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Using the Environment to Facilitate Emergent Literacy

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Name: Dixie Hill

College: CEHHS Department: CFS

Faculty Mentor: Kathy Kidd

PROJECT TITLE: Using the Environment to Facilitate Emergent Literacy

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Kathy Kidd, Faculty Mentor

Date: 8/6/05

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional): Dixie took the lead in collecting research on the topic of emergent literacy almost a full year ago. In her compilation and analysis, she excelled in pulling out the salient information that would support her work on creating environments for young children. Throughout summer semester, Dixie implemented, studied and evaluated strategies and environmental changes in a toddler classroom at the University's Child Development Lab. As a culmination of her project, she presented a thorough and interesting PowerPoint session to the lab staff.

Dixie has been professional and enthusiastic throughout this process and I am pleased with her efforts.
Abstract

This project looks at how the environment can be used to promote the development of children's literacy during the toddler years. A review of the research on literacy and the environment lead to the development of ideas about what changes should be made in the literacy environment of the Older Toddler classroom at the Laurel Apartment branch of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Child Development Labs. After changing the environment over the course of two months, literacy behaviors increased in the children.
Using the Environment to Promote Literacy Development in Toddlers

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contributions by: Carly Ackley
Introduction

The foundations for this project began in the Fall of 2003 as I began researching the topic of literacy environments. Over the course of that semester I located many articles and information that evaluated the literacy environments that were in public schools, but there was little information that looked specifically at what comprised an environment that would promote literacy development in the years before public education. What I did find was related to the home literacy environments of children who began reading before receiving formal education.

This research led to development of my student teacher investigation project in the Older Toddler Classroom at Laurel Apartment Child Development Lab, a branch of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Child Development Labs, during the Summer of 2004. In conjunction, with Carly Ackley my partner and fellow student teacher, we wrote a literature review, made changes to environment based on that research, presented our project to our fellow student teachers, demonstration teachers, and directors, and, then, presented it to the parents of the children in the classroom.

Literature Review- (co-authored with Carly Ackley)

For our investigation we chose to look at how to promote literacy and language development in the classroom. Research by Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland (1993) as well as Snow and Ninio (1986) has suggested that “children’s language and literacy development is interwoven and continuous beginning in infancy” (as cited in Soundy, 1997, 1). For children in the toddler
age group, oral literacy has a significant effect upon later development in reading and writing. In order to promote literacy and language we have chosen to focus on the environment. This is supported by research in the development of reading skills. “The environment plays an important role in the development of reading abilities” (Molfese, Modglin, Mulfese, 2003, 65). Furthermore, “learning occurs as a result of a child’s interaction with adults and peers in a particular environment, so it is critical to examine how a teacher designs the environment and interacts with the children in that limited time” (Nielsen & Monson, 1996, 11).

The environment is often called the third teacher, which is why it is a valuable aspect to help children develop language and literacy skills.

“Carefully and knowingly arranged, the environment adds a significant dimension to a student’s educational experience by engaging interest, offering information, stimulating the use of skills, communicating limits and expectations, facilitating learning activities, promoting self-direction, and through these effects supporting and strengthening the desire to learn” (as cited in Dowhower & Beagle, 1998, 2).

Creating a literacy-rich environment is important, because research shows that early readers are those that come from print-rich homes, are read to by competent readers, have high interactions with these readers, write, and talk about reading (Dowhower & Beagle, 1998). Incorporating aspects of literacy into the environment makes literacy meaningful to the children. Schickendanz (1986) believes that, “when parents and teachers plan children’s environment and activities carefully so that literacy is an integral part of everything they do, and
then literacy learning becomes meaningful part of children’s everyday lives.” (as cited in Dowhower & Beagle 1998, 2)

Not only is it important to have a strong environment, but in order for learning to occur, there must be an interaction between the teacher, the child and the environment. “Cognitive developmental is influenced by transactional relations between the child and different experiential factors in his or her environment. The child’s abilities and behaviors interact with and are affected by the people and experiences in the environment” (Molfese, Modglin, Mulfese, 2003, 65). Children’s understanding of language and print are created through the formation of hypotheses, which are strongly influenced by the quality of interactions with print (Dowhower & Beagle, 1998).

