Emergent Literacy Learners and the Achievement Gap: Strategies to Help Struggling Students

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Emergent Literacy Learners and the Achievement Gap: Strategies to Help Struggling Students

by

Sarah Harradine

A Thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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Abstract

This research is a qualitative case study of the achievement gap among struggling emergent literacy learners and strategies to help those students succeed. Data were collected over a period of five weeks using a reading and writing survey, collecting observational notes, and student work. Findings suggested that there are specific strategies, such as interactive read-alouds and using popular culture print, that can help motivate struggling learners to succeed in literacy. By showing individual attention to students and allowing student choice, emergent literacy learners can succeed and can bridge the achievement gap between themselves and their peers.

Keywords: achievement gap, interactive read-alouds, popular culture print, emergent literacy learners
Introduction

He is that student who struggles to grasp the concept of beginning sounds. He knows he can do it, but is getting frustrated with how long it is taking him. She is that student who sits there silently as her teacher runs through the letters of the alphabet yet once again. She can recognize the letters, just not as fast as her teacher would like. He looks at his teacher with a confused look on his face as she tries to explain syllable segmentation to him. Why does he still have to work so hard to understand this like his friend next to him? She yawns and puts her head down as the lower-case letter writing worksheet is placed in front of her. Her teacher thinks she is bored, but she continues to need to work hard to keep up with the fast pace of learning in school.

Schools have high expectations that they expect the students to meet, and teachers are pressured to stick to these high expectations. The problem arises when struggling students have a lot of trouble meeting these expectations. These students and many more are a part of what is called the achievement gap (Davis-Kean, 2014). They come into kindergarten so far behind their peers in many academic subjects that they may have difficulty meeting the expectations set for them by teachers and schools. Struggling students have a hard time dealing with these high expectations set for them, and sometimes these strict rules are more than they have had to ever deal with before.

Topic and Research Problem

Due to the heightened scrutiny of educators and accountability of teachers (to state standards), emergent literacy is of utmost importance to schools. Learning to read and write in kindergarten are two skills that determine how successful a child is in school in their later years, and along with that comes all the detailed skill sets that must be mastered in order to become a successful reader and writer (Abadiano, 2005). When children enter kindergarten academically behind their peers, they end up having to catch up to the standards determined by the test scores of
children their age. They have not had the previous experiences or education that helps them enter formal schooling for the first time.

The achievement gap is a controversial topic that many researchers and educators disagree on. The term “achievement gap” is used to describe the phenomenon when students come into a school setting with significantly lower academic skills than their more advantaged peers as proven by standardized test scores (Foster, 2007, p.173). For those students who do not have a strong knowledge base, schooling will be extremely difficult, especially for emergent literacy learners. They may take years to catch up to their more successful peers, due to the fast and rigorous academic pace set in schools. With each successive school year, expectations will get harder and harder. If students keep falling farther behind, catching up will be beyond their reach. Circumstances beyond their control might be affecting their school lives.

My students are capable of achieving literacy success, but some do struggle to meet the state’s expectations for their grade level. The achievement gap is a fact of life for many emergent literacy learners. These struggling students come into kindergarten very far behind their peers. There are numerous skills that must be mastered so these learners can become proficient readers and writers. Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are indicators of later reading accuracy and fluency (Brand, 2006). These struggling students often fall behind their peers, and have difficulty reaching the standards set forth for kindergarten. These emergent skills are integral to literacy success in successive school years.

There are many reasons that some students struggle with their literacy skills. According to some scholars, characteristics of schools, parents, or home environments may affect the achievement gap (Davis-Kean, 2014). Each factor contributes to the whole academic picture of the individual student. The important thing to remember is that no two students are the same. It becomes necessary to help these learners close this pre-existing achievement gap. Instructors need a
lot of strategies to help their struggling emergent literacy learners start to catch up to their peers. Read-alouds can help with comprehension strategies and self-perceptions of struggling readers (Wiseman, 2012). Teachers model and help students learn how to read by doing it together. Alphabet knowledge and print concepts skills can be increased by using popular culture print (Vera, 2011). Teachers that use print that is familiar to the students, such as store logos, are showing that what the students are familiar with can help them learn. If the students know that the golden arches forming an “M” stand for McDonald’s, they have already learned that one letter sound, and are on their way to learning more sounds.

The students in my class were from low socioeconomic status households, and were predominately African American. I know my students can make great strides in literacy learning, and I look forward to being able to help them achieve great things in our classroom. Funds of knowledge are what students know, based on their personal experiences (Gonzalez, 2005). The funds of knowledge that students bring with them to school contain a wide range of knowledge and experiences that can help each student succeed in a unique way, if teachers use strategies that support these ideas.

