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# Improving Kindergarten Students' Knowledge by Enhancing Engagement in Literacy Centers

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An Action Research Report

By Maggie Pearson

Improving Kindergarten Students' Knowledge by  
Enhancing Engagement in Literacy Centers

Submitted on November 12, 2013  
In fulfillment of final requirements form the MAED degree  
St. Catherine University  
St. Paul, Minnesota

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Improving Kindergarten Students' Knowledge by  
Enhancing Engagement in Literacy Centers

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November, 2013

Abstract

The action research was conducted in a kindergarten classroom with 18 participating students, in a Northern Midwest elementary school. Baseline data was collected by assessments in the areas of letter identification, onset sounds, rhyming, and concepts of print. Literacy centers were set up for students using differentiated activities in these areas. Conferencing with students and formative assessments were used for monitoring student progress and engagement in the literacy centers of Read to Self, Word Works, Writing Center and Listening Center. The students were assessed again at the end of the research period. The results of this study showed increased learning outcomes for students in the areas of letter identification, onset sounds, concepts of print, and rhyming. This study suggests that if students stay engaged in their literacy centers, they are likely to learn from their independent work at each center.

Improving Kindergarten Students' Knowledge by  
Enhancing Engagement in Literacy Centers

Students are not fully engaged in literacy centers, and some are not reaching expectations for reading and writing according to district/state standards. This has become an issue my colleagues and I have discussed many times. Kindergarten students need to be focused in their center work in order to achieve success and enjoy the learning that can happen in each center.

All students, as well as teachers working with other students in the classroom, are affected by disturbances created when students in centers lose focus (and play or talk instead of completing their work). The nature of the problem is that students are not engaged, due to lack of understanding or boredom at the literacy centers. To address this issue, I created literacy centers that had a clear focus (i.e. word works center, specifically working on phonemic awareness) and were differentiated for students to work on activities at their level of learning.

During literacy center activities, students were often off-task, not only by talking and playing, but also by distracting others who were trying to complete their own center work. One reason for off-task behavior issues was that most often, literacy activities involved worksheets and skills practice rather than learning through hands-on exploration (Reyes, 2010). Reyes' plan was to help students stay engaged, by creating extension activities that students could work on, once they completed a task in each learning center. Students self-selected an activity that appealed to their own interests. During her research, Reyes was able to document that these extensions were effective for students to

meet academic standards, as well as foster developmentally appropriate practices for differentiation among the students (2010).

The goal for kindergarten students was to increase focus on tasks at each literacy center. It was believed that having students stay engaged at each station and working the whole time, would improve scores on the kindergarten data collection, in the areas of letter identification, letter sounds, phonemic awareness and concepts of prints. Improved scores would be directly reflected in students' reading and writing skills. The underlying research question was: "To what extent can kindergarten students' knowledge of letter identification, letter sounds, phonemic awareness and concepts of print be improved by enhancing engagement in literacy centers?"

The setting was in a kindergarten classroom of 5-and 6-year olds. The number of students in the classroom was 22. Two of those students were not part of the research because they are the center-based special education students, who come into the classroom during whole group lessons (shared reading and calendar math), and are not in the classroom for literacy centers. Two other students' data was not used in the research, as the permission slips did not come back from parents. (They did, however, receive the same academic instruction, and participated fully in all literacy centers.) The elementary school was located in a suburb of a major Midwestern state, and part of the largest school district of that state. It is one of 24 elementary schools in said district. The population of the elementary school was 453 students, comprised of 75.9% white students, 13% African American students, 6.7% Hispanic students 3.0% Asian students and 1.3% American Indian students. The elementary school had 19.3% of the student population receiving Special Education Services. Lastly, the student population was over 50% free

and reduced lunch, thereby qualifying for federal Title I funds (for Supplemental Support Programs.) This particular kindergarten classroom aligned closely with these figures.

The use of literacy centers in kindergarten classrooms assisted students in the transition to becoming independent learners. This transition allowed students to develop a sense of responsibility as well as problem-solving and decision-making skills (Baker, 2001). According to Baker, during center time, students are able to plan, select and assess their own learning. When students are actively engaged in learning, they develop an understanding of what they need to accomplish. This allows students to reach an educational goal. Daily practice at literacy centers can help students achieve their independence and learning goals at the literacy centers.

Within a kindergarten classroom, a variety of literacy centers can be used (Boushey, Moser, 2006). At a reading center, students can choose books from a classroom library, according to their interests, or practice reading books learned through guided groups. At a writing center, students can work on various writing skills such as practicing the correct way to write letters of the alphabet, after whole group instruction on this topic. To increase student motivation, it is important to create a special place that includes an assortment of writing tools, stickers, sticky notes, fancy stationery, and a writing journal. At a word works center, the focus is on phonemic awareness skills, or sight word practice. Centers that focus on comprehension strategies include an oral retell center – an assortment of books, previously read by the teacher, set out for retelling to a partner. Big Books previously read in class, are good books for oral retell center, or in a center by themselves, wherein the students can use highlighting tape to mark sight words or “letters

of the day” (Richardson, 2009.) During listening centers, the students listen to a recorded story being narrated on a tape, while following along with the corresponding book.

