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Supporting Language and Literacy Development for All Students

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Abstract

The state of Maine is becoming more and more diverse by the day. The vast majority of children who are members of immigrant families speak very little, if any, English. As these children enter early education centers and public schools, they can experience difficulties in communicating with teachers and peers. It then falls on the educator to properly and effectively support, not only the native English speakers (NES), but also the English language learners (ELL) as well. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered. Preschool-aged children will be asked to name and write uppercase and lowercase numbers, as well as, recount the main events of familiar stories. Educators will be asked to complete a questionnaire that focuses on supporting language and literacy development for all students. The data will then be examined in order to determine if educators are comfortable teaching such skills and also report out on language and literacy skills that preschool-aged children have acquired from their early education setting.

Introduction

The topic of this research focuses on supporting language and literacy development for all students. Regardless of the home language, all children deserve to be in an educational setting that will create success today and in the future. In order for all students to be successful, educators must be knowledgeable about the content they are providing to children. Educators require ongoing professional development that is geared towards specific subject content in order for children to reach goals and objectives. Additionally, educators need to be made aware of supports and teaching strategies that differ from traditional instructional methods.

This research is necessary because ELL and NES children deserve an effective and positive education. By examining the language and literacy skills that preschool-aged children

have acquired, educators can receive feed-back about teaching strategies that are effective and those that are ineffective. This data will also be able to inform educators where additional supports are needed. Educators will be given the opportunity to reflect on their teaching strategies, needs for professional development, and understanding of instructional methods that can support the language and literacy development for their students.

Not only is this research necessary, but it is also very relevant to the times we are living in. Head Start programs in southern Maine serve a large population of ELL families. Although there are children enrolled who are NES, the majority speak a language other than English at home. It is crucial for early childhood teachers to be supported, educated, and well-informed about instructional methods and subject content in order for their students to be successful within their current setting and later on in future educational settings. Providing young children with the language and tools needed to be effective communicators now, will lead them to greater success down the road.

Language and Literacy Development for All Students

Role of Educators

Literacy-Rich Environments

Early exposure and knowledge of literacy skills is linked to success further down the line in school. When children feel confident in their ability to perform literacy tasks, their self-efficacy is enhanced. Providing children with the opportunities to explore, lead, listen, and experiment with literacy will help them acquire the skills they need to be successful. Meier (2000), partook in a discussion with a kindergarten teacher who stated, “preschool should be a social and educational experience that provides high-quality experiences with books, words, and songs within a warm and vibrant environment (p. 105). Furthermore, children will be

enthusiastic about language and literacy if teachers are equally enthused. Barnes, Grifenhagen, and Dickinson (2016) state:

> The need for language-rich early childhood classrooms, where quality conversations and embedded linguistic support have been linked to vocabulary growth, acquisition of complex syntax, and future reading achievement. In fact, the early childhood years represent a "critical period" for vocabulary learning, and teachers in early childhood classrooms play a crucial role in strategically supporting children's language development (p. 41).

Curriculum Development

Early childhood educators play a vital role in the development of early literacy skills for children. Early literacy skills are pre-writing, pre-reading, understanding letter sounds (phonetic awareness), recognizing syllables of words (phonological awareness), and determining the structure of language (I ran down the street rather than I runned down the street). Children's oral language abilities, as well as their approach to learning language and early reading skills and self-regulation, may influence the amount of print exposure they obtain and the reading habits they develop. Also, emergent reading helps children learn the narrative structure of stories and the complex grammar found in text, which appears to support reading comprehension (Morrison, Bachman, and McDonald Connor, 2005). Furthermore, McGee and Schickedanz (2007) tell us:

> Repeated interactive read-alouds allow teachers to scaffold children's understanding of the book being read, model strategies for making inferences and explanations, and teach vocabulary and concepts (p. 742).

The two go on to say that through reading each high-quality children's story multiple times, posing open-ended questions, and providing opportunities to enrich vocabulary children will

increase their understanding, engagement, and appreciation of literature. Preschool instructional activities should be designed to help children develop language and early reading skills in order to ensure school readiness. These skills are expression, listening skills, vocabulary, phonological awareness, print concepts, letter knowledge, written expression, and sound sequencing (Assel, Landry, Swank, & Gunnewig, 2007).

Meier (2000), encourages educators to incorporate activities within the curriculum that are hands on and have no right or wrong way of being carried out. He states:

> I increased emphasis on skill development in two primary ways. First, I brought in alphabet books and incorporated name and letter writing into the children's journals and other writing and drawing projects. At the same time, I introduced and read counting books. With both kinds of books, I introduced the children to recognizing and discussing letters and numbers in playful and open-ended ways (p. 61-62).

Meier (2000), also guides children's language and literacy experiences by playing "sound-symbol" games. During meeting time, Meier claps his hands and chants the syllables of each child's name. For example, "Me-lis-sa, Me-lis-sa, Me-lis-sa." Meier also uses flip-chart paper to write out each child's name and then count the number of letters in each child's name. The names are then written on another piece of paper based upon the first letter of the name. The children are then able to see whose name begins with the letter S, A, etc. Meier implements another language and literacy activity that involves letter recognition using flash cards. One side of the card has a single letter, and the other side has a picture of an animal that begins with the corresponding letter.

Effective Preschool/Pre-Kindergarten Programs

A component of a high quality early childhood literacy program is one that has a greater focus on learning experiences in language and literacy areas (Assel et al., 2007). It is possible that center-based care may help to lessen the risk gap for academic success in four year olds (Cannon, Jacknowitz, & Karoly, 2012). In order to positively impact and expand a child's knowledge of phonological and phonemic awareness, teachers must themselves be knowledgeable (Crim, Hawkins, Thornton, Rosof, Copley, & Thomas, 2008). Recent studies have indicated that some teachers lack the knowledge needed to properly teach skills related to beginning reading instruction. With preschools serving a variety of students (Head Start, private funded, and public pre-kindergarten), it is vital for teachers to be well-versed in strategies that enhance language and literacy skills. Ongoing professional development through trainings, coursework, and coaching/mentoring will assist teachers in acquiring the skills needed to properly instruct children. Shreve (2005) quotes an interviewed research associate, "Professional development needs to be sustained, it needs to be coherent, and teachers need to be supported as they try to enact what they're learning in the classroom." According to Neuman & Wright (2010):

> High-quality professional development is a dynamic process that requires teachers to be both reflective and open to new practices with the overriding goal of improving instruction for young children (p. 64-65).

Programs are successful when quality professional development is provided pertaining to curriculum development, curriculum implementation, and evaluation of the implementation (Assel et al., 2007).

Supporting English Language Learners

As of the 2008-2009 school year, there were more than five million ELL students in pre-kindergarten to grade 12, with a greater concentration in lower level grades (Rodriguez & Guiberson, 2011). For all children, language is developed through social interactions. For ELLs, they must be provided with an abundance of opportunities to comprehend input and cognitively negotiate output. For ELLs, phonological awareness in the native language predicts successful literacy acquisition in both the native language and second language (Ford, 2015). For educators, it is crucial that the native language is supported just as much as the second language. Optimal support will help facilitate literacy development in the second language. When support is not provided by educators, ELLs struggle to thrive. A lack of English may pose risks for academic success (Cannon et al., 2012).Also, children with an incomplete grasp of English grammar will have more difficulty learning new words (Morrison et al., 2005).

Second Language Acquisition

According to Krashen (2013), student will acquire new language only if the input is comprehensible. He states:

> We acquire language when we understand messages that contain aspects of language (vocabulary, grammar) we have not yet acquired, but we are "ready" to acquire (p. 3).

Krashen suggests that educators use the "**i + 1**" model, where **i** is the ELL student's current level of proficiency. In order for the input to be comprehensible, educators must provide verbal and visual scaffolding, such as simple words and pictures. This type of simple, yet effective, assistance will provide students with achievement and success with tasks that would be too difficult to complete independently.

For children who are learning two languages, also known as bilingual, there are sequential stages that these children go through during development. It is important for preschool teachers to be aware of the stages of sequential bilingual language acquisition as they evaluate and observe children's language and literacy development. Educators must accurately interpret children's performance on assessments.

