



Advancing Early Literacy Learning for All Children: Implications of the NELP Report for Dual-Language Learners

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The authors examine the implications and limitations of the National Early Literacy Panel report on the early care of young children who are dual-language learners (DLLs). They examine the relevance of the report for DLLs, particularly the practice in this and other national synthesis reports of extrapolating implications for the education of young DLLs based on a broader population of children. The article addresses the existing gaps in knowledge about literacy practices—knowledge that is central to the development of sound and appropriate educational policies and practices that support DLLs' full development as language and literacy learners.

Keywords: early childhood; language processes; literacy

Children who are learning English often are characterized in ways that do not capture their linguistic repertoires. They are referred to as limited English proficient students or English learners, defining this group of children by a single feature, their proficiency in English. Young learners who are acquiring two languages simultaneously or who are developing their primary language as they learn a second language are better understood as dual-language learners (DLLs). Four-year-old children who have developed language skills in their home language and who enroll in early childhood educational settings with no English skills are also known as early sequential bilinguals (Peña & Kester, 2004). A significant number of children of immigrant families grow up in bilingual environments where an estimated 84% of individuals age 5 and older speak a language other than English (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Capturing the bicultural nature of DLLs' lives not only provides a more accurate representation of children's everyday practices but also is important to the development of sound and appropriate educational policies that support their full development as language and literacy learners. The purpose of this article is to discuss the implications of findings reported by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) for the early care and education of children who are DLLs. We begin with a discussion of the participation of young DLLs in early care and education research, including gaps in

knowledge. Then we examine the relevance of the NELP report for young DLLs and conclude with a discussion of the implications of the report for future research.

Dual-Language Learners in Early Care and Education Research

There is a dearth of studies that focus on children from birth to age 4 from which policy implications can be drawn. This is particularly the case for DLLs, one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States, with approximately 2 million DLLs enrolled in the prekindergarten to Grade 3 cohort (Kindler, 2002); however, young DLLs remain largely understudied, often excluded from studies of early learning and among the least understood from a policy perspective. When included, these children often are subsumed under a broader "at-risk" category, making it difficult to understand underlying learning processes or to tease out relevant differences and factors.

DLLs are a diverse group, yet one of the most common misconceptions is that all DLLs are immigrants. Nearly four fifths of children in immigrant families (79%) are U.S. citizens by birth (Hernandez, Denton, & McCartney, 2008). DLLs also are highly variable in terms of their socioeconomic status, first-language practices, and experiences with literacy. Thus meaningful statements about intergroup comparability between DLLs and monolinguals must do more than rely on simple comparisons and generalizations; they must account for their variability. Often, conceptions of these young learners—whose home practices and histories of involvement with literacy differ widely, in ways that matter—are so flattened out that they become meaningless as guides for developing policy and practice.

Despite limited empirical evidence, there is a tendency to extrapolate implications for the education of DLLs based on a broader population of children. Moreover, studies of older DLLs or monolingual English-speaking children serve as the basis for drawing implications for policy and practices for young DLLs. As we discuss in the next section, in some cases the authors of studies of young language and literacy learners employ the universalist principle: If it works for mainstream children, it must work for English learners and DLLs.

Yet the achievement gap between DLLs and monolingual English-speaking children persists even after 5 to 6 years of

schooling in the United States and is exacerbated by a constellation of factors that constrain DLLs' opportunities to learn (Ballantyne, Sanderman, D'Emilio, & McLaughlin, 2008; Reardon & Galindo, 2006). DLLs are more likely to live in high-poverty communities and thus are more likely to lack access to health care services and to libraries and enrichment opportunities; they also are less likely to attend preschool (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Dolan, 2009), where forms of support known to have a positive influence on children's early learning are available (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000).

Given the vulnerability of these young learners, we must insist on an evidence-based approach to policy and practice for DLLs, as we would for all children. Research that focuses on preschool-age and younger DLLs is needed to understand how early language and literacy learning unfolds. In particular, we call attention to the need for more studies that examine how the home language supports second-language learning in English, including how early biliteracy supports learning in formal schooling environments. Presently, much of what is known either is based on short-term studies that stress English acquisition over the continued use of the home language or is derived from school-age populations (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006).

A related topic in need of a more expansive understanding is the "dynamics of transfer across different language systems" (Castro, Espinosa, & Pérez, in press); that is, which language and early literacy skills do and do not transfer and under what conditions (Snow, 2006). Research building on studies that focus on specific aspects of language development would provide a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic transfer. As some studies have shown, transfer varies by linguistic similarities and differences and between writing systems, as well as the relations between languages. Further research on the role of early bilingualism in children's cognitive processing, including the cognitive benefits of bilingualism/biliteracy independent of the transfer issue, would be an important contribution (e.g., Bialystok, 2009; Carlson & Choi, 2009; de Villiers, de Villiers, & Hobbs, 2009).

