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Teaching Early Literacy Skills in Preschool and Future Kindergarten Success

Teaching Early Literacy Skills in Preschool and Future Kindergarten Success

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A Literature Review Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education

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Abstract

This literature review examines the importance and the effect of literacy on Kindergarten readiness and future school success for early childhood education, specifically on preschool students. Early Childhood Educators are feeling the pressure now more than ever to have their young students prepared to enter Kindergarten. In recent years there has been a shift away from a play-based classroom to more of a focus on academics. In this literature review, various research studies are examined to determine whether or not the real focus of the preschool curriculum should be play or literacy or both.

Introduction

Early childhood classrooms are often viewed as a place where young children are free to play, make crafts, and explore, but recent research shows a paradigm shift in the field of early childhood education. Kindergarten classrooms that were once filled with free play, exploration and imagination as the forefront of learning have now dissipated into environments virtually devoid of play (Miller and Almon 2009 as cited by Cavanaugh, D.M. et al 2017). A paradigm shift has taken place in the early childhood classrooms where preschool programs have been forced to take over Kindergarten skill development. Kindergarten programs have removed free play and exploration replacing those developmental skills with compliance skill development, a narrow set of performance skill development, early learning standards, and standardized tests. This paradigm shift is due to public school systems facing pressure to close the achievement gap (Pretti-Frontczak 2014), which has put the pressure on for more achievement and skill development in the early childhood classrooms. The problem is that the paradigm shift has changed the early childhood focus from play based learning to early literacy exposure such as phonemic awareness, letter identification, letter sounds, rhyming and alliteration skill development. This shift has put too much pressure on the early childhood students, who are not developmentally ready for the assessment of these skills.

The research questions driving this literature review are: how can the gap be closed between what is developmentally appropriate skill development for early childhood compared to the early childhood standards? The purpose of this literature review is to examine the early literacy skills that need to be taught in the preschool setting based upon child development, so teachers can prepare preschool students to be successful in Kindergarten in light of the current paradigm shift in early childhood.

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The research criteria for this literature review included keywords such as: early childhood phonemic awareness, preschool and kindergarten success skills, and early literacy skills. Research consisted of researched based, peer reviewed journal articles within the last ten years located in the DeWitt Online Library. This literature review explores the topics ranging from literacy education in early childhood to the importance of parent involvement in a child's education for student developmental progress. Research based studies were explored on the following subtopics: the importance of teaching phonemic awareness in preschool and how it effects a student's success in Kindergarten, importance of instruction, the integration of play and music, and how phonemic awareness in early childhood classrooms leads to future success in reading and literacy. The peer reviewed research articles included in this literature review outline the effects that early literacy exposure and phonemic awareness have on preschool and kindergarten students.

Early Literacy Exposure and Student Success

When looking at teaching phonemic awareness in preschool, it's important to evaluate the present but also prepare for the future. Fundamental in learning to read, phonological awareness provides a strong predictor of a child's early literacy and development (Melby-Lervag et al. as cited in Kuppen 2017). If students are given the opportunity to learn early literacy skills at the preschool level, the positive effects will last as they continue through grade school. Literature that demonstrates that the explicit teaching of phonics is an important component in the teaching of reading (Castles et al., 2018 as cited in Double, K et al 2018). In the International Reading Literacy Study in 2017, the findings suggested that a phonics check is a valuable tool for identifying children in need of early intervention and that those students who are able to ameliorate their early phonics difficulties fair substantially better in later reading tests

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compared with children with equivalent difficulties who do not improve in the first year of schooling (Double K. et al 2018). When beginning to teach preschool age students (3-5 years old) there is current research that asks whether learning rhythmic language, where cues for speech segmentation have been highlighted, could promote phonological awareness (Kuppen, 2017). A study done by Kuppen and Bourke (2017) used rhythmic sung and spoken rhyming verse to increase phonological awareness and to support children in their first year of school. The final results from the study showed small to moderate success, with significant gains from pre-task to post task (Kuppen, 2017). Rhythmic pattern of speech can be found in music. Music is a common part of early childhood classrooms. Songs are sung as signal to clean up, to learn the days of the week or weather and as part of large group activities. According to a study by Gordon, Fehd and Mccandliss (2015) that was cited in Kuppen (2017), children's engagement with musical activity has repeatedly been reported as conveying literacy benefits (Gordan et al. as cited in Kuppen, 2017). In fact, Bhide et al (2013) delivered a rhythmic program including tapping, clapping, and discriminating rhythms to children with poor reading skills. The observed literacy benefits similar to a comparison group receiving an intervention in phonological awareness (Kuppen, 2017). Exposing students to phonemic awareness in preschool, also acts as an intervention towards future success. In activities used by Bradley and Bryant (1983), as part of an intervention, children participated in play-like activities involving syllable and sound blending and matching words that rhymed or started with the same sound, these were introduced halfway through the intervention period and involved identifying phonemes and sound deletion and manipulation activities (Lyster et al. 2016). These activities such as identifying phonemes, sound deletion and sound manipulation have become an interwoven part of an early childhood classroom in order to teach phonemic awareness and can take as little as five to ten minutes to

teach during a preschool day. In fact, part of the activities being covered might include nursery rhymes. Teachers write out the rhyme and students track the print as the teacher reads, this helps in developing their phonological awareness.

