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INCREASING ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS PRE-LITERACY SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL

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INCREASING ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS PRE-LITERACY SKILLS IN

PRESCHOOL

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

August 2020

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

You walk into your classroom on the first day of school and look around. You see people talking, see mouths moving, hear voices speaking but you do not know what is being said. You cannot understand the language that is being spoken, and feel lost and confused. As the day begins, you sit quietly trying to comprehend the lesson being taught. You have a hard time making friends, not knowing many English words. Not only can you not understand your peers but they can not understand you. Day by day goes by and you continue to fall behind in school. This is an occurrence that happens to many English Language (EL) students. School can be hard enough for students who only speak English. When your primary language at home is different from the primary language spoken in school, it can be difficult to navigate between learning a new language as well as learning academics in school.

Every year, the number of EL students continually increases. There was a 1.7% increase in EL students in Minnesota from the 2017-2018 school year to the 2018-2019 school year, bringing the total number of EL students up to 8.5% (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018). With new EL students every year, there has been a challenge to teach them pre-academic literacy skills. The Minnesota Department of Education has found that more EL students are identified in lower level grades; kindergarten, first and second (2018) than other grade levels.

The guiding question behind my project is: *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students*? This project is aimed to find strategies and activities for EL students to learn pre-literacy skills; letters names and letter sounds. Preschool helps provide the stepping stones that students need to be successful in kindergarten. My capstone is focused on helping EL students build those skills. Knowing more information about how I can help EL students will help me to be a better teacher in the classroom for myself and my students.

This chapter looks at my personal and professional background experiences with English Language students. I will conclude the chapter by explaining my rationale for my project.

Personal Background

Growing up in a suburban neighborhood outside of the Twin Cities brought its diversity to the schools I attended growing up, though I can not recall exactly how much diversity there was in my classes growing up. It clearly was not significant enough that it sticks out in my mind but I do know that the diversity was there. Although there was diversity, a majority of my classmates spoke English and were white. I do not remember students being pulled out of the classroom to work with other teachers to support their language development.

When I hear the word diversity, the first thought that pops into my head is race. It is easy to visually see race but diversity is far more than just the color of our skin. When I think about my diverse teaching experiences, this includes not only race but languages spoken, socioeconomic status of families, gender, as well as disabilities of students.

Diversity is something that is around us in many ways. Each of my experiences has brought about many different types of diversity in each of my classrooms.

I do not remember a lot of the diversity I encountered but I was friends with children of many different nationalities and races throughout elementary, middle and high school. Out of the friends that I had, only one of them spoke another language than English in the home. I remember going over to her house to play often. Her parents did speak English but spoke mostly Vietnamese in the home. They embraced their culture with Vietnamese food and decorations in their home, which I then got to experience while I was at their house. It was a place where I experienced food that my parents never cooked for me. It was also one of the first experiences I remember hearing another language spoken.

It was not until high school that I really saw the diversity in the schools I attended. During high school, I took an EL tutoring class. During this class, I helped students who were learning English with their homework and study for tests. In the class there were many different nationalities and languages among the students. I mostly worked with students who spoke Spanish, Russian, and Somali. Throughout my time tutoring, I saw the struggles that these students had in school. Basic skills that I had learned in elementary school, they were working on and struggling with in high school. Reading and writing were two of the hardest skills that I saw these students struggling with. I finally saw who was really in the school I attended and the languages that were all around me that I had never paid attention to before. It was such an eye opening

experience for me and I do not think I would have realized who was around me in my classes without that class.

Professional Experiences

I have had many different teaching experiences in my six years teaching. In those six years, I have worked in four different school districts where I worked four different jobs. I have taught kindergarten, special education, first grade, and preschool. Each of those experiences have brought a variety of students in my classrooms.

My first year teaching, I taught kindergarten in a suburban school. I had four EL students in my classroom. They spoke English well and did not need much EL teacher support in the classroom. Out of my EL students, three of those students came into kindergarten with low literacy skills. As the year progressed, they still had a difficult time learning letter names and sounds. As a new teacher, I was trying to navigate classroom behaviors, expectations, and curriculum. I did not find ways to better support my EL students in the classroom. Differentiation was new and it was difficult to navigate. When I looked at the progress my EL students made during kindergarten, it was very minimal.

The next year, I taught Special Education with first grade students. My caseload of students had only one EL student. This student was not identified as an EL student until he was ready for his special education re-evaluation. During his re-evaluation meeting, the team learned that both mom and dad spoke another language at home. On all of the paperwork that was filled out parents put that English was the only language spoken in the home. I learned during this process that if parents put English as their first language spoken at home, they are not tested for EL services. There are students who

may speak another language in the home but if parents choose not to put that information on paperwork for school, they can be missed as an EL student. This situation has made me wonder how many other students have not been identified as EL learners due to how parents filled out paperwork. There could be more EL students in our classrooms than we even realize.

After two years of limited experience in working with EL students, my third-year of teaching changed that experience dramatically as I switched to a new school district. I began teaching first grade in a school that had 42% of their students that spoke English as a second language. There was such a high need to support EL learners, that each grade level Kindergarten through fifth grade has their own EL teacher. Half of my class spoke a language other than English at home. When looking at my classroom data, many of my EL students were reading at a kindergarten level coming into first grade. They were still working on letter names and sounds in first grade, and are unable to blend sounds together to read words. I spent guided reading time working on basic literacy skills with many of my EL students, working to build their literacy skills while other students in the class were reading at or above grade level. There were EL students who made progress during the school year while others made little progress looking at their Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and sight word scores. I felt like I was finally starting to make progress while working with EL students.

I moved again to a new school district and a new teaching position. I finally had the opportunity to stay for more than a year in a district and build my teaching skills at

one grade level. I am in my third-year teaching preschool where EL students in my classes have ranged from 20-40%.

My students have an EL teacher that comes once a week to work on skills in the classroom. Many of the skills that are worked on include pre-academic literacy skills; letter names and sounds. The group also talks about vocabulary that is related to our weekly theme. During the week, I also include vocabulary for my class to help build language for all students. I also work in a small group weekly with this group, differentiating instruction to best meet the needs that the students have.

Most, not all, of my EL students have very limited literacy skills. They love to read and look at books but when it comes to letter names and sounds, their knowledge is limited. I work on these skills daily in the classroom but they still make limited progress from the beginning to the end of the year. When I look at my end of the year data, my EL students have been among my lowest when looking at literacy data with the smallest amount of gains.

Throughout my six years teaching, I have had a variety of experience working with EL students. I have had years with only a few EL students and other years with almost half of my class are EL students.

Rationale

When a student starts kindergarten, they are expected to have academic skills on the first day of school. Without these skills, they are already seen as behind and parents are questioned if they have been in school before. I always asked families if their child had gone to preschool. It was good information for me as a kindergarten teacher to know

their prior experiences with school both socially and academically. There are children who can go to preschool for multiple years and still start kindergarten with limited academic knowledge while others never attend prior schooling and start kindergarten knowing many skills.