> When children whose first language is not English arrive to a preschool classroom in which English is used, they continue to use their home language in the classroom. Soon, young children realize that their home language is not effective in the new environment, and they enter a non-verbal stage to gather information about the new language. Later, children enter the stage of using words and phrases in English. Once children acquire a sufficient number of vocabulary and phrases, they begin to use English productively (Rodriguez & Guiberson, 2011).

Once ELLs feel confident in their ability to communicate with teachers and peers in English, they are able to perform code switching with ease. Code switching is the process of switching between languages. For example, a child speaks Spanish with family or Spanish-speaking peers at school, and speaks English with teachers and English-speaking peers. Code switching is a strategy for the appropriation of a new language, a communicative strategy, and evidence of the development of multilingual competence (Gort, 2012). When code switching happens, educators should know that great progress is being made by the child.

Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English

This is a great time to remember the words of Krashen (2013); we acquire language through comprehensible input. According to Genzuk (2011):

> We need to understand what is said, not how it was said. The best language lessons are therefore interesting conversations, good books, films, and activities that are fun and engaging (p. 7).

Specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) is the teaching of grade-level subject matter in English for students who speak a language other than English. This approach is most appropriate for those students who have reached proficiency (intermediate and above) in English and also have basic literacy skills in their own language. SDAIE teachers plan lessons that will meet the objectives of the subject content, but they also include appropriate language objectives for individual students. It is important to point out that SDAIE is not a stand-alone program. It is a singular component of instruction to assist ELL students in understanding subject matter in English (Genzuk, 2011). He states:

> The overriding goal of SDAIE is to make the grade level core curriculum comprehensible, meaningful and challenging to the limed-English-proficient students who English proficiency is at the intermediate level (p. 13).

Accommodations and Teaching Strategies

There are several ways to build skills, provide equity, and increase success for ELL students. Greene (2011), and Ferlazzo (2012), stress the importance for educators to speak slowly and with simple language. Once a statement is made or a question is posed, provide ELL students with additional time to respond. This extra time will allow students to understand the content being presented and formulate thoughts and ideas to share (Alrubail, 2016). Another strategy is to model to the students what is expected of them. Ferlazzo (2012), suggests demonstrating the learning actions and showing work samples for an upcoming activity. Krashen (2013), says that using pictures is a way to communicate by nonverbal means. Greene

(2011), offers the option of using video clips to provide background information about a topic rather than struggling to comprehend certain texts. Krashen (2013), emphasizes that the demand for output from students should be low. The ELL student will chime in once he/she is ready. When that happens, complete sentences are not required, and errors are not corrected (p. 6). Possibly the most important tip provided by Greene (2011), and Ferlazzo (2012), continue to honor and encourage the development of the student's native language and culture. Although the students are in the classroom to acquire and learn English, it is extremely important for them to maintain fluency and build literacy skills in their native language. Barnes et al., 2016, informs us that children benefit from explicit instruction on code-switching between home and school language. Furthermore,

> When teachers can be strategic, there can be huge payoffs, both in terms of building a rich linguistic environment and setting students up for success as they face academic language demands (p. 46).

Using Technology to Support Language Acquisition

Educators have multiple options when it comes to including technology in the classroom. A few examples are tablets, interactive whiteboards, digital cameras/recorders, smart tables, and voice recorders. Another useful tool is the internet. This provides educators with an ability to use resources such as Google Translate. Nemeth and Simon (2013) share this statement:

> For technology to be developmentally appropriate, it should be responsive to the ages and developmental levels of the children, to their individual needs and interests, and to their social and cultural contexts (p. 49).

We currently live in the age of the app. Many school districts across the nation are using tablets with students. One tablet, the IPad, has thousands of apps (applications) that are free to download. According to Burns (2013),

> Teachers of ELLs can use technology to promote growth in their students. Developing a strong vocabulary is an important area of focus for ELLs who are building their reading comprehension, and there are many free IPad apps that support vocabulary acquisition (p. 1).

She shares four of her top apps to use with ELL students:

1. MindSnacks-this app introduces students to Tier 3, low-frequency, context-specific vocabulary words. The words are organized around a theme and built into a game to engage learners.
2. English First High Flyers-this app starts by introducing students to vocabulary built around everyday objects. After studying the set of words, students test their knowledge through spelling, vocabulary listening, and reading quizzes.
3. Flashcardlet-this app allows students to create decks of flashcards on their IPad with a word list. There is also an option to match images with the vocabulary words.
4. Fataba-this app is a game for one to four players. The students are shown pictures of everyday objects. A list of four answer choices is provided, and the students must select the correct word.

Parent and Family Partnerships

In addition to being prepared as early language and literacy instructors, educators must also take into consideration the concept of family involvement. Engagement can happen within the classroom as well as at home. According to Meier (2000), engaging parents in the literacy

development of their children increased the success rates for children in the moment and later on during schooling. He quotes a kindergarten teacher:

> I believe in learning about the needs and expectations of parents, and realizing that parents have varied literacy perspectives for their children. Teachers in diverse classrooms, then, need to see the diversity of parental perspectives on literacy education and the varied ways that parents may express these views (p.113).

Home-school connections are a way to get parents involved with what is happening at school and increases communication between parents and teachers. Sending home book bags, bringing in items from home for a school project, and providing parents with literacy activities for home are all great ideas to promote engagement. This also places some of the responsibility on the parents to support and be involved with the literacy development of their children. Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa and Matera (2013), remind us:

> Unless teachers and family members make an effort to support both the home language and English, young DLLs (dual language learners) can easily lose the ability to speak and understand their home language, or lose the balance between the two languages (p. 9).

Being Prepared for Kindergarten

Greater push for academics in kindergarten has recently put huge demands on preschool teachers to prepare children for this transition. Upon entering kindergarten children are expected to have some beginning writing skills, familiarity with print, letter and sound recognition (Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012). A study conducted by Hatcher et al., 2012, revealed that 11 of 13 teachers and 12 of 16 parents interviewed conveyed that literacy skills were essential to kindergarten readiness. This included letter recognition, sound/letter association, recognizing sight words and names, and writing--especially the ability to write one's own name (p. 6).

Benchmarks have been created to state how many letters children should be able to name by the time they enter kindergarten. Legislation from the federal Head Start program states that children should name at least 10 letters. The Reading First program strives for children to know 16 of 19 letter names. The Common Core Standards states that children in kindergarten should be able to name all uppercase and lowercase letters (Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012). With so much emphasis on literacy knowledge upon entering kindergarten, one must wonder if preschool educators feel as though they are equipped to teach these skills.

Preschool educators want their children to be successful upon entering kindergarten. According to Piasta et al., (2012), children with high letter-naming abilities in preschool and kindergarten are likely to experience success in literacy learning, whereas children with low letter-naming abilities are likely to experience later literacy difficulties (p. 2). It should also be noted that children's abilities to maintain positive peer relations is associated with both social and academic benefits during their early schooling experience (Morrison et al., 2005). This goes to show the importance of literacy skills in the early years.

Summary and Conclusions

Language and literacy development in preschool is linked to academic success in kindergarten and beyond. In order for early childhood educators to best teach and support this development in children they must be knowledgeable about language and literacy acquisition. Knowledge of language and literacy can come from coursework, coaching, mentoring, or trainings. Educators must be willing to support English Language Learners in their acquisition of a second language, and must also be aware of the sequential stages ELLs go through when learning another language. Educators must also find it important to include families in children's development of language and literacy skills. This will lead to greater success for children.

Lastly, early childhood educators should take into consideration what skills children are expected to have in order to be prepared for kindergarten. In this study, the following research questions will be explored: What are teacher perceptions about supporting and teaching language and literacy development to all students? Furthermore, information will be obtained to better understand how teachers prepare their children for continued academic success. The amount of knowledge that children have about language and literacy skills will be observed through task completion.

Research Design

Purpose

The area in which I live and have taught in for the past decade has seen a huge shift in the demographics within schools. Early childhood educators are finding themselves depending on interpreters during enrollment and conference meetings. Educators are also requiring more professional development pertaining to teaching English language learners and supporting families who speak a language other than English. This investigation will gather information about the classroom demographics, abilities of ELL and native English speaking (NES) students, and also educator opinions pertaining to language and literacy development for young children. The information obtained throughout this investigation will benefit students, as well as, educators in the early childhood field within my community. Through the child exercises, I will be able to report to educators about their students' abilities. This will allow educators to provide additional supports and tweak instructional strategies when needed. Educators will also be able to reflect on their own experiences and abilities through the questionnaire. This will then inform them of their own professional development needs and effective teaching strategies.

