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Literacy Exposure in Public Preschools: The Effects on Language Acquisition

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Literacy Exposure in Preschool: The Effects on
Language Acquisition

By Chloe Robison

Literature Findings

Literacy activities have always been an essential part of the preschool curriculum, especially in preparing students for reading independently in elementary school. Researchers have continuously been analyzing the role that literacy exposure plays in the classroom and its effect on language acquisition among young children. In 2003, researchers David Dickinson actively studied 74 preschool students and were curious about the effects of student's exposure to varied vocabulary, the opportunities to be a part of conversations in the classroom, and the linguistic environment the children were interacting in. They used these factors to see their effects on literacy and language development by administering tests and interviewing teachers and parents. Dickinson found that all three of these factors were crucial in language acquisition. In 2010, a study was done by Tarsha Bluiett in which she researched the use of literacy activities among preschoolers in relation to their overall language growth. She found that when teachers sufficiently fostered activities such as dramatic play and group reading, students interacted more and their language acquisition skills improved.

Earlier this year, researcher Cherrie Lovejoy conducted an in-depth study of 3 preschool programs. She was particularly interested in how teachers used their own instruction to improve student's language growth as well as the effect of verbal and written language supported activities used in the classroom environment on their growth. These research studies along with learning about language acquisition in one of my courses had a strong influence on my decision to begin a study in this

area of the field. My research has grown from previous studies on this topic, and is focused on public preschools in the state of Massachusetts. More importantly, the study revolved around the specific types of teacher and child directed activities used in classrooms to promote literacy, and if teachers felt their students benefited from them long term.

Methods

The first step of this project was submitting a proposal to the Institution Review Board at UNH because this study involved human subjects. After drafting a document indicating the intended sample would be 125 preschool teachers in Massachusetts, as well as creating all the survey questions, this proposal was sent to the IRB. A grant was also proposed to purchase books for participants, and was approved. Following some modifications, the proposed study was approved and the research could begin.

Subjects

This study included 125 preschool teachers, and they were asked a series of questions through a Qualtrics survey. The questions were all multiple choice and short answer, so the survey did not take an excessive amount of time to create. Once the survey was finished, the email addresses of 125 preschool teachers in Massachusetts were acquired. This was achieved by searching through the list of public schools on the Massachusetts school database, accessing links to each schools' website, and searching for a faculty page containing email addresses. This was the most time consuming aspect of this project, because not every school had public staff information.

Survey and Reward Structure

Since these participants were full time teachers, an incentive for them to complete the survey seemed like a great idea. After searching for a gender-neutral book for preschoolers, and calculating costs for purchasing books and mailing them to participants, a grant was received. 25 copies of *The Farm Alphabet Book* by Jane Miller were offered to the first participants to complete the survey and request a copy. Upon the initial dispatch of the survey, eight participants opened and completed it. Three weeks later, a reminder email followed kindly asking participants to consider taking the survey and sharing their thoughts. About a month thereafter, one final reminder was dispersed, relaying the same information. In total 16 people completed the survey and seven out of those 16 emailed afterwards requesting a book.

Data

Once all the completed surveys were received and the books sent out, analyzing the results began. This process involved using the Qualtrics software and comparing the answers to each question. This paper will first discuss the basis for choosing each question, and provide an in-depth analysis of the comparison.

The survey began by asking participants how many students were enrolled in their preschool. This was an essential baseline question to get an idea of the variation amongst the populations of public preschools in Massachusetts. When I initially started viewing the results, I expected that most of the preschools would have an average size of about 15-20. However, the size ranged from 9 students to 200. It is assumed that the 200

students were broken up into classrooms for the day, however, for a survey of just 16 participants the classroom size had a wide variation.

The next question in the survey asked participants to select if the preschool they taught at was a half day or full day program. Among the 16 who took this, it was almost split evenly in half between the two choices-only a few more indicated half rather than full day program. This question was crucial in seeing if the length of the school day had any impact on how much time teachers devoted to literacy exposure activities.

Ultimately, it was discovered that the number of hours of the school day had no correlation to the amount of time devoted to literacy activities; which is more likely the result of the Massachusetts curriculum structure that all of these schools must follow. Additional research would need to be done to deduce this conclusively.

The program length determination was followed by querying teachers about how much time they spent per day engaging in teacher directed literacy activities. Results ranged from 15 minutes to 2 hours, with 30 and 60 minutes being the most common answers. This finding was unanticipated because most preschool children are under the age of 5, and typically have difficulties engaging in one activity for a very long time period. One can hypothesize that these reading periods were cumulative with the time split up over the course of the day.

