



Where Is NELP Leading Preschool Literacy Instruction? Potential Positives and Pitfalls

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This article discusses the potential positive and problematic influences of the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP; 2008) report on prekindergarten and kindergarten classroom instructional practice. The authors support the instructional importance of the majority of the foundational skills identified in the NELP report as having “clear and consistently strong relationships with later conventional literacy skills” but also detail a number of concerns about NELP-influenced instructional recommendations drawn to date, arguing that the NELP report is both insufficiently clear and overly narrow with respect to what preschool teachers should be focusing on instructionally in early literacy.

Keywords: early childhood; language processes; literacy

The preschool classroom can be a significant source of early literacy learning for children. What is taught and how it is taught in this setting is a product of multiple influences: social, epistemological, and policy environments, teachers’ beliefs and backgrounds, and—increasingly these days—research. The research synthesis conducted by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP; 2008), *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (available at <http://www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/NELP/NELPreport.html>), sought to influence preschool instructional practice: It asked research questions about practice (which programs, interventions, or approaches affect gains in children’s skills?) and subsequently concluded that findings from its meta-analysis have “implications for practices in early childhood education” (p. 78). These implications, the panel says, both suggest which skills should constitute a teacher’s instructional focus and indicate features that should be included in any curriculum that is chosen by a school, because teaching such skills “may provide valuable literacy preparation” (p. 78).

With federal policy increasingly influencing early literacy instructional practice in American schools (witness the impact of Reading First funding and policy on teaching in K–3), and now that that policy requires implementation of “only those strategies and methods proven effective by . . . scientifically based research” (Comprehensive School Reform Program Office, Office of

Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2002. p. 2), it behooves early childhood teachers, leadership personnel, and policy makers to understand what a particular study’s findings are warranted in saying about everyday language and literacy instruction in early childhood settings. In this article, we discuss the instructional implications for 3- to 5-year-old children (preschoolers and kindergartners) that arise from the research study conducted by NELP (2008).

Concern for Drawing Instructional Implications About What to Teach

Our first concern is our belief that a number of the NELP-influenced instructional recommendations drawn to date are both insufficiently clear and overly narrow with respect to what preschool teachers should be focusing on instructionally in early literacy. Therefore, basing curriculum and instruction on these recommendations can result in literacy teaching that is not maximally effective for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. This has led to situations in which the people primarily responsible for implementing preschool and kindergarten literacy instruction—teachers and other classroom personnel, support personnel such as coaches or early childhood curriculum directors, and administrators of both center- and school-based programs—end up underinformed as to what is and is not warranted scientifically with respect to NELP’s instructional recommendations.

Insufficiently Clear

The NELP (2008) report puts a considerable burden on the consumer-reader to understand its implications for the content and conduct of daily instruction related to early language and literacy. The report identified 11 variables that “consistently predicted later literacy achievement for both preschoolers and kindergartners” (p. viii) and implies in its recommendations a straightforward path from those skills to classroom practice—especially for the six variables found to have “a clear and consistently strong relationship with later conventional literacy skills” (p. 3): alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or digits, RAN of objects or colors, writing/name writing, and phonological memory. The panel stated, “Instruction focused on these skills may provide valuable literacy preparation” (p. 78). But how are those on the front lines of decisions about classroom instruction to interpret such a recommendation?

On the one hand, variables such as alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness reflect identifiable instructional activities

that have been part of quality early childhood programs for years and are frequently found on the schedules posted in classrooms or as activities in teachers' lesson plans.¹ On the other hand, RAN of letters/digits and RAN of objects/colors are also on the list of strong, consistent predictors. Does this mean that instructional time in the school day should be devoted to RAN? Like a number of other early childhood professionals (e.g., Dickinson, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, Neuman, & Burchinal, 2009) and even certain members of the panel, we see pitfalls in drawing a straight line from the RAN variables to instruction. Such an application of the NELP findings related to RAN could easily lead to a preschool day involving numerous skill-and-drill activities addressing something that, based on our experience implementing early childhood literacy curriculum in three Early Reading First projects (<http://www.uic.edu/educ/erf/>), is better conceptualized as a result of instruction than a topic for instruction.