Research Question

In order to answer my research questions, I will distribute questionnaires to classroom teachers and will also spend time with all students to gather information about their language and literacy skills. This research is important because educators need to be aware of the language and literacy skills that their students possess. Also, educators must be willing to reflect on their professional development and think about their perceptions pertaining to teaching students from diverse backgrounds. Through the child task completion, I will gather quantitative date pertaining to language and literacy skills. Through the teacher questionnaire, I will gather qualitative data pertaining to teacher perceptions in regards to providing students with opportunities to gain language and literacy skills. Through my research, I will be able to shed light on teaching strategies that are effective or ineffective. Also, teachers will gain a better understanding of their students' abilities and areas that require additional supports.

Core Concepts

In order to answer the research questions, I must have an understanding of early language and literacy development. It is important to keep in mind that there is a wide array of skills that children ages four and five have. ELL and NES children often have varying abilities and skill-sets. It is also important to keep in mind that ELL and NES children deserve equal opportunities to learn in a supportive environment.

Approach

Because the pre-kindergarten classrooms in my area have a mix of ELL and NES students, I found it logical to research my topic in such a setting. I have a personal connection to this particular setting because my son is a member of one of the classrooms. I expect that gaining permission to complete my research in this setting will be quick and easy.

Methods of Inquiry

I will be using a mixed-methods approach to conduct this research. The data collected will provide me with an understanding of language and literacy skills that all young children currently have; this will be my quantitative piece. I will also gain insight into teacher perspectives in regards to teaching language and literacy skills to all children; this will be my qualitative piece. I will then take both forms of data and determine if there are any correlations between the two.

Research Methods

Setting

Data will be collected in two pre-kindergarten classrooms that are part of an elementary school in a large district in southern Maine. This site was chosen because there is a good mix of English language learners and native English speakers within the two pre-kindergarten classrooms. Signed permission will first come from the superintendent of the district and principal of the elementary school. Signed permission will then come from parents and educators. Finally, verbal assent will come from the children.

Participants

Questionnaires will be distributed to two lead and two assistant pre-kindergarten teachers. There are 32 children within the two classrooms who will be invited to participate once parental permission is obtained. Because I am seeking educator input, it is vital to include the lead and assistant teachers. Also, the preschool-aged children will provide me with data pertaining to letter knowledge and understanding of print concepts. I am hopeful that my connection to the staff will be encouragement to participate.

Methodology

I am choosing a mixed-methods study for this research. The quantitative piece will come from task-completion performed by the children. According the Creswell (2015), performance measures are a way to assess an individual's ability to complete tests or tasks. Although performance measures can provide useful data, Creswell states that the data may be time consuming to gather and could potentially be biased toward a specific cultural group (p. 150). The qualitative piece will come from the teacher questionnaire. The instrument is designed to gather data pertaining to demographics and attitudes through open- and closed-ended questions. According to Creswell (2015), questionnaires should include clear language, no overlap in answer options, and provide questions that apply to each participant (p. 388). The questionnaire that I have designed meets the above criteria.

Operational Methods

For the quantitative piece, I will tally each child for each task regardless of correct or incorrect. I will also group the children by age, gender, and language status (ELL or NES). For the qualitative piece, I will compile the data to further understand teacher perceptions, education backgrounds, and years of teaching experience.

Data Collection

Before children are invited to participate in task completion, parental consent must be obtained. Once I have collected all of the signed permission forms, I will create a tally sheet with gender, age, and language status. Task completion will include naming uppercase letters and writing one's own name. I will also read a short story that the children are familiar with and ask them to recount the main events. Teachers will be asked to sign permission to volunteer their time and opinions for the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The information obtained from the child task completion will be categorized based on age, gender, and language status. I will then look for correlations between the number of tasks completed and age, gender, or language status. The statistical data will be reported through a table or figure of some kind and accompanied by a detailed discussion of the results. The data collected from the teacher questionnaires will be categorized into professional development, teaching strategies, and teacher perceptions about language and literacy development for young children. I will then take this categorized data, analyze for themes among educator responses, and produce a narrative discussion to summarize the findings. Creswell (2015), states that one should take their time when reading all of the data in order to obtain a general sense of the information before jumping into a detailed analysis (p. 262).

Expected Findings

I expect that many of the preschool-aged children will be able to name most uppercase letters. I expect that most of the children will be able to write their own names. Because the children will be familiar with the story, I expect that they will be able to retell the main events of the story. With the teacher questionnaires, I expect to receive positive feedback. Being part of a large school district, there are many opportunities for professional development and personal growth. I am hopeful that the questionnaires will articulate these supports. I think that the findings of this study will show that pre-kindergarten classrooms provide curriculum that supports language and literacy development for their preschool-aged children. The study will also shed light on the teaching strategies and professional development one may find from a pre-kindergarten classroom and school district.

Potential Issues & Weaknesses

One barrier I may face is a number of parents declining permission for their child's involvement in the study. I am hopeful that with two pre-kindergarten classrooms in the school, there will be plenty of children who will be able to participate. One limitation to this study is that I am only looking at one pre-kindergarten setting in the district. I may not obtain a full understanding of language and literacy development for children of a certain population. Another limitation is that the teacher questionnaire is only being distributed to four educators. This will not provide an overall consensus of pre-kindergarten educators in the entire district.

Research/Inquiry Narrative

When I originally put together this research project, I was planning to complete the data collection at the early childhood center I was working at. I had talked with the program coordinator at the site, and she was fully on board with the project. We had discussed the struggles I may approach with this research because the center philosophy was geared towards learning through play, rather than learning through structured academic periods. Because the children were encouraged to freely explore and learn at their own pace, there was no emphasis placed on teaching early language and literacy skills. My worry was that the vast majority of these children would have little to no concept about letter knowledge, letter-sound acquisition, and writing letters. After expressing these concerns to the center's program coordinator, I determined that a center with a structured literacy curriculum may pose higher positive results for this research project.

My next plan of action was to talk with a fellow member of the cohort. I knew that she worked within a Head Start program that used the OWL curriculum; a highly structured literacy curriculum for preschool classrooms. This curriculum puts great emphasis on early language and

literacy skills, and I felt that most classrooms using this particular curriculum would provide the positive results I was looking for. In a typical OWL classroom, one would expect to see a print-rich environment, shelves filled with high-quality story books, and teacher-child conversations that include elegant and expansive language. This curriculum contains story books that have been pre-selected by the creators to touch upon specific topics, generate extensive group discussions, and enhance literacy, math, and science skills in preschool-aged children.

I was thrilled to hear last summer that this fellow cohort member would be willing to sign-off on my data collection needs. Because we had two classes together last summer, we spent quite a bit of time talking about the project and how we would make it work for data collection purposes. It seemed as if I was going to hit the ground running with this research project! Then, there was a huge shift in this particular program. Classroom supervisors were shifted, and a new requirement was put into place for those seeking to complete intensely detailed classroom observations. I was informed that I would no longer have access to the same classrooms as I previously had expected. I also learned that I would have to partake in a six hour training geared towards new employees becoming familiar with the demographics of the classrooms and what to expect from this particular population. Because the company was not hiring at the time I was planning to begin my data collection, they were not holding the New Employee Orientation training. I realized that I would have to wait over a month's time to attend the training and begin data collection. My research project was yet-again at a stand-still.

I then discussed my project with my child's pre-kindergarten teacher. This classroom and one other were part of an elementary school in my area district. This teacher reminded me that the two classrooms used the OWL curriculum, had a good mix of English language learners and native English speakers, and could potentially provide some great results now that they were

approaching the end of the school year. I, once again, felt as though my project may have a good path to follow. As the saying goes, the third time is the charm. Maybe my third setting would be "the one".

Because my original IRB proposal was approved for data collection to be completed at the Head Start program, I had to edit my proposal, and resend it to the Board to represent the current setting of the pre-kindergarten classroom at the local elementary school. I was fortunate that there was no issue in resubmitting my proposal. I simply had to highlight my changes and send it along.

