A study of the effectiveness of a whole language instructional approach in stimulating emergent literacy development among at-risk kindergarten students

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A WHOLE LANGUAGE
INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH IN STIMULATING
EMERGENT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG
AT-RISK KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS

by
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A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division
of Rowan College
1997

Approved by
Date Approved April 22, 1997
ABSTRACT

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A WHOLE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH IN STIMULATING EMERGENT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG AT-RISK KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS, 1997.

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Stanley Urban Seminar in Learning Disabilities

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a whole language instructional approach as a means of stimulating the emergent literacy development of kindergarten students determined to be "at-risk." Meaningful growth on reliable observation surveys would indicate a possible correlation between the use of whole language instructional techniques and emergent literacy development.

A review of the literature indicates that young children acquire emergent literacy concepts and skills most efficaciously when they are immersed in a print-rich environment in which a variety of forms and functions are used in meaningful activities.

The study consisted of thirty students enrolled in a half-day kindergarten program. All students qualified for basic skills instruction based on their performance on an initial kindergarten screening device. Two groups of fifteen students each, evenly distributed by age and screening scores, were contrasted to determine if using alternative instructional methods would make a difference in their overall literacy development. The control group received direct instruction in isolated skills while the experimental group was instructed in a whole-language approach. The treatment program consisted of two, twenty-minute sessions per week for twenty-five weeks.
Analysis of pre- and posttest results as measured on various subtests of M.M. Clay's *Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (1993) seems to indicate that an intensified effort to expose at-risk children to reading and writing activities from a whole-language perspective can make literacy learning more meaningful for some children.
The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a whole language instructional approach as a means of stimulating the emergent literacy development of kindergarten students determined to be "at-risk." Meaningful gains were made by all students demonstrating the effectiveness of using whole language techniques as a means of delivering basic skills instruction.
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CHAPTER ONE
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION:

Proponents of the natural approach to literacy learning, or "whole language" as it is commonly called, argue that young children will learn to read and write if they are immersed in a print-rich environment in which a variety of literacy forms and functions are used in meaningful activities. Goodman (1986) has argued persuasively that learning to read and write is natural for young children. Research on emergent literacy shows that the preschool years are a remarkably active period for learning about written language. Studies demonstrate that natural encounters with print build a strong foundation for literacy. Through these encounters, children learn crucial distinctions between art and written language, as well as the difference between letters, lists, stories, and other print forms (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984).

Too often, however, the knowledge that an emergent literacy perspective better serves the child's present and future development is lost in the perceived need for children to demonstrate competence in specific subskills thought to be necessary for success in beginning reading and writing. A review of the literature indicates that current beginning reading instructional practices typically emphasize discrete skills such as letter-naming and letter-sound correspondence. Unfortunately, literacy practices that focus on isolated skill work at the expense of real reading and writing do not provide children with the foundation or the motivation to read and write well. Such practices fail to build on or take advantage of young children's emergent literacy abilities.
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:
The purpose of this study is to describe the emergent literacy perspective and its implications for children's initial reading instruction, particularly for children identified as "at-risk" upon entering kindergarten. Research has demonstrated that many children with learning problems develop literacy in ways remarkably similar to children without disabilities (Kamins, 1991). Therefore, it would seem likely that an intensified effort to expose at-risk children to more meaningfully integrated reading and writing activities would make a difference in their overall literacy development.

RESEARCH QUESTION:
Will kindergarten children who receive a whole language instructional approach make greater gains in their emergent literacy development than a control group?

DEFINITION OF TERMS AND RELATED THEORIES:
EMERGENT LITERACY:
The concept of "emergent literacy," a term coined by Clay (1966), and explicated by other early childhood educators (Strickland and Morrow, 1989; Teale and Sulzby, 1986), refers to a child's early experiences with reading and writing; experiences which begin to shape the child's view of print in the home and in the community in which he or she lives. Holdaway (1979) defines emergent literacy as the early reading and writing behaviors of young children that precede conventional literacy. Theory and research beginning in the early 1980s have provided new insights into how children develop as readers and writers. Compelling evidence now exists indicating that:
1. Young children begin the process of literacy development before they enter school;
2. Reading and writing develop concurrently and in an interrelated manner;
3. Literacy develops in everyday activities; and
4. Children learn about literacy through interactions with their world.

Furthermore, literacy development is part of the total communication process that includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984; Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Goodman, 1988).

Several assumptions underlie this new body of theory and research. First, children are viewed as active constructors of language who acquire literacy in a developmental process. Their competence grows as they gain inner control over constructing meaning from print (Clay, 1991). Secondly, literacy activities are meaning-based with an emphasis on the functions and social uses of written language. Goodman (1986) points out that children develop an awareness that "written language makes sense" (p.6) and come to know the functions as well as the forms of written language. Finally, literacy develops within a social context and is influenced by children's social interactions with others and the world around them. Growth does not take place without environmental support. Rather, with supportive instruction, children develop in language and literacy competence (Vygotsky, 1962).

WHOLE LANGUAGE:

The approach to learning which is based on the principle that all aspects of language are interrelated is called "whole language." Ken Goodman pioneered the whole language movement by proposing that "language is language only when it is whole" (Fountas and Hannigan, 1988, p.134). Goodman disagreed with the idea that "reading is a precise process
involving exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, and language units" (Fountas and Hannigan, 1989, p.134). He emphasized the use of functional oral language experiences as well as whole text to teach language and reading. Goodman's theory of teaching reading in a whole language context is based on the way most babies learn to speak their native language: through immersion in a meaningful, language-rich environment with many opportunities to model the language process (Fountas and Hannigan, 1989).

NEED FOR THE STUDY:

The term, "emergent literacy," conveys a different paradigm for understanding how children become print-savvy people. It is a construct that differs dramatically from the traditional paradigm of reading readiness. An emergent literacy perspective recognizes that children begin literacy long before entering school as they interact in their homes and communities. Young children develop as readers/writers; the two processes are not learned or taught in isolation. Reading readiness, on the other hand, assumes the existence of a set of skills that are necessary prerequisites to formal reading instruction. Reading is viewed as a process distinct from writing. Writing is not encouraged or taught until children can learn to read and spell.

