Building an Effective Preschool Literacy Program

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to determine the most effective literacy program to use in a preschool classroom. The research plan consisted of implementing four distinct literacy components into the research classroom

- alphabet awareness through music,
- concepts of print through story telling,
- concepts of books using a print rich environment,
- phonemic awareness in rhyming activities.

The research included collecting data through observation and note taking. The results showed that student engagement is a key component to acquiring new skills. Engagement, for this research, is defined as listening and participating in the given activity. It is also interesting to note that teacher enthusiasm was a key indicator to the level of student engagement.
In what was once the heart of the city, on a steep hill, inside a large church, lies a small preschool. As one enters the building one’s senses surge with the sounds of laughter, singing and storytelling, the smell of play-dough and popcorn, and the sight of wet, dripping paint projects. Students move from the classroom to the bounce room, from Spanish class to drama, from music to the playground. Their time is filled with exploration and adventure.

The preschool services 80 families each year in seven different classrooms. There are four classroom options to meet each family’s needs: three-year-old, four-year-old, multi-age and pre-K. In the current school year there are 24 girls and 50 boys with three students with disabilities and two ELL students.

The preschool is a faith based, Christian school, which just celebrated its twentieth year in operation. There are other faith-based preschools in the area, but this school has established traditions over the last twenty years and follows them each year which has contributed to the close knit, time honored environment. The preschool enrolls families mostly from word-of-mouth advertising. It is natural each year during enrollment when a new family arrives that they have been sent to the preschool from a former family. In this same sense the employees of the preschool have all had their own children go through the preschool program, some more than fifteen years ago.

The school has five families on tuition assistance. The school is labeled parent-cooperation, which means that all parents work in the classroom once a month. They are
also responsible for serving on a committee as well as participating in the two major fundraisers. Families on tuition assistance are required to work extra days in the classroom or serve on additional committees. These opportunities not only provide means for families but encourages parental support for students and much needed assistance for teachers.

Of the five teachers, one is a certified and licensed educator, three have bachelor degrees and one teacher has an associate degree. The teachers have 40 combined years of teaching experience. During this current year there is a high ratio of boys to girls. Boys and girls tend to learn in different manners. Young boys are extremely active; they want to build and construct, whereas girls tend to do much more role modeling. The researchers has watched girls have the tendency to copy what they see at home; writing lists and letters, copying words, pretending to read books and so on. That knowledge, combined with the responsibility of preparing students for kindergarten has convinced the staff to look at the literacy program in the school.

One of the main purposes in the preschool is to develop literacy and prepare students for kindergarten. Literacy is woven into many facets of the program. Stories are read, the alphabet is reviewed, student created alliteration alphabet books are completed, rhyming games are played, songs are sung and poems are recited. Literacy is not a section of the preschool program, in many ways it is the preschool program.

The researcher is a certified and licensed educator who has taught pre-K in the school for four years and was previously a second and third grade teacher. The researcher is currently working toward a master degree in education with an emphasis in the area of reading. The researcher has been in the masters program for one year and has
successfully completed many classes in the area of reading and literacy. The researcher attends staff meetings, parent meetings and occasionally teaches parenting enrichment classes. The researcher has been granted permission at the school to research, assume the role and implement needed findings in the area of literacy throughout the year. The researcher will work with other teachers to support their literacy needs in their classrooms.
Literacy development in preschool is an essential element for reading development in elementary school. Although there are many strategies and techniques available to aid in literacy development teachers find themselves with less and less time to research, develop and implement these techniques. While there are conferences to attend, new books to buy and websites to peruse, knowing which ideas and strategies to implement can still be a confusing and daunting task.

At the research site, literacy development is not clearly identified or outlined. While most teachers are keenly aware of what defines literacy development they remain unsure about how to implement literacy in the preschool classroom. Literacy development for a three-year-old looks must different than literacy for a five-year-old. However, literacy is very closely related in the preschool age range.

Literacy in preschool involves exposing children to oral and written language. Preschool programs strive to accomplish this with a variety of activities including songs, stories and games. Using these activities, students practice

- rhyming,
- alliteration,
- syllabication,
- phonemic awareness,
- print concepts, and
- comprehension,
to name a few, in their daily class work. All of these techniques and skills are used at the research site. However, they are not used in any particular order nor are they designed to build upon each other year after year.

On numerous occasions the researcher has witnessed teachers struggling to identify ways to help children build their literacy skills. It is very common to weave a pattern using the same materials each day. As a result, not only do the children grow restless, but teachers become stagnant and uninspired in their teaching. In addition, although the excitement of new materials is contagious, the actual use of new materials in classes is almost nonexistent. The researcher found new materials from last year were rediscovered a year later, unopened with the packages still sealed in cellophane. Teachers were unable to find the time to research how to use, develop or implement the new materials.

The research site has four classes that potentially send students to either kindergarten or T1 (a transitional first grade program). Therefore, it is imperative that the preschool classrooms strive to continue to build the academic program, especially literacy skill development to prepare these students for the next step in their education. To assist in that development the researcher is interested in discovering ways to build a comprehensive literacy program. The researcher asks the research question, “What is an effective preschool literacy program and how could one be implemented successfully at the research site?” as an effort to continue to improve the academic excellence of the research site.
Literature Review

Preschool literacy is the building block for future literacy success in school (Beauchat, Blamey & Walpole, 2009; Arthur and Makin 2001). Many teachers strive to create a rich environment to aid students through the process of learning. Through activities, stories, and songs critical literacy skills are continuously developed to guide learning. “The literacy and language attainments children have at the start of kindergarten set the stage for their short- and long-term reading success” (Adams, 1990; Beauchat et al., 2009, p.26; Arnold, Zelijo, Doctoroff & Ortiz, 2008).

