

PROMOTING LITERACY THROUGH PLAY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Play is a rich activity with opportunities to use language. Designing and enriching play environments for preschoolers and kindergartners through organizing dramatic play areas and adding useful prints and props encourages and supports voluntary and spontaneous literacy behaviors. Pretend play and observed literacy routines increase with adult guidance. Changes in the physical arrangement for a traditional playroom and addition of useful props allowed observation of literacy routines for five preschoolers and kindergartners. Children were observed during play in three periods. Observations were made first in a traditional play environment and without adult guidance, then in a literacy enriched environment without adult guidance, and finally in an environment with enrichment and adult guidance.

“Hilary and Sara are sitting at the table in the Post Office play center. They are writing letters, and then inserting them in the mailbox at the corner of the table. They are mailing letters, retrieving them, and pretending to read the messages. Then Hilary grabs a marker and a clipboard. Sara begins to guide her in what to write. She is pointing at Hilary’s paper and talking softly. They seem to be trying to spell a word and both refer to the hanging mobile over the play center for a spelling or a letter formation. Suddenly Hilary begins to scribble rapidly on her paper. She shows Sara her scribbles and Sara says, “Baby, you’re bad,” They both giggle and continue making and sending letters to one another” (Neuman & Roskos, 1990, p.219).

This scenario highlights the great number of literacy activities that were demonstrated by the two kindergarten children, Hilary and Sara, and highlights the integrity of their reading and writing activities through repetition and elaboration in order to maintain a particular play theme. This play theme was organized previously in the play area of the children’s classroom to reflect a real post office center and which was targeted for children’s literacy enrichment (Neuman & Roskos, 1990).

Play is a thick activity with opportunities to use language. Children perform different form of language in an effort to maintain play, such as recalling sequences by asking, “do you remember how this game works?”(p. 6) or developing vocabulary, problem solving and questioning, which provide a foundation for reading and writing (Roskos, 2000).

This paper focuses on promoting literacy for children during their preschool and kindergarten years mainly by designing and enriching their play environment. An environment that encourages and supports pretend play is considered by psychologists and educators as the first step in learning and developing for children (Morrow & Rand, 1991).

This paper will first discuss how play is considered as a major part in young children's lives and how it is viewed as an important context for literacy learning. Then, it will highlight the importance of adult role in promoting literacy for children through enriching play environment. Finally, it will mention few implications for teachers, parents and cautionary remarks about linking literacy and play.

Discussion

Play is considered as a major part in young children's lives and is viewed as an important context for literacy learning. According to Corcoran and Nielsen (1989) scaffolding responses, modeling and questions are considered as one of the adopted procedures by children to learn from adults in their environment. This means that adults are responsible for children's present and future knowledge, "Literacy does not arise from innate abilities, literacy is learned" (Corcoran & Nielsen, 1989, p.16). This study suggests that children's access to print and literacy experiences in the play environment, either in their house or in their school and enhanced by adult experiences is considered as an ignition for literacy learning.

Researchers demonstrated factors that provide support for the child to move forward in his/her literacy development and "can affect the quality and variety of child's oral language use" (Corcoran & Nielsen, 1989, p.15). These factors are:

- Manipulating the play environment of children through physically arranged play centers in classrooms.
- Including literacy-related materials (pencils, paper, typewriter).
- To engage the child with different activities, such as, storybooks, writing, and play experience.

- Adults support children by interacting with them, and giving models of language and print aspects (Corcoran & Nielsen, 1989).

According to Neuman & Roskos (1990), the redesign of the play environment for literacy enrichment purposes involved four kinds of physical changes:

- The play centers were all carved from each other.
- The use of a wide variety of print and other symbolic forms, in order to increase the amount of labeling in the environment.
- Play areas were more sharply defined and targeted to represent common real life and literacy related routines for children outside their classroom (e.g., post office, library, and kitchen).

Physical arrangements were made in order to make movement between play centers easier which will encourage the development of coherent and ongoing play themes. (The post office was placed close to the library). These physical changes will encourage voluntary and spontaneous literacy behaviors while children are at free play (Morrow & Rand, 1991). When adults add reading and writing materials based on a specific theme in the play area the amount of literacy activity in play increases significantly. For example, teachers design and equip the play area as a veterinarian's office and create a waiting room that includes books and magazines for recreational reading while the pets' owners wait to see the doctor. Posts could be included about animals' care, "no smoking", and a schedule for the doctors hours and so forth, in the office. Teachers could include patient cards, prescription pads, blank sheets and other materials with which students can interact.