Organization of the literacy centers is necessary for the desired success at each center. Through my teaching experience, the management techniques created in the Daily 5 and the Café Book by Gail Boushey and Joan Moser (2006, 2009) have proven to be successful with this organization and management. Their research has shown that creating stamina at each center (starting with smaller blocks of time, and increasing each day) will help students become independent during literacy centers for an appropriate amount of time (Boushey, Moser, 2006). Boushey and Moser provide classroom and organization procedures to create student-driven management structures that help students stay engaged in each of their centers (2009).

#### Research Process

Prior to collecting data for this project, the kindergarten students were trained to build stamina and independence at each of four literacy centers – Read to Self; Word Works; Writing Center; and Listening Center. The students and teacher created anchor charts together to be clear on what everyone’s responsibilities were during center time. Each anchor chart was titled with a specific center. One side listed the Teacher Job and the other side listing Student Jobs. The teacher’s only job was to work with other students. The students were made aware that they were not allowed to interrupt or approach the teacher during center time, except in the case of emergency (bleeding or in need of going to the nurse for illness). For the Read-to-Self Center, the student jobs were listed as: Be quiet; Stay in one spot; Read the whole time; and Read the books again and



again. Anchor charts were created each day for each new literacy center that was introduced, using similar language as was used for the Read-to-Self Center. The anchor charts were reviewed on a daily basis prior to the start of working in literacy centers.

A new center was introduced each day, starting with Read to Self. The students practiced Read-to-Self for 5 minutes. The students and teacher came back together to discuss the anchor chart again and verify that everyone was doing their part to follow the rules listed on the anchor chart. Each day, 5 more minutes was added to the students' independent time at each center. On the second day, students practiced Read-to-Self, and were introduced to the next center, Writing Center. The class was divided into two groups for practice. The third day, students practiced the first two centers and were introduced to Word Works Center. The class was divided into three groups for practice. Over the next two days, the students built up stamina for working independently for 15 minutes. During these two days, the teacher and two other support staff, were able to collect baseline data for Letter Identification, Concepts of Print, Onset Sounds and Rhymes. This kindergarten data collection was collected on all students in the class. On the following day, the Listening Center was introduced, and practiced. The class was split into four groups of 5 students each. Students' stamina was built up to 15-20 minutes for each center. Student groups rotated to each center during a 1-1/2 hour time period. The extra time was used for clean-up, transitions, and redirection, as well as repeat of instructions, if needed. The teacher rotated to each center over the next few days to see that students were working on the assignment given at each center.

During the following four weeks, students were observed at each center and notes were made on an observation sheet (Appendix A) next to student names, and the date of

the observation was also recorded. Under each specific center numbers were placed as to the students' on-task behaviors as follows: 1- Student uses materials correctly; 2 – Student completes assigned task; 3 – Student completes assigned task with no errors; 4 - Student is able to verbalize or show what they are doing at their center. The teacher was able to check each student at each center, once every week during the research period.

Secondly, based on the information from observations made on Appendix A, the teacher met with each student once a week to conference about their score for the on-task behaviors. Anecdotal notes were taken (Appendix B.) The teacher also at this time asked the student what they liked or disliked about the center activity. The teacher was able to use this information to add to or take away from the activities in order to help students stay engaged at the center, and thereby getting the most out of their independent learning.

Lastly, on a weekly basis, Formative Assessments (Appendix C) were used to track progress in each of the following areas: Letter ID, Concepts of Print, Onset Sounds and Rhymes. Students who scored below 30 on Letter Identification were re-assessed and then, for example, at the Word Works Center, these students focused on tracing and saying the letters of the alphabet. At the Listening Center, these students used books on tapes that dealt with the alphabet (i.e. Dr. Seuss' ABC's.) The students who scored in the bottom 2/3 of the class for Onset Sounds, Rhyming and Concepts of Print were re-assessed, using a similar test as the one for baseline and summative assessments, but a condensed version. Based on the information attained from the formative assessments, the teacher was able to determine weekly, if students needed more or less activities in each literacy center.

If students continued to struggle in any or all areas, they were given more direction for specific activities at each center, such as: Following along during Listening Center (pointing to the words as the narrator read to them); matching rhyming words or pulling magnetic letters out of a bag and matching that letter with a picture that starts with said letter at Word Works Center; using a small craft stick as a pointer to track words on a page at Read-to-Self Center; and at Writing Center, naming the letter as they practiced writing, as well as practice writing their names the correct way (left to right) and writing sight words in sentences.

At the end of the four week period of data collection, all students were given the Kindergarten Data Collection Assessment again. The data was analyzed and compared for improved scores, as well as used to continue with the improvement of the literacy centers for student engagement.

#### Action Research Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis drove my research into a different direction than I expected. My goal to improve literacy centers has benefitted from this process, however, data collection became cumbersome, while trying to teach students and move them forward. I adjusted my observation schedule from daily for each literacy center, to weekly. This gave me more time to change activities at the centers and see if and how they were working for my students. I worked with all 20 students, however, only 18 were included in this study.

