The Effectiveness of an Additional Half-Day Program for At-Risk Nursery and Kindergarten Children Through a Collaborative Partnership

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Abstract

A collaborative partnership was developed within a school division, inner-city school and nearby daycare to provide an intervention program for children in nursery school and kindergarten known to be at-risk for school success. The plan was to offer an additional half-day of programming focused on a whole-child vision including language, literacy, social skills and physical activity to increase the children's readiness for school. A program was developed using the results from early screening testing, the provincial curriculum for the early years, and consultations with experienced administrative and school-based personnel, clinical consultants and the director of the child care center. Contrary to expectation, the results indicate greater gains were achieved by the nursery-aged children over those for the kindergarten children. This finding suggests interventions with the nursery school age group may be particularly impactful in making a difference in their language and literacy development.

Introduction

Substantial evidence exists within the research literature to suggest socioeconomic status is positively related to literacy development from the early years through to high school (Molfese, Modglin, & Molfese, 2003; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). Gaps in literacy achievement for children from disadvantaged families are evident at school entry (Buckingham, Beaman, & Wheldall, 2014). MacGillivray and Rueda (2001) found children who come from lower socioeconomic status and children from homes where the language spoken is not the dominant language are "grossly over-represented" when studying the numbers of unsuccessful literacy learners. These children often begin school unprepared for the academic and behavioural expectations of classroom life (Leseman, 2002). Canadian statistics reveal over one-quarter of the children beginning kindergarten will not graduate from high school (Council for Early Child Development, 2007). The ground-breaking revelations of McCain and Mustard's 1999 study revealed the impact of neurological and brain development in the early years as determinants in the trajectory for the rest of the life cycle. In response to this research, provincial governments across Canada have responded by initiating policy focused on early years education.

This study describes one province's early years strategy, encouraging the engagement of cross-sectoral partnerships, which resulted in a collaboration between a school division, a public inner-city school and a neighbourhood day-care. This partnership represents how three stakeholders worked together to create an intervention for inner-city nursery and kindergarten children who had been identified as being at-risk for school success.

Theoretical framework

Theory and research indicate learning to read is the most important outcome of the elementary years (Strickland, 2002) and lack of success in reading in the early years leads to the struggling elementary and middle years reader and eventually school failure (Slavin, Karweit & Wasik, 1992). It is believed the reading problems of many adolescents and adults can be linked back to their early years of development (NRC, 1998).

The field of neuroscience provides evidence showing the early years of development serve as a foundation for learning. The early interactions children have with adults and more knowledgeable peers are important factors in brain development (McCain & Mustard, 1999). More striking is the evidence that the early years of brain development have implications extending beyond the time of childhood and influencing life-long learning (McCain & Mustard, 1999). This knowledge has led to recent efforts among policy makers to reduce the disparities resulting from socioeconomic and second language effects on schooling.

Research in family literacy reveals the socio-economic status (SES) levels of families are strongly related to children's literacy achievement (Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). Family poverty has been shown to contribute to factors affecting children's language development. Parents with limited education and low incomes are less likely to know how to facilitate their child's cognitive and social development. It is a challenge for parents who have struggled with their own literacy to provide a foundation for their children's language and literacy development. Many factors come into play for these parents, with life stresses such as employment and taking care of their families, lack of parental role models in their own lives, and understanding the importance of their role in their children's lives (McLoyd &Wilson, 1990).

Studies have shown the extent to which poverty impacts children's language development. A study on the use of home language (Hart and Risley, 1995) revealed a dramatic difference in language interactions and spoken vocabularies among families of different SES levels. They reported that per hour a child from a poor family heard 615 words, a child from a working-class family heard 1,251 words, and a child from a professional family heard 2,153 words. This accounted for a measurable difference in spoken language by age three for children raised in professional homes and children from lower-income homes.

Literacy practices among different SES families also differ according to number of books in the home and frequency and quality of reading time with their children (Adams, 1990; Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986; McCormick & Mason, 1986). Studies focusing on the frequency of home reading indicate parents with higher SES levels read to their young children more frequently than parents of lower SES levels (Britto et al., 2002 in Fletcher & Reese, 2005 p.88). Children from low income homes have fewer experiences with books prior to beginning school (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009).

In examining the literacy practices in low-income families, Purcell-Gates (1966) found families tended to be more limited in how they used language whereas families with more education applied practices reflecting those used in early childhood classes. Other factors include parents' responsiveness to their children's needs (Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001) and more reliance on power-assertive techniques. Hertzman (2010) states that by the time children enter kindergarten, it is possible to identify those children who have not had secure, nurturing and stimulating early childhood experiences. Children from low-SES backgrounds experiencing these conditions will be less likely to have developed the learning outcomes needed to prepare them for their early years of schooling.

