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The Impact of Preschool Philosophies on Children’s Language and Literacy Acquisition: A Synthesis of the Literature

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The Impact of Preschool Philosophies on Children’s Language and Literacy Acquisition: A Synthesis of the Literature

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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ABSTRACT

Preschool is essential to child development including areas such as language and literacy development. There are two overall teaching methods in preschool, which are play-based and academic-based learning. This research examines a synthesis of the literature on play-based and academic-based preschools and their abilities to develop language and literacy skill acquisition in preschoolers. The analysis suggests that outcomes depend on the timing of testing these skills and based on the personality and needs of the child. Limitations of the research reviewed are discussed along with implications for future research, practice and policy.
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INTRODUCTION

Research has established that preschool can produce substantial gains in children’s learning and development (Bredekamp, 2004). Access to high quality preschool is central to school readiness, which has significant implications for key outcomes including reading at grade level, graduating high school, and being career-ready later in life (Bredekamp, 2004). Critical theorists argue that there are two overall approaches to preschool education: Developmental or play-based and Academic or didactic (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). Preschool years are the time during which language and literacy development are fostered; these years are the foundation for children’s later reading and academic abilities. Unfortunately, there is no concise agreement on which approach is most beneficial to children’s development.

Today, kindergartens have become more academic and more than just an introduction to reading and mathematics. Pressure to prepare for testing in third grade has helped eradicate the block area and dress-up center from kindergarten classrooms (Brandon, 2002). As a result, many developmental schools feel parental pressure to prepare children for these exams and some have even added more structured academics for their preschoolers (Brandon, 2002). Still, little is known about how each early education approach compares with respect to influencing key developmental aspects of preschoolers. The purpose of this study is to examine how each preschool philosophy fosters the development of language and literacy in young children. Using a literature review as my theoretical approach, I will examine the impact of both play- and academic-based preschool experience on children’s language and literacy acquisition to determine how each promotes key developmental outcomes.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Preschool includes those who have moved beyond toddlerhood but are not yet old enough for kindergarten. It is generally geared towards 3-5 year olds (Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009). Though there are differences in preschool philosophies, experts agree on certain developmental aspects/domains a child in preschool should obtain (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005) that include cognitive abilities, social and emotional domains, gross motor development, and language and literacy.

More specifically, cognitive abilities consist of divergent/creative thinking where children have the ability to identify patterns or connections between situations that seem unrelated. Decentration and Reversibility is when children realize that there are multiple aspects of a situation or problem and learn that objects and people can be changed then returned to their original state. For example, on the occasions of playing peek-a-boo with an infant, where they believe the adult has actually disappeared and came back as soon as their faces have been uncovered. Creative thinking also includes mental reversibility where a child might be able to recognize that his or her dog is a Poodle, that a Poodle is a dog, and that a dog is an animal, and draw conclusions from the information. Divergent/creative thinking also helps with their symbolic representations where they acquire the skill of letting one thing stand for another – physical and nonphysical (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005).

Under cognitive abilities children should begin to understand theory of mind, which is when children begin to develop a greater awareness of other people’s mental words such as, “I think, I know, I feel.” They begin to learn about perspective taking and understand
the concept of different points of views and about false-belief understanding, which is the idea that people can believe things that are not true (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005).

The next domain reflects Social and Emotional development. This includes developing an understanding of rules, the ability to negotiate and cooperate, and improve social morality abilities, which embraces respecting the limitations of their own bodies and of others. Additionally the social and emotional aspect of development also involves self-regulation, which refers to the ability to master their impulses to act out and fine-tune their emotional control by consciously monitoring their behavior and conduct. Similarly, coping and resilience involve dealing with stress and thinking of things to do in problem situations. Other aspects of social and emotional development that are critical for both academic and social competence include confidence, independence, motivation, curiosity, persistence, cooperation, and empathy (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005).

Gross motor development encompasses both fine and gross motor development. Fine motor development consists of strengthening the smaller muscles in the body. Fine motor development may be promoted through art activities and play that include using your fingers to manipulate small objects. In contrast, gross motor consists of strengthening your larger muscles for activities such as running, jumping, balancing.

For the purpose of my research, I will be focusing on the Language and Literacy domain of learning in preschool. Preschool-aged children should develop language and literacy at this time. Specifically, children should attain the ability to make symbolic representations, and learn linguistic rules like grammar and pragmatics such as saying “please” and “thank you” and understanding the order of their words. Children begin to learn, understand, and use relatively more complex language. Emergent literacy is when
young children begin to understand that letters mean something, and develop print knowledge, which is in essence knowing when to write and what to write. Lastly, preschool-aged children should develop book comprehension, which is having an understanding of books and stories (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005).

