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EFFECT OF A BALANCED LITERARY PROGRAM IN KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to show the effect of a balanced reading instruction on kindergartners. The subjects were students from 10 kindergarten classes in 2 consecutive school years. This was a causal-comparative study with 129 students in the control group and 151 students in the experimental group. Both the control group and the experimental group were pretested in the the fall and posttested in the spring, using the Lexia Comprehensive Reading Test. The posttest mean of the experimental group ($M = 28.0$, $SD = 10.3$) was higher than the mean of the control group ($M = 24.1$, $SD = 5.21$). The results of the ANCOVA using the pretest as the covariate showed that the differenc was statistically significant, $F(2,274) = 95.8$, $p < .001$. The results support the hypothesis and are consistent with "The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read." For over two years the National Reading Panel reviewed research based knowledge on reading instruction and held open panel meetings in Washington, D.C., and regional meetings across the United States. This research is driving the reading instruction in elementary schools throughout the nation.

Effect of a Balanced Literacy Program in Kindergarten

Reading is essential to success in our society. The ability to read is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement. Most children learn to read fairly well, but there are large numbers of children in America who do not read well enough to ensure understanding and to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive economy. Society now expects virtually everyone in the population to function beyond the minimum standards of literacy. Today the definition of basic proficiency in literacy calls for a fairly high standard of reading comprehension and analysis. The main reason is

that literacy requirements of most jobs have increased significantly and are expected to increase further in the future (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). Because of this problem, few topics have sparked such public debate as the teaching of reading.

Research on Reading Instruction

Research on reading dates as far back as 1879, when a paper was published on eye movements in reading (Samuels & Kamil, 1984). In the mid-1960's, discussion of appropriate reading instruction gained prominence as a result of published research on models of reading instruction and comparative studies of the U.S. Offices of Education's Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction (Venezky, 1984; Samuels & Kamil, 1984). Both of these research efforts sparked widespread interest in all aspects of the reading process, particularly at the beginning stages of learning to read. Two basic views of reading instruction grew out of this activity: the skills-based approach (which emphasizes the use of phonics) and the meaning-based approach (which emphasizes reading comprehension and enrichment). For the past three decades, the works of skills-based and meaning-based researchers were pitted against each other in a media war over the best way to teach reading.

Recent research, such as *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), has found resolution to this war. This study confirms that the teaching of reading requires solid skill instruction, including phonics and phonemic awareness, imbedded in enjoyable reading and writing experiences with whole texts to facilitate the construction of meaning. In other words, balanced reading instruction in the classroom combines the best of phonics instruction and the whole-language approach to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of individual children. In this combined approach, children are explicitly taught the relationship between letters and sounds in a systematic fashion, but they are being read to and reading interesting stories and writing at the same time.

Skills-based Approach to Reading Instruction

Shortly after Rudolph Flesch published *Why Johnny Can't Read*, in 1955, there was widespread concern about the state of education in the United States, because the Soviet Union had been the first to put a satellite in space. The problem with reading, Flesch stated in unequivocal terms, was that first and second-grade teachers were not

teaching phonics. The public popularity of Flesch's book was enormous, and many people asked why phonics was not emphasized more in school. During the following decade, a nationwide study of the best way to teach beginning reading was funded by the federal government.

In 1967 Jeanne S. Chall's scholarly review, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, appeared, and its findings paralleled those of the nationwide study: "code-emphasis" approaches to beginning reading were more effective than "meaning-emphasis" approaches. She concluded that there are consistent and substantial advantages to programs that included systematic phonics. (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Phonics is an instructional strategy used to teach letter-sound relationships by having readers "sound out" words. In skills-based learning, phonics skills are taught in isolation with the expectation that once sound-letter relationships are learned, meaning will follow. Emphasis is placed on intensive phonics instruction that is highly sequenced. Children learn letter-sound relationships by sounding out words. They learn sounds, consonant blends, and long and short vowels. Typically, this approach uses reading programs that offer stories with controlled vocabulary made up of letter-sound relationship and words with which children are already familiar. Writing instruction follows the same vein; children are asked to write only after having achieved mastery in basic spelling skills or when a correct model is provided for them to copy. This type of instruction was widely used in the 1960's and 1970's.

Meaning-based Approach to Reading Instruction

The meaning-based approach to reading was highly influenced by the work of Kenneth S. Goodman (Samuels & Kamil, 1984). Goodman was a leader in the development of the psycholinguistic perspective, which asserts that readers rely more on the structure and meaning of language rather than on the graphic information from text. He and others also noted that literacy development parallels language development. Goodman developed a reading model that became known as the whole-language approach. This approach became popular in the 1980's and continued through the 1990's.

