Strategies to Assist Emergent Literacy Learners in Acquiring Alphabetic Knowledge, Print Awareness, and Phonological Awareness Skills

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Strategies to Assist Emergent Literacy Learners in Acquiring Alphabetic Knowledge, Print Awareness, and Phonological Awareness Skills

By

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Abstract

Emergent literacy is quickly becoming a vital aspect of schooling; as it often reveals a student’s later success. This research asked what strategies teachers can use to assist emergent learners in their literacy development. Research indicates that print concepts, oral language, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge are the strongest predictors of future reading success. Observations and interviews of seven preschool students indicated the need for explicit, hands-on approaches to teach emergent literacy skills. Young learners require adult-mediated discussions and play, as well as the use of manipulatives and technology to increase their understanding. Utilizing hands-on materials and technologies encouraged student participation. This study found that teachers must take advantage of the interests of students and adjust their teaching accordingly.
Introduction

Emergent literacy is a critical topic facing American education today. Teachers, education professionals, and parents alike are beginning to focus on the importance of emergent literacy and how it affects later reading success. According to Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, and Hunt (2009), children require features such as storybook reading, home literacy, and print referencing in the early stages of literacy development in order to be successful later. In addition, Justice, Bowles, and Skibbe (2006) found that children with strongly developed emergent literacy skills are more ready and more quickly able to develop later reading skills and strategies.

Emergent literacy can be defined as the foundational skills, knowledge, and feelings that precede conventional forms of reading and writing (Wilson & Lonigan, 2008). Components of emergent literacy include alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language (Wilson & Lonigan, 2008). Students in the emergent literacy stage are learning the conventions and purposes for print, how to start effectively communicating through language, and the beginning stages of reading and writing, such as the alphabet letters and sounds. These skills and subskills are highly necessary to develop in early childhood in order for later reading to be acquired more efficiently, since these are the basic skills for fluent reading. Teachers must construct lessons and activities around these emergent literacy skills for later literacy learning to be more effective. It is imperative that educators find teaching tools and strategies for struggling emergent literacy learners in order to promote success in children’s educational careers. If students are not given ample opportunity to acquire these basic literacy skills, they may be at risk of falling further behind in later academic years. Skills
such as the alphabetic principle, concepts about print, and letter recognition are the foundation to later academic success. Therefore, it is essential that educators thoroughly teach this in the preschool and kindergarten years.

I was better able to understand how students acquire emergent literacy skills, and how to assist those who struggle based on observations and interviews with students from my own pre-kindergarten class. Due to the extensiveness of emergent literacy skills, I selected seven students to work closely with. Three of the students were considered “higher performing” students, two were in the middle group, and two in the lower group. Initially, early literacy assessments will be administered to focus on one or two particular skills within emergent literacy. The researcher will conduct lesson plans and work closely with these selected students to discover strategies and methods that assist in acquiring those necessary skills. Given that emergent literacy skills have been previously viewed as indicators of future literacy success, this action research project asks, what strategies can teachers use to assist struggling readers in acquiring emergent literacy skills, such as alphabetic knowledge, concepts about print, and phonological awareness?

Theoretical Framework

Research on emergent literacy often focuses on oral language development and interactions (Beauchat, Blamey, & Walpole, 2009); as such a sociocultural perspective on literacy is needed to understand how children acquire and learn literacy. Sociocultural theory is “…children’s development of literacy grows out of their experiences, and the views and attitudes toward literacy that they encounter as they interact with social groups…. (Goodman, 2001, p. 317).” In other words, children are immersed in different
social situations that encourage learning and understanding language around them in order to effectively communicate their needs and desires. These behaviors and ways of communicating are often learned from the home environment and preschool situations. Children are active participants in social situations, as they are investigating numerous ways to interact with others. Particularly in a preschool setting, children begin to understand what language is appropriate and how others will react in various social situations. In this manner, sociocultural theory helps us to understand the ways in which young children interact and learn from one another, teachers, and relatives. Students must develop their oral language through literacy practices. Literacy practices are defined as “…both behaviour and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing (Larson & Marsh, 2007, p. 19).” Literacy practices are the general attitudes and beliefs regarding literacy, its uses, and purposes. It is imperative that both parents and teachers foster positive literacy experiences and practices in the emergent literacy stage in order for children to transition smoothly into later literacy development.

The socio-cultural theory explains the importance of familial connections and experiences for children’s emergent literacy development. Heath (1982) argues that the family is the first setting in which children acquire uses, purposes, and skills in literacy. Children observe others they are closely related to as a model in order to improve their own skills in literacy. It is important that parents are aware of the interactions and frequency of interactions with their child. It is vital that teachers recognize these experiences and interactions in order to further build a child’s literacy learning of emergent literacy skills in the classroom. Parents and other adults must be aware that they
are modeling appropriate ways of interacting and communicating with others. For example, one highly beneficial way for children and adults to interact with one another is through books which foster oral language development, in addition to print knowledge, phonemic awareness, and other important literacy skills (Anderson, et. al, 2010).

In addition, children are thought to be born with an innate sense of language, and a desire to communicate their thoughts and needs to others (Goodman, 2001). According to Goodman (2001), young children attempt to use language to facilitate the communication of their needs and desires, as they have seen from their intimates. Children acquire the functions, purposes, quality, and values of literacy from those that surround them. At an early age, children begin to understand that written language is another format in which communication occurs, and that it can represent one’s thoughts and needs.