Studies of current kindergarten practices in the area of literacy have led to the following conclusions about the nature of present-day literacy education in kindergarten.

1. Kindergarten programs generally emphasize traditional reading readiness skills such as auditory and visual discrimination, visual memory, and gross and fine motor skills.

2. Report cards specifically indicate that kindergarten children are expected to master certain skills such as recognizing upper and lower case letters, printing their
name, associating letters and sounds, and recognizing rhyming words.

3. Most kindergartens have a formal reading program tied to a basal series.

4. Little or no emphasis is placed on children's written work (Hatch and Freeman, 1989).

It is apparent from the research that the reading programs which became so firmly entrenched during the 1960s remain extremely prevalent today (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Equally apparent is the disparity between existing knowledge about how children development literacy and current initial instruction taking place in kindergartens. The recent research that describes children’s knowledge and use of written language prior to school should now be informing practice in early literacy education. Kindergarten practices need to be reconceptualized to reflect an emergent literacy perspective. This is especially true for the at-risk and special needs students who have traditionally been instructed in a skills-centered approach. For decades, the literature in special education has been dominated by articles and books on instructional strategies to improve discrete skills of letter-sound association, letter recognition, word identification, phonetic and structural analysis (Katims, 1994). Ironically, the very abstractness of many of these subskills presented in isolation constitutes the primary weakness in applying them to children who characteristically have problems acquiring, maintaining, and generalizing concepts (Hargis, 1982).

There is, therefore, the continuing need to explore and document ways in which different types of emergent literacy behaviors may be actively promoted in kindergarten and preschool populations who are considered to be "at-risk" or learning disabled.
VALUE OF THE STUDY:

The present study is prompted by an increased concern regarding the lack of knowledge about and more prevalent use of kindergarten instructional practices that reflect an emergent literacy perspective. Of special interest is the understanding of how emerging literacy behaviors may be developed in a group of children who are considered to be at-risk. It is an attempt to explore, experiment with, and document instructional practices which can be used to articulate an emergent literacy curriculum at the kindergarten level. The study will generate instructional objectives and activities that are linked to sound theory and practice. It will address issues that reflect problems educators now face in attempting to change their perspective on long-held beliefs. Predominant among these issues are writing and invented spelling, the development of skills, appropriate assessment, the need for collaborative decision making, and the need to help parents and teachers understand new approaches to literacy that may be out of their realm of experiences.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:
1. ASSESSMENT:

One of the major limitations of this study is that the subjects for the two groups being contrasted are selected through the use of a kindergarten screening device and thus not equated by a global intelligence quotient. Students are assessed using the Screening Test of Educational Prerequisite Skills (STEPS, 1990), an individually administered screening instrument for children who are preparing to enter kindergarten. The STEPS assessment collects a wide sampling of the knowledge, performance, and attitudes of a child. It identifies children who are learning adequately from their environment, as well as those children who need to be
monitored during early instruction or referred for further evaluation. However, the test does not suggest innate potential, nor does it take into account the natural and often rapid developmental growth that may take place between the time of screening in early spring and entry into school in the fall. Furthermore, this screening device, as well as other similar standardized measures, are not evaluative of young children's emergent literacy development. The result of this type of testing, now mandatory in many states, has been a focusing of attention on what five-year-olds cannot do rather on their abilities. Although such screening measures have undergone severe criticism for this very reason, they unfortunately continue to be highly regarded by some policymakers as definitive evidence of young children's learning (Chittendon, 1989).

2. BACKGROUND EXPERIENCES:

There are few who would argue the fact that children differ from each other in important ways. As research has demonstrated, children differ in language use and social competence, in their memory for what teachers view as important, and in the amount of attention they are willing to invest in new learning tasks. Most important, children differ in the personal literacy histories they bring to school, and families differ in the resources they have to promote the educational well-being of their children (McGill and Franzen, 1992). One of the limitations of this study is not being able to adequately determine the amount and quality of preschool literacy experiences that each subject brings to school.

3. TEACHER BELIEFS:

Teacher beliefs about the relationship between instruction and development are extremely important for the impact they have on a child's school learning. As researchers, Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie Shepard (1988) discovered, teachers who hold a nativist view do not believe that they
can accelerate development of children who arrive unready for kindergarten. Rather, they insist children be given the "gift of time" by holding them out of school for an extra year, placing them in a developmental kindergarten or other transitional-grade classroom, or retaining them in kindergarten. On the other hand, teachers who hold remedial or interactionist views of development revise their instruction, not their expectations for learning.

A limitation of this study is the variance of teacher beliefs as well as instructional methods among the regular kindergarten classrooms from which the subjects of this study are selected. Some children will be instructed in more traditional methods which call for mastery of isolated skills. Failure to learn these skills may result in one of the above placements. Yet other children, being instructed in a whole language approach which reflects an emergent literacy perspective, will have many more opportunities to interact in a print-rich environment and thus feel more successful. Since the students selected for this study and identified as at-risk spend most of their school day in the regular classroom, the beliefs, expectations and methodologies of their individual teachers will greatly impact on the outcome of this study.

OVERVIEW:

Literature pertinent to this study is reviewed in Chapter Two. The setting, population, instruments, and design of the study are presented in Chapter Three. Analysis of results of the study are described in Chapter Four. The effectiveness of instructional techniques reflecting an emergent literacy perspective is the focus of the literature to be reviewed.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION:

This study provides an overview of the research on emergent literacy and what it means for beginning reading programs. This review is divided into the following sections:

I. The emergent literacy perspective: how young children learn to read and write.

II. The mechanisms for literacy acquisition prior to formal instruction.

III. The nature of literacy experiences in early childhood settings - both in traditional programs and those implementing emergent literacy ideas.

