

Researchers find simple camera enhances preschool learning

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Three Penn State Harrisburg faculty researchers have proven an educational program built around a simple disposable camera enhances learning for both children and teachers in preschool settings.

The camera-based project is an outgrowth of a just-completed two-year research study undertaken by the faculty members when a local preschool reached out to the School of Behavioral Sciences and [Education](#) for help facilitating [language](#) acquisition in their English language learners.

The preschool with 106 children enrolled was facing an educational dilemma. How do teachers connect with students and increase learning in a preschool which includes American-born three- and four-year-olds along with first-generation immigrant children who speak 15 native languages?

“With our depth of faculty expertise, research, and education programs, we were well-prepared to assist the school,” says one of the researchers, Assistant Professor of Education Martha Strickland. “The three of us brought particular strengths to the project, greatly enhancing its success.”

In addition to Strickland, whose expertise is in [educational psychology](#) and immigrant education, the other collaborators were Assistant Professor of Reading Barbara Marinak, a literacy and English as a second language expert, and Assistant Professor of Education Jane Keat, who spent 20 years teaching and administrating in preschools. “We

addressed a complex picture with a complex team,” Strickland added when the trio presented their findings to faculty, staff, and students recently.

The project’s findings will also serve to strengthen early childhood education at Penn State Harrisburg, which offers majors in Elementary Education, and master’s programs in Teaching and Curriculum and Literacy Education as the instructors share their research findings with students and fellow faculty members.

Strickland says, “We all recognize the importance of quality early childhood care setting the pace for a child’s entire learning career.”

Entitled “More Than Words: Communicating Across Cultures in a Classroom Setting” the study was funded by Penn State Harrisburg’s Research Council as part of its emphasis on outreach to enhance the quality of education in the external community. The study had two purposes: to stimulate conversation between the preschoolers and their teachers and to examine the language development of immigrant preschoolers and their native-born peers.

The solution was a camera.

They began their research by asking two basic questions - What happens when immigrant children show and talk about photos they have taken in their homes and communities? Is learning English an obstacle to the conversational skills of preschool immigrant children? They then developed a project using cameras to answer those questions and the main source of data in the completed research came with the disposables. All children were given a camera which took 27 pictures, instructions on how to use it, and then assigned to take any shots “of their world outside school.”

“The simple camera extends a child’s ability to talk to teachers, enhances cultural awareness, and introduces new connections to the classroom,” says Strickland. The camera conversations were also found to strengthen the voice of the children as they conveyed messages regarding their stages of development, aiding teachers in their educational strategies.

When the photos were developed, the students themselves selected three of their favorites and then sat down with a teacher one-on-one and explained them. The conversations were transcribed and the process repeated twice more over a year and a half to quantify student progress and determine success. “All learning takes place through interaction,” Strickland notes. “The camera became the perfect tool to foster that interaction between student and teacher.”

After the two years and final transcript comparisons were completed, the study unexpectedly found that learning English was not an obstacle to the oral expression of immigrant preschool children when compared to their native-born classmates. In fact, once invited into conversation through photo elicitation, the stories of reportedly “quiet” immigrant children proved as long as the others. And there was no statistical difference in conversational skills when American-born and [immigrant children](#) were compared and, in fact, the immigrant language complexity became superior to the native-born children.

The findings of the study also provided a caution for the teachers in the preschool. “The teachers have to listen to the kids,” Keat points out. “We found the teachers had preconceived notions or myths about the children. The photo exercises changed that and they learned a great deal about the child’s world. The project turned out to be a powerful invitation for all the children to converse and they provided a place for the immigrant voice to be heard.”

Provided by Pennsylvania State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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