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Rachel Moss

Georgia College & State University

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See Dick Run: Developing Literacy in Kindergarten

Rachel Moss

Faculty Sponsor: Martha Daugherty

Literacy has become an issue of great importance in our country. Many children have reached middle and high school without the ability to read fluently. Educators have therefore earnestly sought the best method of teaching literacy. Children in younger grades are now being taught beginning language arts skills. Standardized tests have been developed to measure the extent of these skills. Parents are also inquiring about the most effective means of preparing their children for school.

This study was designed to measure the phonological awareness of beginning kindergarteners as indicated by the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program-Revised (GKAP-R). GKAP-R results were correlated with a parent survey concerning the amount of reading done at home and other preschool experience. It was expected that children who attended preschool and were exposed to print at an earlier age would successfully complete more sections of the GKAP-R than children who did not attend preschool and had limited exposure to print. The study findings will assist educators in determining the level at which to begin reading instruction.

Review of the Literature

In the past, kindergarten was the place where school began. In kindergarten, children learned how to get along, how to work in groups, how to follow directions, and how to recognize numbers and letters. With the introduction of pre-kindergarten, parents and educators have begun to believe that kindergarten should encompass more. The pressure to teach basic skills earlier has increased as test

results have shown that American children lag behind children from other countries in academic achievement (Holloman, 1990).

Many school systems have implemented programs of developmental appropriateness. These programs were designed to meet the needs of all children. The readiness levels of children entering kindergarten, however, varies greatly. The spectrum ranges from those children who are reading or who know letters and/or letter sounds to those who are not yet ready for formal exposure to reading instruction (Holloman, 1990).

Success in reading has become very important. Children with lower reading abilities have a greater chance of dropping out of school because of poor grades (Carbo, 1996). Deficits in functional literacy have also caused problems for adults who have an inability to read product labels, traffic and street signs, and package directions. The necessity of literacy in the workplace has increased as we have become a more technological society (Hempenstall, 1997). Therefore, it is very important that teachers of young children begin laying a foundation upon which successful reading skills can be built.

A study conducted by Davies and Brember (1997) emphasized the importance of preschool experience on reading attainment. They completed a four-year cross-sectional study that found that children who had some nursery or playgroup experience scored higher on a reading attainment test than children who had no pre-school experience outside the home. The authors believed that children who have no outside experiences begin school at a disadvantage.

Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1995), in a follow-up study, found that children in grades one and two who had been instructed in phonemes in preschool continued to be superior in decoding words. The superiority in decoding skills had first been noticed in kindergarten. In addition, the children with phoneme instruction demonstrated better reading comprehension than children in the control group.

A study conducted by McCormick, Stoner, and Duncan (1994) confirmed results of earlier studies indicating that letter-name knowledge and phonemic-discrimination skills are the best predictors of beginning reading achievement. These skills are also prerequisites

for learning to read. McCormick et al. (1994) found that lowercase letter identification at the beginning of kindergarten and consonant identification in midyear kindergarten were significantly related to reading achievement in first grade. The children in this study entered kindergarten able to identify 87% of uppercase letters and 71% of lowercase letters. By December, the children were able to identify 71% of the initial consonant sounds. The authors pointed out that the students in this sample entered kindergarten well prepared to learn to read and did very well with beginning reading. The authors felt that students who come to school with an acquaintance with print and an idea of what it means to read will do well with school instruction.

The studies have shown that phonological awareness improves reading skills. Morrow and Tracey (1997) suggested that phonics can be taught using three different methods. These methods included explicit instruction, contextual instruction, and a combined approach. Explicit instruction was the sequential introduction of phonics skills with direct instructional strategies. Contextual instruction introduced phonetic skills in a meaningful context such as story reading. In the combined approach, the teacher planned phonics instruction in a meaningful setting, thereby incorporating elements of both explicit and contextual instruction. While the impact of the various types of instruction on children's reading achievement has yet to be determined, the authors suggested that all teachers examine and reflect upon their teaching strategies for phonics in order to select the best possible methods for their students.

Muter, Hulme, Snowling, and Taylor (1997) attempted to determine the phonological skills which are most important to learning to read. They sought to determine the role of letter-name knowledge as a predictor of early reading skills and of rhyming skills as a crucial determinant of early reading progress. Thirty-eight children who had been given literacy instruction in a variety of methods were administered four tests of phonological awareness during the period of two years in which the children were learning to read.

These researchers found that segmentation was predictive of early reading and spelling while rhyming was not. They also found that letter-name knowledge was highly predictive of reading and

spelling skills during children's first year of formal schooling. The authors suggested that reading instruction concentrate on the development of segmentation skills as well as letter-naming and phoneme-grapheme relationships.