Adults foster language growth by talking, reading and playing with children. The adult’s presence serves as a link between the child and the environment. To begin, “positive nurturing techniques are important for toddlers and preschool children: they help the child feel secure while developing vocabulary, listening skills and other growth patterns essential for pre-reading and writing skills” (Lawhon, 2000, pg 5). Vygotsky believed that the interaction between adults and children creates knowledge. The teacher makes suggestions and models correct ways to use the literacy props in the classroom. From the suggestions offered by the teacher, the children will be able to expand and guide their own learning use of the materials in the environment (Bloom 1997).
“The teacher dedicated to the development of literacy throughout the curriculum is like an architect who designs a learning environment that supports specific instructional strategies. Preparing a classroom for optimum literacy development includes not only instructional strategies, but also environment planning, i.e. allocation and design of space and the selection and placement of materials” (Strickland & Morrow, 1988, pg 157). Many researchers have found that the inclusion of a library center or “book nook” in the classroom increases children’s literacy behaviors. Morrow suggests that “children in classrooms with literature collections read and look at books 50 percent more often than children in classrooms without such collections” (Dowhower and Beagle 1998, pg. 4).

The library center should be well-defined but in a location for the children to have privacy to explore the books. Research into the homes of early readers shows that literacy tools should be accessible and kept in specific places. Back in the classroom, not only should books be shelved so that the spines are showing, but also so that the covers are visible to attract the attention of the children. This will allow the children to read independently as well as with the assistance of an adult.

The library area must not only contain books but be visually engaging to attract their interest and bring them into the area. Morrow and Weinstein (1982) stated that “children do not choose to use ‘barren and uninviting’ library corners during freeplay time” (as cited in Vukelich, Christie, and Enz 2002, pg. 31). The physical features of a library center that will engage children include ample space, book related displays and props, and labels throughout the center. Props
can include puppets, flannel board with cut out figures, stuffed animals and posters (2002).

Furthermore, books and literacy props should not be limited only to the library center but should be scattered throughout the centers of the room. Morrow’s research (1991) indicated when reading and writing materials are incorporated into the various areas of children’s play that the children are more likely to “generate functional and practical emerging literacy behaviors” (p. 401). According to Newman and Roskos (1992), when literacy props such as writing implements, books and pamphlets are included in the dramatic play area the quantity and quality of children’s literacy behaviors are improved (as cited in Goldhaber, Lipson, Sortino and Daniels 1997). “The open-ended nature of literacy props provides teachers with ample opportunities to both observe and expand children’s literature learning within a meaningful context” (1997, p. 4).

The classroom should also be a print rich environment. One of the most important aspects of a print rich environment is environmental print. Research shows that the first words children read are road signs, labels on food boxes, and logos (Strickland & Morrow 1988). Yetta Goodman (1996) in her research reported, that 60 percent of three year olds in her study were able to read print found on items such as cereal boxes, toothpaste cartons, stop signs, and soft drink logos. (as cited in Kuby, Goodstadt-Killoran, Aldridge and Kirkland 1999). When children are exposed to environmental print, “they form primitive hypotheses about letters, words or messages” (1999, p.1). Using environmental print creates a connection between the home and the school. This is especially
true in homes with parents who are non-native English speakers. In this case, environmental print helps build not only a literacy connection, but also a cultural connection to the child's classroom.

In order to foster the development of literacy and language in the early childhood classroom, a well planned environment is a necessity. This environment should include a classroom library, literacy props throughout the room, as well as environmental print. The environment requires that the teacher model the uses of the literacy components as well as engage the children in interaction in the environment.

The Project

At the beginning of June, the majority of the Young Toddler classroom moved up to the Older Toddler classroom with the Young Toddler teachers and student teachers. The environment was in a virtual blank slate due to the removal of most of the previous teachers' additions when they looped down to the Infant classroom. This provided the opportunity to completely control the literacy environment.

