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Increasing Emergent Literacy in Preschool-Aged Children

Yuliana Morales Santiago

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

This capstone project focuses on teaching preschool-age children from low-income backgrounds about emergent literacy. Emergent literacy is the foundation of learning to read and write. Before children begin learning to read and write, they develop pre-literacy skills such as understanding that print carries meaning, exploring books independently, and letter knowledge. Many preschool children are not taught the fundamental steps of building literacy development at home because of a lack of resources or knowledge due to socioeconomic status. Carroll et al. (2018) found a link between home literacy environment and socioeconomic factors, such as caregivers' education and the type of employment they hold. Another study showed that preschool children who scored high on home literacy environments and practices had higher reading and writing skills when measured a year later in kindergarten (Bigozzi et al., 2023). Therefore, there is a need for young children to experience rich literacy environments in order to develop emergent literacy. I developed three lessons focused on emergent literacy development to best prepare children with the skills they will need to read and write in the future. My first lesson consisted of teaching children about how print flows from left to right and top to bottom. The second lesson addressed book orientation, learning parts of the book such as the front and back cover, title page, and the correct way to hold a book. The third lesson taught children about how letters form into words and how to differentiate between a single letter and a whole word. The three emergent literacy lessons were presented to 3- and 4-year-old low and middle-income children at the Virginia Rocca Barton School in Salinas, California.

Needs Statement

The emergent literacy skills children develop between birth and the preschool years equip them to be successful and strong readers in their school years. Emergent literacy is a term used to describe the early stages of a child's development in regard to reading and writing. Preschool children vary in their levels of awareness of literacy and these differing levels predict their later success in reading and writing (Carroll et al., 2018). Parents' socioeconomic levels and education levels relate to young children's emergent literacy development and later literacy development (Casper, 2009). These factors predict how much exposure young children have to books and book reading. Young children from low-income and low-education families may not have access to stimulating literacy environments at home. By thoughtfully designing and implementing a variety of engaging and developmentally appropriate literacy activities, as well as fostering meaningful interactions with children, caregivers and educators can create a home and classroom environment that cultivates and nourishes the growth of early literacy skills (Guide to Emergent Literacy, 2023). Since young children with low-income and low-education parents are less likely to experience stimulating literacy environments at home, there is a need to foster a nurturing environment that supports reading, writing, and language development. We can help young children develop the skills they need to succeed in school and beyond. In addition, Neumann (2018) acknowledged how giving children the necessary knowledge and skills to build the foundation of these emergent literacy skills before primary school will have everlasting positive effects on their imminent reading and writing skills. My project focused on enhancing these skills through book knowledge, learning where to begin reading, and distinguishing between letters and words.

Emergent literacy is a term used to describe the behaviors exhibited by very young children as they begin to respond to and imitate reading and writing (Lonigan et al., 2000). An example of these behaviors includes a child being able to recognize letters in a book but still not being able to read. The five components of emergent literacy include oral language, phonological awareness, functional book knowledge, letter knowledge, and print awareness (Guide to Emergent Literacy, 2023). Oral language involves the exchange of information or ideas through spoken words between individuals or groups. Phonological awareness refers to having the capability to understand and recognize that spoken words are composed of separate sound elements. Having phonological awareness is crucial as it is a reliable indicator of one's reading proficiency in the future. Book knowledge refers to a child's understanding of what a book is and how to use it. Letter knowledge involves recognizing letters, distinguishing between them, knowing their names and sounds, and understanding that letters group together to form words. These skills help children read by enabling them to sound out words. Print awareness, also known as concepts of print, is a crucial aspect of early literacy. It marks the beginning of a child's journey towards literacy development. Print awareness involves understanding that print has meaning and signifies something. According to Caspe (2009), children who gain knowledge of the concepts of print at an early age tend to develop better reading skills later in life. These skills tend to develop at an early age, particularly before children start school.