**Rationale**

I have seen my own kindergarten students struggle with basic concepts in reading and writing, such as letter recognition, letter/sound matching, and basic book handling skills. These basic skills are integral to an emergent literacy learner’s success later on, because of the rigorous academic standards they must adhere to. Each year of school builds on what should have been mastered in previous years, and if that initial base of knowledge is not strong and secure, the students may see their knowledge structure crumble and fall. Early writing is extremely important to developing the skills necessary to move on to more advanced reading and writing, and providing materials and the opportunity to write may help make the difference for early readers and writers
EMERGENT LITERACY LEARNERS AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

(Cabell, 2013). Doing research into how to help these early learners and how to help them bridge the achievement gap is integral to helping them achieve great literacy skills. Many factors may contribute to the achievement gap that is seen in schools, and many of them are beyond the control of the young students. My study seeks to explain why the achievement gap exists for my students, and explores strategies to help all students succeed.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to be able to better help all learners in my class, with a focus on those who are becoming achievement gap statistics. Figuring out what works to help these struggling learners is helpful to all students no matter what base of knowledge they came into school with. What a student comes into school knowing, based on their personal background and experiences, is called their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, 2005). The students in this study came into school testing low on their baseline assessments. While my students have shown progress since entering kindergarten, I feel like more can be done to ensure their success. I wanted to learn more about what causes this gap in achievement in our young struggling students. They deserve the best education they can get, so they can hope to overcome some of the struggles they are having in life and in school. Researching better ways to help my students became my motivation for completing this research.

**Research Question**

This study focused on the following research question: How can teachers help close the achievement gap for those students who come to kindergarten behind their peers in their literacy learning?
Literature Review

The following literature review summarizes what the achievement gap is, and explores research-based strategies to help emergent literacy learners succeed in elementary school. The achievement gap describes the gap in test scores among beginning literacy students as they begin formal schooling. The reasons that the achievement gap exists are varied among early learners. Educators have been using strategies that have been proven to help emergent literacy learners achieve success in their early school years. Literacy is reading, writing, and speaking in multimodal ways, and is no longer considered strictly reading books and writing on paper (Frankel, Becker, Rowe, & Pearson, 2016). This evolving definition effects how we think about emergent literacy learners, because we are looking at more than one or two aspects of learning literacy.

The Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is a very real situation for many students entering formal schooling. The achievement gap is defined as the situation whereas students come into school scoring significantly lower on standardized tests than their peers from different backgrounds (Foster, 2007, p.173). An alternate perspective on this definition is that scholars should consider it to be more of an “education debt,” that is composed of more in depth components such as historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral factors (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The achievement gap is more than a racial or socioeconomic issue.

The term “achievement gap” has referred to more of a matter of racial and class structure (Ladson-Billings, 2006). According to Ladson-Billings (2006), the achievement gap is more of an on-the-surface problem that does not look deep into the root causes of the disparity among early learners. All learners can succeed, but it is up to the educators to make sure they all have access to an education they can succeed at. For example, Foster (2007) found that students learning literacy skills must master certain levels of skill before they can achieve higher successes in later grade
levels. Therefore, the achievement gap cannot be closed until the early literacy learners have mastery over the earliest of skills they are taught in school. The root causes of the achievement gap or achievement debt need to be addressed so that the learners who are scoring far below their peers can achieve the success in school that they are destined to achieve.

This current educational difference can be related to historical events that have occurred in the United States. Going back further into history, inequities in educational access goes back to times when African American slaves were denied an education (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The basic right to an education was denied to a class of people based solely on the color of their skin. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), the educational debt is defined by its very name, a debt, which is something that is owed to someone else. Educators and the entire educational system owe these struggling students fair access to a successful education (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

**Background Factors**

There are multiple factors that can influence how the achievement gap affects young emergent literacy learners. The age at which a student enters kindergarten may also affect their early literacy success (Huang, 2012). If a parent is able to and chooses to enter their child in kindergarten at a later age, that can sometimes lead to more success in literacy for these learners. Huang (2012) said, “The practice of academic redshirting, or entering a child into kindergarten at a later time, is a practice that is more likely to occur among more economically advantaged families” (p.431). These kids may have more time to learn basic skills before they even enter formal schooling.

Funds of knowledge are what a child comes into school knowing and experiencing. Teachers who can access these funds of knowledge and use them to help the child learn, and who can engage families in the learning, will be successful in teaching literacy to young learners (Hedges, 2015). These experiences are shared between the parents and the child, and by the teacher.
also sharing these experiences, there can be a rich engagement among all members of the learning experience. Teachers need to realize that accessing a student’s funds of knowledge is very beneficial, even though there are strong curriculum needs that they must meet (Heydon, 2015). There are so many demands imposed on teachers from their schools, which makes it difficult for them to be able to access the funds of knowledge their students come to school with.

Teachers can use funds of knowledge to help themselves relate better to their students, and they can use the funds of knowledge to help their students to share their previous knowledge in school (Gonzalez, 2005). Funds of knowledge are a great resource to use in emergent literacy learning (Compton-Lilly, 2006). In my school, being able to relate to my students and being able to help them share their knowledge is very important because it allows them to show their confidence in what they know. It allows my students to prove that they know more than what a test score shows.

