

Fostering Teacher-Student-Parent Relationships Through Hands-On Learning: A No-Screen Approach to Early Literacy

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The Paris Conference on Education 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This multi-case study explores the impacts of a screen-free approach to direct literacy instruction that utilizes the Science of Reading framework and is supplemented by hands-on, screen-free educational games at home. While digital literacy tools increasingly proliferate in early childhood classrooms, early literacy skills benefit deeply from distraction-free, personal student-teacher connections. The study is grounded in relational pedagogy, which is vital for young students during this rapid phase of brain development. These meaningful connections foster their well-being, care, and empathy. Using a mixed-methods design in an urban school district in the northeastern United States, this study analyzed summative student literacy assessments alongside descriptive findings from semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents. Local and national data from neighboring districts were used for comparison. Following the thematic analysis, the results demonstrated a positive correlation between screen-free instruction and reading achievement. Qualitative themes also revealed strong home-school partnerships, improved communication, and deeper mutual connectedness of community members. Ultimately, these findings suggest that a low-tech and high-touch approach better equips students to maintain or exceed grade-level reading expectations throughout elementary school and beyond.

Keywords: early literacy, screen-free direct instruction, relational pedagogy, home-school partnerships

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Introduction: Background and Purpose

Parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators serve as the primary facilitators of child development. When these stakeholders adopt a collaborative, team-based approach to early literacy—creating interactive, engaging, and hands-on learning environments—they profoundly shape a child’s future academic success. By employing a multisensory approach at school, paired with screen-free reinforcement at home, adults can cultivate highly meaningful, distraction-free learning experiences. Specifically, by focusing on the Science of Reading framework and explicitly instructing the six pillars of literacy—oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—through game-based and tactile activities, educators and families can maximize student engagement. Furthermore, replacing screen-based instruction with dedicated, one-on-one adult attention not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also fosters a lifelong love of reading. As screens increasingly permeate both homes and classrooms, understanding their impact on early childhood development is critical. Therefore, this study aimed to expand upon this vital body of research by examining the tangible benefits of screen-free, relational literacy instruction.

Framework

The theoretical framework grounding this study is primarily informed by relational pedagogy (Noddings, 2013) and Vygotsky’s (1978) social development theory. Relational pedagogy highlights the critical role of supportive, collaborative relationships between students, teachers, and families (Noddings, 2013). By fostering a unified, team-based approach to early literacy, this framework supports student development through structured social interactions, including collaborative peer learning, individualized student-teacher engagement, and parent-led game-based learning activities at home.

Closely aligned with the relational foundation, Vygotsky’s (1978) social development theory asserts that cognitive growth and language acquisition are inherently social processes. Within this model, teachers and family members serve as the “more knowledgeable other” (MKO) who provide critical instructional scaffolding within the child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD). Rather than being isolated with digital screens, students in this study engaged in dialogue and tactile learning with attentive adults, directly supporting Vygotsky’s premise that early literacy and language skills work collaboratively together through meaningful human interactions.

Methods & Data Source

Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods, multi-case study design. Participation was entirely voluntary for all participating families and educators. This study took place in an urban school in the northeastern United States that utilizes a strictly screen-free approach to early literacy instruction.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in three distinct phases to allow for the triangulation of quantitative student metrics, qualitative perspectives, and comparative local and national data.

Quantitative Student Assessment Data

With written parental consent, classroom teachers provided summative pre- and post-assessment student literacy data for the focus students ($N = 2$). This data consisted of criterion-referenced benchmark assessments from their district's adopted Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) literacy curriculum. These benchmarks served as the primary individual intervention trackers to measure discrete skill acquisition and mastery over the course of the screen-free instructional period.

Qualitative Interviews

To capture the lived experiences and insights of key stakeholders, semi-structured interviews consisting of 10 open-ended questions were conducted with participating teachers and family members. These interviews inquired about observed student literacy progress, current instructional and home methodologies, the strength of home-to-school partnerships, and participant reflections on the quantitative student assessment data.

Comparative Institutional, State, and National Data

To establish a rigorous comparative baseline, institutional-level data were obtained from local and national sources. First, the target school provided school-wide, end-of-year norm-referenced proficiency rate data utilizing the NWEA MAP (Measuring Academic Progress) growth assessment. This nationally normed metric established the broader academic achievement baseline of the target school.