Emergent literacy is the fundamental building block for academic success in later years. Children who have strong emergent literacy skills are more likely to excel in school as they possess a strong foundation in language, communication, and literacy-related concepts. As children begin their academic journey, it's important to keep in mind that they come from different backgrounds and with varying levels of emergent literacy. Carroll et al. (2018),

established that the level of emergent literacy at the time of school entry is a crucial determining factor of future literacy and academic success. For that reason, it's important to provide children with the necessary support and resources to help them develop literacy skills from an early age. In addition, having a strong foundation in the alphabet at the time of starting school can significantly improve children's literacy skills both in the short and long term (Caspé, 2009). This highlights the importance of early learning and lays the groundwork for academic success. In contrast, children who struggle with reading when entering school are at a higher risk of meeting the requirements for special education services. Therefore, early interventions and support can be crucial in helping children succeed academically and prevent the need for special education services later on. Emergent literacy skills are important for reading and writing development and overall school readiness.

There are many factors related to the variation in young children's emergent literacy such as the parents' socioeconomic status and educational background, the parents' immigration background, and the home literacy environment which includes the child's reading interest. First, the income and educational level of parents can impact the way they communicate with their children. Parents who have a higher level of education tend to speak to their children using more advanced language, which has been linked to improved literacy skills in children (Meng, 2021). In contrast, parents with lower levels of education may communicate with their children using simpler language, which could lead to a higher risk of reading and writing difficulties. Secondly, research has shown that a child's emergent literacy development is significantly influenced by the ethnicity, race, and migration status of their family. For example, as Caspé (2009) noted low-income Latino immigrant parents read less with their young children compared to Caucasian parents. In Latino families, it is common for parents to tell their children fantasy stories as well

as stories from their own lives. Therefore, Latino families may not prioritize reading books together as a family, perceiving it more as a school activity rather than a family activity (Casper, 2009). Furthermore, Niklas and Schneider (2013) conducted a study with 921 German kindergarteners and found families with foreign-born parents had adverse results such as fewer books, and less reading in the home. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge and address this impact to ensure that every child has equal opportunities to develop their literacy skills and reach their full potential.

Home literacy environment (HLE) is a term that refers to a range of literacy-related activities that parents do with their children (Georgiou et al., 2021). Numerous studies have found that HLE is a predictor of children's language and literacy skills in different languages. For example, one study demonstrated that HLE plays a role in predicting vocabulary and phonological awareness during kindergarten, and has a further direct effect on phonological awareness at the onset of primary school (Niklas & Schneider, 2013). These findings indicate that a HLE is crucial in providing children with a strong foundation in language development, which is essential for academic and personal success. According to Lonigan et al. (2000), children possess the power to shape their experiences and surroundings in meaningful and profound ways. By acknowledging this, we can unlock the immense potential within children and create environments that enable them to thrive. Lastly, a child's reading interest is related to the home literacy environment and plays a part in developing emergent literacy. It is worth noting that the level of children's interest in books and reading has a significant impact on the frequency of literacy-related activities that take place at home (Sawyer et al., 2016). In many cases, children are the ones who initiate these emergent literacy activities, which can include reading books.

Teaching preschoolers about the different parts of a book, such as the front cover, book title, and back cover, is crucial in developing their emergent literacy skills. Knowing how to hold a book correctly, turn pages one by one, and identifying different elements contributes to their overall literacy readiness. Learning the names of different parts of a book expands preschoolers' vocabulary related to literacy and reading. They become familiar with terms such as title and author, which are essential for discussing and understanding books. Marie Clay, an educational literacy researcher from New Zealand, believed strongly in early intervention to support children in their reading and writing abilities (Gafney & Askew, 2022). She developed a test to assess early literacy skills in children called the Concepts About Print (CAP). Furthermore, Lonigan et al. (2000), administered a portion of the CAP test to determine the children's knowledge of print, such as labeling the parts of a book. In the end, the researchers found that a child's print awareness had a moderate association with later reading abilities. This means that a child's early understanding of print concepts can help to support their later literacy development.