Children arrive in kindergarten in a plethora of different circumstances and different learning environments. “It is estimated that up to 40% of children enter kindergarten 1 or more years behind their peers in critical language and reading readiness skills” (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007 as cited in Bailet, Repper, Piasta & Murphy 2009, p336). The cost involved in catching students up surpasses the cost of preventing them from failing in the first place. The researcher is looking to find programs and strategies to create a successful and effective preschool literacy program.

Marie Clay defined the term emergent literacy to describe the behaviors in young children as they learn about reading and writing (Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts & Benedict, 2007, p.1). Beginning reading starts before children enter kindergarten. The phases of literacy development begin at birth as parents and caregivers respond to the needs of infants. By eight to ten months of age, children begin to grab at books. Around age two, children begin to read logos as well as their favorite books while concurrently learning that alphabet symbols represent sounds. Between age three to four, children begin experimenting with writing whether it be with scribbles or letter-like forms. And finally
between ages and five and seven children begin to understand that letters make-up words, words make sentences and sentences produce stories (Cusumano, Armstrong, Cohen & Todd, 2006).

The preschool children at the research site usually have had much exposure to literacy in the home. Parents strive to expose children to books, sing songs, as well as introduce children to the library for story time as well as book checkout. The researcher has been interrupted many times while beginning a new book as children excitedly sharing their love for the book.

The National Reading Panel states that

“Children who enter kindergarten exhibiting early literacy skills (eg. Retelling nursery rhymes, recognizing letters in the alphabet, or displaying an awareness that words flow from print) demonstrate higher levels of reading achievement 1, 2, and 3 years later than children who enter kindergarten lacking these skills.” (Cusumano et al., 2006, p363).

A successful preschool curriculum is overflowing with these skills. It is imperative that children sing, rhyme and enjoy stories everyday. The successful classroom is a print-rich environment in which children can hold books, retell stories, listen to stories as well as learn new vocabulary. Children learn to think and process through story elements as well as enjoy literature.

Programs

There are several areas, identified by researchers, that are high quality components of literacy programs. “Some of the areas identified by various researchers as central to good quality include: development of oral language (Norton, 1996); frequent,
interactive reading (Sulzby, 1985); a focus on phonological awareness (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1995); congruence between home and preschool experiences and values (Au, 1993; Cairney, 1994); and attention to the role of popular culture and information technology in children’s emergent literacy” (Freebody & Ludwig, 1995; Arthur and Makin, 2001, p 14).

Many preschool programs strive to find the balance between the ideal program and the students and circumstances they have to work with. In the research article High Quality Early Literacy Programs, the author not only outlines the components of high literacy programs, but also explores the areas that require improvement. Strengths in successful literacy programs include:

- generally positive environments for care and learning;
- well-furnished learning centers;
- appropriate arrangements for play;
- a good balance of activities; and
- warm and sympathetic staff-child interactions.

(Arthur and Makin, 2001, p14)

Along with these components, research has shown the need to identify students early who have difficulty with reading. By beginning intervention early, students have a much greater chance to develop their skills and learn to read. (Sloat, Beswick & Willms, 2007; Lane, Pullen, Eiselle & Jordan, 2009) A five-year pilot program was put into place in collaboration with the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy, the New Brunswick Department of Education and five district school boards. The pilot program involved implementing a school based, continuous monitoring system to be used during
the first few years of school (kindergarten – second grade) to assist teachers in identifying students in need of literacy intervention.

Four measures were put into place to help teachers identify and then work with students to improve literacy. The first measure is the Early Years Evaluation, which was developed to assess the “whole child,” and therefore items are knowledge and skill-specific rather than general questions about overall ability (Sloat et al., 2007). The evaluation also looks at the extent to which a child can perform particular tasks. The assessment is completed based on teacher observations during the first months of instruction and assesses five different domains within the classroom:

- Awareness of Self and Environment
- Social Skills, Behavior and Approaches to Learning
- Cognitive Skills
- Language and Communication
- Physical Development

Teachers input the scores into a secure computer and receive immediate feedback on each child. This system allows teachers to see individual areas of strength and weakness as well as whole-group development. (Sloat et al., 2007)

The second tool is the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which is a series of teacher-given assessments to measure skills such as letter naming, initial sound identification and syllable segmentation. It provides “precise information that teachers can use to target interventions and to monitor students’ responsiveness to instruction” (Sloat et al., 2007, p 3). This tool allows teachers to target their interventions as well as monitor the students’ responsiveness to instruction with
immediate feedback, which allows teachers to compare scores with other children against benchmarks.

The third tool is Word Reading Subtest of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (2nd Edition) (WIAT-II), which is a valid, reliable, norm-referenced direct assessment of emergent and early reading skills. The fourth tool is the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) which yields specific information to plan targeted intervention. This assessment was used optionally by the school involved and was not used to track student trajectories or to evaluate the efficacy of the monitoring system.

All of the assessments combined addressed the need to identify and provide a powerful picture of early literacy development. All teachers received reports about their students’ data. The data was presented not only in numbers, but by color blocks of red, yellow and green. Each color was keyed to a developmental level as well as instructional recommendation. The color blocks made it very easy to interpret the results. (Sloat et al., 2007)

Early school based monitoring allows students’ needs to be identified early so that they have positive school experiences. It also identifies and supports students before they fail, rather than reacting once they’ve failed. Teachers are able to identify literacy strengths and weaknesses and it guides teachers and allows for appropriate and flexible classroom grouping. Teachers gain an enhanced knowledge of literacy and assessment expertise.

