

Book Review

Ready to Learn: Using Play to Build Literacy Skills in Young Learners

Anne Burke

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Ready to Learn: Using Play to Build Literacy Skills in Young Learners is a short book with less than 130 pages. It is an excellent introduction to theories surrounding play and the importance of play in early educational experiences. It provides many ideas for teachers looking for ways to include play in their Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms.

The first chapter introduces the theoretical background to play and literacy, establishing a strong theoretical foundation for the following chapters. In this chapter, Anne Burke builds a strong argument for including play as a central element in the early childhood education curriculum. Literacy is defined as socially constructed and play as a social activity, one that influences children's ability to integrate into peer groups, as well as to develop social confidence. In this chapter, the author also suggests that play brings greater awareness and understanding of the world to children. Moreover, this chapter addresses the fact that play, as a pedagogical approach, is regularly challenged and viewed in opposition to more "productive" (p. 13) learning activities that teach children skills that prepare them for the workforce. Such activities often have more easily quantified outcomes than play-based activities. Burke, however, deftly argues for play as an important way for children to acquire literacies and uses the words of Piaget (the Swiss developmental psychologist known in the field of education for his theory of cognitive development) to summarize her central argument in this book, which is "play is an important medium to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development" (p. 17).

In the following chapters, Burke discusses play in relation to three main components of a language arts curriculum. Chapter 2 focuses on learning to communicate and oral language, and Chapter 3 focuses on reading and writing. In both chapters, theory is present but minimal. Emphasis is on practical ideas for the classroom as well as examples from classrooms, two elements that will be of great interest to educators in Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms, the intended audience for this book. There are also a few pages in these chapters that teachers can photocopy (permission is given to copy for classroom use) and send home to parents. Simple and well written, these pages offer playful ideas to promote literacy at home. Each of these chapters can stand alone and can be used by new and long-service teachers to introduce play in one area of their curriculum.

The remaining chapters address topics that are not often included in books about literacy: numeracy (Chapter 4), science (Chapter 5), technology and computers (Chapter 6), English language learning (Chapter 7), and citizenship (Chapter 8). Including these topics in a book

about literacy allows for an expansion of how teachers think about literacy. Literacy instruction cannot be defined as the acquisition of neutral technical skills. There are multiple literacies (Street, 1995). Researchers such as Cope and Kalantzis (2000), Lankshear and Knobel (2003), and Street (2003) have been advocating for new perspectives to define literacy, perspectives better suited to the 21st century, since the literacy skills one needs to develop are increasingly sophisticated. A more useful concept, according to these authors, would be to talk about multiple literacies; that is, multiple ways of reading the world in particular contexts. For instance, as in Burke's book, one would read the world in the context of numeracy, science, technology, computers, and citizenship.

These five chapters, unfortunately, are much shorter than the previous chapters. As a result, after reading each of them, teachers may not feel as prepared to experiment with play in their science or technology curriculum, as they would with their language arts curriculum. There are simply less suggestions of activities and ways to include play in these chapters, and the suggestions are not as rich. For instance, in the chapter about science, one section presents ideas of activities to explore physical science. This short four-paragraph section provides ideas to explore three concepts related to physics: gravity (twirling baskets and dropping objects), friction (pushing and pulling various objects), and physical properties through the use of water (building small pendulums, filling a can with water then punching holes in it, and playing with sponges). These concepts can be intimidating for teachers and a more in-depth description of each activity, as well as more activities in relation to each concept, would have been very helpful. In a section of similar length in the chapter about reading, Burke explains one single activity to help students recognize their names.

Another small drawback of this book is researchers' quotations written in its margins. The reader is left to wonder from where the quotations come. Were they from interviews with researchers? Were they from a book? Were they from a keynote address? Moreover, the names of these researchers do not appear in the references list. This may not be a problem for all readers, but for readers like me, who may be interested in digging further into the topic of play and literacy, this was a minor annoyance. Furthermore, there was no concluding chapter in this book. Such a chapter would have been an excellent addition because it could have provided a summary of Burke's lessons and her conclusions.

The audience for this book is teachers in Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms. It would also be a valuable read for teacher candidates, for anyone instructing them in the area of literacy, and for experienced teachers who endeavour to include play in their curriculum. There are no turnkey units in this book. Teachers will, however, find many ideas to bring play into their classroom and appreciate being addressed as professionals and experts in education.

References

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