**WHY ARE LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IMPORTANT?**

New language tools mean new opportunities for learning about the world, social awareness and understanding, and for sharing pleasures, experiences, and needs. Children who have poor speaking and listening abilities are considered as having language impairments. In the United States, about twelve percent of children in preschool have some kind of language disability. Data has shown that about twenty-five to ninety percent of these children with language impairments also have a reading disorder (Language Development and Literacy 2010). Reading disorders are usually defined as having poor achievement in reading after sufficient time and opportunity to learn to read. Amongst school aged children, reading disorders are estimated to be between ten and eighteen percent. It is not surprising then that when children struggle with expressing themselves and understanding others, they may also have psychosocial and emotional adjustment problems. These children who have delayed or disordered language are hence at an increased risk for social, emotional and behavioral problems.

Though child development varies, the sequence of development stays relatively the same in children. According to the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (2010), by their second year of life children are likely to know about 100 words and are beginning to combine them into short phrases. By the age of four to six, most children are speaking
grammatically complete sentences, which are entirely comprehensible. Often times, toddler’s first sentences are made up of content words, but are missing grammatical function words such as “the,” “an”, and “a,” or word endings such as “-ed” or “s.”

Developmental Preschools

Developmental preschools are play-based, child-centered and child-oriented with a flexible curriculum (Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009). The developmental approach allows the child to learn at his/her own pace where he/she is free to discover on his/her own. Children choose age appropriate activities for their individual stages of development according to their current interests. Developmental schools focus on developing the child’s wholesome personality and are devoted to learning through hands on activities with the intent to socialize, think, solve problems, mature and have fun (Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009).

Developmental classroom arrangements (see Figure 1) have space for movement freely to and from centers such as the art center, water center, post-office center for dramatic play, and the block center (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005).

Early childhood educators of play-based or developmental preschools take on a constructivist approach, which stresses that children are “capable beings who come to school with a construction of the world and that they learn through interactions with competent adults” (Stagnitti, et al., 2015 p.393). Children are to be actively engaged in their interests and pursue their plans, which are facilitated by the teachers. Educational goals for students include having the capacity to be active, independent learners, have essential skills in literacy, numeracy and information technology and also have confidence and creativity (Stagnitti, et al., 2015). This is achieved in the classrooms through a variety
of play areas to address the different areas of learning: floor space, dramatic play areas, dress-up, writing table, construction area, computer area, and reading tent.

In developmental preschools, teachers follow the child’s lead and integrate learning through play. This is seen as children choosing their own play activities – they decide how they are going to play and what they play with. Teachers serve as a ‘scaffold’ to children’s play by asking thought provoking and open-ended questions, introducing a new prop to extend play and encourage social interactions (Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, 2014).

**Academic Preschools**

Academic preschools are didactic, teacher-controlled and teacher-directed with a structured/routine curriculum (Steinhauer, 2005). In the academic approach, children progress at the teacher’s pace where they are under constant guidance by the teacher. All children are treated alike where the teacher has the power to decide what the child has to learn. Academic schools are gearing children up to be ready for kindergarten and are devoted to learning letters and sounds, distinguishing shapes and colors, telling time, practicing handwriting and other skills (Steinhauer, 2005).

Academic classroom settings have a lot of letters, words, numbers, and colors all around fostered by means of teacher-directed lessons (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005). These schools have tables with chairs for every child and floor space/rug area for the children to sit together for circle time (see Figure 1). Throughout the day, time is set for specific lessons for a variety of subjects including: literacy, science, mathematics, physical education and music (Stagnitti, et al., 2015). In academic or traditional preschool settings, there may be small-group activities, however, these are generally teacher-directed as well.
Most of the child-initiated time is observed during breaks such as lunch or recess. Teachers fully direct the learning of the children.

In academic schools, activities are more guided or structured as previously mentioned. Teacher set the rules based on the academic content and/or social skills. Teachers also take control of the play environment directly through structuring activities in a way that guides the students to learn certain content.

**Strengths and Challenges To A Play-Based Teaching Philosophy**

Each curriculum has its strengths and challenges. Strengths of a play-based curriculum include that it is a developmentally appropriate practice, which provides a meaningful context for children's learning, which in turn promotes positive attitudes towards learning. Activities are individual or in small-group settings, which have been proven to be more effective at skill development than whole group settings (Haan et al., 2014). Play-based schools also recognize all aspects of child development as important, especially social emotional development, which is not emphasized in academic schools.