Preschool can be a place where children learn academic and social skills. It is also a place to learn expectations and routines of school. Nowadays, students are expected to start reading in kindergarten. If children do not know letter sounds, it is difficult to read. They need to know the sounds of the letters in order to blend sounds together to read a word. It is important for students to go into kindergarten with exposure to letter names and sounds to successfully have the skills to begin reading.

I want my students to leave preschool with adequate skills to provide them with success in kindergarten. Too often I feel as though I let students down when they do not learn adequate pre-literacy skills. When I look at my group of students year after year, I constantly feel as though I am not appropriately teaching the EL students in my classroom. I do my best to differentiate my instruction but I do not feel as though it is enough. I need to find a new way to teach EL students pre-literacy skills.

In my six years teaching, I have never been given a curriculum to use with my EL students. If my school had a literacy curriculum, it was not aimed at EL students. There was no differentiation given by the curriculum so I had to do it myself. I have had discussions with coworkers for my lack of progress with my EL learners. My coworkers give examples of what they are doing in their classrooms. As I hear about the different strategies being used in other rooms, I realize that I am doing very similar activities in my

classroom but am still not seeing the progress that I would like my students to make. There are no more ideas that my coworkers have that they have successfully used in their classrooms.

My goal of my capstone project is for my EL students to be meeting literacy preschool goals by the end of the school year. I want to do this by creating a curriculum that can be used in preschool classrooms to build pre-literacy skills. It will be something that all of the preschool teachers in my school can incorporate into their classrooms as they work with EL students throughout the school year.

Summary

Preschool is a place where students learn many important skills which include social and academic skills. For many, preschool is the first academic experience students have. Preschool is the stepping stones to help prepare students for success in kindergarten and beyond. Too often I have seen EL students leaving preschool without pre-literacy skills that will provide them with success in future grade levels. I would like to develop a curriculum for preschool teachers that targets pre-literacy skills for EL students to increase their letter knowledge.

In chapter one, I discussed my personal and professional experiences related to EL learners and literacy skills. I have had many different teaching experiences at four different schools. This has given me the opportunity to see what different districts are doing with their EL students. This chapter explained my rationale behind my capstone question: *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students*? Too often, students leave preschool without gaining proper pre-literacy skills.

In chapter two, I will review literature related to pre-literacy skills as well as English Language Learners to support my capstone question. In chapter three, I will explain my capstone project. Finally, chapter four will describe my reflections on the capstone journey and creating my project.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Just like no two snowflakes are alike, neither are our students. Every student learns in a different way as well as learns at a different pace. For some, learning new skills comes easily while others need more time and practice. Early literacy skills are the building blocks for students to learn to read and write. It is a skill that students are working and building on in preschool. I have noticed in the past three years of teaching preschool, that many of my English Language students need more time and practice as they work on literacy skills. Progress in literacy for EL students is slow and they do not typically make as much growth as their English speaking peers.

In chapter one, I introduced my research question: *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students*? I explained my rationale behind my research question; that I have noticed lower literacy skills in English Language students and wanted to find a way to increase their pre-literacy skills. I also included my personal and professional experiences working with English Language Learners.

In this chapter, I will provide a literature review relevant to teaching literacy skills to English Language Learners. I will be examining three categories of research that applies to my research question: *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students*? The first area looks at early literacy skills. It will look at what early literacy skills are and what skills are currently being taught in preschool. Next,

I will consider strategies and best practices for English Language students when teaching new skills and best ways to teach early literacy skills. Finally, I will look at what assessments are currently being used in a preschool setting. These assessments will include assessments used for all students as well as assessments that are specifically for English Language students.

Early Literacy Skills

Early literacy skills are the first step to developing a child's reading and writing skills. These skills provide a solid foundation needed to learn to read and write. There are many current studies that show that the preschool years are developmentally critical to learn early literacy skills (Lonigan, 2010). Early literacy skills are learned every day in the preschool classroom to provide students the necessary skills for success in reading and writing in kindergarten and beyond. The standards for kindergarten are set high and students coming in are expected to have early literacy skills. McGee and Ukrainetz (2009) found research that indicates that "early literacy instruction, including phonemic awareness instruction among other components such as reading aloud literature and encouraging children's writing, can make reading accessible at an earlier age to more children" (p. 599). It is important for preschool teachers to focus on early literacy skills.

Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) define emergent literacy as skills and knowledge that are precursors to reading and writing. In order for students to learn to read and write, there must be basic skills that they learn prior. For some students, these skills come naturally while others take more work to learn. One group of students that is part of the achievement gap are EL students. There are many students in schools whose primary

language is not English. Restrepo and Towle-Harmon (2008) suggest that having English Language students in preschools can help these students learn necessary academic skills that can help close the achievement gap that is present with EL students. Preschool provides students with a literacy experience prior to starting elementary school. It gives English Language students opportunities to be exposed to English as well as learn academic and social skills.

This section will provide an overview of the early literacy skills that children are working on in preschool. Alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing and oral language skill in preschool students are predictors of later reading and writing success (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008). These skills will then be looked at with a perspective on English Language learners. It is important to understand the early literacy skills that provide students with necessary skills to read and write as they continue on to elementary school and beyond.

Alphabet Knowledge

Growing up, the ABC's is a common song that many children hear. Many children can recite the alphabet from A to Z and verbalize all 26 letters. Not all students are able to identify the letters when you show a student a letter out of order from the song. Often when a student is shown a letter, they have to recite the ABC's to try to determine what letter it is. Sometimes this strategy works, but oftentimes the student is unable to name the letter. When shown letters out of order, it is not uncommon for a student to say A as the first letter with the following letters being guessed B, C, etc. Just

knowing the letters in a song is much different than being able to identify each letter's name when the letters are no longer in order.

Alphabet knowledge is understanding that each letter has a name and knowing what the name is. "Knowledge of the alphabet at entry into school is one of the strongest single predictors of short- and long-term literacy success" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 851). This is why learning the alphabet in preschool is so important. Students who are able to name letters will have better success with reading and writing as they continue through their schooling. There are students who begin kindergarten knowing all of the letters in the alphabet while others come in with no alphabet knowledge. Lonigan (2006) states "children who have difficulty acquiring the alphabetic principle and who continue to experience problems with decoding lose the opportunity to develop the fluency required to become a skilled reader" (p. 98). These students without alphabetic knowledge eventually lose their motivation to learn. When something is difficult, you can only persist for so long before your drive to continue starts to diminish. Every day, students are losing their drive to learn in the classroom as tasks become difficult. This is why early literacy skills in preschool are so important. If students are having difficulty in these skills, early intervention can help students develop skills needed to successfully read and write.

When it comes to English Language students having print knowledge, Restrepo and Towle-Harmon (2008) shares that print knowledge has been associated with reading ability in English for EL students. This means that it is important that EL student's have alphabet knowledge. When students come into preschool, their letter name knowledge is

assessed. English Language students often, not always, come into preschool with low alphabet knowledge. Oftentimes when asking a student the name of a letter, there is a blank stare and no response. Other times, students respond with a number instead of a letter name. English Language students are working hard to not only build their vocabulary in a new language but they are also trying to learn academic skills in a new language as well. Often, EL students' letter knowledge is slow to learn with little progress throughout the year.

