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Literacy Centers: A Way to Increase Reading Development

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Given the current trends in education and the passing of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (U.S. Department of Education), literacy education has become increasingly important. Many studies have been done that indicate that students who do not learn how to read in the early years of their education may experience failure during the later years (Martson, Deno, Dongil, Diment, & Rogers, 1995). The National Reading Panel's (NRP, 2000) findings suggest that becoming a good reader in elementary school is more likely to produce a more effective learner and a better reader as students move through school and into adult life. This information is important to those individuals who are working with children as they first start school and especially to those individuals who are working with children in early intervention services.

With an emphasis on *emergent literacy* as opposed to the outdated theory of *reading readiness* more teachers of students who are at risk or have diagnosed disabilities are now realizing the importance of developing literacy skills at a very early age. The skills that have been identified as ones that are critical to the development of literacy skills include expressive and receptive language development, listening comprehension of stories read aloud, alphabetic knowledge, vocabulary development, and the ability to put all these together to actually read (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2005). These early, critical skills need to be integrated in a way that will facilitate the development of literacy and language for students who are in early intervention settings. Without the development of these skills, the hard task of learning to read will be one that could be met with unsuccessful attempts thus beginning a cycle of school failure for many years to come. It has become evident that students who may be at risk and in early intervention classrooms or who may have disabilities identified in the early years, can and will be successful given opportunities to learn to read (Mirenda, 2003). The purpose of this article is to share strategies for creating and developing literacy centers to increase the reading development of young students with developmental delays.

Early Intervention and Emergent Literacy

Emergent Literacy can be defined as the time period when students develop the skills that are necessary for independent reading (Suzby, 1994). With the development of intervention programs, like Head Start, more and more early intervention experts have found involvement in these programs benefit at risk and disadvantaged children. The long-term benefits and the increase to overall academic achievement have shown that literacy skills are important to begin at a very early age (Weikle & Hadadian, 2004).

Typical developing preschoolers are often exposed to the literacy skills that are necessary and predictive of future reading ability. Some of these skills include an introduction to print concepts, alphabetic and phonological awareness, and oral language concepts (Scarborough, 2003 & Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000). Preschool and kindergarten teachers may create rich language environments to develop vocabulary and oral language skills. They may also involve their students in discussions about books and the functions of books to build an awareness of the functions and forms of print. These teachers often teach their students to identify environmental print so that sight

vocabulary has a foundation of which it can be built. Other activities, teachers of typically developing children, involve their students in are phonemic awareness activities that require rhyming, blending, segmenting, and deleting of sounds in words. Through a variety of methods and activities, most of which involve hands-on connected activities young children begin to learn to read. In the last few years, much research has been done to dispel the myth that young children with disabilities can't learn these same skills in the same manner. In a literature review that summarized the research studies done on students with disabilities and emergent literacy, Weikle and Hadadian (2004), could not find any studies that linked cognitive disabilities with an inability to learn literacy skills at a young age. Thus, it is important for teachers and parents to know that there is no research that suggests that students with disabilities cannot develop literacy skills as typical developing children do (Weikle & Hadadian, 2004). It is common for teachers of young children, such as preschool and kindergarten teachers, to use learning centers that have literacy activities which the children engage in to develop language, concepts of print, phonological awareness, and alphabetic principle.

It has been noted in the literature that students with disabilities do not receive the same kind of literacy opportunities and experiences that students without disabilities get (Goldenberg, 1996). However, more and more research is showing that literacy opportunities and experiences are exactly what students with disabilities, especially developmental disabilities need. Lanter and Watson (2008), identify the following concepts as important for young children with disabilities when developing emergent literacy skills; shared book readings, story retelling, labeling objects and pictures, and language experience activities. In addition, it is noted that reading readiness models should be avoided. Given this information, it may be useful for early childhood special educators to use the same philosophy that general preschool and kindergarten teachers follow in terms of developing literacy learning centers that involve the children in activities to develop the necessary skills for literacy development.