The whole language perspective holds that reading and writing are learned best by actually engaging in reading and writing (not through reading and writing exercises), that literacy instruction should be rich in content, and that children's interests and purposes are paramount in learning to read and write. As a result, the whole language approach focuses on comprehension, uses "real" children's

literature rather than texts designed to reflect phonics patterns, and teaches skills in context rather than in isolation. Primary grade whole language teachers teach phonics, but they do so as the need arises for individuals or small groups of children and in the context of more holistic lessons rather than as isolated, systematic phonics instruction for the entire class.

The popularity of this approach reached its zenith in the mid-1980's, when a new wave of "literature-based" basal readers made its way into elementary schools across the country. But even as whole language appeared to be widely accepted, a reaction against whole language approaches that had begun in the early 1990's was gathering steam. This reaction was spurred in part by the observation that although experienced, knowledgeable teachers were empowered to create strong programs by applying whole language concepts, many other teachers misinterpreted its principles and practices and had little direction in their classrooms. (Strickland & Morrow, 1989, p.6)

Debate Between Skills-based and Meaning-based Approaches

The reaction against whole language was also prompted by factors such as the publication, Marilyn Adams's *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (1990), a book written in response to congressional inquiries about phonics that made a case for systematically teaching young children about phonemic awareness and decoding; the publication of a series of research studies conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development arguing that scientific research established the need for systematic instruction in phonological awareness and phonics in beginning reading (Lyon, 1998); and publication of the results from the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress that showed California students to be second to last in reading achievement in the country, a finding that politicians, the public, and even the former state superintendent of education (who was responsible for implementing California's literature-based curriculum a decade earlier) argued was the fault of the whole language approach.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the great debate over these two approaches to reading is that schools, states, and reading educators have lunched back and forth between paradigms and practices, searching for a single program that will solve the beginning reading puzzle. A major reason for these wild swings is that phonics approaches and meaning-based approaches are often characterized as two diametrically opposed ways of teaching reading. This perception is fueled by the popular press – newspapers, magazines, and televi-

sion news shows – and sometimes even by education journals, which talk about the issue in terms of “reading wars” (Lemann, 1997; Rubin, 1997). Such stories take a strictly argumentative slant, depicting phonics and whole language as polar opposites, either/or choices for schools, teacher, and parents.

Primary grade literacy instruction has received unprecedented attention over the past decade. Unfortunately many state reading initiatives and local policy decisions seem to have been sucked into the A-versus-B approach to beginning reading instruction. Others have called for a “balanced approach” that would incorporate systematic attention to phonics while also maintaining a focus on good literature and comprehension instruction from the start. Perhaps the most influential report from this perspective is the work of the National Academy of Education, which issued the research report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and an accompanying volume aimed at parents, entitled *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children’s Reading Success* (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999).

Although contentions and controversies have been a notable characteristic of the field of beginning literacy instruction for the past quarter century, and although political squabbles continue, research has produced a number of substantial advances in knowledge about early literacy learning and teaching. These studies, combined with classic reading research from the earlier decades of the twentieth century, have yielded unprecedented insight into how young children learn to read and write and what a good instructional program needs to contain.

Balanced Approach to Reading Instruction

The current revival of phonics as the cure-all to all reading problems is not the answer to improving reading skills. Phonics should not be taught as a separate ‘subject’ with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization notes the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996). The key is a balanced approach and attention to each child’s individual needs. In order to accomplish this goal, teachers must keep in mind several key points, notes Strickland (Strickland & Morrow, 2000): First, teaching phonics is not the same as teaching reading: phonics is merely a tool for readers to use. Second, reading and spelling require much more than just phonics; spelling strategies and word-analysis skills are equally important. Third, memorizing phonics rules does not ensure application of those rules; teaching children how to use phonics is different from teaching

them about phonics. Fourth, learners need to see the relevance of phonics for themselves in their own reading and writing. Of equal

importance in literacy instruction is the emphasis on reading for meaning and the promotion of literature for enrichment and lifelong learning. The ability to match print to sound is a crucial part of becoming an independent and fluent reader. Children also need to develop and maintain a positive disposition toward literacy and the ability to think critically and imaginatively. The challenge for teachers is to help children build a solid literacy foundation in the primary grades, one that provides not only basic skills, but also multiple opportunities to reflect and reason, create 'possible worlds' through stories and dramatic play, and to share experiences, ideas, and opinions.