Emergent literacy skills, particularly print awareness, such as directionality, which is how print flows from left to right and top to bottom of the page, are not seen as much in preschool settings. Without these important skills, it makes it difficult for children once it is time to transition to Kindergarten. In a study done, they found that 80% of children of 4 years of age scored high on accuracy when asked which page to read first, which is left to right directionality. Justice and Ezell (2021) found that many scored high on which page to read first, while others scored low, 23%, when asked where to begin reading, which is the first word of the top line. Although this study shows children do have some awareness of where to begin reading, it still lacks where specifically to read from first, which is an important skill one needs to have in order for them to not be behind in their reading abilities. Comprehending the rules of print, such as

reading from top to bottom and left to right, supports the development of being able to read and write (Lonigan et al., 2000).

As children advance in each element of emergent literacy, they establish a comprehensive toolkit necessary for reading. Niklas and Schneider (2013) recognized children's early understanding of letter knowledge can foretell their later language skills when starting school. In order for children to begin reading and writing, they must first acquire emergent literacy skills such as distinguishing between letters and words. Additionally, in a study, they found that young children had difficulty differentiating between letters and words. Justice and Ezell (2021) revealed that the children lacked knowledge of letters and words in written language contexts. The children were unable to accurately point their finger to the last word. When asked to show them one word on the page and where the first word is on the page, only 10% of children out of 30 were able to respond correctly. Children who have a basic understanding of letters and words will reap the benefits of later reading and writing skills in formal schooling.

Ultimately, there is a need for a curriculum that focuses on emergent literacy in preschool-aged children. Developing these skills is essential for their social-emotional, cognitive, and language development. The project aimed to help children recognize and label the ways print flows on a book, parts of a book, and distinguish between letters and words. To address this need, I conducted a series of three lessons over three days to improve the emergent literacy of preschool children at the Virginia Rocca Barton School.

Theory

This project was done with Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development in mind. The theory explores the influence and contributions the surrounding environment and culture have on an individual's development (Cherry, 2023). This includes

parents, teachers, caregivers, peers, and society. The idea is that learning is obtained through collaborating and interacting with others. When we engage with others, we can better understand the information we come across. First, Vygotsky argued that cultural beliefs and attitudes play a role in how development and learning occur within an individual. For example, the development of a child in Japanese culture may be different from the development of a child in Mexican culture. Second, Vygotsky found that children perform better when given help to complete a task (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). This claim comes forth as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Cherry (2023), ZPD essentially explains what an individual can attain without guidance and what they can learn with guidance from more advanced others. Children learn by seeing what others are doing, typically seeing those who are more knowledgeable than they are. Lastly, Vygotsky introduced the idea of scaffolding. Sarmiento-Campos et al. (2022) discuss how Vygotsky defined scaffolding as the support provided by parents, teachers, and others to help individuals develop and advance to the next level. The support being provided by others is being transferred down to the individual in order to bring about the desired outcome (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022).

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development thoroughly informed my project's teaching approach to emergent literacy when creating the learning environment. In agreement with Vygotsky's idea of ZPD and scaffolding, where more skilled individuals can serve as a bridge between learners and the information they seek. As a result, I assisted students in exercising their current skills and knowledge in order to acquire more skills and knowledge related to the development of emergent literacy (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). In addition, the children were offered opportunities to facilitate their interest and cooperation. While implementing the lessons and assessments, scaffolding methods were used such as working

together in small groups, hands-on activities, modeling the skills, and visuals. For example, for the assessment portion of the first and second lessons, children were asked to show me themselves by using a book. I also used visuals, such as having an actual book to read and show the children. Furthermore, my project emphasized the importance of introducing literacy concepts to children from diverse cultural backgrounds. I believe that cultural differences can significantly impact an individual's development, and it is necessary to address this issue by providing all children with various opportunities to learn. In line with Vygotsky's view on the influence of culture on an individual's development, my project emphasized the need to introduce literacy concepts since some children may not have received such information due to cultural differences. By taking a culturally responsive approach, we can ensure that every child has an equal chance to succeed and thrive.

