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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT: EXPLORING EARLY EDUCATORS' VIEWS ABOUT GUIDED PRACTICE

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methods and findings of a study that examined how early childhood educators enrolled in an undergraduate literacy methods course learned to implement guided practice, as a research-based approach to literacy instruction, to support and nurture early literacy. The results of the study suggest that the literacy methods course helped pre-service early educators understand the advantages of developmentally appropriate guided practice strategies designed to promote children's literacy and development of vocabulary, oral language abilities, and print-related knowledge. The results of the study also strongly suggest that the literacy methods class was very effective at providing rigorous pre-service training and experiential opportunities involving guided practice. Based on the results of the study, college-level literacy methods courses for pre-service early educators should teach those educators to use guided practice strategies that help children solidify thinking a fundamental skill for literacy development and all future learning.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Children's Literacy Development: exploring early educators' Views about Guided Practice Teachers in constructivist classrooms believe that knowledge is built through questioning, prompting, targeted feedback, and social interactions that can provide developmentally appropriate support to help young learners think on a higher level (Maloch, 2002). Vygotsky (1978) stated: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals". (p. 57). Exemplary early educators implement guided practice into their literacy instruction, particularly in small group lessons.

Weaving demonstrations through prompting and questioning, rather than telling, is the predominant method of instructional delivery (Morrow, 2011; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez, 2003). Early educators make intentional and deliberate instructional decisions in their classrooms about how to support children's literacy acquisition of skills such as alphabet recognition, print awareness, letter-sound relationship development, and vocabulary development (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance, 2004). Understanding these decision is critical to child development and paramount to build on children's strengths and extend their knowledge and skills. Early literacy development is a complex process that requires strategies such as learning through interactive storybook reading and storybook extensions using props through guided play (Friesen and Butera, 2012). In guided practice, early educators promote guided literacy instruction by creating a language-rich environment in which children become active participants in classroom dialogue (Massey, 2013). They facilitate rich interaction in the classroom as children talk and make sense of stories together. In guided practice, early educators provide opportunities for open-ended responses combined with specific literacy instruction. This guided practice is associated with a variety of strategies, such as (a)

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higher-level questions asked by both early educators and children, (b) meaningful interactions around texts provided by early educators, (c) analytic talk by both early educators and children, and (d) book-related play led by children (Partridge, 2004). Children whose early literacy experiences include interaction with their caregivers are more motivated to pursue the challenging tasks associated with learning and are more likely to develop a lifelong love of reading and writing (Scully and Roberts, 2002). Guided practice is at the heart of helping children develop literacy in early childhood classrooms. Children benefit from the reciprocity between listening and talking and the immediate application of skills (Holland, 2008). Providing the right support for developing literacy skills takes knowledge, skill, preparation, close observation, and instructional decision-making. Early educators are charged with the responsibility of explicitly teaching literacy skills for successful literacy acquisitions to meet the demands of increasingly complex child and family needs (Johns, 2010). Teacher knowledge and instructional decision-making are important in today's more challenging early literacy curriculum. Increased demands for program accountability are often focused on approaches of early literacy development. Early educators need well-conceived literacy strategies/approaches that help them support critical thinking in young children.

Early educators need in-classroom teaching demonstrations provided by the course instructor, which can serve as the most powerful influence on literacy instruction (Ankrum, Genest, and Belcastro, 2014). Burant and Kirby (2002) suggested that we must challenge and reconfigure early field experiences in teacher education to better prepare our pre-service early childhood candidates for teaching strategies that support and extend children's literacy. Research (Jalongo, 2013) supports the claim that the quality of the teachers and their own pedagogical knowledge about children's literacy development is the key to achieving the best outcomes. The early educators must engage in a full academic year of professional development with undergraduate credit under the guidance of a qualified instructor and actively participate in weekly classes while applying their learning by teaching children on a daily basis. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methods and findings of a study that examined how pre-service early childhood teachers enrolled in an undergraduate literacy methods course learned to implement guided practice, as a research-based approach to literacy instruction, to support and nurture early literacy.