It is now evident, however, that risk factors related to literacy development among low-income and linguistically different populations are not inherent, but part of the social contexts of learning, and therefore are amenable to change through education (Zakaluk, Straw, & Smith, 2003). School readiness programs, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, are recognized as a means to positively affect their success in school as well as their future. Ample evidence exists to demonstrate well-designed prekindergarten programming supports the development of school readiness skills and serves as a foundation for continued achievement (Neuman, Rosko's, Vukelich & Clements, 2003).

Context of this study

In 2002, a study entitled "Understanding the Early Years" (UEY) was conducted by the Winnipeg School Division to assess the readiness of kindergarten children throughout their

jurisdiction. Analysis of the data from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) identified children in a catchment area who were in the bottom 10% of readiness to begin grade one, and which would hinder their success in Grade one without some form of intervention.

The Early Development Instrument was developed by Dan Offord and Magdalena Janus at the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University. It has been used in Canada since 1998. It is a population-based tool measuring young children's developmental levels in five domains: Physical Health and Well Being; Social Competence; Emotional Maturity; Language and Cognitive Development; and Communication and General Knowledge. As such, it is considered to be a form of holistic assessment of children between the ages of 3.5 and 6.5 years. It uses a questionnaire format to be completed for each child by the early year's teacher.

Data collection is done in the second half of the kindergarten year, since by this time the teacher is familiar with each child and children will generally have settled into the school environment. The EDI data are sent to the Offord Centre for processing. The results are aggregated to provide a snap shot of children's developmental functioning across schools, neighbourhoods, and cities and provinces across the country.

In Canada, education is under provincial jurisdiction. One policy to support early years learning in the province where this research was conducted is to encourage school-divisions to collaborate with other groups offering programs and services to preschool children and their families. This is referred to as an inter-sectoral initiative. Based on the results of the EDI, a school division, an elementary school, and a neighbourhood daycare worked collaboratively to address the results of the EDI. This joint effort led to the establishment of a half-day intervention program to be offered at the child daycare centre and referred to as The Literacy Intervention for Tomorrow (LIFT) Program.

This school division, which is the largest in the city and includes the inner-city, offered half-day no-fee nursery and kindergarten programming to its residents from September to June. The goal of this intervention was to provide an additional half-day of school experience to build children's readiness experiences for school.

It was decided a proactive approach was needed to intervene for children who were entering nursery school and kindergarten in the following year. The program provided an additional half-day of engagement in language and literacy skills and aimed to develop the socialization skills needed for the school setting. The initial pilot project was funded through the Manitoba Child Care Program (MCCP).

The researcher was approached by the school-community liaison person to assist the LIFT team in assessing the effectiveness of the intervention program. At this time the program had been running but had not been assessed. My objectives for this study were to determine: 1) whether the nursery and kindergarten students made gains in their literacy skills through their participation in the intervention, and 2) to provide feedback on the programming for this intervention.

Method

Participants and program.

Eight children participated in this study over a ten-month period. Four of the children were in nursery school (mean age 4.5 years), and four were in kindergarten (mean age 5.4 years), with two boys and two girls in each group. The four kindergarten children were selected to participate based on their nursery school scores the previous fall in the school division's Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP) testing. Selection of the four nursery school children was based on the school readiness of their older siblings and the observations of school personnel in the first weeks of the nursery school year. In addition, students who were thought to most benefit from the additional support and resources were considered.

Parents were contacted and offered a placement for their child at no cost to ensure there were no barriers for children to attend and no financial burden placed on the families. Parents were then

invited to an information session to be introduced to the benefits of the program. If parents agreed to have their children attend, they and their children participated in a follow-up orientation meeting to familiarize them with the centre and the program. In return, parents brought their children to the program at the daycare every morning Monday to Friday for 8:00 a.m., starting in September and ending in June. The daycare staff walked the children over to the elementary school for the nursery and kindergarten class for the afternoon.

Implementation of the LIFT program was overseen by the director of the daycare and carried out by three early childhood educators. Employment of childcare staff is regulated by the province requiring all staff working with children in child care centres, nursery schools and school-age child care centres to meet certain classification designations: Child Care Assistant (CCA), Early Childhood Educator II (ECE II) and Early Childhood Educator III (ECE III). The most experienced daycare staff member for the LIFT program had the highest attainable designation as ECE III which consists of the Early Childhood Educator diploma, some specialization, and a Bachelor of Education in Developmental Studies. The two additional daycare staff for the LIFT program both had the CCA designation described as no-post-secondary credentials, and 40 hours of Early Childhood Educator coursework to be taken within the first year of employment. Two of the childcare educators worked directly with the students, while one was free to assist as required or prepare materials.