Strategies

According to the joint position statement by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Preschool classrooms should be print-rich environments that “provide opportunities for children to see and use written language for a variety of purposes, with teachers, drawing children’s attention to specific letters and words.” (Wayne et al., 2007, p2) HeadsUp Reading! curriculum believes that early and explicit instruction and environmental intervention (e.g. establishing a literacy rich classroom setting) shapes early literacy skills needed to learn to read (National Head Start Association [NHSA], 2005; Cusumano et al., 2006)

There are several strategies that build students literacy development skills. Using the example of shared storybook reading, teachers develop children’s language when they model and practice oral language development before, during and after reading. This includes using descriptive language as well as asking open-ended questions; which helps to engage students in literature (Beauchat et al., 2009). Teachers also work on comprehension development by not only asking questions regularly, but by varying the range of thinking of the question being asked. Whitehurst, Eptseing, et al. (1994; Beauchat et al., 2009) suggested CROWD as an acronym for that range:

- **(C)** Completion: one-word answer
- **(R)** Recall: remember a series of events
- **(O)** Open-ended: no right or wrong answer
- **(W)** Wh prompts: who, what, when, where, why
- **(D)** Distancing: make connections

Using the acronym, teachers have a method to remember how to vary their questions so that they work toward total comprehension of a story.
Vocabulary development must be built into literacy skills. Teachers need to teach word meanings explicitly which they can do through labeling objects, using child-friendly definitions, as well as picture cards and props (Beauchat et al., 2009). Labels do not have to be used just during a story, they can be moved around the room and included in playtime. Children learn well if they can incorporate their learning into their daily language and play. Hill (2004) quotes the research by Dickinson and Tabors (2002), which suggests that “exposure to rich vocabulary and stimulating discussion in preschool year predicts literacy development in the first year of school and literacy in fourth and seventh grade.”

Phonological awareness is the ability to attend to the sound structure of the spoken language. “Among the numerous reliable predictors of later reading performance that educational researchers have identified phonological awareness in one of the few that educators are able to influence significantly” (Lane et al., 2009, p1). Rhyming, working with syllables and initial sounds, or alliteration easily practices these skills. Games are a good way to use and practice these skills daily in work and play. “Preschoolers who are given training in phonological awareness have accelerated reading acquisition, but we target only the simplest tasks (Adams, 1990, Beauchat et al., 2009 p32, Young 2009). Children with strong phonological awareness skills can blend, match, and detect and manipulate speech sounds. Children are more prepared to use these skills to decipher print (Lane et al., 2009).

Book and print conventions teach the forms, features and functions of print. During shared storybook reading, teachers model for students how to hold a book, and how to turn pages in a left to right manner. Students can also have repeated practice in
finding and identifying the title of the book. Especially when using big books, it is useful to point to the words and text as a teacher reads. This shows students the difference between words and pictures as well as the concept of reading from left to right.

“Knowledge of book and print concepts may seem trivial; however, research indicates the importance of book and print awareness for later reading success. (National Center for Family Literacy, 2007; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, Beauchat et al., 2009, p34, Young 2009)

In the study *Indirect Impact: How Early Childhood Educator Training and Coaching Impacted the Acquisition of Literacy Skills in Preschool Students* the implication of the study suggests that the classroom environment plays a major role in children’s literacy development. It was also found that while books and reading to children is extremely important, there are other strategies that also support literacy development. Using puppets in the classroom, magnetic letters, markers, crayons and clipboards, interactive games as well as word play (clapping syllables, rhyming, etc) also help to promote literacy in the classroom (Cusumano et al., 2006). A variety of techniques will help to attract children to working daily on these skills.

*Literacy Coach*

Research also shows the importance of a literacy coach to guide the development of a successful literacy program (Mraz, Algozzine & Watson, 2008). The role of a literacy coach is very open with many different interpretations (Kem 2009, Mraz et al., 2008, Rainville and Jones, 2008). The complexity of the job of literacy coach is not fully understood. Many people suggest that a literacy coach is the organizer of new information and tools, others suggest that they are a mentor to teachers and therefore
model lessons and new techniques. “The International Reading Association (2000) lists the three major roles of the literacy coach as providing: expert instruction, guidance with assessment, and leadership for a school’s reading program” (Mraz et al., 2008, p2).

Literacy coaches also work to connect parents and teacher/school communication which helps to build a strong bond (Shaw, 2009). “Thus the literacy coach can be thought of as the conductor of a school wide orchestra who brings all teachers, students and administrators together to create a rich, harmonious symphony of literacy learning” (Shaw, 2009, p3). It is important to establish a balanced literacy program in the classroom. It includes asking thought provoking questions, providing a print-rich environment, access to literacy materials, as well as taking into account the interests of the class. Literacy is more than just teaching a skill; it provides students with the capability to build upon current knowledge and understanding as they move forward with their literacy development. It takes collaboration and communication to build a successful literacy program. Teachers must work together in their efforts to build a comprehensive program. By building teacher knowledge and improving techniques and strategies, the goal of increasing children’s literacy has a greater chance of success (Walpole and Blarney, 2008).
Action Research Proposal