From baseline data, it was apparent that this class was low in letter identification. Our district requires that by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> trimester, students need to identify 50-52 upper and lower case letters (*See Figure 1*).

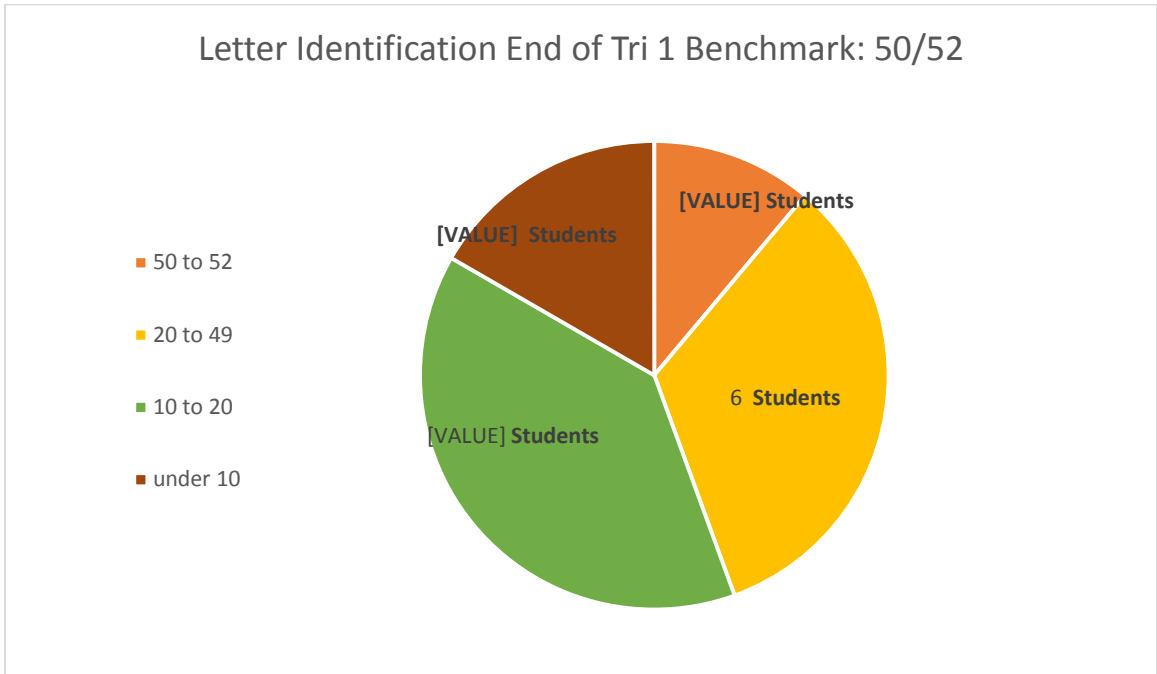
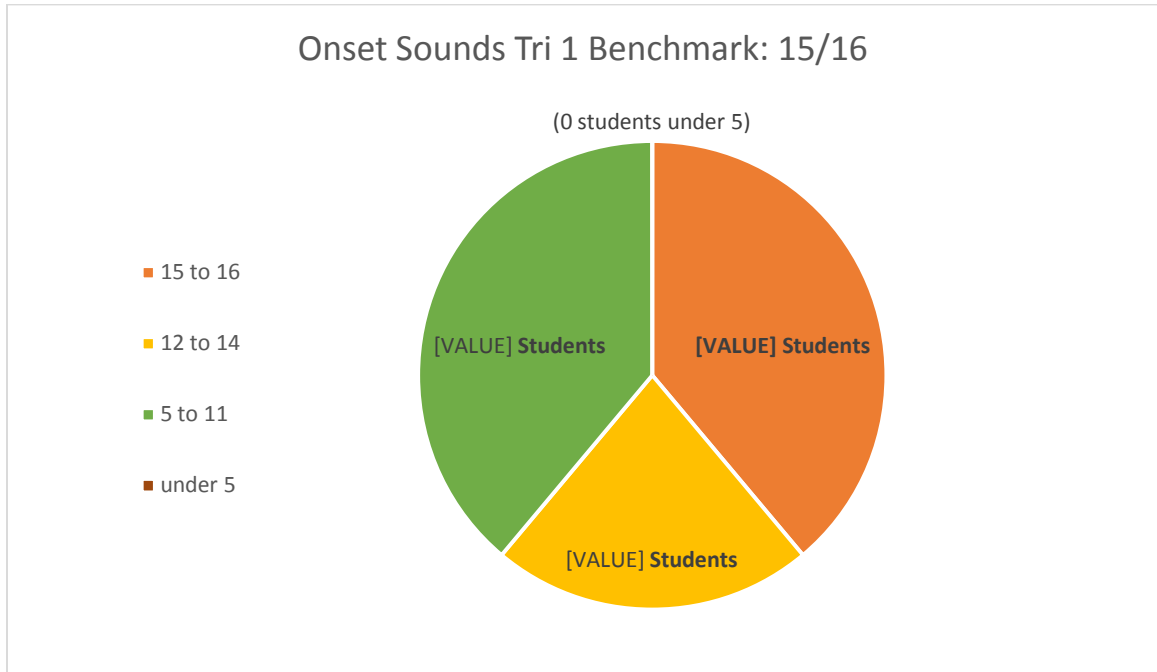


