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Using Socialization to Increase Academic Skills in a Pre-School Classroom

Abstract:

Recent research has shown that students who enter kindergarten with prior academic knowledge are more successful later in their school careers. Yet, pre-school teachers face the problem of limited time in a day to focus on the academic skills of students, as well as work on their basic needs. The goal of this study was to find out if students can increase their academic skills by developing socialization skills. The study consisted of quantitative and qualitative research with questionnaires given to parents, student interviews, and student observations. The conclusion of the study is that the more students interact with each other the better they perform academically.

Introduction:

As the New York State standards increase demands on students' academic scores, the pressure increases on requirements students need to have when entering kindergarten. In order for students to be successful later in school there are many skills pre-school students need to learn before entering kindergarten. This puts more pressure on their teachers who are already focusing on the basic needs of children such as toileting and social skills. As someone who is currently teaching a pre-school classroom, I find that I often struggle between what is most important to focus on in the classroom. Some days I am focusing so much on the social skills of students that I am not focusing on their academic needs. This leads to the question, can pre-school teachers increase academic skills while increasing socialization skills?

Literature Review:

In my research I focused on what aspects of learning preschool children benefit from the most as well as how it impacts them in the later grades. By determining what factors preschool children benefit the most from it allowed me to figure out what is most important to teach students. After looking at all the prior research I found that it was more important to focus on the socialization skills of pre-school students rather than their academic skills. Three studies that were conducted proved this statement to be true.

Piker and Rex (2008) conducted a study on students who were non-native speakers of the English Language (ELL). This study found that ELL students learned more academically through the use of socialization. The study used an observational

design based on a head start classroom. Its focus was on two female teachers and approximately 17 students. The study was conducted by using video recordings of the students and teachers which enabled them to look back upon the videos for assessment purposes. The findings of this study were, students who do not speak the English Language, learned the language better by the social interactions among their teachers and their peers.

After looking into the idea that socialization helps students, I began to wonder what influence parents have on these students outside of the classroom. Zaman (2006) conducted a study on the parental role of Hispanic-American children who were three and four years old. This study was a survey design with a questionnaire directed to 48 parents. Its findings were that many of the parents did not believe in the pre-school setting. The study showed that those children whose parents held that belief, and did not send their children to a pre-school classroom, lacked socialization skills and they did not know how to act in a public setting (Zaman, 2006) Children can either meet the socialization skills in a preschool setting or by parents bringing them on a scheduled basis to public places such as a restaurant or the library and other places in which a child will learn how they should and shouldn't act in public. The article also states that:

“if parents fail to create a healthy educational and literacy atmosphere and remain reluctant in providing an opportunity to develop the Primary Level Skills in various domains, many of those children might fail to build the bridge between home and formal schooling (Zaman, A. 2006).”

These parents who do not believe in a pre-school setting may be giving their students prior knowledge in academic skills, such as pre-literacy skills, by taking them to the

library, however these students are not receiving socialization skills. Due to this lack of socialization they may feel a sense of discomfort when entering the classroom and they may struggle. This study made me wonder if there is a correlation between student's involvement in socialization outside of the classroom, and students socialization and academic skills inside the classroom.

If socialization is very important in the pre-school classroom what kind of methods should be used to help keep students motivated? Stipek (2006), focused on the idea that the “drill and kill” method makes students lose their motivation. This method consists of students just reading the numbers off the calendar without really knowing that each symbol was a number. This study focused on preschool students and their teachers. Stipek also states that “in order to achieve high academic standards, we need to be more concerned with nonacademic skills” (2006). By nonacademic skills she is referring to the socialization skills that preschool students need to learn. Think about a situation where a child is entering kindergarten. If the child goes into kindergarten without the prior socialization skills the teachers will spend more time trying to comfort the child and make them feel comfortable then they will be able to spend on the academic skills. Also students who have the prior socialization skills tend to be more positive about learning and will be more motivated to learn (Stipek 2006). During my research I found there were studies done on the impact socialization has on students who are English Language Learners, However I did not find studies done on pre-school students who speak the English Language.