Wagner et al. (1997) examined the relationship between phonological processing abilities and word-level reading skills in a longitudinal correlational study of 216 children from kindergarten through fourth grade. The children were individually administered a variety of tests each year. The authors found four results of interest.

First, individual differences in children's phonological awareness influenced subsequent individual differences in word-level reading. Second, individual differences in naming and vocabulary influenced subsequent individual differences in word-level reading; however, these differences disappeared as word-level reading stabilized. Third, individual differences in phonological memory did not influence subsequent individual differences in word-level reading. Finally, the variance in word-level reading due to phonological processing and control variables was considerable (Wagner et al., 1997).

In their study, Wagner et al. (1997) found an influence of individual differences in letter-name knowledge on subsequent differences in phonological processing abilities. The proportion of variance in phonological processing abilities due to letter-name knowledge was considerable. Letter-name knowledge directly affected phonological processing abilities, which in turn directly affected reading abilities. The authors hypothesized that letter-name knowledge has a great effect on phonological processing skills because the names of most letters provide information about their sound. Children who know letter names have an advantage in the further development of phonological abilities. This study indicated the importance of phonics in early reading instruction.

O'Connor, Jenkins, and Slocum (1995) proposed that the ability to blend, segment, rhyme, and manipulate the sounds in spoken language influences the child's understanding of the alphabetic principle which in turn makes learning to read a motivating activity. These abilities represent the tasks associated with phonological

awareness. The authors questioned how the level of phonological awareness demonstrated in kindergarten by children who become successful readers might best be achieved. The authors developed a study in which children would be taught blending and segmenting. They did not feel that this instruction was sufficient for developing the broad phonological skills of the early readers.

The authors found that letter naming helped kindergarteners begin decoding skills. As these letter-naming skills improved, the researchers were able to teach most children phonological manipulation tasks. The researchers found that teaching blending and segmenting skills together assisted children in developing phonemic insights about language. The authors also found that the skills of blending and segmenting were transferred to other areas of phonological awareness. The authors suggested that instruction be given in the areas of letter naming, blending, and segmenting to improve overall phonological skills (O'Connor et al., 1995).

Stachoviak (1996) found that as children began to write, their phonological awareness increased. Their letter recognition skills increased as well as their understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds. The children learned practical applications of phonemes, and this knowledge made the learning more meaningful. The author encouraged teachers to provide a wide variety of writing opportunities in their classroom. Writing both teaches and reinforces language skills. The author also recommended that teachers use action research to stay focused on their plan for the school year.

Summary

Research has indicated that children arrive in kindergarten with a wide spectrum of phonological awareness. This research has also indicated the benefits for children who attend nursery or preschool. Benefits have also been ascribed to reading in the home and to exposure to print. In order to maximize instruction time, it is important for kindergarten teachers to determine the level of literacy skills in their students. The purpose of my study is to determine if children who are read to and attend pre-kindergarten pass more

sections of the literacy baseline Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program- Revised (GKAP-R) than children who have not been read to or did not attend pre-kindergarten.

Method of Study

A study was conducted to determine if a relationship existed between the successful completion of the baseline sections of the literacy portion of the GKAP-R and attending prekindergarten. Also considered was whether or not a child had been read to over five hours weekly. The statistical comparison was done using a Chi Square statistical analysis.

Target Population

The study was conducted at a large suburban school in the Southeast. The school is located approximately 30 miles from a major metropolitan area. The school clientele was predominantly upper middle class with many children living in a country club community. The sample was a convenience sample taken from the kindergarten student body, which consisted of 153 children (61 girls and 92 boys). The population was 85% Caucasian, 13% African American, and 2% other. All of the students were five or six years of age at the time the study was conducted. The students who participated in the study were selected by four of the seven kindergarten teachers. Each teacher randomly selected five students from her classroom of 21 or 22 students. A total of 20 students were in the final sample. The information was provided to the investigator without her knowledge of the participants.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather data. The first instrument was a questionnaire given to parents when their child was enrolled in kindergarten. Two specific questions were reviewed as part of this study: how much the parents read to their child each week and whether

The four teachers then randomly selected five students from each of their classes to participate in the study. Five students from each class were chosen to approximate 15% of the total student population in kindergarten.

The teachers completed a checklist of the level of completion in each of the five sections of the baseline literacy portion of the GKAP-R for the children participating in the study. The teachers then determined from parent surveys whether the children attended pre-kindergarten and whether or not the student had been read to at least five hours a week. The minimum of five hours a week of reading aloud was selected because this amount of time would be an average of approximately one hour a day.