Many factors may affect a child’s success in literacy during their school years. Some are more deeply involved than others, and it is hard to tell for sure what factors affect the academics of young students. According to Xu (2014), it is a combination of factors, rather than just a single factor, that affects their ability to be successful in literacy learning. Teachers should be sure to consider all factors that may or may not affect their students so the students can be sure to have the best success they can, no matter where the students come from or what knowledge they come to school with.

**Educator Strategies**

There are numerous strategies that teachers can use to help all learners in their classroom achieve literacy success. Teachers can use popular culture print to engage their emergent literacy learners. Interactive read-alouds are an effective way to motivate young readers. Another strategy is to use children’s names to help them with emergent literacy learning. The purpose of these
strategies is to get young emergent literacy learners actively engaged in the processes of learning to read and write.

**Popular culture print.** According to Vera (2011), one idea that teachers can use is popular culture print to increase literacy success among their emergent learners. Using popular culture print allows children who see these things around their everyday life to relate to what they are learning, by focusing on what they are living (Vera, 2011). If a child wears a shirt from their favorite television character, that child already knows that character, and will be able to recognize that character any time they see them. Using print that students are already familiar with is a great way for teachers to relate real life to real learning. Taking that character and talking about how to write that character’s name makes learning unique and relatable for all students, especially those who are having difficulties in school. Another name referring to this concept is environmental print, which is print that occurs around the student that includes products, toys, logos, and street signs (Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2013). Children are exposed to this kind of print on a daily basis, and become familiar with letters and sounds due to experiencing them. Using this kind of print helps children become familiar with letters, sounds, and words around them in their worlds.

Related to the idea of using popular culture to enhance literacy learning is the idea that teachers can use the culture and experiences that children bring to school to help them learn (Compton-Lilly, 2006). Children are unique beings who bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to the classroom, and each child is different in his cultural backgrounds and experiences at home. In my classroom, I could have the students bring in print from their lives, for example food packaging or pictures of store signs. We could then read the words they bring in to bring interest to learning how to read. Popular culture print, or environmental print, can help students with learning how to read, and can help them become motivated to read, based on the extreme interest they will show when interacting with these items (Neumann, 2013).
When using popular culture print to enhance early literacy learning, using technology and other multimodal means instead of just visual means is a good way to help students learn (Yamada-Rice, 2011). For instance, instead of just bringing in picture of a cereal box to just learn the letters on the package, I could use an actual cereal box, my students could eat the cereal as they examine the box, and they could even watch a video of a commercial for that cereal. These different ways of learning can help students learn by exposing them to a variety of ways of looking at the same word (the name of the cereal).

**Interactive read-alouds.** Using interactive read-alouds in the classroom is a way for teachers to engage students who may not otherwise be interested in or motivated by any other reading strategies used in the classroom (Wiseman, 2012). Interactive read-alouds use teacher readings and two-way conversations to actively engage the listeners and get them ready to read independently. By reading to students, while stopping to talk about what is happening in the book, and involving them in the reading process, educators can grab the attention of the students and help them become involved in the whole reading process from start to finish. Teachers can help the students become involved in learning by knowing how to choose books they can read, since they have been slowly taking on more responsibility of the reading process during the interactive read-alouds. Educators purposely choose books that will interest their students for interactive read-alouds, modeling how the process is done. Teachers can help students want to learn and read by making it a very engaging process for everyone involved. By participating in a read-aloud, students can learn how to better understand the book because of the exposure to academic vocabulary they are experiencing (Archer, 2015). Teachers and students are able to look at this new vocabulary together, to help the understanding of the word on a deeper level.

Storytime and read-alouds offer a lot of specific benefits to children. One thing they can offer is a chance for teachers to model specific literacy behaviors, such as concepts about print and
book handling skills (Irwin, Moore, Tornatore, & Fowler, 2012). By showing the students the proper way to read a book and what the parts of the book are, teachers are able to help them learn how to read independently. Gradually the responsibility would shift from teacher to student, and literacy skills will be learned. Interactive read-alouds offer a way for teachers to participate in the reading process, while at the same time learning the skills necessary to become independent readers (Wiseman, 2011). The students will eventually be able to read by using the skills they are seeing during read-alouds in the classroom.

When done by trained and well-educated teachers, interactive read-alouds provide a time for students and teachers to work together by using specific and useful instruction to enhance literacy skills (Lennox, 2013). The important thing to remember is that read-alouds have to be carefully planned and implemented, so they have the maximum benefit for students. There is a very wide range of skills that can be used and taught during read-alouds, such as how to recognize a letter versus a word, and how to read left to right and top to bottom (Zucker, 2009). There are so many skills related to book reading that emergent learners need to learn, that using read-alouds to do so makes a lot of sense. Teachers can model the appropriate skills, such as book handling skills and reading with expression, and can have students eventually use those skills independently as they learn how to read on their own.

