

SLOW DOWN, CONSTRUCTION AHEAD!

*Young Children Composing With
Play and Children's Texts*

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Abstract: According to Ruetzel & Cooter, "... writing and reading are mirror processes with reciprocal benefits" (2019, p. 316). When teachers provide opportunities for reading and writing practice every day, children flourish. What better place to infuse this practice than through children's play. As children play, they think critically, answer questions, and generate new thoughts. Play naturally inspires children to act upon what they read and offers authentic opportunities for them to write. This article offers a guide to meaningfully infusing play centers with books read aloud. There, children have the opportunity to further inquire about the books. Children then extend and play out stories they will ultimately tell through composing and, possibly, conventional writing.

Keywords: early childhood, play, writing, inquiry, children's literature

Emily and Jorge are in the nature area in their kindergarten classroom. Emily is rereading *Not a Stick* by Antoinette Portis.

Jorge says, "Hey, I really like that the stick can be all kinds of things!"

Emily replies, "I know! It was cool when it was a paintbrush."

Jorge picks up the stick and says, "Look, it's not a stick. It's my paintbrush."

"That's great," Ms. Chen says. "The book had a lot of ideas for Not-a-Sticks. Can you think of another idea that's not in the book?"

Emily yells, "My stick is a bridge!"

Jorge adds, "My stick is the car that goes over the bridge."

Ms. Chen comments, "I bet your Not-a-Sticks could make a great story together."

Emily and Jorge begin to play out their story about the adventures of the car and the bridge.

Emily and Jorge extended a story through play by revisiting, rereading, and talking about what they liked about a book. Through facilitation, Ms. Chen helped the children connect the ideas from the book to play. This play creates a connection between what the children already know and future writing experiences.

This scenario shows how teachers can facilitate play by incorporating a few simple ideas. Take a look at Figure 1 to see how this might be possible. Then, continue reading to see these possibilities in