Figure 1. Letter Identification Baseline Assessment Results

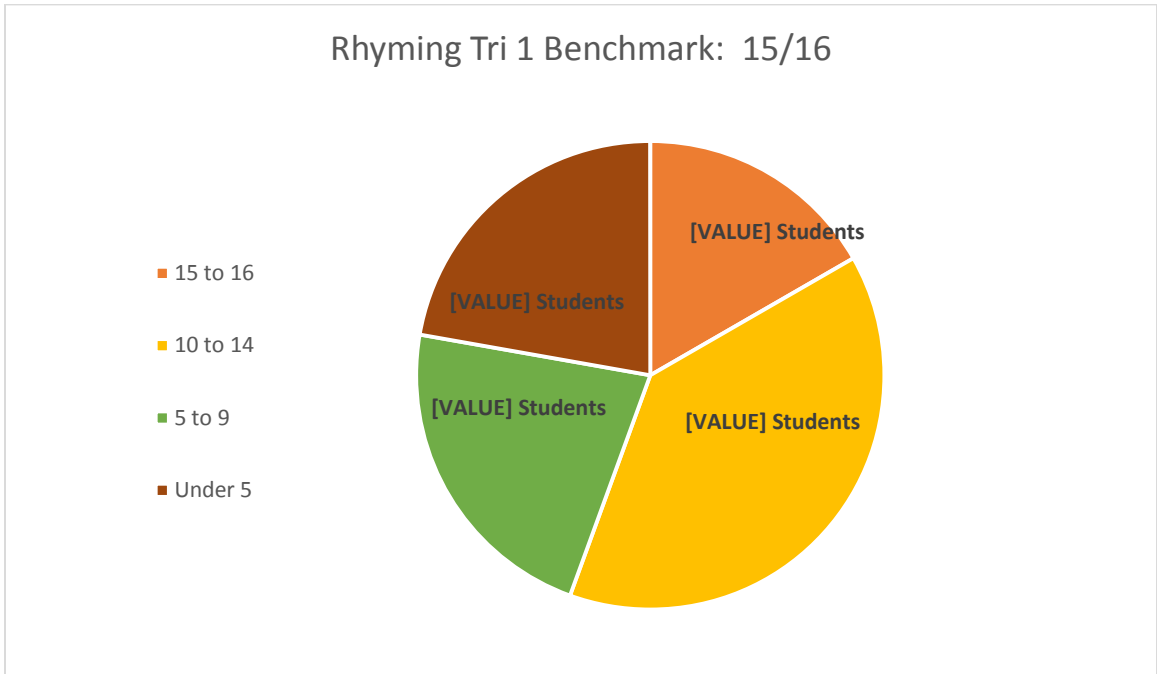
The following graphs show the other three areas of baseline data for kindergartners. These include the district benchmarks for the first trimester.

The assessment for Onset Sounds has students look at pictures and when given a letter sound, they are to point to the picture that starts with that sound. Students are expected to have 15 out of 16 points on this assessment. The data from this graph shows that the students have at least some knowledge of letter sounds (See Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Onset Sounds Baseline Assessment Results

The assessment for Rhyming has students point to a picture that rhymes with the oral given word. Again, students are expected to have 15 out of 16 points on this assessment. The data from this graph indicates that most students have an idea of rhyming words, but they are not solid in this awareness (*See Figure 3.*)



*Figure 3.* Rhyming Baseline Assessment Results

The assessment for Concepts of Print determines student’s ability to identify words compared to letters, directionality of sentence structure, and given two words (i.e. mail, mailbox) determine which one the assessor asked the students to identify (by pointing to said word.) The graph for this assessment shows that more than half of the students are able to understand Concepts of Print, and at least all students have some understanding of this concept (*See Figure 4*).

