

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

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The preschool classroom can be a significant source of early literacy learning for the children who attend. What is taught and how it is taught in this setting is a product of multiple influences: social, epistemological, policy, the teacher herself, and—increasingly these days—research. The research synthesis conducted by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) sought to influence preschool instructional practice: it asked research questions about practice (which programs/interventions/approaches affect gains in children’s skills?), and subsequently concluded that findings from its meta-analyses have “implications for practices in early childhood education.” 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 influencing daily literacy instructional practice in American schools to a greater and greater degree (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” (SRPO & OESE, USDOE, 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 the National Early Literacy Panel. We examine both what the Panel recommends in *Developing Early Literacy* (the report itself) and what the National Institute for Literacy (charged to disseminate information on scientifically-based reading research and to support the cooperative agreement that oversaw NELP) has stated in its publication *Early Beginnings* (Goodson & Layzer, 2008) regarding teaching practices that should flow from NELP findings.

### **Concern for Drawing Instructional Implications About What to Teach**

One reason we address this topic is our belief that a number of the NELP-influenced instructional recommendations disseminated to date are both insufficiently clear and overly narrow in focus with respect to what preschool teachers should be focusing on instructionally in terms of early literacy. As a result, basing curriculum and instruction on these recommendations can lead to 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 under-informed as to what is and is not warranted scientifically with respect to instructional recommendations.

Insufficiently Clear. The NELP report puts 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, stating that “instruction focused on these skills may provide valuable literacy preparation” (p.78). Likewise, *Early Beginnings* recommends that these 11 variables indicate the foundational skills that preschool and kindergarten teachers should focus on in order to promote early literacy. Thus, the research findings are being promoted as indicators of *what* teachers should teach.

But, how are those on the front lines of decisions about classroom instruction to interpret such a recommendation? Variables like Alphabet Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, and Print Knowledge reflect identifiable instructional activities that have been part of quality early childhood programs for years. They can be found on the schedules posted in classrooms or as activities in teachers’ lesson plans. On the other hand, Rapid Automatic Naming (RAN) of Letters/Digits and RAN of Objects/Colors are also found in the list of variables. 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. It is one thing to monitor each child’s fluency in rapidly naming a sequence of letters as part of a classroom assessment plan, and quite another to develop instructional activities based on a recommendation like “When shown a set of numbers (or letters), [the child should be

able] to name numbers in order, quickly and easily” (Goodson & Layzer, 2008, p. 6). Such an application could easily lead to a preschool day involving numerous skill-and-drill activities addressing something that we believe is better conceptualized as a result of instruction rather than a topic for instruction. Our reading of *Developing Early Literacy* indicates that the panel members were well aware of the potential pitfalls of variables like those related to RAN when it comes to instructional activities—e.g., “There is less certainty that teaching these variables early on will result in later achievement improvement” (p. 78). However, the way the report presents results and instructional implications does not render such a position transparent to many who are and will be readers on the front lines of preschool instruction. This situation makes ‘translation’ documents such as *Early Beginnings* especially important for the influence they can have on what is actually taught to children. Unfortunately, *Early Beginnings* does little to right such a potential problem; it presents the 11 variables as “the most important (early literacy skills) for the later development of literacy” (p. 6) and advocates for teaching them as the foundational skills.

Variables like listening comprehension and oral language that were also investigated in the NELP meta-analysis stand, in some ways, at the opposite end of the spectrum. Both play major roles in virtually all states’ preK and K standards, and they are uniformly discussed as significant by those who write methods texts on early literacy (e.g., McGee & Richgels, 2008). Yet, they proved to be relatively insignificant in the NELP results and figured only minimally in discussion 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 the 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 impact student achievement positively.

What was said 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 the relationship between oral language and literacy skills 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.” Thus, when the NELP panel draws instructional implications, it is, in essence, making recommendations about what preK and K 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 preK and K—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 has not addressed 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 meaning making with, or to the creation of, 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; and it is not even hinted at in *Early Beginnings*. This has created a situation that is especially problematic for assisting educators responsible for instruction to understand what the NELP findings imply—and do not imply—for what needs to be taught in early schooling.