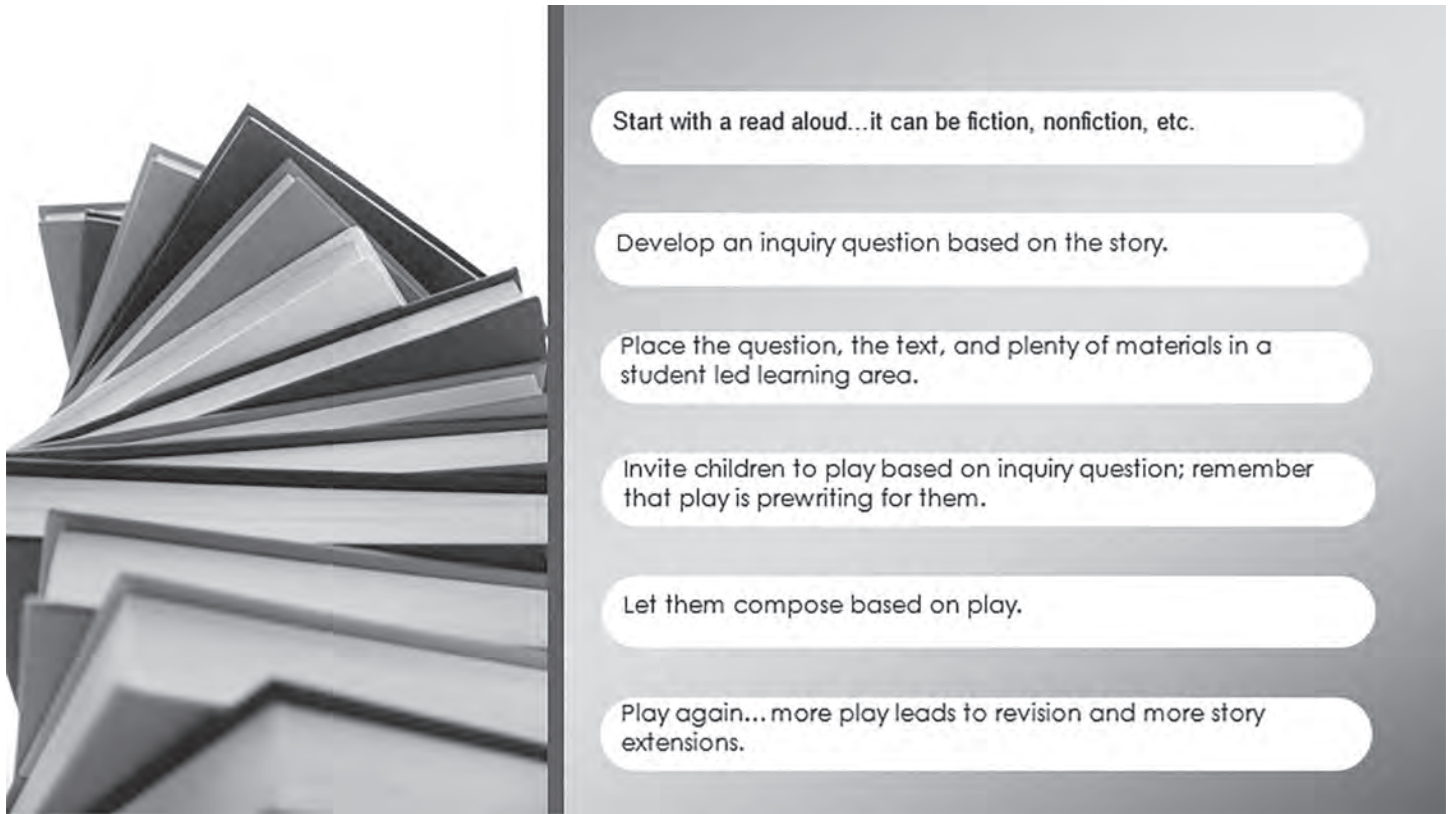


Figure 1. Steps to engaging children with story extensions.

action and learn how children’s texts, inquiry, and play facilitate composition and writing.

GO! Start With a Read-Aloud

Read-alouds provide the perfect vehicle for teaching literacy with children’s texts. Ledger and Merga (2018) tell us that there are many positive impacts associated with reading aloud:

- literacy level development;
- reading intervention effectiveness;
- print convention acquisition;
- comprehension, vocabulary, and cognitive development;
- motivation and reading frequency;
- receptive skills;
- language demands in other curricular areas; and
- the prevention of aliteracy in later life.

Building on those important findings, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) revealed positive effects of shared reading experiences. The more frequent and concentrated the read-alouds, the better. In other words, read-alouds that occur often and focus on specific instruction have a positive impact on oral language and print awareness for most or all subgroups of children (low SES groups, ELLs, etc.). Both of those skills are important first steps for our youngest writers.

Purposefully planned read-alouds with intentionally selected children’s texts help children apply their newfound literacy skills in

authentic reading and writing experiences (Cassano, 2018; Lonigan et al., 2000; NELP, 2008, NICHD, 2000; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). So, let’s go. Consider how to scaffold writing instruction by beginning with a read-aloud.

Start by choosing a text of interest for your students. This could be fiction, nonfiction, poetry, etc., and should lend itself to critical thinking and inquiry. “An inquiry stance to literature and curriculum invites children to make meaning of texts in personally and culturally significant ways to facilitate learning and to develop lifelong reading attitudes and habits” (Short, 2011, p. 60). A text that promotes a thoughtful and engaging read-aloud is also one that is likely to motivate young writers to compose.

One of our favorite texts is *Happy Dreamer* by Peter Reynolds (2017). This book details the different ways a young boy dreams and what happens when his dreams are limited. It explores the ideas of creativity and acceptance. The book helps children think critically about their dreams and wonder what it takes to be a happy dreamer.

Start with the initial read-aloud, reading mostly for enjoyment. Plan at least one open-ended question, but let the children lead the conversation. Listen carefully, question, and scaffold based on what is said. For example, a conversation about *Happy Dreamer* might include discussion about dreams and the type of dreamer each child wants to be.