Our reading of *Developing Early Literacy* indicates that the panel was well aware of the potential pitfalls of variables like those involving RAN when it comes to instructional activities. As the report states, "There is less certainty that teaching these variables early on will result in later achievement improvement" (NELP, 2008, p. 78). However, the way results and instructional implications are presented does not render such misgivings about instructional applications to many who are and will be readers on the front lines of preschool instruction and have little experience in reading research documents. Therefore, it is not surprising that certain teachers and educators involved in professional development whom we have encountered take the research (especially the six strong predictors) as indicating what needs to be taught in a quality early childhood program when it comes to literacy and language (see Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2010, for more details on this.)

Overly Narrow

Our second concern related to the "what" of instruction is that policy makers and educators may get the message that the six strong and five moderate predictors identified in the NELP (2008) report are the only components that should be taught. The NELP report acknowledges that

what is known about the relationship of these predictor variables with reading comprehension is limited to the very constrained conceptualizations of reading comprehension that can be measured with young children—levels of comprehension at which decoding is most likely to be implicated statistically. (pp. 63–64)

In other words, because the vocabulary and sentence structure of typical texts in kindergarten and Grade 1 are controlled to enable children's independent reading, the texts are such that once decoded their meanings are relatively transparent and thus usually readily understood by children at these age levels. However, texts typical of the upper elementary grades and beyond are more complex in terms of meaning and vocabulary so that even though children's phonics and fluency abilities have developed further there is no longer such a close relationship between decoding and comprehension (Cain & Oakhill, 2006).

Moreover, with one exception, the skills contained in the NELP variables are what Paris (2005, 2009) has referred to as "constrained skills." Constrained skills are critically important to

the development of literacy in prekindergarten and kindergarten. However, our contention is that they are not the only critically important skills. In addition to a focus on letter names, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and letter-sound correspondences, we maintain that young children must have systematic and sustained instruction in listening comprehension, oral language, and composing, as well as development of rich and varied content knowledge (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007), to make it maximally likely that they will be capable, confident readers and writers in the later years of elementary school and beyond.

This position on the importance of "higher level" literacy skills and content knowledge for early childhood curriculum grows out of two lines of work conducted in the 1980s—by Heath (1983) and by Chall, Snow, and colleagues (e.g., Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991)—as well as more recent research by Juel and colleagues (e.g., Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003) on the centrality of vocabulary to continuing literacy development and longitudinal patterns in children's literacy development (Juel, 2010). Heath found that both Roadville (working-class, primarily White) children and Maintown (middle-class, ethnically mixed) children had comparable literacy achievement early on in school, largely because the children from each community learned the foundational word and decoding skills to comparable degrees. But significant differences in achievement were manifested in later grades, a change that Heath attributed to differences in skill linked to the language and background knowledge and experience of the Maintown children.

Over the past three decades, Chall, Snow, and colleagues have discussed this phenomenon in terms of the "fourth grade slump" (e.g., Chall, 2003; Chall et al., 1990), a topic that featured prominently in the Snow and Biancarosa (2003) Carnegie Corporation white paper "Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?" The policy advocated by Snow and Biancarosa rests on their contention that development of letter knowledge, phonological and decoding skills, and fluency are necessary but not sufficient for achievement in middle and high school.

Juel's studies help in understanding the significance of going beyond a focus merely on code-related skills in early literacy to include both vocabulary instruction (Juel et al., 2003) and multiple opportunities for oral language interactions (Juel, 2010). Moreover, her longitudinal studies (see Juel, 2010, for a review) help in understanding how what is learned earlier in literacy development may only show its full significance later on. As she described findings from an analysis that she was just completing,

At age 6 both children with phonological processing strengths and visual matching strength performed better on . . . reading measures. Not until age ten did those children with secondary strengths (at age 6) in memory, oral vocabulary and listening comprehension show an advantage. (p. 25)

Juel's call to emphasize oral language in addition to decoding as part of early literacy instruction echoes what is already present in early learning standards. Listening comprehension and oral language are featured prominently in virtually all states' prekindergarten and kindergarten standards, and they are consistently discussed as significant by many researchers (see, e.g., Dickinson,

