Current Research On Literacy Development of Early Years Children from Low-Income and Second Language Families

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Scope of this research review

This presentation is focused on preschool children:

- who are from low-income families

- from homes where English is not the main language spoken at home

- who experience *both* another language other than English spoken at home and a low-income level

Defining literacy

Literacy has a plurality of meanings. It can mean

- functional literacy
- a set of skills allowing one to survive within a particular circumstance
- or a set of skills used by an individual to benefit society

It also refers to being able to communicate and access information in the 21st century:

- Beyond "paper and pencil" reading and writing
- Functional signage: street and building signage, forms and information from different services etc.
- Media (pamphlets, posters, banners, billboards etc.)
- Telephone, cell phone,
- Technology: information on the World Wide Web, services available via the Internet such as mapquest, forms for agencies, email

Historical context of research in literacy development

- Earlier studies in literacy learning have focused on how the school could enhance learning for children who were behind in their literacy development (Alexander & Entwisle, 1996).
- Since the 70's there has been a major effort to intervene in the literacy development at the early years levels.
- The thinking has been to reduce or close the achievement gap of children entering school with low language levels and/or little book experience.
- Grade one was seen as the pivotal time to intervene, in an effort to reduce lack of success in later schooling
- Programs such as Reading Recovery targeted students who were reading below others in their class and provided intensive one-on-one instruction

- While early intervention programs have met with success, attention is now being turned toward children who come from homes of low income and/or English as a second or alternative language.

Manitoba landscape

- Manitoba's immigration strategy - *Growing Through Immigration* (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2005*)* has increased the number of new immigrants or newcomers since 1999 to over 60,000
- Target of 20,000 new arrivals annually over the next decade
- Almost 40% of all newcomers are under the age of 20; they will be served by the K - 12 and post-secondary education systems
- In addition, children born in Canada to immigrant families most often enter school speaking a mother tongue other than English or French

(Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007)

- Substantial evidence documents the existence of a gap between the literacy achievement of students from low income and second language backgrounds and their mainstream peers (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001).

- Research studies indicate that sociocultural and socioeconomic factors influence learning to read.

- Both PISA (2000) and PIRLS (2001) consistently reveal that the scores from children of lower socioeconomic background and sociolinguistic minority families are lower for reading and writing than same aged peers from mainstream family backgrounds (Leseman & Van Tuijl, 2006).

- Factors such as poverty, low economic levels, and non-mainstream cultural background often result in children being less prepared for the formal academic schooling encountered in our education system (Leseman, 2002).
- This has resulted in a literacy achievement gap for these children when compared to children from mainstream homes
- This is becoming a more urgent concern as the number of these students increases (Au & Raphael, 2000)

History of preschool programming

- Preschool programs in the States, such as Head Start (program for 3 and 4 year olds from low income families), have generally focused on social and emotional development rather than on cognitive readiness.

- When these programs have been assessed, there appears to be short-term gains in social-emotional growth with little gain in cognitive growth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

- When preschool instruction moves beyond social-emotional goals to include cognitive development, in particular, attention to content while addressing early literacy skills, children show cognitive gains that carry over into kindergarten (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Zevenbergen et al., 1997).

Early childhood and reading development

- Researchers have found that foundational reading skills need to be attended to in early childhood to ensure success at the kindergarten level (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Frede, 1995).

- This has led to the acknowledgement that the preschool years play a critical role in preparing children to be successful in their schooling (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Teacher's role in literacy development

- There is growing acknowledgement that the classroom teacher plays a significant role in overcoming the literacy achievement gap (Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel & Gunnewig, 2006) .

- Both teacher education programs as well as professional development of inservice teachers are key to improvements in the education of poor and culturally diverse students (Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel & Gunnewig, 2006.)

Research findings indicate the following:

- Students with teachers having 4 or more years of teacher preparation made greater gains in early literacy outcomes than teachers with two or fewer years of education (Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel & Gunnewig, 2006).

- Studies have shown that new teachers may focus on the presence or absence of school-related knowledge and skills which can reinforce low expectations about children's potential (McNaughton, 2002).

- McNaughton (2002) suggests that to circumvent this kind of thinking, preservice teachers develop a greater awareness of:

  (1) how children develop an understanding of school-related tasks

  (2) and children's prior life experiences

  and how this might differ for children of high and low income and mainstream and non-mainstream families on their entry to school.

- However, we need to keep in mind a Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth entitled, "Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners" chaired by Tim Shanahan (President) of the International Reading Association (2007) indicating that at this time the research on acquiring literacy in a second language requires continued exploration.

- What we know at this point is "malleable" and should be seen as open to change as efforts to build teachers' expertise in literacy instruction are developed.

- Studies reveal that while scores on tests of vocabulary knowledge and comprehension remain low in the beginning years of schooling, continued programming focused on raising the literacy levels of low-income and culturally diverse students often result in achievement levels that at the middle years level are comparable to mainstream middle class students.

- In this regard, teachers should be encouraged that while their contributions to their students' achievement may not be readily observable in the early years, their efforts will pay dividends at a later point in the child's learning.

Research on family involvement in low-income children's development

- Children from low-income families whose parents are involved in their schooling have higher literacy levels than children whose families are not involved; and this holds for parents having low levels of education but nevertheless pursuing an active part in their child's literacy development (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006).

