

Curiosity, wonder and awe with literacy in preschool

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Play

As we know, children are curious creatures. They explore, question and wonder, and by doing so, learn. From the moment of birth, likely even before, humans are drawn to exploring new things to make connections. When we are curious about something new, we want to explore it. And while exploring we discover. The discoveries can be how the car rolls in sand or how a bell rings when shaken. To further extend these discoveries, educators can use quality literature in play provocations to enable early literacy investigations.

Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine. When children play with other children they create social groups, test out ideas, challenge each other's thinking and build new understandings. Play provides a supportive environment where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking. Play can expand children's thinking and enhance their desire to know and to learn. In these ways play can promote positive dispositions towards learning. Children's immersion in their play illustrates how play enables them to simply enjoy being. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 15)

What are provocations?

Provocations are deliberate and thoughtful decisions made by educators to extend and explore the ideas of children. Teachers provide materials, media and general direction as needed but the children take the ideas, through play, to make discoveries and learn. The use of provocations provides a unique opportunity for us to connect young children to quality literature – and to all the early literacy practices that can happen for young children (Honegger, n.d).

Provocations with strong literacy links

Comber and Reid (2007, p. 46) suggest that literacy is a process where people learn from engaging in communicative interactions with other people in social settings and activities.

Mackenzie and Hemmings (2014) believe 'that oral language, along with the ability to hear and record sounds and vocabulary development, are important to writing development, which is in turn important

for literacy development and success at school more generally' (p. 41). Providing rich experiences to enable children to interact and experiment with language through deliberate and thoughtful play experiences or provocations is an essential part of developing oral language and early literacy practices. Below are specific examples of how provocations can be used deliberately and purposefully to make the most of every play experience that we have applied in our preschools at Florey and Maribyrnong.

Dinosaurs: From literature, to dispositions and then to fossils

The importance of quality literature from birth, or even before, cannot be underestimated. While many educators acknowledge this, it is imperative that both informational and fictional representations are offered. This provocation utilised visual timelines that represented the dinosaur era coupled with books that provided rich insights into the characteristics of, and similarities and differences among species. Astro turf, plastic dinosaurs, plant models and writing paper supported children to create lists, craft stories and ask questions. Discussions turned quickly to focus on how fossils are discovered. Crafting salt dough fossils (that had letters on them to support future provocations) was then set up over the following days. Brushes allowed the newly discovered fossils to be unearthed from the sand. Over the weeks the fossils were used to suggest dinosaur names and even to describe the dinosaurs themselves.

Story Stones: Oral language and early story telling

A strong vocabulary is a prerequisite to becoming an effective reader and writer (Mackenzie & Hemmings, 2014). Oral language should be a strong focus in any preschool or early years learning program. Story stones act as a 'spark' or 'stimulus' for children to begin orally telling stories. A five year old boy, Tanae, retold *Grandpa and Thomas and the Green Umbrella* by Pamela Allen (2006) whilst manipulating the stones on the floor, with his hands:

Once upon a time Grandpa and Thomas were at the beach together. The umbrella blew away so they chased after it. Then they goed under the umbrella but another big cloud came and blew it away again! And then the wind went oooohhhh! They packed up their bucket and spade and then they went in the car and went broom broom. They then played with the bucket and spade. They put on their hats and went swimming in the ocean. They packed up and broommed away. The end.

After listening to this retelling, there were many opportunities for further learning. Having a conversation with Tanae about onomatopoeia and sharing some books with him that included examples of onomatopoeia provided him with information about how and why authors use this device. In the images below, you can see story stones for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (2002) and some story stones with everyday images for children to create their own story.