Schools can help all children become independent readers and writers through a balanced literacy program. The components of a balanced literacy program include reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, modeled/shared writing, interactive writing, and independent writing. In *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) outline comprehensive recommendations for literacy instruction throughout the elementary years.

To provide balanced reading instruction, schools must give thoughtful consideration to such elements as curriculum, assessment, and professional development. In light of current research, it is imperative that curriculum be designed according to developmental stages and benchmarks and that classroom-based assessment be seamless in order to provide information for both instruction and intervention. Reading instruction should include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Ongoing professional development for teachers is necessary if quality literacy instruction for all children is to be maintained.

Attention to these factors will assist schools in providing reading instruction that is based on an integration of the best of differing bodies and types of research and a theory of reading that puts meaning at the heart of reading from the very beginning, rather than as some distant goal.

The purpose of this study is to show the positive effect of a balanced reading instruction on kindergartners who had previously been immersed in a highly structured skills-based program. We hypothesized that kindergarten students who were instructed using a balanced reading instructional program would achieve at a higher level

than those who received a skills-based approach.

Method

Participants

This study took place at Glenwood Elementary School in Eden, Georgia. There were approximately 1278 students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. The population consisted of 67.5% Caucasian, 29.6% African American, 7% Asian, and 2.2% Hispanic origin. The school community has a high percentage of students from low income, single parent families. The 2000 census reported persons living below the poverty level to be 14.6% of the population. Females with children under 18 years of age headed 7.2% of the households in Putnam County. The free and reduced lunch program available at Glenwood Elementary School serves 66.3% of the student population.

The participants in this study were the students in 10 classes of kindergarten. This study took place over two consecutive years and included 129 students in the control group and 151 students in the experimental group of kindergarten during those two years. The age range of the students is five to seven years old.

Instrumentation

The students were assessed one-on-one with the Lexia Comprehensive Reading Test. This test is designed to evaluate student's reading abilities and skills in four areas: basic kindergarten readiness, phonics and decoding skills, sight words (Dolch 220), and reading comprehension. The first section of the test asks students to respond to basic questions about name, age, colors and phonemic awareness. The second section of the test evaluates phonics and decoding skills from letter recognition to the structure of language including complex Anglo-Saxon, Greek and Latin-derived words. The third section tests the student's ability to read Dolch Sight Words in a limited amount of time. The final section utilizes the Burns/Roe Informal Reading Inventory to evaluate reading comprehension and fluency and to provide Independent, Instructional and Frustration reading levels. An optional oral reading miscue analysis component is also included. The students were given a pretest at the beginning of the school year, a progress monitoring test in the winter, and a posttest at the end of the year.

Procedures

This study examined the Lexia reading scores of kindergarten students over a period of two years. For one of those years the students were instructed with only a skills-based approach to reading, Saxon Phonics and Spelling K. This is a success-oriented program that enables most children to develop a solid foundation in phonics. The phonics series, in keeping with the Saxon philosophy of incremental development and continual review, builds on prior learning. New learning is presented in small increments which are reviewed daily for the entire year. This is a supplemental program, meant to use in conjunction with any other reading program but it is the only program that was used that year.

In the second year, kindergarten teachers used Building Blocks, a balanced literacy program with Saxon Phonics, instead of relying on Saxon Phonics as their only program for reading instruction. This framework included reading to children, reading with children (shared reading, guided reading), children reading by themselves, writing for children (modeling), writing with children (interactive charts, predictable charts), children writing by themselves, phonemic awareness (through nursery rhymes, songs and chants, rhyming books, silly games with words, clapping syllables and hearing sounds), phonics (through “morning message”, tongue twisters, inventive spelling, and making words), and interesting words (words that have meaning to the children such as their names, environmental print, and our “popcorn words” – sight words). Teachers also worked on a reading endorsement throughout the year, which taught them specific strategies for incorporating a balanced reading program of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension into their curriculum.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained in writing from the principal of Glenwood Elementary School. After discovering that the data were not in the school’s database, the kindergarten 2002-2003 set of Lexia CRT scores were found in 129 students’ individual cumulative folders. All but two kindergarten teachers had a disk with Lexia CRT scores from 2003-04 so I was able to obtain 151 scores from that year.

Data Analysis Plan

Analysis of Covariance for the two groups was used to compare the end of the year scores using the beginning scores as the covariate. The alpha level for each test was set at .05. A Bonferroni correction was

used for follow-up tests.