- Research studies have shown that children from poor families who have attended preschool programs or whose parents have received supportive parenting programs have demonstrated improved and in some cases average levels of development upon kindergarten entry (Howes, 1997; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001).

Studies on parent-child home interactions reveal that informal communication such as:

- mealtime conversations
- playing together
- talk during daily household activities
- the use of varied, rich, and sophisticated words

is a substantial influence on children's cognitive and language development and are predictive of later school achievement (Blake, 1993; Bornstein, Haynes, & Painter, 1998; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Wells, 1985; Weizman & Snow, 2001).

Building relationships with families

- Providers of preschool services need to find ways to build relationships so that home and school work together to provide an optimal opportunity for children to achieve (Barone, D, 2006).
- Obstacles to be aware of in terms of relationship building:

  (1) parents of poverty may carry feelings of past failure that inhibit their desire/ability to connect with their child's school

  (2) families of a non-mainstream language may be unable to communicate with their child's teacher

- School administrations have successfully sought the support of community groups, and health and welfare agencies to provide both funds and support in creating opportunities to develop a working relationship between the program/school and parents.

Supporting children through storybook reading

- There is research consensus that reading to young children during the preschool years supports the development of early reading skills (Leseman & Van Tuijl, 2006).

- Children who have been read to regularly from a young age do well in reading, writing and math in the primary grades (Whitehurst & Longigan, 1998).

Studies indicate that storybook reading contributes to literacy development in three ways:

- A child is exposed to reading material on a daily basis
- Provides an informal instructional time within a social interaction where the child is taking in phonological skills, letter knowledge, and a cognitive-linguistic experience
- This creates an emotionally warm time that is paired with a linguistic-cognitive event

  (de Jong & Leseman, 2001).

Making a difference …

Edmund W. Gordon, the first director of Head Start

stated:

    I think schools can be much more powerful, but I don't think they can reverse all the ill effects of a starkly disadvantaged status in society" (as quoted in Traub, 2000). Yet it seems that schools are expected to balance out the inequities from inside their walls (as quoted in Traub, 2000).

Traub (2000) wrote in a New York Times article:

    The idea that school, by itself, cannot cure poverty is hardly astonishing, but it is amazing how much of our political discourse is implicitly predicated on the notion that it can.

Re-envision students from the perspective of "learners from diverse backgrounds"

Reconsidering current instructional practices for improving the literacy achievement of early years learners:

- Accelerate literacy achievement

Contrary to past practices, of typically lowered expectations for poor and second language students, Nieto (1999) calls for:

- a cognitively challenging curricula
- respect for a child's home language and culture
- become more knowledgeable about the home lives of students
- learn about the economic realities of these families and community issues (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001)
- maintain high expectations for all students' learning

- The Second Language Literacy and Learning Committee of IRA has found that language-minority students are a heterogeneous group. As such, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to address the needs of these students.

  (International Reading Association, 2007)

- This Committee recommends that all stakeholders in a child's life need to work together to share knowledge and discuss options in the best interests of the child.
- To be effective, research requires collaboration among:

  academics

  those working with children in the field

  school administrators

  and politicians

  so that social, economic, political and instructional variables are part of the total equation in supporting the education of these children.

Recommendations based on studies on second language learning by this Committee are as follows:

- Provide teachers with professional development opportunities to learn ways to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of second language learners.

- Differentiated instruction takes into account the socio-linguistic-cultural and developmental factors that are a part of students.

  (International Reading Association, 2007)

- We need to acknowledge that solutions to some of the difficulties experienced by disadvantaged children require long-term attention and multi-faceted responses.

- Raising the numbers of successful literacy learners requires a concerted effort beyond the school walls to include community leaders, parents, politicians, and academics.

  (International Reading Association, 2007)

- As educators we need to look inward at our curricula, but also outward at the societal issues that impede our students' progress.

Summary and considerations

- Needed is a more robust method of scaling up teacher professional development based on the findings of effective strategies through research.

- Through teacher preparation programs and professional development teachers need to develop familiarity with the literacy practices of nonmainstream families. In this way, teachers will become aware of the implications of these practices on student learning and enable a smoother transition into learning.

- With such an awareness, teachers may be able to build new classroom activities that bridge to the existing repertoire of their students' family literacy activities. This practice would be consistent with the current constructivist philosophy of our English Language Arts curriculum in that school learning would be scaffolded onto the skills that children already know.

Providing teachers with ongoing mentored training.

- mentors offer positive support
- allow teachers to share their concerns with a non-judgemental individual
- and provide side-be-side modeling of new techniques
- mentors also have the opportunity to meet to share their experiences with teachers, and determine the next focus area by planning multi-day, small group training and workshops

- Interest into the child's language, culture, and home literacy practices by educators and the community will also indicate that the child's life and experiences are valued. This honouring of the whole child may begin to build a bridge between the home and school.

- We should also look to ways that families from other cultures may also inform our western ways of teaching and learning and provide us with new ideas for more diverse instruction.

- Addressing cognitive development along with a social-emotional focus in preschool programming. One way that has been successful is when content becomes the vehicle around which children develop their literacy skills.

- Promoting early literacy within a preschool program does not negate the development of social-emotional skills. A more cognitively focused curriculum, addressing content within a rich literacy context in fact promotes social skills such as turn-taking and cooperation with peers.

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