

Language and Literacy in Preschool Children

Chair: Mariela Paez

Presenters: Christopher J. Lonigan, Adela W. Miccio, Dorothy S. Strickland

Discussant: Blanca Enriquez

Lonigan: These results are from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the nation's report card in reading. The National Early Literacy Panel conducted a meta-analysis of published studies to identify what variables measured in pre-K or before were predictive of conventional literacy. Three hundred studies were included, each involving a predictive relation between a skill measured when children were in preschool or in kindergarten and a conventional literacy outcome. A meta-analysis was completed and all of the effect sizes of these studies were coded and summarized. Correlations ranged from 1.0 to -1.0 reflecting the strength of association.

The National Literacy Panel examined different measured aspects of oral language in relationship to different types of reading outcomes, either decoding or comprehension. The conclusion from these analyses is that the strength of the relationship depends both on what piece of oral language and what reading outcome is measured.

Generally, oral language skill is a better predictor of reading comprehension than it is of decoding. Vocabulary is among the weakest of the predictors of later reading. However, more complex aspects of oral language, such as grammar or syntax, are more strongly predictive of both decoding and reading comprehension.

In summary, there are many early and at least moderate predictors of later reading and writing skills. This comes from a large number of studies with a large number of children involved. These results are likely to be stable, reliable, and replicable. How one thinks about oral language from an early childhood perspective needs to be broadened.

Miccio: This study looked at young bilingual Latino children from socioeconomic disadvantaged homes in urban centers and predictors for early literacy learning. The study is part of a larger longitudinal study of bilingual preschoolers that covers different language and literacy variables. The key elements are relationships among maternal language use, spoken phonological development, receptive and expressive vocal language development, and phonological awareness.

An emergent view of phonological awareness is explored based on the language a child hears at home. From the language heard at home, the child develops awareness of sounds in spoken words. Vocabulary growth drives the development of word recognition from whole to parts. Phonological knowledge is called upon when beginning to read and spell.

Study participants were 83 bilingual preschoolers in urban Head Start English-Immersion centers in central Pennsylvania. All of the children were of Puerto Rican descent, financially eligible to attend Head Start for 2 years, and were developing normally. They were divided into two groups: Home English/Spanish Communication (HEC) and School English

Communication (SEC). The children were followed through first grade and instruction was provided in English. Data were gathered twice yearly at 6 month intervals through parent interviews, standardized tests, and language sampling.

Bilingual status matters for phonological development for the SEC group in Spanish, but not in English. There were no differences between HEC and SEC either at their starting point or at 70 months of age. It was also found that the Percent of Consonants Correct (PCC) measure may not be reliable for distinguishing among bilingual children at earliest ages (less than 55 months). In English, gender had no effect on phonological development. In Spanish, gender did not affect rate, however females have significantly higher scores both at the start and at 70 months.

The maternal language change did not affect the rate of change of phonological development in children. However it has a significant effect on phonological development in Spanish if there is a major decrease in the amount of Spanish in the home. Speaking more Spanish in the home does not detract from English development.

Phonological awareness is the ability to reflect upon and manipulate the sounds of a language. Decoding requires phonological awareness and understanding of the alphabetic principle. Without phonological awareness, one cannot grasp the alphabetic principle needed to be able to decode and understand the alphabet. In both Spanish and English growth of PCC performance does not predict phonological awareness at kindergarten. Predictors are based on skill growth, not a particular score at a particular time.

In terms of independent phonological development, phonetic abilities increased rapidly in both languages, particularly in segmental acquisition. The first time that they were tested children used more sound in their stronger languages, and both groups use simpler syllable structures than reported for monolingual speakers of either Spanish or English. By the third time that they were tested, phonetic inventories of both groups were similar to those used by monolingual speakers of either language.

In relational phonological development, both groups had difficulties with complex syllable structure and word groups, however error patterns differed between groups. On the second test, there was a decrease in Spanish accuracy for the HEC group, and by the third test error patterns reflected the mixing of the two languages. By the fourth test both groups continued to have difficulty with multisyllabic words although they corrected for them in different ways. HEC children tended to omit unstressed syllables in both languages. However, SEC children tended to maintain syllable number but simplify syllables by omitting onsets or codas. On the fifth and sixth test, there was Spanish influenced English, and English influenced Spanish, and by the seventh test the majority of problems had been extinguished.