In preschool, teachers are constantly teaching and assessing a student's letter knowledge throughout the school year. Teachers are creating interventions for students who are lacking alphabet knowledge to hopefully build letter knowledge in EL students by the end of the school year.

Phonological Awareness

Although there are four domains that are considered when talking about early literacy skills, phonological awareness is one of the most important. "Phonological awareness is the understanding that oral language can be broken up into individual words, words into syllables,and syllables into individual sounds, or phonemes" (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p.10). It is the understanding that each letter has a sound and words are made up of sounds. Wackerle-Hollman et al. (2015) suggests that in order to have success in reading later on, there is an important link with phonological awareness. If a student does not know the sounds that each letter makes, they are unable to blend sounds together to read words. It would also make writing difficult without knowing the sounds that letters make.

Phonological awareness is taught in preschool every day with a big focus on learning the sounds that each letter makes. Wackerle-Hollman et al. (2015) found that preschool students who are able to identify individual phonemes have had more success in reading and comprehension by second grade. Phonological awareness is a skill that is learned gradually. It takes time and repetition for students to learn each letter sound.

Many times, EL students have a difficult time with phonological awareness skills. Han et al. (2013) states that EL students are at a higher risk of developing problems with reading. This is due to the development and lack of proficiency of English language skills. Students who come into preschool speaking more than one language are trying to navigate not only their primary language but the English language as well. The sounds and letters in a students primary language as well as English are not the same with some sounds not existing in a students primary language. "If a letter or sound does not exist in the child's native language, explicit instruction and repetition may be required" (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p. 12). Repetition is important as EL students learn new skills.

Preschool teachers are working hard to provide EL students with the exposure to phonemic awareness and develop their skills. "Children who are ELLs and who live in poverty or with limited literacy experiences often do not develop phonemic awareness in preschools. With adequate preschool instruction and exposure to literate environments, however, ELLs can readily learn phonemic awareness skill" (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p. 11). It is important that EL students are exposed early to literacy experiences.

Writing

Writing is a skill that all students are able to create no matter what their primary language may be. When a child draws a picture and scribbles lines for words, they are demonstrating their emergent writing. "Emergent writing is considered a child's first experience with writing" (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p. 11). As a child begins to scribble, they are demonstrating their knowledge that print has meaning. Emergent writing begins with a child drawing scribbles and lines to eventually writing letters and numbers. Eventually, students will be able to use letter forms to represent words. In preschool, there is a wide range of writing abilities. There are students who are still scribbling lines to represent words, others are writing letters on paper, while there are others who are already writing words.

Writing is often a strength for EL students. Restrepo and Towle-Harmon (2008) state that if preschool students are bilingual their emergent writing skills are as proficient in both languages as their peers who only speak one language. Writing is an early literacy skill that does not always involve speaking. This shows that you can learn more than one language and still be successful in writing. English Language students can write or draw their thoughts and ideas using lines, scribbles or letters. When children have multiple experiences with writing in their early years, they have success later in their reading and writing skills (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008). Providing EL students with many different writing experiences early will help build their literacy skills as they get older.

Oral Language

In order for anyone to understand what your needs and wants are, you need to be able to verbalize them. "Oral language is central to both the teaching and learning of

many early literacy skills, including concepts of print, phonological and phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, alphabet knowledge and writing" (WIDA, 2014, p. 20). In order to build on early literacy skills, students must also build on their oral language skills. "Oral language provides the building blocks for literacy," (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p. 11). In preschool, students are working on oral language skills every day. All students are introduced to new vocabulary on a daily basis. This occurs through daily interactions between staff and students as well as during structured learning times. Raynolds et al. (2019) state that even though students may have phonological skills, they often have difficulty transitioning from using their skills from learning to read to reading to learn. Although students may have the necessary skills to decode words, the students also need to understand what those words mean. "Building vocabulary and background knowledge is so important throughout early childhood," (Raynolds et al., 2019, para. 22). Without vocabulary and background knowledge, it can make literacy difficult for students to learn.

While phonological awareness is one of the most important early literacy skills, it is not the most important for EL students. "One of the most critical emergent literacy skills for ELLs to develop is oral language in the native and second languages," (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, p. 11). English Language students are working on developing their oral language skills not only in their native language but also in English. In order to develop oral language skills, students must talk. Often students with lower English skills speak less in class. "An ELL child who has been unsuccessful in communicating with peers and teachers may lapse into a silent or nonverbal period"

(Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008, 12-13). When these students are not talking, they are not being provided with opportunities to continue developing their oral language skills in English. Oral language development in both a student's native and second language is one of the most important literacy skills an English Language student can learn (Restrepo & Towle-Harmon, 2008). One way to help increase reading comprehension skills is to increase a students oral language vocabulary.

In preschool, one of the critical times of the day that students are working on oral language skills is during free choice time. "Teachers intentionally design experiences so that children have opportunities to practice academic vocabulary and language forms" (Raynolds et al., 2019, para. 19). Teachers are able to build learning experiences for students through play through intentional planning. Free choice is the time during the day that students are able to talk with their peers. "Play is a perfect vehicle for incorporating both vocabulary and content knowledge into every learning experience" (Raynolds et al., 2019, para. 21). Free choice gives English Language students a time to talk without having all of their peers focused and listening on them. It allows EL students to interact with adults and peers whose English language skills are higher and more proficient. Interacting with others that are proficient in English, helps EL students continue to develop their own English skills.

English Language Strategies

Every student learns differently which is why differentiation is important in the classroom. In order to provide students with success, it is important to find out how they learn best and create activities and lessons to best support their learning style. Bernhard et

al. (2006) states that "placing young ELL students in minimally demanding environments results in fewer opportunities to develop initial literacy skills" (p. 2381). It is important that EL students are still challenged, even though they are in an environment where their first language is not spoken. Setting high expectations for all students will help process high outcomes. When expectations are set low, outcomes will be low. These students are trying to navigate through school not only learning curriculum but also learning a new language. Bernhard (2006) states that English Language students are often found to have lower achievement in school than their peers who speak English. The goal is to increase student achievement with English Language students. This section will look at different learning strategies that can help support English Language Learners. These strategies include but are not limited to; wait time, scaffolding, and vocabulary usage.

Wait Time

Have you ever experienced silence after a question? A teacher asks the class a question and sits back and waits. You can almost hear the crickets chirping and feel the awkwardness while no one responds. "Pauses provide the framework for the children's participation and may even contribute to improving the quality of their answers," (Maroni, 2009, p. 2081). Maroni (2009) also explains that wait time allows for a teacher to control a student's participation both verbally and nonverbally. He also states that teachers can then use wait time to choose who they want to speak and when. As awkward as wait time may feel for a teacher and the students, that time is important for all individuals in the classroom.