The daycare was formerly a remodelled two-story house. The main floor was rich with early years learning materials including a dramatic play area, a reading loft, construction toys, books, puzzles, a fish tank, a bird cage, and arts and crafts materials. There was a carpeted area for children to gather around and work with the teacher, an area with small tables to sit at, and an area for children to sit together and have snacks and their lunch. A gym was located on the second floor with a variety of equipment for physical exercise.

The curriculum for the LIFT program was developed by drawing from several existing sources being used within the school division for early years programming. This included the provincial English Language Arts curriculum for kindergarten and the five areas assessed through the EDI assessment: physical health and well-being, emotional development, social competence, language and cognitive development, and communication and general knowledge. A team representing school personnel and administrators, a speech-language consultant and the director of the daycare planned the intervention program utilizing these documents, assessments, and drawing on the collective experience of the team members.

Six target areas for skill development were identified based on the analysis of the CAP scores, EDI results, and early year observations of the children. A whole child philosophy was foundational to the goals of the program. It included the following: language and literacy development, social development, self-help and life skills, preparation for the school setting, building of self-confidence in life and learning skills and an excitement for learning. Programming was developed for the entire ten-month period, with the three early childhood educators working through weekly curricular plans.

A typical day in the LIFT program began at 8:00 a.m. when parents brought their child to the daycare with activities beginning at 8:30. The morning was divided into different learning opportunities of age-appropriate duration and utilizing different spaces within the daycare centre. Learning experiences included circle time, large muscle activities, adult-led activity in art, small group activities with an adult, mini group options, creative play, red play box activities offering varied and free play. The children were provided with a nutritious snack mid-morning and ate their lunches together, allowing for an opportunity to work on self-help and socialization life skills.

Data sources

This was a mixed methods study employing both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Access to the school division's scores for their CAP testing was provided for the two consecutive fall periods bookending the study. Scores were compared to assess the children's knowledge and skills prior to and after the LIFT program. The children's learning was assessed through a descriptive

analysis of seven subtests of the CAP testing. The subtests inclusive for both groups, the nursery to kindergarten and kindergarten to grade one, were selected as they would allow for cross comparisons. These subtests included: story or personal information, reading of environmental print, word identification or tracking, retelling, conventions of print, letter names, and speech and language development. Scores were compared for the fall nursery school year (Time 1) to the fall of the kindergarten year (Time 2) for one group, and for the fall of the kindergarten year (Time 1) to the fall of the grade one year (Time 2) for the second group.

Qualitative data included three different sources. Interviews were conducted with each of the early childhood educators at four points during the year: October, January, March and June. These were audio recorded with the teacher's permission and later transcribed for analysis. Three field observations of the LIFT program were conducted in each of January, March, and June. A final focus group was conducted with the daycare teachers at the end of the school year. Analysis of the data was through the grounded theory approach, involving searches for emergent themes present within the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and the constant comparative method in which the investigator simultaneously codes, categorizes, and makes notes of new and recurrent themes. Weekly lesson plans and monthly records of student progress lent depth to the analysis and description (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results and findings

The CAP analysis places learning performance in one of three levels (see Table 1). "Independent" refers to the child working at or beyond the indicated grade level and able to proceed into the next grade level with ease. The "developing level" refers to the child approaching the indicated grade level and able to benefit from instruction. The level described as "needing support" indicated a child required additional instruction and support to reach the beginning stages of this grade level and to continue to make progress toward grade level outcomes.

Table 1: Performance Levels on CAP (Comprehensive Assessment Program) Scale

Level of progress	CAP scale
Grade 1	
Independent Grade 1	10
Developing Grade 1	9
Needs Support Grade 1	8
Kindergarten	
Independent Kindergarten	7
Developing Kindergarten	6
Needs Support Kindergarten	5
Nursery	
Independent Nursery	4
Developing Nursery	3
Needs Support Nursery	2

In total there were seven subtests for each of the four children in the nursery school to kindergarten group and the kindergarten to grade one group, with a total of 28 subtests per group (see Table 2). Analysis of the findings of the subtest performance indicate that in 20 out of 28 subtests, the nursery to kindergarten children achieved at a level indicating readiness for beginning kindergarten instruction. In 13 out of 28 subtests, the kindergarten to grade one children achieved at a level indicating readiness for beginning grade one instruction. Overall, in 71% of the subtests, the nursery to kindergarten children were able to enter their new grade ready or requiring some support to achieve the next grade level expectations; whereas, 46% of the kindergarten to Grade one children were ready for the next grade level.