Methodology:

This study sampled 27 students in a preschool classroom in a sub-urban area of Central New York and 22 parents of those children. There were 21 male students and six female students in the study. The study was first approved by the Human Subjects Committee of my institution. Following this approval, a letter was written to the administrator of the daycare in order to seek approval for the study to be conducted in the facilities. An informed consent was given to a participating teacher who allowed her four year old students to participate in the study. The last form of consent was provided by parents for their children to participate. By signing and returning the consent form, parents gave permission for their children as well as their own participation in the study.

Three instruments consisting of questionnaires, observations, and student interviews were used in the study. Questionnaires were given to parents in order to help assess the amount of socialization that students participate in outside of the classroom. Interviews were conducted with students in the preschool classroom. They were conducted during center time in order to keep the other students occupied while meeting with each child on an individual basis. These interviews focused on the students' ability to answer questions where activities were conducted during individual work and activities that were conducted during social interactions. The third method used was observations. The observations focused on how many students were engaged in social interactions at a given time, as well as if those students were demonstrating academic skills during the social interactions.

In order to test accuracy of these items there was a pilot study done on the student interview questions, in which I found that there were a few minor adjustments that had to

be done in order to get accurate results. A pilot observation was also done, in which I found that it was too difficult to get accurate results when focusing on the three and four year olds as a whole group in order to see who was actually engaged in socialization at a given time. Therefore after the pilot observation was done I altered it so that I was only focusing on the three year olds at a given time or the four year olds at a given time. This allowed for accurate information to be documented on the exact amount of students who were engaging in social activities. It also allowed for me to correctly monitor which students were demonstrating academic skills during this time of socialization.

Analysis and results:

The majority of students who were engaging in socialization demonstrated some form of academic skills. The topics that they discussed were identifying numbers, identifying colors, identifying food, and identifying vehicles. However, I had two different situations while observing, where the student would shout out a color or a number at random, to no one in particular. On most days, with the exception of those two students, I found that students' continued in fluent conversations off what each other had said. One student said, "it is raining outside"; the next student responded with "we can't go outside and play today"; then the next said "we have to use the gross motor room." I have seen other situations where a teacher would ask a student what number they saw and if they did not know it a classmate would say the number for them in order for the student to look at it and remember.

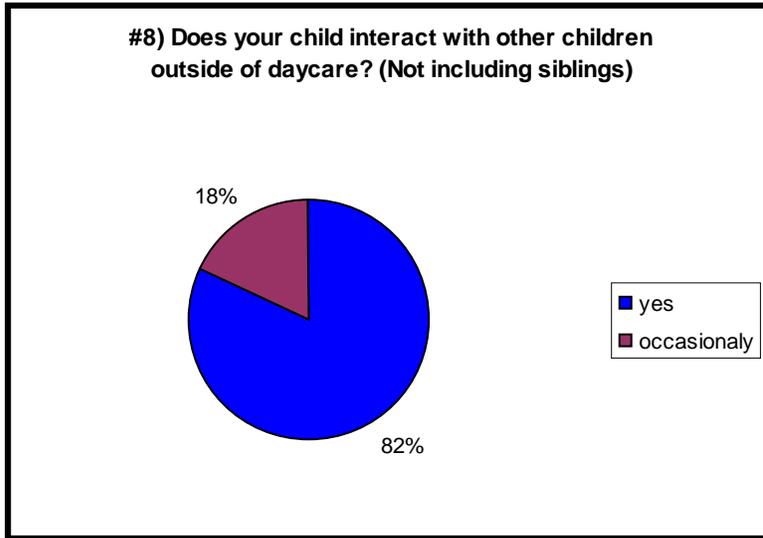
I observed one particular child in the three year old classroom who had troubles with speech. At the beginning of the study she did not speak, when she did all you could

hear were sounds which mainly consisted of vowel sounds. It was near impossible to figure out anything this child was saying. However, by the end of the study her peers and her teachers were able to understand her better. It seemed the more this child socialized with her peers, the more she was able to communicate. In order to determine validity on this theory I had her talk to other teachers, who are not in the room with her on a daily basis, to see if they could understand her. In the beginning of the study those teachers could not make out anything she was saying and I could only pick out very few words. By the end of the study those teachers were able to understand her more clearly. By focusing on this particular child and her improved speech it was clear that her continuous interactions with her classmates improved her speech, which also helped to determine where she stands with her academic skills.

