

EDUCATION WEEK

February 25, 2009

Study: PBS Cartoon Show Boosts Early- Reading Skills

“The Effects of WordWorld viewing on Pre-School Children’s Acquisition of Pre-Literacy Skills and Emergent Literacy”

Watching “WordWorld”, a publictelevision show in which letter-shaped cartoon characters morph into words, significantly increases preschoolers’ emerging literacy skills, says a new federally financed evaluation of the program.

The findings, which were shared by researchers this month, come from an ongoing study of 798 children attending prekindergarten classes in five states.

According to Michael Cohen, one of the study’s principal investigators, the children were randomly assigned to either an experimental group, where they watched the Public Broadcasting series for 15 minutes a day, or to their regular preschool classes.

Six weeks later, the study found, the gains the program viewers had made in expanding their oral vocabulary skills and in reading and recognizing words significantly outstripped those of their counterparts in regular classes.

The reading and word-recognitions improvements were greatest, the researchers said, among children who were older, lived in rural areas, and started out with higher vocabulary scores. In the area of phonological awareness, or sensitivity to words’ sound structures, the biggest improvements came among children with low initial test scores and those of less educated parents.

“The story with these results,” said Mr. Cohen, who is the president of the Michael Cohen group, a New York City-based research organization, “ is that the most basic pre-literacy skills showed up as a significant gains for the children who needed them the most.”

