, p. 25)

Shifting the literacy lens from language and print to bodies and movement provides an accessible context for all young learners, but it is especially powerful for children with physical limitations or challenging social behaviors.

Through play, children are adept at running, moving, sensing, and learning the places around them through their bodies (Hackett, 2014). Leander and Boldt (2013) mapped the free-wheeling, spontaneous flow of a child’s unfolding play. This mapping captured the chaotic blur of moving bodies and morphing meanings in a young boy’s active play—bouncing on furniture and swinging a sword as he enacted his favorite manga characters. Play is an action-based literacy for children by children through which bodies mediate the world, moment-to-moment. By handling objects and moving through space, children’s bodies and actions resemiotize things in a place to make them manageable, meaningful, and malleable for players’ immediate purposes. For example, Campano, Ngo, Low, and Jacobs (2016) found that young children who were visiting a university campus used play as a way of inquiring and learning a new space: they “. . . climbed on the statue of Benjamin Franklin and settled on his lap, played duck-duck-goose in the courtyard of the dorm quadrangle, ran around the College Green as if it were a park, and repurposed large sculptures as jungle gyms” (p. 211).

A strength orientation to development expands what qualifies as early literacy research and whose research is valued. Spencer, Knobel, and Lank-shear (2013) problematize the “canon” of literacy research that excludes a decade of research on children’s imaginative expertise in areas such as popular culture, new media, and digital technologies. The researchers “were perplexed by the obvious disconnect between this growing and vibrant body of literature and the widespread international shifts toward school-like expectations within preschool and kindergarten settings” (Spencer, 2014, p. 180). Early literacy policy and reforms that rely on this “canon of research” impose expectations for a universal and linear sequence of development that runs counter to two decades of early childhood research on early childhood development (Allington & Pearson, 2011; Burman, 1994; Genishi & Dyson, 2014; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). Spencer (2014) points out that policy often equates poverty with academic deficits, and by doing so, offers “‘solutions’ to deficits that might not even

exist,” thus perpetuating “a theory of learning that neither makes sense in early education nor reflects the knowledge and perspectives that young children bring to classrooms” (p. 181).

## Technologies

Husbye and Vander Zanden (2015) noted the multiple threads of meanings and practices in a two-year-old’s playful exploration of technologies in his home:

Theo grabs hold of Nicholas’s iPhone, his finger swiping the screen to make the video of himself golfing play, a myriad of giggles erupting as he watches himself on the small screen. Theo, 2 years old and Sarah’s son, is a human pinball, bouncing back and forth between activities, making a movie in one moment, reading a book in another, and still moving on to pound out a rhythm on his drum. . . . Watching Theo move fluidly between meaning-making activities, he demonstrates contemporary ways of being literate as he engages in multiple activities at once, with little concern as to the perceived distinctions between reading a book and making a video. (pp. 109–110)

Action texts—whether in live-action play, video production, app navigation, or virtual worlds—are multilinear stories with many starts, stops, retracings, loops, and do-overs, complicated by multiplayer ideas and moves in and out of spaces. Burnett, Davies, Merchant, and Rowsell (2015) acknowledge the slipperiness of children’s engagements with literacy objects, people, and the meanings that are always contingent. Merchant (2014) points out that technologies and bodies must always be considered in relation to one another as “things in use.” Merchant followed a two-year-old’s body movements with iPads, categorizing the stabilizing movements that helped him hold on to the tablet, the control movements that operated onscreen actions, and the deictic movements that directed attention to particular screen areas among co-viewers.

New tools with lifelike interfaces on global networks are stretching the ways we think about digital and physical, challenging dichotomous categories and blurring distinctions among “real” and digital spaces or ideas and materials (Burnett, Davies, Merchant, & Rowsell, 2014; Marsh, Plowman, Yamada-Rice, Bishop, & Scott, 2016; Rowe, Miller, & Pacheco, 2014; Rowsell & Harwood, 2015).