Another often-ignored topic is the relationship between socio-emotional development and dual-language and literacy development. Young DLLs experience additional developmental demands in comparison with their monolingual English-speaking peers. Depending on the language-learning context, negative emotions such as anxiety and self-consciousness may interfere with learning and limit the child's ability to benefit from instructional strategies developed for his or her support (Espinosa, 2009). Understanding language development in young DLLs involves understanding both the mechanics of language transfer and the social context of children's learning.

Many children in the United States participate in early childhood programs; however, DLLs remain underrepresented, especially in assessments of program and instructional effectiveness. Given the increased federal interest in early learning, DLLs can no longer be ignored in early childhood federal policies and programs or omitted from relevant assessments, as their exclusion significantly affects the validity of local, state, and federal policies and practices designed to meet their needs.

The National Early Literacy Panel Report and Young Dual-Language Learners

Given the imperatives described above, we turn to an examination of *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (NELP, 2008; available at <http://www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/NELP/NELPreport.html>) and its implications for DLLs. We argue for more relevant and rigorous study and discuss the relationship between extant early learning literature and relevant studies needed to develop appropriate and robust policies and programs for DLLs. We argue that the NELP report is yet another example of a national research synthesis that does not address the issues of prekindergarten DLLs, and we recommend that the report not be used as a guide for making policy for this population of children. Colleagues in this issue of *Educational Researcher* address the merits and limitations of the report for English-speaking populations. Our focus is on its limitations for young children who are DLLs.

We argue that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support generalizing NELP's findings to DLL populations, as they were not the focus of the meta-analysis. Generalizing the predictive significance of NELP's conclusions to DLLs or drawing implications about effective instructional strategies for this population without qualification is a practice inconsistent with the American Educational Research Association (AERA) standards for reporting on empirical social science research (AERA Task Force, 2006; Laosa, 1990), because what is effective pedagogy and practice for DLLs remains an unanswered empirical question. Few studies with sizeable samples or studies of DLLs were included in NELP's analyses, so there is little attention to the particular developmental demands associated with acquiring two languages and becoming literate in the early years. One related concern is that the report's findings may be seen as suggesting interventions for DLLs and other educationally vulnerable student populations, for example, poor urban or rural students who also were not represented in the report's studies. Specifically, the report does not contribute evidence about the effectiveness of particular instructional practices, social arrangements, and interventions for DLLs.

Let us examine how the report addresses the issue of underrepresentation of DLLs. Regarding code-focused studies, the authors state that extant studies did not allow for sufficient examination of the "relative effectiveness of code-focused instruction for specific subpopulations of children" (NELP, 2008, p. 119). The authors then argue that it makes good sense to suggest this particular intervention for all populations of young children:

Although the early childhood education field is interested in specific questions about which interventions will work best for children living in poverty, children from traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups, children who are English-language learners, or children growing up in rural or urban environments, there are not yet studies focusing on these specific subpopulations or that allow examination of these subpopulations to answer these questions. Given the clear success of code-focused instruction with these mixed populations, it seems prudent to make such instruction available to all populations of young children, at least until research more directly addresses this question. (p. 120)

Here the NELP study first argues that its studies include mixed samples of children from various ethnic and racial groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and population centers but that the studies lack sufficient specificity to examine differences across groups. Nevertheless the report recommends the intervention for all children until there are sufficient studies to support or proffer other claims. The report makes a similar argument regarding the positive effect of shared-reading interventions:

At present, the number of studies in the literature that have examined specific groups of children (such as children from different SES backgrounds, different ethnicities, home languages, or living circumstances—i.e., rural versus urban) is not sufficient to allow an adequate analysis of how shared-reading interventions may result in larger or smaller effects on these groups. (p. 164)

As before, the study's authors find it reasonable to recommend that shared reading would help all or most subgroups of children:

Studies focusing on shared reading with these groups have not yet been reported in sufficient frequency to allow definitive answers to these questions. Nevertheless, the existing studies provide no reason to expect substantially different patterns of results for these variables in future research. (p. 164)

The issue here is not whether shared reading is inappropriate for DLLs; that is an empirical question. Rather, the point is that we currently do not have a sufficient evidence base to support the claim. Researchers need to provide appropriate caveats and proceed with care when extrapolating findings on monolingual English-speaking children, or samples that have insufficient numbers of subpopulations, to subgroup populations with distinct characteristics, such as DLLs, that would benefit from appropriate and robust forms of instruction and support. For instance, questions about shared reading for DLLs should ask how this strategy should be implemented to be effective with DLLs at different stages in their English acquisition (e.g., language or languages used, in which sequence, how many times, for how long).

