

2019

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Emma L., "A Summary of Literacy Skills and Improvement Methods from the Perspective of a Future Teacher" (2019). *A with Honors Projects*. 261.
<https://spark.parkland.edu/ah/261>

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PSY 207
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May 16, 2019

A Summary of Literacy Skills and Improvement Methods from the
Perspective of a Future Teacher
A with Honors Project

This semester I have had the opportunity to observe and tutor in local elementary schools. The first being Dr. Preston L. Williams Jr. in Urbana, Illinois, as well as Garden Hills in Champaign, Illinois, which both reside in high poverty neighborhoods. At both schools I was able to work individually with some students on reading and math skills. This was exciting for me because I was able to use things that I was learning in my classes in efforts to help those students. At Dr. Williams I was working with a student who was in fourth grade but was performing at a first-grade math level as well as having low reading scores. This was a concern for me as a future teacher because I know that this level of delay in fourth grade can have a large impact on the child's future success in education. I also know that no matter where I am teaching I will have students with similar delays. This triggered my curiosity on how to help improve math and literacy skills for students from the teacher, parent, and student perspectives.

Considering that I am only beginning my journey of becoming an elementary school teacher, I have had very little training on this topic. The only experience that I have had in teaching math or literacy skills to elementary school students before this was when I was

learning how to do these things for the first time. The way I had learned these important skills was in a strategic, formulated way, but as I learn more about teaching styles and practices I have come to realize that there are a countless number of ways to teach these skills to students. One of the first things I learned from this experience is that a dedicated teacher is able to find the best way that is going to get the information across to their students. I began to attempt this by finding out things that the student liked to do and incorporating it into our time together. For example, they really enjoyed playing games, so an effective math activity was using numbered playing cards to practice addition. Overall when beginning this endeavor, I had very few ideas on how to start or where to find resources to help with my research.

This project has been very eye-opening for me as a future educator. One of the things that surprised me the most was how related literacy and math literacy are to each other. Through research I have learned that one of the best ways to increase both reading literacy and math literacy is by reading books that include math concepts in the story line (Meirick). In my education class we have learned about interdisciplinary teaching and I had known that this was possible between subjects like social studies and reading or science and math. It was surprising to see how many ways teachers can also do this by combining math and reading. I also learned a lot about the importance of math literacy through my research, like number sense, spatial recognition, and patterns (Pellissier). This was something that had never been emphasized in my education, but instead math was a set of rules and concepts that were learned in order to accomplish a task. By teaching math this way, many students learn maladaptive ways of coping with difficult problems that are math related or not, much like the student that I was tutoring. A way that I learned to counter act the negative thoughts the fourth grader was having was by teaching new concepts through games. It was interesting to see how the students acted differently

with similar problems but presented as a game instead of work. The Erikson Institute Early Math Collaborative has many resources for finding educational games. These games include movement, card, and many cooperative activities that are able to engage young students.

Some other things that surprised me were more closely related to my observation of the fourth grade student and the research I did in regard to that. The student that I was working with had very low math and reading scores, so I was mainly working with her in increasing her math skills. We began with adding and subtracting, which she had called the plus and minus. Whenever I would ask if she wanted to do addition or subtraction she did not comprehend what I was talking about but was able to perform the operations after I explained what it was. At the beginning she would use maladaptive strategies to answer the problems like shouting out many answers at once in hopes that one would be right. Before I had the opportunity to work with her I had forgotten how difficult it is to learn these things from the beginning and how a student has to start with a solid math literacy foundation that includes skills like pattern recognition, spatial awareness and many other aspects before they can be expected to compute problems that are seen as simple to adult learners.

Another thing that was surprising to me was how intelligent the student actually was. She was labeled as struggling because of how low her math scores were, but she was very capable of learning new math concepts. This made me realize that the students labeled at-risk are just as intelligent as other students, but they have other forces acting against them that can impact their education like how my student has a record of moving homes a lot. One thing that teachers and administrators need to realize is that “too much pressure or damaging labels placed on children on the lower end of a developmentally normal progression is counterproductive” (Morgan). Labeling students as at-risk from a very young age and constantly reminding them of this can be

detrimental to any future progress of their schooling. This is because they think that no one believes that they can succeed so they give up on themselves as well. Teachers contribute to this through the self-fulfilling prophecy about students based on labels. I found that something that I had to do was constantly encourage my student by telling her she was smart and capable of doing the problems I was challenging her with. The last thing that I was surprised by was that every student has their bad days no matter what you, as the teacher, do. Some days it was extremely hard to get my student to focus on doing work because of things that had already happened that day. This a challenge because students bring things that happened before school into the classroom. Teachers have to find creative ways to engage their students from the very start of the day.

