



Early Literacy in Everyday Settings: Creating an Opportunity to Learn for Low-income Young Children

Persistent concerns about income and social inequality have raised questions about how to address opportunity gaps in access to literacy learning for low-income young children. Recognizing the need to strengthen learning opportunities, this study examines how specially designed hybrid spaces within the 'everyday' place of a neighborhood laundromat might support children's literacy development. Twenty laundromats in high-poverty neighborhoods from a large urban city participated in the research: 10 in which small spaces were reconfigured to create literacy-related play settings; 10, remained "business as usual" control sites. Conducted over two phases, the 7-month study examined changes in children's literacy activities resulting from the physical design changes alone, and subsequent changes when combined with a trusted messenger, a public librarian, who assisted in their activities. Results indicated that these hybrid spaces dramatically increased children's time on literacy-related activities, especially when given adult assistance, averaging 47-minutes per child of sustained activity. These results suggest that intentionally-designed everyday spaces may play an important role in increasing young children's access to resources and opportunity to learn.

Advancing Knowledge to Bridge the Word Gap

These results suggest that intentionally designed everyday spaces may play an important role in increasing young children's access to resources and opportunities to learn. The modest design changes affected children's activity in the laundromat compared to activities in control sites. Children engaged in activities on their own, in pairs, and small groups using the resources in playful ways, creating an impromptu learning community. They spent an average of 23-min, involving over 900 instances of literacy-related play compared to none in the control laundromats. In these contexts, learners and their partners in play chose to be in these spaces, crafting their configurations of social and material resources. They pretended to read, initiated dramatic play through puppetry, and wrote using magnetic letters in a context without evaluation. When Librarians were present children and their play partners had greater increases in engagement in literacy activities. These findings suggest everyday spaces provide opportunities for learning and literacy. When an additional adult is engaged with the child, the child may increase their engagement and learning opportunities. Future research in other everyday learning spaces may increase the inequities in access to learning for children.

Meet the First Author: Susan B. Neuman, Steinhardt School, New York University



What were your primary goals for this research?

Susan: Literacy learning is not bound in time and space. Every context can be a space for learning language and developing understandings of the purposes of print. Context plays an important role in children's developing word knowledge, and these everyday activities can stimulate language growth.

How does this study inform your next research?

Susan: In our next research, we are exploring the potential of community-based volunteers to help build capacity and culturally responsive language and literacy activities in the laundromats. Ultimately, our success in promoting everyday literacy learning lies in working with community members and local trade organizations to support a 360 degree context for our young language learners.

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