Literacy acquisition mostly occurs through interactions and socialization with others. One’s discourse, or how one uses language in social situations based on one’s social structure, largely determines the ways in which literacy is acquired (Gee, 2001). According to Gee (2001), there is a primary discourse and a secondary discourse. One’s primary discourse involves the ways in which language is used through interactions with “intimates,” or close family members. On the other hand, one’s secondary discourse is how language is used in social settings outside of the home environment, such as school or other public facilities, in which a close-knit relationship does not necessarily exist (Gee, 2001). Some of this language is learned, while some is acquired. Gee (2001) argues that learning language is a conscious process in which one explains and analyzes the content through teaching. The learning of language is done through explicit teaching of
skills, such as phonics instruction. Acquisition, however, is the subconscious process which is done through exposure in natural settings, and lacks a formal teaching structure (Gee, 2001). This is a situation in which children acquire skills from others through observations and discussions. Children acquire skills through literacy events, such as through conversations and reading street signs or store catalogs, for example (Larson & Marsh, 2007). One needs both acquisition and learning in order to competently and fully utilize a language system. Therefore, it is imperative that children in the emergent literacy stage are given ample opportunities to both acquire and learn these necessary skills. This research will question what educators can do to support the learning and acquisition of students in the emergent literacy stage in order to prepare them for success in later literacy activities.

**Review of the Literature**

**Introduction**

Due to the recent accountability and performance expectations of students, there has been more pressure and attention given to student’s academic success, particularly in the realm of literacy (Pokorni, Worthington, & Jamison, 2004). Expectations for students upon the entrance of kindergarten have grown astronomically. However, there are also an increasing number of children who experience considerable difficulties in learning to read (Lafferty, Gray, & Wilcox, 2005). Nearly 40% of students are estimated to enter kindergarten a year or more behind their peers in emergent literacy and reading readiness skills (Bailet, Repper, Piasta, & Murphy, 2009). Struggling emergent language learners typically come from a low socio-economic background or may have difficulty with speech or communication (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). These students rarely catch up
Strategies to Assist Emergent Literacy Learners

with their peers or meet grade-level expectations in later reading expectations (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

There is a body of research that indicates that particular emergent literacy skills, such as letter knowledge, phonological awareness, print concepts, and oral language skills, are strong predictors of future reading success (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). While all of these have been proven to be essential skills for learning to read, none of them can be taught in isolation and be considered efficient for reading (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that educators integrate all of these skills into their curriculum, as they are inter-linking while a child reads and therefore need to be taught in a similar fashion. To meet the high demands of the upper elementary grades, it is crucial that pre-kindergarten teachers and early elementary teachers begin explicitly teaching the foundational and emergent literacy skills that will assist students in successful reading in the future.

Intensity, Duration, and Expectations of Instruction at the Pre-kindergarten/Kindergarten levels

As previously stated, the expectations of students are increasing with the increasing pressure for school success and performance rates, as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Lo, Wang, & Haskell, 2009). Therefore, preschool teachers are beginning to feel heightened pressure to teach these foundational skills to students in order to prepare children for elementary school. Teachers are also feeling pressure to identify students with reading difficulties as early as four years of age, based on children’s emergent literacy skills (Aram, 2006). According to Schuele and Boudreau (2008), approximately 20% of students fail to acquire the phonological awareness skills
of reading by kindergarten. Additionally, more than one-third of students struggle significantly with reading, particularly in terms of alphabetic knowledge (Lafferty, Gray, & Wilcox, 2005). It has been found that second grade literacy achievement can be predicted by the middle of kindergarten (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). Therefore, these students require immediate intervention in order to catch up with their peers.

In order to understand when students have fallen behind and what skills they should have had mastered at certain ages, it is necessary to have a scope and sequence, or expectations, of emergent literacy skills at each grade level. Schuele and Boudreau (2008) suggest that pre-kindergartners and early kindergarteners need to focus on lower levels of phonological awareness skills, such as rhyming, alliteration, and syllables. By the middle of kindergarten, it is anticipated that most students will have mastered these skills and be ready for the later portion of kindergarten. Towards the end of kindergarten, students should be expected to acquire the deeper levels of phonological awareness, such as segmentation and blending skills (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Research has shown that students should begin receiving early intervention as early as the beginning of kindergarten in order to prevent further reading failure (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Schuele and Boudreau’s (2008) work is strengthened by the research of Wilson and Lonigan (2010), who argue that the three main skills of emergent literacy (phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language), are the strongest predictors of later academic success. Consequently, it is essential for educators to identify and intervene early before the student further struggles in literacy (Cooke, Kretlow, & Helf, 2010). In this manner, students will be given the opportunities they need to remediate these essential reading skills.
Once a child has been identified as struggling, preschool teachers need to provide immediate interventions and supplemental instruction to prevent further achievement gaps. Researchers have spent a great deal of time finding the appropriate amount of time and type of intervention instruction and at what age it is appropriate to begin such interventions. It has been estimated, though with little supporting research, that students in need of reading interventions benefit from approximately 25 to 90 minutes a day of supplemental instruction (Stevens, Van Meter, Garner, Warcholak, et. al, 2008). It has also been found that approximately nine to twelve weeks of intervention have indicated significant improvements in student’s emergent literacy skills (Stevens, Van Meter, Garner, Warcholak, et. al, 2008). Others, however, argue that up to 90 minutes of additional instruction may be cognitive overload for some students, especially those with speech-language or other disorders (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Others, still, fear that introducing too many skills too early will lead to confusion and a sense of frustration at the many and varying concepts that need to be developed (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Therefore, teachers must be cautious of their student’s needs and abilities, and adjust the amount of instructional time as well as intensity to allow for success with their students. It is imperative that educators utilize children’s interests and research-based practices in order to assist their development in emergent literacy skills.