While this read-aloud is a springboard for later story extension compositions, these oral language and critical thinking experiences are extremely important. “The key is hearing the book, thinking, and talking deeply about what it means” (Pinkerton & Hewitt, 2020, p.71).



INTERSECTION AHEAD! Develop Inquiry Questions Based on Interests and Texts

Because the initial purpose of this read-aloud is for enjoyment and critical conversation, young readers and writers may ask to hear a text read multiple times before they are ready to retire it to the play center. Take some time at this intersection between reading aloud and playing to develop an inquiry question that will guide the play and ultimately serve as an impetus for the story extension compositions. Ask yourself:

- What inquiry questions come to mind while reading the book?

- What play can I imagine the children engaging in to respond to the questions?
- How can I use that play to prompt creative composing experiences?

For *Happy Dreamer*, one inquiry question might be “What type of dreamer are you?” Children can also have input about questions of interest to them. Plan some questions (see Figure 2 for ideas) but leave room for the children to question too. The questions developed should be unique to the story and promote critical thinking and play.

The questions might be based on:

- sentence stems from a text
- patterns in a text
- vocabulary from a text

Or, they might prompt:

- a story that could be inserted into a text
- an extension of a text
- a whole new story

Figure 2. Creating inquiry questions for story extensions.

As another example, the book *Pool* by Jihyeon Lee (2015) might prompt conversation about an underwater world. This leads to an inquiry question like “Tell me about your underwater pool world.” The question provides a means for young children to extend the story in a whole new direction, different from the text (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Inquiry question developed after reading *Pool* by Jihyeon Lee.

The important questions that accompany texts read aloud build a bridge for young writers. The bridge allows children to march ahead into play and ultimately compose their own unique texts.

BRIDGE OPEN! Place the Question, the Text, and Plenty of Materials in a Play Center

Play promotes a child-centered, developmentally appropriate classroom environment where children are intrinsically motivated to learn. Using books and writing materials placed in the play center, children interact, hold conversations, and practice literacy skills naturally (Bredenkamp, 2005; Roskos & Christie, 2013). Teachers can use a read-aloud text and the inquiry questions developed as a starting point for the development of a play center that promotes composition.

Portier, Friedrich, and Stagg Peterson (2019) conducted action research in early childhood classrooms. The data revealed that writing success was partly a result of intentional preparation for play. This planning included teachers’ considering children’s interests, creating authentic writing experiences related to texts and inquiry questions, and involving children in designing the play center. Intentionally selecting materials to accompany the focal children’s text and inquiry question has the power to promote play that results in important opportunities to compose.

The children are also invaluable resources for building these play centers. Let their interests and imagination guide the materials selected. Sometimes, this might include “assigning new meanings” to old play areas or materials (Portier et al., 2019, p. 17). Allow the children to look for ways to repurpose items in your classroom. For example, a puppet theater might become a flower shop, a drive-through for fast food, etc.

Think about intentional planning with *Happy Dreamer*. In addition to the text and the inquiry question, children may want to have:

- pillows or cushions to represent clouds where dreaming can take place
- clothing, hats, and other materials to make costumes
- paper, paints, markers, pencils, etc., for artistically representing or writing about dreams
- a camera to capture images of their dreams
- music, either soft and melodic or upbeat with a fast rhythm, to represent dreams
- recording devices to capture video of dream play or audio of dream retellings.

Can you apply this idea to a book like *The Best Part of Me: Children Talk About Their Bodies in Pictures and Words* (Ewald, 2002)? Think about the materials needed to support the question “What is the best part of you?” (see Figure 4). What materials would children need to explore this idea and begin to compose their own answers through play?



Figure 4. Thinking about materials for The Best Part of Me play center.

Inquiry-based play is the bridge between read-alouds and your children’s compositions. Open that bridge and invite children to play based on the inquiry question. Remember, play is prewriting, or as we would like to call it—precomposing.

