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## Effects of Early Literacy Development on Academic Success of Children in Elementary Schools

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**Abstract**

Some students begin to develop literacy skills before they begin formal schooling, while others do not. Several studies discuss the inconsistency of those who practice early literacy development as opposed to those who do not. In fact, this creates an inequitable schooling experience from the day students begin kindergarten. This senior capstone examines the effects of early literacy development on the academic success of elementary school children through the use literature review and provides recommendation on how schools could provide equitable services to all students.

Keywords: Early literacy development, Academic achievement

## Introduction and Background

Burchinal, Jurgens, and Roberts (2005) state, "Understanding how the home literacy environment affects the acquisition of children's later language and emergent literacy knowledge has become of increasing interest during the past three decades" (P.345). I am a Liberal Studies Major with a minor in Human Development. In my Human Development minor, I focused on the development of infants until their final year of elementary school. Throughout the work in my Human Development minor, I became curious about how early literacy development affects children in regard to their academic success in elementary school years. I hear a lot of speculation debating whether early literacy matters in the development of a child. This encouraged me to explore some of the effects of early literacy development, on a small scale.

In the future, I want to be an elementary school teacher, this Capstone topic will also relate to my future profession. As I am coming to the end of my undergraduate studies I feel it is important for potential elementary school educators to know how early literacy development affects their future students. My senior research paper will help me to understand how early literacy development affects students in relation to their academic success and why a parent may, or may not have their child practice literacy skills before they begin elementary school. Reading is crucial to humans, due to the heavy correlation it has with communication, it is very hard to communicate with someone who cannot read, however in elementary school there is a wide variety of academic reading ability. This senior research paper, will explore the effects of early literacy development on elementary school age children. I will compare and contrast

the academic success in regard to literature among children who were heavily exposed to early literacy development, and those who were not.

Wildova and Kropackova (2015), state “Pre-literacy development (early childhood literacy) starts, as stated above, with a child’s birth and continues until child’s entry to school. The aim of this period is to develop child’s positive relationship to written speech and to open and encourage their skills and abilities enabling them future optimum reading and writing development. The emphasis is put on developing positive motivation for reading and writing. The main techniques to achieve the aim are playing, natural situation, and role model. These techniques are put to use in a natural way with the help of appropriate teaching materials in stimulating reading environment” (P.879). Early literacy skills are skills in regard to literature gained before the child enters elementary school. The parent or guardian of a child is usually the deciding factor in whether their child participates in early literacy development, or not, and the extent the child participates in furthering their early literacy development. Lawson (2012) states, “If parental reading aloud is an indicator of children’s later academic success, it may be effective not only in helping children to develop pre-reading skills but also in developing more complex skills and behavior” (P. 347).

The primary research question my paper will answer is, *how does early literacy development affect children’s academic success in elementary schools?* Some secondary or related research questions my senior capstone research paper will seek the answers to are: *what does research say about how early literacy development affect the academic success of elementary school students? What is the role of parents in early literacy development? How*

*does it correlate to the academic success of their children in elementary schools? Is there a difference in the level of academic success between children who have exposed to early literacy development vs. those who have not? If there is, what is the difference? How does early literacy development affect children's academic success in their elementary school years, according to teachers? What could parents do incorporate early literacy development for their children before they enter elementary schools? In addition, are there resources available for them to help their children with early literacy skills before going to schools?*

### **Literature Review**

Literacy development begins very early in a child's life, and ages 3-5, before the child begins school are an important time in regards to the capacity they can learn literacy. This section of the senior capstone will explore the research done on early literacy development. This section of the paper will explore arguments regarding early literacy development, and show various studies providing said proof. Wildova and Kropackova (2015), state "Reading literacy is generally seen as a set of skills and abilities to use written speech for communication, entertainment, education etc. It is not defined only as an ability to read written speech "technically" correctly, but also to understand it, critically evaluate it and use information from it (functional application of reading/writing). From the developmental point of view, we distinguish pre-literacy period (0 – 6 years), reading literacy period" (p. 879)

Early literacy development or lack of early literacy development can heavily affect a student according to research done by Nutbrown, a past educator. Nutbrown (1997) states, "During the years three to five - before children begin compulsory

schooling - their literacy can be highly developed. It is around these preschool years that there is significant, recent research in early literacy development and this growing body of research has major implications for assessment" (P. 1) However, Lawson (2012) states, "Reading with an adult plays an important role in developing children's oral language skills, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. Parental reading aloud is also an indicator of children's later academic success, which suggests that the practice may be further linked to children's development of broader academic skills and behavior, such as persistence and the ability to sustain attention" (P. 257). The combination of Lawson's (2012) and Nutbrown's (1997) research help to show how important early literacy development can be for the child. Nutbrown (1997) states that literacy can be highly developed in the time right before formal schooling begins. Lawson (2012) states the strategies and outcomes of early literacy development.