McCabe & Essex, 2005; Dickinson & Sprague, 2001) and by those who write methods texts on early literacy (e.g., McGee & Richgels, 2008). These two variables were investigated in the NELP (2008) meta-analysis, but they proved to be relatively insignificant in the results and figured only minimally in discussions of instructional implications. Listening comprehension did not appear as a predictive variable at all; oral language was at the “low end” (p. 73) of the moderate range in predicting later achievement and thus was considered only “potentially important” (p. viii). It was also found that oral language correlated more highly with later literacy achievement if the measures used to assess it included the more complex aspects of language; but, interestingly, this finding received little consideration in discussions of instructional implications, other than to say that the finding suggests that instruction would need to do more than focus on vocabulary if it is to affect student achievement positively.

What was said in the NELP (2008) report about areas like oral language and listening comprehension provided considerable insight into how NELP has approached the issue of instructional recommendations emanating from its analyses. Most of the studies examining oral language in the NELP corpus assessed its relationship to literacy skill by examining outcomes in kindergarten or first grade. Some went as far as second grade, but very few studies looked at outcome measures beyond that (p. 63). Therefore, what the meta-analysis is able to conclude is something akin to “Here are the factors early in early literacy development that relate to outcomes later in early literacy development.” In other words, when the NELP panel draws instructional implications, it is, in essence, making recommendations about what prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers can teach in order to have the greatest likelihood of positive impact on the literacy skills of children as they are manifested and assessed in Grades 1 and 2.

We see four important points to be made about this. First, the panel did not address in a substantive way how early literacy—and what is learned and taught in prekindergarten and kindergarten—relates to literacy development in third grade and beyond. Second, the panel is right in the approach it takes to instructional implications because the existing body of studies it reviewed did not address higher level literacy substantially enough to enable firm conclusions. Third, as a result, the predictors identified in NELP’s results likely tell us very little about some of the most important components of higher level literacy acquisition, namely, those oral language and comprehension skills related to comprehending or composing complex texts. Fourth, the NELP report lacks a consistent, explicit explanation about the relation between early literacy and achievement at the intermediate grades and beyond. This has created a situation that is especially problematic for helping educators responsible for instruction to understand what the NELP findings imply—and do not imply—for what needs to be taught in early schooling.

Again, the NELP authors do not expressly state that instruction should focus solely on constrained skills, but they also do not expressly state what more there should be to a comprehensive early literacy curriculum in prekindergarten and kindergarten. If the chain of events resulting from the NELP report follows a sequence like what happened subsequent to the National Reading

Panel report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), policy will be created that, for all intents and purposes, specifies a roadmap for instruction, and this roadmap will be limited to the findings from this particular body of research. In such a scenario, programs receiving federal funds would be required to use this roadmap as the focus of their early literacy instruction and to measure students’ progress in mastering these skills. So, although the panel may not believe that an early literacy curriculum should be limited to what surfaced in its analysis, funding would support teacher professional development and curriculum implementation related centrally to the skills identified as predicting later (in this case, primarily Grades 1 and 2) conventional literacy achievement. As a result, both early childhood teachers and leadership personnel could receive the message that what counts is instruction narrowly focused on a small set of constrained skills.

Such a narrowing of the curriculum could be especially problematic for children in rural and urban schools who come from under-resourced homes. Perhaps the most significant factor in upper grade reading comprehension and success in content area classes for children who have developed basic decoding skills is background knowledge (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms need to be places where the development of conceptual understandings and subject matter knowledge begins. Over the past decade in a significant number of elementary schools around the country, an increased time for literacy skill instruction has been obtained at the cost of lowering the amount of time spent in content area instruction, especially in science and social studies (Center for Education Policy, 2007).

The data from NELP rightly point to the importance of instruction in sound-, letter-, and word-related skills in prekindergarten and kindergarten, but the data do not constitute a mandate to teach only these narrowly prescribed skills at the expense of focusing on oral language, vocabulary, and the associated background knowledge that form the foundation for early and long-term literacy achievement.

Potential Pitfalls in the How of Teaching

Finally, the instructional recommendations issuing from the NELP (2008) report have had relatively little to say about *how* early literacy can or should be taught in everyday classroom interactions. Although the panel conducted separate analyses on the impact on young children’s early literacy skills as a result of (a) code-focused interventions, (b) shared reading interventions, (c) preschool and kindergarten programs, and (d) language enhancement interventions, the analyses did not provide sufficient detail that that would enable teachers or administrators to understand what actually took place instructionally. Leaving the “how” issue underspecified while drawing conclusions about what needs to be taught results in many practitioners’ having insufficient guidance about the report’s implications regarding the nature of classroom interactions that constitute quality early literacy instruction. In other words, a teacher could take the goal of foundational skills as a panel recommendation to teach individual letters one at a time and proceed in order through the alphabet, a strategy that is not supported by current research on alphabet learning and instruction (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006).

Our 4 years of work in Early Reading First preschool classrooms and previous experience with emergent literacy instruction in kindergarten classrooms (e.g., Teale, Leu, Labbo, & Kinzer, 2002) have shown us that the vast majority of early childhood teachers require professional development, ideally with classroom coaching, that provides specifics and contextual understandings to enable them to implement early literacy instruction in ways characteristic of exemplary teachers (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2001; Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009). As Teale (2003) noted, good early childhood teachers “make principled insightful instructional decisions for individual children and orchestrate effective instruction for the group of children being taught rather than apply learned procedures for instruction or follow scripted lesson plans” (p. 35). The discussions emanating from the NELP report can lead educators to the impression that there exist prescribed sequences of development that a teacher can follow in different areas of early literacy (e.g., “focus initially on identification of letters and then on writing letters and then on forming simple words and then. . .”), implying that curriculum consists of an aggregate of activities (e.g., room design, explicit lessons, center and hands-on activities) that provide instruction in different aspects of literacy and language.

Although we have found through our preschool work that many of the activities suggested in the NELP recommendations are quite good (they are engaging to children and help them learn important early language and literacy concepts), what does not exist in the recommendations is a sense of early childhood curriculum, of how early language and literacy instruction functions in the larger context of an overall cohesive framework or thematic focus for children.

We believe that the NELP recommendations exist within a deliberate theoretical perspective, one that privileges skills over context. And this is where we part company with the NELP panel. On the one hand, the panel’s view is not particularly surprising, because to address a comprehensive early childhood curriculum would extend well beyond the purview of the analyses they were charged to conduct. But we feel it is important to surface this issue because of the potential for how the NELP-related instructional recommendations can be taken up in the classroom. Because NELP pays little attention to how a teacher might embed instructional activities in contexts meaningful to children, it is easy to understand Dickinson et al.’s (2009) concern that the results of this research “might be taken as a mandate to teach narrowly prescribed skills.”

Conclusion

NELP has performed an extremely valuable service to the early childhood education community. The NELP report has systematically and clearly identified variables that experimental and quasi-experimental studies repeatedly show to be associated with subsequent literacy achievement in the primary grades. The report also draws instructional implications from these findings and helps researchers and educators understand the why’s of the instructional recommendations it makes.

However, the recommendations emanating from the panel report should not be taken as a blueprint for instruction. We wish that the panel’s discussion of instructional implications contained more about the need for research complementary to that

represented in the NELP meta-analyses to develop an understanding at a fundamental level of what high-quality, meaningful, and engaging early language and literacy teaching and curriculum are. We believe that such instruction can be informed by the NELP results—but only partially informed—and that frontline school and center personnel need to understand that. More comprehensive instructional suggestions for teachers that will enhance the early language and literacy abilities of our young children will come when the insights from the NELP analyses are examined vis-à-vis the scientific research emanating from rigorously designed and conducted qualitative studies that describe the contexts, practices, and results from early childhood settings.

NOTE

¹We base this contention on two data sources. One is direct observation: our observations in preschool classrooms through implementation of multiple Early Reading First (ERF) projects (see federal reporting on these projects at <http://www.uic.edu/educ/erf/annualreports.html>), the first author’s work as an ERF site reviewer for the U.S. Department of Education, and the first author’s consulting work over the past decade with early childhood programs in various areas of the United States. The other source of data is the activities reported in research (see, e.g., Dickinson & Neuman, 2005; Justice & Vukelich, 2008; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001).

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Manuscript received October 22, 2009

Revisions received February 4, 2010,

and February 12, 2010

Accepted March 16, 2010