As I had mentioned before, from what I can remember when I was learning how to read everyone learned the same way. I remember reading book after book and trying to memorize sight words so that I could get better at reading. After researching about literacy skills, I have learned that there are many different ways to learn how to read and that teachers have to be aware of this in order to help their students. Learning how to read is a long and complicated process for young children to go through and similar to how students learn best with different teaching styles some students are going to learn how to read in different ways. Some students will be able to learn to read like how I did, but many might not be able to so as a teacher I need to be prepared to cater to those students' needs. I believe this is something that I still need to learn. Through this project I have become aware of the things I can do as a future educator to help any at-risk students I might have, but I need to practice these teaching styles to be an effective teacher. I also think there is so much to learn about at-risk students and how to successfully teach and interact with them.

Where is reading?



Reading is not just something learned by reading books. You can learn important literacy skills from any aspect of life you are interested in.



1. Books

- Reading aloud
- Following along with the words

2. Drawing

- Creating pictures from the story
- Tracing letters, lines and shapes

3. Theatre

- Acting out stories
- Predicting next line or scene

4. Music

- Singing a song
- Hearing words aloud

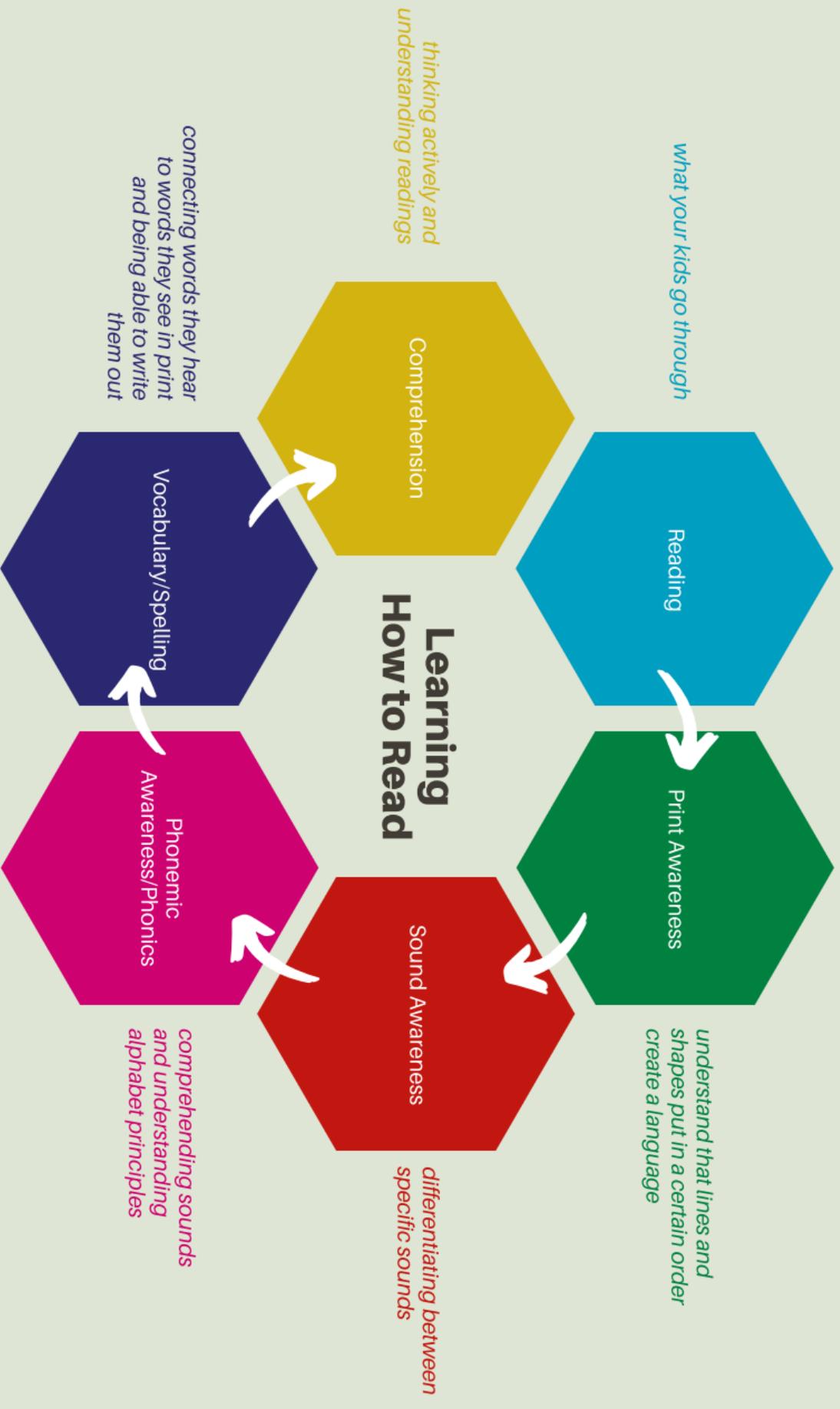
5. Icons

- Differentiating characters
- Recognizing symbols

The above poster is designed for students to read who are in the process of or have just learned to read. My inspiration for this poster came from a quote found on Amanda Morgan's blog, Not Just Cute, where many different nonobvious ways children can learn how to read were listed. This poster offers information for students as they are strengthening their reading skills. The focus of the information being given is that children can learn how to read from many different sources besides books. Learning how to read is a complex process that includes many steps like print awareness, sound awareness and many others that are often overlooked (Snow). Learning how to read is something that even college students need continuous practice in order to consistently improve their reading level, but students might be discouraged when they think that the only way to improve this is through reading books.

On the poster, I included five different things that children are exposed to that can increase their reading level. The first one is reading books which is one of the most obvious ways a student can improve their reading level. This can be done by reading alone or aloud with a group. The exposure to books and words is the main benefit to reading books as it increases a student's language development and reading capability. The next one listed is drawing. Drawing helps with reading because if students can draw a scene from a story it shows that they understand what they are reading. An important skill that comes along with reading is being able to imagine what is being described in words as a live event so drawing the scenes can help to scaffold this. The third thing listed is theatre which includes activities like reading scripts or acting out scenes and this again helps to scaffold visualizing what is being written by creating a concrete image of the story line. Theatre also helps with predicting future lines or scenes which is a common literary question asked of students as they become older. The fourth literary aid is music. Music can be used in many different ways to improve literacy skills, but for the poster's

purpose I focused on how singing songs can help with language development and then eventually reading skills as well. The last aid on the poster is icons. Icons can be seen everywhere and are often times the first way that students are exposed to reading. Students will associate these images with meaning very similar to how words are symbols created that we give meaning to. If a student can understand these then they can also become proficient in reading.



What Are Literacy Skills?

“As a result, reading aloud with children is the single most important activity for parents and caregivers to do to prepare children to learn to read” (Adams, 1990 as cited in Reading Rockets)