Further, the report makes a number of claims about what works that could be interpreted in ways that have unintended consequences for children who are most in need of robust literacy practices. As Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Neuman, Burchinal, and Golinkoff (2009) observed, the report may suggest a prescription for early literacy that privileges narrow skills at the expense of “oral language skills, vocabulary, and background knowledge that form the foundation for early and long-term literacy” (p. 1). This is consequential, as large studies of the effects of early language on reading development illustrate the relation between language and code-related skills (Dickinson et al., 2009) and the role that language plays in subsequent reading comprehension (Vellutino, Tunmer, Jaccard, & Chen, 2007).

Although NELP's synthesis notes that oral language skills are a moderate to strong predictor of emergent literacy, the report also suggests that indices of oral language development were moderate to weak predictors of later reading skills and less predictive than conventional reading skills (e.g., phonological processing skills). Despite the attention to language studies, NELP's core

findings do not emphasize the development of oral language as being critical to later reading, as are decoding skills.

More specifically, the main table reporting predictors of reading comprehension measured at or before kindergarten lists oral language with an average r of only .33. However, this is misleading. A secondary analysis reported later in the chapter shows that some oral language measures have a much higher average r , including overall language comprehension (.70), receptive language (.52), expressive language (.48), and grammar (.47), and some others have an average r at least somewhat higher than the .33 reported in the initial table (definitional vocabulary: .38; verbal knowledge: .36; verbal IQ: .35; receptive vocabulary: .34). The average correlation for *overall language comprehension is in fact the strongest predictor of reading comprehension reported in the chapter*, well above such constructs as alphabet knowledge (.48) and phonological awareness (.44; N. Duke, personal communication, December 2, 2009).

Although we applaud the panel for conducting the secondary analysis that revealed these higher average correlations for measures of oral language, we are concerned that they will be overlooked. There have been no headlines or claims based on the report that highlight overall language comprehension as the strongest predictor of later reading comprehension; the executive summary of the report itself does not list any oral language variable among the constructs with “medium to large predictive relationships with later measures of literacy development” (NELP, 2008, p. vii).

Overemphasizing decoding skills and minimizing the role of oral language in literacy development is problematic for all young children and consequential for DLLs, as their need for deep knowledge of words (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006; Verhallen & Schoonen, 1998) is addressed by providing them with ongoing opportunities to learn word meanings explicitly in a range of linguistic contexts and with repeated practice in using them (Collins, 2005; Silverman, 2007). Most DLLs simultaneously acquire oral proficiency and second-language literacy (Castro, Páez, Dickinson, & Frede, in press), highlighting the mutually reinforcing nature of second-language learners' reading, writing, and oral skills (Brisk & Harrington, 2007). Thus language and literacy development involves the lamination of component skills and sociocultural variables that help form the social situation of development.

Research with older populations of DLLs identifies the importance of English oral language development, especially in relation to mastery of question forms and word meaning (Saunders & O'Brien, 2006). Further, transference theory, well established in the language development field, posits that children learning two languages will use information from their first language (L1) to build their understanding of how language functions in their second language (L2); transfer is also bidirectional from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 (e.g., Dickinson, McCabe, Clark-Chiarelli, & Wolf, 2004). Thus oral language development in the home language has important implications for understanding the general cognitive functioning of young DLLs (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). The National Literacy Panel of Language-Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006) identified oral language proficiency as a key component of more advanced

reading skills and found that students may apply decoding skills with only a basic minimal knowledge of the phonological structures of English. However, oral English proficiency correlates with the ability to comprehend more difficult texts and to apply word- and test-level skills (August & Shanahan, 2006). As Ballantyne et al. (2008) suggest, “These findings help explain why many language-minority students can keep pace with their native English-speaking peers when the instructional focus is on word-level skills, but lag behind when the instructional focus turns to reading comprehension and writing” (pp. 24–25).

Currently, there is no empirical base to support the assumption that factors that predict later conventional reading skills will function similarly across ethnic and socioeconomic status levels. However, a recurrent and related theme in the NELP report was that no differences were identified in conventional reading skills by ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Although NELP does acknowledge that many studies lacked adequate demographic sample descriptions and that more focused research for English-language-learner populations is needed, the concern is that consumers of the report will view the “no difference” findings as justification for a narrow drill-and-skills approach to literacy development over other approaches that are essential to more robust language and literacy. Further, little is learned about the relation between the development of the home language and a second language, as most studies that include DLLs measure outcomes only in English.