As mentioned earlier, interventions that may prove successful for young children with disabilities include labeling objects and pictures to develop sight words, phonological awareness activities, shared book readings and retellings, and teaching literacy in natural contexts (Lanter & Watson, 2008). An example of an activity may be to label objects and then give explicit instruction regarding these labeled objects to begin the building of a sight word vocabulary (Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003). Early childhood teachers may also consider involving their students in phonological activities. Young children with disabilities can be taught to segment and blend sounds so that they can decode in a more phonetic approach (Connors, 1992). It may be necessary to first develop sight word vocabulary and to involve students in very explicit and direct instruction of the letter-sound relationships. When books are shared in a frequent and repeated manner, it is believed to increase the oral language abilities that are important for students with disabilities to develop literacy skills. It has been noted that other appropriate school behaviors such as attention are increased and behaviors such as echolalia and outbursts may decrease (Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003). Lastly, the importance of teaching literacy skills to young children with disabilities in natural contexts is extremely important. Involving students in using picture and word-based schedules, singing songs for routines, using labeled objects in the classroom for sight word activities all adhere to that concept. Ensuring that literacy development begins during early intervention for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities is important for success in future academic activities. For young children, learning centers with different literacy activities that involve them in active and necessary skill development could be crucial to later success in the literacy area.

Literacy Centers

As previously stated, many authors agree that literacy development for children with developmental disabilities is vital. Not only that, but teachers should use the same techniques shown effective for all students, with or without disabilities. Whether teaching in an inclusive setting or not, it is guaranteed that students in your classroom will need differentiated instruction. Tobin and McInnes (2008) discuss how literacy centers can be a wonderful way to differentiate instruction. Learning centers allow for varied instruction by using different kinds of literacy materials that may be at different levels, by matching tasks and activities to student's levels, interests, and preferred modes of learning, and by allowing for small-group instruction.

According to Kamps et al. (2007), learning centers not only allow for adequate differentiated instruction but when using RTI can also help with implementing second and third tier interventions related to literacy. This in particular stands out as early childhood teachers are looking for reasons to use centers. Literacy centers can be beneficial, not only for general education students, but also for students with developmental disabilities. The students in early intervention programs often are the students that are projected to need that tertiary level of support. By targeting literacy through centers in early intervention programs, students are targeting all of the skills that are needed for the development of emergent literacy skills.

One of the most challenging aspects of implementing literacy centers in an early childhood classroom is deciding what centers to have and then to begin creating these centers. Early childhood teachers must also ensure the emergent literacy skills are covered. As previously mentioned, the following skills are crucial and need to be included in the center development: expressive and receptive language skills, listening comprehension of stories read aloud, alphabetic knowledge, vocabulary skills, and the ability to put all these together to actually start to learn to read (NICHD 2005). In addition, the National Early Literacy Panel (2009) also recommends alphabetic knowledge and phonological awareness activities, as well as labeling objects and colors, and simple written expressive activities like name and letter writing.

As early childhood teachers think about their own classrooms, they must ensure that the learning centers they are creating are literacy focused and include activities for skills that will predict future success in reading. Table 1 includes examples of literacy centers that can be developed by early childhood teachers to ensure that their students are getting the exposure that they need to key literacy skills. Using literacy centers benefits students in early childhood classrooms in ways that will ensure they future success, not only in the area of literacy but also in many other areas of learning.

Conclusion

“The road to literacy begins long before a child enters school...It begins at birth when sounds of language are first perceived and this journey continues throughout the preschool years” (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009). With the impact early intervention services can play in the development of a child and his or her literacy skills, especially those with developmental disabilities, it is important that we offer teachers strategies for the development of these emerging skills. Both the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Response to Intervention Initiative of 2009 require high standards of literacy success from all students. Knowing this, early childhood educators have to focus their

instruction on ways that allow for future success as their students move into elementary schools and beyond. Learning Centers that focus on the skills needed to develop emergent literacy can be a viable answer for this dilemma (Avalos et. al., 2007). Literacy centers allow for a balanced approach to teaching literacy, and include all areas that need to be targeted during early literacy instruction (National Institute for Literacy 2009).