Post-test scores in three of the subtests were similar for both groups. In the telling of personal information through drawing and writing and reading environmental print or simple books, one child in each group was at an independent level for their grade. For retelling a story that had been repeated over a few weeks, two children in each group were at an independent level for their grade. For the

remaining four subtests on conventions of print, letter recognition, and speech and language development more of the children in their kindergarten year were at a level of readiness than were the grade one children. These subtest scores indicated that, comparatively, only half as many of the grade one children were ready for their new grade as were the kindergarten children.

Table 2: Number of Children in each Level Based on Time 2 Scores for Group 1 and 2

	Nursery to Kindergarten (Group 1)			Kindergarten to Grade 1 (Group 2)		
	Not ready	Developing	Independent	Not ready	Developing	Independent
Personal story sharing	3	0	1	2	1	1
Reading	0	3	1	3	0	1
Retell	1	1	2	2	0	2
Conventions of print	1	0	3	2	0	2
Letter	1	0	3	2	0	2
Speech	1	0	3	2	0	2
Language	1	0	3	2	0	2

Each child's learning is represented on bar graphs for each of the CAP subtests (see Figure 1 through 7). For each of the subtests of the CAP testing, three to four children in the nursery to kindergarten group (N – K) showed gains of three or more levels of progress on all seven of the sub-tests from time one to time two. For the kindergarten to grade one group (K - Gr.1), one to two levels of progress were reached by one to two children from time one to time two.

Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

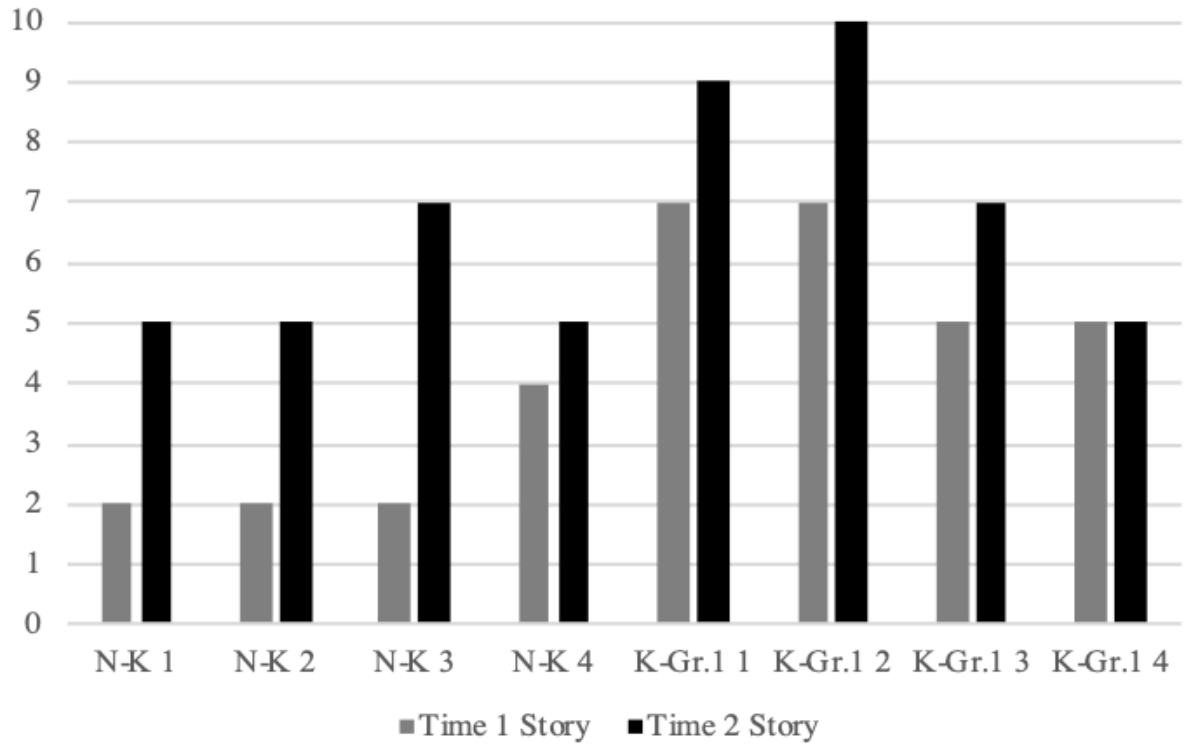

Figure 1: Story
Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

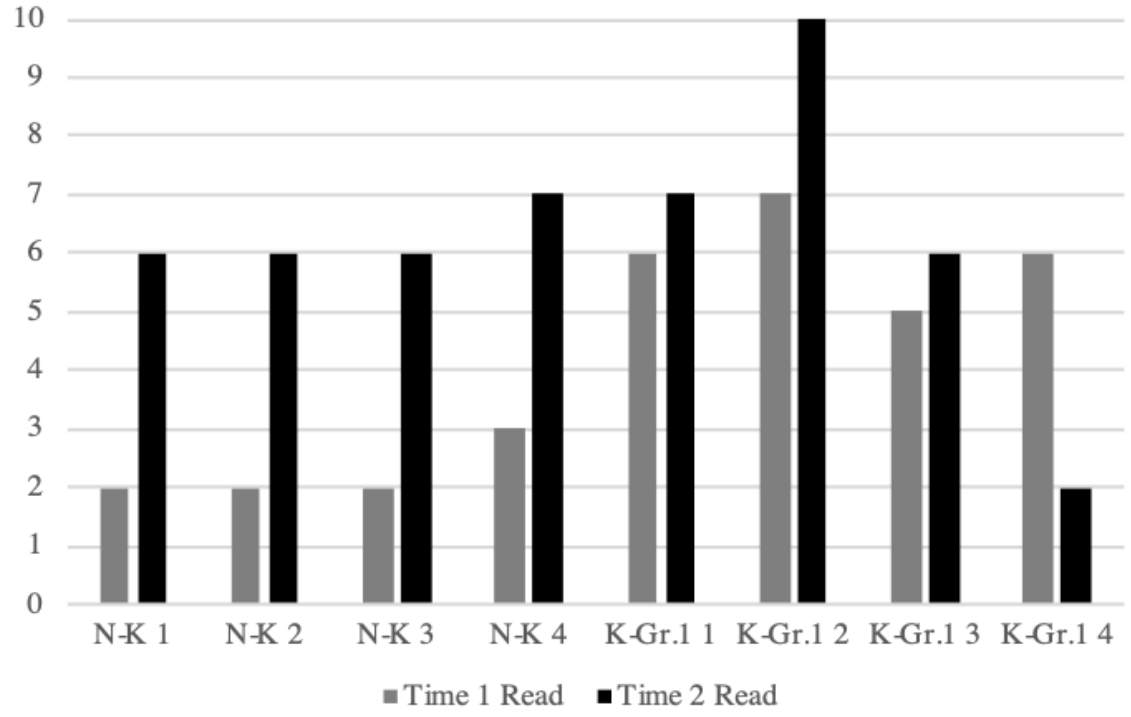

Figure 2: Read

Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