When planning interactive read-alouds, it is important to realize that they should be planned and integrated into the curriculum, rather than last-minute and used to keep the students busy (Damber, 2015). Students can learn so much from these read-alouds when used properly and modeled for them, so the skills they are trying to learn and perfect and can be copied. In my study I used read-alouds by reading the same book all week, and by touching on different skills each day of the week. For example, I focused on naming the author and illustrator and what they did for the story on one day, and focused on vocabulary the next day.
**Personalizing learning.** Making emergent literacy learning a personal experience is a great way to connect children to their learning (McNair, 2007). Any time teachers are able to bring in something personal for the children, it helps them with literacy learning. For something as simple as learning the letters of the alphabet, students learn the letters that are in their name easier if they see them more often (McNair, 2007). This way of teaching can make learning fun and relatable for young students.

Educators tend to look at reading and writing as straightforward activities. According to Kuby (2015), it is important to embrace the unexpected moments in a classroom. Teachers should take a step back and explore writing as more than simply using a pencil and paper. Students can write by expressing themselves through art and creative projects. These “writing” moments can help students learn how to tell a story without using the traditional paper and pencil method, but rather by using their creative mind to tell a story to their peers through art and creativity (Kuby, 2015). In my classroom, I love to allow my students the freedom to express their ideas in multiple ways.

**Conclusion**

The ultimate goal for educators is to help all learners achieve academic success. The way teachers help with academic success is to become educated on what the achievement gap is, consider any factors that affect the reality of the achievement gap, and to use proven strategies to help them help their students. By being educated on the history of the problem, what can affect the problem, and knowing what to do to help fix the problem, teachers can combat the achievement gap and help their struggling students make great strides. The literature I found during my research supports my study because it helped me to answer my research question about closing the achievement gap for struggling students. I found background factors, learned about strategies to help emergent learners, and learned how to use these strategies in my classroom. I then used these ideas to guide all aspects of my study.
Methodology

The purpose of this study is to be able to support all learners in my class, with a focus on those who were falling victim to the achievement gap. Figuring out what worked to help these struggling learners was helpful to all students no matter what base of knowledge they came into school with. My students came into school testing fairly low on their baseline assessments. My student participants showed some progress since entering kindergarten, but the rate of progress has been slow. I used interviews, observations, and gathered student work so that I could see progress over the course of several weeks during my research study. I used these methods to better understand how to help not only my struggling students, but all students in my class.

Participants

The participants in my study were selected because they were my kindergarten students for the 2016-2017 school year. There were 17 students in my class, with the gender breakdown of 11 boys and 6 girls. Within our school, there was a 98% poverty rate, with all students receiving free breakfast, snack and lunch during school hours. Within our classroom, I was the classroom teacher and we had a teaching assistant in our room all the time as well. There was a co-teacher who split her time between our room and the room next door for different subjects.

From my class of 17 students, 9 were participating in my research study. Within those 9 students, there were 6 boys and 3 girls. The participants in my study were all either 5 or 6 years old. Participant 5 and Participant 6 had spotty attendance, and Participant 2 and Participant 9 were often tardy for school.
Setting

The setting for my study was my kindergarten classroom in our charter school, which was located in Plainville (pseudonym), NY, and contained students coming in from a city school district. These students in grades K-6 applied to be students in our school and were accepted based on a lottery system. Their parents looked into our school and felt it would be the best educational option for their children. According to the New York State Department of Education data website (http://data.nysed.gov), for the 2015-2016 school year, our school had a total enrollment (K-6) of 293 students, with 44 of them in kindergarten (split between two classrooms). The building used to house a middle school, so the bathrooms were down the hall, and there were not built-in cubbies for student belongings. Our classroom was longer in size, due to its previous use being for two intervention teachers. There was a U-shaped table where I worked with students in small groups, and there were three tables where the students sat to do their table work.
At the time of this study, we had three kindergarten classrooms of 16 students each, to spread the students into smaller class sizes. The data for last year indicated that the majority of students belonged to an ethnic minority and were eligible for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch.

**Positionality**

My background is very different from that of my students. I am from a white middle-class family who lived (and still live) in a suburban neighborhood. My family consisted of two parents and a brother. I now live with my own family in a similar situation. I am a married mother of three, living with my husband, kids, and pets in a large home. I am college-educated, working on my
second Master’s degree. My children do well in school, so we have been fortunate not to have experienced significant academic struggles like my students.

I believe that all children have the right to the best education they can get, regardless of their home life and experiences. All children can succeed, if given the proper support and expertise at school. My students need not only academic support, but social and emotional support in school as well. I have personally seen a different school experience that myself and my children have experienced. They need more support, but can still accomplish great things like their peers in different situations have accomplished.

Methods of Data Collection

As the teacher in the classroom I was doing the teaching and observing, so I was in a unique position to see both sides. It was helpful to use my own class, because of my familiarity with the room and our schedules and routines.

**Reading and writing survey.** I administered a semi-structured survey to my students at the beginning of my study. I sat down with them one at a time and asked them the questions on the survey (See Appendix A). All students in my class were asked these survey questions, but only the students who had parental consent had their data used in my research paper. At the end of my study I administered the same survey to all students. Each time I administered the survey, the other students were doing independent work at their tables. It took about 5 minutes to administer, because I wrote down their answers after I asked the questions.