Consideration of Diversity

This project was conducted at the Virginia Rocca Barton School in Salinas, California. The school has a predominantly Hispanic or Latino student population, with more than half of the students enrolled belonging to this demographic. Upon completing my lesson plans, all of the participating children were of Hispanic origin. Additionally, around 77% of the students at the school come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, indicating that it is likely that a student with similar socio-economic circumstances participated in the project (U.S. News Education, n.d.). Out of the five children who took part in the project, two were from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, while the remaining three came from middle-class families. The students represented diversity regarding age, ethnicity, parents' educational background, and socioeconomic status. The five students involved in the project were 3 to 4 years old. Some of the children's parents were born in Mexico, making the children

Mexican-American, while others were born in the United States but identified strongly with their Mexican heritage. They grew up with Spanish as their first language, and English as their second language. More than half of the students' parents had a high school education and one had a college degree. The children came from low socioeconomic status and middle-class families.

The curriculum developed was intended to be comprehensive of every child involved by being aware of their diverse characteristics. The lessons created were designed to be developmentally appropriate for preschool-aged children. The instructions and materials were intended to use comprehensible language and define words that may be unfamiliar to young children. To accommodate the Spanish-speaking children in the class, I made adjustments such as conducting the lessons in Spanish in addition to English and writing down the sentences in Spanish for better comprehension. I also took the time to define words that may be unfamiliar to the children, such as the spine of a book, using relatable examples such as the spine in our body. However, I recognize that further modifications are necessary to effectively introduce emergent literacy lessons to children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and varying ages.

Learning Outcomes

I designed a 3-day lesson plan on emergent literacy development for preschool-aged children. This project has three learning outcomes:

1. Children will be able to recognize and label three parts of a book (front cover, back cover, title page) using an actual book.
2. Children will be able to recognize and label one way that print flows on a book.
3. Children will be able to distinguish between letters and words using cards.

Methods

Location and Participants

The project was conducted at the Virginia Rocca Barton School in Salinas, California. The three lessons given were separated into three days, each targeting and focusing on a different skill relating to increasing preschool children's emergent literacy development. The lessons were given to five preschool-aged children ranging from age 3 to 4 in an afterschool program. All three lessons involved three girls and two boys. Two of the girls were Spanish-speaking, therefore, I adjusted my lessons to meet their needs by conducting them in both English and Spanish. Through connections with an employee from the school, I was able to give my lessons to the children in her after-school program.

Procedures and Materials

The first set of lessons over three days focused on recognizing and labeling the different parts of a book. I first talked about the book we were going to be focusing on and showed the children what the title is, explaining how it's the big bold words at the front of the book (See Appendix A). Second, I discussed what the front cover is and what the back cover is. Third, I showed and talked about the spine of the book, explaining how we have a spine and so do books. Finally, I discussed the person who wrote the book and explained that this person is the author. I made sure to repeat myself and have the children say with me what it was while I pointed to it. I concluded the lesson by giving the children the book and asking them what the title is, what is the front cover, what is the back cover, where is the spine, and who is the author. I assessed the success of the lesson through the children being able to name and point to the different parts of the book.

During the second lesson, I focused on helping the children recognize and label the flow of print in a book. I started by reading a book in English to the two children who understood the language, followed by a Spanish book for those who only understood Spanish (See Appendix A and B). To keep the children engaged, I talked about the story on each page and asked for their opinions. While reading the book, I used my finger to point and run along the words on the page, demonstrating to the children where we start reading from. Next, I provided each child with a strip of paper with a sentence describing what they were wearing (See Appendix C). I wanted the children to see how print flows in a different way, so I read the sentence aloud while pointing at each word, left to right. Finally, I assessed the lesson by giving each child their strip of paper and asking them to show me where we start reading from.