Lawson (2012) and Nutbrown (1997) both state the importance of early literacy development, however, it is still currently up to the discretion of parents. A quote I often hear said are that parent's are the child's first teacher. Parents hold the ability to choose whether their child participates in, and to the extent their child practices early literacy development can make education in elementary inequitable. Research proves early literacy development has an effect on the child however, many children are deprived of or lack early literacy due to their socio-economic status. Dodici et. all (2003) states, "Children from low-income families are less likely to have conversations with adults and are exposed to fewer words than children from families with higher socioeconomic backgrounds" (P. 125).



## **Methods/Procedure**

Coming into my Capstone, I wanted to focus on the child/parent relationship; however, after my conversation with Dr. Thao, I realized the important role teachers play in early literacy development, and in analyzing student academic success. To seek the answers my research questions, there are a plethora of scholarly related journals and books related to my topic. I also created and conducted a survey consisting of ten questions for teachers (See Appendix A), and a survey consisting of ten questions for parents (See Appendix B). Both surveys had 6 participants from the Monterey Tri-County area, and the survey was conducted via a google form. My survey was not random and was given to a select group of unbiased people. There was one representative from every elementary school grade level, Kindergarten through Fifth grade. The parents that were chosen to be interviewed had children in the classes of teachers that were chosen to be interviewed.

## **Results, Findings, and Discussion**

From the information collected from parents, the data showed a heavy correlation of children who were heavily exposed to early literacy development are currently reading at or above the student's current grade level. According to my data, three out of six parents claimed their child was heavily exposed to early literacy development through means of reading to their child, or their child beginning to read. Of the three children whose parents claimed they were heavily exposed to early literacy

development two of those children are reading above grade level, and one child is reading at grade level. This leads me to believe, as many of the scholarly journals and books also stated, that early literacy development has a large effect on the later academic success of a child. Of the three students whose parents did not claim their child was heavily exposed to early literacy development, two of those students are currently reading below grade level while one student is meeting grade level.

The data did not show a correlation between children who were exposed to early literacy development and children who enjoyed reading. Of the two children who are reading above grade level, only one parent claimed that their child enjoys reading. Of all six of the parents interviewed only two claimed that they believe their child enjoys to read. Leading me to believe early literacy development does not lead to a child's enjoyment of reading. Parent A claimed, "Before my child started school, she loved to read, however, once reading became a requirement she didn't want to read anymore. I feel like getting her to read is a hassle, but she isn't a bad reader" (Parent A, personal communication, 23 March 2019).

All of the teachers I interviewed said they allotted at least an hour every day for literacy development (reading, writing, speaking, literature, and other language skills). Three out of the six teachers I interviewed claimed they have a special reading corner located in the classroom. However, Teacher B claimed "Getting my students to read is like pulling teeth, many of them do not enjoy reading. Things I see almost daily are students having to use the restroom right before reading time, or feeling sick and having to be sent to the nurse right before the reading time when the child was just fine.

I have a wide selection of books in the classroom, and I think there is at least one book I think every child would enjoy if they gave it the chance, however many do not give books a chance” (Teacher B, personal communication, 23 March 2019).

Four out of six of the parents I interviewed claimed that they (or someone else i.e. tutor, sibling, etc.) assist their child with whatever homework was assigned if any. Parent E claimed “I can’t let him do homework by himself, because nothing gets done. I do not think he is able to sit in a chair for an hour by himself and do his homework, so I sit right next to him guiding him through it and making sure he does not get distracted. While I do help him with his homework, I do not think I am doing any of the work for him or making it too easy on him” (Parent E, personal communication, 23 March 2019).