A list of teacher directed literacy activities was then provided to each participant, and they were asked to check off which activities they used, or write in their own. The list included reading aloud to the class, picture and letter naming tasks, sight word recognition tasks, rhyming games, and phonological awareness tasks. Every teacher who completed this selected at least one activity from the list and many teachers also wrote in

activities that they used in their classrooms. Some activities that they included were technology and apps, having a letter or word focus of the week, writing stories together, doing pre-writing journals, and dramatic play.

The survey then transitioned from teacher directed to child directed activities. Teachers were asked the same questions-how much time they allotted for these types of things and what sort of activities their students engaged in. Child directed would indicate that the children were for the most part managing their own literacy activities. The time allotted for this was on average less than for teacher directed activities, with the most common response being 30 minutes per day. This was an expected finding, since preschool students are young and it is surmised that they would not be able to sit for a long period of time on their own, engaging in a single independent activity.

In similar form to the teacher directed literacy activities, participants were then given a list of child directed activities that their students-might have engaged in, and were asked to check off if they used any of these or to write in their own. The list included shared and independent reading, word and letter games, and using props to facilitate shared reading. Some participants wrote that their students also listened to stories on CD's, used magnetic letters and words for games, and made stories using picture boards. The purpose of this question was to get an idea of what sort of literacy exposure activities the children self-directed, in comparison to those orchestrated by the teacher.

Participants were then given a scale of 1-5 with 1 being unsuccessful and 5 being very successful, and asked to indicate how successful were their attempts to engage their students in literacy. 100% of the participants answered with at the very minimum-a 3, meaning they were somewhat successful. This was a positive result because regardless of

how much time they could devote to literacy activities, instructors felt that their students benefited in some way.

Once teachers commented about the success of their own attempts, they were next questioned if they felt they devoted the appropriate amount of time to literacy exposure, should devote more time, or should devote less time. 30% of the participants that completed this survey indicated that they would like to dedicate more time to reading activities. This indicates that a significant number of participants felt that reading skills are important to children who are getting ready for elementary school.

A question was then posed to participants regarding barriers in the classroom. When participants were asked if there were any barriers that prevented them from spending time on literacy activities, the vast majority indicated that there were obstacles that made it difficult to incorporate activities that promoted reading. Asked also to describe any of these barriers, the most common ones indicated by participants included social and behavioral problems, students with special needs, wide ranges of academic abilities in the classroom, and the challenge of getting all children engaged in a single activity. These findings were also expected, because with preschool students being young in age, it would be considered typical for there to be both demanding behaviors and a variety of social needs.

Participants were asked how much they felt the activities their students were engaging in each day promoted future benefits. 88% of the people who completed the survey indicated that they felt their students experienced very positive long-term gains. The interpretation being that these students are being well prepared for kindergarten and

the duration of their elementary school years where there will be an overarching and dominant focus on reading and writing.

As the survey drew to a close, participants were asked to write down one activity that they felt had been most successful in promoting literacy among their students. There was a plethora of answers for this question, including reading aloud, using rhyming games, focusing on one letter each class, playing name bingo, and using apps on an I-pad or computer. The wide variety of responses indicated no one “direct” or “right” way to be successful in promoting literacy. That literacy can be experienced and heightened through so many different multi-sensory activities other than simply by reading is the fundamental concept that seems crucial to consider when working with this age group.

Further Data Interpretations

After analyzing all of the results from each question, some comparisons were made between questions. It was found that there was a direct correlation between how much time teachers spent on literacy activities in the classroom and how successful they felt their attempts were. This positive correlation was an initial hypothesis and the outcome was expected.

A comparison regarding barriers being present in the classroom versus children benefitting from the literacy activities was also performed. It was found that although 75% of the participants indicated there being barriers, all of the participants that indicated that they felt at the very minimum that their students benefited from the literacy activities, even if not greatly. This is an important finding because it highlights that

although demanding factors were present in many classrooms, teachers were still able to surmount them and engage students in activities that promoted literacy.

Discussion

There is much room for expansion in this area of study. Researchers could increase the population to comprise a greater amount of educators, including more states as well. It would also be of interest to compare different categories of preschools to determine the variation in type of, and length of time engaged in, literacy directed activities. Types of preschools could include private, Montessori, Waldorf, charter, religious-based, and others. An additional thought-provoking angle would be to consider preschools in different socio-economic areas focusing on how that factor influences both literacy exposure and the types of activities used. Regardless of the type, frequency, and duration of activities, exposure to literacy is an undeniably positive factor in language acquisition.

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