### **Guided Practice: The Research**

The research conducted over the past two decades on prevention of reading difficulties has produced extensive results demonstrating that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up. One particular research-based strategy, guided reading practice, is an important interactive method associated with today's developmentally appropriate literacy instruction (Pinnell and Fountas, 2010). The National Reading Panel (2000), based on a review of scientific research-based literacy instructional practices used by educators in classrooms across the country, argued that guided practice is preferable when helping children develop literacy. Additionally, in their position statements, the International Literacy Association/The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National

Council of Teachers of English have recommended programs to adapt guided reading practice as part of a balanced literacy program (Iaquinta, 2006). In guided practice, early educators provide specific demonstrations and teach comprehension strategies such as open-ended questions, targeted feedback, analytical talk, expansion on responses, recall of what was learned, repetition of pages, and evaluation of conversations. Early educators prompt children to think critically and talk in strategic ways. The National Reading Panel (2000) suggested that interactive techniques are highly effective in helping children recall information, generate questions, and understand texts. Discussion-based guided reading lessons have greater depth to help stretch children's language abilities and can be "geared toward creating richly textured opportunities for students' conceptual and linguistic development" (Goldenberg, 1994, p. 178). In guided practice, an early educator (a) selects books that are engaging and developmentally appropriate, (b) introduces a prompt by using questions and then evaluating and expanding on the responses, (c) repeats the prompt to see if the children have more to add, and (d) uses a scaffolded method of supporting children's vocabulary and critical thinking. As the children become increasingly familiar with a book, early educators use higher-level prompts to encourage the children to go beyond naming objects in the pictures to thinking at a deeper level about what is happening in the book and how it relates to their own personal experiences.

Research shows that guided practice in which early educators read collaboratively with children through interaction has positive impacts on the receptive vocabulary development of children (Kotaman, 2013). In guided practice, early educators read aloud while creating meaning through dialogue and classroom interaction, providing an opportunity for children to respond to literature in a way that builds on their background knowledge (Wiseman, 2011). Reading aloud and encouraging interaction provides important learning opportunities for emergent readers because early educators can actively model and scaffold strategies and engage readers in a variety of meaningful ways. Without interacting with the children, early educators cannot assess what children know about literacy, which in turn makes it difficult for them to facilitate guided practice (Matusov and Smith, 2007). Guided practice has been an effective technique for increasing children's engagement in and understanding and appreciation of reading in early childhood and kindergarten settings (Pinnell and Fountas, 2010). Disadvantaged at-risk children who have fewer at-home opportunities for literacy development can especially benefit from guided play through listening, hearing, and interacting with adults (Pinnell and Fountas, 2010).

### **Course Overview: A Literacy Methods Course for Early Childhood Educators**

The methods course examined in the study described herein was designed to help early educators improve instruction by describing theory of language emergence for young children and developing skills in creating an environment where literacy flourishes. The course helps future educators learn to focus on a child's emerging literacy and exposure to language stimulation. Combining research, reflection, and developmentally appropriate practices, the course fosters an understanding of how techniques and activities affect language and early literacy skills development in young children from infancy through 5 years of age. The course gives early educators 12 hours of supervised practical experiences to apply and further develop their knowledge and skills as a

professional. Early educators have the opportunity to apply the theories, principles, skills, concepts, and best practices that they have learned in their coursework. They earn a total of 3 credits for 12 practicum hours per semester. The early educators complete their practicum experience at a local accredited Head Start program that serves children ranging in age from infants/toddlers through preschool. This mid-level methods course includes observation, participation, and teaching in the early childhood setting. In the literacy methods course, the instructor (the first author) spent several weeks teaching pre-service early childhood educators how to teach literacy using guided practice, including explanations, demonstrations, modeling, scaffolds, and targeted feedback. The instructor exposed pre-service early educators to the types of comments and questions that could serve to facilitate children's vocabulary and comprehensive language development. She also collaborated with the local Head Start partners to discuss effective implementation of guided practice. Each strategy was taught using supporting research, followed by a description of how it could be implemented. The guided practice was modeled as a tool for educators to increase instructional motivation in children. The goal was to improve the educational outcomes of all children by creating a language-rich environment in which the children could become active participants in classroom interchange (McKie *et al.*, 2012).

## METHODS

The literacy methods course that was the basis for this study was offered by a U.S. Midwestern university's Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education. Through class activities and field experiences, the pre-service early educators developed an increased awareness of the importance of establishing a learning climate conducive to literacy development for all children and an understanding of methods to assimilate the critical thinking skills that involved children's synthesis of new learning through dialogue. Pre-service educators were required to take this mid-level literacy-related course before enrolling in their senior-level courses. The participants of the study were 10 pre-service (undergraduate) early educators who were enrolled in the methods course during the fall of 2014, and the age of participants ranged from 20 to 40 years. All 10 educators were white female teacher candidates. The approach of this descriptive study was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The researchers mainly collected qualitative and quantitative data by using a reflective journal assignment to determine if the pre-service early childhood educators were well trained to offer children opportunities to become active participants using guided practice. The assignment provided educators with an opportunity to implement guided practice that required children's involvement in literacy experiences and reflect on the effectiveness of the guided practice and its positive influence on early literacy. The premise was based on life-span research demonstrating that literacy development is positively affected by the amount of active participation in learning episodes (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez and Angelillo, 2003). The reflective journal required educators to include ideas related to teaching and learning, reasoning of strategy used, analysis of performance, propositions of developmentally appropriate practice, and opinions with some justification and explanation. The purpose of the reflective journal was to teach educators to regularly ask and answer questions about teaching and learning and thus develop deeper

thinking and more careful judgments about all the dynamics of what occurred during teaching (Nelken, McAdoo and Manwaring, 2009). In short, the journal assignment asked educators to reflect on the interaction between the educator and children by documenting effectiveness of guided practice. The evaluation criteria were based on clear descriptions of characteristics of the work associated with each component, at varying levels of mastery. Grades were determined in accordance with the university's policy and written guidelines that were distributed within the first session of the course. The percentage of possible points system was easy to apply and established the educational value of criteria or standards tied more directly to course goals.

## RESULTS

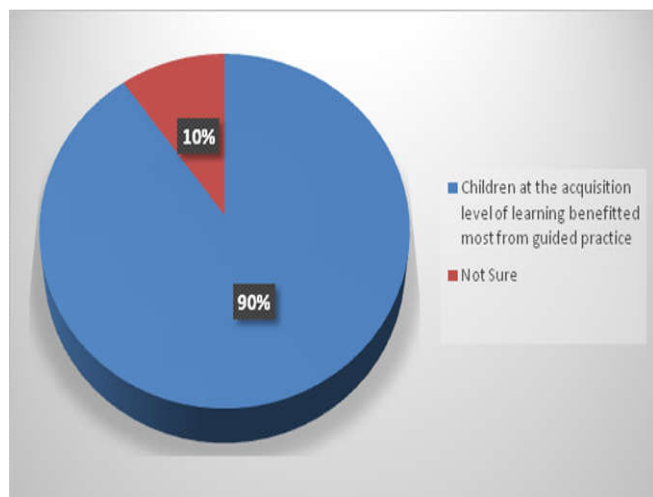
The purpose of this paper was to discuss the methods and findings of a study that examined how pre-service early childhood teachers enrolled in an undergraduate literacy methods course learned to implement guided practice, as a research-based approach to literacy instruction, to support and nurture early literacy. Qualitative analysis was used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons and motivations or generating ideas for later quantitative research. Quantitative analysis was considered for the purposes of quantifying data and measuring the incidence of various views and opinions in a chosen sample. Statistical data were used in the form of tabulations for recommending a final course of action (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012).

### Qualitative Analysis

John Dewey (1938) believed that education should serve not only as a means of acquiring knowledge but also as a way of applying knowledge to everyday actions and behaviors. The reflective journal assignment was used to determine if early educators could apply knowledge through active application of the information that was taught. The purpose of analyzing the reflective journal assignment was to determine if early educators felt that they could maximize guided practice during instructional time to make sure that children successfully learned a desired skill through the social and interactive processes of learning. One early educator wrote how guided practice helped children consolidate new learning through dialogue: "It seems that children's social interactions and talk during these guided practice sessions are indicative of this assumption that learning is inherently social and that children's dialogue with the caregivers is an important factor in developing literacy skills". Another educator explained how children's new learning was guided through social interaction: "Guided practice provides children with opportunities to incorporate their personal experiences and learning efforts into a fun social setting, which seems to motivate them to extend their literacy learning". Wiseman (2011) posited that interaction between children and early educators fosters an exchange based on a constructivist approach, which is an interrelationship between what a child already knows and what is to be known. Guided practice used in classrooms creates a social and cultural context of literacy, which Wiseman indicated is central to how and why children learn. These techniques help children with expressive and receptive vocabulary development, print awareness, concept development, and other pre-literacy skills. The type of interaction that children experience has a more profound effect on their vocabulary and prior knowledge than the time spent

