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The Magic of the Morning Message: Literacy Strategies Used in Preschool Classrooms

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Miss G. teaches in a state-funded preschool program with an assistant teacher in a suburban area in Michigan. Every morning, Monday through Thursday, just after the 16 children in her classroom eat breakfast, she calls them to the morning message board (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Preschool Teacher and Children Reading the Morning Messages Together (Photo reprinted with permission of HighScope Educational Research Foundation.)

Morning messages are a part of the classroom's regular daily schedule. Miss G's plan for morning message today includes reinforcing the numbers and corresponding counting dots for 1 ▪, 2 ▪ ▪, and 3 ▪ ▪ ▪. She also will introduce the words "pumpkin" and "dissect" and the letters and sounds that make up each word. Miss G understands the importance of purposefully incorporating literacy-promoting practices into her daily routine. As Miss G. and her assistant teacher begin to sing the morning greeting song, children join their classmates on the rug at the front of the classroom.

Miss G starts with messages 1 and 2, encouraging the children to count the dots and read the number, letters and pictures that describe the first two messages.

Miss G runs her finger along each part as they work along. The third

message is about a special activity that children will be doing today. She points out each dot and the number "3" and then says, "Message three. What do you think message three is about?" She points to the word "pumpkin." She invites the children to join her in reciting each letter, then they sound out "P-U-M-P-K-I-N."

Miss G. brings out a pumpkin from behind her.

Miss G. asks, "What is this called?"

Child A. offers, "Pumpkin!"

Miss G. replies, "A pumpkin! Yes, and here, I have a very big pumpkin. What can you do with a big pumpkin like this?"

Child B. responds, "Make a Jack-o-Lantern!"

Other children chime in, "I made a Jack-o-Lantern before!"

Child C. adds, "My mom makes pumpkin pie."

Child D. says, "My mom makes pumpkin pie AND pumpkin bread."

Miss G. continues, "Yes, so you can carve pumpkins for Halloween, and you can also eat pumpkin in many ways! Today, I cut a circle (teacher shows children the top of the pumpkin). Why do you think I cut a circle in the top?"

Child E. says, "So we can get inside."

The teacher removes the top and a collective "eeewww" can be heard from the children.

Miss G. asks, "We are going to put our scientist hats on and discover what is in this pumpkin. Do you know what that's called, when scientists cut something open to look inside? It's called dissection. So, we are going to DISSECT this pumpkin (emphasizing the new word, dissect). Let's look inside, what do you see?"

Child F. says, "Seeds and green stuff."

Miss G. asks, "Green stuff, where do you see that?"

Child F. corrects himself and says, "No, yellow stuff, yellow stuff!"

Miss G., "So we have yellow stuff and seeds. What else do you see?"

Child G., "The pumpkin guts."

Child H. says, "There is goo on the seeds."

Miss G., "Yes, there is goo on the seeds. That goo is called pulp. Those are good observations. Today we will use our spoons and scrapers and discover what else we find inside pumpkins at small group time. Here is another pumpkin for Miss. P's group."

The class then transitions to two small groups. The teachers (Miss G. and Miss P.) place informational picture books about pumpkins, that children can refer to, on their tables as they begin their exploration. Today, Miss G. incorporated several *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy - Prekindergarten* (heretofore, *Essentials Pre-K*; Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force; (MAISA-GELN, 2016) into the classroom's approximately 10-minute morning message and 20-minute small group time. They included intentional use of literacy artifacts, play with sounds inside words, letter names and sounds associated with letters, extended conversation and books available that related to the content being covered.

The *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) is a set of 10 research-supported practices to promote the quality of literacy instruction for children ages 3-5. It outlines ways educators can support the development of skills young children need to develop for later literacy competency. The practices are intended to be utilized every day in preschool classrooms as a guide for continuous improvements and better reading outcomes by third

grade. The *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) can be implemented regardless of curricular programs and should be integrated into the curriculum, as opposed to stand alone literacy lessons. Table 1 describes each of the 10 practices included in the *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016; pp. 2-4). Our study took place before the development of *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) therefore, allowing us to look retrospectively at naturally occurring literacy activities in Pre-K classrooms.

The *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) were developed by a group of Michigan school administrators and literacy experts in 2016 in response to rising concerns related to the low reading abilities among Michigan's children.