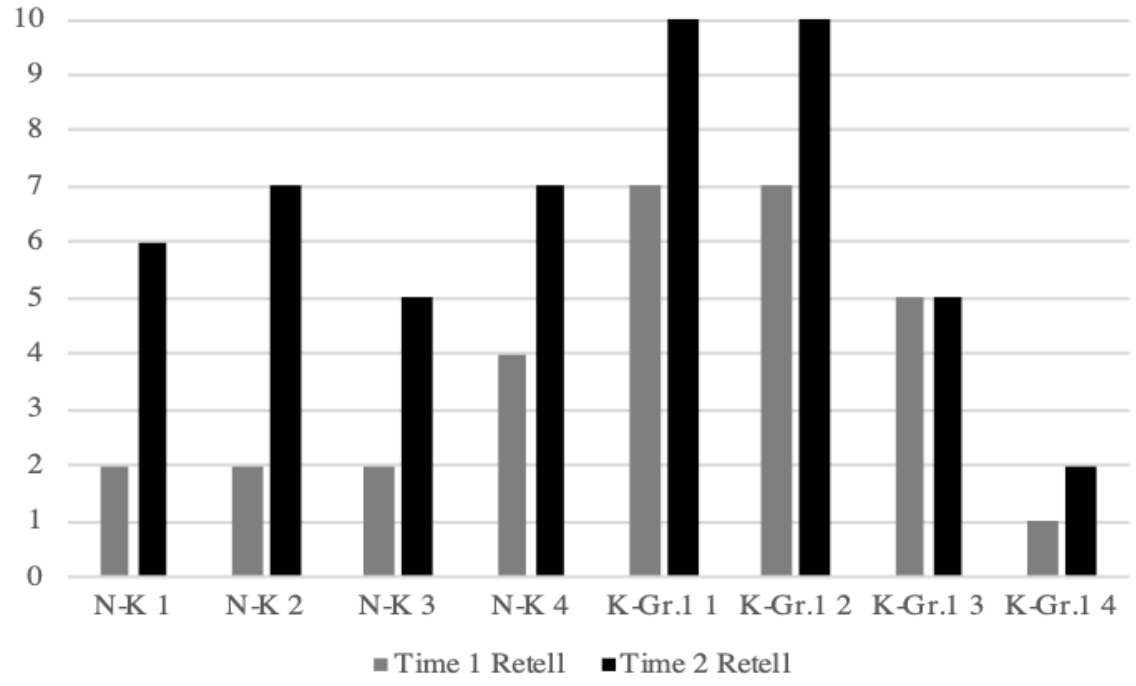

Figure 3: Retell

Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

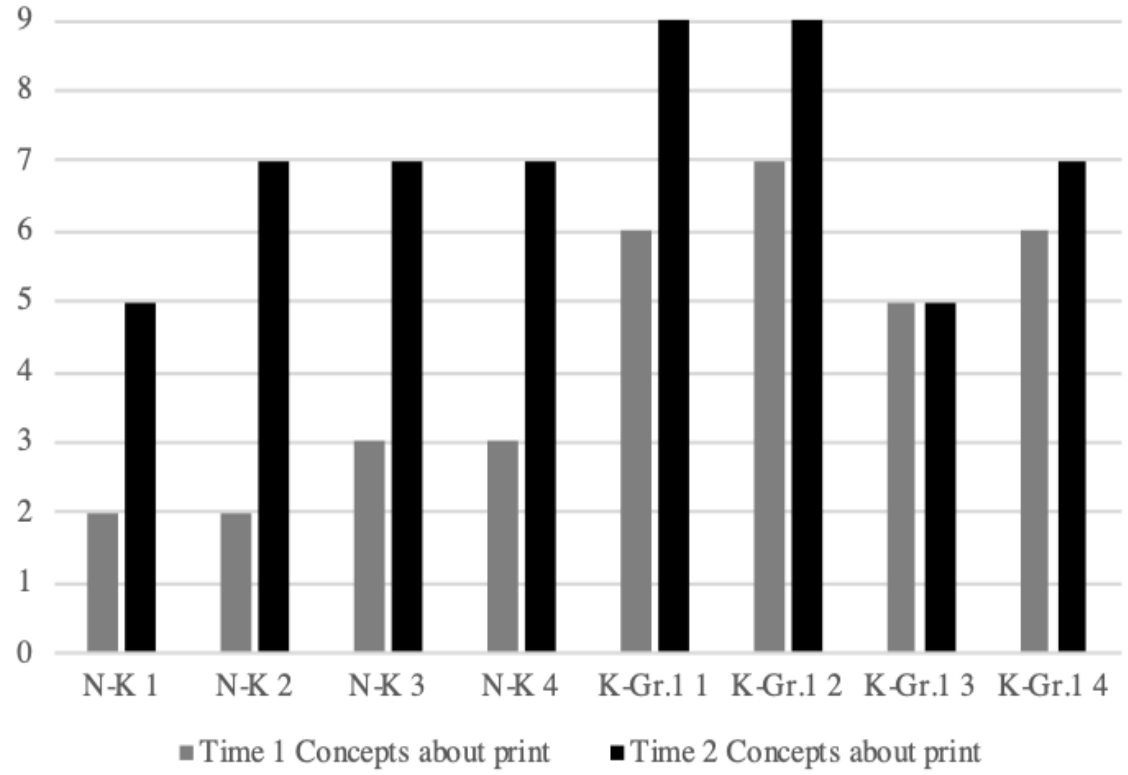

Figure 4: Concepts about print

Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