**Phonological Awareness Activities**

Phonological awareness is the ability to analyze and dissect the sound structures within language (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Phonological awareness, particularly at its earliest emergence, is shown through a child’s ability to manipulate sounds, such as in rhyming, syllabication, segmentation, and blending activities. Children develop
phonological awareness skills through the act of “playing” with words and sounds within words. Phonological awareness skills, at their earliest point, begin with a child’s ability to break words into syllables, rhyme, and use alliteration (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008, Pullen & Justice, 2003). As a child’s awareness strengthens, the child is able to participate in more complex activities such as segmenting, blending, and deletion.

Explicit and evidence-based approaches to teaching these skills are essential in a child’s language development for future reading success (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Students typically develop phonological awareness skills around the age of six, and should be provided with intervention services if problems remain after first grade (Pokorni, Worthington, & Jamison, 2004). In order to develop phonological awareness abilities, educators can purposefully plan activities that work on these skills. Particularly for struggling emergent learners, it is crucial that these activities are integrated on a daily basis. While it is highly beneficial for students to have explicit phonological awareness instruction, it is not suggested to be conducted through drill-like activities or worksheets (Pullen & Justice, 2003).

Students require engaging, meaningful, practical, and enjoyable activities in order to actively process the skills of phonological awareness. Since the focus here is to develop phonological processing skills in emergent literacy learners, the focus is on rhyming and alliteration activities. Simple and common songs, chants, and poems, as well as alphabet puzzles, help to build phonological awareness skills (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). In order to promote rhyming in emergent learners, rhyming books that are used as read-alouds are effective in that it engages children’s natural aptitude towards rhyme. Teachers can utilize these read-alouds as opportunities to explicitly point out
various rhymes found within the text. MacDonald and Figueredo (2010) have found that the children involved in these activities saw a larger increase in test scores at the end of the program, as compared to a group of students that did not participate in these activities. As MacDonald and Figueredo (2010) state, “the most effective way to improve language is for children to engage in many conversations with language proficient adults…” (p. 404). Therefore, educators should remember how important it is to have conversations about these language-rich experiences.

Students can sort rhymes as well. Since the majority of pre-kindergarten children cannot read, students can sort manipulatives, objects, or pictures into different rhyme families. They can also play various matching or other card games in which they must attempt to pair the words that rhyme. Similar matching games and sound sorts can be completed for students to recognize alliteration in order to identify the sounds at the beginning of words (Pullen & Justice, 2003).

For the general purposes of phonological awareness development, there are a variety of books, games, curriculum packages, and websites available for students and teachers alike to use. These activities include placing foam letters in the correct order, listening to rhymes on tape or during read-alouds, or matching and sorting letters, rhymes or other sounds into categories (Bara, Gentaz, Cole, & Sprenger-Charolles, 2004). Students who would benefit from visual and tactile activities require activities such as multisensory tracing. Students can trace letters or rhyming words in a variety of ways, such as in sand, clay, or rolling and shaping play-dough while saying the letter aloud (Bara, Gentaz, Cole, & Sprenger-Charolles, 2004). Once students have mastered these simpler tasks, they can write their own rhymes or words that begin with the same letter or
sound as one provided. In order to check the efficacy of these activities, Bara, et. al (2004) completed pre- and post-tests with a group of students. It was discovered that students showed gains in the areas of rhyme, and phoneme identification through the combination of visual and kinesthetic activities.

Another activity that focuses on the kinesthetic aspect of phonological awareness is pantomime, in which students are given a word and must act the word out physically for others to guess. On the other hand, students can play the game “stepping stones” in which they step onto a picture of a stone with the letter, sound, or word family that the teacher calls out. In this manner, students are being asked to narrow in on a particular phonological awareness skill as well as actively utilizing their gross motor skills to jump from stone to stone. Teachers can use these activities to informally observe students’ understanding of particular phonological awareness skills (Rule, Dockstader, & Stewart, 2006). Tactile, or object, boxes can be made for individual or small-groups. Tactile boxes are boxes in which the student must sort out the objects by a particular skill. Students are required to choose an object, name it, and break the word into syllables, for example (Rule, Dockstader, & Stewart, 2006). All of these activities can be changed in order to meet the particular needs of a student. Whenever a student can make real-world connections to objects or products they see every day, the activity becomes more meaningful and therefore the student is more likely to retain the information (Rule, Dockstader, & Stewart, 2006). As with the previously mentioned research, Rule, Dockstader, and Stewart (2006) completed pre- and post-tests to find that students made significant gains, of 18.9 for kinesthetic activities, as compared to 8.2 for the control
Strategies to Assist Emergent Literacy Learners

Thus, a body of research has proven that activities with a visual, kinesthetic, and/or physical participation will result in gains in emergent literacy concepts and skills.

**Print Awareness Activities**

According to Elliott and Olliff (2008), a print-rich environment is essential to a child’s emergent literacy development. Signs, labels, directions, books, and words should fill the classroom and they should be immersed in print activities regularly. Children have typically learned the forms and purposes of language and reading during their preschool years. Children begin to learn concepts about print, environmental print, and alphabet knowledge, which are receiving more attention recently. Research has indicated that a child’s understanding of print concepts builds the necessary foundation for reading and writing (Pullen & Justice, 2003).