Chapter Three – The Goal of the Action Research Project

The goal of this action research project is to discover an effective literacy program at the preschool level in order to prepare students for kindergarten. Eventually, the researcher would like to have a literacy program in place based on early literacy skills as well as strategies developed to implement them easily into the preschool classroom. The literature review discussed the many different type of skills needed to improve early literacy. While research in chapter two clearly documented a multitude of important early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, concepts of print, vocabulary, rhyming, alphabet recognition, and so on, during this research, the researcher will be focused on four main early literacy skills:

- Phonological awareness: rhyming, syllables, alliteration
- Enjoy stories including a print rich environment, new vocabulary, frequent, interactive reading, and concepts of print
- Integration of literacy in play centers
- Recognizing letters in the alphabet

During the research, the researcher will implement each of the four literacy skills one at a time for a period of four weeks each. Using observations in the researcher’s class as well as another preschool class in the building will allow the researcher to see what concepts are being taught in the two classes. The researcher will also keep a weekly journal of the observations. Students from the researcher’s class will be surveyed using simple survey’s as to how they like or dislike the activities that are implemented.
Throughout this research, the researcher will be using a variety of techniques to collect data. The researcher will work with students to learn alphabet letters using songs and music (Appendix A). Bailet et al. sites many authors on the importance of alphabet knowledge, “Alphabet knowledge (i.e., knowledge of letter names and letter sounds) also strongly predicts and is most likely causally related to later reading success, particularly for children at increased risk for dyslexia” (2009, p337). The researcher will use games such as Alphabet Bingo, for observation purposes.

The researcher will manipulate the classroom environment to create an atmosphere for play related literacy. The researcher will then use the technique of observation to document when and how the students incorporate the objects into their play. “Literacy-related play is a practical and meaningful way for teachers to support preschool children’s literacy development” (Wayne, 2007, p2).

The researcher will introduce many books to the class. Books will be placed around the classroom in appropriate designated places to create a print rich environment. For example, cook books, and books about food will be placed in the kitchen area along with pads of paper to create opportunities for children to reference books and create lists. Books will be used to introduce new vocabulary to students as well as create an environment for interactive reading and story retelling. The researcher will use Marie Clay’s Concepts of Print to guide the teaching of the concepts (Appendix B), however, students will not be formally assessed. The researcher will use the information observed in the journal.

The researcher will also focus on phonological awareness skills such as rhyming, syllabication and alliteration. The researcher will teach these skills with the help of
nursery rhymes, songs and the pre-k alphabet book. The pre-k staff teaches each letter of
the alphabet using alliteration (for example, letter p: Perfect Piece of Pizza). The
researcher will assess the skills using an assessment created by the researcher. The
students will also keep writing journals where they will be able to further develop their
beginning writing skills. The researcher will make observations about the progress and
development of their writing skills.

At the end of the research, the researcher will compare students’ literacy knowledge
through the sixteen-week period using the journal, observations and student surveys.
Action Research Proposal

Chapter Four – Action Plan

The issue to be examined in this action research project is effective preschool literacy programs. The researcher is looking at literacy in preschool to understand what components construct a successful program.

The issue is essential due the fact that the preschool prepares students for entering kindergarten. Kindergarten standards have become more complex and therefore preschool children need to have extensive knowledge and practice with literacy skills. The researcher wants children to practice several different literacy activities to decide which are the most effective in teaching literacy at the research site.

Possible Solutions

For years, educators debated whether or not computers should be placed in the classroom. The debate has shifted with the question now being not if they should be in classrooms, but how they should be used in the classroom. In research conducted by Heft & Swaminathan (2002), computers were placed in preschool classrooms to research the social and behavioral impact on the children. The concern in the preschool classroom is how the computer will impact children’s social development. It has been shown that preschool children work better in partners, which allows them to work on their social skills such as problem solving, sharing, and cooperative learning strategies. This method, of working in partners, also allowed for students to ask each other for help when problems arose, instead of the teacher. It was shown that much of the teachers’ time during class was employed answering computer mouse problems, printer problems, lost screens and so on.
The researcher rejects this solution for two main reasons. The first is that students are in the research classroom for only 2.5 hours each day. The preschool students time is better spent playing and interacting with classmates and practicing literacy skills with the teacher. The teacher cannot spend valuable teaching time solving computer problems.

The second part of the rejection is the cost of computers and software in the classroom. There is currently one computer at the research site shared with twelve employees, therefore at least one computer would need to be purchased for the research classroom. Software would also need to be reviewed and purchased for the site. The teacher would need to be responsible for maintaining the computer, as technology support is not available.

Another possible solution for implementing the most effective literacy program is to purchase developed literacy curriculum. Massive amounts of money have been poured into developing literacy curriculums. These curriculums offer an array of themes all while supporting literacy skills. These curriculums can be especially helpful for teachers to save time creating and preparing projects to enforce skills. Curriculum can also be purchased for faith-base support.

Through biblically based lessons, preschoolers will be introduced to social studies, language arts, math, phonics, science, health and safety, arts and crafts, music, and physical education. The hands-on activities are perfect for little bodies, while concepts are reinforced through games, songs, poems, and drama to prepare your preschooler for kindergarten-type games. The multimedia elements include captivating stories on DVD and Christian songs on CDs and CD-ROMs that
coordinate with lesson themes presented in this curriculum. 180 lessons.

(Christianbook.com)

After researching many different curriculums available, the researcher rejects this as a possible solution. The cost of purchasing the Horizon curriculum is $334.36, which covers the cost of the basic set. Additional books or photocopies would have to be made of each of the student books. There are additional CDs, videos and support material that would need to be purchased separately. The researcher explored additional curriculum to find the cost soar to $1000 per year. The preschool research site is a nonprofit organization. The monies collected for tuition only cover the teacher salaries. All additional supplies and enhancements come from the two fundraisers completed each year. Therefore, the cost is not in the preschool budget.