SHARE THE ROAD! Let Children Answer the Question Through Play

“Rigorous, developmentally appropriate play is a blend of what we know is appropriate practice and standards-based academic skills. It depends heavily on the children engaging in inquiry, critical thinking, and application” (Pinkerton & Hewitt, 2020, p. 67). When children share the road and play together, their play represents the development of their composition.

Hall and Robinson (2003) discuss the “framing statements” that have been identified in children’s play. Researchers have observed children during play and found that they make statements that:

- identify the setting and situation,
- assign roles to players,
- clarify relationships and actions, etc.

Hall and Robinson (2003) propose that these types of statements repeatedly observed in children’s play are the “glue that [holds] the bits of the play together,” but also provide “evidence for considering play to be authorship” (p. 19). They go on to suggest that experienced writers, when they write, make the same decisions that children make during play. Writers have to identify setting, bring characters to life, and create conflict and resolution that glue readers to a text. This is the same thing that children do when they play together.

If we place *Happy Dreamer* in a play center in a pre-kindergarten classroom, along with the inquiry question “What kind of dreamer are you?” we might see Gannon, a Soaring Dreamer, pretend to fly above the world searching for lost treasures. Or we might see Vashni, a Creative Dreamer, use recyclables to create a new world where children are in charge.

Similarly, combining *What Do You Do With an Idea?* by Kobi Yamada (2014) with the inquiry question “How do your ideas grow?” might lead second-grade children to play wizards, snakes,

and monsters (see Figure 5). All of this inquiry-based play creates a shared road for both play and composing.

WORKERS IN AREA! Let Them Compose

We are defining *composition* as the act of putting together the ideas needed for fictional/nonfictional narrative, expository, or poetic pieces. We are defining *writing* as skills for conveying those ideas in print, like using print conventions, letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, etc. Compositions manifest themselves through oral retellings, drawings, acting, and of course, writing. Play provides opportunities for both composition and conventional writing instruction.

Matt Glover (2009) tells us that “as children play stories, hear stories, and start to write stories, they are creating an understanding of the concept of story” (p. 70). This is composition.

The best place to find composers and writers at work is in play centers.

Sometimes, the youngest children might need the play to be the only product for their composition. However, older children will be able to turn their compositions into dictation, drawings, and writing. “What is clear is that most children, when learning to write, already know a great deal about how to construct texts. The problem is that too often the trials and tribulations of learning to hold pencils, writing letter shapes, and rendering sounds into symbols create a distance between learning to write and being able to compose”



Figure 5. Creative play products created by students after reading *What Do You Do With an Idea?*

(Hall & Robinson, 2003, p. 26). Remember, composition may happen before writing, and when writing begins, don't dismiss the simple drawing and scribbling techniques.

Thoughtfully choose when to explicitly teach specific and particular concepts about composition and writing. For example, observing children at play offers opportunities to talk with them about characters, settings, actions, etc., in narrative story composition. Centers make the perfect spot to teach to individual needs, like discussing concepts about print, letter sounds and patterns, and more.



Bahlmann Bollinger and Myers (2020) studied two preschool classrooms to observe the effects of intentionally using play centers as a method for teaching writing. They found that the key to writing skill development through play is the teacher who is intentional. This intentionality includes teachers who:

- add authentic writing materials in play centers
- are involved and active in the play
- invite children to write
- observe and know when to encourage deeper composition and writing
- promote play based on children's interests and writing based on choice and authenticity.

Using the book *Happy Dreamer*, let children begin composing as they play out the inquiry question "What kind of dreamer are you?" Think back to Gannon and Vashni mentioned in the previous section. Gannon is playing parallel to Vashni. Although their play is quite different, the two children are still talking and composing together.

Gannon puts on a blanket cape and dons a Batman mask.

"I'm flying across the world," Gannon says.

"What are you looking for?" Vashni asks.

Gannon replies, "My dreams."

Vashni says, "I'm going to build my own world because I am a creative dreamer."

Vashni searches the recyclables box and finds paper towel rolls, milk jugs, and empty tissue boxes. Gannon asks, "What kind of

world will you build?" The children continue their talk and play as they each work to compose their own happy, dreamy worlds.

