



Early Literacy during the Period of Transition from Preschool to Primary School

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Abstract

Early literacy refers to the basic skills which enable children to become skilful readers. We can divide it into the following components: oral language (listening, speaking, communication skills), awareness of script and the ability to write (adequately developed fine motor skills), pre-reading skills (phonological awareness and the basic ability to recognise differences between letters / adequately developed auditory and visual perception), vocabulary (understanding words), as well as general knowledge of the world, acquired before starting school. The study presented in this paper was conducted with the aim of determining the differences between boys and girls in their year before starting school, namely in the areas of fine motor skills, auditory perception, speech, pre-reading skills, and reading readiness. The study was conducted using a sample of children between 6.3 and 7.2 years of age, and their teachers. The surveys given to the participants were related to the assessment of fine motor skills, auditory perception, speech, pre-reading skills, and reading readiness. The results of this study can serve as quality guidelines for a better selection of more appropriate activities for acquiring early literacy before starting primary school, while also respecting the individual differences of each child.

Keywords: *Early literacy, children, pre-reading skills, reading;*

1. Introduction

One of the goals which should be met during the preschool period is the adoption of early literacy skills, which shall be the foundation for the successful mastery of reading and writing, i.e. literacy in later schooling. Literacy, according to Goodson et al. (Goodson, Layzer, Simon Dwyer, 2009) includes speech, writing, listening, and reading and understanding spoken and written text. Early literacy covers basic skills that enable children to become skilled readers and consists of six skills: oral language (listening, speaking, communication skills), phonological awareness, awareness of the alphabet and books, basic knowledge of letters, vocabulary, and general knowledge about the world obtained before starting school. Reading and writing are complex activities that depend on numerous abilities and skills that develop gradually. During this period, the influences to which children are exposed are very different (Velički, 2007). The foundations which need to be laid, apply not only to the components of early literacy, but also to the low-level functions: visual and auditory perception, tactile area, motor skills (Velički, Katarinčić, 2011). The impact of low-level function, as well as the multivariate model of early reading acquisition, have been a topic of study for many authors (Boets et al., 2008; Hood and Conlon, 2004; Konold et al., 2003), particularly the influence of auditory perception on phonological awareness and reading (Anthony and Francis, 2005; Holliman et al., 2008), as well as the similarities and differences among boys and girls (Logan, Johnston, 2009; Mathews et al., 2009; Peterson and Par, 2012).

This research determines the differences between boys and girls in the following areas of early literacy: auditory perception, speech, pre-reading skills and reading readiness.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. The aim of the research

This research was conducted with the aim of determining the achieved levels of acquisition of early literacy components (auditory perception, speech, pre-reading skills and reading readiness) in children during their transition from preschool to primary school, and establishing the possible differences according to gender. Determining the differences would allow selecting more appropriate activities for children prior to their inclusion in the educational process at school.

2.2. Research problems

P 1: Whether there is a difference between boys and girls in their transition from preschool to primary school in auditory perception.

P 2: Whether there is a difference between boys and girls in their transition from preschool to primary school in speech.

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P 3: Whether there is a difference between boys and girls in their transition from preschool to primary school in pre-reading skills and reading readiness.

2.3. Hypotheses of the study

H 1: There is no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in their transition from preschool to primary school in auditory perception.

H 2: There is no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in their transition from preschool to primary school in speech.

H 3: There is no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in their transition from preschool to primary school in pre-reading skills and reading readiness.

2.4. The sample of respondents

In this study, the participants were children of eight preschool groups in the year prior to starting school (N=196), of which there were 99 boys (50,51%) and 97 girls (of 49.49%) and their teachers (N=8) from Zagreb kindergartens. The teachers are female and, on average, have about 25 years of work experience. The age of the children is in the range of 6.3-7.2 years.

2.4. Research instruments

1. Auditory perception questionnaire, 13 variables
2. Speech assessment questionnaire, 9 variables
3. Pre-reading skills and Reading readiness questionnaire, 9 variables.

A Likert scale of assessment with a series of claims, with the associated numerical scale of five defined categories.