A solution with a greater possibility for the research site is to teach the literacy skills through music and stories. In Campbell and Brewer’s study (as cited in Wilmes, Harrington, Kohler-Evans & Sumpter, 2009, p1), they state “music enriches the human intellect and spirit.” When listening to music the entire brain is functioning. When music is paired with academic content it naturally connects to the brain as neurons fire constantly. Using big books, poems and charts (especially set to music) helps students connect that print has meaning (Fisher & McDonald 2001). Music contributes to students comprehension to stories as well as the idea of sequential order. The foundation to reading is phonemic awareness. It is an essential element to a preschool literacy program, which can be addressed everyday in listening for rhyming words. “Playing” with words allows children to connect language development (Fisher & McDonald).
The solution proposed is realistic for the research site. The researcher has access to many pieces of music for teaching alphabet sounds, listening to stories on CD and playing with language. There is no cost incurred with the research plan as all of the materials area available at the research site. The researcher accepts this idea as a possible solution to finding the most effective method to teach preschool literacy.

*Action Plan*

The action research project will begin in December and continue through April. The following outline explains the order of research.

- **December:** The researcher will gain consent from the preschool director and preschool parents to follow through with the action research proposal. The researcher will also create a journal, observation logs and surveys.
- **January – April:** The researcher will observe the preschool students and their interaction and play with the four literacy skills focused on.
- **January:** The researcher will use the song “Alphabet Sounds” from *Sounds Like Fun* CD with the alphabet poster. During the first five minutes of class each day the students will listen to the CD and point and say the alphabet names and sounds. The researcher will make observations as well as keep a journal of the daily activity. At the end of the month the students will take a survey as to how they liked the activity and what they learned.
- **February:** The researcher will integrate literacy into the play centers. For example: in the block area the researcher will provide books about construction, hard hats, graph paper and pencil. This will allow students
to look at construction plans, draw and plan and then execute it to the best of their ability. The researcher will make observations as to how often children are incorporating literacy into their play. At the end of the month the students will take a survey regarding their use of literacy materials in their daily play.

- March: The researcher will expose children to print rich environment by having students listen to stories on cd, introducing new vocabulary from the stories, provide opportunities for interactive reading using big books and teach the concepts of print. At the end of the month the students will meet with the teacher to show their knowledge of the concepts of print using a familiar book in class. The researcher will make observation notes.

- April: Everyday the researcher will work with students on rhyming activities, alliteration and syllabication. The students will create a rhyming chart to show their progress of the sound of language. At the end of the month the researcher will play rhyming games with students and make observations as to the students knowledge of rhyming.

- April: The researcher will send home a survey for the parents about preschool literacy and how they have seen their child continue to develop. There will be an opportunity for the parents to write about their experiences.
May: The researcher will analyze and interpret all of the results of the action research project. The final project will be completed and turned in May 30th.

The researcher is very excited to begin the action research plan. Introducing new activities to the preschool students in an effort to work on attaining literacy skills may prove to be a difficult undertaking, however, as the literature shows, preschool literacy is essential to prepare students to learn to read. The researcher hopes to find the most effective method for teaching preschool literacy will help to create a successful preschool program.
The researcher has spent the last four months researching effective components of a preschool literacy program. The research question “What is an effective preschool literacy program and how could one be implemented successfully at the research site?” has many fascinating components. The researcher focused on four different literacy strategies for periods of three weeks each. The students were immersed in each strategy for the three-week time period. The four strategies used were:

- alphabet awareness through music,
- concepts of print through story telling,
- concepts of books through a print-rich environment and
- phonemic awareness through rhyming activities.

The researcher used specific data gathering techniques that best fit each intervention and implemented the action plan with fidelity. She will now explain each element in further detail and report on the findings.

**Overview of Interventions and Data-Gathering Techniques**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Data Gathering Technique</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alphabet awareness through music</td>
<td>Observation form (teacher), note taking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concepts of print through story telling</td>
<td>Observation form (teachers, parents, aides)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Print rich environment</td>
<td>Observation (teacher), note taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonetic awareness through rhyming</td>
<td>Observation (teacher), note taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first intervention was alphabet awareness through music. The researcher used the same song each day for three weeks. Students had their own mat printed with the alphabet letters as well as pictures to represent each sound. The researcher used observation and note taking as the data gathering strategy. The researcher also had her assistant make observations when she was available to do so. The researcher watched for participation in two distinct ways: finger movement across the mat and saying each letter and sound.

The second intervention was concepts of print through story telling. Each day the researcher chose a book and spent time going through it with the children. Because the researcher was involved in telling the story, the researcher made arrangements for parents, aides and other staff members to observe the process. A form was provided for each observer. The researcher asked the observers to focus on each student’s engagement (defined as listening and participating in the story) as well as answer ten questions using a Likert scale. Observers were also encouraged to leave comments regarding their observations.

The third intervention was print rich environment. The research placed themed books and objects around the room for students to interact with. The researcher used observations and notes to gather data.

The fourth intervention was building phonetic awareness through rhyming. The researcher used observations and note taking to gather data. The researcher looked for engagement of the process as well as how well the students learned the skill of rhyming. The researcher used games, poems, and songs to enhance the learning moments.
Researchers agree that additional research is needed in preschool skill development. However, according to Doris Bergen the act of playing in preschool with rooted literacy increases children’s use of literacy materials as well as their engagement of activities. It has been shown that students that have literacy items in their play environment tend to be spontaneous readers of signs. It has also shown that children’s verbal skills increased as well. Children have the ability to learn much more than originally thought (5). Pretend play, as well as modeling behavior and skills is a great motivator as well as strategy for encouraging student learning. The ATF position paper on Early Childhood Education states, “Social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical lessons are learned best through integrated experiences (ATF Fed Rep Council, 2008).” These experiences allow children to be engaged in their learning and continue to make progress in their skill acquisition and development. The early childhood educator structures the classroom so that students are able to root themselves in these experiences. It allows for greater growth and learning increases.

In the article Putting Early Academics in Their Place by Marilou Hyson (2003), several guidelines are given for including academics in the young classroom.

- Select important, appropriate academic content which includes subjects that connect with young children’s interests

- Promote social and emotional competence, teacher-child-family relationships, and positive approaches to learning. “Children that enter kindergarten with curiosity, delighted engagement, and persistence at learning tasks leave 2nd grade with better skills in reading and mathematics (p. 22).”
Insist on well-prepared teachers. This includes the level of education of the teachers. A preschool teacher should hold at least a bachelors degree with a specialization in early childhood development and education. The specialization in this area helps teacher to “create experiences that build the concepts, vocabulary, and engagement that make academic competence possible (p. 22).”

Use appropriate instructional strategies. Instead of using “drill and kill” methods focus on building concepts through literature.

Use appropriate assessment methods

Results

Alphabet Sounds

The researcher used the song “Alphabet Sounds” from the compact disc Sounds Like Fun each day for a three-week period to view how the children responded to learning the alphabet as well as each accompanying sound. During the ABC job each day the researcher had the helper of the day lead the class in finger exercises. The finger exercises were used to create excitement about the task as well as focus the students on the exercise. The exercises used stretched the children’s hands as well gave them the opportunity to use their hand-eye coordination. Following the finger exercises the alphabet mats were distributed to each child. Children were guided to place their pointer finger on the first letter on the left side of the page. The expectation was that the students would follow the lines of alphabet letters and pictures while singing the accompanying sounds and words to the song. The music began to play and the students moved through the mat exercises. The researcher and the aide observed, perusing the room in an effort to
guide student fingers across the page in the correct direction. Additionally the researcher sang the song with the students to model the correct behavior. The entire song lasted four minutes.

On the first day, all students were eager to participate in the music exercise. Out of the nine students, one child (boy C) did not participate in saying the sounds while pointing to the letters and pictures. A teacher stopped by the classroom to observe the students. She had previously taught many of the students in the researcher’s class and was amazed by the sounds she heard coming from the classroom. She stayed for the rest of the exercise to watch the students work. She also praised the students for their hard work.

On the second and third day, the researcher noticed that three students were switching fingers and hands while pointing to the letters. The researcher helped them to find their pointer finger of their dominant writing hand to finish the task. Boy C requested that the class only do one side of the mat for the day. Boy C is very advanced in his knowledge of phonics. The researcher also observed that Girl K was pointing slowly to the letters and therefore missing some letters.

In the second week, a new student was added to the classroom. The researcher spent time with him to teach him how to complete the task. He caught on very quickly. The researcher also took a new approach in her observations. Instead of observing silently, she gave verbal input to the students. She also sang the song with the children excitedly. The students shared the researcher’s excitement as all students were singing and pointing to the letters.
In the third week, the researcher continued to give encouragement and praise for students working the task up to expectations. Boy C showed boredom by singing ahead of the song. Girl K was able to keep up with the song this week and point to each letter and picture as well as say each sound. Girl L was singing in an opera voice by the end of the week.

The researcher believes that the majority of the students enjoyed the task of working with “Alphabet Sounds.” They were pointing to the letters and pictures and singing the sounds. One parent asked the researcher if she could purchase the compact disc because her child was singing the ABC song at home each night. The child was trying to teach the song to the family. The parent was very happy with her child’s progress. The researcher noted during the three-week period that Boy C had a difficult time with the task. The researcher believes that Boy C was bored with the task. Boy C is advanced in his phonetic skills. The task was mundane for him and not challenging. He was entertaining himself in his efforts to sing faster than the song. On multiple occasions he requested that the class only do half of the song. It is also interesting to note that the researcher’s enthusiasm seemed to play a large role in how the students responded to the task. The first week the researcher was very quiet with her observations. The students seemed to not know how to respond to the activity. During the second and third week when the researcher sang along enthusiastically and gave tips aloud, the student’s interest level rose. It appears in this activity, then, that children mirror and learn from the teacher’s enthusiasm. It might be appropriate to better meet the needs of Boy C by having him work with an extra adult in the room on sight words. This can be done through another game or song activity. Because he is well versed in the alphabet sounds
it would continue his own personal learning development. Overall, in the context of the research question, this activity was beneficial to the majority of the students. The students were engaged in the activity and the music was an effective technique for teaching and reinforcing alphabet sounds.

*Storytelling*

For the next three weeks the researcher focused on storytelling techniques in an effort to teach concepts of print, work on comprehension strategies and connect the stories read to the student’s life. Observation forms were completed by the classroom aide, teachers in the building and parents. Students sat on carpet squares on the floor of the classroom in the circle time area. Each observer filled out a seating chart to show where the students were sitting. As the story was read the observers took notes about when students were engaged or not engaged. They made notes on the seating chart.

During the story, the researcher introduced the book by showing the cover of the book. The students were asked what they thought the story was about. The researcher gave time for ideas. The researcher then introduced the book by the title, while pointing to it, and asked if the students had any new ideas about the story. The teacher called on students to show the class:

- how to turn the page of the book
- where she should begin reading
- where she should read when she comes to the end of a line of text

During the reading, the researcher also gave students the chance to choral read together if appropriate for the book. The researcher read with enthusiasm and interest in the book. The researcher encouraged students to share their ideas and participate in the book. As
students told stories or shared ideas, the researcher helped them to connect their experiences to the book. The researcher also worked on comprehension strategies using Bloom’s Taxonomy by asking differing levels of questions (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation).

The data shows that overall students were mostly engaged during story telling sessions. At times, both boys and girls became off task, but it was rare in the classroom that they cause a disturbance. Often they are pulled back into the story with the enthusiasm and interest the researcher has created while reading. One observer commented, “Fun to watch! The kids who started to wiggle were drawn back in by all of the participation – active story.” Another observer commented “(the researcher) uses a calm voice when getting kids to stay on their bottoms and goes back to the story without missing a beat!” Many observers also noted the patience of the researcher while listening and responding to each child. There were two occasions when the researcher did not focus on the concepts of print while reading the story. There were also two occasions when new vocabulary was not introduced, but the observers also noted that the text of the story did not have new vocabulary words for this level of student.

In summary, the researcher spent a large amount of time exploring elements of storytelling with the students. The researcher worked diligently to give students a voice in the story and allowed the students to interject and make connections with the text. The researcher also made use of voice inflection and personal enthusiasm to engage students in the stories. It is interesting to note that in the data from both the music component as well as the story component both showed that teacher enthusiasm is a gauge of student engagement. In relation to the research question, it appears that story telling is an
essential method for teaching students concepts of print. The students were engaged in the story while also enhancing their comprehension and prediction skills as well as relating the story to their own lives.

*Print Rich Environment*

The researcher added print rich material to the classroom play areas:

- Kitchen: phone book, cookbooks, story books about family and food, pads of paper and pencils (to create shopping lists, etc)
- Science: Small magazines that scientifically look at different animals (their habitats, skeletal structure, etc)
- Math: book about time, books about shapes
- Animals: a basket of books, both nonfiction and fiction about animals
- Transportation: a magazine rack full of fiction books (ex. Thomas the Train) and nonfiction (dump trucks, hot rods), etc.
- Building: graph paper on clipboards and a huge set of design plans

All of the books have been added into the toy area. The researcher used large baskets to contain the materials. Some baskets were placed on shelves, while others were placed on the floor in front of the shelves. The large set of design plans was displayed open on the floor.

In the first days, the researcher noted that the students gravitated to the books in the kitchen and science area to explore the materials. They were intrigued with the cookbook and diligently searched for new recipes to create. There were squeals of excitement when they found mom’s famous cookie recipe. The busily began copying it on paper and gathering all of the necessary ingredients. One of the researcher’s old grocery lists was
tucked into the cookbook. The students enjoyed reading the list as well as creating new
lists for shopping.

In the science area the students used the magnifying glasses to look at the magazines.
After observing this for a few days, the researcher asked why they were using the
magnifying glasses. A little boy responded, “so we can read the pages.”
The researcher noted that the first week that the books were added into the toy area they
were ignored. The students went right along playing as they had always played. The
only items that were used were those in the kitchen and science area. The researcher
believes this is because the students have seen adults use books in the kitchen for
cooking.

During the second week, the researcher brought in baskets to display the books in
the toy area. The researcher believed this would let the books stand out on the shelves.
After two days of the books not being touched, the researcher then displayed the books
and showcased a new book each day in each area of the room for the students. Once the
books were showcased, the research found students engaged in looking at them during
their play. Also during this week, the set of architect plans arrived. The researcher
immediately displayed them on the floor (as it took up a large amount of space). The
researcher found that the students gravitated to the plans immediately. The block bin was
opened and students were busy building new buildings. It is interesting to note that at
some stage in the first three sections of the research (music, story telling and print rich
environment) the enthusiasm of the researcher helped to create a sense of engagement,
and desire to try something new.
**Phonetic awareness through rhyming**

The researcher used rhyming songs from *Word Family Sing Along* as well as Rhyming Bingo to reinforce the rhyming concept. Each day the researcher chose a rhyme ending to focus on for the day. To aid in enthusiasm the ABC helper for the day used the pointer to follow the rhyme on the poster chart which also reinforced the concepts of print that the students had developed early in the research.

The first day the researcher chose to work on the rhyming sound (-at) and chose to song Rat-a-Tat Cat to reinforce the rhyme. The ABC helper picked a pointer to use and showed the students how to follow along the words of the poster. The researcher played the CD for the students to listen to the song, feel the rhythm and hear the words. The researcher then played the song again and the students sung along. The following day the researcher used the same song for the ABC job. Another student had the opportunity to use the pointer and help the students follow the words. The entire class sang the song together. The researcher noticed that the students were moving along to the music and therefore had the students stand up to sing. As a class, the students created movements to the catchy tune. The class then spent time pointing out the rhyming words and listing them on a poster. More than once during the day the researcher heard the students signing Rat-a-Tat Cat song. During class discussions and story time, students recognized and called out words that had the (-at) sound. Words were added to the (-at) poster.
During the research period a new rhyme was added almost everyday, depending on how the students handled the new rhyme sounds. The students were able to learn 14 rhyme sounds in all:

- (-at) Rat-a-Tat Cat
- (-ay) Sail Away May
- (-ace) The Space Race
- (-ap) Clap Your Hands
- (-ake) Bake a Cake
- (-ell) Nell’s Swell Pies
- (-eep) Two Sleeping Sheep
- (-ee) The Wee Bumblebee
- (-ine) Nine Fine Swine
- (-ick) Rick and Nick
- (-ike) My New Red Bike
- (-ill) Down the Hill
- (-og) A Jog in the Bog
- (-ub) Rub-a-Dub Cubs

During work time, the researcher played rhyme bingo with the students. The students were familiar with bingo games as they have been played often in class. The rhyme bingo game was different in the sense that the students had to listen to the rhyme sounds. The researcher played a CD of sounds and the students listened for the matching rhyme.
Listening Lotto Rhyming Pictures

Students engaged in rhyming activity.