IV. Ways of strengthening the match between young children's emergent literacy and instructional experiences.

V. The role of assessment from an emergent literacy perspective.
1. THE EMERGENT LITERACY PERSPECTIVE: HOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN TO READ AND WRITE

Although important studies contributing to an emergent literacy perspective date back several decades, this viewpoint represents a relatively new way of thinking about the reading and writing development of young children. Of paramount importance is the work of Marie Clay (1982), which has provided the foundation for these new ways of studying early literacy. Teale and Sulzby, in *Emergent Literacy* (Ablex, 1987), suggest that the new research sparked by Clay has several unique dimensions:

1. the age range studied has been extended to include children fourteen months and younger;
2. literacy is no longer regarded as simply a cognitive skill but as a complex activity with social, linguistic, and psychological aspects;
3. since literacy learning is multidimensional and tied to the child's natural surroundings, it is studied in both home and school environments; and
4. researchers are now studying literacy from the child's point of view.

As a result of this recent research, new understandings have emerged regarding the origins of literacy development. Reading and writing start much earlier than once suspected. Some key insights into early literacy have led to the following conclusions.

Language is learned through use rather than through practice exercises on how to use language (Harste and Woodward, 1989). Young children understand the purpose of print and expect it to be meaningful, realizing that writing is functional and purposeful and that it communicates ideas and feelings (Weisman and Watson, 1980).

Because the writing attempts four-year-old children
produce prior to formal schooling reflect the written language of their culture, we can no longer assume that children come to school without some knowledge of written language. Young children have some knowledge of linearity, directionality, spacing, sequencing, patterns, forms, repetitions, and uniformity of shape and size (Clay, 1982; Weisman and Watson, 1980).

Because the markings three-year-old children make when asked to draw a picture of themselves look quite different from the markings they make when asked to write their name, we can no longer dismiss these efforts as mere scribbling (Herste and Woodward, 1989). Also, as they write or draw, they use talking as a way of planning. They elaborate meaning, generate ideas, seek assistance and evaluate, suggesting a well-developed understanding of written language (Smith, 1981).

By age five and six, most children have sorted out how language varies by context of use and have begun to explore the grapho-phonemic system of language. Their phonetic writing has been called "invented spelling" and has been found to progress systematically and predictably. Read (1975) has shown that while children's first attempts to write may not appear meaningful because of random arrangement of letters and incorrect spelling, children are often using letters purposely. Chomsky (1979) believes that invented spelling is a concrete way for children to acquire written language knowledge.

By age four, the texts that children produce when asked to write a story, as opposed to a letter, are beginning to be distinctive. Their stories sound like stories, look like stories, and function like stories. Their letters sound like letters, look like letters, and function like letters. By age six, these distinctions are well developed and much more marked (Herste and Woodward, 1989). Children are aware of print, associating letters with things and people (Hiebert, 1981). They have some proficiency in letter naming, visual
and auditory discrimination and word-to-word correspondence between writing and speech (Mason, 1980).

Most children as young as three can read "Stop" on a stop sign, "McDonald's" when shown the golden arches, and "Crest" on a toothpaste carton. By age six, all children can read these and other items of environmental print they frequently encounter (Harste and Woodward, 1989). Young children use their environment to make sense of writing (Hiebert, 1978). Their responses to the task of reading the message on a page or on a sign indicate that they have amassed numerous perceptions and abilities related to reading.

By age three, when asked to read or pretend to read a book, children start to vary their normal speech to sound like "book talk." By age six, children who have been read to frequently have internalized the structure of stories in their culture and can produce many fine stories of their own. As Pappas and Brown (1987) conclude, young children develop a register for the language in books that differs from language in conversations.

Learning proceeds from the known to the unknown. Comprehension and learning are now seen as a search for patterns that connect, and growth is seen as a search for ever wider patterns. Literacy develops in context with meaning as children struggle to bring some sense to the world around them. (Foster, Haugh, and Matthews, 1991).

Language learning is risky business. Children learn best in low-risk environments where exploration is accepted and current efforts are socially supported and understood. Language is a social event. Most of what we know about language has been learned from being in the presence of others. Although the gradual expansion of language and print awareness into literacy is accomplished without formal instruction, it is a teaching-learning event dependent on mediation or social interaction as a key ingredient (Teale, 1984).
II. THE MECHANISMS FOR LITERACY ACQUISITION PRIOR TO FORMAL INSTRUCTION

In addition to the literature reviewed thus far, there is another body of research concerned with the mechanisms for literacy acquisition prior to formal schooling. These studies point toward aspects of home environments that seem to promote literacy acquisition in preschool children. Knowledge about the manner in which young children acquire literacy behaviors before school entry can provide valuable information for the design of school literacy programs. By creating school experiences that build upon children's existing knowledge and acquisition processes, the transition to school learning is made an easier, more meaningful, and more successful process.

Home literacy events can be analyzed in terms of a number of dimensions, including their psychological qualities and their academic content. The literacy episodes that have been documented in home environments of high socioeconomic families have several common psychological characteristics. They are high on meaningfulness, child initiation, and child direction; and there is a partnership quality to the adult-child relationship (Schickendanz et al., 1990). Additional studies report that opportunities to relay information about language in day-to-day interactions are endless in homes, regardless of socioeconomic levels (Anderson and Stokes, 1984).

One characteristic of preschool environments in which children acquire literacy concepts and skills is the opportunity to see adults using literacy for work and pleasure (Hiebert, 1980). When adults involve children in the use of literacy, children come to understand the functions of reading and writing and experience the enjoyment that reading and writing bring (Taylor, 1983). Research
documents that such home-based literacy events are meaningful because they occur in the course of everyday events (Schickendanz et al., 1990).

Home-based literacy events are meaningful in another way - tutoring about specific details is not separated from broader language contexts. Indeed, efforts by parents to convey information about the functions and forms of literacy as part of everyday occurrences have proven more successful than having parents drill their children on the ABCs (Taylor, 1983).

Tobin (1981) identified the presence of games that focused on word patterns and word rhyming as one of two factors (out of 85 factors) that distinguished the home environments of young children who were reading when they entered kindergarten from those who were not. Tobin's other factor, directing children's attention to the relationship between spoken and written words, also speaks to the importance of parent-child interactions regarding literacy.

Another parent-child activity that has been substantiated repeatedly as facilitating literacy acquisition is storybook reading (Snow and Ninco, 1986). One characteristic associated with effective storybook reading by parents is connecting content with what children already know (Flood, 1977). Other characteristics of effective parent-child reading include asking children questions during reading, encouraging children to ask questions, and responding to children's questions (Shanahan and Hogan, 1983). Finally, it has been found that children who are avid readers come from homes in which there is a designated time for reading independently, such as prior to bedtime or dinner (Fielding, Wilson and Anderson, 1986).