There is limited research on bilingual children's vocabulary and phonological awareness development. Preschool vocabulary scores have been found to predict later phonological awareness skill, however in the past studies have not considered the growth of the skill as being predictive. Growth of vocabulary in Head Start predicts phonological awareness in kindergarten for both groups, and phonological awareness for the SEC group at the end of

first grade. Vocabulary growth in kindergarten and first grade predicts phonological awareness at the end of first grade for both groups.

In Head Start children could benefit from more direct teaching about literacy, strengthening phonological abilities, vocabulary enrichment in naturalistic context, and support for Spanish in the home. Further research questions include examining why some children are able to catch up and others are not and using that information to identify best interventions.

Strickland: Literacy development starts early in life and is highly correlated with school achievement. In early childhood research, there is a long history of studying children's language development, but not such a long history in terms of literacy. A second key point is that all of the domains of a child's development—physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language, and literacy—are interrelated and interdependent. There is an abundance of evidence that the more limited a child's experiences with language and literacy, the more likely he or she will have difficulty learning to read. It has tremendous implications for achievement throughout school. Key early literacy predictors of reading and school success include: oral language (listening and vocabulary development), alphabetic code (phonological/phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge), and print knowledge (environmental print and print concepts).

Highly capable teachers are required to implement today's more challenging early literacy curriculum. Teacher knowledge, respect and support for the diversity of children's families, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds is an important factor in early literacy development. Key issues in early literacy and preschool are standards, curriculum, accountability and assessment, teacher education and professional development, and home-school connections.

Well conceived of and implemented standards can establish clarity and shared understandings of curriculum content raising expectations for achievement. When properly done and linked to assessment, they can promote greater accountability in a positive way. However, ill conceived and poorly implemented standards can place the burden for learning directly on children, rather than on the opportunities and supports required to foster their achievement.

Evidence-based practice findings should be the basis of decisions for curriculum. There needs to be support for key language and literacy components. Additionally, attention should be paid to prevention and intervention, special needs, cultural and linguistic differences, and class size. These all have a relationship to curriculum.

Accountability and assessment can measure development and learning and help guide teacher and program decision-making. They also identify children who might benefit from special services. If a systemic package of assessment is going to be efficient and doable, it needs to be something that teachers have the time to do and inclination to use. Certainly screening measures and diagnostic measures as well as some kind of progress monitoring should be included.

Child assessment seems to be the major focus and indeed is a major issue in Head Start for developing curriculum. Conducting assessments with young children when there may be a

short amount of time and they have short attention spans is always a challenge. Additionally, assessments should always be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.

Meaningful and ongoing professional development is an area that needs attention in early childhood education. What happens in the classroom largely depends on the quality of the teacher. All of the standards and assessments in the world can be conducted, but it is what is happening between and among the adults and the children in the classroom that is important.

Much is known about how a home literacy environment influences children's achievement in school. When there are books in the home, children are read to, talked to, taken places, and television is monitored, children will have strong language backgrounds, and, usually, do well in school. Studies of parent involvement and family literacy programs have shown mixed results.

Early literacy standards should be established that articulate with K-12 programs and reflect consistency and continuity with overall program goals. Early literacy assessment programs should use multiple methods and use the information to improve both teaching and the total preschool program.

Additionally all children should have access to early childhood programs with strong literacy components that include clear adaptations for children with special needs. Early literacy curricula and teaching practices should be evidence based, integrated with all domains of learning and understandable to staff members.

Finally, standards for early childhood professionals should require staff to meet early literacy instructional standards. Parent involvement programs should have a strong early literacy component that guides parents and care givers in providing early literacy experiences at home. Support for English language learners should be specified and provided in both the home language and English where feasible.

Enriquez: The process of learning to read and write successfully begins long before first grade. Early language and literacy development is a complex process with long lasting results. This process is influenced by but not limited by the classroom environment including the contents of classrooms, how classrooms are arranged, and who is in the classroom.