Wait time is not just for the benefit of the students but also is beneficial for teachers. Ingram and Elliott (2014) suggest that wait time provides teachers an opportunity to think. Wait time allows for the teachers to build on what one student has said, extending the learning for the class. With an extended wait time, it is found that the expectations that teachers have has changed. Students just needed more time to answer questions, not that they are incapable (Ingram & Elliott, 2014). When teachers allow wait time, they are able to think about the question that they asked. They can help guide the conversation without quickly jumping from one student to another.

English Language students are processing language as they receive it. They are trying to comprehend what is being asked to them as well as trying to process how to answer. Without wait time, EL students are not always given enough of an opportunity to process how to answer a question. By the time they are able to come up with an answer to a teacher's question, the question has already been answered and the teacher has moved on leaving the thoughts and ideas of other students behind. It is easy as a teacher to call on the first student who raises their hand. The students who raise their hands first are not always the only ones with answers but are able to process information more quickly. If you call on those who know the answer right away, discussions can move forward quickly. Moving quickly through questions does not always allow for a deeper conversation though.

Wait time allows for all students to process their thoughts as well as allow for deeper conversations in the classroom. It allows for English Language students to answer questions and build their vocabulary and oral language. "Students need time to identify

and put into practice the critical thinking tools they are being asked to hone in class before composing thoughtful and coherent verbal contributions," (University Center for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d., para. 5). The use of wait time allows students to gather their thoughts and share them with the class.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a tool that can help benefit all students in the classroom, especially EL students. "Scaffolding is the intentional, strategic support that teachers provide that allows children to complete a task they could not accomplish independently" (McGee & Ukrainetz, 2009, p. 600). In order to successfully scaffold for students, teachers need to know what a student can do independently and what is too difficult. Teachers then provide just enough help to provide students to correctly respond to a task or question. "Scaffolds are comments or instructions in which teachers provide more guidance for answering the question correctly" (McGee & Ukrainetz, 2009, p. 600). Scaffolds are not intended to tell students the correct answer without support. They are used to help bridge the knowledge that a student already has and build on that to learn more.

In preschool, teachers are scaffolding all day long. Teachers use scaffolding to help "boost a student's self-esteem and to maximize student's opportunities to assume ownership and responsibility for their own learning" (Benson, 1997, p. 126). Teachers are helping students learn new vocabulary, social skills, literacy and math. Teachers are providing support to students to help them learn new skills and concepts in the classroom. The hope is that eventually they will be able to independently demonstrate skills they did not previously have.

For English Language students, many concepts are new. This means that scaffolding is important to help build on their current skills. Benson (1997) states that "scaffolding is actually like a bridge used to build upon what students already know to arrive at something they do not know" (p. 126). Teachers are helping build the bridge to connect old and new knowledge that each student has. The level of scaffolding can range from minimal to intense, depending on each student's needs. "A great deal of scaffolding will be needed at the beginning of teaching a new concept" (Benson, 1997, p. 127). When a concept is new, more scaffolding will be needed. Once there is knowledge about a topic, fewer scaffolds are needed. The goal is for teachers to eventually have provided enough scaffolding that students can independently complete tasks that were once difficult. Teachers need to make sure they do not move through information too quickly or "students will not have crossed over the bridge to the new idea" (Benson, 1997, p. 127). Scaffolding helps provide students with just enough information to provide them with knowledge to learn and build on new skills.

Vocabulary

Every day, students are being exposed to new words. They are continually building their vocabulary. "Vocabulary has been documented as a predictor of later reading development within and across languages," (Restrepo & Howle-Harmon, 2008, p. 12). When a student is exposed to a language-rich environment, they will have more oral language skills than those that come from limited oral language exposure. Grabmeier (2019) states that when a child is read to even if it is only one book a day, that child will hear around 290,000 more words by the time they turn five than children who are not

read to. When children are read to, they are being exposed to vocabulary that may not be used in everyday conversation.

Reading to a child is so important and builds their growing vocabulary. The "million word gap could be one key in explaining differences in vocabulary and reading development" (Grabmeier, 2019, para. 2). Grabmeier (2019) explains that when parents read at least five books a day to their children they will have heard 1.4 million more words by the time they enter kindergarten than children who were not read to. Preschool provides an opportunity to children who are not read to an opportunity to be exposed to new vocabulary and help to close the million word gap.

Preschool is an opportunity for English Language students to have a rich vocabulary experience prior to starting elementary school. It allows students to build on their current vocabulary skills and build new vocabulary. Preschool teachers are able to directly as well as indirectly teach vocabulary skills to EL students. "Explicit vocabulary instruction is done primarily through thematic units that build the selected or target vocabulary" (Restrepo & Howle-Harmon, 2008, p. 12). When there is a thematic unit, it allows for similar vocabulary across different areas of study throughout the day; math, reading, and writing.

"Again?" This phrase is often yelled out when the same book is brought out day after day for the whole week. There is a sound of disappointment in the students' tones and they are told that yes, we would be reading the same book again. One way that explicit vocabulary is taught is through repeated read alouds. Repeated read-alouds are when the same book is read for multiple days in a row. There are so many literacy rich

books that even as a teacher, it is often difficult to continue reading the same book day after day but "knowing a book well increases children's confidence and engagement," (Children's Literacy Initiative, n.d., para. 3). "Children learn through repetition," (Children's Literacy Initiative, n.d., para. 3). Children's Literacy Initiative (n.d.) found a language acquisition study that states that:

> children pick up new vocabulary quicker from repeated readings of the same book than when they encounter the same words in different new texts. This is especially helpful for English Language Learners. Multiple readings of the same book support them as they learn new words, phrases and sentence structures (n.p.).

Repeated read alouds allow for students to grasp a deeper understanding of the book being read. It also provides students the opportunity to ask and answer questions about the topic or book which builds a students vocabulary as well as their oral language. When a student hears a book over and over they are able to build their confidence in the knowledge that is being taught. Every day that the book is read, new words can be discussed and learned. Repeated read-alouds helps English Language students learn new vocabulary and concepts over an extended period of time. It builds their confidence to respond to conversations about a book being read.

Assessment

The start of a new school year is a time of excitement and nerves for both the students, families, and teachers. Students start preschool with a wide variety of skills. There are a handful of students who come in with a large vocabulary and high literacy skills, others come in with no letter knowledge and some start school with limited

English skills. In order to understand the knowledge that each student has, teachers must assess each student. Assessments provide teachers with information to guide their teaching. A teacher can be doing everything right and working with their students every day but in order to know if they are making progress, it is important to assess where they are at multiple times throughout the year. "Assessment is the process of gathering information in order to make evaluative decisions" (Appl, 2000, p. 219). Assessment allows you to find out what a student knows and then make a plan on what to teach next. Appl (2000) states that "Assessment data should not be collected unless it will be used" (p. 224). I think that this is important to remember. It does not matter how much and what you assess unless you actually use the data you collected.

There can be difficulty in assessing and accurately collecting information with English Language students. When students come into school with limited English skills, assessing them is not always easy. They may have skills in their primary language but not in English. Also, they may not be able to understand what is being asked of them. "The accuracy of assessment results is one of the key issues when determining the value of any particular test" (Lonigan et al., 2011, para. 12). Without accurate information on what a student does and does not know, teachers are not able to effectively teach.