**Observational notes.** Taking observational notes was an easy transition for me, because I already had been doing that in my classroom. I used a clipboard and a note catcher (See Appendix B). Each student was given a pseudonym so their identity was not known to anyone. I took observational notes at a minimum of 3 times per week.
Student work. I collected student work as another source of data from my students. I collected work we were already doing in class, so there was no extra effort required on my part or on the students’ side of the study.

The data I collected was enough to get a wide range of information, in order to further my research. I looked at whether the students’ attitudes towards reading and writing changed, and how their work improved as a result of our efforts.

Procedures

I administered the Reading and Writing Survey (Appendix A) at the very beginning and very end of my research time period, to see how the students’ opinions about reading and writing changed throughout the study. I sat down individually with them to ask them the questions and recorded their answers.

Throughout the study, I used the Teacher Observation Sheet (Appendix B) to record daily observations of specific students. It was kept on a clipboard that I used throughout the lessons in order to record specific information for certain students I observed.

Trustworthiness

My design meets the criteria for trustworthiness because it followed the standards set forth by The College at Brockport Institutional Review Board. I did not use deception or bribes in any way, and the work being done was already going to be done in my classroom. There was no excessive risk or coercion, and any student who chose not to participate did not have any negative consequence because of that choice. Participation in this study was completely optional for students and their parents. To confirm the trustworthiness of this study, I used triangulation, which is using multiple methods to view data (Huettman, 1993). I compared my data using interviews, student work, and observational notes.
Data Analysis

Analysis

This qualitative case study explores teaching strategies to help struggling emergent literacy learners bridge the achievement gap on standardized test scores. A case study is when a researcher conducts research on people from a certain group (Shagoury & Power, 2012). Clark & Creswell (2015) define a case study as exploring a bounded system in depth. In my particular case study, I researched my kindergarten class for a period of several weeks. I used a reading and writing survey at the beginning and end of the research time period, as well as student work and observational notes to obtain data about my participants. I wanted to know what they did and how they acted during reading and writing in our classroom. I used the constant comparison analysis method to look through all of my data and come up with common themes (Shagoury & Power, 2012). I color coded my data to find common words and phrases. Through detailed research, I found examples of strategies that have worked to help struggling learners achieve academic success.

I looked through my surveys to find themes and trends about my participants’ perceptions about reading and writing. I looked for words that matched, as well as perceptions that were the same across the participants. I then looked through my observational notes to see if there was any connection between the surveys and the participants’ behaviors in my observational notes. After that, I looked through the student work that I had gathered from my participants. Looking through all three sources of data helped me to develop my themes and then my findings. Using the constant comparison analysis method helped me to find common words and phrases (Shagoury & Power, 2012).

The findings include choice is important, individual attention makes a difference, and being able to treat reading and writing as necessary skills allows students to be accountable for their hard work.
Finding 1: Struggling readers and writers need choice, so that they are interested in the reading process.

When administering my reading and writing survey, I didn’t have any idea of what my participants would say. I had not yet sat down individually with my students and had conversations about reading and writing. It was exciting to be able to speak with them individually and to talk about their thoughts and feelings on literacy, more specifically, reading and writing. I was able to conduct one interview at the beginning of my case study, and the same one at the end of the study, to see if what we worked on made any difference in their answers. Being able to really flush out my participants’ feelings about reading and writing was extremely helpful to me, in order to get a deeper insight into their thoughts on literacy.

![Reading and Writing Interview]

1. What kinds of things do you like to read? Why?
   Spiderman, Antman, Ironman, Black Panther books bc they’re my favorite.

Figure 3. Survey answer. This figure shows an answer from a reading survey I gave the participants that reads, “Spiderman, Antman, Iron Man, Black Panther books because they’re my favorite.”

I found that giving my students choice helped tremendously with their interest in reading. Participant 2 said he liked to read about super heroes, which showed that he had a clear opinion and interest in this topic. Being able to provide him with books about super heroes gave him the interest and motivation to want to read. This interest could even lead to him learning more, and a greater investment in his learning. Participant 2 also continued to write a lot about super heroes. He did more writing and got more down on the paper when he was given the choice of a topic to write about. Participant 2 was a good example of giving choice to students leading to more productive
reading and writing. Participant 2 was always talking about super heroes in class, and loved to tell me a lot of details about their super powers. It was interesting to figure out how to use this interest to help him with his writing. I would try to figure out how to help him sound out terms like “running fast” and “shoots spider webs,” and use these terms in his writing.

One way to give students choice is to tap into their everyday life, as I did with Participant 2, and to use popular culture print to help them succeed (Vera, 2011). By using something that the students are familiar with and allowing them to read and write about things they know, they are likely to be more interested in the literacy process. They will have a personal connection to their learning, by being able to choose a topic that they know and that they are interested in.

Participant 1 really liked to talk with the students at his table. He was quite the chatterbox, so getting him to participate in writing was always difficult. Participant 1 struggled to find the focus necessary to get any words down on his paper during writing, except when he had a choice in what he could write about. When the writing assignment was an open choice, Participant 1 was able to get some words down that matched the picture he drew, like when he drew a picture of his birthday party with all of his cousins. His ability to make a choice about his topic of writing enabled him to actually get some writing done.