The children in the classroom range from a one-an-a-half years to three years old. There are eight males and six girls in the classroom of the fourteen children. During the two months of this project, the teachers included one Demonstration Teacher, one Academic Resource Specialist, one Graduate Assistant, and two student teachers.
It was decided to slowly introduce new literacy elements into the classroom through lesson plans and activities to provide the time to build the children’s interest and engage them with the new literacy props and materials. The first introduction of new literacy elements began with an imaginary play lesson plan that focused on encouraging the children to pretend they were at a restaurant. The children were encouraged to use menus, notepads, and pens during their play. A teacher demonstrated the restaurant for them to provide a script for the children to use during their play.

Zoe, a two year old, began using the notepads and pens during her play. After the teacher’s demonstration, she presented a child with a menu and then asked them what they wanted. She would then write on the notepad with a pen or marker. She continued to engage in these literacy behaviors throughout the course of the week the materials were in the environment.

Research indicates that adding books to every center increasing the children’s literacy behaviors when they are in those centers. The classroom already included a book area where the children could select from books during the day. However, the book center was at one end of the room, and was not easily viewable from the other centers in the room. Books about eating at
restaurants and pretending were placed in a basket in the Imaginary Play Center, and those about transportation and music were placed in the area where the transportation and music materials were located. After placing these books, the children were observed asking to be read to more, selecting books from these containers, and seeking books from the book center more often.

Another important aspect of the literacy environment according to research is bringing in the world through environmental print and including functional print around the room through labels and signs. To build this into the literacy environment, an imaginary play lesson plan focusing on the children pretending to go grocery shopping was used. Real cans of food and empty boxes, coke bottles, and other real world items were brought in as environmental print. The parents even participated by bringing in empty boxes of their child's favorite snacks. Labels were created to organize the different foods. These signs were for vegetables, fruits, and breads. The children were engaged in these examples of print by the teachers who would point the print out and say what was written. The children were then encouraged to repeat the word. Later, the children were asked to point to the signs to see if
they could recognize the different labels. Several of the children were able to do so and the signs were left in the area for the children's continued use.

Labels were also added to objects around the room with contact paper. When the contact paper would not adhere to the washer and dryer, the labels were placed over the items so the children could associate the words with the machines. The children were fascinated with the signs and took them off of the wall and replaced them. Two of the children began to recognize the signs as being different and accurately were able to recognize the washing machine and dryer labels.

One of the final steps in the projects environmental changes was to include books that would make literacy personal. The book was made by a student teacher using pictures of the children that had been taken during the course of the project. The storyline was similar to that of the class favorite *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?* by Eric Carle. The book was introduced to the whole class during group. After the story the children were presented with...
slips of paper with their names typed in the same font as the book to help them begin to recognize their names. This book quickly became a favorite that the children wanted read to them.

Results

The additions and changes to the literacy environment were followed by an increase in the children's engagement of literacy behaviors, especially reading and writing. The children began seeking out the teachers more often with the phrase, "Read to me!" They began picking books up in the different centers and asking the teacher to read to them or began turning the pages engaging in their own version of reading from the pictures. The children also began read to each other. They would tell other children or teacher's that they wanted to read this book to another child.

Also, the children have become increasingly more interested in the writing their names. This is encouraged, because the teachers write the children's names on top of papers while they are working. The children will then take their marker, crayon, or color pencil and write their

Kharma reads a book to Jack on the playground.

The children are encouraged to write their names when using color pencils.
name over it. Many of the children have shown great strides in moving into the early writing stages.

For the teachers in the classroom, the project has helped them to recognize opportunities for promoting literacy development throughout the day. One of the more unusual opportunities has been during lunch. The teachers began using the ketchup bottles to write the first letter of the children's names and later the children's full names. The children are very enthusiastic about this literacy activity and often ask teacher's for their letter or name.

Conclusions

The results from this project have lead to the conclusion that by creating a strong presence of literacy in the environment through functional and environmental print, including books throughout the room, and engaging the children in the literacy materials the children engage in literacy behaviors more often. The more often the children engage in these literacy behaviors the more their understanding of both oral and written language will grow. Furthermore, having literacy materials easily accessible increases the teacher's ability to engage the children in the materials.
Reference List