The NELP report also places significant weight on phonemic awareness (PA). We agree that the development of PA is important for young DLLs and acknowledge that PA shows some overlap in certain instructional contexts; however, the limitations of existing evidence make it difficult to generalize. We have some indication of how PA develops for Spanish speakers learning English but have relatively little knowledge of its functioning in other languages, particularly for 3- and 4-year-olds. Because PA is influenced by the quality and quantity of language input at home and school, research that documents these factors merits attention.

A long-term view of literacy development places an emphasis on the foundational skills, avoiding the either–or dichotomies that are neither productive nor supported by the extant literature. As summarized in a recent review,

For dual language learners, the development of language and literacy involves the integration of *component skills* (e.g., sound–symbol awareness, grammatical knowledge, vocabulary knowledge), as well as more elusive sociocultural variables critical to the development of reading and writing. (Castro, Espinosa, et al., in press)

To understand these relationships, valid, reliable, and culturally sound assessment instruments normed for young DLLs should be developed to effectively monitor children’s English language acquisition and development across different developmental domains.

Moreover, research that examines language and literacy development in DLLs younger than 5 is needed, as recent research on DLLs focuses primarily on school-age populations (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006). One shortcoming of the NELP review is

that it also did not include children younger than the age of 4, limiting its findings to children 4 and older. Similarly, as the analyses found no differences between these 4-year-olds and kindergarteners, the findings are aggregated for these populations and important distinctions blurred. For example, the analyses do not acknowledge distinctions between many programs for 4-year-olds and kindergarten classrooms and thus neglect important differences attributable to the early education philosophy.

In the discussion above, we address the efficacy of the NELP report for young DLLs. We note that there is insufficient evidence to adequately apply its findings to pedagogical practice. We take issue with the universalist principle at work in the report in which findings are generalized to DLLs, despite the acknowledgement that more research is in order. Of course, we are not suggesting that it would be better to withhold educational opportunities for DLLs; rather, we argue that educational practices for DLLs should be based on relevant empirical evidence. This research lacuna suggests further consideration of how first-language development relates to second-language development. We also emphasize that oral language development is critical for all young children but has particular salience for DLLs, who need more time and practice with receptive and productive skills.

Conclusion and Implications for Research

The NELP (2008) report calls attention to the need for research to “determine whether certain interventions would be effective with particular groups of children” (p. 18). The growing population of young DLLs merits immediate attention. We are hopeful that the present article serves as a call for a more expansive research agenda for young DLLs. The field would benefit significantly from longitudinal studies that examine how children exposed to two languages from an early age develop in relation to their specific individual differences and sociocultural contexts, including different types of educational interventions. There is also need for studies that examine how early literacy skills in the first language influence literacy development in English and how the development of academic literacy unfolds. Similarly, we need empirical work that examines the effects of specific instructional practices and approaches with a different language of instruction on DLLs’ first- and second-language development. Such studies are essential to building a knowledge base that can guide the development of evidence-based policies and practices. Currently, there is a dearth of research about which program configurations, instructional models, and curricular approaches are most successful with prekindergarten DLLs.

Space limitations constrain us from addressing the important policy implications of the NELP review. In sum, we advise policy makers and practitioners to proceed cautiously as they consider implementing NELP’s findings vis-à-vis DLLs, as more definitive research is needed to provide evidence-based interventions for this educationally vulnerable population. In the interim, there is an emerging body of research on DLLs’ language and literacy development that should be taken into account when discussing instruction for young DLLs. Several research syntheses of studies targeting DLLs have identified specific instructional practices to promote language and literacy (August & Shanahan, 2006; Gersten et al., 2007), and recommendations have been given for

using research on older DLLs prudently and strategically (Castro, Páez, et al., in press).

In conclusion, we highlight the need for a robust research agenda that focuses on young simultaneous bilinguals. We also encourage the development of language and literacy interventions that serve as cultural amplifiers (Cole & Griffin, 1980) that extend rather than constrain children's repertoires of practice—repertoires that can be leveraged to ensure full participation in meaningful literacy practices across learning contexts (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). To accomplish this research agenda, there is significant need for researchers who have the relevant expertise to examine the language and literacy practices of young DLLs. We advocate studies that push for more nuanced understandings of DLLs, studies that capture the cognitive and sociocultural complexities of becoming literate and biliterate, and policies that promote robust language and literacy learning, rather than seeking silver-bullet solutions for this important child population.

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