*What does research say about how early literacy development affect the academic success of elementary school students?*

Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, and Koehler (2010) state, “There is a substantial research literature to inform decisions about language and literacy skills to emphasize in early childhood programs. Narrative reviews of this literature have emphasized oral language skills, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge as key preschool foundations of later reading ability (e.g., Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). A recent meta-analysis conducted by the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and writing or name writing among a set of variables that was consistently and moderately to strongly predictive of later conventional literacy outcomes” (P. 299)

*What is the role of parents in early literacy development? How does it correlate to the academic success of their children in elementary schools?*

Dodici, Draper, and Peterson (2003) state, "A sociocultural perspective of child development emphasize that infants, toddlers, and young children learn many skills through adult-child interactions. Vygotsky (1986) posited that social interactions with an adult within the cultural contexts of society are fundamental to cognitive development. Building on Vygotsky's theories, Rogoff (1990) proposed the idea that skill development requires the interaction of two parties, a teacher (typically, an adult) and a learner (typically, a child)" (P. 124). As earlier stated in the introduction and background section it is currently under the discretion of parents to determine whether or not their child will begin to develop early literacy skills. The environment the child is born into, and socio-economic status of the family plays a large role in early literacy development. The combination of these factors creates an educational inequity before the child enters formal schooling.

*Is there a difference in the level of academic success between children who have exposed to early literacy development vs. those who have not? If there is, what is the difference?*

Of the children whose parents stated they were heavily exposed to early literacy development,  $\frac{2}{3}$  were reading above grade level, while the remaining at grade level. For Children who were not heavily exposed to early literacy Development 1 of the 3 children is at grade level, while the other 2 are reading below grade level.

*How does early literacy development affect children's academic success in their elementary school years, according to teachers?*

All six of the teachers I interviewed claimed at least 30% of their class was reading at or above grade level. Teacher A, who had the highest percentage of their class reading at or above grade level with roughly 52% claimed, "Teaching is hard, you get 35 students, in my case all at different academic levels, and you are told to make them all know how to read. They should be able to know this, this and this, and sometimes even though you tell them everything they need to know and more, they still end up not knowing. Before this school year began only about 30% of the students were at where they are supposed to be in regard to reading, and now almost half of my class is where they should be" (Teacher A, personal communication, 23 March 2019).

*What could parents do incorporate early literacy development for their children before they enter elementary schools?*

When parents were asked what they did to encourage their child to learn, there were extremely varied answers. Parent D claimed, "Before my child started school I would offer to her to let me read every day, sometimes she said yes, sometimes she said no. On the days she said no she would not get dessert, on the days she said yes, she would get dessert. Once school started I assumed she would be reading, or being read to at school, so honestly, I didn't do anything to encourage learning after school started" (Parent D, personal communication, 23 March 2019). According to my data, four out of six of the parents claimed once school began they no longer felt the need to encourage their child to learn because they assumed that would be happening at school.

*Are there resources available for them to help their children with early literacy skills before going to schools?*

The data showed that all of the parents interviewed had books accessible from home, many from the child's school and the local library. Parent B claimed, "I am constantly taking my child to the local library for events where the children get read to. The local library has a lot of books she (the child) enjoys and although she is not the best at reading. I take her to the library at least once a week, sometimes more and I let her pick out any book she wants" (Parent B, personal communication, 23 March 2019). Although all of the parents had access to books from the library, or the child's school not all of the parents took advantage of those resources given to them. Parent C claims, "My child sometimes comes home with books from school but I do not like it when he brings books home. He often loses or ruins books, and we end up having to pay out of pocket. I don't like our local library, because it is not in the best part of town, and I don't feel it is safe. Our books usually come as hand me downs from family members" (Parent C, personal communication, 23 March 2019).

### **Problems & Limitations**

While looking for scholarly articles, and books related to my topic I was not disadvantaged, and it did not take long to find many sources relating and offering information about my topic. However, I did not find any opposing opinions on whether early literacy development affects children in elementary schools. All the data I found led to the belief early literacy development affects the later academic success of a student in regard to literary skills.

A problem I had when doing the interview was some of the teachers I contacted did not respond, therefore I had to replace them with another teacher of that same grade level. This made it so I was missing some data for about a week and a half from a two out of the six teachers I had originally planned to interview. However, it was not difficult to find teachers willing to participate in my study.