One longitudinal research study that followed 3,975 children concluded that if children are not proficient readers by the end of third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of high school. In the case of Black or Hispanic children, the likelihood of dropping out doubled. Living in poverty and in poor neighborhoods multiplied the possibility of children not attaining third-grade reading proficiency (Hernandez, 2012).

In Michigan, the percentage of 4th-grade students who performed at a proficient level was 32% in 2019, somewhat below the national average. This percentage has remained at 32% since 2017. The percentage of 4th grade students in Michigan who performed at or above a basic level was 64% in 2019. Again, that percentage for at-or-above a basic level has not changed since 2017

Table 1

Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy - Prekindergarten

Essential 1	Intentional use of literacy artifacts in dramatic play and throughout the classroom
Essential 2	Read aloud with reference to print
Essential 3	Interactive read aloud with a comprehension and vocabulary focus
Essential 4	Play with sounds inside words
Essential 5	Brief, clear, explicit instruction in letter names, the sound(s) associated with the letters, and how letters are shaped and formed
Essential 6	Interactions around writing
Essential 7	Extended conversation
Essential 8	Provision of abundant reading material in the classroom
Essential 9	Ongoing observation and assessment of children's language and literacy development that informs their education
Essential 10	Collaboration with families in promoting literacy

for Michigan 4th grade students (The Nation's Report Card, 2019a). In 2019, Black students' average score was 25 points lower and Hispanic students' average score was 17 points lower than that of White students. Students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), had an average score that was 26 points lower than for those students not eligible for the program (The Nation's Report Card, 2019b).

Reardon (2011) showed that besides White and non-White discrepancies, there are also discrepancies related to family income (i.e., discrepancies between children who live in families in the 90th percentile for income distribution and those who are in the 10th percentile). This gap has widened by 30-60 percent in a 25-year period. In response to such adverse statistics, many states have taken steps to help ensure students achieve grade-level reading. In the case of Miss G.'s class, she is working with children from low-income households in a state-funded preschool program and actively trying to improve instruction and learning outcomes for her students.

Purposes of the Current Study

The data collection for the current study took place as a part of a larger statewide preschool program evaluation in Michigan. The data allowed for an intensive case study of four state-funded four-year-old classrooms followed throughout the 2014-2015 school year. Classrooms were selected based on the level of program quality (medium to high) as measured by the Preschool Program Quality Assessment (Preschool PQA; HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2003), and children's overall gains in academic skills (low to high gains) from the previous school year. The purpose of this study, using data collected previously, was to explore the depth and patterns of literacy promoting activities that naturally occurred during the day in high-quality state-funded preschool classrooms for children at risk of school failure. We also wanted to examine how literacy-promoting activities identified in the *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) were implemented by teachers who were not trained specifically in early literacy and how those literacy promoting practices were distributed throughout the school day. The findings provide information about what literacy practices naturally occur,

how they may be implemented, and how teacher professional development could center around asset-based practices. The recommended practices in the *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) can guide incremental improvements, ultimately enriching preschool children's early literacy environment, and preparing children for later literacy demands.

The questions we addressed are as follows:

1. How do teachers in high-quality state-funded preschools in Michigan utilize research-supported literacy-promoting practices during different parts of the day?

2. Are there patterns (such as co-occurrences) in teachers' use of the various literacy promoting practices?

Method
Sample
Four lead teachers from four state-funded preschool classrooms in Michigan were video recorded monthly from October, 2014 through May, 2015. Three classrooms were located in an urban school district and used the HighScope curriculum model. One classroom was located in a rural school district, blended with Head Start, and used the Creative Curriculum model. In this state-funded program, the lead teachers are required to attain at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development with a specialization in preschool teaching. At the time the video recordings were made, the teachers in this sample had not received any type of specialized training in early literacy. The four lead teachers were all female, white, and had elementary education teaching certification with an early childhood endorsement.

Procedures
Our data collection design was naturalistic and purposeful, in that researchers did not intrude during classroom observations. Researchers focused on lead teachers when capturing interactions via video recordings. Researchers also maintained objectivity by transcribing the recordings verbatim prior to coding.

Each monthly video recording captured the entire morning of a typical school day. The video recordings started between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. and lasted until noon or 1:30 p.m. depending on the schedule of each classroom being recorded, making sure to capture each part of the daily routine. To examine time points throughout the school year, we chose three months to analyze: beginning of the year (October), middle of the year (February) and end of year (May). We produced video clips for three parts of each day recorded for ease and consistency of analysis: morning message, reading time, and small group time. This method resulted in thirty-four distinct video segments (over 750 minutes of video footage) and corresponding transcripts per teacher/classroom.