- Composing teachable moment #1: Have Gannon think about what that dream might be, where to find it, etc. Gently guide Gannon to compose a narrative that has all of the elements of story: characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution. Ask Gannon about the dream, which helps to solidify the plot. Gannon's dream is to find a treasure. This could prompt a follow-up question about where to find that treasure and help establish the setting. Probing questions such as these can push Gannon forward in the composition and may be dictated later to see it in writing.
- Writing teachable moment #2: Vashni has stacked recyclables, creating a dream world where kids are in charge. Ask Vashni to talk about the creation. Reread *Signs in My Neighborhood* by Shelly Lyons (2013) and ask if any of the recyclable buildings need to be identified. Vashni might make a sign that says, "House," a word copied from a label in the architecture play center. Suggest Vashni's own name as another option for a sign.

With young children, composition is always under construction. They often replay and reconstruct the original stories that they create. This reconstruction of their story moves them into recomposing, which is similar to the revision made by experienced writers.

CONSTRUCTION ZONE! Play Again

In their book that studies the moves that children make during play, Hall and Robinson (2003) link those moves to how writing is composed. As children move through a play situation, they make many negotiations with one another that lead the play often in a different direction from where it first started. "In similar ways as a written text progresses, so ideas will be generated, some rejected, some incorporated; some work and some don't" (p. 25).

Katie Wood Ray (2006) encourages teachers to use inquiry to help children make composition decisions to move the writing forward. While watching children inquire and explore (whether their product is just play or a more conventionally written piece), it would not be uncommon to hear phrases like:

- This time, we should ...
- Don't say _____. I think you should say _____.
- Can I tell you my story again? (to an experienced scribe)
- I'm changing my drawing to _____.
- Is this how you spell "happy"?

As children are recomposing, a teacher's intentional role as a participant observer provides the scaffolding needed to address skills for recomposing and rewriting. These are perfect opportunities for teachable moments.

Going back to *Happy Dreamer* one last time, imagine that Gannon and Vashni are reconstructing the compositions or writing they previously created.

- Reconstruction teachable moment #1: Gannon decided that the Soaring Dreamer story dictated yesterday needs revision. Gannon wants to find the treasure in outer space instead of

China. Use this opportunity to talk about how authors convey setting to the readers. Pull a book to help guide Gannon. For example, with *Pig the Pug* by Aaron Blabey (2016), ask how readers know the story takes place in Pig's house. Help Gannon determine which words from the first dictation show readers that the story took place in China. Talk about what will have to change to help readers know the new story takes place in outer space.

- Reconstruction teachable moment #2: Vashni is adding writing to the Creative Dreamer world. Labels were already created for "Vashni," "House," and "Store." Vashni used prior knowledge about letter and sound correspondence, names, and labels from other play centers. Vashni examines the label created for the car and is not quite happy. Vashni thinks there should be more than just "cr" in the label. Use this moment to help Vashni with CVC words that have an r-controlled vowel. Start with the familiar text, like *Cars: Rushing! Honking! Zooming!* by Patricia Hubbell (2010). Help Vashni to find the word "car" in the book and compare it to the "cr" label made. Vashni can think of other words that sound like "car" and write those down. Talk about how the "r" sound is often spelled with "ar."

While children's texts, inquiry questions, and play are vital, being a participant observer, like in the teachable moments above, is the key to unlocking the world of recomposing for children. A teacher who is intentional and observant can assist young writers in constructing written pieces that move way beyond just writing the alphabet.

Navigate the Curves Ahead

With many schools seeking a quick fix to fill in learning gaps or striving to prove academic excellence through test scores, the curves could be sharp. Confidently navigate the curves as you promote composition and writing through play-based strategies. Using children's texts, inquiry, and play to teach literacy can easily support standards and be justified by research. Think about it. Which classroom would you most like to be in: one with predetermined lessons taught every year or one with your interests incorporated into the classroom through play?

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