Children begin to view literature as different from spoken language, and understand that language is utilized differently in books than in conversations. They start to understand that print provides us a story, as well as the simple concepts of print, such as left to right progression and where on a page to begin reading. These skills have been shown to moderately predict later reading success (Pullen & Justice, 2003).

Awareness of print can effectively be promoted through the activity of storybook reading. In order to be most successful, shared storybook reading must be an interactive, meaningful, and positive experience. It is not sufficient for teachers to simply read the story aloud, but should include discussion between the adult and the child. Shared storybook reading should encourage children’s participation and allow them to see the way vocabulary, syntax, and storytelling concepts are used in print (Aram, 2006). Students need to be able to discuss stories after they have been read and answer open-
ended questions that were created to expand the student’s understanding of the text. Teachers can also utilize this opportunity to point out various text features that are being discussed in class, as well. For example, a teacher can find texts with alliteration embedded in order to point out this feature to students (Aram, 2006). Teachers can ask questions about the story, make comments or think-aloud, point to print while discussing the story, and track the print while reading. All of these behaviors fall into the intervention strategy of print referencing (Justice & Pullen, 2003). While these strategies and activities are considered highly important according to Justice and Pullen (2003), it is relevant to note that neither of their arguments was supported by research-based practices or research they had done to prove the effectiveness of these strategies.

Another method to approaching the explicit teaching of print awareness is through dialogic reading. Justice and Pullen (2003) explain that dialogic reading is an adult’s use of interactive behavior during shared storybook reading. Dialogic reading includes asking open-ended questions, answering children’s questions with questions, expanding upon what children say, and following children’s interests while reading (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Generally speaking, dialogic reading has been found to improve children’s phonological awareness skills, but has not been found to have a different impact than any other type of storybook reading.

Environmental print becomes another component of print awareness. Goodman (2001) argues the importance of conversations and interactions between adults and children in order for children to acquire skills in recognizing environmental print. Children acquire skills through literacy events, such as through conversations and reading street signs or store catalogs, for example (Larson & Marsh, 2007). Young children
realize that the golden arches represent McDonald’s and they are aware that a red octagon on the side of the road has the meaning “to stop.” Becoming cognizant of these key features and symbols allows a child to understand the connections between pictures or icons with letters or words. They can begin to link meaning to written language (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Students have begun to take a deep interest in reading print in other forms, such as multi-modally. Children can begin to internalize the features of print in an electronic format, as the programs highlight specific vocabulary or parts of the text that should be given particular attention. Adults need to encourage children, during both electronic and printed texts, to pay attention to the features of the print and mediate the interaction between the student and text. Teachers should reference the print whenever possible in order for students to understand how the print functions (Pullen & Justice, 2003).

**Literacy-Enriched Play**

A typical preschool classroom includes a dramatic play area for children to take on the roles of adults in various settings, such as the home, work, or restaurants. Many studies indicate that including literacy artifacts into the dramatic play area will promote children’s print awareness. Children should be given play materials that are highly relevant, meaningful, and familiar to their daily lives. In this way, students are able to personally investigate the uses of these artifacts independently and make their own discoveries of the functions of literature (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Teachers can put environmental print signs on the walls of the play area to label “buildings” and include literacy tools, such as pads of paper and pencils (Pullen & Justice, 2003). Children will naturally begin to experiment with this equipment and find ways to utilize them. Children
will see that their parents use grocery lists as an organizational tool for shopping trips, and may begin to use the paper and pencil to make their own grocery list.

There are a multitude of ways to integrate literature and literacy-related props into the children’s play. The housekeeping center can include cookbooks, telephone books, pads of paper and pencils, shopping lists and more. Children can use these materials to enact life in the home; tending to children, cooking meals, and making phone calls. They can also use this space as a restaurant, in which they can write down meal orders from their peers, pass out menus, make coupons, and more. Children will find excitement in these materials because they will be engaging in meaningful writing activities which they see adults use on a daily basis (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

A great deal of increasing children’s print awareness through play involves adult mediation (Pullen & Justice, 2003). Adult mediation includes an adult communicating with the child about the purposes and uses for various literacy artifacts and tools in order to make their literature-enriched play experiences more powerful and productive. The adult should model the purposes and uses of such materials and think-aloud so the children are aware of what the adult is doing and why. Then, the adult should role-play with the children and show them the appropriate use of various materials. The adult should continually discuss these purposes with the children to guide their use of the materials in future play (Pullen & Justice, 2003). Play allows children to explore the world around them from multiple perspectives so that they are given an opportunity to modify their understanding of the world. When providing children with literature-based supplies, such as paper and pencils, they are given the chance to begin understanding the way print works and what its purpose is (Morrow & Rand, 1991). If literature is included
within play in meaningful ways, it is suggested that learners will begin to move from unconventional forms of literacy to more conventional ways of interacting with literature (Christie & Enz, 1992). It is more likely that children will further their understanding of words, books, and print forms if they are exposed to these concepts through play on a frequent basis. Literature-enriched play allows children to experiment and understand print concepts and provides them with valuable literature experiences (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2004).