reading without analytic talk by early educators (Rao, Newlin-Haus and Ehrhardt, 2016). One early educator wrote how guided practice helped children develop an understanding of the new concept or critical thinking skill: "It is in the collaboration between children and me that children seek to make sense of the meanings found within the texts they engage with. It is within these conversations that the children develop their understanding at levels that move them towards more critical thinkers". Another early educator wrote how she supported children in classrooms by creating opportunities that allowed them to think:

"As children discuss the story elements and do not simply just listen to the read aloud, talk becomes an important factor in the learning process. The interaction during guided instruction creates opportunities for children to ask and answer questions, engages them to get involved in analytic thinking and talk, presents environments to dramatize the conversations, and allows [them] to carry on dialogue related to concepts". Guided practice with young children creates an opportunity for adults and children to present and participate in read-alouds that promote active engagement of the children with reciprocal sharing of information (Flint, 2010).



**Figure 1. Response to the reflective journal guidelines, "Who benefitted most from explicit instruction activities and guidance to perform new tasks to mastery?"**

### Quantitative Analysis

Data about the pre-service early educators' familiarity with and use of guided practice strategies revealed the following results. First, 100% of early educators said that the literacy methods course was very effective for advancing competence and comfort with implementing guided practice that helped children develop positive reading attitudes and build receptive vocabulary. In addition, 100% of early educators said that the activities in the course enabled them to design effective teaching strategies that provided for a balanced literacy approach and included attention to guided practice. Further, 100% said that the field component was very effective for engaging with children in direct experiences using guided practice as an important touchstone for the course. Nearly 90% of participants said that children at the acquisition level of learning benefitted most from explicit instruction activities and guidance to perform new tasks to mastery (Figure 1). Furthermore, 90% said that the guided practice strategies were the most powerful techniques to promote children's oral

language, vocabulary, and print knowledge and to foster children's engagement in interaction. Finally, 100% said that their guided conversations and interaction with children ensured understanding of the printed words, inspired imagination and critical thinking, and helped children develop a love for reading, an integral component of literacy proficiency.

### Recommendations and Implications

The results of the study suggest that the literacy methods course helped pre-service early educators understand the advantages of appropriate guided practice that are linked with children's improved literacy and development of vocabulary, oral language abilities, and print-related knowledge. Young children learn literacy skills through interactions with the adults around them and gain skills necessary for literacy development when those adults, particularly parents and early educators, are both knowledgeable and intentional in how they support and nurture early literacy (Rao *et al.*, 2016). In order to develop teaching competencies, teacher preparation programs must provide pre-service trainings that are grounded in current scientific knowledge about how children learn to develop literacy skills and the best instructional practices to help them learn. In addition, the results of the study suggest that the literacy methods class was very effective at offering rigorous pre-service training and experiential opportunities involving guided practice. Each early educator in the study reported having training in research-based guided practice that resulted in enhancing young children's vocabulary and increasing children's engagement in and understanding and appreciation of literacy. Based on the study results, college-level literacy methods courses for pre-service early educators should teach those educators to use guided practice strategies that help children solidify thinking—a fundamental skill necessary for literacy development and all future learning.

The generalizability of the results of this study is limited due to the small number of participants. A study with a larger sample would allow for more valid conclusions about how guided practice could be implemented to improve young children's literacy. A similar study extended over a longer period would generate more participants and would mark an interesting direction for further research. An additional element could be added that examines a lesson/unit plan of children and determines if guided practice strategies have a significant impact on literacy development. Finally, an extended study might help determine other ways faculty can support pre-service early educators in order to improve literacy instruction and thus achieve a successful school wide literacy initiative that truly impacts children's achievement and improves their literacy and learning.

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