Young children also acquire literacy concepts and skills through the use of toys and materials. Although the effectiveness of some of the newer toys on the market is undocu-
mented, some of the simpler toys and materials of decades past have proven their worth. For instance, chalkboards were found to be present in the homes of early readers and not in the homes of matched, non-reading counterparts (Durkin, 1966). It must be noted, however, that even though children may play with materials and toys independently or with their peers, their understanding of their use typically depends on parental involvement (Fielding, Wilson, and Anderson, 1986).

Home-based literacy events can also be analyzed in terms of their academic content. Schickendanz et al (1990) concluded that preschoolers' home-based literacy episodes contain as much, if not more, academic content than school-based episodes. Furthermore, the content is often more explicit and allows the child more time for self-direction and experimentation.

Studies of children's initiation into literacy in the home highlight qualities of environments that help literacy become an interesting and valued part of children's lives. They also highlight the variation in the kinds of experiences with literacy that children bring to school with them. The general qualities of environments for literacy learning at home have influenced researchers' efforts to study how these qualities might be realized in early childhood classrooms.
III. THE NATURE OF LITERACY EXPERIENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

There has been much debate about basing initial reading experiences on the emergent literacy perspective as opposed to the more traditional concept of reading readiness. The question of when children should learn to read and write has been researched extensively since the 1930s (Hall, 1985). This section attempts to examine prereading and beginning reading from both an historical and current perspective with emphasis on implications of recent findings on children's literacy learning for instruction.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The concern with readiness began in the late 1920s as evidence of the high failure rate in first grade accumulated as standardized tests became widely used. The child study movement at that time stressed individuality in all aspects of child development. This "whole child" notion had a number of positive as well as negative effects. The examination of child growth and development and the recognition of individual variations in achievement and learning patterns still have merit today.

However, there were many negative effects as well. Easy explanations of failure abounded. Perceptual problems, cultural disadvantage, nutritional deficiencies, social maladjustment, physical immaturity, and other factors, although legitimate concerns, were too often cited as excuses for children's difficulties in coping with beginning reading.

In response to the needs of the "not ready child," reading readiness materials were developed to prepare children for reading. These materials were widely used from the 1930s to the 1950s and reviewed periodically. Readiness materials contained little print and did very little to develop the written awareness needed for success in reading (Hall, 1985).
Readiness tests were frequently used as a sole measure of children's readiness. The misuse of these tests was evident in the practice of grouping children based on their test scores and in the labeling of children. Although these tests were insightful in a diagnostic way, observant teachers could determine the needs of children without relying on such measures.

The Russian triumph of Sputnik in 1957, the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955, and considerable evidence pointing to well-established cognitive development in young children resulted in new attention to the old question of when and how children should and do begin to read. The work of Durkin (1975) suggested that despite individual differences among children, many children can and do learn to read at ages four and five.

These findings gave impetus to the initiation of instruction in readiness and beginning reading in some preschool and kindergarten programs. At the same time, there were many who held the extreme opposite position that kindergarten should be devoid of pencil and paper activities.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the pressure for early reading instruction in preschool and kindergarten settings accelerated. Instructional programs stressed letter-naming, sound-letter correspondence and basic sight vocabulary. These programs often lacked opportunities for natural literacy development that can occur through meaningful use of print.

Storybook reading by the teacher, once a staple of any kindergarten program had been supplanted by demands for accelerated curriculum. Available evidence indicates that the majority of kindergarten children's school reading programs today are still more likely to consist of practicing discrete skills than of listening to and writing stories. (Hatch and Freeman, 1989).

The findings of Hiebert (1985) also suggest that
children with limited literacy experiences at home may be receiving developmentally inappropriate readiness experiences in school at early ages.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVE:

Although the readiness concept has been and is still viewed as a broad spectrum which includes child development and program content, there is a marked distinction between readiness and beginning reading. The newer term, "emergent reading" (Holdaway, 1979) does not focus on prerequisites for reading but instead on children's gradual acquisition of a "literacy set" through extensive and active experience with books, with immersion in print in the environment, and mastery of oral language.

The failure of conventional instruction to take into account children's existing knowledge about written and oral language has prompted the initiation of many emergent literacy programs. Taylor et al (1986) found that children who were read to understood stories better, attended to picture clues more, inferred causal relationships better, and told more connected stories. In yet another study of full implementation of an emergent literacy program, it was found that on tests of linguistic awareness and concepts of print, those children performed significantly higher than their counterparts in a low-implementation class (Taylor et al, 1986).

Morrow and Weinstein (1982) studied the ways in which library design changes and activities with books influenced kindergarteners' use of books during free play. They concluded that increased attention to literature, whether it occurred through changes in library design or activities, increased children's use of books during free play.

McCormick and Mason (1984) developed a set of "little books" - several pages in length with a key word or phrase on each page - which proved to significantly increase literacy development among Head Start children.
Anecdotal accounts of other treatments from an emergent literacy perspective include a study by Chomsky (1979) describing invented spelling as an incentive for children's reading. Hiebert (1986) suggests familiar print from the environment as a means for guiding children into word identification. Neuman and Roskos (1990) demonstrated that clearly defined play centers stocked with appropriate literacy props can support play with the social roles and functions of print. While the effects of these and other applications have not been fully investigated, they do attest to the effectiveness of programs that involve children with literacy in a variety of functional means.

In summary, it appears that young children acquire emergent literacy concepts and skills most efficaciously in contexts where they are involved in using written language. The key ingredient in early literacy programs now appears to be written language awareness. This awareness involves both the functions and forms of print. Conventional contexts of formal reading instruction differ from the contexts of preschool literacy acquisition in that the forms of literacy are emphasized more than the functions.
IV. STRENGTHENING THE MATCH BETWEEN YOUNG CHILDREN'S EMERGENT LITERACY AND INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCES

The analyses of conventional programs (Durkin, 1987; Hiebert and McWhorter, 1987) seem to convey the message that young children's literacy abilities are not being built upon or developed in traditional beginning reading programs. Practices for the introduction of reading should not be the stilted readiness and beginning reading programs that have characterized kindergarten and first grade for so long. Hall (1985) found that readiness materials have so little written language that their use has not resulted in the development of the written language awareness needed for reading. The match between young children's emergent literacy and typical beginning reading instructional practices is not very great.