There are many ways that assessments can be completed. Assessment can be done though a program called Teaching Strategies GOLD®, which is an ongoing assessment throughout the school year, as well as through World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA). Assessments can also be informal observations of students in the

classroom. There are many assessments available for schools and programs to choose from to best support their students and teachers.

This section will look at three different assessments that can be used in a preschool setting. The first part will look at assessments that can be used for all preschool students which include informal assessment as well as an assessment called GOLD®. This section will end with looking at the assessment WIDA which is used for English Language learners.

Informal Assessments

A person can learn a lot about the world just by watching. The same holds true in the classroom. Teachers are using informal assessments and observations all day in the classroom. Lonigan et al. (2011) suggest that "informal assessment of children's skills can be useful for teachers as they teach new skills because they can be used to scaffold instructional activities with a child" (para. 13). When a teacher sees skills that a student has throughout the day, it can guide the teaching and learning of a student. It allows teachers to gather data without needing to do formal assessments to see what a student knows.

In preschool, children are learning through daily interactions with peers as well as through play. You can learn a lot just by watching a child play. They may count objects they are playing with, identify letters in books or colors of toys. This is where informal assessments can be useful for teachers. Teachers are able to collect data on individual students. Although informal assessments are not typically standardized, they can provide teachers with important information on a student's skills. "Informal assessments are

relatively easy to create and use and can serve as broad screening measures to identify children in need of more rigorous assessments" (Lonigan et al., 2011, para. 18). Informal assessments can include rating scales, checklists, or students work. They help provide a teacher with quick information on a student's abilities and skills to guide teaching.

Although informal observations can be beneficial for teachers they also have disadvantages. Informal observations "reflect a teacher's judgment based on casual observation of the child" (Lonigan et al., 2011, para. 13). With observations being done informally, there is not always data to compare and see growth. It can be difficult for teachers to see if students are making progress on specific skills.

When working with EL students, informal assessments can be very beneficial. English Language students who are not confident in their language skills tend to be more quiet in the classroom. When students choose not to talk, it is difficult to assess and see what skills the students have. Students always feel like they need to be right and do not want to make mistakes. "I don't know" is often a phrase teachers hear when a student worries they may be incorrect, even if they may actually know the answer. Informal assessments are a great way to see what a student knows without the pressure of a formal assessment.

Teaching Strategies GOLD®

Learning is ongoing. It is not something that happens in one day. Should our learning be judged on an assessment that is completed on one day? Teaching Strategies GOLD® is an "authentic, ongoing, observation-based assessment system" (Teaching Strategies, n.d., para. 1). This assessment is available to use from birth through grade

three and has 38 different research-based objectives. GOLD® is an assessment that can

be used for all students. "It is intended for use with typically developing children,

children with disabilities, children who demonstrate competencies beyond typical

developmental expectations, and dual language learners" (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 52).

Teachers should use GOLD® daily in the classroom.

  As the teacher observes the students, they are able to take pictures, videos or write

notes on individual students. They can then add this documentation into the GOLD®

online system. Based on a teacher's observations, they then place them on a color band

based on where their skills are at. Each color band represents a different age or grade

level. At the end of the trimester the data is looked at overall to see where the students

skills are at. There is no 1:1 testing being completed on one particular day. "Capturing a

child's emerging abilities over time and their performance as they engage in the active

process of learning, provides insights that may not be obtained in one assessment setting,

as is typically the case with direct assessment measures" (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 50).

GOLD® provides teachers with the ability to obtain data over multiple days and settings.

  GOLD® also looks at a student's home language. Martinez (2019) states that

"making assumptions about children and their families' language needs can have

profound effects" (para. 6). In order to avoid making assumptions about languages

spoken in a families home, Teaching Strategies GOLD® recommends teachers to

complete a Home Language Survey. "The Home Language Survey helps teachers learn

about the languages each child is exposed to and uses at home and at school" (Martinez,

2019, para. 6). Having knowledge about a students home language can impact a teacher's

planning and teaching. A student may come into school having some English language knowledge from being around others who speak English but still have a primary language other than English. Completing the home language survey helps teachers avoid assumptions.

Lambert et al. (2014) completed a study looking at the use of GOLD® in the classroom. During their research, they found that "English language learners (ELLs) were rated lower at the beginning of the year and showed some faster rates of growth than their native English-speaking peers" (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 27). The thought behind why English Language students have faster growth than their peers is that these children are coming into school with lower skills in English than their peers. As EL students are exposed to more English and gain skills, their academic and language skills improve. As the year progresses, teachers also get to know their students better and are able to more accurately rate each student more accurately in each of the assessments areas.

Teaching Strategies GOLD® has two objectives specifically used for EL students. Teachers would complete these objectives if a student scores higher than a two on their Home Language Survey. If a student scores less than two, English is considered a student's primary language. The objectives for only EL students assess if a student is listening and understanding English as well as speaking English. A student may be able to speak English but when asked a question or in daily conversations, their English skills may be lower. It is important to understand that a student can not only understand English but can speak it as well.

The downside to using Teaching Strategies GOLD® the classroom is that it is an observation based assessment. "Some authorities question if teachers can objectively and reliably assess children particularly when informal assessment measures rather than standardized instruments are used" (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 50). There is no one right answer so a teacher could rate one student differently than another, even with similar observations and documentation. It can be difficult to accurately assess students without a formal observation. It is the teacher's opinion and rating a student can be bias. It can also be proven difficult to assess all of the areas in GOLD® informally as not all of the areas are always seen by each student in the classroom.

World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA)

Every day children learn language from listening and responding to those around them. "All young children learn language through the context of relationships with their primary caregivers during daily routines" (WIDA, 2014, p. 8). In the classroom, a tool that is used to help determine the level of English understood is the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA). WIDA is a resource that is used to assess English Language learners as well as provide resources to support these students. Just like states have their own set of standards that must be taught in the classroom, WIDA also has standards for pre-k through grade twelve. WIDA has standards that are focused on English Language Proficiency. "WIDA's vision of language proficiency encompasses both social and academic contexts tied to schooling, particularly to standards, curriculum, and instruction" (WIDA, 2007, p. i). WIDA allows teachers to see where EL students English skills are both socially and in academic settings. These skills can be very

different between both settings with one area being stronger than the others for some EL students.

For preschool students, there are six English Language Proficiency standards that address the four language domains; listening, speaking, reading and writing. These standards "outline the progression of language development implied in the acquisition of English as an additional language" (WIDA, 2007, p. ii). The progression is from entering, meaning that the child is new to speaking English, and moves to bridging, meaning they have attained proficiency.

WIDA has standards that are specific to Early English Language Development (E-ELD). These standards include both receptive and expressive language domains. "These language domains, with their focus on oral language development, encompass the listening and speaking and overall meaning-making skills" (WIDA, 2014, p. 20). The E-ELD standards were "developed to help support the unique language needs of children ages 2.5-5.5 years who are in the process of learning more than one language prior to kindergarten entry" (WIDA, 2014, p. 1). The E-ELD standards are used to help students progress to the next level with their English Language skills. "Language is fluid and often varies based on the context for language use" (WIDA, 2014, p. 14). A student may be "developing" in their English with social interactions with peers in the classroom but still be at an "entering" level when using language with academics. Students' language should be observed on multiple occasions over a period of time and in different settings.

The WIDA standards help provide teachers with the knowledge of where a student is performing in regards to their language development. The standards provide a

"critical tool for educators of ELLs for curriculum development, instruction and assessment" (WIDA, 2007, p. i). With students beginning preschool, their level of English is varying. Knowing where a student is at in their reading, writing, speaking, and listening can help provide a framework to teach academic skills in the classroom. Using WIDA will provide a teacher with a student's strengths and weaknesses in their language proficiency and effectively plan for classroom instruction.

Summary

Early literacy skills are an important concept that all students should have as they begin kindergarten. For some students, learning comes easily while for others it takes a lot of practice, patience, and repetition. A key time in a child's life to learn these skills is in preschool. Preschool provides students the opportunity to learn and practice using early literacy skills. These skills are taught in a variety of settings throughout the school day. These skills provide a framework for reading and writing that students need as they begin kindergarten. For students whose primary language is not English, early literacy skills can be difficult to learn.

Chapter two discussed many key topics related to literacy skills in preschool through a literature review. This chapter looked at the four areas of early literacy skills; alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, oral language and writing. The chapter then looked at three strategies that can be used to help English Language students learn early literacy skills; wait time, scaffolding and vocabulary usage. Chapter two ends with looking at informal assessment, teaching strategies GOLD®, and WIDA assessment for English Language students.

Chapter three will provide an explanation of my project to help EL students learn early literacy skills. The chapter will also discuss the audience that is being targeted, the setting the project will be completed in as well as a timeline for completion to help answer my question *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students*?

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

I have been teaching preschool for the past three years. The preschool years are when children are beginning to learn pre-literacy skills that help prepare them for reading and writing in the future. They learn letter names and sounds. During my preschool teaching experiences, I have worked with a variety of students, which includes a large population, up to 40% in a preschool class, of English Language Learners. Working with English Language students in my classroom is what led me to my research question, *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students?* More time than not, English Language students come into preschool with limited literacy skills. They make little progress in their literacy skills throughout the school year. I want to find a way to help ELL students increase their skills to provide them with success in their future reading and writing skills.

In chapter two, I completed a literature review that looked at each of the early literacy skills, described by Restrepo & Towle-Harmon (2008), that are important to developing reading and writing. I also looked at the early literacy skills from an EL perspective. I then looked at different teaching strategies that can help students successfully learn a new skill. Finally, my literature review looked at assessments that are currently being used in preschool. The literature review was used to help guide my

curriculum development. This research helped me design and plan a curriculum that can be used with EL students to increase their literacy skills.

This chapter will begin reviewing the pre-literacy skills that are important to reading and writing. I then review Understanding By Design, the format that I will use to plan my curriculum. Next, I will provide a description of my project and the curriculum that I am developing to increase pre-literacy skills. I will then describe the setting and the participants that my curriculum will support. Finally, I will develop and share a timeline for my curriculum project.

Pre-Literacy Skills

Reading and writing are fundamental skills that are needed to do many things in life. You need them to complete school, get a job, and read instructions, just to name a few. Restrepo & Towle-Harmon (2008) explain four different early literacy skills that are essential to learning to read and write. They are; alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing and oral language. These are skills that children are beginning to learn well before beginning kindergarten.

As a preschool teacher, I am teaching students pre-literacy skills every day. We work on letters, rhyming, and alliteration. Throughout my three years teaching preschool, I have noticed a trend that a majority of EL students in my classroom come into preschool with low literacy skills and make little progress throughout the year. Restrepo and Towle-Harmon (2008) state that to help EL students learn pre-literacy skills, it is encouraged that they attend preschool. These students' parents have already done this,

these students are in preschool. Now, I need to find a way to help increase their literacy knowledge.

There currently is no curriculum to use with English Language students. Teachers have to adapt and differentiate instruction the best they can for students. Even through differentiation, EL students are not making the progress I would hope to see. I wanted to create a curriculum that can be used focusing on EL students to increase their pre-literacy skills in preschool. The curriculum uses scaffolding to help push students just enough to get to the knowledge that is being taught.

Understanding by Design

We often research something to see if we are getting the best deal or that the product is reviewed by others and works how we hope. We do not want to jump into something too quickly without taking the time to learn more about a product. This holds true for teaching as well. It is important to spend time thinking about and planning what we are going to teach in order to create and design lessons and activities that are developmentally appropriate for our students. The process that I am using to design my curriculum is called Understanding by Design. Understanding by Design is a curriculum model that works backwards. I chose this model to use because I think that the process makes the most sense as I plan my curriculum. Working backwards helps me determine what I want students to learn and then work to eventually plan lessons to teach towards the end goal.

The first step to Wiggins and McTighe (2005) backwards design is to identify the desired results. What do I want my students to know when the lessons are complete?

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) state "Only by having specified the desired results can we focus on the content, methods, and activities most likely to achieve those results" (p. 15). In o rder to plan my lesson plans and curriculum, I need to determine a goal that I want my students to reach.

The next step is to determine acceptable evidence. Once I have determined a goal, I need to decide how I want to assess my students. I will create and develop an appropriate assessment to determine if the goal has been met. You need to "think like an assessor before designing specific units or lessons" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 18). In order to know what to plan for lessons, an assessment needs to be created first.

Finally, the last step in backwards design is to plan learning experiences and instruction. Once a goal and assessment has been determined, lesson planning can begin. "Specifics of instructional planning— choices about teaching methods, sequence of lessons, and resource materials— can be successfully completed only after we identify desired results and assessments" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 19). Lessons and activities can be created to provide students with knowledge to work towards the end goal.

Understanding by Design is a method of creating lessons that best fits my curriculum planning. Working backwards will help me first determine an end goal, then create an assessment, and finally design lessons. It will help me stay focused as my curriculum is created.

Project Description

As I planned my capstone, I thought hard about what was going to be most beneficial for me as a teacher. I wanted to find a way to help increase pre-literacy skills in EL students. I decided the best way to support early literacy skills in EL students in preschool was to design a curriculum. Providing teachers with a curriculum can allow for teachers' lesson plans to use in the classroom with English Language students. As a preschool teacher, I have not been given anything specific to use with English Language students. I can differentiate instruction for them but do not have a curriculum or lessons to specifically use with this group of students. I want to create a curriculum that supports the students at their current level of literacy and builds on those skills. The lessons allow for hands on learning as well as student engagement.

The goal for the curriculum is for students' pre-literacy skills to increase, providing students with skills necessary to read and write in school. The curriculum that I will create will have a pre-assessment that can be used to see where a student's skills are currently at. It will also have a post-assessment to see where the students' skills are at the end of the trimester. The pre- and post-assessments are the same assessment to see the growth each student has made. There will be eight lessons used in a small group setting. The curriculum will focus on letter names and letter sounds.