Overly Narrow. The insight just discussed, coupled with close consideration of the *Early Beginnings* publication aimed at early childhood administrators and professional development providers surfaces our second concern related to the ‘what’ of instruction that emerges from NELP: its findings could be taken as an indication that these 11 variables are the “critical precursor skills” (Goodson & Layzer, 2008, p. 4), that is, the only things that really need to be taught in order to have a research-based literacy program in pre-K and K. Unfortunately, these precursor skills are likely not predictive of more mature reading comprehension: the NELP Report acknowledges that “what is known about the relationship of these (11) 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 K/Grade 1 level texts are controlled to enable children’s independent reading, the texts are such that once decoded, their meaning is relatively transparent and the vocabulary in them is most often readily understood by children at these age levels. However, texts typical of grade 4 and beyond are more complex in terms of meaning and vocabulary, so that even though children’s decoding and fluency abilities develop, there is no longer such a close relationship between decoding and comprehension at those points in development (Cain & Oakhill, 2006).

Moreover, with one exception, the skills contained in the 11 variables are what Paris (2005, 2008) and we (e.g., Teale, Hoffman, & Paciga, 2008) have referred to as “constrained skills.” Constrained skills are critically important to the development of literacy in preK and K. However, they are not the only critically important skills. In addition to a focus on letter names, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and letter-sound correspondences, 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.

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 preK and K. If the chain of events resulting from the NELP report follows a sequence like what happened subsequent to the National Reading Panel report (NRP, 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 for 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 was surfaced in its analysis, funding would support teacher professional development and curriculum implementation related exclusively 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 few, key 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 grades reading comprehension and success in content area classes for children who have developed basic decoding skills is background knowledge. PreK and K 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 as a result 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 preK and K, 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 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 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 simultaneously 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. Take, for example, the instructional

topics of “knowing the names other printed letters” or “knowing the sounds associated with printed letters” recommended for practice in *Early Beginnings* (p. 6). We wholeheartedly subscribe to the importance of letter knowledge for prekindergarten and kindergarten children. But when we read in the *Early Beginnings* publication the simple pronouncement that a child should be able to “label letters correctly” (p. 6), we get concerned that an overly straight line is being drawn to an instructional practice that emphasizes rote learning rather than rich, conceptually based learning. In other words, a teacher could take this foundational skills goal as a panel recommendation to teach individual letters one at a time and proceed in order through the alphabet.

Our four years of work in Early Reading First preschool classrooms (<http://www.uic.edu/educ/erf/>) 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, including coaching, that provides specifics and contextual understandings in order for them to implement early literacy instruction in ways characteristic of exemplary teachers (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Collins Block, & Morrow, 2001). 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 *Early Beginnings* publication presents its recommendations in a way that (a) gives the impression that there exist prescribed sequences of development a teacher can follow in different areas of early literacy (e.g., “Move from identification to writing letters and forming simple words...”, p. 10) and (b) implies 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.

The implications that have emanated to date from the NELP report promote a view of preschool and kindergarten early literacy instruction that is in many ways sound and in keeping with the overall body of research and teacher wisdom about effective instructional practices that has accumulated in the field. It champions the idea that young children should have the benefits of intentional instruction in early language and literacy. That is of critical importance because even today there are numerous pockets of resistance to instruction in general and literacy instruction in particular among certain segments of the early childhood education community. However, it is easy to come away from the NELP-related publications with a picture of early literacy instruction as the following:

- saturate children in a great range of formal and informal activities related to the identified predictors
- organize instruction in the different domains (e.g., phonological awareness) from simple to complex to conform to the developmental patterns exhibited by children

In short, instruction is discussed as various activities and as activities that can be ordered in a logical way for teaching. Although we have found through our 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 them 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. Although this is not particularly surprising (since to address early childhood curriculum would extend well beyond the purview of NELP), it is important to mention because of the potential for how the NELP-related instructional recommendations will be taken up in the classroom. Because there is little attention to how a teacher might embed the instructional activities in contexts meaningful to children, it is easy to understand Dickinson, et al's concern that the results of this research “might be taken as a mandate to teach narrowly prescribed skills.”

## **Conclusion**

The National Early Literacy Panel 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 instructional recommendations emanating from the panel report should not be taken as a blueprint for instruction. What has been written to date by the National Early Literacy Panel and the National Institute for Literacy about recommended instruction in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms is underspecified, overly narrow, and does not address substantively enough the issue of how early literacy instruction should be conducted. We wish that the report contained more discussion of the need for research complementary to that represented in NELP. We believe that what it takes to have high quality, meaningful, and engaging early literacy instruction can only partially be answered by the NELP results. 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 qualitative studies that describe the contexts, practices, and results from early childhood settings.

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