Research has indicated that literacy-enriched play activities result in increased understanding of written language and its forms and functions, especially when mediated by adults (Justice & Pullen, 2003). When children received adult-mediation during play, they were more likely to engage in literacy-related play activities. The increased uses of literacy-related play have been linked to increased performance in written language awareness, with particular attention to alphabet knowledge and environmental print awareness (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Conclusion

Overall, children have shown improvements in their understanding of print, written and oral language, as well as phonological awareness when given multiple opportunities to experiment with language. Children benefit from adults mediating conversations about print, and explicitly teaching phonological awareness skills. It is imperative that educators embed multiple opportunities for acquiring knowledge and activities should include both written language awareness and phonological awareness (Justice & Pullen, 2003).
Methods

Context

The research described in this paper occurred at Children’s Center D, a privately-owned preschool and children’s center, which serves approximately ninety families in the Buffalo and Rochester regions. Children from six months up to twelve years old are given full-day child care services and lessons from a curriculum that is nationally accredited by the Middle States Association. All of the students in the class, except for two, are Caucasian and upper-middle class to upper class in terms of socioeconomic status. My research will focus solely on one of the three pre-kindergarten classrooms at a location outside of Rochester, NY. In this particular classroom, there are twenty students; eleven females and nine males. Student’s attendance schedules vary. Eight of the twenty students attend daily, while the others attend on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule, or a Tuesday, Thursday schedule. Students are typically in attendance for a total of eight to nine hours per day.

I plan to examine evaluations that are given at Children’s Center D twice a year, both in October and February. This evaluation examines a student’s alphabet knowledge and number sense. I will also select particular pages out of their Art Journals, which are completed on a weekly basis, to better understand how they use language to convey the meaning of a drawing they have made. Once a student draws a picture, they must describe it to a teacher, who writes this on the page. By looking at this data, I will be able to understand their use of detail to explain their point of view and picture, as well as the types of sentences they use.
Participants

In order to conduct my research, I chose seven students to focus on, while also informally observing the class as a whole to gain a better sense of the “whole picture.” All of the participants are four and five-years old and are planning on attending Kindergarten this coming September. My attention was focused on three higher-level students, two students at the middle-level, and two who were considered to be performing below their peers. These students will be at the forefront of this research because they are students that I, as the classroom teacher, have found to struggle the most with literacy skills and understanding the alphabet. I have made this deduction based on past assessment results; as evaluations in the past have required students to show an understanding of language, concepts about print, and alphabetic knowledge. For example, students have been previously asked to depict an understanding of left to right progression, as well as identifying and naming particular letters of the alphabet.

Researcher Stance

Since this research will be completed in my own classroom, it is necessary that I provide background information on myself. I have been a pre-kindergarten teacher at Children’s Center D since last February. I have had this particular group of students since September, and will continue to be their teacher until June, when they will “graduate” from the program. Some of them may choose to stay in my classroom throughout the summer prior to Kindergarten, as well.

I hold dual certification in Unified Childhood and Special Education, and am currently working towards my Master’s Degree in Literacy. I have completed various observations and field experiences throughout my higher education; in urban, suburban,
and rural districts. During this time, I have established experiences with students of all ages; ranging from six to twelve years old.

Methods

For this research question, I observed the whole class, while paying particular attention to seven chosen students, on a daily basis. I recorded my observational notes each day during our nap period and at the completion of my shift, as the events and discussions were still fresh in my mind. I also met with each of the students individually in order to ask them particular questions in a quiet, exclusive setting.

As the researcher, I was primarily an active participant in the study. Since I am the classroom teacher and researcher, I took observational notes at the completion of the day. I observed the extent to which these student’s participated in whole-group, small-group, and individual lessons and assessments. I looked to see if they attempted to participate in activities and take initiative, how they responded to particular questions or prompts, and the outcome of a given assignment, such as writing a letter of the alphabet.

In addition, I took the informal observations that I have, as well as the assessment and evaluation data from the classroom, in order to better understand the child as a literacy learner. This data assisted me in finding where these students might be struggling, and what types of strategies I can use to assist this learning.

Data Collection

For my research, I conducted interviews and informal observations with seven pre-kindergarten students at Children’s Center D in a suburban town on the outskirts of Rochester, New York.
In order to collect data on each student and their understanding of print and language, I informally observed the students in different types of classroom situations, such as whole-group and individually. I compiled notes and reflected upon this data at the completion of each day and analyzed the observations for consistencies across time and situations among the students. This provided me with a clearer picture into the students that I am unable to recognize throughout the day as I am teaching.

Children’s Center D also conducts its own evaluations twice a year; both in October and February. These evaluations are done individually in which the classroom teacher assesses each student’s letter knowledge, number sense and identification skills, and days of the week. In order to have a more frequent and consistent source of data, Children’s Center D completes assessment portfolios. Each month the classroom teacher must choose one piece of artwork that the student has done and explain why it was a significant accomplishment to add to the child’s portfolio. In addition to the artwork, there is an assessment sheet which lists approximately ten to twelve indicators (or tasks in which the child should be able to complete in that month, at that age). The teacher must observe or assess the student on each of these indicators during the month and then create personal goals for each student based on the results. For the purposes of this study, I focused on the literacy-based indicators from the past assessments and analyze the areas in which these students are “falling behind.”

**Findings and Discussion**

**Description of Analysis**

Upon analysis of the child interviews and various pieces of assessment data, it is apparent that there are a few overarching themes. This information allowed me to find
consistencies across the data and make conclusions about these children’s alphabetic knowledge and phonological awareness based on the information I had received.