2.5 Methods and procedures of the study

The preschool teachers filled in the questionnaires based on systematic monitoring, observation and detection. For each child, an estimate of specific skills was recorded. The survey was carried out individually and independently. Filling the questionnaires lasted for approximately 60 minutes for each child. The implementation of this part of the research (data collection) lasted four weeks during the month of March 2018.

In processing the results, we used the arithmetic mean and standard deviation, the percentage of represented views, and the Chi-square test.

3. Results and discussion

The study established whether there was a statistically significant difference between boys and girls in the specified components of early literacy at the transition from preschool to primary school. The independent variable is gender, and the dependent variable includes certain abilities associated with auditory perception, speech, pre-reading skills, and reading readiness.

The first problem was to examine if there was a difference in auditory perception with regard to gender in the transition from preschool to primary school. From the data regarding the arithmetic mean and standard deviation of each of the 13 variables for boys, girls, and the total, it was evident that there was a minimal difference with respect to gender in these variables, in favour of girls: the child can consciously and deliberately concentrate and hear the sounds of nature and identify them; the child can receive oral information/instruction even if there is another noise present; the child can imitate word or sentence prosody.

Boys showed a slight advantage in the following variables: the child can complete the presented syllables, and in this manner, construct words; the child can link the presented phonemes into a word.

The values of the Chi-square test (χ^2), the values of the degrees of freedom (df), and the p-value for each statement in the questionnaire on auditory perception ability were less than the expected values in the Chi-square tables at the levels of 0.05 and 0.01, and so we can conclude that the sample showed no statistically significant differences in teacher estimates of the differences in auditory perception between boys and girls, thus H1 was confirmed.

The second problem of the study was to examine whether there was a difference in speech with regard to gender. Based on the results of arithmetic means and standard deviations of each of the nine variables for boys, girls, and the total, a minimal difference with respect to gender was visible in all nine variables, in favour of girls.

The values of the Chi-square test (χ^2), the values of the degrees of freedom (df), and the p-value for each statement in the questionnaire on speech abilities were less than the expected values in the Chi-square tables at the levels of 0.05 and 0.01, and so we can conclude that the sample showed no statistically significant differences in teacher estimates of the differences in speech abilities between boys and girls, thus H2 was confirmed.

The third problem of the study was to examine whether there was a difference in pre-reading skills and reading readiness with regard to gender.

In the arithmetic means and standard deviations data on each of the nine variables for boys, girls, and the total, a minimal difference with respect to gender was visible in all nine variables, in favour of girls. The most notable difference is in the following variables: the child is familiar with books and can tell a meaningful story from a series of images, or a picture book; the child can receive information based on a previously read text and repeat it in its own words, the child wants to learn to read and repeatedly attempts to discover the meaning of the written words in its surroundings.

The values of the Chi-square test (χ^2), the values of the degrees of freedom (df), and the p-value for each statement in the questionnaire on pre-reading skills and reading readiness were less than the expected values in the Chi-square tables at the levels of 0.05 and 0.01, and so we can conclude that the sample showed no statistically significant differences in teacher estimates of the differences in pre-reading skills and reading readiness between boys and girls, thus H3 was confirmed.

4. Conclusions

The results of the study showed that the differences in respect to gender were minimal. The sample showed no statistically significant differences between the preschool teachers' assessments of the differences regarding the achieved levels of adoption of early literacy components.

Regarding speech, pre-reading skills and reading readiness, the most noticeable difference was in favour of girls, which can be seen in the recorded results of the arithmetic mean. Regarding auditory perception, certain abilities were more prominent in boys, and certain others in girls.

The results also show that the children have adopted the tested early literacy skills at a high level. In the year before starting school, they show a maturity for learning and adopting tasks related to the tested fields. They have achieved appropriate developmental levels for the next chapter in their lives – starting school.

The results of this study can serve as good principles for a better selection of more appropriate activities for children before their inclusion in the educational process in schools, with respect for the individual differences of each child regardless of gender, which would thereby reduce stereotypes and assist in finding optimal solutions and incentives for each individual child.

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