

Linking Literacy and Movement

by Rae Pica

As a movement specialist for nearly a quarter of a century, I've seen response to my topic wax and wane over the years. At first, no one wanted to hear the words *children* and *movement* together, imagining as they did the chaos that could result. Gradually, however, early childhood professionals realized children were going to move anyway; and they could either fight it or use it. (It was the educational version of “If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.”)

Today I find that most early childhood professionals are fully aware of the cognitive benefits of movement. They understand that young children need to physically experience concepts in order to truly grasp them. Recent brain research, as well as Howard Gardner's recognition of the bodily/kinesthetic intelligence as a way of learning and knowing, has confirmed this. But with the clamor for more accountability and testing – and the emphasis placed almost exclusively on early literacy – movement is once again in danger of falling by the wayside. Not only are physical education and even recess being eliminated from schools and centers in favor of more “academic time;” teachers are also feeling pressured to teach young children in ways that are developmentally inappropriate.

But children haven't changed. They still need to physically experience concepts to fully understand them, and that includes concepts falling under the heading of literacy and the language arts. This article, therefore, looks at why and how early childhood professionals should use movement as a tool in the promotion of children's emerging literacy.

Language Arts – Then and Now

The language arts include the components of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, being about communication – imparted or received – this content area plays a vital role in every individual's life. It is also part of every curriculum, in one form or another, from preschool through advanced education. Additionally, it is tied to linguistic intelligence, which is granted enormous validation in our society (Pica, 1999).

In early childhood programs, language arts have traditionally received the greatest concentration during daily group or circle times. During these periods, teachers and caregivers read stories or poems to the children, who sit and listen. Sometimes discussion precedes or follows the readings. In elementary schools, reading and writing have all too commonly been handled as separate studies, with the children focusing on topics like phonics, spelling, and grammar.

Today's approaches to children's emerging literacy recognize that listening, speaking, reading, and writing overlap and interrelate, each contributing to the growth of the others. These approaches also acknowledge that children learn best those concepts that are relevant to them. Therefore, their language acquisition and development must be a natural process that occurs over time, relates to all aspects of the children's lives, and *actively* involves the children in making meaning (Sawyer & Sawyer, 1993; Raines & Canady, 1990).

What Language Arts and Movement Have in Common

Movement, like language, plays an essential role in life. It is also a form of communication. While “body language” is a very distinct form of communication, it is additionally believed that “ideas and feelings expressed in words actually begin in the body...Before you write or speak, there is a physical response in the body” (Minton, 2003, p. 37). Thus, movement and the language arts are naturally linked.

Furthermore, rhythm is an essential part of both movement and the language arts. According to Block (2001, p. 41), “children should listen to the rhythm of language and actively participate in physical expressions of this rhythm.” She writes: “Integrating the rhythm inherent in children’s rhymes with simple external stimuli such as tapping movements will help develop temporal awareness. After children listen to a poem, they can be directed to tap out the rhythm. This teaches them to be aware of the rhythm of literary works and to internalize the beat when they are being read to.”

Linking words to form sentences (and eventually paragraphs) is very similar to stringing movements together to form sequences (and eventually dances or athletic activities). Both require that children choose components that naturally flow. Both require breathing room (a pause in the action, or a comma) and, finally, an ending (a full stop, or a period). Additionally, Block (2001, p. 44) contends that the sequencing of movements “accesses many learning modes: visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, rhythmic, vocal, mnemonic (long- and short-term), and creative.”

The Argument for Learning through Movement

Research shows that movement is the young child’s preferred mode of learning – and that children learn *best* through active involvement. For example, *prepositions* – those little words so critical to language and life – are very much a part of movement experiences. As children move over, under, around, through, beside, and near objects (e.g., *under* the slide, *through* the tunnel, *over* the balance beam), these words take on greater meaning to them. Olds (1994, p. 33) contends that such spatial orientation is also necessary for letter identification and the orientation of symbols on a page. She writes: “The only difference between a small ‘b’ and a small ‘d,’ for example, both of which are composed of a line and a circle, depends upon orientation, i.e., which side of the circle the line is on.”

When children speak and listen to one another, as when they invent games on the playground, they’re using and expanding their vocabularies and learning important lessons in communication. When they invent rules for those games (as preschoolers like to do), they further enhance their communication skills.

When children perform a “slow walk” or “skip lightly,” adjectives and adverbs become much more than abstract concepts. When they are given the opportunity to physically demonstrate such action words as *stomp*, *pounce*, *stalk*, or *slither* – or descriptive

words like *smooth*, *strong*, *gentle*, or *enormous* – word comprehension is immediate and long-lasting. Even suffixes take on greater relevance when children act out the difference between *scared* and *scary*. In all of these instances, the children have heard the word and both felt and seen the meaning. And research tells us that the more senses used in the learning process, the higher the percentage of retention (Fauth, 1990).

Jensen (2001) labels this kind of hands-on learning *implicit* – like learning to ride a bike. At the opposite end of the spectrum is *explicit* learning – like being told the capital of Peru. He asks, if you hadn't ridden a bike in five years, would you still be able to do it? And if you hadn't heard the capital of Peru for five years, would you still remember what it was?

Extrinsic learning may be quicker than learning through physical experiences, but the latter has greater meaning for children and stays with them longer. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that intrinsic learning creates more neural networks in the brain (Jensen, 2001). Another reason may be that it's simply more fun!

Carla Hannaford (1995) writes: "We have spent years and resources struggling to teach people to learn, and yet the standardized achievement test scores go down and illiteracy rises. Could it be that one of the key elements we've been missing is simply movement?"

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More Ideas for Linking Language and Movement

The possibilities for exploring language arts through movement are inexhaustible (Pica, 2004). Beginning in infancy, when we label a baby's actions ("You're making your arms go up and down!") we are making vital connections. Also, consider the simple act of children forming letters of the alphabet with their bodies or body parts – individually or with a partner. Such an activity leads to greater awareness of the straight and curving lines that comprise each letter and the difference between upper- and lowercase letters.

Talking about experiences (“What did you do this weekend?”), depicting them through movement, and then discussing the movement contribute to language development by requiring children to make essential connections between their cognitive, affective, and physical domains.

When children clap the rhythm of words or rhymes, or move to the rhythm of a poem, they are increasing their knowledge of both rhythm and language. Clapping, stamping, or stepping to the rhythms of words can also familiarize them with syllables. You can begin by sitting in a circle and clapping out the syllables of each child’s first name (one clap per syllable) and then move on to greater challenges from there (first and last names, nursery rhymes, etc.).

Acting out fairy tales and nursery rhymes increases the children’s comprehension and helps them recall the order of events (Rowen, 1982). And it’s fun! Nursery rhymes like “Jack and Jill,” “Humpty Dumpty,” and “Jack Be Nimble” (which also provides practice with jumping) are perfect for dramatization, as are such classic tales as “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Henny Penny,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Three Billy Goats Gruff,” and “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.”

Listening or sound identification activities help develop auditory discrimination. Ask the children to close their eyes. You then make sounds with a variety of familiar objects (keys, a ball bouncing, hands clapping) and ask the children to identify them. Or go for a listening walk, in which the children must tell you all the different things they hear.

Finally, try reading-readiness activities involving movements that go from left to right – like turning the head, slowly and quickly, and drawing a line on the floor with a leg.

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