When observing children during play it was typical to see them reading books to their stuffed animal pet, child playing the doctor role, by asking question to his patients (another

children playing patient role) about pet problems, using his/her records, writing prescriptions (frequent scribble or random letters) and other such behaviors (Isenberg & Jacob, 1983).

Researchers found that student's definitely engaged in attempted literacy behaviors as they obviously noticed and were encouraged by the theme that was created environmentally in the play area. Although children involved themselves in reading and writing activities, it was noticed that their literacy play activities increased with adult guidance. However, even without adult guidance, literacy behaviors took place in comparison to rooms without such materials and play theme stations (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Roskos (1988) suggested, "pretend play nurtures narrative competence" (p. 562). This means that when children engage in pretend play they use texts and invent stories in different forms and number of levels to bring meaning to their pretend play. Roskos also explained that these types of invented stories during pretend play "may have a significant consequences for reading and writing achievement, primarily because such activity may facilitate imaginative uses of language and story schema development" (p.563). During pretend play children tend to display their stance or orientation toward literacy. Activities during pretend play were observed and cataloged into three domains:

- Activities, like reading favorite books to their pretend babies.
- Skills, like printing alphabet letters and words.
- Knowledge, how to use writing and reading in a specific situation.

According to Roskos (1998), children adopt their pretend play from life experiences. Literacy routines- sets of reading and writing actions embedded in common events in life in a modern industrial culture such as banking, phoning, shopping, and so on- find their way into the play of children providing numerous opportunities to them to explore the usage of reading and

writing in different meaningful ways. It was found that children who participate in story inventing during pretend play episodes in a frequent and active way may be a head on literacy learning as they enter the school.

Finally, according to Strickland and Morrow (1989), preparing the environment for functional literacy behaviors in the classroom or in the home environment by providing materials in free-play environments, “facilitates spontaneous, voluntary, functional uses for reading and writing” (p.179). This will create the need and desire to read and write, and will allow the children to behave like readers and writers. Just placing pencils, pens and papers in their play area will generate an increase in children’s literacy behavior. “Placing materials in well orchestrated environments and encouraging their use thematically replaces random happenstance with purposeful use” (p.179).

“Play creates a pleasurable low risk environment in which mistakes are inconsequential and which as a result can serve a significant role in supporting literacy development. In a low risk atmosphere children are able to engage in emergent forms of reading and writing” (Cooper & Dever, 2001, p 59). Recent research suggests that children’s creative engagement with reading and writing activities through play has important implication for their literacy development. Just as children use clay and blocks to create and express their world, they also use print to make sense of their experiences (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). In another study researchers cited that, “Physical environment can indeed have a significant effect on children’s play behaviors for example, small, intimate, and well defined play spaces appear to enhance task involvement and interactive play among preschoolers. The type, number, and accessibility of play materials also seem to relate to the quality of play themes” (Neuman & Roskos, 1990, p.215).

Studies suggested that play contributes to children's learning play is considered as "the driving force behind learning" (Isenberg & Jacob, 1983, p.1). Even though that there are many researches demonstrating that literacy development in early childhood can be enhanced by creating a classroom environment rich in print and by providing the right environment for children in their home, still, classroom environment is often overlooked in instructional planning and home environment is not given the right attention (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

Implications for teachers and parents

According to Cooper and Dever (2001), adults can enrich play by providing materials and enabling children to engage in literacy activities that they could not do on their own. They allow children to practice what they know as well as demonstrate and confirm what they are capable of doing. Teachers need to focus on pretend play as a place for promoting literacy development by, creating play centers that can facilitate children pretend play, and work on developing these centers to stimulate children exploration for the functions, routines, and literacy features. It's important for teachers to observe closely literacy interactions during children pretend play and ask their children to share their pretend play stories and record them, in order to use them for extended language experience activities and for guiding instructional efforts in literacy (Roskos, 1988). In order parents of young children to capitalize on pretend play as a place and a medium for promoting their children's literacy development they may do so by:

- Encouraging pretend play activities.
- Providing enriched environment with plenty of space and literacy props.
- Providing their children with guidance and attention by mentioning positive regards and comments and encouraging their children early stories by listening to them.