Once the updated IRB proposal was approved, I was able to reach out to the district superintendent and principal of the elementary school. The superintendent responded quickly to my request for approval. Once he received a signed copy of my IRB proposal and knew that the project was approved by the Board, he granted approval for the project. The school principal was also on board with the project and granted approval. I was now able to reach out to parents and classroom teachers and begin my data collection.

I handed out my teacher questionnaires to the four classroom educators; two per classroom. I received all four questionnaires back within a week's time. I found that the majority of parents were willing to sign permission for me to include their child in my task completion groups. Because several families carpool each day, I did not see some parents and was unable to include certain children in the project. I also encountered a few parents who did not want their children included in the group. One mother expressed that her son was reading at a second grade level, so she did not want him engaging in activities that were "too low" for him. Another mother worried that her child's lack of English would interfere in her ability to engage in the activities, so she declined consent. Out of 32 children, I was able to include 20 of them in

this research project. I felt that this was a good number and representation of the group, so I moved on with my data collection.

The child task completion moved along faster than I expected. In one school week, I was able to collect data on 17 children. Some children were able to move through letter identification, writing their name, and retelling the main events of the story in under ten minutes. I was impressed at how smoothly the data collection was moving along. Because I did not want to interrupt any classroom instructional time, I completed my data collection during a 30 minute window in the morning while the children were eating breakfast and snack (I waited for the children to be done eating before taking them to the group). There were one or two children who had very limited English, so I waited until the end to collect data on them. I wanted to allow them to partake in the task completion independently and at a slower pace, so that they did not feel overwhelmed at any point.

With my collection now complete, I was able to sit down and thoroughly sift through the data and determine some supported themes. With my highlighters, colored pens, and sticky notes, I went back through my literature review and made page by page connections to my collected data. Who knew that interpreting and coding data could be so enjoyable?

Data Analysis/Interpretation of Findings

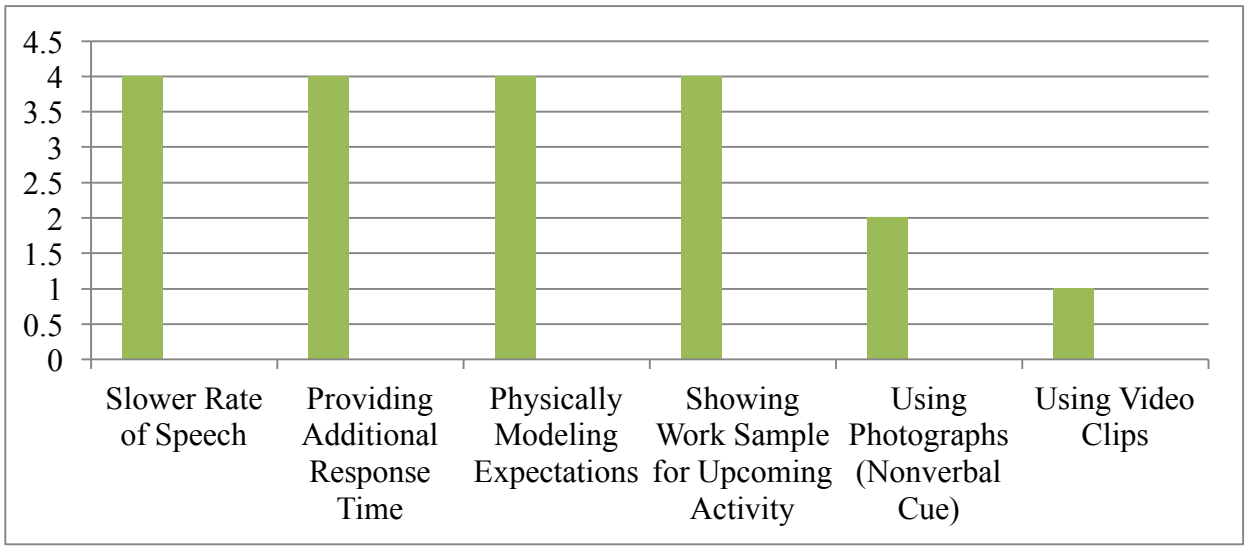
For this research project, I used a mixed-methods approach to collect my data. My qualitative piece of data was obtained through a teacher questionnaire given to four veteran teachers. I was able to pull out three themes and relate them back to my literature review: Teaching strategies in the classroom and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English, Technology usage with students and supporting language acquisition, and Encouraging family involvement to create positive home-school partnerships.

My quantitative piece of data was obtained through child task completion. Twenty children, ages four and five, were observed in their abilities to exhibit basic language and literacy skills needed to be deemed prepared for kindergarten. From this collected data, there were two themes that stuck out: Repeated interactive read-alouds and retelling the main events of a story and Letter identification and being prepared for kindergarten.

Teaching Strategies in the Classroom and SDAIE

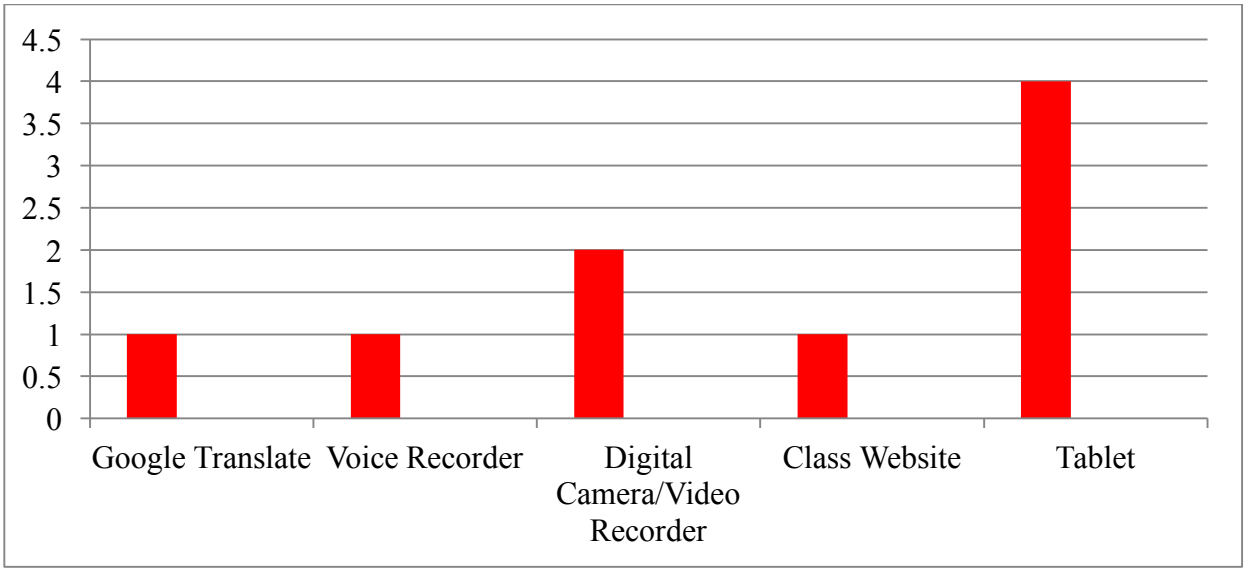
For those students who speak a language other than English at home, it can be difficult for them to fully engage in a classroom with high demands for spoken language in English only. A singular component of instruction that will help ELL students better understand subject matter in English is SDAIE. The major goal of this form of instruction is to make curriculum comprehensible and meaningful to students.

There are several strategies that educators can incorporate into their instructional time that will benefit ELL students. I found that these strategies were being used within the pre-kindergarten classrooms with ELL and NES students.



Technology Usage with Students and Language Acquisition

It seems as if everywhere you go these days, technology is at your fingertips. Public schools are no exception to this phenomenon. These schools have many options for educators to choose from: tablets, interactive whiteboards, digital cameras/recorders, smart tables, video recorders, and the internet. As long as technology is used in a developmentally appropriate way, students' needs and interests can be met no matter their developmental level.