I wrote observational notes when observing Participant 9 that said she was playing with her pencil and putting her head down, and when she began writing, she seemed distracted. This student was not normally one who sat at her seat not writing, but this particular writing assignment was a guided one, meaning there was a picture already printed at the top of a pig in garbage, and the students were expected to write the words to go with the picture. Participant 9 was simply not interested in the topic, and therefore did not do much writing. She only was able to write a quick fact about the picture and nothing more. Participant 9 was capable of writing more, and participated when we talked about using our five senses to help write more, but chose not to during this activity,
due to her lack of interest in the topic. She either did not make a connection to the pig in the garbage picture, or did not care about it enough to expand on her writing. Allowing her to choose the topic she writes about tended to lead to more productive and interesting writing that is expanded beyond one simple sentence.

Figure 4. Student work. This figure shows a sample of guided writing work from Participant 9 that reads, “The pig is in the trash.”
Finding 2: Students who struggle with reading and writing need individual attention given to them whenever possible.

Some of my students would just put their head down, or would act out and distract others during reading and writing. For example, Participant 8 only did one sentence during writing, then put her pencil down and said she was done, as I recorded in my observational notes. She then did better and put more writing down when I sat down and worked with her individually the next time we did writing. Similarly, Participant 8 struggled to get the motivation to start writing, so I wanted to sit and push her so she could succeed in writing. I wanted to help give her the confidence she needed to prove to her that she could do it. I believed in her and knew she had the motivation and knowledge to succeed.

My students tended to struggle with literacy activities, and without direct one-on-one help they tended to not participate. They had a hard time focusing and doing productive writing activities without the individual attention, but that was a hard thing to do for them every day. Teaching the skills necessary to work independently is something that I strive to do. I want to hand out writing folders and know that my students are able to start and complete a writing assignment without a long one-on-one period of help from an adult every time. The goal is independent writing every time, with minor assistance from a teacher.
Figure 5. Observational notes. This figure shows one of my observational notes from Participant 3.

When I was able to sit down with Participant 3, he had better focus and did a better job writing than when I was not sitting right next to him. Prior to me helping him individually, he didn’t even have his writing folder open, and was not writing. When I was able to give him this attention, he was focused and wrote down some words on his writing paper. Participant 3 could not write without me sitting down and pushing him to begin. Also needing some individual attention was Participant 1, who was very distracted during writing. He was shouting out asking how to spell words during a guided writing lesson, and kept shouting it out until I was able to come over and help him. Participant 1 needed the individual attention before he was able to focus on his writing. Being able to sit down with him allowed him to focus on what he needed to do, in order to write the words down that matched the given picture on his writing page.

I took observational notes on Participant 7, who was slow and distracted when writing, so I sat down and worked with her. After I began giving her the individual attention, she immediately got more writing down on her paper. She needed my one-on-one attention to get motivated to start writing on her paper. Participant 7 used every distraction technique she could to avoid writing, because I was focused on other students at the time. She needed me to sit down right next to her and talk her through the writing process. Participant 7 was not even close to being able to write independently. I hope that she is able to work independently by the end of the school year, so she is better able to get her thoughts down on paper during writing time.
Similarly, Participant 4 really liked to write about his friends in class, so when I sat down with him individually, I was able to help him write about this interest in his friends. He could really talk a lot about his friends, but I wanted to help him get the words written down on his writing paper. Participant 4 needed the guidance to help organize his thoughts so his writing could be written down in a coherent way. One day during class he was telling me a story about how he liked to play on the playground with his friends that sit at his table. I then asked him to write this story down on his paper, instead of just telling me the story verbally. Because I prompted him individually, he was then able to get the words written down on his writing paper. He just needed the one-on-one time to be able to write the words down that matched the stories he had told me verbally.

**Finding 3: Students need reading and writing to be mandatory, so they feel compelled to do their best work and to be a good student.**

I found that when students knew that reading and writing is part of their responsibility as a student, they were happy to take on that role. Six out of my nine participants reported that reading
and writing made them feel happy. For example, Participant 3 said that she was happy to learn how to read because she was “a small kid.” The sense of ownership is clear in this case, because Participant 3 knew what her task was and was taking on the responsibility of learning. The participants felt that because they were a young student, they were supposed to learn how to read, and that made them feel happy. For example, in Figure 5, Participant 3 noted that she felt happy when she reads because she has to learn how to read, because she’s “a small kid.” As her teacher, I felt like she would do better only if she knew it was an important part of school success to learn how to read and write. I was happy to see that this student was so responsible about her learning, so I made sure to give her the encouragement she needed to push beyond her literacy struggles. I encouraged her by supporting her one-on-one and praising her good writing work.

Figure 7. Survey answer. This figure shows a survey answer from one of my participants that reads, “happy because I have to learn how to read because I’m a small kid.”