The two main areas that my curriculum focuses on is alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. Restrepo and Towle-Harmon (2008) found that print knowledge and reading ability are associated when it comes to EL students. Wackerle-Hollman et al. (2015) believes that phonological awareness is linked to reading at an older age. My

curriculum focuses on EL students learning letter names and sounds. They are two skills that are important and are linked to reading success.

The curriculum begins with an assessment to see where the students skills are prior to beginning. The information from the assessment helps the teacher determine where and how to begin. The curriculum begins with letter exposure. The lessons and activities teach letter names in a matching format. Students will be given or shown letters and letter sounds that they must match to the same letter through different activities. The curriculum then progresses to the students identifying and verbalizing letter names and sounds. The progression of the curriculum scaffolds information to provide students with success. The students are then assessed at the end of the unit to see where their literacy skills have progressed to.

Assessment

Assessments are a tool to help drive our instruction as teachers. When an assessment is created first, teachers can build their lessons and activities around what they want students to know by the end of the lesson or unit. Assessments also allow teachers to see growth that a student has made over a period of time. In my preschool classroom I am currently using the assessment tool teaching strategies GOLD® as well as informal assessments. GOLD® is an informal assessment tool that teachers place a students skill on a colored band. The colored band represents the age level the skills are currently at. It is ongoing throughout the year and a student may be placed in different areas of the band on different days. It then looks at the overall place that the student falls to see where their skill level is at. Informal assessments are also used to gauge where

students' knowledge is at. The EL teacher is using World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) to assess each EL students language proficiency. These different assessments are great but I have not found them to give me the most accurate information on the students' knowledge. There is no formal assessment that is being completed to find out the students skills.

For my curriculum, there will be a pre- and post- assessment. The assessments will be the same. It will be very simple and basic as far as how the assessment looks. In previous years, we have used FastBridge learning to assess literacy. With Fastbridge, you time students letter name abilities and sound knowledge for a minute to see how many letters they assessed correctly. It did not tell me how many letters they actually knew though. If the first row of letters were ones a student did not know, I had to discontinue testing. I never got to assess if they knew the rest of the letters. The assessment I created will assess a student on all letter names and sound knowledge without the limit of time, to see what they truly know. Here are what the assessments will look like.

Letter Sounds Assessment

a g l r i x n k

s h q t o c m e

d j w y p v f u

z b

Letter Names Assessment

h U p D R W m H s

O q B S v J f u E

e r w a z o t I G

T M X d Q c N V l

Z L K F b Y k C A

n i y g l w P m

The only issue comes with how assessments can make a student feel. Garrow (2016) states that "assessment of young children, particularly children aged five years and younger, remains challenging and complicated in many ways" (p. 2). There is such pressure for students to do well on assessments. When they don't know an answer, I have seen students begin to shut down on the rest of the assessment. I wanted to create an assessment that was not intimidating to students.

Activities

Once an assessment has been created, teachers can begin creating lessons and activities. With preschool students, it is important that the activities are taught in an engaging way and also that it is hands on. "Play, in particular, can unite imagination and intellect in more than one way, and help children discover things at their own pace and in their own way" (Roussou, 2004, p.6). In preschool, we focus a lot on learning through play. Students do not even realize that they are continuously learning throughout the school day. You can work on colors, numbers and literacy all through play. Learning through play helps students stay engaged in their learning. The activities will be short 15 minute lessons in a small group format during small group time in class. Small group time is when all students are in groups completing different teacher created activities. It is when learning can be differentiated for students in a more school like format. The activities will begin with matching, move to identifying with the hopes to get to naming. The activities will focus on letter names and letter sounds.

The activities that are created for my curriculum are hands on and game formatted activities. The activities can be changed throughout the unit as the students skills

progress. An example of what this looks like is; each student holds a fly swatter. In front of each student are random uppercase letters. At the beginning of the trimester, the teacher will show a letter and say its name. The students must then find the letter in front of them and swat it, repeating the name. As the trimester progresses and students learn the letters, the teacher may no longer need to hold up the letter for the students to see. The teacher can call out a letter and the students must find it independently. The teacher is scaffolding the information to provide students with "intentional, strategic support" (McGee & Ukrainetz, 2009, p. 600). With just enough scaffolding, the students should be able to find the letters with the support provided by the teacher.

Each activity is created so that it can be differentiated based on the group of students in your classroom. The activities can be adapted as the trimester and students' skills progress. The activities are created to provide just the right amount of scaffolding to provide students with the confidence and success they need.

Setting

My curriculum is created for use in a smaller suburban district that I work in. There are only three elementary schools in the district with preschool taught in all three buildings. There are currently five preschool classrooms in the district with two different publicly funded programs; Voluntary PreKindergarten (VPK) and School Readiness Plus (SRP). I work at an elementary school with VPK and two preschool classrooms. It is the smallest elementary school in the district. There are 328 students enrolled. The demographics include; 41.7% White, 15% African American, 2.5% Asian, .6% American

Indian, 30.7% Hispanic or Latino and 9.5% are two or more races. Out of the population of students, 13% are English Language students.

The results on the number of students meeting proficiency on state standardized testing is currently on a downward trend for my current school. In 2017, there were 52.4% of students who were proficient in reading. This number has decreased the past two years down to 42.3% in 2019. This significant decrease shows the importance of pre literacy skills. My goal is to provide a curriculum that can be used to build literacy skills early in preschool so that more students are proficient in reading as they continue through school.

Participants

As I plan for the participants for my curriculum, it is more than just EL students. The participants of this project includes; six preschool teachers, eight preschool paras, and two Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teachers. The teachers' experiences range from first year teachers to teachers with over 15 years of experience. There are six preschool classrooms in the district that I work in with eight different classes of students. Each classroom has a maximum of 20 students. Two of the preschool classrooms are special education co-taught classes. All of the classrooms would benefit using my curriculum if they have English Language students in the class who have low pre-literacy skills. There are occasionally preschool classes without any EL students, in which case the curriculum could benefit students who need the additional pre-literacy support.

Timeline

My curriculum project has been thought about for the past two years. I completed all of my Masters coursework except for my capstone. During the time that I was not taking classes, I was continuously thinking about what I wanted to complete my capstone on. I was moving districts and taught new grades for four years in a row. It was difficult to decide on a topic when I was not settled into one grade level or school. I had finally found a job that I was able to spend more than one year there. I have now been teaching preschool for three years. As I thought about my capstone and what I wanted my question to be, I thought about what would benefit me most as a preschool teacher. I spent February 2020 narrowing down my thoughts to come up with my research question: *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students?* I spent from February through May 2020 researching and planning to answer my research question. During the months of June through August 2020, I designed and created my curriculum assessments and lessons. I will implement my curriculum during the 2020-2021 school year. Students will be assessed at the beginning of the school year to see where their skills begin. The curriculum will then be implemented during the first trimester and then reassessed at the end of the semester to see the growth that was made.