In the third lesson, I focused on teaching the children how to differentiate between letters and words. To start, I asked them if they knew their ABCs and explained that those are letters. I then showed them the book and pointed out how the title contains words (See Appendix A and B). Next, I presented labels and cards that said letters and words (See Appendix D and E). I picked out five different letters and five different words from the book and explained to the children which ones are called letters and which are called words. I repeated the letters and words on the cards to ensure they understood the difference between them. To assess the lesson, I asked each child to identify whether the card I was holding was a letter or a word. I said the word on the card and asked, "Is this a letter or a word?" The child responded with either "letter" or "word," and I placed the card in the corresponding spot under the labels. Finally, I gave the children the opportunity to change any of their cards after we went through all of them.

Results

The first learning outcome was that preschool-aged children would recognize and label three distinct parts of a book. To assess their comprehension, I utilized a combination of verbal and visual aids during the first day of lessons. The instructional materials used for this lesson were the two books. The points possible on the assessment were six points. A passing score was 4 . To receive all six points, children were required to label three parts of a book. Two out of the five children (40%) could identify three parts of the book and passed the LO. One child could only identify two parts of the book, another child could only label one part of the book, and another child couldn't identify any parts of the book. Therefore, they did not pass the LO. Since only two out of the five children (40%), less than half, could label three parts of the book, the learning outcome was not met.

The second lesson's learning outcome was that preschool-aged children would recognize and label one way that print flows. The materials used were the strips of paper with the sentences about the children. The points possible on the assessment were four points. A passing score was three points. To receive three points, children were able to say where to begin reading. To receive one point children were able to point with their finger where to begin reading. Based on the question, 'Where do you begin reading from?', four of the five participants (80%) stated where to begin reading and could point to it and therefore passed the assessment. One child said where to begin reading but did not point to it but still got the necessary points to pass the LO. One child pointed out where to begin reading but did not verbally say where and did not pass the LO. Four out of the five children (80%) earned four points therefore, the learning outcome was fully met.

The third lesson's learning outcome was that preschool-aged children would distinguish between letters and words. The materials used were the labels and cards with letters and words

on them. The possible points one could earn were six points. A passing score was four points. To earn the six points, children were able to match all letters and words correctly. To receive 4 points, children were required to have matched at least 6 letters or words to the corresponding labels. One child seemed overwhelmed and confused with this assessment portion, so no assessment data was collected. As a result, this child's results were excluded from the assessment conclusion. All four remaining children (100%) listed 6 correct letters or words to the corresponding label. Therefore, the participants earned 5 points, therefore the learning outcome was fully met.

Discussion

This project aimed to support the emerging literacy development of preschool children by teaching them the fundamentals of what a book consists of, where in the book to begin reading from, and understanding the difference between letters and words. Learning Outcome 2, children will be able to recognize and label one way that print flows on a book, was fully met. When asked where to begin reading four out of five children successfully said and pointed where. The success of Learning Outcome 2 was perhaps due to children already knowing where to begin reading through watching parents and teachers read to them. Learning Outcome 3, children will be able to distinguish between letters and words, was fully met as well. The children were able to match the necessary letters and words to the labels presented. I may have had this successful outcome due to the children luckily guessing the correct letters or words. When I asked the children if it was a letter or word, some of them took a bit to answer and seemed to not know. I think they just guessed whichever they thought it was. Lastly, another way my project was successful beyond the learning outcomes was the participants found my lessons interesting. The children were intrigued by the book I chose and mentioned how they had read similar books.

They were smiling while I read the book to them. One child wanted to read another book after we finished reading together. The project also worked well with the children's developmental characteristics. The lessons were short which aided in keeping the children engaged because they do not have long attention spans yet. Also, in addition to speaking in English, I spoke Spanish to the children which helped the Spanish speakers in understanding the lessons.