But such blurrings have always been the hallmark of children’s pretend play, with or without digital devices. Thiel (2015a) draws attention to the multiplied entanglements in the relations among literacies, materials, and bodies:

Literacy is not bound up in manuscripts, coiled up in composition notebooks, or encased in mark-making utensils, nor is literacy merely a communication tool. Literacies are leaky, seeping deep into our bodies and unfurling through our movements, perceptions, and reactions to other bodies. (p. 46)

## Making Space for Innovative Programming

Playshops and makerspaces offer new possibilities for play-based early literacy programming that integrates strength orientations with diversity, development, technologies, and teaching. Playshops (Wohlwend, 2011) are curricular innovations that retain elements of traditional early childhood dramatic play curriculum to help children create and produce collaborative stories and work with new child-friendly technologies. For example, in playshops, children can dress up in costumes or “cook” in the play kitchen as they pretend with dolls, action figures, plush animals, small cars, and Lego playsets, but they can also use apps and iPads to film their own live-action stories or create digital puppetry, collaboratively producing their own digital media.

Makerspaces are curricular innovations that encourage children to tinker with electronics, apps, and arts materials in order to create original designs and artifacts. These programs help children develop digital literacies such as game design or icon-based coding. For example, Scratch Jr. is an early childhood coding program that allows children to play and animate avatars by snapping onscreen blocks together into a code sequence, rather than writing text commands; KIBO is a play-based early childhood robotics program that takes this a step further by allowing children to code their own programs by snapping together plastic blocks (Bers, 2008).

Playshop innovations complement familiar elementary education approaches to reading and writing, like balanced literacy or writing workshop, but with a critical early childhood twist. Putting the child

at the center, playshops shift control of the activity from the teacher to the child and turn workshop structures upside down and inside out. Rather than using an instructional sequence of gradual release of responsibility—from modeled to shared to guided to independent reading or writing—playshops begin with children’s independent and collaborative exploration. For example, a filmmaking unit might begin by giving small groups of children a camera, a few small dolls or toys, and an open-ended invitation to “see what you can do with these things.” Through observation of ongoing explorations, teachers note what needs to be mediated, then teach—just in time and just enough—to move children along when they seem stuck. Occasionally, teachers gather the whole group together for guided engagements that feature demonstration, such as how to frame a camera shot, or for problem solving or celebrations. Four key components—play, storying, collaboration, and production—infuse each part of the process in teacher-designed activities. Over the last decade, I’ve partnered with preschool and K–1 teacher study groups to help them develop and implement play-based literacy curricula that integrate filmmaking, digital animation, crafting with electronics, puppet making, and toy making.

Some playshops focus on playing to produce multimodal storytelling and filmmaking. In literacy playshops (Wohlwend, 2013; Wohlwend, Scott, Yi, Deliman, & Kargin, in press), children create action texts through play to draw upon their popular media repertoires as resources for making films using iPads and digital cameras. Action texts can be almost nonverbal: one group of boys created a film about zombies that was almost wordless but rich in dramatic sound effects, music, synchronized dance, and puppetry (Wessel-Powell, 2017). Children’s excitement is palpable when given the opportunity to play together and create films that showcase their media passions and expertise.

Design playshops and makerspaces focus on playing with new technologies to make “stuff” with art materials and electronics (Wohlwend, Keune, & Pepler, 2016; Wohlwend, Pepler, Keune, & Thompson, 2017). In design playshops, children play with coding kits, LEDs, battery packs,

playdough, blocks, fabrics, found objects, and craft materials in makerspaces to create puppets, toys, and other projects. Makerspaces provide an exploratory space for tinkering to allow ideas to unfold, to make or repurpose things, and to explore the properties and potential meanings of things in the world.

Ensuring that makerspaces and playshops are accessible to all children is a fundamental matter of social justice. Imaginative spaces like playshops and makerspaces are often located in affluent neighborhoods and progressive schools.