This poster was created to inform parents about the many different skills that must be learned before and along with reading for students to be considered proficient at reading. These steps are often forgotten about or not emphasized by parents when their children are not learning how to read. There are many different resources for parents to learn about reading and different strategies, but there is not always enough awareness for parents to know that these sites exist. This poster includes information that I gathered from Reading Rockets, which is a site designed for parents and other adults seeking information on reading and children. The poster is set up so that the different aspects of literacy skills are listed with a brief description of what it entails.

In order to be a successful reader a student also has to become proficient in all of the literacy skills that are involved in reading. These do not necessarily occur in a certain order, but they do act in a cumulative way building off previous knowledge. One of the first skills students learn is print awareness which is understanding that lines and shapes put together in a certain order create letters and words that have meaning. Another aspect is being able to differentiate between specific sounds which is called sound awareness. Phonemic awareness is when students are able to comprehend the sounds they were originally differentiating between. Understanding phonics or the principles of the alphabet is also important when building a solid reading foundation. The next step is being able to spell and remember vocabulary that are often present in books. One of the last things that students learn is comprehension or understanding what they are reading. It is important for parents to know all of the different things that their children are learning while learning how to read because it can help them improve how to approach reading with their students. It also gives some insight on what things parents could focus on if their child is struggling with reading and they can decipher what is causing the most trouble for the child.



Understanding Your At-Risk Students

At-Risk Students in Literacy

Students face situations on a daily basis that make learning literacy skills extremely difficult due to a lack of exposure to literary concepts.

- lack of phonological awareness
- difficulty in sentence or story recall
- often parents struggle with reading
- may have limited proficiency in spoken English
- more likely to reside in low-income families

*Students who
"have a
higher
probability of
failing
academically"*

-Great Schools Partnership

Teachers have to be aware of students' individual experiences in order to tailor to their academic needs.

This poster's purpose is to inform teachers on how literary skills can be very low in at-risk students and the reasons why. Almost all teachers will have to teach students who are struggling in school for various reasons at some point in their career, so it is important for teachers to be aware of their students' backgrounds in order to help them improve their grades. A student at-risk is described as having "a higher probability of failing academically" and those "who face circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school" (Great Schools Partnership). Teachers need to be aware of any students they have that might fit these criteria and be willing to put in extra effort in hopes to see the student succeed. By understanding their past and home life, teachers can better prepare to teach these students because they will know what areas need to be focused on. Many students that fit the at-risk criteria lack an overall phonological awareness due to lack of exposure to reading books as a child. Reading books to children is one of the best ways to improve reading skills, but it is sometimes over looked in low income areas or seen as a low priority (Reading Rockets). In a similar fashion these students might have trouble with sentence or story recall because they do not get enough practice with this at home. Often the parents of struggling students have also had their own problems with learning how to read which leads to less emphasize on learning to be proficient in reading. There are also a rising number of students in the United States where English might not be their first language, so they are struggling do to the fact that they are expected to learn English and then know how to read it (Reading Rockets). In these families English is not the language used at home so their only exposure to English is while they are at school.