Summary

In order to meet the literacy needs of English Language students in preschool, I created a curriculum to use in the classroom. My curriculum will be easily incorporated into the classroom schedule during small groups. This chapter described my curriculum project that I created to support pre-literacy skills in English Language students.I

explained the setting that my curriculum project will be completed in as well as the

participants involved. The chapter concludes with the timeline for my curriculum project.

In chapter four, I will reflect on my capstone project. I will connect back to my

literature review. I will then talk about the implications of my curriculum. Finally I will

describe the learning that I have gained through this process.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

As I began my capstone journey, I thought long and hard about what was going to benefit me most as an Early Childhood teacher. I thought about what areas I needed to work on most in my teaching. The thing I kept coming back to over and over was teaching English Language students, specifically in literacy development. Year after year of teaching preschool, I have seen students come the first day with varying levels of academic skills. There are students who start school knowing all their letters, and others who do not even know what a letter is, let alone know the names or sounds. A common pattern I have seen is that many English Language students begin and end preschool with limited early literacy skills. Although this does not hold true for all EL students. There are some EL students who have high literacy skills in preschool or make a lot of literacy gains throughout the year. There is something that I have not been doing to target and teach this group of students. Keeping this in mind, I developed my research question; *How can preschool teachers increase pre-academic literacy skills in EL students*?

This chapter will provide a reflection of my capstone and the process that I have gone through. I will go back and revisit my literature review and how it influenced my capstone project. I will also discuss the implications of the project both in the present as well as the future. Finally, I will review my personal learning throughout the capstone process as an educator and a researcher.

Connection to Literature Review

As I created my capstone project one of the pieces that I considered in the creation was the literature review I completed. The literature review helped me to think about the early literacy skills that are important to teach in preschool. It allowed me to dig deeper into each of the different areas of; alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing and oral language. Another area that I focused on when completing my curriculum was the different teaching strategies to support English Language students; specifically wait time and scaffolding. I wanted to create my curriculum with these strategies in mind to best support students in their literacy skills.

During my literature review, I looked at the four early literacy skills. These are; alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing and oral language. The most important of these domains is phonological awareness. Lonigan (2010) shares that the preschool years are critically important when it comes to learning literacy skills. Students are working and developing their literacy skills early in their lives. Preschool provides students the opportunity to continue to learn and develop these skills. Restrepo and Towle-Harmon (2008) state that having English Language students in preschool can provide these children with literacy development skills and help close the achievement gap. One of the biggest predictors of academic literacy success in school is knowing the alphabet upon entering kindergarten (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). With this research in mind, I created eight lesson plans that help build and develop skills in alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness.

As a teacher, one of the hardest things to do is allow silence in the classroom when trying to have a discussion. We want discussions to be thoughtful with students

sharing their thoughts and opinions. When we ask a question, we expect students to answer that question. It can be difficult to stop and allow students time to process the question and create their responses but even waiting for a minute can allow for a more thoughtful discussion from all students in the classroom. Ingram and Elliott (2014) have suggested that wait time is not only for the students but for the teacher as well. When the teacher gives wait time, it allows the teacher to think about what was asked. The teacher can think about the direction they want the discussion to go and help guide the discussion in that direction.

For students, especially English Language students, wait time provides students with the opportunity to think about the question asked and allows them time to answer the question. Ingram and Elliott (2014) suggest that students are capable of answering questions, they just need more time to think about the question than they are typically given. As I created my curriculum and lesson plans I kept wait time in mind. I created lesson plans that allowed students the opportunity to think about the literacy skills present before a teacher steps in.

Scaffolding was an important piece I kept in mind while creating my curriculum. McGee and Ukrainetz (2009) describes scaffolding as an approach that teachers take to help support students in learning a skill that they would not be able to complete independently. When a teacher scaffolds, they are providing just enough support to the student so that they are able to learn new information. Benson (1997) describes scaffolding as a bridge. It helps connect the students current knowledge with a new skill that they have not learned yet. As my curriculum was created, scaffolding was kept in

mind from one lesson to the next. Each lesson builds on skills that were taught in the previous lesson. This allows students to build their literacy knowledge and continue to stretch their learning. The teacher is there supporting students throughout the lesson, helping students build their literacy skills.

Implications

The development of my capstone project was created successfully. It was created for use in my own preschool classroom with my students but can be used in other preschool classrooms as well. My capstone project has a number of limitations in the development and use. These limitations include; formal use of the curriculum and audience involved.

The first limitation I have is implementation of my curriculum. My curriculum was created and developed in the summer when my preschool class is not in session. Due to this, I have not had the opportunity to implement my curriculum with English Language preschool students. With the curriculum not having been used, I have not been able to collect feedback from teachers. I also have not seen if there are areas of the curriculum that are missing or need to be altered to better fit the goal to answer my research question. The curriculum will get to be used at the beginning of a new school year and will be adjusted once I am able to implement it.

Another limitation that I have is the intended audience for the capstone project. The project is intended to be used with English Language students. Every year, the students in your classroom change and there is no guarantee of who will be in your classroom. As a new school year begins, I do not know that there will be any EL students

in my classroom or how many there will be. There are also a small number of preschool students in my district. This means that there are not many preschool classrooms that can implement the curriculum in their classroom. Due to this, the curriculum will have a small scope of data from a small number of EL students.

The limitations of my capstone project include the lack of implementation and the intended audience varying from year to year. Without the project being implemented it is difficult to know the success of the curriculum. It also is unknown who will be in your class from year to year to know if you are able to use the curriculum to support EL students. If there are no EL students in my classroom, I will be unable to use the curriculum to see if it supports my research question.

Personal Learning

Working on my masters has been a long journey. From starting full time as a masters student to take a two year long break with only my capstone left to complete. I finally decided that it was time to finish this journey even with all the work I knew was ahead of me. I knew that completing the capstone would not only provide me with my masters but also allow me to grow as an educator. It would also allow me to dig deeper into a topic that has a lot of meaning for me.

Writing and researching is something that has never been my strongest area. It took a long time for me to get everything exactly how I wanted in my capstone project. It was a lot of trial and error and a lot of deleting. When I write, I want everything to be perfect so it often takes me a long time to write papers and complete research. I found that writing the chapters with my own voice was much easier than doing the research

pieces of my capstone. I learned a lot about my writing and researching abilities throughout this process.

Creating my capstone project was much easier than I had imagined. I was able to use my previous years teaching preschool as well as my research to help me create lesson plans and activities. My curriculum incorporates small group and individual practice. I created lessons that I wanted to be able to use in my classroom every year. I want the activities to be engaging and appealing for my students.

Summary

This chapter I reflected on my journey through my capstone. I began the chapter by discussing my literature review and how it helped me in the process of creating my capstone project. Following that, I shared the different implications of my project. Finally, I shared my personal learning I had through the capstone process. Creating my capstone project was a dream that I wasn't sure would become a reality and I am incredibly proud of the accomplishment in completing my capstone. I plan to use my capstone project for future years of teaching and make adjustments and changes as I implement the curriculum in my classroom.

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