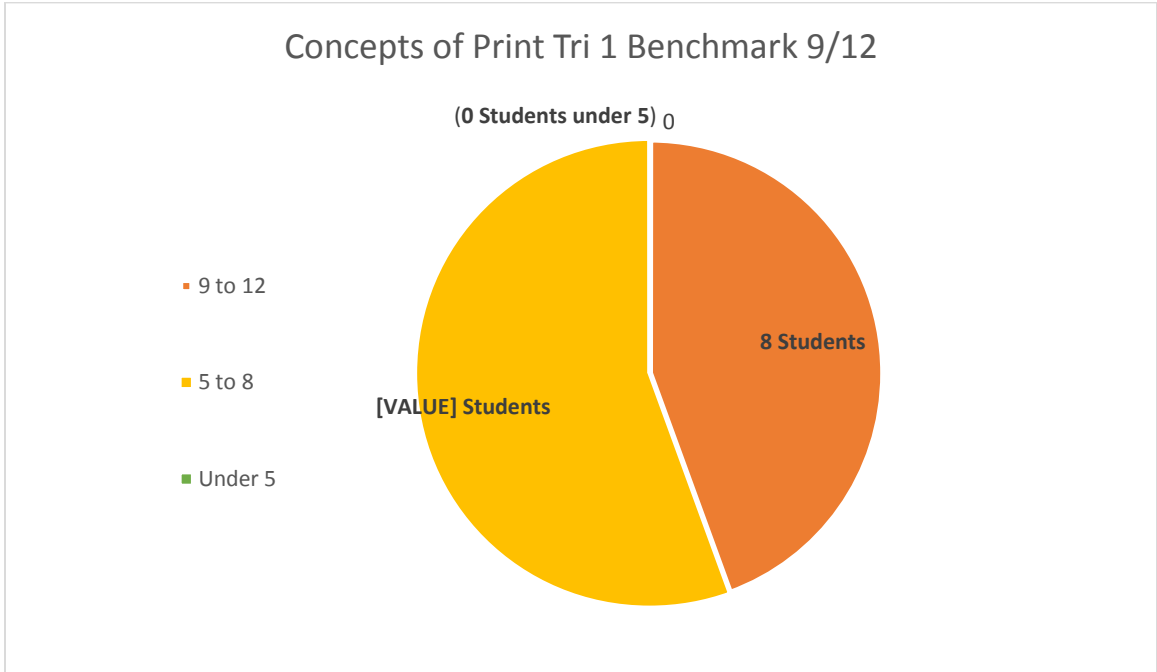


Figure 4. Concepts of Print Baseline Assessment Results

All four graphs show that students who were lowest in letter identification were also low in the other three areas. They made up the first of five groups of students. The next four groups were also formed by looking at the letter identification. Group five worked on letter identification skills, such as tracing letters in an alphabet book or matching upper and lower case magnetic letters. Group one worked on matching pictures to first or last letter sounds. The other three groups worked on a combination of these activities (See Figure 5).

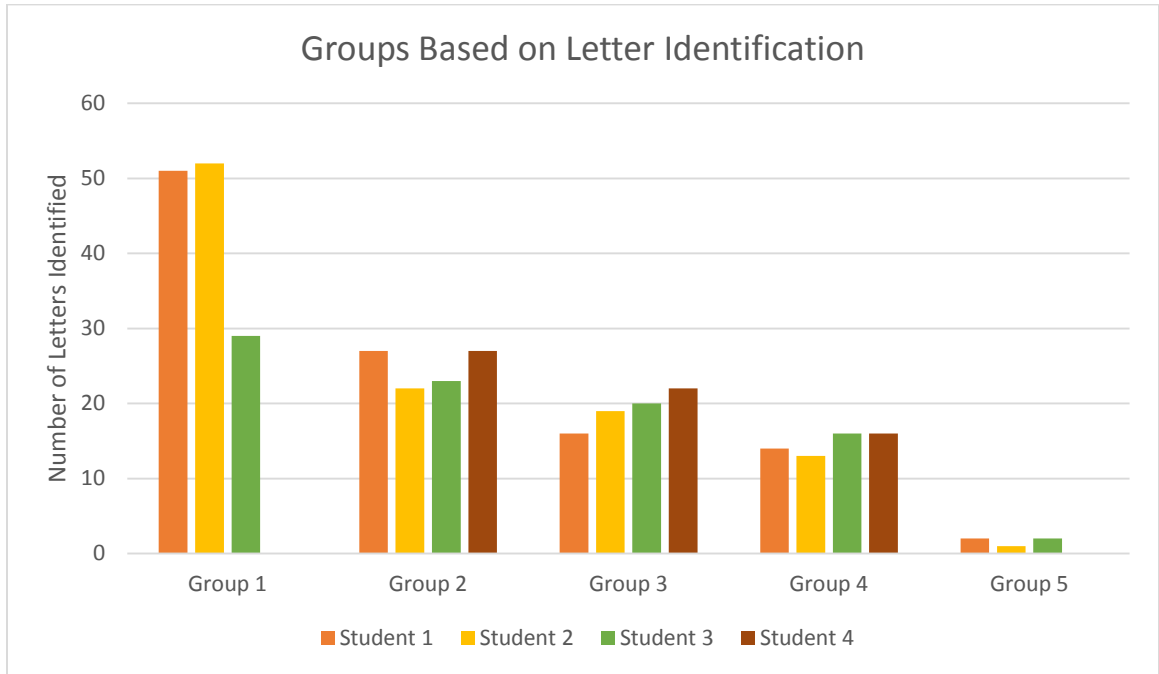


Figure 5. Student Literacy Center Groups Based on Letter Identification Results.

At the Word Works Center students worked on target skills throughout the study, but activities were varied weekly to maintain interest. The Listening Center had alphabet books which were specifically intended for the low group, but were enjoyable for the other groups as well. There were also two other books rotated throughout the week. At the Writing Center all students did the same activities. These were based on a letter of the day, and sight words studied that week. At the Read-to-Self Center, students read a book from a book bag that had a variety of leveled books. Students were also allowed to choose from our classroom library, which has many book bins sorted according to subject or author.