Results

It was hypothesized that kindergarten students who were instructed using a balanced reading instructional program would achieve at a higher level than those who received a skills-based approach. The difference between the two groups at pretest was not statistically significant, $t(270) = 1.61, p = .11$. The means of the control group was 9.9 (SD = 3.7) on the Lexia CRT and the means of the experimental group with balanced reading instruction was 10.8 (SD = 4.9).

The posttest mean of the experimental group ($M = 28.0, SD = 10.3$) was higher than the mean of the control group ($M = 24.1, SD = 5.21$). The results of the ANCOVA using the pretest as the covariate showed that the difference was statistically significant, $F(2,274) = 95.8, p < .001$. Partial Eta Squared was .41 and observed power was 1.0 with alpha set at .05. Comprehension is the goal of reading, and the significance of this study suggests that the balanced reading program enabled students to read connected text and answer comprehension questions on the Lexia CRT that skills-based students were previously unable to do.

Each group consisted of 12 classes. There were ten teachers who were there for both years. The means for each teacher by year were higher in the experimental condition. See Figure 1.

Discussion

The major purpose of this study was to determine the effect of a balanced reading instruction on kindergartners who had previously been immersed in a highly structured skills-based program. The results support the hypothesis that kindergarten students who were instructed using a balanced reading instructional program would achieve at a higher level than those who received a skills-based approach. The data used for analysis was obtained from a computerized assessment that was given by classroom teachers. There was some threat to validity because the test administrator had a stake in the outcome and was not as objective as an outside administrator would have been. Another threat to validity that the balanced approach resulted in higher achievement is that all of the teachers also received more training in the teaching of reading through their reading endorsement coursework. Although scientifically, this teacher skill upgrade was a confounding variable, the improvement of the

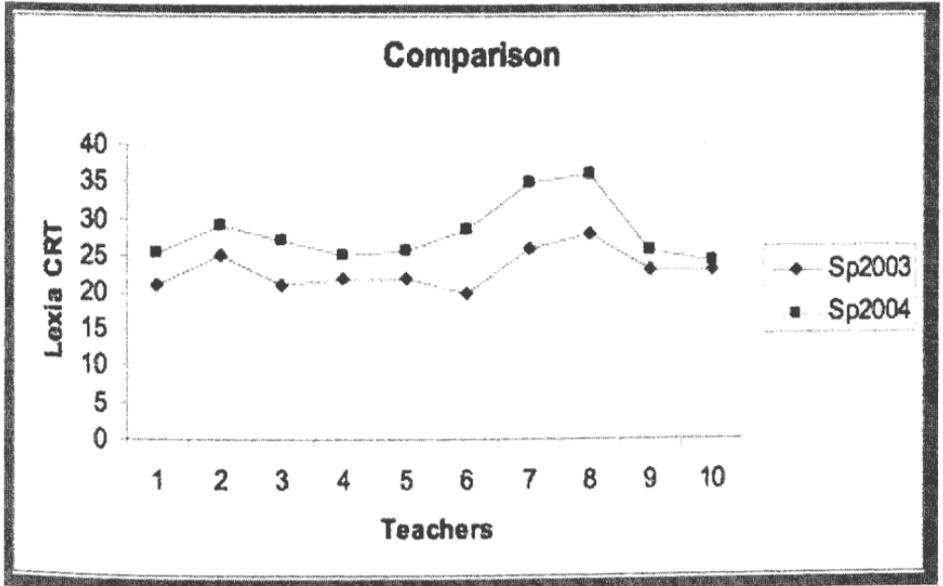
experimental cohort's test scores was beneficial to all. Teachers spent the same amount of time teaching reading, but divided that time between phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

The results found in this study are consistent with the reading research of the last decade. Phonics should not be taught as a separate 'subject' with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996). The key is a balanced approach and attention to each child's individual needs. The components of a balanced literacy program: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, were carried out during the second year with the experimental group using the Building Blocks model. Giving attention to each of these five pillars of reading, rather than devoting all instructional time to phonics, increased students' reading comprehension, which resulted in higher scores on the Lexia CRT. Teachers were also provided with ongoing professional development, which helped maintain quality literacy instruction.

The findings of this study support the ongoing reading research that puts an end to the debate between phonics and whole language. Neither approach ensured reading success, but a balanced approach, integrating the best of both, puts meaning at the heart of reading from the beginning. As balanced reading instruction sweeps the nation's schools, funded with federal initiatives, there is hope that we will help our students meet the literacy challenges of this century.

Figure 1

Teacher by teacher comparison for post-test scores in the Spring



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