Instruction and Assessments

In recent years, the area of early literacy has expanded greatly. Initiatives such as Early Reading First, the National Early Literacy Panel report (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013 as cited in Mesmer et al., 2015), and universal prekindergarten have shined the light on early literacy research and, in many ways, greatly improved the quality of literacy instruction with young children (Mesmer & Williams, 2015).

Learning how to read words requires both letter sound knowledge and phonemic awareness, and both accuracy and speed are needed (Hulme, Bowyer-Crane, Carroll, Duff, & Snowling, 2012; Roberts, Christo, & Shefelbine, 2010 as cited in Roberts et al. 2019). In spite of the clear importance of alphabet knowledge for learning how to read, there is relatively little scientific evidence on the most effective methods for teaching these skills (Roberts et al. 2019).

In a study completed by Roberts, Vadasy and Sanders (2019), they conducted an investigation that included the teaching of letter names and letter sounds, both isolated and with story book reading. Five elementary schools located in a Western U.S. city participated. The preschool teachers at these schools, delayed their teaching of any alphabet instruction until after this intervention took place. The instructors were graduate students and retired teachers. They received a one day, eight-hour training before beginning their instruction (Roberts et al. 2019). Ten letters were selected for instruction (D, F, H, I, K, M, S and T). The students completed activities that included a daily review, a one letter a day letter card, various games, speed practice, story book reading where each book represented a letter, and finding the letters in their

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names. Whether instruction was contextualized, or decontextualized, preschool children showed statistically significant pretest-posttest gains on all alphabet measures and these gains on letter identification can be attributed to instruction (Roberts et al. 2019).

Another important aspect of instruction includes activities being offered that incorporate play. Research indicates the importance of a child's early years for later achievement; educators must foster development during this period by offering children the most beneficial activities, such as play (Cavanaugh et al. 2016). In Cavanaugh et al's study (2016), they examined how guided play, combined with literacy rich opportunities affected student outcomes. Two kindergarten classes in two different public schools participated. During a fifteen-minute part of the day, students completed hands on work in order to practice phonemic awareness and phonics. Students at both elementary schools made gains on their DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment. Students made small gains using beginning sounds in their journal writing. Teachers observed students relishing in their creative freedom when they were able to create their own games to practice sorting and language skills.

By providing academically rigorous, developmentally appropriate instruction, early childhood teachers engage in learning experiences that help children learn the foundational knowledge and skills they need to succeed in elementary school (Brown et al 2015). According to Brown, Feger and Mowry (2015), this can be accomplished by building on background knowledge and by making connections across student learning experiences. Teaching content that is developmentally appropriate including following a pattern, providing students with vocabulary that can be used to describe what is happening in a chosen activity, differentiating instruction, such as splitting a class up into small groups based on their abilities or small groups based on mixed abilities. The reasoning behind grouping students is to meet student's needs by

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having the students collaborate with one another. Basically, creating multiple opportunities for learning that may include teaching a study. Studies in early childhood classrooms would include learning about trees, buildings, boxes, balls, just to name a few. In studies, students can emerge themselves into what they are learning. These studies also bring in small group activities that include literacy, math, science etc. Communication with colleagues and administration: remind colleagues how young students learn and that there will be some inconsistencies. Finally, informing families, having a discussion about how their child's love for learning can be fostered at school and at home.

Collaboration and Readiness

As the pressure to succeed academically is imposed on children earlier than ever before, it is essential to understand what characteristics are most important to parent and teachers in order to be school ready. While formal readiness is typically measured using chronological age and mastery of cognitive skills, readiness also includes physical, behavioral and social-emotional development (Miller, Kehl 2019).

In Miller and Kehl's study (2019) they worked to compare parents and teacher's ideas of what is most important for starting school at an early age given the increasing importance of formal preschool. In their research, they involved parents of 81 children between the ages of 2 and 4 in or around a small, Midwest U.S. city. They recruited these families through preschool programs, social media and word of mouth. They asked parents and teachers to rank 10 commonly identified characteristics of early school readiness in order of importance (Miller, Kehl 2019). The findings indicated that parents and teachers only differed significantly when ranking physical health. Teachers ranked this higher than parents. Counting to 20 was also highly ranked as opposed to identifying shapes and knowing letters of the alphabet. The findings

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in this study demonstrated that parents and teachers generally agreed upon the relative importance of early childhood readiness characteristics. This consistency between parents and the teachers facilitate the success of the children in the school environment (Lewis and Baker 1995 as cited in Miller, Kehl 2019).