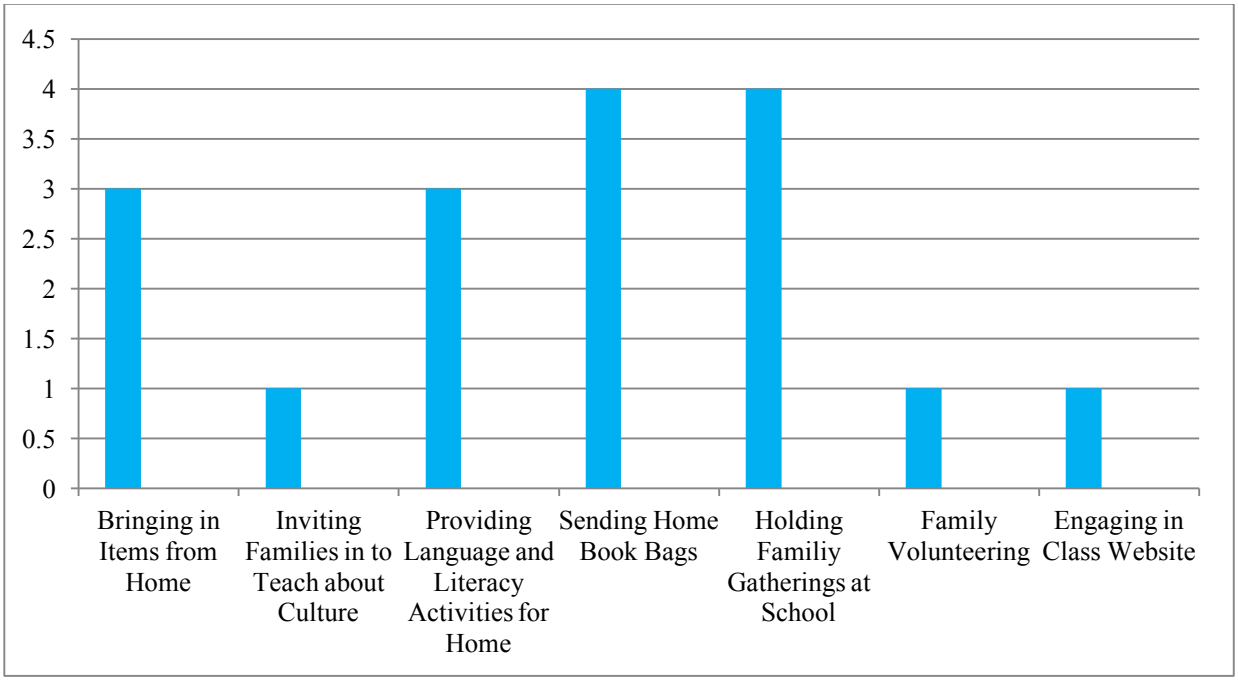


Within the two pre-kindergarten classrooms, tablets are used only once or twice per month. The tablets are typically teacher directed within small groups. Classroom teachers use the tablets to assist all children with letter recognition, letter tracing, and letter-sound acquisition.

Encouraging Family Involvement and Positive Partnerships

Family involvement does not simply mean that the family is present within the classroom and helping with daily routines. Family involvement also takes place at home. Children acquire an abundance of skills throughout the day at school during instructional and independent choice time, but they also acquire skills at home when conversing with a family member or engaging in

dramatic play with toys. Meier (2000), reported that children whose families were involved in their literacy development, saw an increase in academic success throughout schooling.



Family involvement is strongly encouraged within the two classrooms. At the beginning of the school year, plastic cases were sent home with each student that contained a variety of writing instruments, blank paper folded into books for drawing and coloring, and a children's book. Throughout the school year there have been family gatherings where each child was sent home with multiple children's books. During parent-teacher conferences, the lead teachers emphasize the importance of language and literacy skills within the classroom and at home. Data is collected at a few different points throughout the school year in regards to language and literacy progress in order to inform families of growth and concerns.

Repeated Interactive Read-Alouds

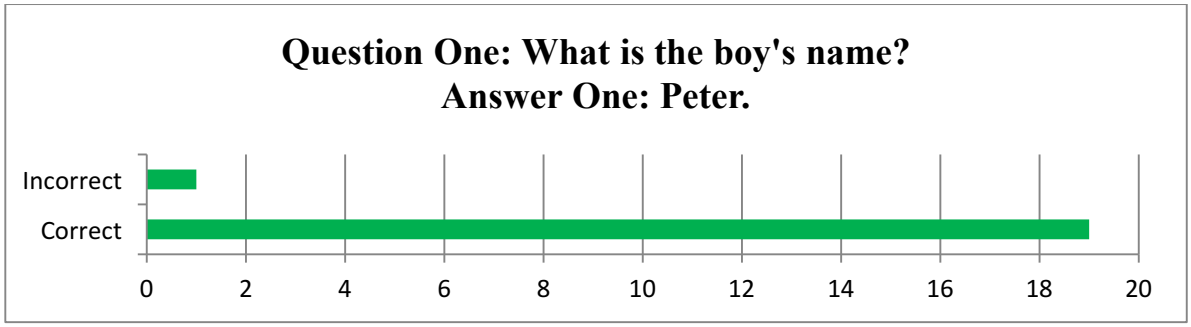
The literacy curriculum used within the pre-kindergarten classrooms is Opening the World of Learning, OWL. This curriculum has six units that are broken into four week sessions.

For each unit, there are preselected story books that are each read three or four times. The readings are spread out over the course of two weeks and overlap with the readings of other story books. During the first reading, the teacher moves through the story slowly. The curriculum creators provided a page-by-page script for the teacher to follow as they read the story. Vocabulary words are to be defined, and children are prompted to repeat the word. After the story, the teacher guides the children through the main events and makes references back to certain pages. During the second reading, the teacher begins by recapping the main events of the story. The page-by-page script provides teachers with a question such as, "What is happening here?" The children are then encouraged to chime in to help tell the story. Vocabulary words are again defined, and a group discussion takes place at the end of the story. During the third reading, the teacher reads only the first two or three words of a sentence, and the children are able to finish it off. This strategy allows children to recall the main events of the story and practice saying the new vocabulary words that have been introduced. As with the first two readings, there is a group discussion that takes place at the end of the story. During the fourth reading, the teacher assigns the children to take on the role of the main character in the story. As the teacher reads, the children are able to participate in saying the character's lines. Not only do the children have the opportunity to partake in telling the story, but they are also able to make connections to their own experiences through group discussion.

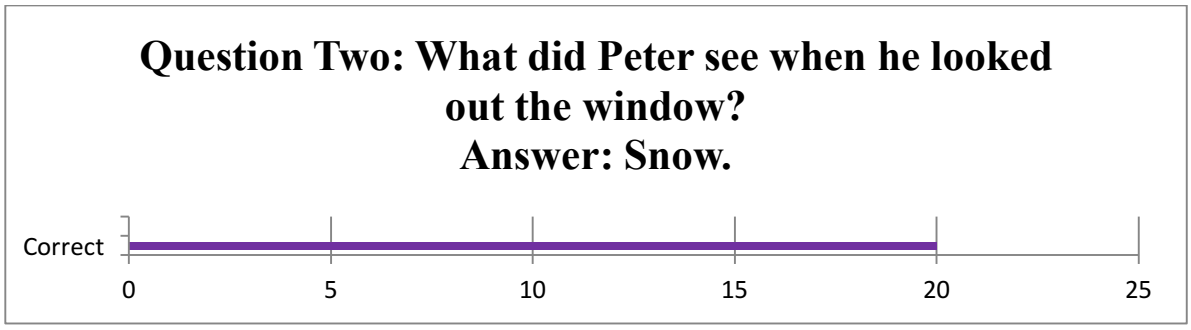
The OWL curriculum is very structured, and to some educators, extremely intense. From the educator's stand-point, there is a lot of work that goes into planning these interactive read-alouds. Many educators place sticky notes on the back of the book to cue them for a vocabulary word or explanation of the events on the page. Because the program is so scripted, educators must be knowledgeable about each component. Professional development is a must in order for

educators to understand the purpose, effective strategies, and positive outcomes of this highly comprehensive curriculum.

