

The Language of Emergent Literacy: A Response to the National Institute for Literacy
Report on Early Literacy

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On January 9, 2009, *The National Institute for Literacy* released its report from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP). This panel of prominent scholars and researchers committed enormous energy to this report that we anticipate will help shape national policy on early childhood education. We applaud the work of the panel but are concerned that there could be unintended consequences associated with how its findings are interpreted. Specifically, it might be taken as a mandate to teach narrowly prescribed skills like letter-sound correspondence at the expense of focusing on oral language skills, vocabulary and the associated background knowledge that form the foundation for early and long-term literacy.

Carefully reviewing over 500 research articles these scientists asked, “What skills and abilities are linked to later outcomes in reading, writing and spelling?” They examined correlational research to identify early abilities linked to later reading and scientific studies of interventions designed to foster emergent literacy. Three themes emerge in response to this report. First, the science of early reading and emergent literacy is strong, allowing us to zero in on the building blocks of emergent literacy. Second, there are interventions that are successful in supporting these building blocks – especially decoding and phonemic awareness. Third, any policy decisions relating to early literacy should be made with caution, taking into account long-term reading outcomes that depend on language skill and associated conceptual knowledge.

Consensus in the Field: The Building Blocks of Emergent Literacy

The NELP report underscored the importance of abilities that influence early literacy and that are strong to moderate predictors of early and later reading. *Phonological awareness* is the knowledge that speech is composed of smaller units of sound (*cat* can be dissected into 3 smaller sounds). *Alphabetic knowledge* occurs when children know the names of the letters and can associate the letters with the appropriate sounds. *Concepts about print* include knowing how print is placed on the page along with an understanding of word conventions. *Writing*, most often reflected in a children’s ability to write their names, brings together phonological, alphabetic knowledge, and concepts of print. The *ability to rapidly retrieve words* reveals an important cognitive processing capacity. Finally, *oral language* development is the backbone of reading through vocabulary, discourse and narrative. Mastery of this basic toolkit of skills fosters both decoding and reading comprehension. On these issues there is consensus in the field.

The Weighting of these Building Blocks

The field is still determining the proper weighting of these core skills at different ages and the relationships among competencies over time. The purpose of reading is the

extraction of meaning from the printed page. The report noted that oral language skills that form the base for reading readiness are a moderate to strong predictor of emergent literacy. It also found that the ability to understand and use language is a more potent predictor than vocabulary. But in reporting the core findings the report places the spotlight on what are commonly called “code skills” as the more reliable predictors of reading success. That is, the meta-analysis used in the NELP report found that phonological processing skills, phonological memory, spelling and letter-knowledge are the strongest predictors of conventional reading in kindergarten to second grade. Language is a less strong predictor, but two chapters are devoted to reporting results of language-focused interventions, an indication of the importance accorded language by the field and the panel

Why does this report find that language is of secondary importance in predicting reading, yet the field accords it a central role?

- **First, the panel was directed to examine factors that predict early reading.** The primary challenge young readers face is learning how to map sounds to symbols, to decode print into words. Extraction of meaning is important, but the relatively simple texts children read rarely tax their language ability or conceptual knowledge. Thus, skills associated with mastering the code and analyzing language into units of sound are most directly recruited when young children read. However, once children master basic decoding, language and conceptual knowledge come to the fore.
- **Second, interventions can target and change narrow skills like phonological awareness and spelling more readily than broader skills.** The panel found that, “Older children, between three and five years of age, did not get as big a language boost from these interventions as did the younger children” (p. 248) In contrast, interventions that address code-related skills have more short term impact, and are more constrained. Why? Because language is an entrenched competency that develops over the course of early childhood rather than in a single year and few longitudinal studies have been conducted. The fact that language is relatively hard to teach should not be taken as a reason not to do so. Also, far more energy has been devoted to developing and testing interventions designed to foster code-related skills than to fostering language and conceptual knowledge. This imbalance in the research must not diminish the importance of oral language and conceptual knowledge.
- **Third, language skills developed in the early childhood years have indirect and delayed effects on reading comprehension** The report reviewed intervention studies that typically examine short-term and direct effects and thus underestimate the effects of language on later reading competence. Yet, multiple, large studies that tracked the effects of early language on reading find that language effects are considerable after basic decoding is mastered (3rd to 4th grade). A sizable amount of those effects are carried by code-related skills that build on language skills. By way of example, phonological processing is

contingent on adequate vocabulary and language skills. Children would be unable to operate on language at a reflective, “metalinguistic” level without language capability.

- **Fourth, background knowledge forms the basis of children’s developing understanding of the world and represents a key building block for reading comprehension. Without content, the words children read cannot map on to anything meaningful. The development of knowledge, early on, must be a central feature of literacy instruction.**

The early years are too precious to get it wrong. At a time when preschool curricula and pedagogy are on the national agenda, it is imperative that we take a comprehensive look at early literacy development. The NELP report furthers this process by looking broadly at the extant research. They did a remarkable job. Now it is imperative that educators and policy makers read not only the executive summary and practitioner-oriented summary, but also the fine print. Skills that are the easiest to measure and change – such as code skills -- are not the only factors of importance in early and later literacy.

We urge the public (curriculum developers, instructional designers, teachers, parents, and policymakers) to not only look at the code skills , but to also heed the panel’s finding on the importance of comprehensive language development and associated background knowledge, and conceptual development. Without attention to all of these elements children will be insufficiently prepared for reading readiness as well as for attaining longer-term reading success. Like the expert decoder who can sound-out German Hebrew or Greek words without understanding the language and content to which these words map, children with limited vocabulary and conceptual knowledge might *mean to read* but never master *reading for meaning*.

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