Transcripts, accompanied by video recordings, were deductively coded using Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis software (Dedoose, 2018). We used the descriptions and examples mentioned in the *Essentials Pre-K* document (MAISA-GELN, 2016) to identify and code recommended instructional practices observed across three times of the day--morning message (or greeting time), reading time and small group time. While the *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) consists of 10 recommended literacy-promoting practices, Essential 8 (reading materials in the classroom), Essential 9 (ongoing observation) and Essential 10 (family engagement) could not be accurately captured via video recording. Therefore, only *Essentials Pre-K* 1 – 7 (MAISA-GELN, 2016) were coded for the purpose of this study (see Table 1 for a description of *Essentials Pre-K* 1 – 7 [MAISA-GELN, 2016]).

Three graduate research assistants (GA) who were not involved in the collection of the video recordings, and who were unaware of the teacher/classroom characteristics, were trained by the second author on coding categories. Again, coding was conducted in Dedoose (Version 8.0.35, 2018). Each GA independently coded one transcript and crosschecked the results with one another and the second author until 100% agreement was reached. Twenty percent of the transcripts were coded independently by two GAs for interrater reliability, which resulted in more than 90% agreement. Later

on in the process, two more students were trained by the original GAs for supplemental coding. The latter set of codes were minimal in quantity, and all codes were checked and deemed in agreement with the original GA coders.

Data Analysis
To answer the first research question, "How do teachers in high-quality state-funded preschools in Michigan utilize research-supported literacy-promoting practices during different parts of the day?" we counted how many times each recommended practice occurred during each part of the day (i.e., frequencies). To answer the second research question, "Are there patterns (such as co-occurrences) in teachers' use of the various literacy promoting practices?" we conducted a Hierarchical Clustering Analysis. We first calculated the difference (i.e., distances) between teachers' frequency of use of each coded practice. We grouped practices starting from the smallest to the largest distances, then constructed a hierarchical cluster (dendrogram) of practices. The dendrogram was used to represent co-occurring practices (practices with smaller distance) grouped at a lower level.

Results
Research Question 1: How do teachers in high-quality state-funded preschools in Michigan utilize research-supported literacy-promoting practices during different parts of the day?
Table 2 shows practices used during three parts of the daily routine: morning message, reading time, and small group time. As shown, literacy promoting practices were observed in each part of the day; however, the frequency of use doubled during morning messages as compared to reading or small group time (160 morning message vs. 81 reading time and small group time). Essential 1, *Intentional use of literacy artifacts in dramatic play and throughout the classroom*, was used most often during morning messages. Essential 5, *Brief, clear, explicit instruction in letter names, the sound(s) associated with the letters, and how letters are shaped and formed* was used second most often. The frequency of use of these two codes accounted for approximately 73% of the literacy

activities that occurred during morning messages for this sample of classrooms.

Also of note are the rarity of occurrences of Essential 6, *Interactions around writing* and Essential 4, *Play with sounds inside words*. Teachers in this study spent very little time devoted to interacting around writing or sounds inside words, no matter the time of day. In fact, there were zero occurrences of writing observed during morning messages and zero occurrences of sounds inside words during small group time.

Research Question 2: Are there patterns (such as co-occurrences) in teachers' use of the various literacy promoting strategies?
To answer our second question, we used a Hierarchical Cluster Analysis. This method sorts various pieces of information into similar small groups. As shown in Figure 2, patterns were found in the teachers' use of literacy promoting strategies. The lower the connecting line is to the x-axis, the stronger the co-occurrence

was. Therefore, the strategies of Essential 5, *Brief, clear, explicit instruction in letter names, the sound(s) associated with letters, and how letters are shaped and formed* and Essential 7, *Extended conversation* have the strongest co-occurrence. During extended conversations and instruction around letter names, sounds and formation, teachers also tended to incorporate literacy artifacts. In general, when preschool teachers used one of these literacy strategies, they tended to use the other ones as well.

Discussion and Implications
After examining literacy opportunities in different parts of the day, this study found that the richest literacy instruction in the pre-k classroom happened during the morning message time. These results support the importance of the morning message being a part of a preschool classroom's daily routine to promote literacy development. During the morning message, more literacy promoting activities occurred than during any other part of the day examined. Teachers engaged with

Table 2

Number of Occurrences of Literacy Strategies Per Time of Day

| Literacy Strategy	Message Board	Reading Time	Small Group Time	Total
Essential 1: Intentional use of literacy artifacts in dramatic play and throughout the classroom	72	6	5	83
Essential 2: Read aloud with reference to print	13	15	1	29
Essential 3: Interactive read aloud with a comprehension and vocabulary focus	1	30	5	36
Essential 4: Play with sounds inside words	3	1	0	4
Essential 5: Brief, clear, explicit instruction in letter names, the sound(s) associated with the letters, and how letters are shaped and formed	44	4	20	68
Essential 6: Interactions around writing	0	1	10	11
Essential 7: Extended conversation	27	24	40	91
Total	**160**	**81**	**81**	**322**
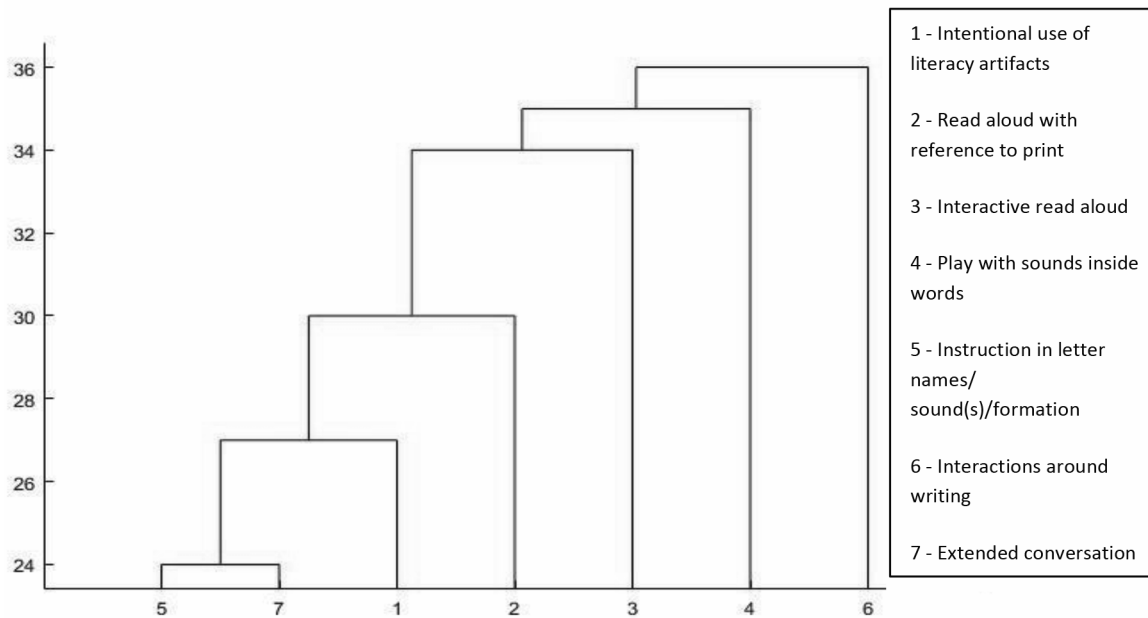
Figure 2. Hierarchical Cluster Analysis of Co-occurring Literacy Promoting Practices

children around intentional use of literacy artifacts and instructing children about letter names, sounds and formation of letters most often during morning messages. The purpose of the morning message is to enable children to transition from home to school, both physically and emotionally. Teachers intentionally design morning messages to follow a common routine and to engage children, setting the tone for the rest of the day.

A strategy for teachers to consider would be helping caregivers understand how important an on-time arrival to school is for their child's literacy learning and development. Morning messages may be viewed perhaps, as an unimportant transition time. However, in actuality more literacy activities, and thus exposure to literacy learning opportunities, may take place during this part of the Pre-K schedule than during other parts of the day. Teachers may also want to consider delaying the morning message until all children have arrived for the day. If breakfast is served, adjust the schedule to serve breakfast first and then move the morning message to the second activity of the day, thus ensuring more children can participate. Imagine how important the morning message may be for children's language and literacy development, if it is rich with literacy promoting activities.

The cluster analysis indicated that teachers tend to use certain literacy strategies in clusters or combinations, rather than in isolation. For example, when teachers used extended conversions with children, they also provided instruction in letter names, sounds and formation. By identifying these naturally occurring clusters, trainers could design professional development sessions that may reduce teachers' feelings of being overwhelmed, and better facilitate learning. In addition, frequently co-occurring strategies and activities could be coupled with those that are less used (e.g., writing).