Finally, although play magnifies children's literacy understandings, making visible their thinking and skills in the actions, gestures and language of their play making, Roskos and Christie (2001) pointed out a few cautionary remarks about linking literacy and play. They remark that, "there is also a danger that filling play setting with literacy props may shove aside other playthings that children might enjoy and prefer. The infusion of literacy props into play settings could become an invasion displacing other toys and props that children need and benefit from" (Roskos & Christie, 2001, p.65). Further maintaining balance is needed to ensure that play settings are also rich in other materials "generic and specific that spark children's imaginations and prompt new understandings" (p.65). If literacy-promoting strategies are carried too far, they can interfere with children's play and become "stumbling blocks to the literacy learning that may flourish in play" (p.65).

Method

Participants for this study were from preschool and kindergarten children who were purposively chosen. Children in this sample talks Arabic fluently and are making progress in English as their second language. Although gender in this sample was not an issue in this research, this sample contained four males and one girl.

I decided to reorganize my children's game room in order to use it in my research. The room is medium in size; one of its corners is longer than the other corners and has a window. On one wall there is a big drawing of a colorful boat and on the opposite wall my baby's name is printed in a big letters with beach drawings between letters. The third wall has a drawing of balls and umbrella beach; the opposite wall has no drawings and painted in white.

Room designing before enriching the environment and after considers different settings regarding the following: adding prints (labeling every thing, adding pictures), literacy props

(books, papers, scissors, pencils...), white and bulletin boards, dramatic play areas filled with useful props, partition (to divide the room into sections), tables and chairs.

Two designs were considered in this paper. The first design reflects a usual environment in children room, which means prints were not available at children sight level, and no added literacy props nor any type of boards were available. The room was undivided and toys were added and scattered in the room without having any theme to reflect a dramatic play area.

The second design reflects the purposeful enriching environment in children's room in order to promote literacy. The room was first divided into three areas by using a long dresser with four drawers. As shown in Figure 1, the dresser was added between walls 3 and 1. The area between wall 3 and the dresser represents the kitchen area and the area between wall 1 and the dresser represents the library area. The area between wall 2 and the dresser represents the restaurant area. Close to the window corner is the restaurant table and opposite it is the cashier area.

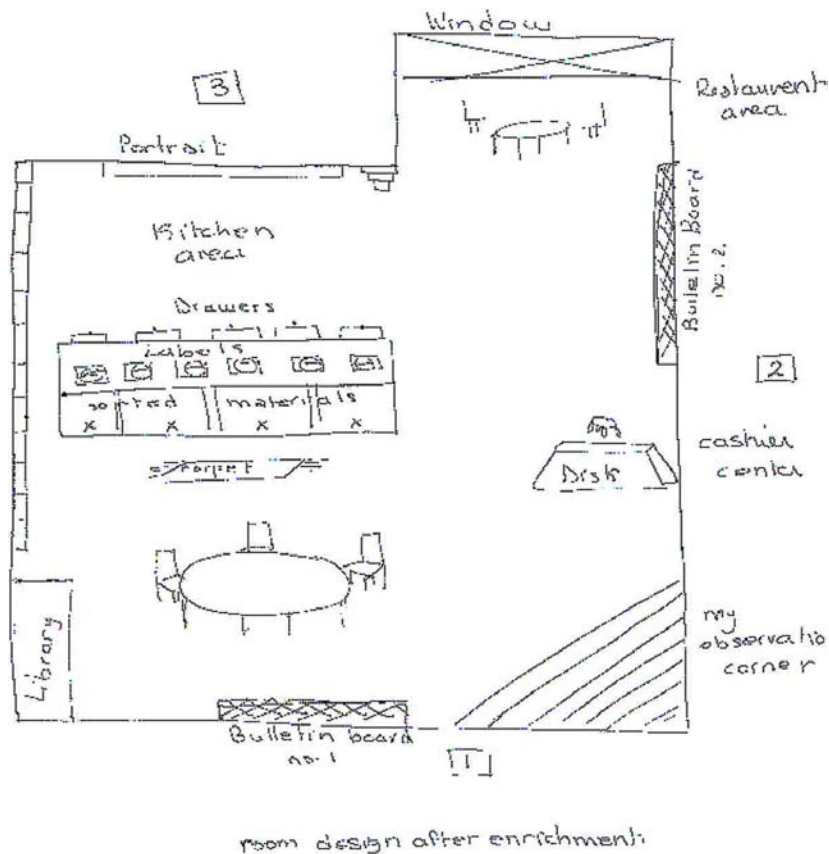


Figure 1: Room Design after Enrichment

Three boards were added to the room: one white board on wall 4 shared between the kitchen and the library area; two bulletin boards, one was added on wall 1 in the library area and the other one was added on wall 2 in the restaurant area.