Observation and conferencing data was used to pinpoint students’ interests so I could plan activities that engaged them at their literacy centers. The most surprising result of this information was that most students chose Writing Center as their favorite, yet this was the center where most errors occurred. The students at the Writing Center



worked on a letter book, wherein they traced the letter of the day, and practiced additional letters of their own choosing. Many students did not add the extra letters, and some students used the letter pages for doodling. Possible reasons for this are boredom, and/or a complete misunderstanding of how important it is to practice letter writing. The students also were working on sight word books, and many times these were not completed, or the sight words were misspelled. The sight word for the book was on the front of book, and also on a sheet of paper at the Writing Center, so the reason for this was not clear. Students were unable to explain why they didn't do what was expected of them at the Writing Center. The center that I considered the most fun, because it was more "hands-on", was Word Works Center. However, nobody chose this as the favorite center (See Figure 6). I think that a survey for students that asks them to list in order the centers they like would be more helpful. This kind of survey could address the question of "why?" with more meaning.

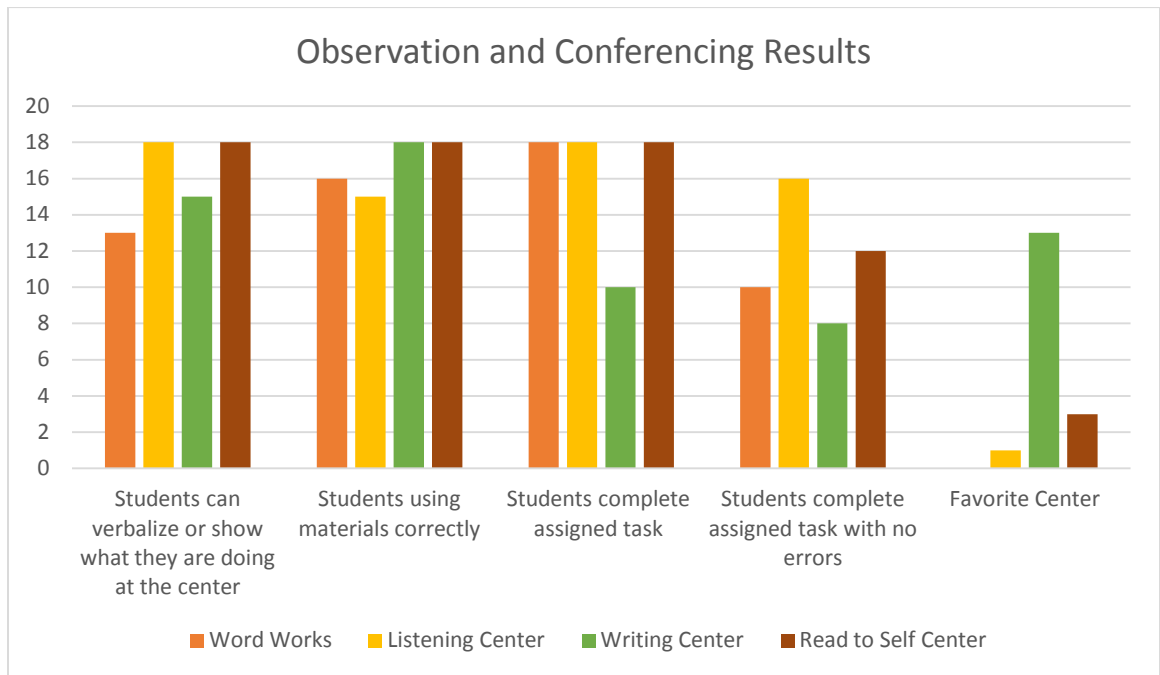


Figure 6. Observation and Conferencing Results

The final graphs represented the student progress after four weeks of research. According to this graph, significant progress was made in the area of Letter Identification. Students were given letter identification activities to work on at all of the literacy centers throughout the research period. Keeping the focus on Letter Identification may be one reason for this result (See Figure 7).