The seven students were placed into groups based on ability levels, according to the data that was collected. Three students were placed into the higher level group, two in the middle level, and two in the lower level. The results of the letter knowledge tests were compiled into a table to indicate the variations of knowledge between the students. This information was placed into three different tables. One table indicated the number of students that recognized each letter in October, when the original assessment was given. The next table indicated this same information as of February, given the same assessment. The last table focused specifically on the students used for this study. It indicates how many letters the student recognized in October and February, and how much of a change was noted between these assessment dates. In addition, student interviews were coded and analyzed in order to find overarching themes or information within the student responses (See appendices).

**Attentiveness**

When reflecting on the observations of the students, I was able to find consistent information that allowed me to better understand each child’s language development. One of the themes that stood out from the observations was student attention, particularly during structured periods of the school day. The major periods of the day that were analyzed were Circle Time, which is the most structured time of day with the highest amount of direct instruction by the teacher, and handwriting, which focuses on the “letter of the week” in small-groups.
According to the observations, it is apparent that the student’s attention level correlates with their emergent literacy knowledge. I noticed that the students in the highest level group were consistently attentive during Circle Time, by raising their hands to participate and answer questions as well as physically sitting closer to the teacher. The students in the middle group appeared mostly attentive, and it was simple to redirect their attention when there was a distraction. These students sat in close proximity to the teacher, but tended to move their placement and be more “fidgety” after a certain length of time. These students also participated in “Letter of the Week” activities, such as finding words that begin with that letter, but were less likely to take a risk on a word they were unsure of. These students tended to seek more assistance from a teacher, by asking for hints more often than their higher level peers. When analyzing the lower level students, it was found that they are much more easily distracted by peers and other situations than the other two groups. These students tended to whisper to their peers more often during Circle Time and find objects to distract them, such as snags in the carpet or torn pieces of paper on the floor. The teacher and assistant teacher were continuously reminding them to redirect their attention and asking for their participation. The lower level students did not offer to participate as often or as consistently as their peers in the other levels.

It is important to note that one of the students in the lower level group missed the first half (twenty minutes) of Circle Time each day. Andrew arrived at school around 8:45 A.M. each day that he attended and a typical school day began at the same time. Since he still needed to eat breakfast, he sat in a spot in which he could only hear what was being discussed, but could not see the letters of discussion or participate in the
activities. This made it more difficult for him to participate in group activities and actively participate in his emergent literacy learning.

**Family and Adult Connections**

Through the analysis of the student interviews, it is apparent that students in this critical period of literacy highly regard their parents as vital components of their learning. It was immediately evident that students at this age need strong parental influences. For example, when asked about her least favorite part of school, Ava responded that “she will miss her dad.” In addition, two of the seven students who were interviewed stated that their parents were good readers; mostly because they read to the student each night, according to the interviews. The other students responded that their teacher was a good reader. However, none of the students were able to provide an explanation as to why the person was a strong reader. Tyler, one of the lower level students, stated that Dr. Seuss was a good reader. The class had recently completed a week-long unit on Dr. Seuss and read a wide range of his books. This student particularly enjoyed this unit and was most attentive during read-alouds of his books. Although Tyler was not able to explain why he enjoyed reading and listening to these books, the teacher noted that he continuously laughed during the read-alouds and found them humorous. He enjoyed playing with the words as Dr. Seuss did, and he found an interest in finding rhyming words as a result of this unit. During his interviews, Tyler mentioned that Dr. Seuss was a good reader because his books are also movies. His response indicated that he is able to recognize the connection between the text and the movie, and that a story can be told in both ways.

Overall, it appeared that none of the students were capable yet of explaining why a particular person was considered to be a good reader. The students that were
interviewed were unable to explain whether a person read with expression, read fluently, was attentive to syntax, or even read many books. The knowledge and understanding of what a reader must be able to do in order to read a text successfully still appears too advanced for students at this level of literacy learning.

**Use of Manipulatives, Technology, and Other Hands-On Activities**

Through teacher observations and student interviews, it became clear that emergent literacy students generally hold a high interest in manipulatives and other hands-on items to use for literacy learning. Out of the seven students who were interviewed, all stated that their favorite activities were ones which required them to move or place objects, or to “play” with letters. For example, some of the students stated that they enjoyed writing letters on the art easel after the teacher draws a picture of a word that begins with a particular letter. This game allows the students to look at a picture, guess what it is and which letter it begins with. From here, the teacher chooses a student to tell the letter to the class and then write it on the easel. Other students discussed similar games on the easel, in which students were able to erase a letter after the teacher explained an object that began with that letter.

In addition, some students explained that they enjoyed forming play-dough into various letters, or writing the letters on chalkboards. During observations the students were seen taking these activities further, by “quizzing” their peers on which letter they had made. Students also mentioned that they enjoyed using objects to create the “Letter of the Week.” For example, students rolled tires into the shape of a “C” for the word “car.” They turned toothpicks into the letter “T” and used goldfish crackers to assemble a “G.” The students enjoyed using manipulatives and concrete objects to create the letter,
instead of simply practicing it in their notebooks. Each student has a workbook with each of the letters of the alphabet. When interviewed about these workbooks, none of the students replied that they enjoyed this. Most stated that it was “boring” and that they only wrote in it because it was a requirement.