Recent implementations of emergent literacy findings in classrooms suggest that a better match can be achieved between children's emergent literacy and beginning reading instruction by allowing children to participate in a variety of reading and writing activities. These new programs achieve a balance between the functions that some educators have touted as the only necessary components for reading acquisition (Goodman and Goodman, 1979) and the skills-centered approach that now seems to dominate beginning reading instruction. The perspective of emergent literacy suggests a balance between meaning and decoding (Chall, 1987) and between function and form (Goodman and Goodman, 1979).

As documented earlier in this study, current research on oral and written language development depicts children as impressive communicators. By the time they enter an educational setting, all normal children are developing or have developed appropriate ways of learning and communicating within their own families and communities. Once they are in school settings, teachers need to allow children to continue to make sense of situations in light of what they already
Because children come to school with varied histories, early childhood educators need to provide curricula that are responsive to diverse groups of children. They need to provide a range of developmentally appropriate settings, not a single type of setting appropriate for all children (Bredekamp, 1987).

Choices among types of curriculum vary sharply in preschool and primary grade programs. The most widely debated contrast among types of programs is the "developmentally appropriate" versus the "academic." Various studies of classrooms that are deemed to be developmentally appropriate provide evidence that less academically-oriented programs are associated with children demonstrating fewer stress behaviors (Burts et al, 1990). Furthermore, additional studies (Hirsh-Pasek et al, 1990) suggest a possible lessening in creativity and emotional well-being among the more academic (teacher-directed) programs, with no apparent academic advantages.

In terms of curricula for language and literacy, these programs often translate into "whole language" (holistic) versus "phonics" (skills-oriented) instructional approaches. Consistent with the psycholinguistic model of development, whole language advocates believe that the development of literacy is a natural by-product of immersion in high-quality literacy environments. In contrast, other reading educators argue that learning to break the code (phonics) is a critical part of primary-level reading, and that breaking the code is most likely to occur when students are provided systematic instruction in decoding (Chall, 1967). There is a growing research base that concludes that such instruction increases reading competence (Adams, 1990), especially for students who experience difficulty learning to read when instruction is less explicit (Mather, 1992).

In practice, whole language classrooms are not in the majority. Many studies including Smith (1987), Durkin (1987)
Because children come to school with varied histories, early childhood educators need to provide curricula that are responsive to diverse groups of children. They need to provide a range of developmentally appropriate settings, not a single type of setting appropriate for all children (Bredekamp, 1987).

Choices among types of curriculum vary sharply in preschool and primary grade programs. The most widely debated contrast among types of programs is the "developmentally appropriate" versus the "academic." Various studies of classrooms that are deemed to be developmentally appropriate provide evidence that less academically-oriented programs are associated with children demonstrating fewer stress behaviors (Burts et al., 1990). Furthermore, additional studies (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 1990) suggest a possible lessening in creativity and emotional well-being among the more academic (teacher-directed) programs, with no apparent academic advantages.

In terms of curricula for language and literacy, these programs often translate into "whole language" (holistic) versus "phonics" (skills-oriented) instructional approaches. Consistent with the psycholinguistic model of development, whole language advocates believe that the development of literacy is a natural by-product of immersion in high-quality literacy environments. In contrast, other reading educators argue that learning to break the code (phonics) is a critical part of primary-level reading, and that breaking the code is most likely to occur when students are provided systematic instruction in decoding (Chall, 1967). There is a growing research base that concludes that such instruction increases reading competence (Adams, 1990), especially for students who experience difficulty learning to read when instruction is less explicit (Mather, 1992).

In practice, whole language classrooms are not in the majority. Many studies including Smith (1987), Durkin (1987)
nominated as effective in promoting literacy and formulated a number of conclusions as to what constitutes effective literacy instruction. These conclusions provide a framework for strengthening the match between young children's emergent literacy and instructional experiences. They include the following practices.

1. Effective teachers attempt to create literate environments which include a classroom library, displays of children's work, chart stories and poems, word walls or lists, learning centers, and posted signs and labels.

2. Effective learning environments are rich with stories. Teachers read and reread stories, tell stories, use audiotaped or prerecorded videotapes.

3. Teachers fully committed to whole language instruction are less likely to use basals. Most teachers surveyed claimed to be somewhat whole language oriented.

4. Effective teachers use modeling and scaffolding techniques both in reading and writing.

5. Literacy instruction is integrated with the rest of the curriculum through the use of themes.

6. Effective teaching is sensitive to individual student needs permitting progression at one's own pace, and attempts to access the learning style of each student.

7. Basic skills are taught in the context of actual reading and writing. There is much more commitment to the teaching of phonics in ways that are consistent with ongoing reading and writing and student needs during reading and writing than to teaching phonics in isolation.

8. Effective teaching of reading incorporates choral reading, shared reading, read-alouds with big books, the use of outstanding literature, picture books and predictable stories.

9. Effective writing experiences include journal writing, response-to-literature logs, poems, and experience stories dictated by the students.

10. Extensive efforts are made by teachers to make literacy
and literacy instruction motivating. They include the following factors: the classroom as a risk-free environment; positive feedback; conveying the importance of reading and writing in life; setting an exciting mood for reading and writing; encouraging an "I can read, I can write" attitude; accepting the child where he is; conveying the goal of every lesson and why it is important to students; encouraging ownership of reading and writing by having students make decisions about what they will read and write; and selecting material to be read in class based on student interests.