During interviews I found that students retained more knowledge during the activities that were socialization based such as circle time. The majority of the students could answer questions that were asked about an activity they completed that was socialization based, however they could not answer questions about an activity they had been asked to do independently, such as reading a book, or working on an art project by themselves. I think students learn more from their peers than they do working on an activity on their own. They are having more fun with the activity when they can interact with their classmates, therefore they do not know that it is an academic skill that is being learned.

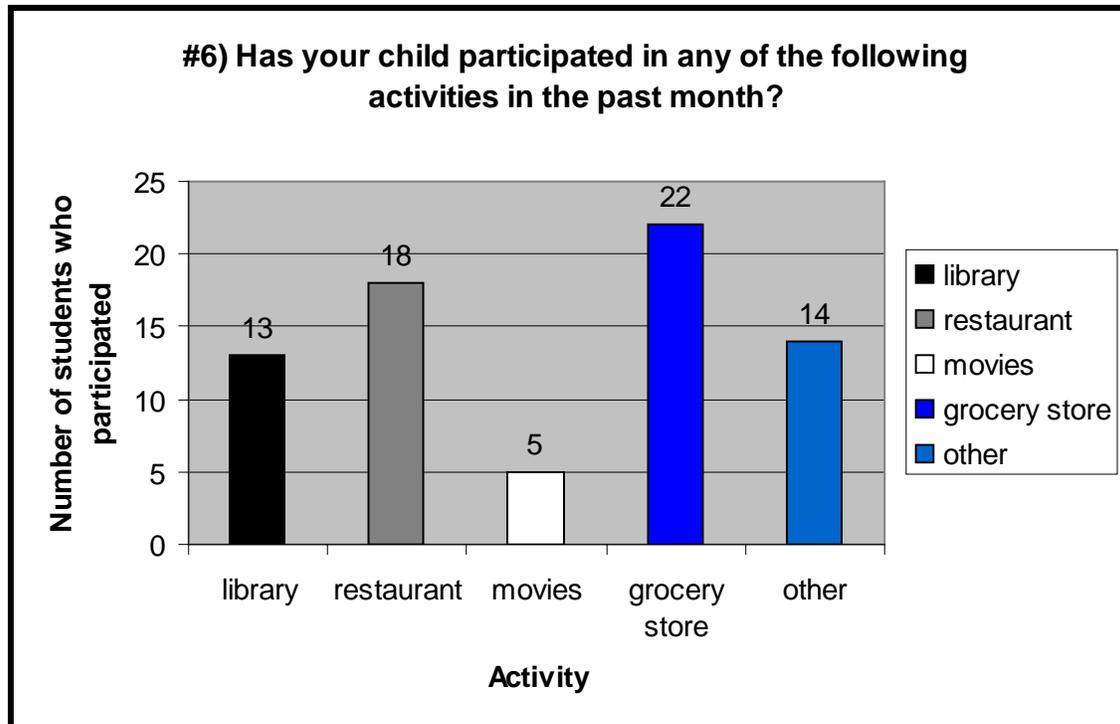
The results of the questionnaires were that the majority of the students do engage in social activities outside of the classroom and the majority of them also have siblings which may also increase their socialization and academic skills (see figure 1). 82% of

students interact with other children outside of the classroom. These numbers do not include interactions among their siblings.



(figure 1)

Figure 2 below shows some of the actual events that students participate in outside of the classroom.



(figure 2)

Discussion and Conclusion:

After looking at all of these findings it is apparent that pre-school teachers need to focus more on the social activities with students rather than try to push the academic skills. Students learn better while interacting with one another, and it especially helpful to those students who have speech delays. Therefore, the results of this study are that academic skills can be acquired from student to student. Students learn best from socializing with each other or socializing with their teachers.

After conducting my observations I found that not only did socialization increase academic skills among pre-school students, but it also helped improve speech. This finding concurs with Piker and Rex (2008) who found that students who did not speak English as a first Language, learned more academically through the use of socialization

based activities. Both studies found that the social interactions increase the use of the language, whether it is a student who does not speak English as a first language, or a student who is just struggling with speech in general.

Another significant finding of my study was that majority of the students (82%) participate in social interactions outside of the classroom. This finding is consistent with a similar study done by Zaman, (2006) based on the parental role of Hispanic-American children with three and four years old. This study found that parents did not believe in the pre-school setting and their children also lacked socialization skills (Zaman, A. 2006). In my particular study the majority of the students did not have trouble with socialization skills which makes me conclude that their participation in social activities outside of the classroom helps to increase their socialization skills in the classroom.

Another finding from my study was that students learn best from interacting with one another and “piggy backing” off what each other says and does. This way of learning helps students to increase their academic skills. While conducting this study I found other ways to teach the students in order to keep them engaged in activities that are not hands-on learning. For example, during calendar time students were not able to have hands-on learning activities, however they were able to talk to one another and listened to each others responses. They were able to feel a sense of comfort among their peers and were able to speak if they wished to. They were not forced into answering a question. I also changed the way I asked them about the number of the day in order to focus more on their intellectual abilities. Instead of just having them count their numbers off, I had them tell me what the number was, what number we wanted to keep, and what number we wanted to change. This allowed for me to see where they were academically with their

numbers and their problem solving skills. This finding concurred with Stipek, 2006 study which focused on the idea that the “drill and kill” method makes students lose their motivation. This method would be to have students just reading the numbers off the calendar without really knowing that each symbol was a number.

Limitations:

The study yielded significant information but caution must be taken while interpreting the results because there were some limitations. Time was a big limitation I faced. If there was more time I would have liked to focus a little more on the four and five year olds especially during the interview questions. I also would have liked to study a larger population, including students from many other preschools in different areas. A larger sample would provide a variety of opinions as well as teaching styles. Another limitation I faced was that I was not able to compare the students who participate in social activities outside of the classroom with the way they interact in the classroom.

Ideas for Further Research:

I believe this study is just a stepping stone to many other studies that can be done. I would like to see a study done that includes schools from different areas. Using a larger sample would help to understand if social interactions helps students who are from inner city schools, or students who have special needs. Also if someone had more time to do a study, I would like to see them focus more on the four and five year olds and compare the differences between the age groups. I have not done research yet to see if there has been

any done based on the impact of socialization on school age children, but that would be another study that needs to be conducted.

Implications:

From this study it is evident that pre-school teachers should focus more on the socialization of their students rather than their academic skills. This can be done by allowing students to interact with one another while giving them those academic cues. For example while students are interacting around the play kitchen, give them food they may not be familiar with such as an avocado. This will expand their knowledge and if one student does not know what the object is, another child may.

Parents can also play a large roll in students' socialization and academic skills. While at home parents can talk to their children about many different objects such as money. When they are taking their students grocery shopping they can talk to them about how they have to pay for the item, how much it costs, have the child count out the money, etc. To increase this idea, teachers can send home a different idea every week so that parents will have an idea of what can help increase their child's academic skills while they are socializing with them. I think if teachers and parents work together it will have a great impact on the skills demonstrated by their pre-school children.

Conclusion:

Preschool students learn best in situations where they can interact among their peers. It helps keep them motivated. Therefore, preschool teachers should not try to focus so much on the academic skills that students need to learn, and instead focus on the

socialization skills that students should develop. Students will always have the opportunity to learn academic skills when they reach the elementary grades, so pre-school should be a time for students to learn socialization skills and have fun. Students will gain the motivation to learn if they are comfortable in their environment. They are also learning academic skills, without the “drill and kill” when they are socializing. Let them have fun learning, while they are still young.

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