Interactive read-alouds are a good way for teachers to gradually introduce reading skills to students, to give them a sense of responsibility about their reading (Lennox, 2013). Being responsible and being held accountable for learning literacy skills helps students learn by helping them to be a part of the process. Read-alouds allow the responsibility to gradually shift from the teacher to the student. I liked doing the interactive read-alouds with my students. I could see them learning the procedure of doing reading. It was nice to see them learning and processing the steps needed to succeed in reading. I would model how to read a book by turning the pages carefully, reading left to right, top to bottom, and I saw them mimicking these actions during independent
reading time. I would see them modeling their behaviors after me, such as when they would point word to word, and when they would read with good expression when they were reading with a partner.

Being responsible for literacy learning gave my students a sense of worth and the ability to know what they had to do in school. They became accountable for their learning, and that made it easier for them to accomplish greater things in literacy learning. Participant 3 stated in her interview question that reading made her happy because she “learns stuff” from reading. She mentioned that she enjoyed reading and writing about animals, and enjoyed reading with her mom “on Saturday.” I feel like that because she is learning information about animals, this helps her to be more motivated to read and to cause a happy feeling to occur during reading. This showed that she was happy to be learning, which was an important part of being a kindergarten student.

Another student who reported that she “felt happy” to read was Participant 5, who said she felt happy when she read because she learned stuff from reading. She felt a sense of responsibility to read, and felt happy when she accomplished a reading task. Participant 5 felt the need to fulfill her role as a student by learning how to read, and it in turn made her feel happy when she did exactly that. Participant 6 also felt a love of reading and writing, as he indicated in his pre-interview that he liked to write letters at school because it’s important. He knew that learning his letters helped him learn how to write, and he was taking responsibility for his learning. Both of these participants used their happiness with reading and writing to help fill their role as a kindergarten student.
Discussion

The reason I conducted this study was to help teachers of struggling readers, by answering the research question: *How can teachers help close the achievement gap for those students who come to kindergarten behind their peers in their literacy learning?*

During this qualitative case study, I spent several weeks asking questions of and observing my kindergarten students. I took observational notes and kept student work, so I could figure out how to help my struggling readers and writers. I sought to understand what makes them tick and how I could use effective strategies to help them learn and to bridge the achievement gap that currently exists between them and their peers. I found that choice plays a huge role in student interest in literacy activities, individual attention helps to motivate struggling learners, and becoming accountable for mandatory literacy activities all impact how a struggling emergent literacy learner learns.

Conclusions and Implications

**Conclusion 1: Struggling readers and writers need choice, so that they are interested in the literacy process.** The results of my study show that students who struggled with reading and writing needed choices. They were more likely to have interest in the literacy process if they had choices about what they were reading and writing. For example, participants who were struggling writers tended to do much better during writing time when given a choice about what to write, rather than being given a prompt or being asked to participate in guided writing. Participant 7 was really interested in super heroes. When he was allowed choice for his reading and writing, he was much more successful. He loved to write about super heroes, and could read me his work back much easier and with greater detail than when he was writing about a topic I provided for him. Participant 7 showed much more interest and motivation when super heroes were allowed as the topic for learning.
If students were motivated and interested in what they were doing, they would do better at that particular task. During reading time, struggling readers would not be interested in what they were reading if they were forced to read something that they did not get to choose. They would do much better when given a choice about what to read, so it got them interested in the whole reading process. Allowing choice led to a greater interest in the literacy process as a whole.

**Implication 1: Teachers need to allow room for student choice during literacy activities.** When appropriate, teachers should try to allow choice for students during literacy activities in reading and writing. Rowe (2010) found that preschoolers participated in emergent writing activities based on their personal interests. There are, of course, times when this is not possible. For instance, guided writing requires more teacher input than student choice. But, when it is possible, giving students the ability to choose the topic they want to read or write about can be extremely beneficial to the struggling literacy learner. Participants in my study often did better work when they were allowed to choose what they did. For example, when provided with books of varying topics that they were allowed to choose from, my participants showed much more interest in their reading than when I provided books of my choice for them to read.

To get students interested in reading and writing means to get them actually reading and writing. If they do this, they can improve on their literacy skills and build a strong base of knowledge. These struggling learners can move to close the achievement gap by earning higher standardized test scores and may be able to catch up to their peers. This implication is supported by Vera (2011), who found that using popular culture print led to a greater knowledge of the alphabet, and from there more higher level literacy skills. When giving students the choice of using popular culture print, students will be more interested and motivated.

**Conclusion 2: Students who struggle with reading and writing need individual attention given to them whenever possible.** During my case study, I found that those students who
struggled the most tended to do much better when given one-on-one attention. They were able to complete tasks that they normally would have just stared at, without even attempting to do work. A few of my participants would just sit during writing time and not even pick up their pencil. When I sat down with them individually, they would write beautifully and put forth more effort. The participants showed that I was interested in what they were doing, so they became interested as well, and therefore produced much better work. Therefore, the personal attention from the teacher led to increased work output from the participants.