Challenges to play-based preschool curriculums include that they require a higher level of professional skill and knowledge from early educators about developmental pathways to nurture each child’s play activities. It also requires a higher teacher-student ratio to make sure each student is individually attended for and tracked. Tracking a child’s development is also based mostly on notes and observations that are another learned skill that must be perfected. Lastly, in play-based preschools, the teacher’s role is relegated to ‘following the child’s lead’, which for many children does not seem to be a viable alternative to academic schools.
Strengths and Challenges To Academic-Based Teaching Philosophy

Young children are better equipped for testing in elementary school if they attend a preschool that is academic-based (Haan et al., 2014). This is because didactic schools prepare children for kindergarten curriculum. Children are learning basic skills much faster through the direct instruction or modeling of teachers where they are explaining things in a step-by-step fashion. Here, teachers are helping pupils along with their learning and keep them trying until they complete the task, or perfect the skill/ability.

However, challenges to academic-based preschool curriculums include that it limits the individual exploration and creativity by fostering a teacher-directed environment. Classrooms also operate in whole group settings, which make it twice more likely that the child is passively listening, watching rather than talking or acting. This style of learning also negatively impacts social/emotional skills and fosters superficial learning of simple responses rather than real understanding and problem solving abilities (Haan et al., 2014). Lastly, it is also ultimately believed to be ineffective in the long-term and often shown to lead to increased levels of stress in children (Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hyson & Rescorla 1990).

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Although there is evidence that academic-based centers promote children’s development for school readiness, there is also unequivocal evidence for the critical importance of play in preschool development (Elkin, 2001). The literature offers a tremendous amount of support for the role of play in children’s development. According to Gilliam (2005), play reflects, reinforces and results in development. It reflects development
because this is when the child has the chance to “show off” the skills he has and has learned. It also reinforces development because through assimilation, the children are able to practice these skills as well. Lastly, play results in development due to the fact that through play, a child learns and develops. "Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition and social competence" (NAEYC, 2009, p.14).

Though the literature views play as an important feature to success, there seems to be a trend towards academic preschools. Unfortunately, children are learning math and reading skills at the expense of social skills (Miller & Almon, 2009). Kids in play-based programs usually catch up academically, while kids from academic backgrounds may never catch up socially (Vail, 2003). With so much pressure to teach essential math and literacy skills for testing, preschool teachers and even kindergarten teachers say that “time for free play and exploration is increasingly limited” (Kagan, 2004).

Another early childhood educator, Anne Stoudt from San Diego, expresses her concerns with the shift to an academic focus in preschools. “When we replace the block center with a math center, what do we gain?” says Stoudt; “Blocks are all about math, except they are more fun” (Curwood, 2015). Part of the reason that preschools are becoming more and more academic is a growing understanding of the importance of early learning and the capabilities of young children. By beginning the first-grade reading curriculum in kindergarten, schools have effectively gained an extra year of instruction (Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009).

“While young students’ reading and math scores are soaring, there is little assessment of the effect of the intensified academic focus on kids’ motivation to
learn, creativity, motor skills, social skills, or self-esteem. The risk is [found in] children who are already burned out on school by the time they reach third grade,” says Stoudt. “Play is how children learn. There should be more of it in the upper grades, not less in the lower” (Curwood, 2015, p. 2).

As stated by Stoudt,

“Kindergarten is now first grade, and first grade is now second grade, it used to be normal for first graders to still be learning to read. Now, the handfuls of kindergartners who aren’t reading by the end of the year are considered behind [and] the underlying academic pressure is then all placed on Preschool Education” (Curwood, 2015, p. 2).

Academic pressure in preschool has been repeatedly shown to be insufficient for lasting educational success (White, 2012). Didactic or highly academic instruction is presumed to inhibit intellectual development by directly fostering superficial learning of simple responses rather than real understanding and problem solving ability and indirectly, by negatively affecting social-motivational variables that affect learning related behavior such as effort persistence (Brandon, 2002). Experts argue that academic or teacher-controlled instruction that emphasizes performance threatens, young children’s intrinsic interest in learning and their perception of competence and willingness to take academic risks. It also fosters dependency in young children on adult authority for defining tasks and evaluation outcomes and endangers anxiety about achievement (Brandon, 2002).

According to Willis (1993), however, the trend towards academic schools is due to the need to prepare young children for the kindergarten curriculum and to better equip
young children for testing in elementary school. Donna Siegel, an associate professor of Education at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, is a supporter of teaching basic skills in young children, especially the disadvantaged. She is concerned that an emphasis on allowing children to explore and discover may leave them unprepared academically (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). “It's hard to discover how to do math or how to read,” she says. “Some things you have to sit down and learn” (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). Young children learn basic skills much faster through direct instruction or modeling than through exploration or play. The teacher should then explain in a step-by-step fashion, help pupils along and keep them trying. “Reading is so critical to later school success; a little head start can only be beneficial” (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995, p. 65).

