
86.

How do Pre-K Teachers and Students Experience Literacy Games?

Exploring affordances of table games in a preschool classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study is to examine affordances of literacy table games in a preschool classroom environment and experiences of students and teachers playing the games. The study explores factors relating to games and play, developmentally appropriate practice, emergent literacy skills, motivation, cognition, and sociocultural considerations. Themes will be based on observations of classroom game play and interviews with preschool children and teachers. The study will provide a broader understanding of games-based play in early childhood classrooms, help to develop informed best practices for similar activities, and provide implications for future inquiry.

Background

Considerable disagreement exists regarding effective preschool instruction (Dickinson, 2002). There has been a dramatic shift toward earlier instruction over the last decade. Phonological awareness skills are important for early reading development. Failure to develop basic decoding skills by first grade is predictive of lifelong poor literacy (Lonigan & Shanigan, 2009). Partly as a result of this shift, there has been a significant backlash against teaching in preschool, pitting an “academic approach” to early childhood education against a “play approach” to early childhood education. Focus on cognitive skills may undermine important benefits of play non-cognitive skills such as social and emotional competencies (Ziegler & Bishop-Josep, 2004). The best approach, as recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) may be a balance between skills instruction and play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Games may serve as a valuable intersection between play and academic skill instruction, with advantages of learning actively through hands on manipulation, and opportunities to build foundational literacy skills through repeated practice that is not based around worksheets, drills, or standardized tests.

There is a wide body of research on benefits of play for children’s development, including literacy (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2000). Most of this research, however, has been focused on free play or dramatic play. Literacy games are frequently recommended best practices for early childhood education, but detailed descriptions are often not provided, or could be more accurately described as game-like activities than formal games with structured rules. Games-related research over the last decade has demonstrated many educational benefits of games, though most of this research focuses on digital games and does not typically address preschool age children (Gee, 2003). The report from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center showed that teachers are using games, but the report did not look at

games in non-digital format or at the preschool level (Takeuchi & Vaala, 2014). Research on table games with rules at the preschool age is limited. Different delivery methods, subject areas, and target audience could result in different outcomes. As noted by Pellegrini (2009), further research is needed to address gaps in the literature in the area of play and games.

Purpose for the Study

The purpose of this research is to understand the affordances of table games for early literacy instruction at a preschool level, and how these affordances positively or negatively impact the experiences of students and teachers playing the games. This study will inform early education teachers' and parents' expectations of good games for influencing children's development, useful insights to game designers in developing literacy games better suited to the needs of the preschool age range, and add to the literature research on games and learning. The central research question this study explores is: "How are literacy table games experienced by learners and teachers in a preschool setting?" In particular, this study focuses on affordances of table games for preschool children related to factors of game play, developmentally appropriate practice, emergent literacy skills, motivation, cognition, and sociocultural contexts and the experiences and behaviors of preschool learners and teachers in these areas.

Methods and Data Collection

The current study was carried out at a (NAEYC) accredited laboratory preschool using a multiple instrumental case study qualitative design. Observation of experiences in naturalistic settings and open-ended questions allow an opportunity for participant voices to be heard, which should yield important insights in terms of motivation, learning, and pedagogy, and lead to deeper understanding of the needs of the preschool age range and which affordances of table games are suited to meet those needs. In order to gain multiple perspectives, both preschool children (primarily 4-5 years old) and their teachers were recruited using an opportunistic, purposeful sampling approach. Literacy tabletop games were demonstrated to teacher-facilitator participants before they were played with children. Later, teacher facilitator participants played the games with students in small groups while the researcher was present to observe. Play sessions were arranged and recorded for each game, and learner participants as well as teacher-facilitator participants were interviewed about their play experiences after the initial and subsequent game play sessions for each tabletop literacy game.

The games chosen for this research are *Appletters* (Nathanson, 2009), *The Super Why ABC Letter Game* (University Games, 2009), and *Tapple* (USAopoly, 2012). *Appletters* was chosen because children can actively engage with letter tiles as hands-on manipulatives. *The Super Why ABC Letter Game* was chosen because the simple roll-and-move mechanism may be familiar to some children, and multiple levels of challenge cards gives opportunity to flexibly target to individual children's zone of proximal development. *Tapple* was chosen primarily to explore social interactions between children cooperating with their own team and competing against another team. While these games are among the most developmentally appropriate literacy board games currently commercially available, not all aspects of the games are ideal. The games to explore a wide set of affordances to give ideas for game design and pedagogy in terms of what is good, what should be avoided, and what could be improved. Teachers may make modifications to better suit the needs of the population and improve the game playing and learning experiences.

Final themes will be built inductively based on participant responses to semi-structured, open-ended questions. Codes at the paragraph or sentence level will be refined into themes using visual sorting methods and software. All forms of data collected in this study (interviews, observation field notes etc.) will be triangulated; Rich, detailed descriptions will be provided for the observations. Participant's voices will be included to the greatest extent possible by providing direct quotes and using in-vivo language to represent codes, and themes. Emerging themes from the research relate to areas of activity and movement, peer helping, classroom management for games, game affordances, and experience gained through practice. Two qualitative peer reviewers will be sought to establish inter-rater reliability for codes and themes. Member checking of themes with teacher-facilitators is planned to assure participants' experiences are accurately reflected (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

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