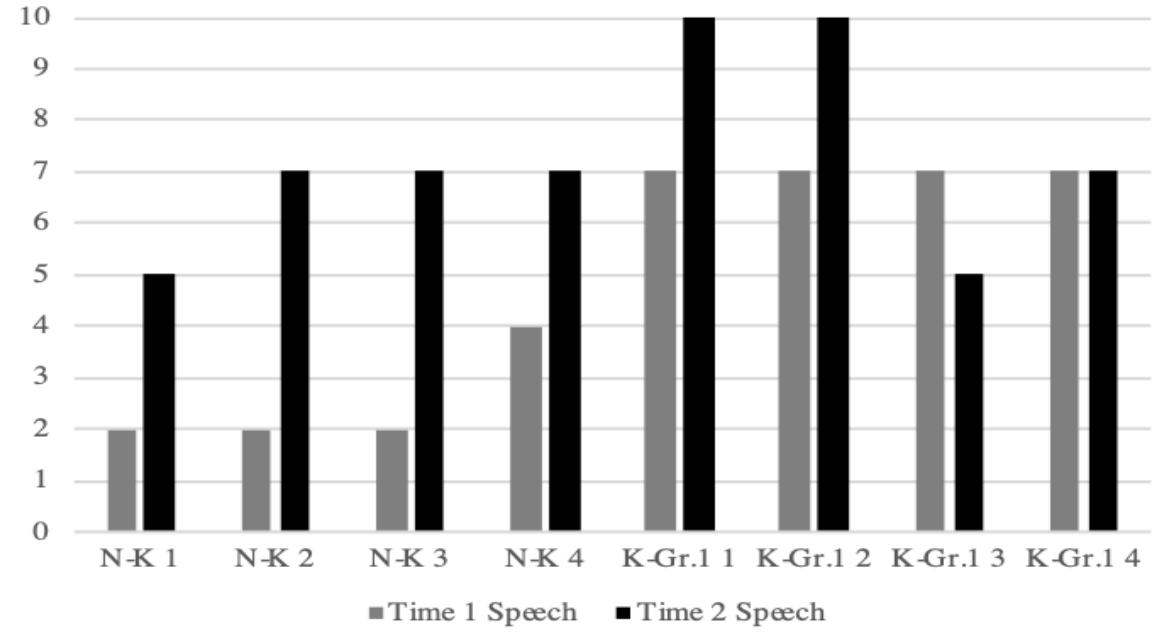

Figure 5: Speech

Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

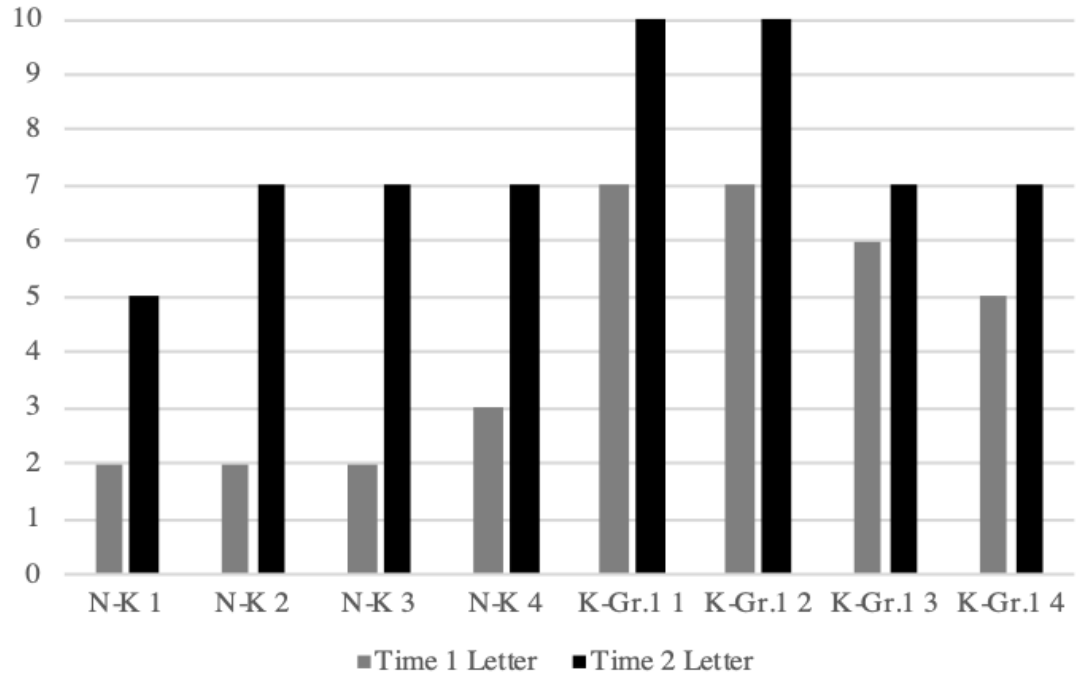

Figure 6: Letter

Note: N-K 1 = Nursery to kindergarten group child 1
K-Gr. 1 1= Kindergarten to grade 1 group child 1