Children may benefit from language, literacy, and math activities carried out in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. According to research, these skills are strong predictors of later school success (Haan, Elbers, & Leseman, 2012; Jordan & Levine, 2009; Korat, 2005; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Smith & Dixon, 1995). To assess the relationship between classroom qualities, many studies focus on classroom environment and the responsiveness of the teachers. Quality on its own may not be conclusive, however; we must mind the effectiveness of a program and attend to what activities children participate in and how they are done (Haan, et al., 2012). Walsh (1989) noted that the highlighting of academics in preschools and kindergarten, which is often also associated with an increase in teacher-led activities, is driven by pressure for schools to be more effective. To weaken this educational gap, there is a greater emphasis on results and accountability and thus this leads to greater time devoted to direct instruction of literacy
and math skills (Haan et al., 2012; Graue, 2008; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995). Considering this inconclusive and conflicting information, the question then becomes, how is this impacting language and literacy acquisition for development in young children?

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

(1) Which preschool philosophy provides greater developmental outcomes for language and literacy acquisition?

(2) What are the key challenges of both preschool philosophies in terms of fostering language and literacy?

(3) What are important implications for practice?

**METHODOLOGY**

The methodology I used to complete my research is a synthesis of literature. This is an analysis that combines the results of multiple scientific studies to synthesize data across these studies. Literature reviews are also used to identify common themes and gaps in the literature for future research. In my literature synthesis, I used information gathered from approximately 30 articles and summarized their findings to answer my research questions.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS: PLAY-BASED INSTRUCTION**

The increasing formality of preschool curriculum means that curriculum is not meeting the individual needs of many children. Hence, many nations have adjusted their traditional educational policies in the direction of a more play-based and developmentally
appropriate approach for teaching and learning in early education (McGuinness, Sproule, Bojke, Trew & Walsh 2013). Developmentally appropriate practice consists of three core tenets:

“Sensitivity to the developmental stage of children both individually and collectively, an emphasis on ‘appropriate process’ in the curriculum rather than on curriculum content, and a recognition that all aspects of child development are important and interdependent” (McGuinness et al., 2013 p. 773).

Children play with language as the beginning of their understandings of richer uses of language, like humor and poetry (Crystal 1996; Holms 2011; Howard 2009). How to play with language appears to relate strongly to children’s linguistic development, suggesting that language play may be more a verbal than social skill (Read, James, Weaver 2017). Children with higher peer interactions, which are nurtured through play-based curriculums, were more competent at verbal play. Verbal play is a regular part of most young children’s early communicative experiences. It includes repetition as play within games, books, and songs. Verbal play fosters development because children can practice and develop linguistic knowledge and play with a more basic form of language (Howard 2009). Verbal play also includes rhymes and jokes, which are one of the most common ways that children engage in verbal play (Read, James, Weaver 2017).

According to theorist Vygotsky, children learn reading and writing through play. Play is associated with children’s mastery of written language. Children begin to learn that a word such as “fast” contains the sounds “F-A-S-T.” This shows that children are gaining conscious awareness of their own activities and their production of sounds by pronouncing each separate part of the word willingly. Furthermore, when the child begins to learn to
write, he also begins to do this sounding-out without the purview of oral speech (Vygotsky 1934/1987).

Imagination was also linked to more advanced reading and writing skills in young children. According to Bodrova (2008), imagination grows from the experiences of a child through play in preschools. Imagination is the human form of conscious activity and derives from action. Moreover, play provides an optimal context for children to use reading and writing in personally meaningful ways. Teachers and peers are being used as a means of communication with others rather than learning the A,B,C’s which is simply mastering the habit of writing. According to a study by Haan and colleagues, (2014) picture-book reading or flipping through pages of a book and merely looking at the pictures were found to be related to gains in these literacy areas. In addition to flipping through the pictures of a book, copying words with letter stamps and other activities involving print showed the same correlation with literacy skills.

When engaging in play, preschoolers produce more complex grammatical speech than in routine guided activities (Fekonja et al 2005). It was also observed that there was an increased amount of time in which children spent talking when and where play-based activities were taking place (Martlew et al 2011). During play and in play-based curriculums, children spoke more, used more multi-word sequences, and asked more questions and solicited more verbal responses from others than in its counterpart. Increased spoken language seems to be associated with more complex language use and vice versa. In addition, and increase in linguistic activity is a predictor of incremental improvements in linguistic knowledge (Stagnitti et al., 2016).
According to Vygotsky, real play consists of children: (1) creating imaginary situations, (2) taking on and acting out roles, and (3) following a set of rules determined by specific rules (Bodrova, 2008). In essence, Vygotsky is referring to make-believe play/dramatic play. He determined that play in this social context is responsible for creating young children’s “zone of proximal development” or ZDP (Bodrova, 2008). Elkonin (1978) and Istomina (1977) concluded that the mental skills of a child during play is higher that in other activities, this represents what Vygotsky identified as the higher level of the Zone of Proximal Development (Bodrova, 2008). In the study, Istomina (1977) compared the number of words children remembered during dramatic play (ie. Grocery list) versus during a typical laboratory experiment. In the end, preschoolers remembered more items during dramatic play conditions comparative to the level that older children would be able to exhibit in a non-play situation similar to usual school tasks (Bodrova, 2008).