End-of-year NWEA MAP proficiency data was also obtained from a neighboring school located in close geographic proximity. This neighboring school served as an ideal comparison group, as it shared nearly identical demographics regarding student-teacher ratios, proportions of students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, while both schools utilized the same HMH literacy curriculum, the comparison school integrated digital screens into its early literacy instruction, whereas the target school utilized a screen-free approach.

To contextualize student performances within state-level expectations, the state learning assessment, NJSLA, was referenced as a norm-based metric. Statewide averages for third-grade English Language Arts (ELA) typically serve as the primary benchmark for early elementary literacy. Since this formal testing does not begin until the third grade, NWEA MAP Linking Study was referenced to bridge the gap and be a predictive metric. Nationally, reports from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) were used to evaluate state-level standards, allowing for a comprehensive comparison of individual student achievements against local, state, and national performance metrics.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interviews were transcribed and systematically analyzed using MAXQDA software to identify, code, and categorize emerging themes. Quantitative pre-and post-assessment data scores were then analyzed and compared against the student data in their own school, in a neighboring school, and national averages to evaluate the overall efficacy of the screen-free literacy instructional approach.

Methodological Notes on Data Metrics

While this study utilized multiple assessment types that measure achievement through different statistical lenses, they are integrated within a structured, multi-layered framework. Specifically, national and state norm-referenced data (NAEP and NJSLA) establish the macro-level educational landscape, while school-wide NWEA MAP Growth percentiles provide a meso-level norm-referenced comparative baseline. Since formal state testing (NJSLA) does not begin until third grade, NWEA's NJ Linking Study is referenced to statistically project early childhood MAP performance towards future state-level proficiency rates (NWEA, 2025). In contrast, the HMH curriculum benchmarks serve as a micro-level, criterion-referenced trackers designed to isolate and measure the individual acquisition of target skills under the screen-free, high-touch instruction. Triangulating these distinct macro, meso, and micro metrics allows the study to evaluate localized student mastery while contextualizing individual growth within state and national achievement standards.

Participants & Setting

School Setting

The study was conducted within a public school district in the northeastern United States, purposely selected due to its implementation of a screen-free, hands-on approach to direct literacy instruction aligned with the Science of Reading framework. The focal school serves students from pre-kindergarten to fourth grade, with a total enrollment of approximately 429 students. The school maintains a 10:1 student-teacher ratio. Demographically, 18% of the student population are classified as students with disabilities, 12% are multilingual learners, and 8% of students are receiving financial assistance during the academic year of the study.

Participant Selection

Through convenience sampling, two families and two kindergarten teachers from the same school community volunteered to participate. Because the families' children were assigned to different homerooms, the participant group consisted of two distinct parent-teacher-student triads.

- Case 1 (Student A): A Caucasian female kindergarten student who is currently classified as a multilingual learner. The case includes Student A's parents (2) and homeroom teacher (1).
- Case 2 (Student B): A Caucasian female kindergarten student who received academic support under her Individualized Educational Program (IEP). The case includes Student B's parents (2) and homeroom teacher (1).

Results

Quantitative Student Literacy Progress

At the beginning of the school year, pre-assessment data revealed that the two focus students entered kindergarten with vastly different levels of English language proficiency and foundational literacy skills. Over the course of the academic year, both students received direct screen-free literacy instruction. Summative pre- and post-assessments evaluated student development across key early literacy domains, including oral language, phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

To measure progress, teachers utilized standardized rubric criteria based on benchmark assessments from their literacy curriculum to calculate proficiency rates. Both students demonstrated substantial, clinically significant academic growth from the beginning of the year (BOY) to the end of the year (EOY).

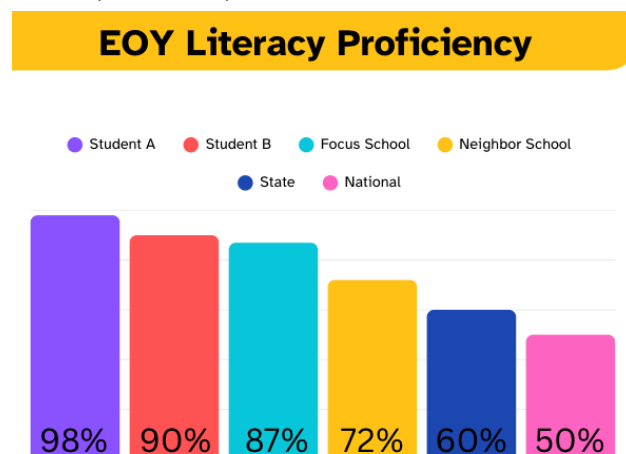
- Student A (Multilingual Learner): Demonstrated a 39% increase, improving from a pre-assessment proficiency rate to a post-assessment proficiency rate of 98%
- Student B (IEP Support): Demonstrated a 50% increase, improving from a pre-assessment proficiency rate to a post-assessment proficiency rate of 90%

Comparative Analysis

To evaluate the efficiency of the screen-free instructional mode, the focus students' end-of-year (EOY) proficiency rates—derived from their curriculum-based benchmarks—were compared against school-wide, local, state, and national data points.

Figure 1

End-of-Year Literacy Proficiency Rates of Student A, Student B, the Focus School, Neighbor School, the State, and the Nation



As illustrated in figure 1, both individual case study students exceeded the overall EOY literacy proficiency rate of their own school, as well as the neighboring school's EOY proficiency rate by a margin of 15%. Furthermore, when analyzing institutional performances independent of pedagogical modalities, both localized schools outperformed broader state and national standards. (NCES, 2025 & NWEA, 2025).

Specifically, the screen-free focus school (87%) and the screen-integrated neighboring school (72%) both exceeded the state proficiency average of 60% and national norm-referenced median baseline of 50%. This tiered comparison indicates that while both local schools are high-performing, the focus school's screen-free approach with their pedagogical model, achieved the highest overall tier of academic success, which is mirrored in individual mastery of the two focus students.

Interviews

To capture the lived experiences of the participants, semi-structured interviews were analyzed. This process yielded three primary, interconnected themes: stronger school-home partnerships,

enhanced multi-directional communication, and a deepened sense of community connectedness. These themes collectively showcase relational pedagogy in practice.

Theme 1: Stronger School-Home Partnerships

The first prominent theme was a shared appreciation among all adult participants for the collaborative partnership built to support the students. Teachers expressed gratitude for families actively reinforcing classroom content at home using tactile, game-based resources. Parents, in turn, appreciated that these home-learning materials were engaging rather than burdensome. As one parent noted, the activities felt “fun” and “interactive” and did not feel “like a chore” (Parent B, interview, 2026). Since these activities were easy to implement, parents reported utilizing them frequently, including on the weekends. This consistent, playful reinforcement at home allowed students to solidify literacy concepts “faster” (Teacher A, interview, 2026) enabling educators to build steadily upon a stronger foundation in the classroom. This collaborative approach enriched not only teacher-student dynamics, but also parent-child relationships and the engaging nature of the games even prompted siblings to join in on the activities. Ultimately, by recognizing and valuing each other’s roles within this educational team approach, participants supported substantial student growth that outpaced local peers utilizing the same curriculum under traditional, screen-integrated instructional methods.

Theme 2: Enhanced Communication

The second emerging theme centered on improved communication across all stakeholder groups—including school-home, teacher-student, and child-parent interactions by establishing transparency regarding curriculum expectations. Specifically, teachers knew what was required within the classrooms and families knew how to support these goals at home—participation cultivated a highly supportive network. This open communication loop reinforced the foundational idea that raising literate children is a shared relational responsibility, with both families and teachers reporting stronger, more cohesive communicative ties.

Theme 3: Connectedness

The final theme highlighted a profound sense of connectedness and shared community among all participants. This relational closeness was particularly meaningful for one participating multilingual family who had recently immigrated to the United States. They reported that the school’s robust school-home partnerships, especially with frequently in person events, transparent communication, and active family participation, allowed them to feel fully immersed in both the school community and their new neighborhood far more rapidly than they had anticipated. The family even noted that they had “only met the principal one time” at their old school, whereas the current school’s principal knew them “on a first-name basis” (Parent A, interview, 2026). This deep level of connectedness extended directly to the classroom teachers, who reported knowing their students thoroughly both academically and socially-emotionally. Since the screen-free instruction prioritized dedicated one-on-one time and interactive classroom community building, educators felt highly attuned to their students’ “unique personalities” and “different interests” (Teacher B, interview, 2026). This relational bond frequently transcended the classroom walls, with teachers reporting their attendance at weekend extra-curricular activities of their students, such as soccer games and recitals. Ultimately, these findings reveal how prioritizing human-centered, screen-free relationships creates a supportive ecosystem that deeply connects students, families, and educators.