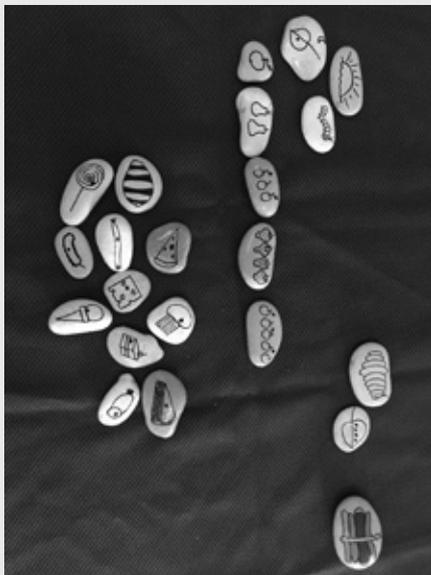


Figure 1: The Very Hungry Caterpillar story stones

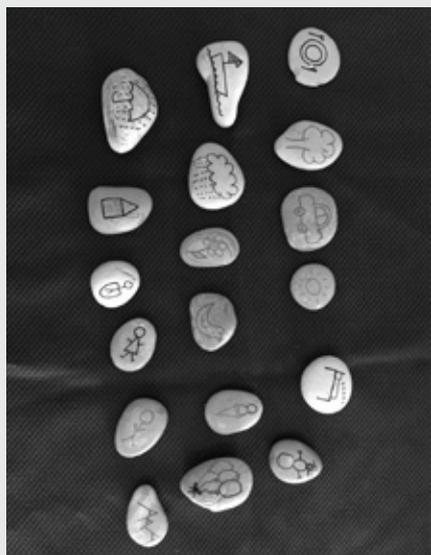


Figure 2: Assorted story stones

The Tree House: Thinking about visual literacy

A two-year-old boy had developed a strong interest in two-storey houses when his family was looking to extend on the family home to make room for their expanding family. A wooden tree house (Figure 3) was introduced into the learning environment and the boy was able to manipulate the family and furniture throughout the house, creating family scenarios and interactions. Educators read *Sharon, Keep Your Hair On* by Gillian Rubinstein and David Mackintosh (1996) to then connect with literature and literacy practices. The repeated phrases in the book allowed the child to repeat and read to himself. Educators also made the choice to use visual literacy to extend this child's learning. Floor plans and architectural plans were printed and explored by the child as more space was created in the play with the tree house.



Figure 3: Tree house (made by Timber Textures)

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom: Early music explorations through literature

The natural rhyme and rhythm in *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Marin, Archambault, & Ehlert, 1989) was enhanced through using musical instruments. The preschoolers shook their egg shakers every time they heard the word 'chicka.' Over time this became a musical performance as the drums were struck on the words 'boom boom'. The children would shake on hearing rhyming words and as they became experts in listening for rhymes they would also experiment with creating new rhyming words. Some maintained meaning while others were enjoyed for their nonsensical nature!



Figure 4: Chicka Chicka Boom Boom tree

Further literature to play with

- *Miss Spider's Tea Party* by David Kirk (2007) set up with miniature wooden pieces, a tea set and spiders.



Figure 5: Tea set with wooden stools and spiders

- *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt (2014) set up with crayons and materials for writing.

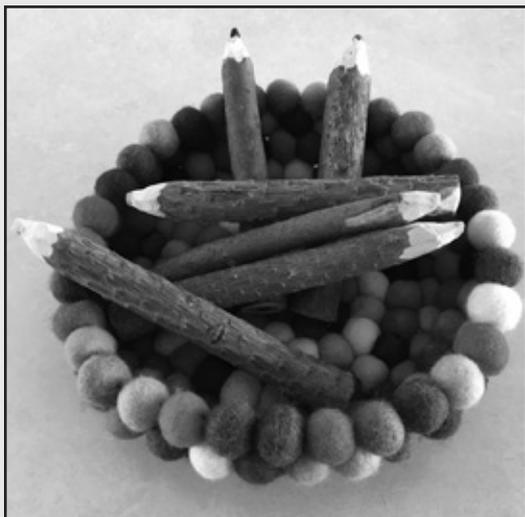


Figure 6: Large wooden crayons

- *Once Upon an Alphabet* by Oliver Jeffers (2014) and *Alphabet City* by Stephen T. Johnson (2000) set up with writing materials and alphabet tiles to support further literacy exploration.

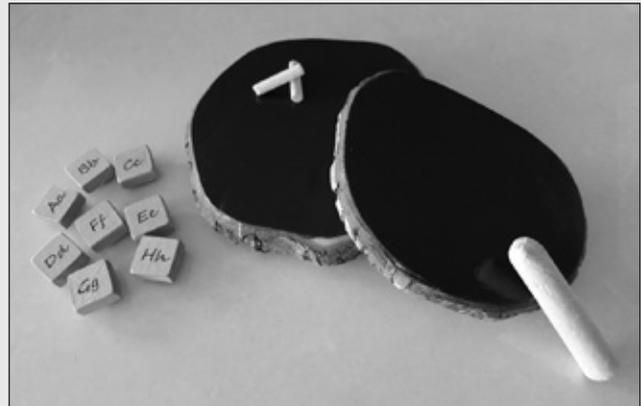


Figure 7: Mini chalkboards with letters and chalk

- *Tough Boris* by Mem Fox (1998) set up with a pirate ship and pirates.



Figure 8: Pirate play scene

- *Wave* by Suzy Lee (2008) set up with kinetic sand and seashells.



Figure 9: Shells from the beach and a bottle of sand

Word study in preschool

Using themed book sets or collections for author studies also allows children to make connections.

While enjoying the wonderful Mr McGee books by Pamela Allen one preschooler noted the onomatopoeic words, such as ‘oooooooo, owwwwwww, eeeee!’ Ruby then asked if they were normal words or special words. We talked about how these *soundful* words did in fact have a special name. The next day her mum was very excited to tell me that Ruby was talking about alliteration at home that night. Ruby, quite indignantly, said to her mum ‘No not alliteration. Pamela Allen does lots of onomatopoeia in her books so that we know how Mr McGee is feeling!’ Suffice to say, mum was corrected and Ruby was beyond proud!

Conclusion

Strong links to literature provide a deeper and richer experience for young children and support learning that is driven by their interests. Oral language skills, early literacy knowledge and the ability to inquire about their ‘wonderings’ will support young children in every aspect of their learning. As passionate early childhood educators, we agree with Paterson (2001) who says, ‘wonder puts us in awe of ordinary things’ (p. 41).

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