Many studies have found a correlation between pretend play and early language development; this relationship seems to remain significant even in later language development (Bates et al., 1979; Hall et al., 2013; McCune, 1995; Shore et al., 1984). Children can expand their language and literacy capabilities through the context of pretend-play (Vygotsky 1997). In regards to young children in their first year of formal education, both play skills and oral language attainment are significantly enhanced by play-based learning (Stagnitti et al. 2016). Oral language and pretend play are interconnected through language itself and not the physical settings in where pretend play activities are taking place however (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993) even though the physical setting of a play-based curriculum does promote the development of pretend play and other forms of dramatic play such as dressing-up. Furthermore, increasingly complex play sequences envisioned through
pretend play predicts the emergence of early multi-word speech (McCune 1995). For example, when children are engaged in pretend play, they sometimes may produce meta-play or meta-communication (Pellegrini 1993). Meta-play is defined as talking about play as they are engaged in the play activities. For example, when two children are pretending and taking on the role of mother and daughter, the child playing the role of the mother may step out of his/her designated role for a second to notify the other child that he/she is also pretending that this banana is a phone (before they step back into character).

Flexibility in pretend play provides the child an avenue to extend conceptual knowledge. Such as in the example provided above, playing with real objects in unconventional ways reflects conceptual abilities and complex thought (Lewis 2000). Additionally, studies have found that the quality of a child’s pretend play expands as the ability to think logically and sequentially develops through play. The same is true in the opposite direction; logical sequencing behaviors and actions provide insights of a child’s pretend play (Stagnitti, 2007).

The significant relationship between pretend play and early language development remains meaningful even in later development (Bouldin et al 2002; Ilgaz & Aksu-Koç 2005, Trionfi & Reese 2009). Within a 6-month period of time from the start of beginning of schooling, children in play-based preschools showed significant growth in vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and nonverbal IQ (Stagnitti et al., 2016). Based on this plethora of studies, it can be concluded that play-based programs lead to significant improvements in narrative skills and grammatical knowledge in children.

Symbolizing in play has been related to expressive and receptive language development (Lewis, Boucher, Lupton & Watson 2000). Expressive language refers to
being able to put thoughts into words and/or sentences in a reasonable manner and receptive language refers to the ability to understand information from words, sentences, spoken language and reading. The use of symbols and elaborateness in play suggest both semantic organizational skills and narrative re-tell abilities (Stagnitti & Lewis, 2015). Semantic organization is in essence organizing learning. Children who have developed this organization of thought and information are able to participate in more complex play and practice using symbols in their play and vice versa. Narrative re-tell abilities refers to being able to explain in a sequential manner what happened, is happening or is going to happen whether that be in their play activities, stories, or real life.

Children may generate stories or narratives while or before engaging in pretend play. Nicolopoulou (2007) argues that play narratives share similarities with narratives of daily life as an expression of their own symbolic thoughts. Pretend play is thus argued to be a complementary unit of narrative activity (Nicolopoulou 2005). Research on preschool children's play and language links play to developments in narrative skills including story comprehension and story production. (Stagnitti, et al., 2015). In addition, Trionfi and Reese (2009) showed that children who have imaginary friends, and thus engage in large amounts of pretend play and conversations, produce more complex narratives rather than those who do not have imaginary friends (as cited in Stagnitti, et al., 2015).

During pretend play or dramatic play, children have opportunities to extend their capabilities linguistically. Nicolopoulou (2005) has argued that dramatic play and storytelling are modes of narrative activity due to the fact that play regularly involves enactment of scenarios. Whitehead et al. (2009), observed an overlap in the areas of the brain that
were active when participating in pretend play and narrative re-tell, hence supporting the proposal that pretend play is a form of communicative narrative.