Two wooden tables and one plastic desk were added to the room. One small and high table with two chairs was added in the restaurant area to serve as a serving table. Opposite to it, the plastic desk was added with a plastic small chair to represent the cashier area. In the library area, a round wooden and large table with four chairs was added in order serve the library area. In the kitchen area, the long dresser served as working table for the children. Regarding prints I tried to add them in two ways: the first was through labeling props and toys in each area. In the library I intended to sort things either by color, size, shapes or by theme. I sorted blocks into

colors and sizes and gave them a label like red or blue... or sorted them in sizes and label them like big or small blocks, shapes, puzzles, numbers or letters and animals were given a label too.

Labels were written on either white papers or colored if the label was intended to differentiate between color, and of course, the color of the paper matches the color of the blocks .I wrote in big, clear letters in two languages, English and Arabic, and stuck them above each item close to children’s sight and reach.

The second way I used in labeling was by using bulletin boards in the room. In the library area I added procures or pictures for animals, letters, shapes; and later I added children scribbling or drawings. On the other board in the restaurant area I added things that could be found in a restaurant like pictures for food, recipes, calorie intake, prices, vegetables pictures and finally U.S.A map. I tried my best to add prints in each area; for instance, in restaurant area on the window close to the serving area I added a welcome sign. In the kitchen I hung a large table cloth on the kitchen wall number 3; the table cloth has a picture of Big Bird having his breakfast, with prints for things on his table and all the picture was labeled with all the alphabetical letters.

Finally I added props for each area. I chose props that usually are available naturally in the children’s environment. For instance, instead of using pretend recipes or coupons I added real coupons from newspapers. I made sure that the selected props were inserted as a part in each dramatic area. These props are itemized in Table 1.

Table 1: Literacy props used to enrich play centers

Play center	Literacy props
Kitchen	Telephone books A cell phone A telephone Radio Calculators Cook book

	<p>Blank cards Food coupons Grocery store ads/fliers Empty grocery containers Calendar Pens, pencils, markers Different size containers Kitchen ware (dishes, silverware) Cans and snack boxes Chick peas</p>
Restaurant	<p>Decorative vases Napkins Menu's chart Serving ware Flyers Prices sheet Cash register Credit cards Credit card holder Calculators Food dishes pictures Papers Pens, pencils Telephone Yellow pages directory</p>
Library	<p>A wide variety of children's books Book marks Pens, pencils, markers Paper of assorted sizes and colors Telephone Posters of children's books Book shelves Scissors and staples Scotch tape Blocks in different sizes and colors Puzzles of different types Wooden alphabetic and letters Wooden shapes Plastic animals Letter cards and numbers Painting books Carpet Bulletin pins</p>

To determine the effects of these literacy–enriched play centers, I conducted an observational study analyzing the play of 5 preschoolers and kindergartners in a home based environment. Mainly, the aim of the study was to observe how changes in the play environment might influence the nature of children’s print activities in play.

Results and Analyses

Using the book, Educational Research (Airasian, P. & Gay, L.R., 2000), for analysis and application, categories of changes in literacy- related play were established. This categorical analysis provided a means for describing the children’s literacy demonstration in play behaviors. The qualitative analysis provided a description for children literacy behaviors prior to enrichment and indicated a number of important changes in the nature of the literacy-related play after the enrichment. Literacy behavior during play was defined as follows:

- Reading: browsing, pretend reading, book handling, story telling, reading aloud to oneself or others, and reading silently.
- Writing: drawing, scribbling, tracing, copying, dictating, writing related to thematic play, story drawing.

Changes in the nature of literacy–related play were observed in the three periods of investigation: traditional environment prior to any literacy enrichment or adult guidance, literacy enrichment environment without adult guidance, and literacy enriched environment with adult guidance.

The traditional environment prior to any literacy enrichment or adult guidance

In this period there are no changes to serve literacy enrichment nor were any literacy behaviors that children could try during their play suggested children’s play was random and didn’t serve any specific literacy purpose. Their free play seemed to focus on exploring the toys

and experimenting with them. Children used the available props in a limited act; for example they used the few kitchen items they had in one corner in the room and set them on the carpet in what appeared to be cooking. They played separately without a theme in their play or any distinct use of literacy routines. Children were happy to be together and they did enjoy playing with the toys in the room; for example, Salah told me he liked playing with the toys and when it was time to leave children begged their parents to spend more time together. In this period of investigation children's behaviors can be described as natural, random, and traditional. They didn't show any significant literacy routines in their play such as pretending to read or write.