An observational study (Wakabayashi et al., 2020) used a checklist adapted from the *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016) document and results mirror those of the current study. The checklist assessed teachers' level of implementation of each strategy as *meets or exceeds expectations*, *meets expectations with reservations*, or *does not meet expectations*. Morning message integrated a large number of high-quality literacy practices including literacy artifacts, extended conversations, and teaching letter names/sounds/formations. The lowest quality instructional practices were interactions around writing and read alouds with reference to print. The findings from this observational study, along with the current study present important information for consideration

as we work to better understand what elements of literacy instruction are being implemented and those practices that need improvement. This is particularly true in light of the guidance provided in the *Essentials Pre-K* document (MAISA-GELN, 2016) that states, each of the 10 practices should be carried out every day in preschool classrooms. Considering the findings from these two studies, examples of professional development topics might include instruction related to implementing playing with sounds inside of words (Essential 4) or how to incorporate interactions around writing (Essential 6) *Interactions around writing*.

This study presents information that morning messages may be more beneficial, regarding literacy promoting activities, than previously thought. These results can also inform program administrators as they design professional development for their teachers. A critical step for administrators is to ensure there is time in the professional development calendar for teachers to be trained in each of the 10 instructional practices included within the *Essentials Pre-K* document (MAISA-GELN, 2016).

Implications for Policymakers and Program Administrators

The National Governors Association (NGA, 2013) published a report outlining research-policy gaps to promote children's literacy outcomes stating that: 1) starting at kindergarten is too late; 2) reading proficiency requires a set of interrelated skills and knowledge that are taught and cultivated over time; and 3) parents, primary caregivers, and teachers have the most influence on children's language and literacy development. This study may inform state-level policymakers about early literacy practices prior to kindergarten. That is, how do preschool teachers in high-quality state-funded preschools, without specialized training in early literacy, promote early literacy, and where gaps in strategies may lie. In addition, as more and more focus is placed on early literacy at the preschool level, in response to the pressure of the third grade reading law, results from this study can serve as a baseline for later evaluation work related to preschool early literacy practices.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that the data was collected from a small sample of classrooms. Data was collected from only four classrooms across Michigan. While this is a limitation, it is also a benefit. That is, the small size of our sample allowed us to collect thorough and rich data, spanning three time points across a whole school year.

Our sample selection was the result of this study being a part of a larger statewide evaluation. The classrooms were from state-funded preschool programs, with teachers that had earned at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, but they had no specific training in early literacy. If we included other program types with less educated teachers, the results may have looked quite different. This is left for future research.

We also chose to use predetermined codes in our analysis. If an inductive coding method were used instead, we may have found additional strategies that are not part of the *Essentials Pre-K* (MAISA-GELN, 2016). However, our focus was on examining teachers' use of research-supported strategies only.

Using video recording to capture teacher behavior has many advantages, one of the biggest being you can review the content over and over again to ensure all the details of an interaction have been captured and checked for understanding; however, there are also limitations. The camera lens is only so wide, likely there were literacy promoting activities happening off camera in many of the classroom visits that were not captured. It is also important to consider that during various parts of the daily routine, it is harder to capture all the activities that are taking place in an early childhood classroom, in particular during child-initiated freeplay time both inside the classroom and outdoors. For this study, we chose not to include these parts of the daily routine, but very likely literacy activities were taking place during free-play times, as well.

Final Thoughts

Introduction of the third grade reading law has increased pressure on teachers and parents to ensure

children are ready for kindergarten and an unprecedented urgency to produce successful readers by third grade. Our findings surrounding the morning message imply that literacy promoting instruction can be readily implemented and integrated via playful interactions; instruction need not be an increase in worksheets and desk work or more intense literacy-focused instruction added to the preschool daily routine. Capacity building in research supported literacy promoting strategies may be, thus, a matter of focused professional development that fills the gap in current practices, that is, a need for more activities that emphasize playing with words and age-appropriate writing. It also must build on what teachers already intrinsically do, such as the morning message.

Overall, if Michiganders are seeking increases in the percentage of proficient readers in the state, Pre-K teachers need to be equipped with the "literacy armor" that ensures children are on a trajectory to be successful. The morning message may be a promising venue for that armor to shine. Morning message may be a "magical" time. This study suggests that the combination of its transitional purpose and literacy-rich content may be more beneficial for young children's literacy development than previously thought.

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