Another limitation I had was I only interviewed 6 parents, from the Monterey Tri-County area, meaning my data was extremely limited. To get more precise data I would have needed a larger study group, for both parents and teachers. Therefore, because my study group was so small I will have to make the assumption the data would be similar if the study group was larger.

My final limitation is that this was all based on the opinions of parents, and teachers. A lot of the information they provided to me in the survey cannot be proved, for example, there is no way for me to ensure their child really does hate reading. This leads to possible misinformation parents or teachers could have given me, skewing my data.

## **Recommendations**

Students begin kindergarten at different academic levels dependent on a variety of factors, including whether the child attended preschool, and whether the child was exposed to early literacy development. Doggett and Wat (2011), claim “The United States can't “race to the top” when many children are not even at the starting line” (Pg. 1). Some students are set back by the educational system at the time they enter the educational system, and it all depends on how the child’s parents and family supported

the student academically, and the socio-economic status of the family in the child's first five years. Dougett and Wat (2011), state "The benefits of high-quality prekindergarten for low-income three- and four-year-olds are well documented and widely accepted. But pre-kindergarten can significantly improve all children's cognitive skills. For example, a study of the Tulsa, Okla., preK for-all program (2004) found that middle-income children who attended preK scored 41% higher in assessments of letter-word identification and 17% higher in spelling than their peers without preK (Gormley et al.). High-quality prekindergarten has proven effective in alleviating grade repetition, dropping out, and special education placement (Belfield et al. 2006; Reynolds et al. 2002)" (Pg.7) Cunningham and Callahan (2009), state "Whether children come from impoverished or enriched language environments, their preschool teachers are in a unique position to provide opportunities to build the fundamental skills and knowledge they will need for the transition into the first years of formal schooling—the years when reading and writing will be among their most significant core achievements. Simply put, preschool teachers have the potential to make an invaluable contribution to the literacy development of children" (pg. 1).

My recommendation is making preschool free and mandatory for all. This will help to close the gap of children entering formal schooling, kindergarten, at many different academic levels. I feel there should also be an entrance test to get into kindergarten, to ensure everyone begins at a kindergarten level (knowing the alphabet for example). These recommendations will help to close the achievement gap when



students enter formal schooling and make it so every child is exposed to early literacy development, regardless of parental status, or socio-economic status.

### **Conclusion**

After research determined early literacy development does have an effect on students, and their academic success in elementary school, I was led to the primary research question: How does early literacy development affect children's academic success in elementary schools? According to the data I found, children tend to be reading at or above grade level if they were exposed to early literacy development.

In conclusion, early literacy development does affect the students' academic success later in life. Research shows students who were exposed to heavy amounts of early literacy development are now reading at or above grade level. Students who were not exposed to early literacy development tend to enter the formal schooling system at a lower academic level than others, making it harder for them, due to them having to catch up, and learn the new material necessary for first grade. My recommendation is to make preschool mandatory for all children, to ensure all children are exposed to a good level of early literacy development. I also want to test children before they begin elementary school to ensure they are meeting the minimum knowledge necessary to start that grade. There are many reasons why a child may not experience early literacy development, but my goal is to make education more equitable, therefore every child will get to develop literacy skills in their first five years.

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## Appendix A

### Teacher Survey Questions

1. What Grade level are you teaching?
2. How many students are in your class?
3. Right now how many of your students are currently reading at grade level, how many above, how many below?
4. At the beginning of the school year how many of your students were reading at grade level, how many above, how many below?
5. How many of your students do not have English as their 1st language?
6. In a typical week, how much time is spent on literacy development (reading, writing, speaking, literature, and other language skills)?
7. Do you have a library or reading corner in your classroom?
8. How often do you take or send the students to the school library?
9. Can the students borrow books from the classroom library or reading corner to take home?
10. By the end of this school year, how many years will you have been teaching altogether?

**Appendix B**

## Parent Survey Questions

1. What grade is your child in?
2. Is your child currently reading at, above, or below grade level?
3. Before your child started school, how often did you read to them?
4. Before starting school, did your child have the sounds the letters make?
5. If your child has homework do they usually work on it alone or with assistance  
(I.E. tutors, parents, siblings assist child)?
6. Does your child enjoy reading?
7. Does your child have books at home?
8. Do you/your child often check out books from the library?
9. What other languages are spoken in your home?
10. Please explain what you do with your child to encourage learning, before and  
after they started school?