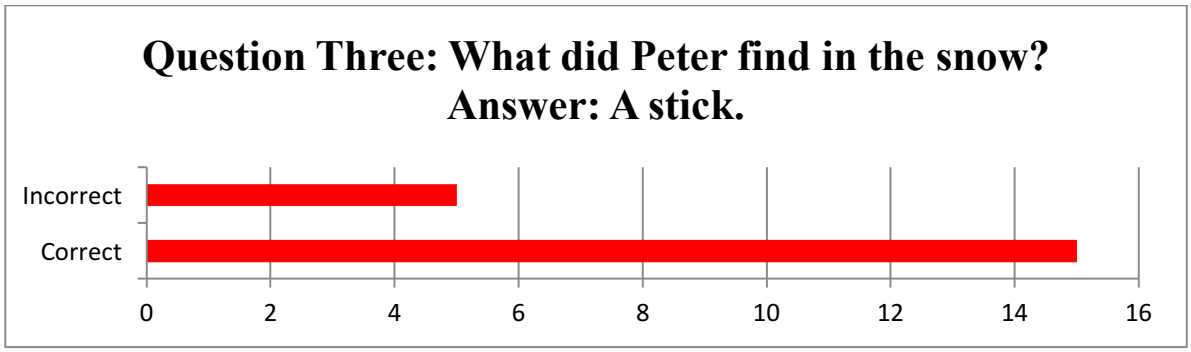
For my read-aloud with the children, I chose the story, The Snowy Day, by Ezra Jack Keats. This book is included in unit three of the OWL curriculum. The children were asked six questions about the story. Although the children had not heard the story since late January/early February, the vast majority of them were still able to retell the main events of the story to me in early April. This can certainly attest to the effectiveness of interactive read-alouds with pre-kindergarten students and their ability to follow along with the narrative of a story, gain reading comprehension, and understanding of rich vocabulary.



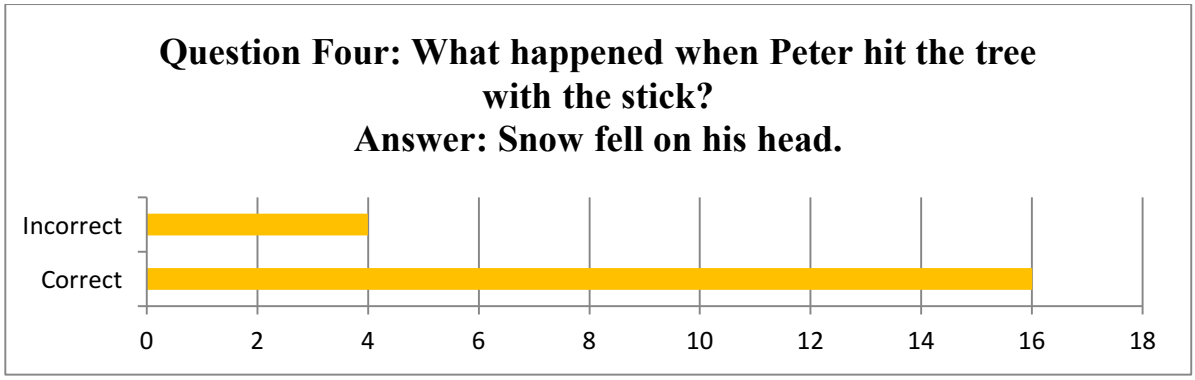
Nineteen children answered the question correctly, and one child gave an incorrect answer.



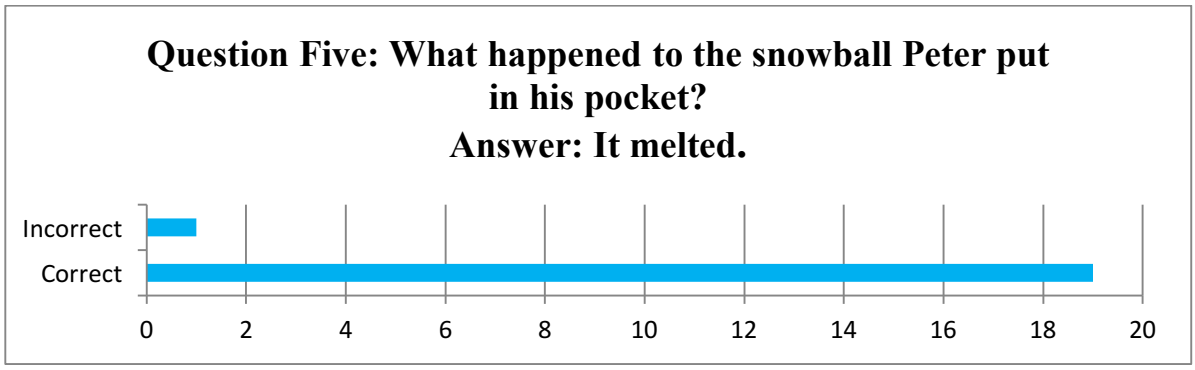
All 20 children answered this question correctly.



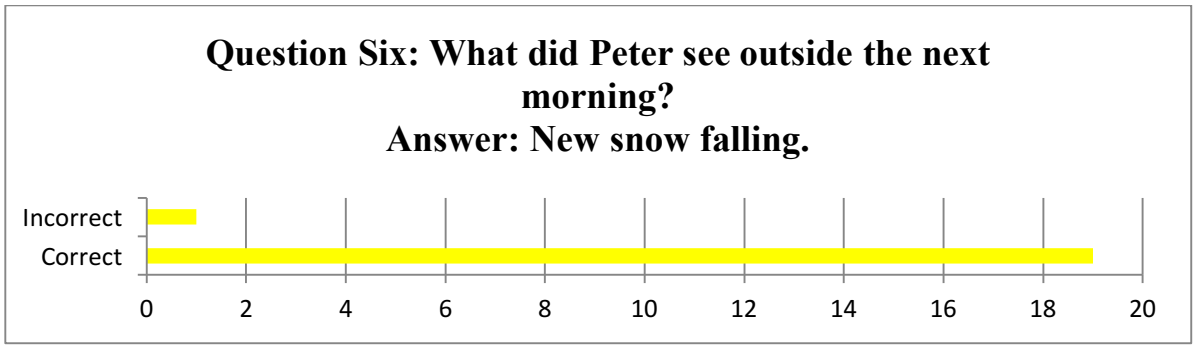
Fifteen children answered the question correctly, and five children gave an incorrect answer.



Sixteen children answered this question correctly, and four children gave an incorrect answer.



Nineteen children provided a correct answer, and one child provided an incorrect answer.



Nineteen children provided a correct answer, and one child gave an incorrect answer.

Although the children did quite well on retelling the main events of the story, questions three and four seem to be the most challenging. Even though I was holding the book and showing the children the illustrations, a handful were unable to generate the correct answer for these two questions in particular. It is important to remember that these children had not had any interaction with this story at school in two months. All in all, I would say that the abundant number of correct answers is enough to confirm the current research about the benefits of repetitive, interactive read-alouds.

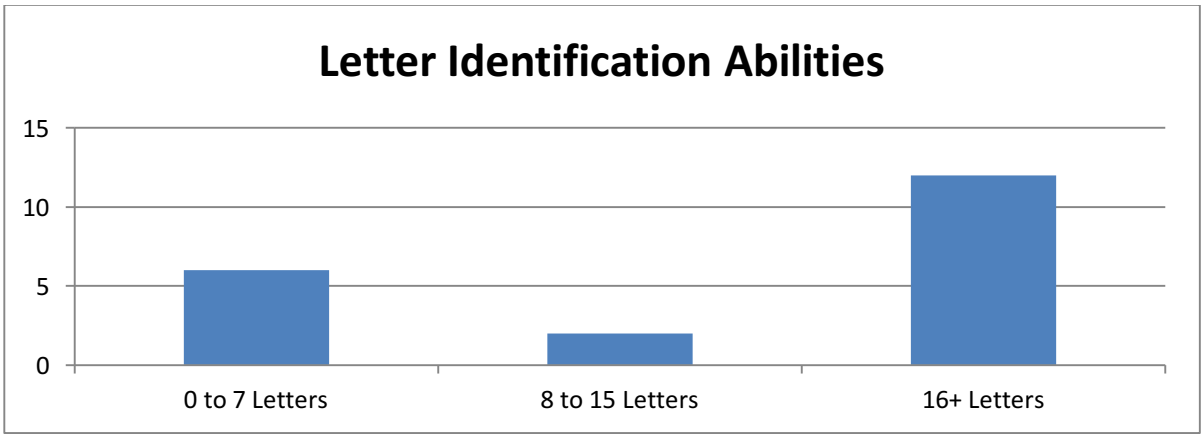
Letter Identification Abilities

Depending on your academic source, you will receive varying answers regarding how many letters young children should be able to identify upon entering kindergarten. Piasta et al., (2012), found that if you obtain information from the federal Head Start program, you will be told that children should know at least 10 letters upon entering kindergarten. The Reading First program would provide information stating that children should know 16 to 19 letters upon entering kindergarten. The Common Core Standards has the highest preference for children preparing for this transition—be able to identify all 26 letters. With such a wide array of

recommendations, where should pre-kindergarten educators strive for their students to be once they transition to kindergarten?