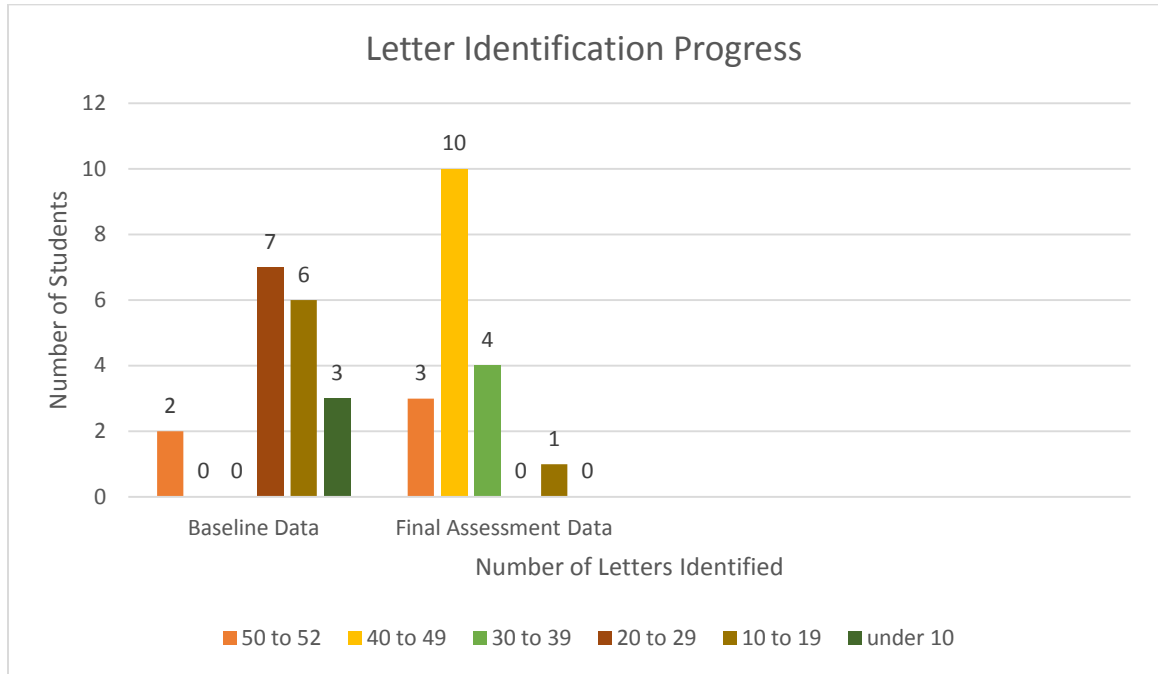


Figure 7. Student Progress in Letter Identification

Because the other three areas, Onset Sounds, Rhyming and Concepts of Print were most often dealt with as a small part of the guided group time with the teacher, the results shown on those graphs may be indicative of students needing more guidance before working on these areas independently (See Figures 8 and 9.)