Despite the successes, this project had its limitations. Learning Outcome 1, children will be able to recognize and label three parts of a book, was not met. More than half of the children could not identify three parts of the book, while less than half of the children could identify three parts of the book. Another limitation was the exclusion of data from one of the children in the third learning outcome. It seemed as if this lesson plan was too difficult for the Spanish-speaking child. Furthermore, one of the children had difficulty paying attention. I caught his eyes wandering around the room due to other children playing. He was among one of the youngest and couldn't focus as well as the other children. Lastly, Learning Outcome 3 seemed to be challenging for some of the children. When I asked them which letters or words should be placed under certain labels, they appeared to be unaware and unsure of their answer. Some of them took a while to respond and even guessed because they didn't know the correct answer. I anticipated that children as young as three and four years old would find this lesson difficult, so their reaction didn't come as a surprise to me.

Based on the limitations of this project, teaching young children to label a book, showing them where to begin reading, and helping them differentiate between a letter and a word, may be beneficial to further supporting emergent literacy development. Additionally, I would modify the first lesson plan by including fewer parts of the book. During the lesson, I noticed that the children struggled to pass the learning outcome, which could have been due to an overload of

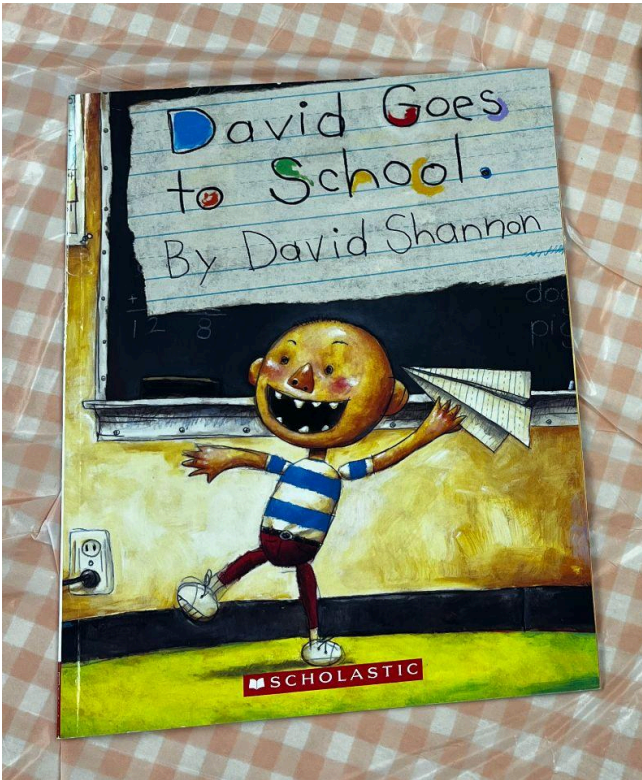
information. By focusing on fewer parts of the book, perhaps only three instead of five, the children may have been better able to retain the information and pass the learning outcome. Moreover, teaching Spanish-speaking and English-speaking children separately can avoid confusing them with two languages and provide a better learning experience. Despite not meeting one of the learning outcomes, this project successfully shows that the children displayed a strong desire to learn and engage with the materials provided. The project provides valuable insight into what needs to be changed and done to help young children get the necessary support they need to increase their emergent literacy development. Therefore, it is time to take action and ensure that all young preschool-aged children receive the necessary support to increase their emergent literacy development.

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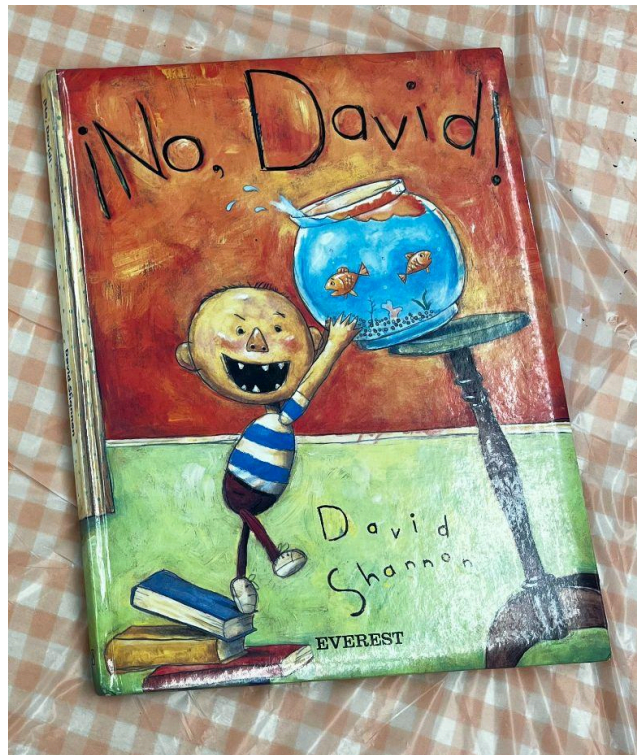
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Appendix A: Book in English