The transition from preschool to kindergarten is an important period for all families but can prove to be difficult for children. Transition involves not only the children's readiness, especially in terms of literacy, but also how families, preschools and schools interact and cooperate to provide comprehensive support in the early years of school (Ramey & Ramey, 1994 as cited in Emfinger 2012).

Wildenger and McIntyre (2012) conducted a research study investigating the effects of kindergarten preparation variables on student outcomes. The purpose of their study was to investigate the relationship between kindergarten preparation variables, including early education experiences and family involvement in preparation activities and children's socio-behavioral outcomes in kindergarten (Wildenger, McIntyre, 2012). The sample group included 86 general education students, their primary caregivers and their kindergarten teachers. Data was collected in the fall of the student's kindergarten year. Caregivers and teachers completed a questionnaire. Kindergarten teachers were asked by the researchers to provide families with study materials within the first two weeks of school. Results from this research study suggested that kindergarten preparation, primarily students who attended a preschool program, displayed fewer problem behaviors and had positive student-teacher relationships in the first months of kindergarten, as opposed to the students who didn't attend a formal preschool (Wildenger, McIntyre, 2012). This demonstrates the importance of a preschool program, prior to attending Kindergarten, and the

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effects it has on behavior and relationships. If these two things are not considered important, students cannot be expected to learn what they need to in order to be successful.

While educating preschool students and students in general, in the subject of literacy it is important to take a look at the challenges of educating the whole child. A study to examine this topic is a quantitative research study conducted by Alverson, Ginn and Gilbert (2019) examining early childhood programming from a systematic and holistic approach. Data was gathered and analyzed by the District Preschool Partnership Grantees. Data included open ended questions describing professional development opportunities, holistic interventions, and effect preschool activities afforded by grant funding (Alverson et al. 2019). This study found that through various grant opportunities teachers were able to take part in more training and interventions. Also, school districts realized how important collaboration is when it comes to working with the community and families. If collaboration is a part of a preschool program, it benefits the students in various ways. The school district, teachers, families and community partners work towards a common goal: to see students become successful. What these research studies demonstrated is while, academics are part of that common goal, it's not the most important to the educators, parents and community.

The School Readiness Alliance worked to first establish a seminar series that focused on literacy and language development. It was accessible to all preschool and kindergarten teachers in their community. Literacy readiness was the predominant focus of the professional development (Emfinger 2012). Similar to the Alverson, Ginn and Gilbert study (2019), academics was not part of their common goal. As a group, the educators embraced an inclusive definition of Kindergarten readiness, which stated: school readiness is a condition whereby children enter school with an enthusiasm for learning, an ability to function in a social setting,

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age- appropriate communication and problem-solving skills, age-appropriate physical and emotional skills and optimal health (Emfinger 2012). By the end of the yearlong professional development the Kindergarten teachers found that they had much more in common in regard to curriculum content and instructional strategies with the preschool teachers than they thought. The teachers discovered that teaching preschool is extremely challenging, with few supports and many barriers and lastly, they found that there is a tremendous growth curve in student learning between the beginning of preschool and the beginning of Kindergarten. This training also bridged the gap in communication not only between the preschool and kindergarten teachers but also the gap in communication within the community. The shared experiences built a common knowledge base of developmentally appropriate best practices, provided a forum to build relationships among teachers with a range of different educational and experiential backgrounds and built alliances between programs and transitional practices (Emfinger 2012).

Active Learning and Integration

The development of literacy skills is critical to children's learning (Pyle et al. 2017). Children who develop these skills earlier demonstrate better academic learning, both in the early years and in later schooling (Elliot and Olliff 2008, McNamara et al. 2005; Steele 2004, Van Oers and Duijkers 2013 as cited in Pyle et al. 2017.) When looking at the best way to teach preschoolers in the area of phonological awareness, one option could be integrating phonological awareness instruction with music. Phonological awareness being taught with the use of music helps students, especially in the early childhood setting, connect to their learning. Language and music share basic processing mechanisms and, the effect of both programs on enhancing phonological awareness are similar according to Dege and Schwarzer (2011). In Dege and Schwarze's research study forty-one preschoolers were assigned to one of the three groups:

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phonological skill group, music group, or a control group that received sports training. The students received training in their group for ten minutes a day over twenty-week period. Prior to beginning this research study, a pre-test was given where no differences were found amongst the groups in regard to age, gender, intelligence, socioeconomic status and phonological awareness (Dege and Schwarzer 2011). When the post test was to the students in the phonological skills group and the music group showed significant increases in phonological awareness as opposed to the control group that received sports training. The findings of the study suggested that phonological awareness can be taught through phonological skills program as well as through the integration of music (Dege and Schwarzer 2011).