In summary, it appears that effective teaching integrates many literacy instructional components that are supported empirically. Placing young children in environments that invite and support literacy stimulates them to do things that are literate (Morrow, 1991; Neuman and Roskos, 1990).
V. THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT FROM AN EMERGENT LITERACY PERSPECTIVE

Closely linked to the issue of appropriate curricula, is the issue of how to assess children as they engage in literacy activities. To a degree, kindergarten and preschool programs have traditionally been shielded from widespread formal assessment, partly because of concern about the appropriateness of formal testing of young children, and partly because early childhood programs were considered experiences preliminary to the "real" elementary school education and, therefore, not sufficiently academic to warrant testing. However, with escalating academic demands and a tendency toward more structured approaches to the teaching of basic skills in kindergarten, tests are increasingly becoming part of the lives of four and five-year-old children in school (Shepard and Smith, 1988). Furthermore as the number of programs available to young children grows, so, too, does the number of standardized measures. There are tests that children take before entering preschool or kindergarten and then before entering first grade. These screening devices often classify children into specially-funded or transitional kindergartens versus regular first grade. Such practices appear to be increasing despite the results of research that show transitional classes and kindergarten retention do little to improve children's school achievement in later years (Shepard and Smith, 1988).

Standardized tests function primarily to provide information not about individuals, but about groups of children to people outside the classroom, such as administrators and boards of education. Test scores have the advantage of being "comparable" from school to school and state to state. They are well-designed to measure and compare products, i.e. children's performance on specific questions or tasks (Clay, 1990). They effectively assess curricula built upon uniform
and specific objectives for all children.

Curricula that are intended to respond to the diverse needs of young children are more difficult to assess within this traditional framework. Educators and researchers have learned a great deal about how children become readers and writers long before schooling begins and, as a result, alternative ways of assessing children's learning and development have surfaced.

Proponents of the whole language approach recommend qualitative methods of assessment that focus on the processes of teaching and learning in particular classrooms (Goodman, 1989). Teachers' own observations and documentations are deemed more appropriate forms of assessment, based on the belief that assessing what children do and know is intrinsically linked to what is taught and learned. Furthermore, a major purpose of assessment is to guide further instruction and individualization in meeting children's needs. Child-oriented assessment, therefore, has a clear and valid function; it becomes part of the ongoing dialogue between children and teachers, and gives direction to future learning tasks (Dyson and Genishi, 1991).

The issue of what a developmentally appropriate early childhood assessment program should encompass is multifaceted and primarily concerned with literacy development and the relationship of assessment to curriculum and instruction. Many researchers have articulated their support for various alternatives to traditional testing (Dyson and Genishi, 1991; Kami, 1990, Chittenden and Courtney, 1989). A common theme reflected in their research is that assessment should be conceived of broadly to reflect the abilities of children in a number of domains, and that it should reflect the judgments and knowledge of those closest to children, including parents and teachers.

Many educators share the belief that "the major goal of assessment is optimal learning for all" (Johnston, 1987, p.335) and focus on the testing-teaching relationship. The
most important factor in the attempt to foster optimal learning is what the teacher does in the classroom and thus assessment should contribute to improving classroom practice.

Ironically, Stiggins (1985) found that the information teachers use and need most to teach individual students in the classroom does not come from standardized tests. Instead, teachers report relying on information from tests that they themselves make up and from structured performance samples. Furthermore, rigidly standardized and/or highly constrained procedures seriously underestimate the capacities of young children because the children's styles of handling a complex task may be incompatible with the way the task is posed in the test situation (Teale, 1988). Informal assessment methods are especially important for early childhood because young children have not yet become socialized to the activity of test taking. Thus, more than at any other time in a child's development, there is a risk of erring in judgment if standardized tests become regarded as the only legitimate means of assessment.

The reconceptualization of the beginnings of literacy in young children into what has become known as the emergent literacy perspective has profound implications for assessment of early childhood learning. The emergent literacy research gives valuable insights into how children develop. Consequently, assessment based on instruction should be keyed into these insights.

Assessment of young children's literacy should be conducted in a variety of settings. Extensive use of performance samples and observation will ensure a representative picture of a child's strengths and weaknesses. Systematic development data should be gathered on young children's (1) concepts of the functions and conventions of written language, (2) text comprehension (i.e. their ability to understand and recall books read to them), (3) abilities to read print commonly found in their homes and communities, (4) emergent reading of storybooks (strategies children use
to read books before they are able to read conventionally), (5) metalinguistic awareness (word awareness and phonological awareness), (6) emergent writing strategies (including composing, spelling, and strategies for reading their own writing), and (7) knowledge of letters, letter sounds, and the relationship between them. (Teale, 1988).

The above-mentioned list reveals that current understandings of young children's literacy knowledge and strategies have moved beyond traditional reading readiness. The effect of the emergent literacy perspective on instructional activities is evident in recent research literature. Hiebert (1986) and Schickendanz (1996) have researched the use of environmental print in the classroom. Predictable books and shared-book experiences have been expounded by Bridge (1986) and Holdaway (1979). Repeated readings of storybooks has been researched by Martinez and Roser (1985) and Sulzby (1987). Writing has been investigated by Crowell, Kawakami, and Wong (1985) and Martinez and Teale (1987). By taking new perspectives on young children's reading and writing, and by employing innovative methods for their investigations, the above-mentioned researchers have provided important new insights into early childhood literacy learning which have paved the way for the development of more appropriate assessment programs.

The changes in the curriculum that an emergent literacy perspective engenders are considerable. Unfortunately, the assessment procedures currently sanctioned for use with young children measure very few of the factors reviewed in this section. To bring instruction and assessment together, researchers and teachers need to continue developing instruments and techniques so that a repertoire of valid, reliable measures are available. Furthermore, administrators and policy makers need to ensure that data gathered from such functional measures are legitimized and supported in the school environment, if we are to achieve a closer match
between instructional beliefs and practices and the assessment and evaluation of literacy learning.
CHAPTER THREE
DESIGN OF THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of exposing at-risk children to more meaningfully integrated reading and writing activities as part of their basic skills instructional program.

To accomplish the general purpose of this study, data was obtained and used to answer the following research question: Will kindergarten children who receive a whole language instructional approach make greater gains in their emergent literacy development than a control group?

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE:

The participants in this study were all involved in a half-day kindergarten program and all enrolled in the basic skills instructional program of the district, based upon qualifying scores obtained on their initial kindergarten screening. The students attended Waterford Elementary School, located in Waterford, New Jersey. This community is located at the eastern edge of Camden County, approximately halfway between Philadelphia and Atlantic City. It is a suburban/rural community with limited development in some areas due to Pinelands regulations and expansion in others. The demographics are quite diverse due to an influx of upwardly mobile families as well as areas of lower income families. The students in the sample population, for the most part, provided a fair representation of the community as a whole, in terms of racial and economic distribution.