Literacy enrichment environment without adult guidance

In this period dramatic play areas were set up and literacy props added in order to allow any literacy routines in children play. The role of the researcher in this period of investigation was only in mentioning the presence of literacy materials. In Figure 2, children are interacting in with literacy materials. Children's behaviors started to change. In the beginning children were surprised with and excited about the changes in the room. For example Salah remarked that this game room was different from his room and he liked it better.



Figure 2: Children interacting

Children immediately ran into the room and started to explore the added props in each play station. In this period their actions started to look more purposeful. They began playing in the divided areas using these props in their play. Children used the kitchen area to pretend cooking, cleaning or even serving food for children playing in the restaurant area (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Children in the restaurant area

It was obvious that each child preferred to do something in one of these play stations. They moved from one station to the other and exchanged roles and places between them. For example, Maria played in the reception area and started to use the phone and the calculator; in the other corner Salah and Ibraheem played in the restaurant area; Hamzeh was reading a story in the library corner (Figure 4) while Muaaz was in the kitchen area.

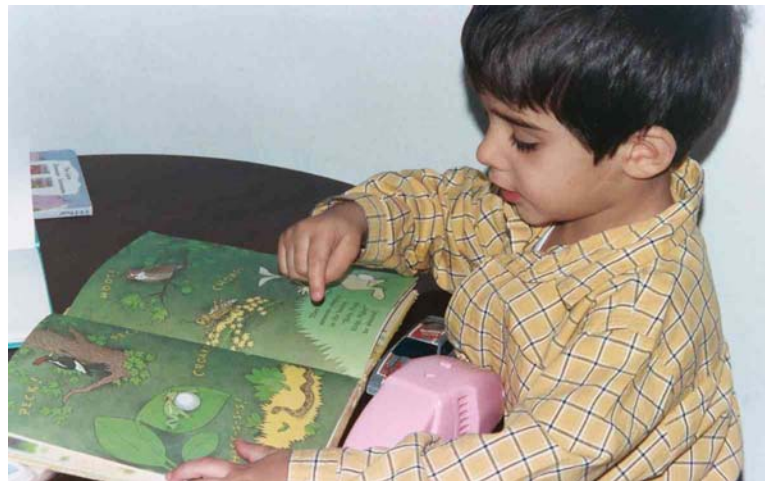


Figure 4: Hamzeh reading

Although in this period of investigation they were active in moving between stations and participating in a pretend play, most of the time they played alone or in dyads. They didn't play all, as a team and they didn't use all the added props as I imagined they would. For instance, although Maria used the phone and the calculator in the reception area she didn't pretend to take

orders of customers. Muaaz, in the kitchen area was obviously immersed in cooking but didn't cook for the purpose of serving children in the restaurant area

Finally, the second period of investigation of seemed better than the first period prior to enrichment because it did show that children in literacy enriched environment can increase literacy routines. Literacy routines observed in this period were mainly connected to the prints in each dramatic area, mostly in the library corner through reading stories and by using literacy props to write and draw. Children were interested in spending several minutes in observing prints all over the room, commenting or asking questions about them, or even trying to read them aloud.

Literacy enriched environment with adult guidance

In this period the only thing that changed from the second period of investigation was the researcher's role. This role was defined as the following:

- Pointing out the presence of materials and explaining their use.
- Reminding the children of the time.
- Encouraging and guiding children's use of inserted props.
- Suggesting writing stories, recipes and shopping lists.
- Reading books to them.
- Suggesting writing notes to friends.
- Modeling behaviors.
- Participating in play.
- Giving directions.

In this period play looked even more purposeful than in the two previous observations. As shown in Figure 5, the children interacted through role playing.



Figure 5: Children preparing food in the kitchen area

More literacy routines were observed and children engaged in more reading, and writing activities (see Figure 6). They seemed to like these activities more with adult guidance. For instance, in the beginning the researcher wrote each child's name on a label, spelling each letter in the name, as they watched; each then stuck it on his/her chest.