Factors affecting language and literacy development also include policies and practices regarding standards and curriculum, accountability and assessment, teacher education and professional development, and the home-school connection and its effect on parental involvement. There is a focus on the teacher, which is important, but it is also important to look at the administration and decision making in the program.

Another influence on this area is the linguistic and cultural diversity of the students. Currently there is an increase of English language learners in classrooms, which impacts teaching. Diversity must be recognized as well as the critical value the home language can have on the development of a second language. In terms of early language and literacy skills development, the results of the National Early Literacy Panel are directing researchers to reconsider the

critical role that six areas have on literacy development. There were strong correlations in the literacy area with alphabet knowledge, writing the name, writing in general, phonological awareness, rapid naming of letters and digits, rapid naming of objects and colors, and phonological short-term memory. Additionally, there must be a focus on oral language development.

Literacy is not exclusive to vocabulary development. In oral language development, language must be expanded to include grammar, definitional vocabulary, and listening comprehension. While listening comprehension has always been looked at with regard to English language learners, it is important to all children. This knowledge places practitioners and researchers in a position to be responsive to well-defined and research-based expectations. It is critical that early language educators realize that early literacy development and the process of reading and writing are interrelated, but not the same.

Literacy and language development are critical yet there must be an awareness that young children, ages 0 to 5, are in developmental stages and children should not be placed in situations where they are receiving a watered-down first grade curriculum. Academic skills are important but so is physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development. Given the diversity of young children in Head Start programs, it is important to be attuned and responsive to linguistic and cultural differences.

Comment: In the area of professional development our Head Start program in Birmingham incorporates training throughout the year. We begin with two preservice teaching sessions based on current research and trends. The training is provided through partnerships with colleges and universities around Birmingham. There are professional days incorporated into the program year so that time every month is devoted to professional development training. Also, education specialists help teachers take what they have learned and put it into practice.

Enriquez: Follow-up is important as is training in small groups. Each group should have a limit of 25 teachers, if possible. When there are 100 teachers, all one can do is talk and engagement is more difficult.

Comment: There could also be a mentor working with the teacher in the classroom; working to assist him or her in putting research into practice.

Comment: Good teachers are being lost because they do not get support, particularly in the first several years.

Comment: One of the main concerns in the early childhood community was the requirement of Bachelor degrees for teachers. However, there is a need to lift this entire field in a concerted, organized way.

Enriquez: As teachers' knowledge level and credentials increase, Head Start needs to be prepared to pay them better. What happens if Head Start pays for teachers to be sent to school for Bachelor's degrees and then they leave for the public schools? That is one of the realities

that we have to be prepared for when continuously developing more teachers. Without funding to pay these teachers, they will be lost.

Comment: Early language acquisition is almost nonexistent as a field of knowledge in the early childhood education field and a different mindset needs to be developed.

Comment: There is no additional money for raises or to help teachers go back to school. Teachers pay for their own education and then they leave. There are no people who have stayed for 20 years because they cycle out of the system. Young children deserve the best and research supports that the best is a Bachelor degree.

Comment: In Louisiana there is an open environment where teachers can go into other teacher's rooms. When teachers observe each other in the classroom, they can provide feedback and become each other's resources. This is especially effective when some teachers have attended workshops and have been certified in different areas in which others are not.

Lonigan: One of the challenges that researchers and practitioners face, as well as those involved in professional development is being able to determine when one is getting scientifically based practice information. People need to help practitioners identify what is scientifically based.

Miccio: The vast majority of people, including Congress and related branches of the government, and even the general public, do not understand what early childhood education is. There is a misperception that Early Childhood Education research only examines what good parents already do. Part of the reason why people do not want to pay for a more highly educated teacher equal to one in the public school is because they do not see early childhood education in the same realm of importance. People need to understand what is expected of Head Start teachers, particularly the social and emotional components. They need to understand that one cannot do some of the more complex aspects of teaching language without teachers who are better trained. The fact that early childhood education is not day care needs to be emphasized.

Strickland: We are moving forward in terms of helping the public understand the importance of early childhood. Those within the field are the best advocates for not only universal pre-K, but evidence-based, high-quality pre-K.