It is not only recommended that children be able to identify letters upon entering kindergarten but also be able to write letters, recognize letters in print, and make letter/sound connections. Piasta et al., (2012), reported that preschool children who were able to identify a high number of letters went on to experience greater levels of literacy success in school over their peers who named a low number of letters. This is more evidence that a greater demand is being placed on early childhood educators to academically prepare children for kindergarten.

In this part of my data collection, the 20 children were prompted to identify all 26 letters and write their own names. There was certainly a mix of abilities between the ELL and NES students. In this group there were 10 boys (six NES and four ELL), and 10 girls (six NES and four ELL). The graph below shows the results of this section of the task completion.



In the first column, two of these children were NES and four were ELL. In the second column, these two children were NES. In the third column, eight children were NES and four were ELL. You can see that 60 percent of this group possessed a high level of letter naming capabilities. According to the research presented by Piasta et al., (2012), the 12 children from

column three may go on to achieve greater success in literacy development in school than their peers from columns one and two.

In terms of writing abilities, 18 of 20 children were able to write their own names. I found it interesting that seven of these children were able to write their names, but they were not able to verbally identify all of the letters in their name. Out of these seven, four were NES and three were ELL. This goes to show that the early literacy skill of writing letters is more prominent than the skill of identifying letters for these seven children.

Discussion

Conclusion

Based upon the teacher questionnaire, it is safe to say that the pre-kindergarten educators at this specific elementary school feel very comfortable in their abilities to teach language and literacy skills to all students. These four educators receive continuous professional development through their employer pertaining to the topic and have the materials and supports needed to effectively implement the OWL curriculum. The strategies being used by the educators engages children and families, and helps to support academic success in school. The pre-kindergarten educators are also using technology, such as tablets, as a tool to support the acquisition of language and literacy skills for their students.

For many of these students, the high letter-naming ability has set a strong foundation for their kindergarten transition. Also, the information retention through the repeated interactive read-alouds has helped to boost success in reading comprehension for these students. Lastly, the ability to write one's own name shows that the majority of these students have the beginning writing skills needed to successfully enter kindergarten. As a whole, many of these students are adequately prepared for the upcoming kindergarten transition. They were able to demonstrate

the basic language and literacy skills that kindergarten educators will be looking for during student screenings.

One thing to point out here is that this study only focused two pre-kindergarten classrooms that implement the OWL curriculum. For the most part, pre-kindergarten classrooms that are tied in to the public school system and Head Start programs in our area use the comprehensive OWL curriculum. Private childcare centers, as well as in-home daycares, often implement a curriculum that does not have a strong language and literacy component. Some do not use a structured curriculum at all. If children from these private or in-home settings were included in the study, there is a strong possibility that the findings would have changed.

Implications

Because OWL provides a page-by-page script for each story reading and discussion, many educators, regardless of experience with the curriculum, find it rather easy to implement. The authors clearly articulate the importance of intentionality and how effective teaching strategies provide great academic results for students. If an educator is not overly familiar with the intensity of such a curriculum, it can take some getting used to and discipline to be sure that it is being implemented correctly. Professional development is important to ensuring success with this curriculum.

Many of the students who were unable to identify a high number of letters have already been "flagged" by the classroom educators. At this point in the school year, all students in these two classrooms have been academically evaluated once or twice before. Some of these "flagged" children are currently receiving Tier 1 supports through the Response to Intervention (RTI) program within the classroom by the general education teacher. By the end of the school

year, the pre-kindergarten teachers are striving for children to be able to identify at least 17 letters, display some letter-sound connections, and demonstrate book knowledge.

Before the school year is over, the teachers will determine if these children are eligible for the summer Kindergarten Jump Start program with the school. This program meets Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm at the school for five weeks. Children are deemed eligible if they have little to no preschool experience, low letter identification, and low exposure to the English language. In most cases, children who are identified as having a developmental delay will not be considered for this program because they will already, or will soon, be receiving services to address their need(s).

Recommendations

Future research should strive to include input from families in order to provide more incite about young children's language and literacy skills. This data could be collected through a questionnaire or one-on-one interview. One factor to look into is if there are any language and literacy supports being offered at home. If the answer is yes, then what do those supports look like? Another factor is the individual child's willingness to engage in language and literacy activities at home and if these activities are child or adult directed. This could be the parent reading to the child at bedtime, the child independently drawing and trying to write letters, or a family member using alphabet flashcards with the child. Another question to ask is if the child has had any previous group care experiences before enrolling in the public pre-kindergarten classroom. If so, was there a curriculum used with an emphasis on language and literacy skills?

Obtaining this information from families will help to gain a better understanding of where the children are at in terms of language and literacy skills upon entering pre-kindergarten. This may provide incite about developmental needs, areas of strength, and at home supports for

young children. The information will also provide educators with a starting point for the individual child.

Personal Learning Reflection

In doing this research, I have gained a greater respect for those early childhood educators who implement the OWL curriculum. It is evident to me, that these educators put forth a tremendous amount of time and energy in making sure that this curriculum is used to its highest potential. The educators follow the curriculum so closely to be sure that each minute detail is carried out within the classroom. The language and literacy skills that the children exhibited during my data collection can attest to the effectiveness of the OWL curriculum in producing academic success for all young children.

In my previous teaching position, the early childhood setting I worked was a private program that did not use a curriculum with a heavy emphasis on academic skills. The philosophy of the program was that children learn best through play experiences, rather than teacher-directed instructional time. To some degree, I can acknowledge the benefits of less structure and the play-to-learn approach. On the other hand, little to no exposure to academics has the potential to place these children behind their academically-exposed peers upon entering kindergarten. Now that kindergarten is more academically driven and higher standards have been put forth, it is crucial that early childhood programs place some emphasis on pre-reading, pre-writing, and basic math skills.

In this new appreciation and understanding of the OWL curriculum, I feel as though my next professional endeavor will be in a setting where this curriculum is implemented to its fullest potential. After talking with the pre-kindergarten teachers about what these young children need for skills in order to successfully enter kindergarten and reflecting on my previous position, it is

clear to me that a setting that offers academic supports to its little people is the place I would prefer to be. As an educator, regardless of age or grade, it is your job to prepare your students for current and future life success; socially and academically. If you cannot accomplish that, then you may need to rethink your career path.

I would say that I certainly had my ups and downs with this research project. I believe that others in the cohort feel similar to me when I say that I would have preferred EDU 582 be held closer to EDU 586. It was challenging to generate a topic, begin researching the topic, and then forget about it for a year. I would imagine the thought behind it was that people would continue to obtain sources during the interim, but because I took multiple courses each semester, I put my research on the back burner until EDU 586 began. I found it difficult to go back through all of my data, remind myself of my research plan, and then actually get things started. I think that more continuity between the courses would have helped create a smoother transition from beginning to end with the research process.

Once the data collection was going, I found myself thoroughly enjoying the process. The classroom teachers were timely in getting their questionnaires returned to me, the parents were generally eager to sign permission for their children to be involved in the study, and the children were more than willing to show off their skills and hang out with me for a short while. I was absolutely thrilled with the positive response I received on all ends of the data collection process.

The biggest change I would have made, if I had more time, would have been obtaining more signatures to include more children in the study. Although I included 20 out of 32 children, I would have liked to have had at least five more. I know that five is not a huge increase, but it would have provided me with the opportunity to include a few more ELL children in the study.