Students need attention, in more ways than one. By being able to give them individual attention during writing, I was able to push them to do their best work. It was eye-opening to be able to see what work they were actually capable of during writing. I was proud of what they accomplished with my individual attention.

**Implication 2: Teachers need to give individual attention to those students who struggle the most during literacy activities.** Given the time constraints and curriculum demands, teachers already struggle to fit in everything they need to in a regular day. Adding the need for individual attention for struggling readers onto this already hefty workload seems impossible. The benefit of being able to do this would severely outweigh the struggle to find time. According to Puranik (2014), emergent writers who do not have a strong base knowledge of skills may have trouble gaining these skills later on. This means that being able to help those students who struggle the most may need the most individual attention whenever possible, so they can strengthen their emergent literacy knowledge.

Scheduling individual attention may be a good way to make this possible in the classroom. If teachers can find time, even if it’s a little bit of time, to meet with struggling readers and writers, it may make a big difference. Being able to push these young writers may be enough for them to eventually become independent with their literacy skills. Wiseman (2012) found that a student
would get frustrated when skills became too difficult. Therefore, when given individual attention, I was able to help my participants push past that initial frustration and get more motivated to do better literacy work in our classroom.

**Conclusion 3: Students need reading and writing to be mandatory, so they feel compelled to do their best work and to be a good student.** Some of my participants made comments that indicated they felt that reading and writing was something they had to do during school. This gave them a sense of responsibility about the whole literacy process. These students felt that it was their task to learn how to read and write, and that was what they were going to try to do. The participants were holding themselves accountable for learning how to read and write, because that is what they were supposed to do.

These students realized that they should do their best work and learn these literacy skills. Their knowledge about this was amazing to see. For example, Participant 9 told me that reading made her happy because she is a little kid and learning how to read is what she is supposed to do. It was implied that this was what was expected by the school. I could tell she knew what she had to do, but was just struggling to get to that point. She wanted to and had the ability to do good literacy work, but just needed some teacher strategies to get there.

**Implication 3: Teachers need to indicate to students that literacy is something they need to do, in order to become successful students.** When teachers encounter struggling emergent literacy learners, they may struggle to find motivation. When students see literacy learning as something they have to do, that may encourage them to work hard at it.

Students who struggle may lack the motivation to do good work and to learn how to read and write. The motivation they need may simply come from knowing their work is necessary and something they need to accomplish in school. These students have a great sense of responsibility for their literacy learning.
Limitations

There were several limitations to my study. I conducted my study during five weeks. Given more time, I could have had more data, and might have been able to use this data to measure student improvement. I think that being able to get more data could help me see more strategies to help my students. Also, I had a limited number of participants. Out of my class of 17 students, 9 of them had parents who consented for their participation in my research. I feel like the more students involved the better, so a higher number would have been more useful to me. I had limited time for observations, because I was the teacher and the researcher at the same time. It was difficult to find the time to write down information for my observations while at the same time teaching lessons. All of these limitations were not preventable in this case, but I do feel like if I were to do it again I would try to combat some of these for my research.

Future Research

There are many things I could do if I were to research this topic in more detail. I think that getting parent input would be a tremendous benefit, to see what they think about their children’s literacy process. Parents are an important asset to have when helping emergent literacy learners to succeed in school. I feel like if I had more parent input, it would have given me more insight into my students. Having more participants in my study would also help benefit my research because I would be able to see across a wider range of learning abilities.

There are three kindergarten classes in my school, so having access to research other classes within the same grade level would be a great way to see more learning levels. On the same level, asking other kindergarten teachers their opinions by doing a questionnaire would also be a great way to find out what other students are doing who are at the same age group as my participants.
Overall Significance

This study is significant to the area of literacy, more specifically struggling readers and writers. Being able to help educators come up with viable solutions in the form of specific strategies is of utmost importance. Emergent literacy learners need to acquire a strong base of knowledge so future learning can happen later on in school. These struggling learners need to have as much help as possible, so they can bridge the achievement gap between themselves and their peers. Their future learning depends on having knowledgeable educators who can help them learn and achieve great things in literacy. By researching this topic and by being able to have access to my own class, I was able to see them in a closer light and was able to see how to help not only the struggling learners, but all of my students. It has put my teaching in a whole new light, and I really think about how I can help my students, based on what I learned during this qualitative research case study.

Moving forward, I will be looking at these strategies, specifically popular culture print and read-alouds, to help my struggling emergent literacy learners. I feel like I have a really strong portfolio of ideas that I can enact in my classroom easily, in order to help my learners succeed.
References


Appendix A

Name ___________________________ Date __________

Reading and Writing Survey

1. What kinds of things do you like to read? Why?

2. Who reads with you? When? Where?

3. Do you have any things to read at home? If so, what?

4. How does reading make you feel and why?

5. What kinds of things do you like to write? Why?

6. Who writes with you? When? Where?

7. What do you write at school? Why? Do you like ____? Why?

8. What do you write at home? Why?

9. How does writing make you feel and why?
## Appendix B

**Teacher Observation Sheet**

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**Other Notes:**