

Research Brief

Preschool Instruction and Children's Emergent Literacy Growth

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Summary

This study involved 156 preschool students who were observed during language and early literacy activities. The activities observed were sorted into specific categories. Activities could be described based on who was managing student attention: teacher managed (teacher guiding lesson or focusing attention), teacher-child managed (meaning the attention is shared and the adult and child are interacting), or child managed (child is working independently or with peers). Observed activities could also be classified as code-focused (letter-sound correspondences, decoding, etc.) or meaning-focused (vocabulary, oral language, or comprehension-based activities). Finally, the categories of either explicit or implicit learning were used to record the differences between activities with a specific learning outcome in mind compared to those with learning outcomes that occur simply due to exposure or as a secondary benefit. For example, play falls under implicit learning, because the focus is on fun but language and emergent literacy skills are utilized during play.

Based on these categories, it was found that only teacher guided instruction improved student alphabet and letter-word recognition. However, child-managed time, including play, was associated with vocabulary growth. Also, code-focused instruction was 10 times more effective for students when lessons were taught in a small group, versus a whole class setting.

Results & Key Findings

Preschools in this study were located in a single school district near a major midwestern city. The preschool students were, on average, 4 years old. The 156 students in this study were primarily white (82%) and only 10 parents reported speaking a language other than English at home. The instruction observed was provided by 25 teachers, some who taught both a morning and afternoon class. The classrooms were observed throughout the school year. Student literacy level was assessed using the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement (using the Letter-Word Identification, and Picture Vocabulary subtests) and an alphabet task where students were asked to name all of the letters in the alphabet when shown a flashcard.

There were three main research questions for this study: a) what amount and type of literacy instruction occurs in a preschool class and how does it compare to other subject areas b) how do the literacy activities they engage in impact growth in alphabet knowledge, letter-word reading and vocabulary and c) how does students' initial skill level impact how different amount and types of instruction influence their overall growth in emergent literacy skills. The results from this study were calculated using statistical methods called hierarchical linear modeling.

Key Findings:

1. The amount of instruction time students spent on literacy varied greatly from classroom to classroom.
2. Time spent in emergent code-focused activities is associated with growth in alphabet and letter-word recognition skills.
3. Time in meaning-focused activities (e.g. book reading) is associated with growth in vocabulary skills.
4. Only teacher-managed activities were associated with alphabet and letter-word growth.
5. Child-managed experiences, including play, were also associated with vocabulary growth.
6. When code-focused instruction was given in a small group setting, it was approximately 10 times more effective compared to its classroom-level (whole-class) counterpart.
7. Incoming skills matter, and different students benefit more or less from specific lessons. Specifically, the impact or benefit of different activities varied, depending on the preschoolers' incoming vocabulary and emergent literacy levels.



Conclusion

This study examined the nature of specific preschool activities in which teachers and children engaged and the relation of these activities to preschoolers' alphabet, letter-word recognition, and vocabulary growth. The key findings can be summarized by two broad takeaways: (a) There were substantial differences in the amounts and types of language and literacy activities children experienced, and (b) these activities were related to preschoolers' language and emergent literacy skills but the exact nature of the connection is complex.

Young children with emergent literacy skills appear to benefit from most preschool activities, including those that have a literacy focus. More specifically, vocabulary and language development was connected to interactions with adults and peers. In contrast, skills more directly associated with reading text were only improved through direct adult instruction. This impact was even great when the students were taught in a small group setting. Finally, students who entered the school year with a higher level of emergent literacy skills (could recognize more letters or words) showed less growth in those areas across the year compared to their peers entering the year with lower literacy skills. Vocabulary development was improved for all students when they spent time on meaning-focused activities.

Overall, these results show that students in the same classroom do not necessarily experience the same amounts and types of instruction. In addition, beginning as early as preschool, students' vocabulary and decoding abilities influence what activities will benefit them most. These findings all demonstrate that differentiated instruction and focus on language and literacy skills is beneficial for students well before they reach kindergarten.