There were a total of 30 children who took part in the study; 15 in the experimental group and 15 in the control group. This number included 16 girls and 14 boys. All of the children were at least 5 years old at the start of the school year, with age ranges varying from 5 years, 0 months to 5 years, 11 months. This data is summarized in Table One. One child in the experimental group had prior public school
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year-month</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5-10</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of students: 15

Total number of students: 15
experience in the district's program for the preschool handicapped. Of the other 14 children in the experimental group, 7 had some preschool experience in the private sector. Of the 15 children in the control group, 11 had preschool experience. Members of the sample population as well as the control group were evenly distributed among four different kindergarten homerooms.

DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUMENTS USED:

1. **Screening Test for Educational Prerequisite Skills**

   Each student in the study was determined to be eligible for Basic Skill Instruction based upon scores obtained on the Screening Test for Educational Prerequisite Skills (STEPS, 1990), an individually administered screening instrument for children preparing to enter kindergarten. This test is usually administered in the spring prior to school entry. New students are tested upon entry. However, no new students arriving after October 1, were included in this study.

   Children are given scores ranging from 5A to 1A or 5B to 1B based upon language and cognitive abilities. Any child with a score of 3A and below (language) is considered eligible for the program. Any child receiving a "B" score from 5 to 1 is eligible since potential cognitive delay is suggested from the test results. One child in the experimental group was admitted to the program with a 5A based upon teacher suggestion and parental input regarding emotional issues. Most of the children in the study fall in the 3A to 1A range. This data is summarized in Table Two.

2. **The Observational Survey of Early Literacy Achievement**

   Each student was pre- and posttested as part of this study to determine growth in literacy development using selected subtests from Marie Clay's *Observational Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (1993). Assessments included "Letter Identification," "Concepts About Print," and a writing vocabulary sample.
### TABLE TWO

**RESULTS OF KINDERGARTEN SCREENING (STEPS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP</th>
<th>CONTROL GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>5B</td>
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<tr>
<td>4B</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>3B</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total number of students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP</th>
<th>CONTROL GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The "Letter Identification" subtest assesses knowledge of letters/sounds. It notes the child's preferred mode of identifying letters, the letters a child confuses, and the number of unknown letters. Reliability and validity studies are 0.97 split-half and 0.85 respectively (Clay, 1966). Results are reported as stanines.

The "Concepts About Print" subtest assesses a child's awareness that print (not pictures) tells the story, that letters and clusters of letters called words, that there are first and last letters in words, that you can choose upper and lower case letters, that there are spaces for a reason, and that punctuation marks have meanings. The booklet entitled "Sand" (Clay, 1972) was used for the pretest and "Stones" (Clay, 1979) for the posttest.

The "Concepts About Print" subtest has proved to be a sensitive indicator of one group of behaviors which support reading acquisition. As non-readers become readers, changes occur in "Concepts of Print" scores. This set of observations is able to capture changes over time in the first year of school (Clay, 1993). Reliability studies were done using test-retest reliability coefficients (0.73-0.89) and corrected split-halves (0.84-0.88). Validity was indicated to be 0.79 (Clay, 1966). Scores are reported as stanines.

A writing vocabulary task, constructed to encourage the child to write down all the words he knows how to write, was administered also. This simple test is said to be reliable and has a high relationship with reading words in isolation (Clay, 1993). How children respond changes over time, and highly competent children can demonstrate long lists of words even after a limited time at school. Scoring includes correct spelling, formation of letters, and writing from left to right, and are reported as stanines.

4. Other Instruments:
Other functional data-gathering instruments included the
distribution of a parent interview and "My Child As a Reader," an observational guide for parents, adapted from Literacy Assessment: A Handbook of Instruments, edited by Lynn K. Rhodes (1993). These instruments were used to determine the amount and quality of literacy experiences the child had at home. Although not valid in a statistical sense, they do help to present a more meaningful picture of the child.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY:

The format used in this study involved the administration of pretests, subsequent treatment and then posttest administration. The treatment period was for a total of 25 weeks, spanning approximately October, 1996 to March, 1997. Treatment for the experimental group included the use of integrated reading and writing activities which incorporated basic skills required for mastery at the kindergarten level. The control group, on the other hand, had as its instructional focus, the remediation of isolated skills.

Children in both samples were seen in small groups of two or three children, at least twice per week for twenty-minute sessions.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA:

Analysis of pretest and posttest data will be accomplished by observation and visual inspection of test results. If a child gains at least one stanine on each of the observational survey subtests, that will be regarded as meaningful improvement in literacy development.
CHAPTER FOUR
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

INTRODUCTION:

It was hypothesized that an intensified effort to expose at-risk children to more meaningfully integrated reading and writing activities would make a difference in their overall literacy development.

To determine the effectiveness of using whole language instructional techniques as opposed to direct instruction of isolated skills, a group of 30 students, divided evenly by age and initial screening scores, were taught by two different teachers using different methodologies.

All students in the sample group were pretested prior to initiation of the treatment program (Sept.-Oct., 1996). Treatment occurred twice weekly for twenty minutes for a duration of 25 weeks. Children were posttested in March, 1997.

For the students in the control group, each session consisted of direct instruction of isolated skills deemed necessary for mastery of the kindergarten program. Children in the experimental group were exposed to the same skills embedded in a variety of whole-language reading and writing activities.

RESULTS:

An attempt was made to answer the following research question: Will children who receive a whole language instructional approach make greater gains in their emergent literacy development than a control group? The proposition was set forth that a group of 15 at-risk kindergarten students receiving whole language instruction would make more meaningful gains in literacy development than their counterparts who were being instructed in isolated skills only, as measured on two subtests of M.M. Clay's Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (1993).
Based on a comparison of scores reported as stanines from a pre- and posttest on "Letter Identification" and "Concepts About Print" subtests, students who gained at least one stanine were considered to have shown meaningful growth.