In the United States, accessibility to afterschool programs is often mired in who has the various resources to send their children (money, transportation, schedule, English language reading and writing literacies), limiting possibilities for families like the ones in South Woods. . . . Afterschool centres that focus on creativity and special interest classes are rarely accessible to working class children and children of color. (Thiel & Jones, 2017, pp. 328–329)

With this disparity in mind, Thiel and Jones turned a low-income community center into a makerspace, designing intentionally to reconfigure the literacies of children’s bodies, things, and places that are deeply entangled with race, class, and social justice. Removing bars from the windows and opening the Playhouse to the community reconfigured materials as well as power relations around race and class that determined the kind of literacies made available to children.

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Thiel and Jones show that children are active players who can engage in more than artifact making; they can remake the physical makerspace itself. Children in the community center repurposed discarded wooden bookshelves and turned them into ramps for bicycle races, actively engaging in place making—that is, remaking institutional furniture from a school for their own purposes. As children reconfigured the space, they wrestled with the

meanings and potential meanings of things that were entangled with their bodies, their neighborhood, and discourses about responsibility, accountability, economics, race, and class.

We are in a moment when international and interdisciplinary teams of early childhood researchers are studying young children's participation in virtual playgrounds (Burke & Marsh, 2013) and makerspaces in an increasingly globalized world (e.g., MakeEY, 2016, at <http://makeyproject.eu/projects/>) and the ways it requires flexible and continually expanding repertoires of literacy practices (Sefton-Green, Marsh, Erstad, & Flewitt, 2016).

### Seeing Teachers' Imaginative Expertise with Classroom Realities

Policies and programming that enact innovations from a strength orientation must offer teachers the flexibility and creative space to navigate tensions without feeling it's "one more thing" they must get done during the day. It's crucial to consider the impact of policies and programming innovations on the classroom realities of early childhood teaching, but this can make educators feel as if they are caught in a revolving door, as explained by below:

From our collective experiences over the past four decades, we feel like we have seen it all: from popping M&Ms in the mouths of 4-year-old Head Start children each time a "correct" response was given to the DISTAR question "What is this?" to reading readiness workbooks to learning to read naturally, to invented spelling to emergent literacy to whole language to Phonics First to NCLB and Reading First, to evidence-based curriculum to Early Reading First to Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge. (Hoffman, Paciga, & Teale, 2014, p. 11)

As revealed above, researchers who regularly team with teachers must be sensitive to the complexities that teachers face when implementing new projects or technologies. For instance, Flewitt, Messer, and Kucirkova (2014) provided early childhood classrooms with iPads that enabled teachers to explore apps and to develop activities based on children's responses. Beyond choosing open-ended apps and developing skills with the technologies, the research showed there must be an integral connection to

teachers' existing practice for new technologies to be used effectively. The researchers caution:

Unless "new" digital devices are woven innovatively into the fabric of classroom practice, then their potential could all too easily be reduced to being no more than a device for delivering repetitive curriculum content, albeit with added interactive multimedia appeal. (Flewitt, Messer, & Kucirkova, 2014, p. 303)

Like policies, teacher education programs should actively provide robust field experiences that help prospective teachers appreciate and build on children's cultural resources through play. For example, Da Silva Iddings and Reyes (2017) conducted a five-year longitudinal study grounded in a funds of knowledge approach to early childhood teacher education. Through university, family, school, and community partnerships, the program provided culturally responsive teaching for young immigrant children in Arizona. A number of preservice teachers experienced a paradigm shift from a deficit orientation to a strength orientation toward immigrant families' language and literacy that resulted from long-term relationships with families that they formed through regular visits to children's homes during two years in the program.

We urgently need policies and programs that expand early childhood education through innovations in teaching that take a strength orientation to teachers' and children's expertise with playful literacies and technologies, and that appreciates the diverse ways young children play to make and remake their cultural worlds.

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