In terms of technology, three of the seven students argued that the computer was their favorite way to interact with letters, books, and other print forms. These students particularly enjoy the website, www.starfall.com, in which they are able to click on a letter of the alphabet and interact with various activities related to that letter. For example, the letter “R” was clicked during observations, and the students were able to race cars around a track. The website offers a variety of texts and other ways to interact with language in order to develop student’s emergent literacy skills. The students explained that they liked the computer, and the ability to interact with the letters in a more visual manner.

**Conclusion**

The data from this study reveals that these students, who are in the emergent literacy stage, benefit and enjoy using manipulatives, technology, and other hands-on materials to assist them in understanding the alphabetic principle and acquire phonological awareness. Based on this data, it is also evident that students at this young age require and appreciate the assistance and teaching of a more knowledgeable adult with whom they have a strong relationship with, such as a parent or teacher. Students within this stage of literacy learning should have an adult to assist them with various opportunities to utilize materials and technology to better understand the alphabet and phonological awareness skills.
Implications

Based on the observations, surveys, and analysis of various assessment pieces, there are many conclusions that can be drawn regarding these student’s understanding of emergent literacy skills; particularly letter recognition and phonological awareness. The first observation I found was that the students who were able to recognize more letters and were considered to be the “stronger” literacy students, were the ones who participated in large-group activities and discussions. They were also the students who appeared more willing and excited to practice their letter recognition skills. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of which students tend to participate more often, and look more closely to find out why. The lower achieving students may not be as willing to participate because they do not possess high attention levels, or because they are frustrated with their lack of knowledge, as compared to their peers. These students are most likely aware that their peers recognize more letters than them and see their peers as “smarter” than they are. This may cause them to shut down and be unable to fully participate. On the other hand, it is also possible that their attention levels have not yet matured enough for them to be able to participate in such activities. In addition, they may not have an interest in literacy concepts, so are therefore not as willing to participate. Overall, there can be many reasons why some students are stronger literacy learners than others. It is therefore the teacher’s responsibility to find ways to captivate all students and make literacy learning possible for all types of children in the classroom. If the teacher is able to discover children’s interests and motivations, they are more likely to be able to help students learn emergent literacy skills better.
For example, one of the students who were interviewed explained that he believes Dr. Seuss is a good reader because he likes the movies that are made from Dr. Seuss stories. This piqued my interest because I found that Tyler was able to correlate reading and writing as similar skills and this information indicated that a teacher might better reach him if a visual representation of the skill is given. Tyler enjoyed the Dr. Seuss unit in class because he found the silly words and stories captivating. Based on this interview, I found that Tyler is much more willing to participate in literacy activities if it involves a sense of “silliness” and if he can manipulate the letters and sounds. He also needs to be able to connect and apply his knowledge to real-life situations. Therefore, I have found that he enjoys participating more in activities in which letters are manipulated into objects. For example, he appears to enjoy manipulating concrete objects, such as goldfish crackers in the form of “G”, into the shape of the letter. This gives him a way to utilize his hands and form the letter in a way that makes sense to him. It is by fully understanding and listening to students that educators can find ways to pique student interest.

I also noticed that all of the higher level students are those that attend School D on a daily basis, while the lower level students attend three days a week. The students who attend School D on a daily basis receive repeated exposures to letter recognition activities and are given more opportunities with the teacher’s guidance to work on various emergent literacy skills. The students who attend school three times per week are less likely to have as many opportunities and exposures to these activities, and therefore may not master such skills as easily as their peers who receive the instruction on a daily basis. I found that Nathan, a middle level student who attends on a daily basis, made the most
progress in terms of his letter recognitions skills. In October, he was able to recognize six letters, and in February, this number rose to nineteen. Ava was the other student who performed at the middle level, in comparison to her peers in her class. She attends three times per week, and she had an improvement of ten more letters recognized over the four-month time period.