Table 1:

| Center Ideas: | Targeted Skill |
|---|--|
| <p>Saying Words Aloud Center: With a mirror at the center, have a backpack filled with objects. The students pack and unpack the backpack saying the names of the objects aloud. As they say the names of the objects they can look in the mirror to see how the formation of the words and their mouths.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Expressive language · Receptive language · Listening comprehension |
| <p>Book Center: Create a book nook with all sorts of books, big and small. Big books with pointers can be included. A CD player and headphones can also be included. Other things to include; character dolls, capes, book posters or jackets to decorate the walls, puppets, etc.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Receptive language · Expressive language · Listening comprehension · Environmental print · Sight word vocabulary |
| <p>Alphabet Center: Many options exist for alphabet puzzles- from foam floor puzzles, to wooden cut out, etc. Have students say the letter before they put that specific letter in the puzzle. Letter blocks can be used with toy trucks to move down a road map. Magnetic letters can be lined up and read on the side of a file cabinet. Beanbag letters can be included to throw at a target. Sponge letters can be included to dip in paint and then stamp on paper or to dip in water and then stamp on a little chalkboard. Lacing bead letters</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Alphabetic knowledge · Expressive language · Written expression |

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| <p>can be included to string on a necklace.</p> | |
| <p>Music: Provide songs on tape or CD that require student to use language, either an alphabet song or traditional nursery songs (Eentsy weensty spider, Jack and Jill). Include a play microphone and a mirror for the child to sing along and to watch themselves. Instruments can also be included.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Vocabulary · Receptive language · Expressive language |
| <p>Stamp Writing: Provide paper and letter stamps for students to stamp their name, environmental print they've learned, names of objects in the classroom, family member names, words from books, etc.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Written expression · Alphabetic knowledge · Sight vocabulary |
| <p>Dramatic Play Center: Wrap blocks with food wrappers or toy catalog pictures. Include other things like milk cartons or cereal boxes or other objects that may be familiar to students. Set up the center as a kitchen, store, or restaurant. As students play with the items and blocks have them try to recognize the words and logos.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expressive language ▪ Receptive language ▪ Sight word vocabulary ▪ Environmental print |
| <p>Visual Literacy Center: Provide lots of picture books that students use to create and tell a story about. Include paper, crayons, markers, chalk and have students draw or create pictures for their favorite book. Students can also create their own story and illustrations about a particular topic.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expressive language ▪ Receptive language ▪ Vocabulary ▪ Alphabetic knowledge |
| <p>Book Characters Center: Make character cutouts, from books you've read, by scanning illustrations from the book and</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alphabetic Knowledge ▪ Expressive language |

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|--|---|
| <p>cutting them out. Students can make up their own stories with the characters, retell the story with the characters, find words or letters in the story the students know and have the character read them aloud.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Receptive language ■ Listening comprehension ■ Vocabulary ■ Sight Word vocabulary |
| <p>Puppet Center: Use the puppets as book characters and have students retell the story or talk about something that happened in the story. Have arts and craft materials available for students to make their own puppet who is the character in a story they read. Read a patterned book or rhyming story as the puppet character. Have students find letters or words they know in the story and read them as the puppet.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Alphabetic knowledge ■ Expressive language ■ Receptive language ■ Listening comprehension ■ Vocabulary ■ Sight Word vocabulary |
| <p>Greeting Card Center: Provide paper, envelopes, crayons, markers, and other art materials for students to create greeting cards for any occasion (thank you, birthday, holiday, congratulation, get well). Word banks can also be provided for the students to choose words for their greeting cards. Letter stamps and letter stickers can also be available for students who cannot write.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Written expression ■ Alphabetic knowledge ■ Expressive language ■ Sight word vocabulary |

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