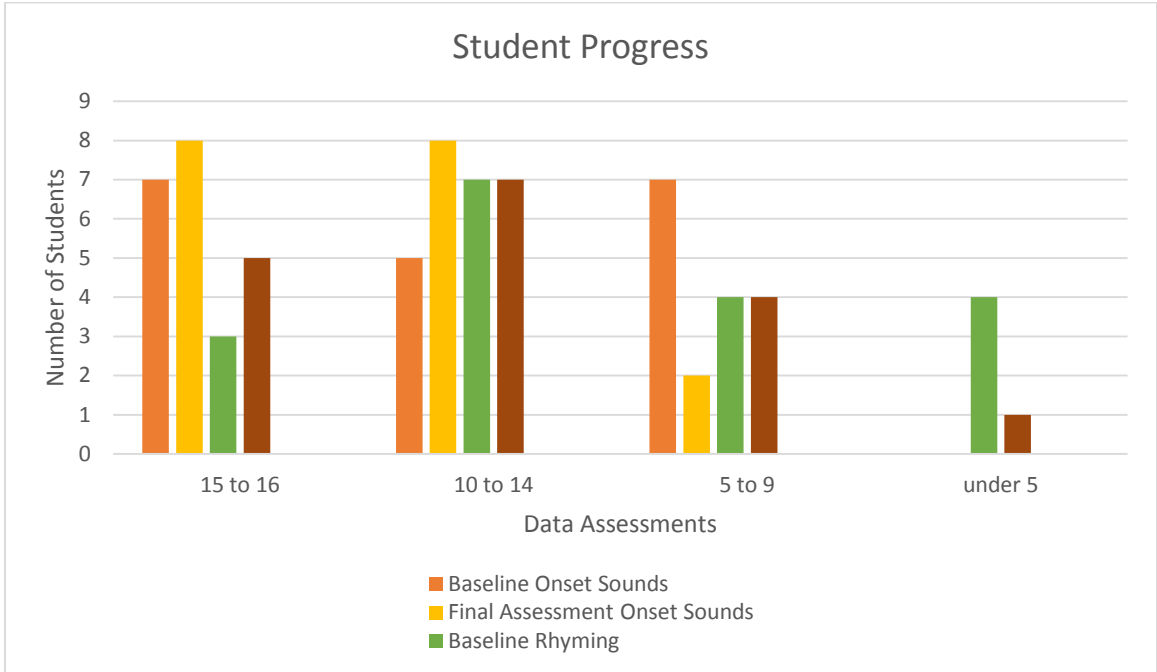


Figure 8. Student Progress in Onset Sounds and Rhyming

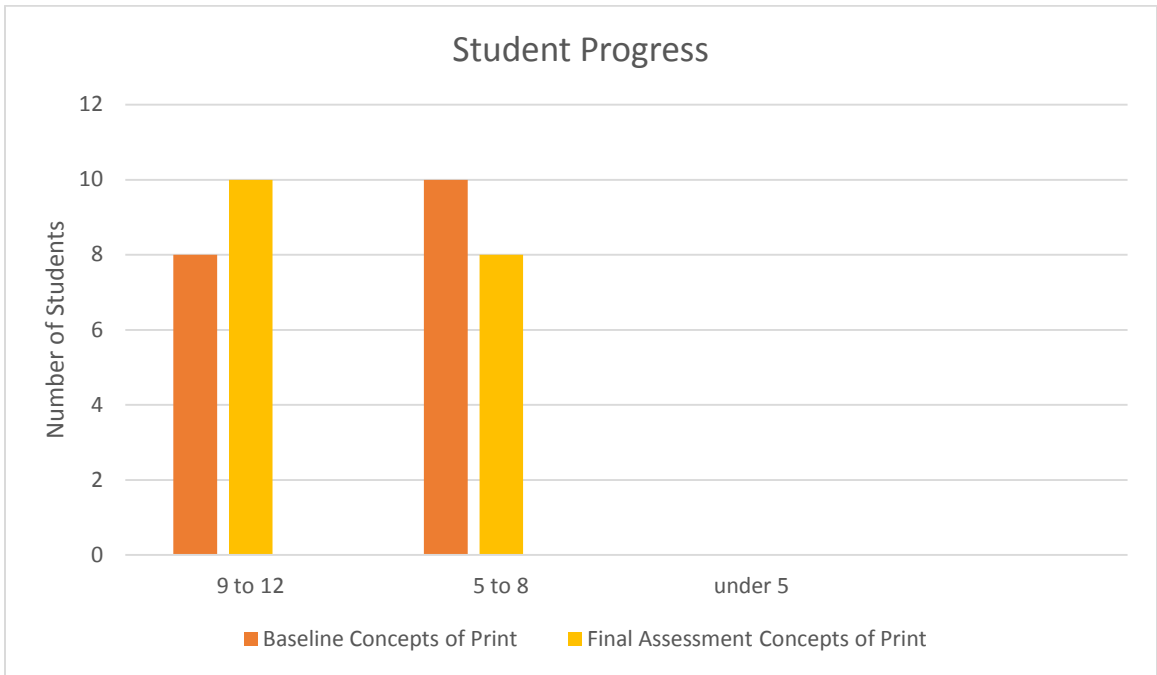


Figure 9. Student Progress in Concepts of Print

The research and data collection in this project has provided information for creating literacy centers that will keep students engaged, thereby enhancing their learning. The original intent was to see if providing engaging literacy centers would increase student learning in the areas of letter identification, onset sounds, concepts of print, and rhyming skills. By being more mindful of what is actually happening in the literacy centers (Word Works Center, Listening Center, Writing Center and Read-to-Self Center), a teacher has the ability to provide meaningful centers differentiated for students' needs.

The baseline data collection at the beginning of the study showed a deficit for most students in the area of letter identification. By providing center activities based around letter identification, students were able to practice alphabet letters in a variety of ways at each center. It was also necessary to find out which students were on task, or off task, and why. Conferencing with students on a weekly basis, helped identify if the students were liking the activities. Students who I observed off task were given the opportunity to let me know what it was they liked or disliked about the center work. Students were most likely to tell me what they liked, rather than disliked. This information helped me to keep certain activities in place, and discontinue other activities that were not acknowledged by the students.

Weekly conferencing also gave me a chance to informally assess the students using brief formative assessments, to see if they were actually learning to identify more letters. This was done quickly with a list of letters, both upper and lower case, wherein the student could point and identify the letter to me. This was done with the students who knew fewer than 20 letters.

When student groups were formed, they were based on the number of letters students were able to identify. It was important to be aware of the differentiation I offered in each center to help the students be successful at their current level of learning.

In this research process I also realized that I needed to take the necessary time to conference with each student to identify their needs. Because students have a variety of ways to learn, talking to them to see what was working and what was not working, or to see if they understood what it was they were trying to accomplish at their centers, helped me to meet their needs. Some students worked better with magnetic upper and lower case letters on a white board. Other students used puzzles that matched pieces for upper and lower case letters. Some students found that writing the letters on a white board was more helpful to them. In the alternative, those students who already had a solid knowledge of letter identification were given higher level activities to work on during center time. For example, at Word Works Center, these students could work on letter sound identification, as well as playing a memory game of matching rhyming pictures, to work on rhyming skills.

It was also important to find out why most of my students liked Writing Center the best. What elements were in place that students liked the most? I found that the students liked to have a tangible product to show me. They were proud of what they had done. Even if it wasn't always correct, they still were eager to show me their work. This will drive my instruction to include having the students show me what they are doing at a center, so they can show me their success and I can praise them or lead them toward their goals. Continuing to conference with each student will impact my effect on what my students learn and how they work toward meeting the state standards.

The impact on student learning will show in their ability to read and write at the level established by the state standards. Differentiation is key to keeping students engaged and learning to meet district goals.

The results of this study showed increased learning outcomes for students in the areas of letter identification, onset sounds, concepts of print, and rhyming. Creating centers that students enjoy while helping them to learn, is crucial for success in literacy centers. The students were able to tell me what it was they liked about each center.

Further research into what drives the students to stay engaged in their literacy centers will help my students be successful in kindergarten. I know that conferencing with students, and routine formative assessments can assist me with finding center activities that help the students stay engaged. If they stay engaged in each center, they will learn from their independent work at each center.

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Student Name	Date of Observation	Word Works	Listening Center	Read to Self	Writing

- Behaviors observed (Key):**
1. Student uses materials correctly.
  2. Student completes assigned task.
  3. Student completes assigned task with no errors.
  4. Student is able to verbalize or show what they are doing at their center.



Inquiry - Conferencing/Anecdotal Notes

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Week 1:
Week 2:
Week 3:
Week 4:

