

A high-angle photograph of a teacher and five young children sitting on a colorful, interlocking foam play mat. The teacher, a woman with blonde hair tied back, is wearing a purple top and is holding a card with the letter 'L' and a lion illustration. She is looking down at the cards on the floor. Five children are gathered around her, also looking at the cards. The children are of various ethnicities and are dressed in casual clothing. The play mat is made of large, colorful tiles in shades of pink, green, blue, and yellow. Several letter cards are scattered on the mat, including 'L', 'Q', 'b', and 'h'.

Playful learning supports children's development by fostering curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and social skills through active, engaging exploration rather than passive listening and repetition.

# PLAY ISN'T A LUXURY

||| **Tori K. Flint and Myae Han**

**Reclaiming Joyful  
Literacy Learning  
in the "Science of  
Reading" Era**



It is the first week of kindergarten. You walk into your classroom and notice how different it looks from a few years ago. The dramatic play corner is now a phonics station. The block shelves hold tubs of letter tiles and decodable texts. Over the summer, your school adopted a new curriculum aligned with the “science of reading,” and you have spent hours studying the manuals, highlighting key routines, and planning how to make it all work for your students.

You call your class to the rug. As they gather, a few children start turning their linked arms into a “train,” quietly negotiating who will be the driver and who will ride in the back. One child begins to tell you a story about the superhero game he and his older brother played the night before. Another proudly holds up a drawing from home and explains, “This is the castle we built with blocks in my living room.” You know these moments of story and play, even when they spill in from home onto the classroom carpet, truly matter for language and literacy development. You also know that the pacing guide says you should already be on Day 3, Lesson 1. You make a quick decision. “I want to hear your stories and your play ideas,” you say, “and we’re going to make time for them today. First, we’ll practice some sounds together, and then we will use those sounds in our stories that we will act out.”

Skilled, caring teachers are working hard to respond to expectations around the “science of reading” while also trying to protect time for talk, play, and child-led exploration. The pressure is real, and so is the professional knowledge that children’s play is a primary context in which they experiment with sounds, words, texts, and identities as readers, writers, and speakers, not just an “extra” to fit in “if there’s time.”<sup>1</sup>

This article asks how we might work with curricula drawn from the “science of reading” while still centering play as a transformative driver of language and literacy development and learning.

### **When the “Science of Reading” Becomes Scripts and Drills**

The “science of reading” is often used to describe a body of research about how children learn to decode print; in many schools, it is often implemented as tightly scripted programs and narrow routines. Teachers have welcomed clearer guidance about phonological awareness, phonics, and word recognition. The concern is that when the “science of reading” is treated as the whole story, it shows up as rigid scripts and leaves out language, play, identity, culture, and other rich forms of meaning-making in literacy.

In many schools, the “science of reading” arrives as a box of materials. Inside are scripted lessons, a schedule broken into minutes, and materials that focus almost



entirely on letter-sound correspondence and accuracy. This interpretation narrows expectations for early childhood classrooms, crowding out play-based experiences in favor of teacher-centered, whole-group instruction, seatwork, and worksheets.<sup>2</sup> Early childhood educators may be asked to move from one quick activity to the next, with very little time for conversation or play. The message may be that imaginative play, long read-alouds with rich discussions, or drawing and writing from children's lives can only happen if reading scores go up.

In this version of the “science of reading,” language and literacy development and learning are treated as a checklist of subskills instead of rich, social, meaning-making processes. Children spend a lot of time repeating sounds, circling the correct letter, and reading highly controlled texts. There is much less time for them to talk, wonder, ask questions, retell or act out stories, or write about what matters to them.

Many teachers feel this conflict deeply. They are implementing what the school has chosen, they care about helping children learn to read, and they also see students who can “sound out” words but struggle to tell what a story is about. They hear less spontaneous conversation and notice that many children begin to disengage.

Such implementations misread both the science and the child by overprivileging discrete decoding skills over meaning-making, language use, and engagement, which are foundational to early language and literacy development.<sup>3</sup> And when schools serving children in poverty or those learning English are the first to adopt the most rigid versions, it becomes an equity issue as well as a curriculum choice.<sup>4</sup> For policymakers, this raises critical questions about how accountability systems and curriculum adoption decisions shape educational equity. For school leaders, it signals the need to



examine implementation models more carefully. For teachers, it underscores the importance of professional judgment in adapting mandates to children's needs.

### What Play Really Does for Language and Literacy

If you think back on your most joyful teaching moments, they are probably not from the assessment block. They are more likely to be during children's pretend play in the restaurant your class set up, a story the children acted out with scarves and puppets, or the time a student proudly wrote a note to a friend on a scrap of paper. These are not just "cute" moments. They are where deep language and literacy development and learning occur. In a grocery store center, children are naturally reading labels, making lists, using number and print, and negotiating roles with one another.<sup>5</sup> They are building vocabulary, hearing sentences modeled, and using language to solve problems. In imaginative play, children invent storylines, shift between characters, and draw on their community and cultural funds of knowledge, creating rich opportunities for vocabulary growth, oral language practice, and reading and writing development.<sup>6</sup>

The kinds of play you see in these centers and other classroom spaces are also supported by empirical studies. When teachers add print and writing tools into play areas, children begin to recognize letters and words and connect sounds to symbols as part of their everyday play.<sup>7</sup> Research also shows that professional development supporting teachers in designing and sustaining play increases the likelihood that classrooms will have rich materials and opportunities for emergent reading, writing, and speaking embedded into instructional practices, connecting imaginative activity with measurable gains in language and literacy.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond classroom outcomes, play also shapes children's brains. Play helps develop neural circuits associated

with flexibility, emotional regulation, and complex social communication, which are also implicated in language learning and literacy development.<sup>9</sup> When children repeatedly engage in varied forms of play, they rehearse the cognitive and social processes that support decoding, comprehension, and written expression.

For many children, especially those who have experienced stress, poverty, or displacement, play is also a space to process emotions and experiences. A child who has moved frequently might build "homes" in the block center. A child learning a new language might feel safer trying words out with a puppet than speaking in front of the whole group. When we take away play, we remove one of the few spaces where these children can bring their whole selves into language and literacy learning. For educators and leaders, this recognition demands a commitment to equity that goes beyond skills-based outcomes.

### What Play-Rich "Science of Reading" Can Look Like

You may be thinking, "This all makes sense, but I still have to teach phonics. I still have to give the assessments. I still have to use the materials my school purchased." The goal here is not to ignore requirements. The goal is to offer ways to weave play and the "science of reading" together so they support, instead of compete with, each other.

Here are some possibilities that build on things many teachers already do:

- **Use dramatic play as a place to apply new skills.** If your small-group phonics lesson focuses on the letter "m," you might later invite children to open a "market" in the dramatic play area. Add menus, money, mail, and signs. As you circulate, you might say, "You just wrote 'milk' on your list. That starts with /m/ like we practiced this morning." Children are still working with the sound, but in a way that feels purposeful and rooted in language and literacy development and learning.
- **Use real, diverse children's literature to inspire play.** After reading a beautiful picturebook that reflects your students' lives and communities, invite the class to act it out, draw a favorite part, or create new endings together. Choose books with rich language, authentic characters, and stories that matter. When children dramatize literature, they are developing

comprehension, vocabulary, and narrative understanding while also extending storylines through their bodies and voices. Playful reader response positions children as active meaning-makers and fosters positive dispositions toward reading.<sup>10,11</sup>

- **Protect at least some open play time each day.** Even if your schedule is tight, try to keep a block of time for child-led play with rich materials. You can quietly notice and support language and literacy during that time. Sitting down at the block center and asking, “Tell me about what you built. What should we call this place?,” invites narrative, vocabulary, and naming, all part of language and literacy development and learning. For school leaders, protecting this time means examining schedules and pushing back on pressure to eliminate unstructured time. For policymakers, it means evaluating accountability measures that inadvertently incentivize the removal of play.
- **Bring print and writing tools into every play area.** Clipboards, blank books, markers, sticky notes, and labels can be placed in every classroom center. Children can make signs, tickets, notes, and maps as part of their play. Over time, they move from scribbles to letters to words, not because they are forced to, but because the materials are there when they are ready. This simple shift requires intentionality more than new funding.