Studies suggest that play-based learning significantly improves both pretend play skills and oral language skills in children who are in their first year of formal education. This is important because it specifies that learning through play has the potential for learning through a medium that is both “non-threatening and intrinsically enjoyable, and which appears to result in longer lasting benefits than does traditional didactic instruction” (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Research shows positive associations between play-based practice and the development of academic and social domains (Smith, 2010). However, there is an increasing disconnect between research and public practice in Early Childhood Education (Kidd, 2012; Robinson, 2006; Tullis, 2011). A study was conducted to compare the development of play skills and oral language in children within both play-based and traditional didactic curriculums and have reported on the difference, which were in favor of the play-based instruction (Stagnitti, Bailey, Stevenson, Reynolds & Kidd, 2015). Oral language is the principal socio-cognitive ability a child brings to the classroom; “it is the medium through which children acquire and represent new knowledge and communicate their understanding and competencies, as well as being the foundation from which they learn early literacy skills” (Clarke et al., 2010; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Therefore, understanding how play-based preschool education conveys oral language is essential if evidence-based developmental practices are to be incorporated into mainstream preschool education.
Challenges of PLAY-BASED Instruction

Although some research supports-play-based learning of language and literacy development, some has NOT. In their study, McGuinness et al. (2013) developed an ‘enriched curriculum’ which was conceived as a more play-based, informal and more developmentally appropriate than the pre-existing curriculum that focused heavily on academics. This Enriched Curriculum (EC) stimulated a child’s curiosity, creativity, social development and engagement with learning while abandoning desk-work and worksheets. Essentially, there were three sequential cohorts of children who participated in the program evaluation; the controls were one year ahead of the first intervention cohort and did not receive intervention. The first intervention cohort is represented as EC1 and the succeeding intervention cohort in its second year is represented as EC2. In the first year, there was a focus on emergent literacy activities while formal reading activities were postponed for a later time. In the study, children began with the ‘shared reading’ program where children were taking books home to read/look over with parents. Once the child reached certain milestones, such as recognizing letters and common words, they moved on to ‘guided reading’ where teachers worked with small groups of children. In the first year of implementation, it was determined that the majority of children were not yet considered ready to move to guided reading; some children continued to be unprepared to move on throughout the second year. This resulted in increased guidance about actively moving the second cohort of EC children to guided reading more quickly.

Given previous expectations about the reading and mathematical developments of young children in early education, as defined through test norms and expectations of educators, the EC curriculum did not meet these expectations in the short term. During the
first two to three years of school, the EC students’ reading and math test scores were much lower than children who were placed in traditional or academic-based curriculum where this sort of ‘formal instruction’ began right away (McGuinness et al., 2013). Thus, they found that the play-based EC had no positive effects and some negative effects on the children’s reading and math test scores. By the end of primary school, there were no significant differences between the second EC and control classes though significant shortages remained between the first EC cohort and the controls. Surprisingly, in the short term, it was found that Enriched Curriculum had an immediate negative impact on reading and mathematics achievement with EC children significantly underperforming compared with controls during the first two years. By the third year however, the pattern was changing and by year four, the gap was nearly closed. By years 5-7, while the advantage remained mostly with the controls, EC2 cohort marginally outperformed EC1 with only reading scores being statistically significant (McGuinness et al., 2013).

RESEARCH FINDINGS: ACADEMIC-BASED INSTRUCTION

Teacher-managed activities have the potential to benefit children’s development. Studies show that children who were in academically-based preschool programs showed larger gains in language, literacy, and math skills. McGuinness et al. (2013) determined that teacher-managed activities enhanced the development of children in early education. Preschool children in particular show greater improvements in language, literacy and math skills if their teacher devoted a large portion of time to these topics than compared to children in preschools where fewer direct activities were carried out. Similarly, Haan et al. (2012) found that because of the fact that preschool children rely mostly on their teachers
to nurture their developmental milestones, this might explain the positive association between the amount of teacher-led language-literacy and math activities and children’s development of the skills. More time spent in the classroom learning direct language and literature activities results in a greater gain of alphabet knowledge, letter-word recognition and vocabulary (Conner et al 2006).

There is a noted accelerated growth in expressive language skills in preschools where academic skills such as literacy were a main focus compared to children in other programs. Justice, Mashburn, Pence and Wiggins (2008) developed a comprehensive language curriculum which focused mainly on language development in young children and found that there was an increase in oral language in children who participated as opposed to children in other programs.

Results from a play-based program implementation considered the majority of children not ready to move on to guided reading by the end of their first year of the play-based curriculum. Guided reading in this program was depicted as teachers working in small groups to practice letter-sound correspondents with children. Furthermore, it was found that even after the second year of the play-based program, young children continues to be underprepared to advance. As more structure was implemented to the curriculum and the program, about 75% of the children were able to catch up to their academic-curriculum peers. The researchers concluded that due to the lack of informal teaching of reading and lack of practicing letter-sound correspondents in the program, children were then unprepared (McGuiness et al., 2015).