A common theme of students who are struggling with reading is that they are not getting the exposure to literary elements as much as they need to constantly improve their scores. As a teacher this has to be a priority because it is not necessarily considered one when the students go

home. This means focusing on reading in interdisciplinary ways and exposing the students to as many books, articles, music, art, and science that also includes reading as possible.

Works Cited

“Early Math Collaborative Erikson Institute.” *Erikson Institute Early Math Collaborative*,

earlymath.erikson.edu/.

The Early Math Collaborative Erikson Institute was created in 2007 in efforts to better the quality of early math education by providing resources for teachers as well as to conduct research on the topic. The website has many articles on the most effective ways to improve early math education. This website is a good resource for teachers due to the extensive research articles, professional development advice, and math activities that are uploaded to this site.

Great Schools Partnership. “At-Risk Definition.” *The Glossary of Education Reform*, Education

Reform, 29 Aug. 2013, www.edglossary.org/at-risk/.

The Great Schools Partnership is an educational glossary of reform that offers information on widely used terms, concepts, and strategies within the education field. It is an informative website for journalists, parents, and anyone else who is looking to know more about the education field. It is a resource for community members to learn more about the significant issues that the education system faces today. The website gave current information about at-risk students and the different criteria for students to be considered at-risk.

Meirick, Cody. “4 Fun Books That Explore Math Patterns and Sequences.” *Erikson Institute*

Early Math Collaborative, 29 Mar. 2019, earlymath.erikson.edu/4-fun-books-that-explore-math-patterns-and-sequences/.

Cody Meirick is one of the production managers for the Erikson Institute Early Math Collaborative. He has his Masters in English from the University of Missouri. The article that he wrote was informing parents and teachers about the importance of books embedded with math concepts. This article gave specific books that included these topics and explained why they were successful in teaching math literacy to children. This is a good resource for parents because reading books is an easy way for parents to expose their children to important math and literacy skills.

Morgan, Amanda. "What I'm NOT Saying When I Speak About Developmentally Appropriate Practice." *Not Just Cute*, 27 Feb. 2019, notjustcute.com/2017/03/28/what-im-not-saying-when-i-speak-about-developmentally-appropriate-practice/.

Amanda Morgan is a blogger who focuses on writing about child development. She graduated from Utah State University with a dual major in Elementary and Early Childhood Education as well as a MS in Human Development. She writes to inform parents and teachers about child development and how this plays a huge role in education. Her interesting topics paired with a casual way to present the information makes it entertaining for parents and teachers to learn about this useful information.

Pellissier, Hank. "Why Early Math Is Just as Important as Early Reading." *Great Schools.org*, 18 Oct. 2018, www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/early-math-equals-future-success/.

Hank Pellissier is a freelance writer who focuses on education and brain development. The article touched on how building math literacy skills is just as important as building reading literacy skills at a young age. This is important information for teachers to know because they are the ones who need to focus on this beginning at a young age. The article

also offers information on how to help teach these skills at a young age through the use of everyday concepts.

“Reading Rockets | Launching Young Readers.” *Reading Rockets | Launching Young Readers*, 29 Apr. 2019, www.readingrockets.org/.

Reading Rockets is a website designated to provide information to teachers, parents, or anyone else who interacts with children about reading strategies. They conduct research on the best practices for teaching literacy skills and then present it in a way that is easy for anyone to understand. This website provides information tailored for teachers and parents making it a versatile website for anyone interacting with children to use. Reading Rockets also has information on how being an at-risk student impacts literacy development giving many resources for teachers to potentially use.

Snow, Catherine, et al. “Identifying Risk Factors to Prevent Difficulties.” *Reading Rockets*, 27 Oct. 2017, www.readingrockets.org/article/identifying-risk-factors-prevent-difficulties.

Catherine Snow is a writer for Reading Rockets that focuses on reading difficulties in students. The information provided in the article is important for teachers to know in order to be equipped to teach students who might be at-risk. The article gives specific information on identifying risk factors in order to prevent future difficulties with reading. The article helps teachers to understand the backgrounds of these types of students which better prepares the teachers to teach them.