Discussions & Conclusions

The primary objective of this multi-case study was to examine the impact of a screen-free approach to direct literacy instruction, paired with hands-on, game-based home supplements. While the target school, surrounding district, and much of the state utilize a literacy curriculum rooted in the Science of Reading Framework, this study highlights the profound difference that instructional delivery methods can make. Specifically, it contrasts isolating digital screen-based practices with high-touch, relationship-centered human instruction.

The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study offer a compelling alternative to current educational trends. Nationally, the consequences of over-relying on digital interfaces for early learning have become starkly apparent. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as “America’s Report Card” notes that the time between 2020 and 2022 saw the largest average score decline in reading since 1990 (NCES, 2025). This historic drop occurred during a period of unprecedented reliance on screen-based instruction and remote learning. While technology will undoubtedly remain integrated into modern society, these national trends suggest that screens cannot replace the foundational human interactions required for early childhood cognitive development.

The rapid literacy progress demonstrated by the two focus students in this study directly supports this assertion. Furthermore, the screen-free focus school’s overall proficiency rate on a norm-referenced assessment was 87%, which substantially outperformed the demographically matched, screen-integrated neighboring school at 72% proficiency rate. Crucially, both local institutions outperformed broader benchmarks, including the state average (NJSLA) proficiency rate of approximately 60% and the national norm-referenced median baseline of 50% (NCES, 2025). The tired comparison underscores that while both local schools perform above average, the target school’s screen-free, high-touch pedagogical model yields an exceptional, top-tier results that far exceed both state and national norms.

These results demonstrate that when young children are provided with distraction-free, face-to-face direct instruction, they do not merely stay on grade level, but they thrive. Through the lens of relational pedagogy (Noddings, 2013) and Vygotskian social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978), these findings make sense theoretically. Humans are fundamentally social beings and language acquisition, and early literacy are not solitary. By replacing screen-time in the classroom and at home with face-to-face activities and supplemental games the participants in the study cultivated a nurturing community where students and other participants felt safe, valued, and motivated.

Implications and Significance

While extensive research has focused on the cognitive aspects of the Science of Reading approach in early literacy, this study is highly significant because it centers on how early literacy skills are developmentally established. True early literacy acquisition does not happen in isolation on a digital device, but rather it relies on physical books, pencil-and-paper writing, oral communication, and close human connection to build sustaining reading routines, habits, and skills over time.

Additionally, by documenting how two high-needs cases—a multilingual learner and a student with an IEP, who achieved massive literacy gains by the end of the school year, this study serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the post-pandemic push for classroom digitization. It

proved that a return to screen-free and high-touch pedagogy is not a step backwards, but rather a vital path forward for fostering both academic excellence and deep community connectedness.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the efficacy of screen-free early literacy instruction, several limitations must be acknowledged:

Small Sample Size and Single-Site

The primary limitation is the small sample size ($N = 2$ students, 2 sets of parents, and 2 teachers) situated within a single school. Therefore, the findings cannot be widely generalized to larger, more diverse student populations. Replicating this study across multiple schools or even different school districts would be necessary to determine if these positive outcomes are universally replicable.

Socioeconomic and Geographic Factors

The geographic and demographic context of the participating school community may limit the transferability of the results. The target school is located within a few miles of a major metropolitan area, where approximately 53% of parents hold a college degree (US Census Bureau, 2024) and median household income is \$123,715 as of 2023 (US Census Bureau). These factors suggest a high level of systemic support and resources at home, which may have facilitated the successful and consistent implementation of the at-home game supplements.

District Baseline and Selection Bias

The selected school district is characterized by high historical performance, consistently scoring well on state and local surveys of teacher and parent satisfaction as well as maintaining student proficiency rates above the national average. Since the district already benefits from high baseline academic achievement and strong community engagement, it is difficult to isolate the screen-free intervention as the sole driver of the students' success, and the local and national data posted were not from the current academic year but from the previous school year.

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