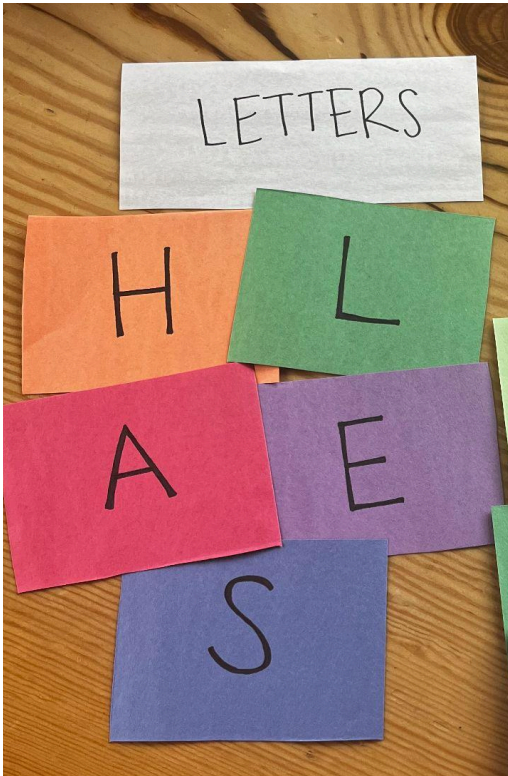


Appendix B: Book in Spanish

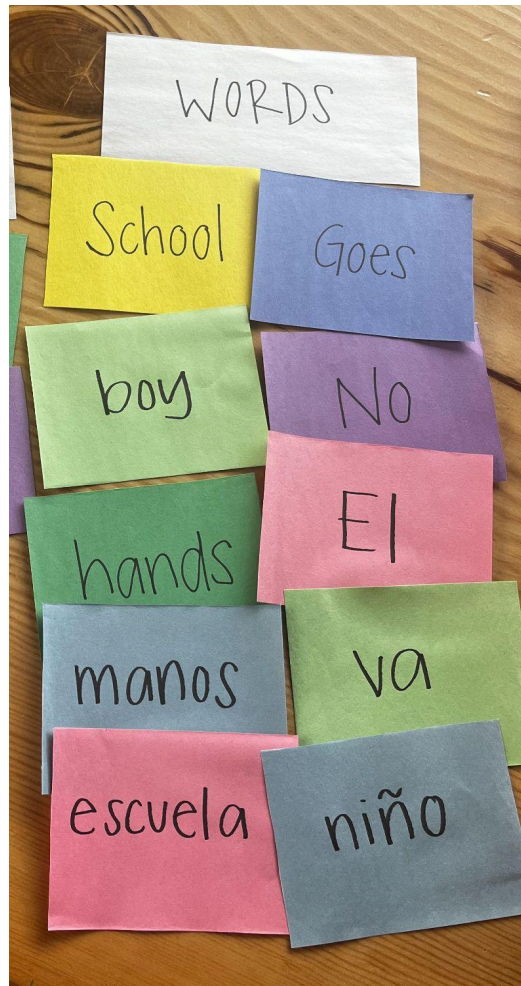


Appendix C: Strips of Paper with Sentences About Children

Appendix D: Letter Cards



Appendix E: Word Cards



Appendix F: Capstone Festival Presentation

INCREASING EMERGENT LITERACY IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Yuliana Morales-Santiago
Human Development and Family Science

INTRODUCTION

- Emergent literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a child develops in relation to reading and writing, starting at birth and before starting formal schooling
- I chose this topic because I will soon be a preschool teacher and want to find ways in which I can better their overall development.



NEEDS STATEMENT

- PROBLEM:** Many young children are not taught the fundamental steps of building literacy development because of lack of resources or knowledge.
- NEED:** Create engaging literacy activities and having meaningful interactions, parents & teachers can create a home/classroom that nurtures and encourages emergent literacy.

NEEDS STATEMENT

- Children's early understanding of letter knowledge can predict their later language skills when starting school.
- Young children have difficulty identifying where to begin reading in a book when prompted to.
- Children with low-income immigrant parents had fewer books and less reading in the home.



THEORY

Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development - Lev Vygotsky

- Explores the influence and contributions the surrounding **environment** and culture have on an individual's development
- Scaffolding.** Vygotsky defined scaffolding as the support provided by parents, teachers, and others to help individuals develop and advance



LEARNING OUTCOMES

I designed a workshop on increasing emergent literacy for a group of preschool aged children. It focused on the following learning outcomes:

Children will be able to recognize and label three parts of a book

1

Children will be able to recognize and label one way that print flows on a book.

2

Children will be able to distinguish between letters and words.

3

METHOD - Location and Participants

Virginia Rocca Barton School - Salinas, CA.

Children: 5

Ages: 3-4 years old

Ethnicity: Hispanic

Gender: 2 Boys and 3 Girls

Languages: English and Spanish

Socioeconomic Status: Low and Middle Income



METHOD- Procedures and Materials

LESSON 1

- Talked and showed the book
- Pointed to the different parts
- Had them hold the book and name and point to what each part was called



LESSON 2

- Read the books to them (English and Spanish)
- Pointed to the text as I read
- Wrote down a sentence about each child and read it
- Asked them where to begin reading from using the piece of paper

LESSON 3

- Explained how ABCs are letters and we use letters to make words
- Had 5 cards with letters and 5 cards with words
- Had them say whether the card I was holding was a letter or a word

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Learning Outcome 1

- Children will be able to recognize and label three parts of a book
- Children were asked to name and point to three different parts of the book
 - 2 out of 5 children were able to
 - LO 1 was **not met**



ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Learning Outcome 2

- Children will be able to recognize and label one way that print flows on a book.
- Children were asked where to begin reading from using the sentence provided about them.
 - 4 out of 5 could say and point where to begin reading from
 - LO 2 was **fully met**



ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Learning Outcome 3

- Children will be able to distinguish between letters and words.
- Children were asked whether the card I was holding was a letter or word
 - 4 out of 4 listed six letters or words correctly
 - LO 3 was **fully met**



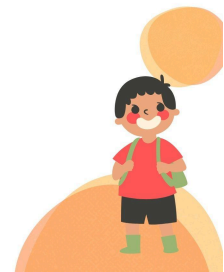
DISCUSSION

Successes:

- LO 2 and LO 3 were fully met
- The children were interested and engaged

Challenges:

- LO 1 was not met
- One child couldn't participate in LO 3
- LO 3 was challenging for some



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

How I would strengthen the project if I were to do it again:

- Work independently with children
 - actively listening
 - undivided attention
 - able to grasp what you are trying to teach



THANK YOU