Through my topic research, I learned a great deal about second language acquisition, best ways to support ELL students within the classroom, and technological tools that can provide assistance to educators and students. Before diving into this topic, I had never heard about code-switching, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English, and the numerous apps that support language acquisition.

I feel that teachers do not receive enough credit and recognition for all of the time and energy that they put into supporting their students. With the overwhelming amount of ELL students entering our public schools these days, educators are increasingly becoming overworked and burnt out. Thankfully there are resources such as ELL instructors, interpreters, and education technicians who can be present within the school and provide assistance to classroom teachers from time to time. Hopefully students can continue to make progress, and educators can continue to make positive strides toward student success.

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Appendices

Appendix A-Parental Consent

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Melissa McCrillis.

This year, as part of my master's program in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine at Farmington, I am conducting a research project on how to best support language and literacy development for students in pre-kindergarten. I am also looking to gather information about language and literacy skills that pre-kindergarten children already have. I would like to observe your child's writing abilities, letter identification abilities, and interactions with a classroom story book. I plan to read The Snowy Day, written by Ezra Jack Keats and previously read to your child by his or her teacher. Your child and I will then talk about Peter, the main character, and his adventures throughout the story.

I appreciate your consideration to allow your child to participate in this project. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you again,

Melissa McCrillis
Melissa.mccrillis@maine.edu

By signing this you give your consent for your child's participation in this study. **Please note:** You have the right to withdraw your child at any time for this study. You also have the right to withdraw permission for collected data to be used for the purposes of this study.

_____ _____

printed name date

_____

signature

Appendix B-Principal Consent

Dear Ms. Jeanne Malia,

I am currently working towards my masters in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine at Farmington. As the final piece, I am required to conduct a research project and have chosen to focus on supporting language and literacy development for all students in early childhood education. Research will begin pending your written permission in early March and will conclude with a symposium presentation in May 2017 on the Farmington campus. Research will be conducted through anonymous pre-kindergarten teacher questionnaires and also through task completion of individual pre-kindergarten children. For this research, pre-kindergarten educators will be asked about their comfortability teaching language and literacy skills, their professional development pertaining to language and literacy development in young children, their use of technology in supporting student's language and literacy development, and also family involvement strategies. The pre-kindergarten children will be observed on their abilities to identify uppercase and lowercase letters, creation of a writing sample, and also their interactions with the high-quality story book, The Snowy Day.

What I am asking:

•Permission to administer teacher questionnaires to pre-kindergarten educators.
•Permission to observe pre-kindergarten children in regards to language and literacy development.
•Permission to gather data from these educators and children and publicly share this data in an open forum at the Farmington campus.

I will:

•Inform parents of the nature of my study and gather consent forms from the parents.
•Inform children of the nature of my study and gather verbal assent from them.
•Inform educators, parents, and children that participation is voluntary.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact myself or my advisor at UMF, Dr. Christopher Strople at christopher.strople@maine.edu.

By signing this form you are consenting for me to gather information from teachers in the pre-kindergarten classrooms, as well as, observe pre-kindergarten children whose parent(s) has provided written permission.

_____ _____

printed name date

_____

signature

Appendix C-Superintendent Consent

Dear Mr. Xavier Botana,

My name is Melissa McCrillis, and I am a graduate student at the University of Maine at Farmington. For my final semester, I am pursuing a research project pertaining to language and literacy skills of pre-kindergarten children and how classroom teachers support such skills. Data collection will take place during March and April 2017 and will then be presented to my peers in an open symposium on the Farmington campus in May 2017.

My goal is to collect data from the children through task completion (identifying uppercase and lowercase letters, writing their names, and observing their interactions with the high-quality story book, The Snowy Day. I will also collect data from the classroom educators through an anonymous questionnaire pertaining to their comfortability teaching language and literacy skills, their professional development pertaining to language and literacy development in young children, their use of technology in supporting student's language and literacy development, and also family involvement strategies.

Written consent will be obtained from parents and teachers, and verbal assent will be obtained from children. All parties will be informed that participation is voluntary and that one has the option to leave the study at any time.

I will not share any identifiable data pertaining to specific individuals involved in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact myself at MPoms213@gmail.com. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Christopher Strople, at christopher.strople@maine.edu.

Thank you for considering my request to conduct research,

Melissa McCrillis

By signing this form you are consenting for me to gather information from teachers in the pre-kindergarten classrooms, as well as, observe pre-kindergarten children whose parent(s) has provided written permission.

_____ _____

printed name

date

_____

signature

Appendix D-Teacher Questionnaire

Teacher Questionnaire

1. How long have you been an early childhood educator?
2. How many students in your classroom are English Language Learners?
3. How many students in your classroom are native English speakers?
4. How comfortable do you feel teaching language and literacy skills to your ELL students? (please circle one):

   Very Comfortable Somewhat Comfortable Not Comfortable

5. How comfortable do you feel teaching language and literacy skills to you native English speaking students? (please circle one):

   Very Comfortable Somewhat Comfortable Not Comfortable

6. Have you been provided or participated in professional development pertaining to teaching language and literacy skills for young children? (check all that apply):
   a. Credit courses through college _____
   b. Professional development provided by employer _____
   c. Professional development attended independently _____
   d. Other (please specify) _____
7. What teaching strategies (if any) do you use to support language and literacy development with your students? (check all that apply):
   a. Slower rate of speech _____
   b. Providing additional response time _____
   c. Physically modeling activity expectations _____
   d. Showing a work sample of upcoming activity _____

e. Using photographs as a means for nonverbal communication _____

f. Using video clips rather than books to assist with text comprehension _____

g. Other (please specify) _____

8. What forms of technology (if any) do you use with your students to support language and literacy development? (check all that apply):

   a. Google Translate _____

   b. Voice Recorders _____

   c. Digital Cameras/Video Recorders _____

   d. Tablets _____

   e. Other (please specify) _____

9. In what ways do you (and/or your organization) encourage family involvement? (check all that apply):

   a. Bringing items from home for a project _____

   b. Inviting families into the classroom to teach students about home language/culture _____

   c. Providing families with language and literacy activities for home _____

   d. Sending home book bags _____

   e. Having family gatherings at school _____

   f. Other (please specify) _____

10. To what extent do you agree with the following statements (please circle one):

    a. Parents engaged in their child's language and literacy development will increase the child's academic success today and in the future.

Fully Agree Somewhat Agree Undecided Somewhat Disagree Fully Disagree

b. Parent involvement is important to me.

Fully Agree Somewhat Agree Undecided Somewhat Disagree Fully Disagree

c. I feel confident in my ability to teach language and literacy skills to all students.

Fully Agree Somewhat Agree Undecided Somewhat Disagree Fully Disagree

d. I believe that I am setting my students up for academic success today and in the future.

Fully Agree Somewhat Agree Undecided Somewhat Disagree Fully Disagree

Appendix E-Teacher Consent

Hello Pre-Kindergarten Teachers,

I am conducting a research project pertaining to supporting language and literacy development for all students. I would like to obtain some input from you about the topic through a questionnaire. This questionnaire is designed to provide me with information about classroom demographics, your comfortability teaching language and literacy skills, individual professional development around the subject, using technology with students, promoting family involvement, and opinions about language and literacy development for young children.

Please note: this questionnaire is voluntary and will be kept anonymous and confidential. In no way will your responses jeopardize your employment status.

I hope that you will be willing to take roughly l0 minutes of your time to complete this questionnaire. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank You,

Melissa McCrillis
Melissa.mccrillis@maine.edu

By signing this form you are providing me with your informed consent to participate in this study.

_____ _____
printed name date

_____
signature

Appendix F-Child Verbal Assent

Hi There,

My name is Melissa.

I was wondering if you would like to go with me to the small table to play some games. The first game is naming uppercase and lowercase letters. I have some letter cards to show you. If you know the names of the letters, you can tell me. The second game is writing uppercase and lowercase letters. I will show you the letter cards again. If you would like to, you can write the letters on a piece of paper. The third game involves reading a story and then talking about the boy in the story. You may know this book: The Snowy Day. I really like to read about Peter in this story because he has so much fun playing in the snow, and I like to play in the snow too!

Would you like to join me at the small table? It is your choice. You can say *yes* or *no*.