

Title: "Walking with Rosie: A Cautionary Tale of Early Reading Instruction"

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Subject(s): Oral Language, Phonics and Decoding, Vocabulary

Grade Level: Preschool, K, 1–2

Synopsis: (Abstract) What kinds of early reading skills are essential to help students grow into competent readers, and how well are schools teaching these skills in kindergarten and 1st grade? The authors describe a long-term study that tracked the growth of 200 students in six urban schools in decoding and vocabulary skills from preschool through grade 1. Through detailed classroom observations, the researchers assessed how various kinds of classroom instruction affected students' growth in these skills. They found that the schools were successful in teaching their students word recognition skills, but that students lagged behind in the vocabulary skills necessary for comprehension growth. Overemphasis on decoding instruction in 1st grade was associated with lower growth in vocabulary skills. The authors identify anchored word instruction—which highlights meaning, spelling, and letter-sound relationships in the context of text—as an instructional approach that has the best potential for building young students' vocabulary and comprehension skills.

(More Detail) Students in these urban schools entered preschool with low skills. Using the Woodcock Diagnostic Reading Battery, researchers found that the children scored relatively low on letter-sound identification and oral vocabulary when they began preschool. The teachers in these six urban schools (preschool through grade 1) taught phonological and phonics skills through carefully developed, systematic, and targeted instruction. By the middle of first grade, students' average decoding skill scores were slightly higher than the national norms. However, students' oral vocabulary scores remained significantly lower than national norms. They were not catching up in this area.

In analyzing their data, the researchers drew the following conclusions:

"Neither reading children's books aloud to students nor mentioning vocabulary during these readings significantly predicted oral vocabulary during kindergarten or 1st grade." (too incidental)

"1st graders who received more anchored word instruction tended to score higher in oral vocabulary."

"In contrast, more instruction in letter-sound relationships [in first grade] was associated with lower vocabulary scores. In particular, the more a student experienced unanchored letter-sound instruction—in which the focus remained on the letter sounds rather than explicit references to word meanings or contextual links . . . —the lower the student's predicted oral vocabulary scores."

The authors admit that they did not design this study as an experiment, and therefore they cannot interpret the results causally. They are currently implementing an experimental study to test the hypothesis that anchored word instruction may have beneficial effects on oral language development.

Quote(s): “[T]he ability to decode—although crucial for reading success—is not sufficient. . . . Oral vocabulary knowledge also plays a pivotal role in reading comprehension.” (p. 13)

“Highlighting several important aspects of a word—meaning, spelling, and sound—provides students with a wealth of information that helps to anchor that word in their memories. This multifaceted approach to word learning, incorporating instruction in both decoding and vocabulary, may prove useful in students’ development of oral language.” (p. 18)