Data Analysis

A Chi Square statistical procedure was used to calculate the results of the study. Two Chi Square analyses were done. The first was a 3x2 grid in which the categories were "attendance at pre-kindergarten" or "no pre-kindergarten attendance" with frequencies in the "not evident," "in progress," or "accomplished" column. The second analysis was also a 3x2 grid in which the categories were "read to greater than five hours weekly" or "not read to greater than five hours weekly" with the same frequency columns as above. A Chi Square was calculated for each grid. The second independent variable for both analyses was achievement level on the GKAP-R literacy section.

Data Findings

A Chi Square of 1.46 was calculated for the "attendance at pre-kindergarten"/"not attended pre-kindergarten" grid. A Chi Square of 3.94 was calculated for the "read to greater than five hours weekly"/"not read to greater than five hours weekly" grid. Neither result exceeded the critical value of 5.991; therefore, no significance can be placed upon the Chi Square.

Discussion

The results of the study indicated that attendance at pre-kindergarten did not significantly affect whether or not a child will successfully complete the baseline literacy portion of the GKAP-R. The study further indicated that reading to a child greater than five hours a week also had no effect on successful completion of the assessment. These results contradict the results of the studies cited in the review of the literature.

Davies and Brember (1997) found that children who had attended preschool scored higher on a reading attainment test than children who had no preschool experience. My study found no difference in the successful completion of the baseline literacy portion of the GKAP-R between children who had attended pre-kindergarten and those children who had not. Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1995) also found that children instructed in phonemes in preschool continued to be superior in word decoding in the first and second grade. Senechal, Thomas, and Monker (1995) found that reading at home increased a child's vocabulary. A larger vocabulary and phoneme knowledge should assist the child in successful completion of portions of the baseline literacy GKAP-R. My study found no differences in achievement on the kindergarten assessment from reading at home or pre-kindergarten attendance.

Children who had been read to should have scored higher on the GKAP-R than children who had not been read to. My study did not find this claim to be true. My study found no difference in achievement between children read to greater than five hours a week and those who were not read to more than five hours a week.

The surprising results of the study may be the result of a number of limitations. The parent questionnaire had not been piloted, and no validity or reliability had been established. The information supplied by the parents about the amount of time they spent reading aloud to their child may not have been accurate. Inaccurate information may have skewed the results of the Chi Square.

A second uncontrolled variable was the time of day tested. Kindergarten teachers perform their assessments during learning

center time or rest time. Center time often creates a noisy and animated atmosphere. Children are easily distracted during this time. Some children become unhappy when they are pulled from a learning center such as the home or block area. Such distractions may have affected performance on the assessment. While children do not resent being aroused from rest time, this assessment was normally the last experience of the day. The children may not have been as mentally fresh as they would have been if the testing had occurred earlier in the day. The time of day at which the testing was conducted may have had a significant impact on the results.

No controls were established for the status of the child. These controls could have included attitude, health, and emotional well-being. Also not controlled was the socioeconomic status of the student. Since the study was conducted blindly, no age, sex, or retaineer status could be obtained. These unknown factors may have affected the outcome. In addition, the small sample of only twenty children may not have been a large enough to portray accurately the achievement of the entire population.

A final limitation of the study was the level of comfort the children felt with their teacher. The baseline portion of the GKAP-R is required to be administered within the first two weeks of school. This requirement does not provide ample time for the students to become fully at ease with their teachers. While the results of my classroom were not included in the study, I have noticed an increase in performance as the students have developed a level of trust with me. My students were apprehensive when I first administered the first GKAP-R. I believe that the case was similar in the other classrooms and may have had a major impact on the successful completion of the various tasks involved in the GKAP-R.

Future research should be conducted in this area to resolve the conflicting information between this study and the previous studies reviewed. A larger sample should be used to more accurately reflect the characteristics of the general population. The parent questionnaire should also be tested for reliability and validity. It would also be of interest to compare the individual categories of pre-kindergarten attendance/no pre-kindergarten attendance and read to/not read to

with each of the five sections of the baseline literacy portion of the GKAP-R. This comparison would provide data on which, if any, individual sections would be rated "accomplished" by attending pre-kindergarten or being read to. It would also be interesting to compare the sections rated "accomplished" for each student. Some predictions might then be made on which students are most likely to be rated accomplished on individual sections because of their previous experience. Whichever method is selected, further research may provide insight into the best preparation of young children for formal education.

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