According to the above criteria, 100% of the children in the experimental group increased in letter identification skills by at least 2 stanines. In contrast, 87% of the control group showed growth of at least 1 stanine. The mean posttest stanine score of the experimental group was 6; for the control group, 5.

On the "Concepts About Print" subtest, 100% of the students in the experimental group showed growth of at least one stanine, while 87% of the control group did likewise. The mean posttest stanine score for the experimental group was 6; for the control group, 5. This data is summarized in Tables Three, Four and Five.

A third subtest, a writing sample, was also given as a pre- and posttest. However, it was deemed to be a developmentally inappropriate task for the students in the study at this time. In order to improve by one stanine, students would need to write more than thirteen words from memory correctly. Although students have been observed to make significant gains in their ability to understand the concept of "words," their writing consists mostly of invented spellings at the present time. Results of this test were considered to be statistically invalid.

ANALYSIS:
As mentioned in Chapter 1, in the section on Limitations, it is difficult to definitively associate growth or lack of it based solely on this treatment program. Innate potential, developmental growth, background knowledge and experiences, parental involvement and various methodologies used by their regular classroom teachers all have a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT</th>
<th>LETTER IDENTIFICATION SUBTEST</th>
<th>CONCEPTS OF PRINT SUBTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
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TABLE FOUR
Pretest and Posttest results for control group
(Scores reported as stanines)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT</th>
<th>LETTER IDENTIFICATION</th>
<th>CONCEPTS OF PRINT</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SUBTEST</td>
<td>SUBTEST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Pretest</td>
<td>Posttest</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>
## TABLE FIVE

**GROWTH IN PERCENTAGES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STANINE</th>
<th>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP</th>
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<td>LETTER ID</td>
<td>CONCEPTS</td>
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<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase of one stanine</td>
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<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase of two stanines</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase of three stan.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase of four stan.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of students showing gain: 100% 100% 87% 87%
significant impact on the outcome of this study.

However, it is interesting to note that of the children in the experimental group, only half of them had any prior school experiences. Yet they made more substantial gains in literacy growth when compared to the control group, of which two-thirds had some preschool experience.

Overall, results of the study seem to indicate that whole language instructional techniques produce greater gains than do more traditional methods and may be a more valid way of reaching some children who do not respond satisfactorily to a skills-oriented approach.
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a whole language instructional approach as a means of stimulating the emergent literacy development of kindergarten students determined to be "at-risk." Meaningful growth on reliable instruments would indicate a possible correlation between the use of whole language instructional techniques and emergent literacy development.

A review of the literature indicates that young children acquire literacy concepts and skills most efficaciously when they are immersed in a print-rich environment in which a variety of forms and functions are used in meaningful activities. The whole language approach emphasizes the interaction between student, language and experience and has a strong research basis as a method of reading instruction, particularly at its initial stages.

The premise upon which most basic skills programs operate is that children who are determined to be "at-risk" of later academic failure need to be taught isolated skills through direct instruction. The idea of teaching children those same basic skills in a more meaningfully integrated manner through well-planned, comprehensive, and individualized instructional sessions is one that has not been thoroughly investigated or documented in the research. This theory has given impetus to the present study.

The thirty students in this study were enrolled in a half-day kindergarten program in Waterford, New Jersey. All qualified for basic skills instruction based on their individual performance on an initial kindergarten screening device. Two groups of 15 students each, evenly distributed by age and screening scores, were contrasted to determine if using opposing instructional methods would make a difference in their overall literacy development. The control group received direct instruction of isolated skills deemed
necessary for mastery of the kindergarten program, while the experimental group was instructed in a whole language approach. The treatment program consisted of two, twenty-minute sessions per week for a duration of 25 weeks.

Analysis of pre- and posttest data as measured on various subtests of M.M. Clay's Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (1993) seems to indicate that an intensified effort to expose at-risk students to reading and writing activities from a whole language perspective can make literacy learning more meaningful for some children.

FINDINGS:

The results of the study indicate that 100% of the students in the experimental group receiving whole language instruction showed growth in literacy development compared to 87% of their counterparts receiving direct instruction of isolated skills. What is more significant is that the experimental group showed higher levels of growth with higher mean scores for each subtest administered. This would seem to indicate that whole language instructional techniques are a viable alternative to the more traditional way of delivering basic skills services.

A limitation of the study is that it is difficult to definitively associate growth or lack of it based solely on this treatment program. Innate potential, developmental growth, background knowledge and experience, parental involvement, and regular classroom teaching methodologies may significantly impact on the results of this study. However, it is interesting to note that of the children in the experimental group, only half of them had any preschool experience. Yet, they made more substantial gains in literacy development, when compared with the control group, of which two-thirds had some preschool experience.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

What young children understand about print has
implications for early instruction. Two different instructional approaches to introducing print-related concepts have been identified and used in this study. One assumes learning to read occurs as a consequence of mastery of a series of discrete skills. It endorses the development of individual skills such as recognition of the alphabet and matching letter sounds. The second instructional method is premised on the belief that all forms of language competence develop concurrently. The instructional emphasis is on total language enhancement.

After completing this study, some suggestions for further investigation into this topic have evolved.

1. It would be beneficial to investigate other types of assessment tools which are reliable and valid for measuring literacy growth at the early stages of development.

2. A whole language program such as the one incorporated in this study would benefit by being more directly related to the kindergarten curriculum to make it as meaningful to the learners as possible. Although this was attempted, it was not always feasible to align lessons due to time constraints and individual teaching schedules.

3. It would be beneficial to explore the possibility of developing more performance-based assessment tools that are closely aligned to the kindergarten curriculum.

4. It would be interesting to follow-up on the students in this study to determine if exposure to whole language instruction at the entry level has beneficial long-term effects. This could be accomplished by:
   a. looking at the results of the kindergarten IOWA achievement scores later this year, and
   b. charting these students' progress through first grade.

5. Students enrolled in basic skills programs in kindergarten become likely candidates for the Reading Recovery Program in first grade. It would be interesting to find out how many of the students in the experimental group
as opposed to the control group qualify for this program next year.

6. Motivation is the key to all learning. An interesting study would be to find out how effective whole language instructional techniques are in motivating young children to want to learn to read and write.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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