NIEER Statement on the National Early Literacy Panel Findings
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The report of the ***National Early Literacy Panel (NELP)*** is an important new source of information about early literacy development. It also has implications for policies and practices to support early literacy development in the preschool years. This issue is so important that five prominent scholars have prepared a response to the NELP report that we are posting here, together with a link to the original report. The response is not a challenge or critique of the report. Instead it seeks to clarify the implications of the report for early childhood education with respect to both what it tells us and what it does not.

To further this goal of clarification we wish to make a few brief points of our own:

The NELP report is a meta-analysis, or quantitative summary, of the literature. It tells us what the studies summarized found. The NELP report summarizes results of (a) studies of the correlation between measures of early skills and measures of later skills and (b) studies of the effects of interventions on early and later measures. How close this gets us to the "truth" depends on the strengths and weaknesses of those studies and how wisely we interpret the findings. In addition, a meta-analysis can only be as good as the existing studies included. In the case of early literacy, there are still many issues that have not yet been adequately studied. For example, the research literature on dual language learners is just emerging; thus the implications of the NELP results must be used cautiously with this and any other under-represented population. On the other hand, we have a much more extensive literature regarding children with reading difficulties and caution must be used in generalizing these results to the general population. In addition, many new curricular approaches are being implemented and few have published research yet, thus the merits of these innovations can not be included in the findings.

A strength and a weakness of meta-analysis is that it converts all outcomes to a common effect size (fractions of a standard deviation) to make them comparable. This is entirely reasonable when combining different measures of the same outcome (for example, IQ or reading comprehension), but it can create problems when combining measures of quite different outcomes. The value of a given effect size is not the same for a very narrow and easily produced skill as it is for a broad set of difficult-to-modify abilities. Why is this relevant?

Consider the following tale of two studies. One study focuses on teaching letter identification to children who know few letters. In a short time the effect on letter knowledge will be large and because there is little variance at baseline, the effect size (which is relative to the variance) will be very large. The study lasts only a few weeks or months and there is no measure of the effects on reading ability years later. The other study focuses on the effects of attending a preschool program for two years prior to kindergarten. It measures effects on vocabulary at kindergarten entry and reading comprehension in third grade. The effects on vocabulary are large and the effects on reading comprehension are modest. The variation in both of these is quite large and,

therefore, effect sizes are relatively small. The second study does not measure effects on letter knowledge.

When the meta-analysis pools the two studies just described, it will find much larger effect sizes for teaching letters for a few weeks than for two years of preschool education. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to conclude that teaching letters for a few weeks is a more powerful early literacy intervention than two years of preschool education.

Another aspect of meta-analysis that requires caution is that correlation is not the same as causation. This is more complicated than is sometimes realized. For example, rapid naming of random letters is correlated with later, broader literacy abilities. This need not mean that training children to rapidly name random letters through direct instruction is essential for preparing them to be good readers. Why?

Rapid letter naming is an indicator of a set of skills and abilities that may be important precursors of later literacy, but which also reflects all of the environmental and genetic influences on those skills—influences that may also affect later literacy such as exposure to written language and speed of cognitive processing. In addition, many children may acquire the skills and abilities indicated by rapid letter naming from activities other than direct instruction. Some may benefit from instruction; others may not. None of them will become better readers if only the indicator and not the underlying skills and abilities are improved.

We do not mean to suggest that the implications of these cautions are not understood by the authors of the NELP Report. Our aim is reinforce several points:

(1) Reading for comprehension is complex. There is no silver bullet, but many things can be done by parents, teachers, and others to help children become good readers.
(2) Simple, narrow skills are easier to teach than broad and complex domains of knowledge and abilities. More time must be spent on the latter rather than the former simply because learning the latter takes more time.
(3) Intentional teaching of individuals and small groups based on in-depth knowledge of early literacy acquisition and the specific children taught is highly effective. Preschool programs can do this only if teachers are well-prepared and teacher-child ratios allow for one-on-one and small group interaction.
(4) Early childhood education is a matter of both/and and not either/or. Children need: explicit instruction *and* dramatic play; an understanding of letter sound correspondence *and* a rich vocabulary; teacher directed *and* child initiated activities; early literacy instruction *and* enrichment across content domains, social skills, and the arts.