The researcher made adjustments to the game as was necessary. In the beginning, the rhyme CD moved onto new sounds too quickly. To help the students, the researcher would pause the CD after a sound was heard. Once the children had a chance to think and process what they had heard and place their marker on the appropriate picture, the researcher would play the CD and allow the next sound to be heard. The listening bingo game was played five times during the three-week period.

The researcher noticed that the students were excited about the rhyming songs. During the three-week period every child was given the opportunity to be the ABC helper and
therefore each had a turn in using the pointer with the poster. This was a significant amount of responsibility for each child. The researcher was surprised that the students requested Word Family songs to be played and danced to outside of ABC time. This happened frequently and became a useful tool during transition times. The students also often made up new hand motions to new songs. After hearing a particular song, they would begin to create the motions. Several times the researcher witnessed the students creating motions during free choice time. The researcher links this to the enthusiasm in the room for learning. The students were eager to “read” the poster and take part in the process of learning. Learning became an incredible adventure each day. Students were practicing reading skills, but enjoying the process tremendously. Their enthusiasm, interest and eagerness was noted by their parents as well through discussions with the researcher.

Conclusion

It appears, there are key elements that have come forward during each of the four components of learning.

- Student participation
- Teacher enthusiasm
- Music
- Responsibility
- Encouragement
- Colorful posters
- Enticing books
- Time to explore
Oppunities to share
Time to play
Model skills
Model behavior

All of these components have contributed to the students’ success in learning and enhancing their skills. When looking at best practices for the acquisition of skills in early childhood education, “developmentally appropriate practice provides children with opportunities to learn and practice newly acquired skills (ATF, 2008).” This allows for continued practice in an environment that is safe and secure. Engagement for young children can be defined as play. The act of playing provides children the time to explore, influence, problem solve and interact with their environment. It allows children to make connections with their world. They take what they know and add their new skills and make new meaning for themselves. For example, when children play in the block area they are problem solving with other children as well as practicing important math skills. This shows the child actively engaged in their learning environment. This follows in direct line with Piaget’s theory that “children should actively participate in their world and various environments so as to ensure they are not ‘passive’ learners but ‘little scientists’ who are actively engaged (ATF, 2008).”

Through active research and article researcher, the researcher has shown that a key element to early childhood literacy programs is the active engagement of students in learning new skills. This is shown in the classroom with students engaged in play, practicing new skills, playing game, reading books, and singing. Teachers create
exercises to allow students the time to explore their environment in a safe manner and make connections from their current learning to their past experiences. The researcher saw this happen many times in the classroom, but especially during book sharing. Students were given the time and opportunity to share the meaning of the books and how they connected with their lives. After much prompting and modeling from the researcher in the beginning of research, students developed their own sense of understanding and connecting to their lives.

_Suggestions for Further Study_

The researcher suggests at this time two ideas for further study. The first is that teachers implement a literacy program into the curriculum. Designate time each day to work on literacy components as a whole class as well as in small group settings. The second idea is to vary teaching techniques. Students learn in a variety of methods and therefore a variety of techniques will aide in reaching all students and their best schema of learning.
References


Appendix A - Music

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Appendix B – Story Telling

Observation Form for Angela Vossenkuhl

Observer: _________________________   Date: ___________________

Number of Students in class TODAY: __________

Before the book share begins, please take a minute and familiarize yourself with the observation form.

1. Please label the boxes below with a B for boy and a G for girl as they are sitting in their carpet squares.

2. During the story please make an X for students that are engaged (listening and participating) and mark an O for students that are not engaged (goofing around, etc).

   Teacher

---

Please answer the questions below using the number scale.

1 Never   2 Sometimes   3 Usually   4 Most of the Time   5 Always

1. Does the teacher introduce the book, including the title, and discuss the cover of the book? (Concepts of Print)
   1  2  3  4  5

2. Does the teacher give time for student response to the title/cover of the book?
   1  2  3  4  5

3. When reading the book, does the teacher allow for student choral reading if appropriate for the book?
   1  2  3  4  5
4. Does the teacher use voice inflection when reading the book?
   1   2   3   4   5

5. Are new vocabulary words introduced?
   1   2   3   4   5

6. Does the teacher help students make connections with the text?
   1   2   3   4   5

7. Does the teacher point to the text (showing left to right flow – Concepts of Print) while turning pages to show the flow of the book?
   1   2   3   4   5

8. Does the teacher ask comprehension questions?
   1   2   3   4   5

9. Are students encouraged to share and participate in the book?
   1   2   3   4   5

10. Is the teacher enthusiastic about the book?
    1   2   3   4   5

Comments: Your comments on specific things you noticed during the book share are crucial to me. Please take a few minutes and tell me the things you saw that you liked, didn’t like or that surprised you.