Children in the free-play profile, in which children had the most free choice time, made the smallest gains in a number of language and literacy outcomes (Haan et al 2014).
It was also noted that at the time of school entry, children in academic schools scored significantly better on both grammar and verbal IQ than their counterparts. Grammar refers to the structure of sentences and verbal intelligence is measured as the ability to name objects and point out things and objects when told a word. For example, if you ask a child to pass you the green cup or ask them where is the green cup? Their verbal intelligence capabilities may or may not help them determine which is the cup versus which is a car. Within a 6-month period of time, children in didactic or academic-schools showed significant growth in vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and verbal IQ (Stagnitti et al., 2016).

Play-based curriculum did not meet teacher’s expectations, in the short term, for test norms. Reading and mathematics test scores were substantially higher-ranking in academic-based than play-based curriculums. Academic content in early childhood education programs is important for children’s school readiness development, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds where language and literacy activities may be scarce or not as heavily enforced or focused (Bus et al., 2012). Books and other literacy and language materials may not be readily available and may thus hinder language and literacy development.

**Challenges of DIDACTIC PRESCHOOLS**

Nearly all teacher-managed activities observed by researchers, were carried out in whole-group settings (Haan et al., 2012). Whole-group settings limit individual interaction opportunities and thus may therefore be less effective in stimulating developmental needs appropriate for every child. Haan and colleagues (2012) noted that children in whole-group
settings were twice as likely to be passively listening or simply watching than talking, acting, and consuming new knowledge. Connor et al. (2006), reported that with regards to skill development, small-group instruction is ten times greater than instruction in larger groups. Activities that are carried out in smaller-groups may be more effective in fostering children’s development than similar activities in larger groups. According to McGuinness et al. (2013), in spite of the fact that there were sharp differences between reading and math test scores in play-based and academic preschools until the age of 8, by the time the children were at the age of 11, the students participating in the Enriched Curriculum did catch up and even slightly outperformed those who started academic based learning early on.

**ASSESSMENT TOOLS**

Across the various studies I have read for my literature review, I noted diverse assessment tools and methods were being used to test literacy and language development in young preschool children. I also noted that in order to test language and literacy acquisition in both preschool philosophies, studies used varying assessment tools, which measured different aspects of language and literacy in different ways.

These measures include: Raven Coloured Progressive Matrices (RCPM; Stagnitti et al., 2016), British Picture Vocabulary Scale II (BPVS; Stagnitti et al., 2016), Test for Reception of Grammar 2 (TROG; Stagnitti et al., 2016), Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS), Child Initiated Pretend Play Assessment (ChIPPA; Stagnitti et al., 2016), and the School Age Oral Language Assessment (SAOLA; Stagnitti et al., 2016) along with Classroom Observations and Curriculum Programs Implemented amongst a group of children.
The Raven Coloured Progressive Matrices are a series of multiple-choice questions testing abstract reasoning and non-verbal cognition. This exam tests children’s ability to complete the missing visual pattern of various complexities. The British Picture Vocabulary Scale II is used to measure receptive vocabulary in children. Children are orally presented with a word and asked to identify the picture associated with the word. The Test for Reception of Grammar 2 is used to assess children’s response to English grammatical contrast. During this test, children are asked to choose the picture that matches the sentence such as “the cat is standing on top of the table.” There is also the Performance Indicators in Primary Schools, which are used to assess school readiness emergence of language and literacy skills. This assessment tool tested for receptive vocabulary, which is comprehension of words, writing, ideas about readings, letter identification, reading word, and reading sentences.

The two most commonly used measures across my findings were the Child Initiated Pretend Play Assessment and the School Age Oral Language Assessment. The ChIPPA focuses on observing children involved in dramatic play activities such as dress-up or pretend play. Over spans of 30 minutes, children are being observed in their play. Three measures of the play are being measured within this time period. The elaborateness, complexity and organization of a child’s play, the child’s ability to use symbols in play and the child’s ability to self-initiate play ideas. Lastly, the SAOLA measure is used to assess oral language in children. The test can be used to measure semantic knowledge, narrative re-tell ability, and metalinguistic awareness.

These assessment tools were used in various studies and for varying philosophies. The inconsistency of the types of tools used to measure language and literacy development
in children of both preschool philosophies may create unreliable results, which may not be comparable with one philosophy to another.

CONCLUSIONS

Which preschool philosophy provides greater developmental outcomes for language and literacy acquisition? According to my research, the answer to this question is that it depends. It depends on when you are testing the child. If you are testing for short-term results such as kindergarten readiness, academically-oriented preschools may provide the language and literacy acquisition early on necessary for testing performances in the higher grades after preschool. However, if you are testing for language and literacy achievement in the long-term, play-based or developmental preschools may provide the best context for a child’s language and literacy development. According to Bodrova (2008), children who attended play-based preschools did later catch up in language and literacy and even marginally outperformed their peers by the age of eleven.