- **Invite children’s languages and stories into play.** When you have multilingual learners in your classroom community, encouraging them to use all of their languages in play supports both identity and language and literacy development. A restaurant center can have menus in more than one language. A home center can reflect different family structures and traditions. Read books in multiple languages. Make space for children to tell stories in the languages they know and love.

These moves do not require you to abandon the “science of reading.” They invite you to place it inside a larger frame of language and literacy learning that includes play, talk, culture, and identity.

### For Teachers, Leaders, and Policymakers

Teachers are already doing complex work to balance mandates and children’s needs. Documenting what you see when play is present can strengthen your voice. Quick notes about a child using new vocabulary in the block center, a quiet student talking more during pretend play than during whole-group time, or a group of children jointly writing a sign for their store can become powerful stories to share with families, coaches, and administrators.

As a school leader or coach, you can support teachers by protecting blocks of time for play, by looking for evidence of rich language and literacy development and learning in play during walk-throughs, and by organizing professional learning that treats play as central rather than optional. You can help interpret the “science of reading” in your community in ways that emphasize both decoding and meaning, both skill and joy. You also can advocate for curriculum adoption processes that prioritize play and for accountability systems that measure outcomes beyond early literacy skills.

As a policymaker or district administrator, consider how adoption timelines, accountability measures, and funding streams either support or undermine play-based approaches. Policies that incentivize narrow literacy outcomes over holistic child development squeeze play out of classrooms.





Policies that protect time for play, support teacher professional development in play-based instruction, and measure success through multiple lenses invite a more balanced approach.

## A Different Way to Read the "Science of Reading"

The question is not whether the "science of reading" matters. The question is how we interpret it. We can interpret it narrowly, as a reason to double down on scripts and drills and to push play out of the early grades. Or we can interpret it alongside decades of work on play, language, and literacy development and ask how instruction in phonics and phonological awareness can live within classrooms where children also talk, imagine, build, move, act, draw, and write together.

When we choose the second path, we are not ignoring the research. We are taking it seriously enough to place it in a fuller picture of children's development. We are trusting what we see in front of us: Children who light up when they act out a story. Children who find their voices first in play and then on the page.

For teachers, this approach acknowledges your expertise. It allows you to use your professional judgment, your knowledge of your students, and your creativity. It invites you to see your classroom not just as a site of compliance with the "science of reading," but as a place where language and literacy learning unfolds through the transformative power of play.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Wohllwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. Teachers College Press.

<sup>2</sup> Roskos, K. A., & Christie, J. F. (2011). The play-literacy nexus and the importance of evidence-based techniques in the classroom. *American Journal of Play*, 4(2), 204-224.

<sup>3</sup> Duke, N. K., & Cartwright, K. B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(S1), S25-S44.

<sup>4</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Advancing equity in early childhood education* [Position statement]. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity>

<sup>5</sup> Neuman, S. B., Roskos, K., Wright, T. S., & Lenhart, L. A. (2007). *Nurturing knowledge: Linking literacy to social studies, math, science and so much more*. Scholastic.

<sup>6</sup> Souto-Manning, M., Alvarez, B., & Martell, J. (2024). *Reading, writing, and talk: Teaching for equity and justice in the early grades* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

<sup>7</sup> Han, M., Moore, N., Vukelich, C., & Buell, M. (2010). Does play make a difference? How play intervention affects young children's language and literacy development. *American Journal of Play*, 3(1), 82-105.

<sup>8</sup> Han, M., Buell, M., Liu, D., & Pic, A. (2023). Can an intensive professional development on play change child care providers' perspectives and practice on play? *International Journal of Play*, 12(2), 175-192.

<sup>9</sup> Pellis, S. M., & Pellis, V. C. (2010). *The playful brain: Venturing to the limits of neuroscience*. Oneworld.

<sup>10</sup> Flint, T. K. (2025). *Sparkling joyful learning: A teacher's guide to connecting play and reader response*. Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>11</sup> Flint, T. K. (2016). *Responsive play: Exploring play as reader response in a first grade classroom* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

### Disclosure Statement:

The authors report no conflict of interest.