The data showed that the middle-level students made the most progress, as compared to the higher-level and lower-level peers. I believe this may be because these students were given the most beneficial lessons and the goals of the curriculum were geared directly to their level. However, the higher-level students had already mastered letter recognition skills, so the activities and lessons were most likely not providing new and challenging information to allow these students to grow. It is difficult to say why the lower-level students still did not make any progress over the four-month period. These students may have had a more difficult time grasping the information, were unable to give their full attention, or are still not yet capable of grasping the information. Therefore, it is important that teachers fully understand which students their lessons are geared towards, and adjust lessons based on student needs so that all students can make progress, regardless of which point in their development they are at. For example, I realized that the higher-level students were not appearing to make any progress, since they had already mastered letter recognition skills. I then began approaching these students in a different way; by asking that they generate words that begin with the “letter of the week” and attempt to spell some of those words based on what sounds they hear. In this way, these students are being given the opportunity to expand their knowledge and begin working on more advanced skills.
While looking at the student interviews, I noticed that almost all of the students explained that they enjoyed playing interactive online games, such as those on the website www.starfall.com. On this website, the students are able to manipulate letters and their corresponding sounds, and play games that assist the understanding of these letters. It became apparent to me that as technology changes, so does education. These students were able to state that the Internet gives them opportunities to develop emergent literacy skills that they may otherwise not be interested in. Many of the students were apprehensive and resistant to learning these skills in a traditional fashion; through workbook pages and discussions. Instead, these students were excited to play these educational games online. Teachers need to understand that technology is changing our world and the interests of our students. Therefore, it is imperative that we change and structure our lessons to incorporate their interests as often as possible. While school D expects students to complete the workbook pages each week, I understand, as their teacher, that this is simply an activity they do because they “have to.” However, the games on the computer and the other hands-on activities that supplement the workbooks are what truly interest and motivate these students. As their teacher, I take a deeper interest in what they do. The students continue to complete the workbook pages because they are an expectation of the school, but I do not expect the students to take an active interest in this. I understand that they are learning more from the manipulatives and hands-on activities, as well as the computer games, than the workbook pages and discussions that are required by the school. For that reason, I must continue to provide them with the opportunities to play these games and use various manipulatives in order to maintain their interest in emergent literacy skills.
Finally, I was able to find how significant it is to have adult-mediated discussions with children in the emergent literacy stage. Students at this young age find their parents and teachers to be vital pieces of their literacy development. This became evident when I interviewed the students, and nearly all of them stated that their parents or teachers were good readers. Students at this age require adult models to show them what effective reading and writing looks like, and how to approach it. Since these students are still so young, they still value and respect the knowledge and support of adults. Meanwhile, students at this stage of literacy need the full support of knowledgeable adults in order to effectively develop their literacy skills. Therefore, it is important that adults effectively model strong reading and writing skills for their students; particularly during these early stages. In addition, adults should have discussions with students about print and literacy on a regular basis. Young children benefit from discussions and interactions with adults regarding emergent literacy skills, as it gives them an appropriate model and a knowledgeable person to explore their world with. Teachers and parents alike should be willing to have these conversations on a regular basis with young children in the emergent literacy phase.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of my research study was to investigate different ways in which educators can create purposeful and effective activities and lessons in which young children can begin to develop essential emergent literacy skills. In order to begin this process, I first needed to identify one or two skills that were significant emergent literacy skills that students should be learning prior to entering Kindergarten. Through a great
deal of research, I found that alphabetic, or letter, knowledge as well as phonological awareness are two highly important skills at this stage of literacy development. Therefore, I conducted my own research, observations, and interviews with students on these two skills, in order to investigate different ways to teach them. Supported by students during interviews, it was found that hands-on manipulatives and the incorporation of technology are two very significant teaching tools that assist students in the development of emergent literacy skills.

As with any study, there were certain limitations. Since the data was gathered in late winter, the students continued their schooling for another four months. Therefore, the data was unable to depict student progress throughout the final portion of the school year, making it difficult to know what type of progress was made and for whom. In addition, the observations and interviews were conducted during a busy period of time; as many students were on vacation for their winter break. This made it more difficult to receive detailed information from the students and lessened the number of observations that were conducted. Another limitation was the lack of time to ask the parents questions regarding their daily routine surrounding literacy, if they have any at all. This information, if time would have allowed, would have made home to school connections much clearer and would have provided an opportunity for analysis regarding the home environment’s impact on emergent literacy skills, in addition to activities done in the classroom.

Despite these limitations, I was able to discover how important it is that adults bring literacy into a child’s life in as many and varied, ways as possible. Children must be exposed to emergent literacy skills from the start of their education years. Therefore, teachers must provide these opportunities in ways that interest the students. Based on this
research, I found that many students enjoy kinesthetic and tactile activities, as well as the incorporation of technology. It is imperative that educators utilize the child’s interests and find ways to integrate emergent literacy skills in the child’s daily activities.
### Appendix A
Changes in Letter Identification from October to February

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B
Student Interview Questions

1. What is your favorite thing about school and why?

2. What is your least favorite thing about school and why?

3. Is there anyone that you know who is a good reader? Who and what makes them a good reader?

4. What’s your favorite alphabet activity that is done in school? Why do you like it?

5. Do you like reading or being read to? Why or why not?
## Appendix C

### Concepts about Print Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>COMMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cover</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Front of book</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Print contains message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Where to start</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Which way to go</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Return sweep to left</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Word-by-word matching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.</td>
<td>First and last concept</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Bottom of picture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/9</td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Begins 'The' (Sand)</td>
<td>Begins 'I' (Stones) Begins 'I' (Moon) Begins 'Leaves' (Shoes) bottom line, then top, OR turns book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/11</td>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Line order altered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Left page before right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>12.</td>
<td>One change in word order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>13.</td>
<td>One change in letter order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/15</td>
<td>14.</td>
<td>One change in letter order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/15</td>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Meaning of a question mark</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Meaning of full stop (period)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Meaning of comma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Meaning of quotation marks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Locate: m h (Sand); t b (Stones); m l (Moon); m l (Shoes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/19</td>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Reversible words 'was', 'no'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>21.</td>
<td>One letter: two letters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>22.</td>
<td>One word: two words</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>23.</td>
<td>First and last letter of word</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Capital letter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D  
Evaluation Sheet

Child's Name  
Age _____  Date of Evaluation _____/_____/_____  
Name of Evaluator ______________________

1. Circle the letters, numbers, colors, and shapes that the child is able to recognize.

   A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O
   P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16
   17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

   YELLOW  RED  ORANGE  PINK
   GREEN  BLUE  PURPLE  GRAY
   BLACK  WHITE  BROWN

   TRIANGLE  CIRCLE  SQUARE
   DIAMOND  RECTANGLE  OVAL

2. Ask the child to recite the alphabet.
   Comments  

3. Ask the child to count from one and write down what he/she says.

4. Ask the child to recite the days of the week. Circle those he/she knows.

   MONDAY  TUESDAY  WEDNESDAY
   THURSDAY  FRIDAY  SATURDAY
   SUNDAY

   Can the child say the days of the week in order? Yes No

5. Ask the child to write his/her name below or on the back.
References