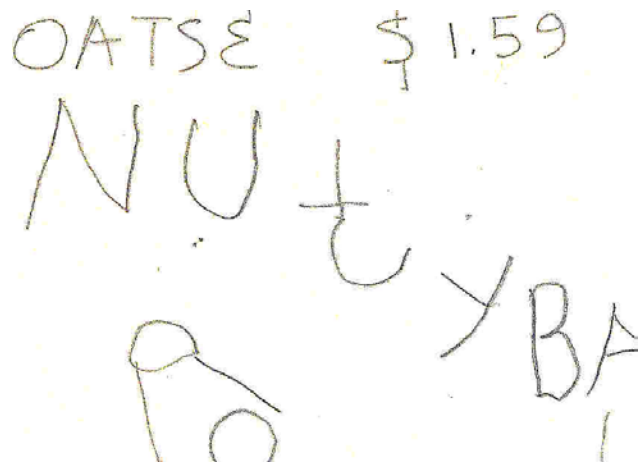


Figure 6: Salah traced the Nutty Bar® box label

Children's literacy routines observed in this period can be described as the following:

- Literacy became more interactive among the children, as well as between them and the researcher. For example, Salah was sitting in the restaurant area pretending to be a customer while Ibraheem was taking his pizza order (Figure 7), giving him choices by using pizza flyers from a newspaper. In the kitchen area Muazz was preparing something to drink for them and later Hamzeh was joining their company to have a drink, too.



Figure 7: Pizza ordering

- Literacy activities in play became more connected. Before enrichment and before adult guidance, children's play was isolated. For example, Muazz was in one corner playing with letters and shapes while the other children were in the library area (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Children in library area

- After a few seconds, he abruptly left the corner, grabbed a book from the shelves and started flipping through it; and then, again abruptly, returned to the letters and shapes. These behaviors were seen among all the children in different patterns.

Following the enrichment with adult guidance, literacy activities appeared to become more connected and related to each other especially among the pretend play. For example, Ibraheem was in the kitchen area cutting coupons from a grocery newsletter (see Figure 9) and then sticking each coupon with the item picture on different colored boxes. He then started sorting them in shelves in one corner of the kitchen pretending that he is in ALBERTSON store; he even cut the store name from the news letter and stuck it on the wall. Later, he started pretending to sell these boxes for Muazz and Salah. Then they started cooking in the kitchen and fixing food in order to serve it to the restaurant; they were working like a team.



Figure 9: Cutting newspapers

- Literacy routines with adult guidance became more intense and interesting for children. In this period children seemed to like my interference. For example, when I was reading a story for them they were all around me, cuddling me. Maria sat on my lap while the others were focusing on listening to the story. Literacy

became more intense with my interference, especially because I drew the story while telling it, children tried to imitate my drawings (Figures 10 and 11) and they tried to write a story as well, even they were reading to others in loud voices.

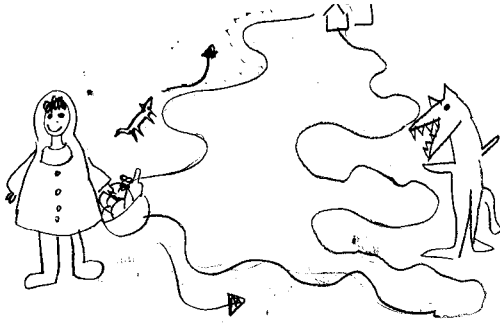


Figure 10: Adult's drawing



Figure 11: Child's drawing

Finally, in this period of investigation were adult guidance played a role with literacy enrichment; literacy became more interactive, purposeful, tense and interesting.

Conclusions

Finally, according to these results, preschool and kindergarten children are likely to engage in more spontaneous and voluntary literacy behaviors during their free play period, when literacy enrichment is introduced into their environment. Their voluntary literacy behaviors will be more purposeful, interactive and intense and children would be more interested with adult guidance. In conclusion, adults play a major role which is extremely important in guiding and modeling literacy behaviors in which children can imitate and lead to increase in their literacy routines, but it's important to remember not to push too hard in adding props and in their usage in order to promote literacy because it can interferes with children play and may hinder literacy learning that could be promoted through children play Finally, these results might be added to others results in order to give evidence for how literacy enriched environments with adult guidance can promote literacy . This study needs further implications and more statistical analysis. In future more observation should be done for longer periods of time and on different

intervals. More changes should be done to the environment in order to get more results and these methods should be observed on another group of children in order to give more evidences for this study.

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