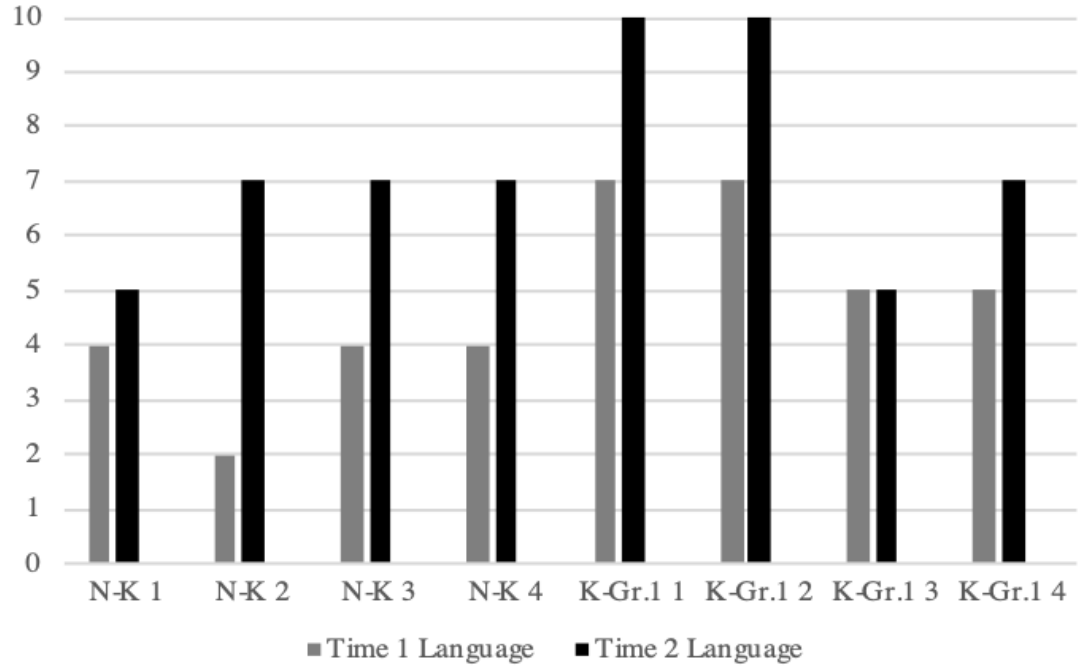

Figure 7: Language

It was found the nursery to kindergarten group showed the greatest gains in the CAP testing from time one to time two. This was contrary to expectations as it was thought both groups would benefit from the extra half-day of instruction, particularly as full-day kindergarten programs have shown to support learning for children lacking readiness for beginning school.

Teacher interviews, observations and teacher records

A recurring theme in the qualitative analysis was the early childhood educators' astute observational skills. Each early years educator was able to provide a detailed description of each child's learning, both in terms of their difficulties and the gains they had achieved. While they kept anecdotal records of their observations, these were not acted upon to inform instruction. The instructional plan for the LIFT program was prescribed, determined in advance and followed the original format. The teachers' keen kid-watching skills were not accessed to inform the previously determined programming and instruction. Another theme emerged showing even with a small student population of only eight children, teachers spoke of the challenge in meeting the needs of these diverse learners.

Limitations and other considerations

The small-scale nature of this study does not allow for generalization of the testing results to a larger population. Fidelity of implementation of the program is uncertain as school-based personnel developed the program which was carried out by early childcare teachers. It is not clear how the implementation of the program was monitored. A process of on-going assessment of student learning, instruction, and programming among the early years educators and program developers would enable instruction to be more intentional in meeting the learner's needs.

While the intervention program was designed to develop the typical early readiness skills, the question arises, was it more suitable to the developmental level of the nursery-aged children or was there a larger learning curve for the kindergarten children to reach for readiness for grade one? In addition, would regular revisions of the program, with observational and anecdotal input provided by the early year's teachers, have allowed for instructional shifts of greater benefit to the kindergarten children?

Conclusion

Although the children in both groups made gains in their learning, the effects were not as dramatic as hoped for given the amount of additional time, small child-to-teacher ratio, and rich learning environment. Given the achievement gap for disadvantaged children reportedly widens during kindergarten when the learning gains of their mainstream peers are considered, the gains made through this intervention may not be enough to sustain learning levels.

The greater gains made by the nursery to kindergarten group were of special interest. This suggests the preschool years are highly amenable to stimulating the domains of learning. While recognized as a critical period for development and influence for future learning, this period of life requires more focused consideration.

The early childhood educators had keen observational skills which allowed them to describe each child according to the abilities they displayed. However, it maybe they lacked the professional training to know how to adjust their instruction to better meet the needs of individual children. The limited professional preparation and knowledge (Burns, Donovan, & Bowman, 2000) for early years teachers is documented.

This collaborative initiative reflects ways in which local communities strive to meet the needs of their early learners. By bringing the research sector into site-based interventions, both the research community and those working in schools and early childhood centers will inform the understandings of one another. Clearly, the early childhood educators had well-developed "kid-watching" (Goodman, 1985) skills and a strong belief in the potential of each child. Professional development focusing on response to observations of student learning would serve to guide and differentiate instruction.

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