Another level of integrating across academics includes the integration of physical activity with literacy. While in the prior study, music was the primary tool of integration, a study by Kirk's (2016) explored how early literacy integrated with physical activity improved student learning. Fifty-four preschool children from a Head Start program participated over an eight-month time period, where they were divided into two groups: a controlled group and an integration group (literacy activities paired with physical activity). The integration group completed 300 minutes a week of moderate to vigorous physical activity that was integrated with the early literacy areas of rhyming and alliteration (Kirk and Kirk 2016). During the physical activity the children marched in place while the teacher repeated several lines of a poem. As the children heard the rhyming words in the poem, they acted out the words or performed a certain number of jumping jacks (or other movement). The children repeated this sequence through the entire poem (Kirk & Kirk, 2016). This rhyming activity was repeated with the control group but did not include the physical activity component. The results of this study showed that over the eight-month period, the rhyming and alliteration activity in the physical activity group was more

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successful than in the controlled group of children. These results proved that the integration of phonological awareness combined with physical activity is an important component in teaching various early literacy skills.

Phonemic awareness is one component of phonological awareness, a continuum of skills that require an understanding of and an ability to manipulate various linguistic units (e.g. words, syllables, onset rime; Phillips & Piasta, 2013 as cited in Erickson et al. 2019). Phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge are two of the most powerful predictors of early literacy success and research suggests combining the two skills during instruction (Invernizzi & Tortorelli, 2013; Phillips & Piasta, 2013) In a study conducted by Erickson and Wharton-McDonald (2018) a 12 minute Reutzel's lesson aimed to build phonological awareness and letter recognition amongst a group of students. The students were able to choose whether they wanted to complete a writing activity, a letter of focus activity, an order of tasks activity and they were given the choice to work alone or with a partner. The students in this study were able to take responsibility of their own learning while improving their phonological awareness and letter recognition ability.

Is Preschool Necessary

The question is not whether children should attend an early childhood program, but rather, whether an early childhood program should be built upon play- based learning or early literacy exposure. The paradigm shift in early childhood classrooms has put too much pressure on the early childhood students, which in turn has put pressure on teachers and families. Educators are finding that some children are not developmentally ready for the push for early literacy and are falling behind, which is forcing educators to re-examine the early childhood curriculum.

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Early childhood education is changing rapidly due to the dynamic nature of positive and negative trends affecting the profession (Haslip and Gullo, 2017). Researchers, Haslip and Gullo (2017) examined the changing demographics and landscape of early childhood education such as the increase in culturally and linguistically diverse population of students. Haslip & Gullo's (2017) research study found that ELL student supports are necessary to meet the needs of the early childhood population of students in need. They found that the current early childhood curriculum and instruction lacks exploratory learning, arts, and the influence of early learning standards. Haslip & Gullo's (2017) study suggests that the early childhood programs need an increased focus on accountability to address the high teacher turnover rate caused by lack of resources, teacher stress, and a scripted curriculum that lacks creativity. Positive trends taking place in early childhood education include: increased understanding of child development, professionalization of the early childhood workforce, research exposing deficiencies in existing educational systems, public and private funding, improved policy making and wide spread advocacy. Negative trends taking place in the early childhood education include: challenging core pedagogical principles and knowledge about best practices, an over emphasis on skill based literacy and math standards can exclude balanced approaches to child development (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2015 as cited in Haslip and Gullo, 2017).

Conclusion

This literature review examined the importance and the effect of literacy on Kindergarten readiness and future school success for early childhood education, specifically on preschool students. Play is no longer a profound focus in early childhood education, the shift in early childhood classrooms has turned to literacy, primarily phonological awareness and preparing these young students for Kindergarten and beyond. Early Childhood Educators are feeling the

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pressure now more than ever to have their young students prepared to enter Kindergarten.

Professional development and collaboration has shown to help in this area. Interestingly enough, through research Educators are finding, if they are better prepared when it comes to teaching their early childhood students, this paradigm shift can be met. As touched on previously, in the Alverson, Ginn and Gilbert study (2019), academics was not part of the educator's common goal. Educators believed school readiness is a condition whereby children enter school with an enthusiasm for learning, an ability to function in a social setting, age- appropriate communication and problem-solving skills, age-appropriate physical and emotional skills and optimal health (Emfinger 2012). None the less, educators are working to best prepare their students through instruction that integrates multiple facets of an early childhood classroom including music, physical activity and literacy activities. Educators are also recognizing the importance of collaboration between fellow educators, parents and the community in order to best serve these young students and to help reach their full potential.

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