Today, educators around the world face the consistent pressure to teach academic skills at an increasingly younger age at the expense of traditional early childhood activities. This pressure is mainly the result of the overwhelming concerns about children not being ready for grade school or about falling behind in academics later on (Bodrova, 2008). Ironically, research on academically oriented preschool programs uncovers that they do not necessarily promise future academic success, especially in long-term, and may even intensify problems in social and emotional areas (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer 2006; Marcon 2002). At the same time, as mentioned previously, the only alternative to a didactic education is expressed as teachers ‘following the child’s lead’ (developmental...
preschools). For many children, this alternative does not seem to be a feasible one (Witehurst 2001). Some children may excel better in environments that provide greater structure. They may shy away or feel overwhelmed in settings where there were more opportunities for free play and choice. In addition, some students may continue to return to the same play activities without expanding their learning experiences and thus hindering their own developmental outcomes. This being said, it is important to note that language and literacy development is also dependent on the child him/her-self. Children may excel differently in different preschool settings, education styles and curriculums based on their given needs and personalities.

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

Unfortunately, the challenges of one philosophy were strengths of another. Play-based school’s strengths were the challenges of didactic pre-schooling and the strengths of didactic/academic schools highlighted the challenges faced by play-based preschool curriculums. This demonstrates the importance of weighing the pros and cons of each philosophy along with considering the needs and personalities of child(ren) in order to decide which preschool philosophy would be most linguistically beneficial and compatible with your child. You would want to focus on which teaching-style would match to your educational values, beliefs and practices.

In addition, my research highlights the importance of considering preschools which have a have more of a balance between child-initiated (play-based) and teacher-directed (academic-based) activities to foster language and literacy acquisition. In this end, children have the chance to explore language and literacy on their own and solidify these findings
through direct instruction of the information. They may then also continue to support their learning of direct teacher-instruction of language and literacy materials greater through further exploration in their play and socialization.

Moreover, I can conclude, based on my findings, that a focus on the holistic development of young children is more important than instead teaching for later testing and assessments. If there were less emphasis on testing and assessing young children, this pressure, along with parental pressure would diminish. Children may learn and develop holistically considering all valued aspects of a child’s development (Cognitive/Thinking, Motor Development, Social/Emotional and Language/Literacy).

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Limitations of my study include the fact that my research was done on a select amount of literature. Additionally, another limitation of my research is the fact that most of the literatures supporting language and literacy acquisition in preschool were concentrated on play-based curriculums. My research was then heavily skewed in amount of information provided for play-based schools instead of academic-based schools. Because the scholarly literature does heavily support play in preschool, even though there is a gap between practice and literature, most of the information I have gathered were supporting play-based schools. I cannot conclusively say that the amount of literature I used did not impact this result as my findings may have been more balanced with further literature review.
**FUTURE RESEARCH IDEAS**

Thoughts I have for consideration of future research topics include the fact that different assessments tools were used to analyze language and literacy acquisition. Questions I have are: Would my findings have been different if the researchers all used the same assessments? Would this lead to a more reliable comparison of the two philosophies? Because these assessments were not consistently measured in all of my findings, does this mean that the comparison isn’t completely accurate?

Also, even though most of the literature did not give a profile of participants, would my result change if gender, socioeconomics, culture were factored in? One research briefly mentioned disadvantaged populations, but failed to go in depth with the implications of preschool philosophies and language and literacy acquisition in these populations. Additionally, I wonder if my findings would be different for schools outside of America, in other countries such as Finland, which has been known for the “best education system in the world.”

Finally, because my research emphasized the lack of social emotional development in academic-based schools, some questions that arise are: How exactly does enforcing language and literacy academics in preschool negatively impact social emotional variables? What are the implications for social emotional factors such as communication, sharing, compassion, teamwork, etc. by emphasis on academic-based learning in preschools? How are these negative implications affecting a person’s quality of life and relationship with self and others in the future/ long-term? And lastly, besides socially engaging with peers, what types of play specifically foster language and literacy development, and how?
Further long-term research studies must be implemented in order to conclusively determine whether play-based or academic-based preschools produce the greatest developmental outcomes for children. It is important to know the correlations between preschool philosophies and human development and success particularly in language and literacy acquisition. For students at the age of 11, long-term results show play-based curriculums to be most beneficial although testing in the short-term for educational exams and government tests in kindergarten, academically oriented schools produce the adequate results to pass these examinations of young children. In closing, there must be a determination of which outcome, long-term or short-term, is mostly valued in our society and for human development. Only then, can we conclusively decide on which philosophy is overall conducive of producing the outcomes we desire from young children and bodies in our society.
References


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