

Child-centred versus Teacher-directed Teaching Practices: Associations with the Development of Academic Skills in the First Grade at School

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This study explored the extent to which child-centred versus teacher-directed teaching practices would predict the development of children's reading and maths skills in the first year of elementary school. Evidence was found that a high level of child-centred teaching practices predict improved children's reading and maths skills' development during the first school year. Child-centred teaching practices were equally beneficial for academic skills' development of children with varying initial skill levels.

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- Early childhood education (ECE) classroom practices impact child outcomes such as children's social and academic skills.
- In child-centred teaching, children are viewed as active constructors of knowledge and the teachers' role is mainly to facilitate their learning. The teacher-directed approach holds that basic academic skills are acquired through direct instruction and practice. These approaches differ in terms of the degree by which the teacher facilitates learning, that is, by encouraging children's active exploration and construction of their own knowledge.

Defining child-centred teaching

Partnership: teachers assist and facilitate children's learning by providing them with guidance, opportunities, and encouragement to direct their own exploration of objects and academic topics.

Supportive: the teacher supports children's learning efforts and social skills.

Sensitive: teaching practices are sensitive to children's needs and interests.

Motivational: by taking into account children's needs and interests and promoting children's autonomy in the classroom, the teacher motivates children to learn, thereby resulting in improved learning outcomes.



The study

The benefits of different teaching practices can vary depending on the skill domain and age of the children. In this study, we were interested in how child-centred versus teacher-directed teaching practices contribute to the development of reading and maths skills during the first school year in a Finnish school context for children aged seven years old.

- *Child-centred teaching* emphasises the child's active role as a learner and is sensitive to children's needs and interests.
- *Teacher-directed teaching* emphasises the provision of information and the employment of structured group lessons, teaching discrete skills in small steps, and giving praise to children when predetermined goals are reached.

Participants were 1132 Finnish first-grade children from 93 classrooms (and their teachers). A subsample of 29 teachers participated in classroom observations on a voluntary basis. The Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure (ECCOM) was employed to observe the extent to which child-centred and teacher-directed approaches to instruction, management, and social climate were present in the classrooms.



Findings

- Child-centred teaching practices were associated with better reading and maths skills in Grade 1 (spring).
- Teacher-directed teaching practices were negatively associated with reading skills in Grade 1 (spring).
- Child-centred teaching practices seems to promote better skills in reading and maths.

Child-centred teaching practices

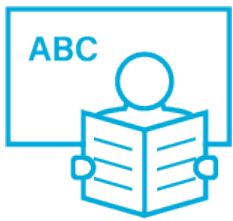
- Child-centred teaching practices predicted better reading and maths skills development through the first grade.
- Child-centred teaching practices benefited the reading and maths skills of children with different initial skill levels in reading and maths.
- The higher the initial skill levels the children had and the smaller the class sizes were, the more child-centred teaching practices were used.

Teacher-directed teaching practices

- Teacher-directed teaching practices predicted poorer reading skills development among those children who initially had average or high skill levels.
- The larger the class size, the more teacher-directed teaching practices the teacher used.
- There was no effect of teacher-directed teaching practices on maths skills.

Summary

- Children's higher initial reading skills were associated with higher levels of child-centred teaching practices in their classroom.
- A high level of child-centred teaching practices contributed positively to children's reading and maths skills development, while the effect did not depend on children's initial skills.
- Teacher-directed teaching practices had no effect on maths skills development.
- However, an emphasis on teacher-directed practices was negatively associated with reading skills development among children who had average or high initial reading skills.



Implications

Child-centred teaching practices in first-grade student classrooms resulted in better learning development of both reading and maths skills. Thus, the use of child-centred teaching practices may be recommended especially when children have initially average or high skill levels. A teacher who emphasises child-centred practices in the classroom is a supporter and sensitive facilitator of children's academic skills development and views children as active contributors to their own learning. Teachers using child-centred teaching practices provide a wide array of literacy experiences and instructional choices (including phonic-based and meaning-based tasks) to facilitate each child's individual literacy learning based on the child's previous knowledge and skills. In child-centred classrooms, children have more autonomy over their learning and they can choose activities and texts

according to their personal interests, which will keep their motivation for reading practices high while further fostering their reading skills.