

TESTIMONY - NOVEMBER 19, 2009
HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR SUBCOMMITTEE
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Thank you for the opportunity to share some of the current thinking about literacy learning during the early childhood years. Though I have done a fair amount of research over the years, my primary contribution to the field has been as translator of research to practice. I have been a classroom teacher, learning disabilities specialist, and teacher educator. I am also a mother and grandmother. So, I bring many perspectives to the table. Before I begin, however, I would like to state that although I believe that greater attention to literacy is extremely important, I also believe that early literacy should never be stressed at the expense of or in isolation from the other domains of child development. In fact, all of the domains of early childhood development - physical, social-emotional, cognitive, language, and literacy - are interrelated and interdependent. I have organized my comments around four questions.

Question #1. What is known about the importance of early literacy development?

Early childhood professionals have long recognized the importance of language and literacy in preparing children to succeed in school. Early literacy plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates, and enhanced productivity in adult life.

Literacy learning starts early and persists throughout life.

In the past, our field has talked about early literacy in terms of what was called *reading readiness*, the necessary level of preparation children should attain before beginning formal reading instruction. Key factors or predictors include oral language, alphabet knowledge, knowledge of how the sounds of our language link to the alphabet, and knowledge about print. Reading readiness largely focused on targeted instruction in kindergarten and early first grade. While the notion of certain predictors has been maintained, the way we look at their development has changed. Today's research suggests that learning to read and write is an ongoing and emerging process from infancy. This is consistent with what has been learned from neurocognitive research about young learners and learning. From the earliest years, everything that adults do to support children's language and literacy *really* counts.

Oral language and literacy develop concurrently.

Although oral language is foundational to literacy development, the two also develop concurrently. What children learn from listening and talking contributes to their ability to read and write and vice versa. For example, young children's phonological awareness (ability to identify and make oral rhymes and manipulate the individual sounds – phonemes- in spoken words) is an important indicator of their potential success in learning to read. Phonological awareness begins early with rhyming games and chants, often on a parent's knee.

- Children who fall behind in oral language and literacy development are less likely to be successful beginning readers; and their achievement lag is likely to persist throughout the primary grades and beyond.

- It is not enough to simply teach early literacy skills in isolation. Teaching children to apply the skills they learn has a significantly greater effect on their ability to read and write

Children's experiences with the world and with print greatly influence their ability to comprehend what they read.

True reading involves understanding. What children bring to a text, whether oral or written, influences the understandings they take away.

The more limited a child's experiences the more likely he or she will have difficulty with reading. There are two kinds of experiences that are highly influential to literacy development: background knowledge about the world and background knowledge about print and books.

Question #2. What is needed to support young children's language and literacy development?

Young children need parents, caregivers, and teachers who:

- Know that a child's capacity for learning is not determined at birth and there is a great deal they can do about it.
- Respect and build upon the home language and culture of the child
- Are aware that there are many informal and enjoyable ways that language and literacy skills can be developed at home and in pre-school settings
- Provide opportunities for children to use what they know about language and literacy in order to help them transfer what they know to new situations.
- Take time to listen and respond to children.
- Talk *to* and *with* children not *at* them.
- Engage children in extended conversations about events, storybooks, and a variety of other print media.
- Explain things to children.
- Use sophisticated and unusual words in their everyday talk with children, when it is appropriate to the conversation.
- Recognize that interesting concepts and vocabulary do not emerge from a vacuum and, thus, make sure to provide interesting content to think and talk about.
- Involve children in trips to local points of interest and talk with them about what they see and do.
- Establish a habit of raising and responding to children's questions about things that occur in the home environment or at trips to local points of interest.
- Provide time for reading to children and talking with them about what is read.
- Share a variety of types of literature, including lots of informational books to stimulate conversations about ideas and concepts beyond everyday experiences.
- Make books accessible for children to return to on their own to "pretend read" -- a child's personal reenactment of the read-aloud experience.

Question #3. How can we improve existing early childhood programs to better support early literacy development?

Both my knowledge of research and my experience suggest that we have come a very long way in providing quality 0-5 education in the United States, but there is much to be done. Following are some ideas for your consideration with recommendations for policy and practice.

1. Well-conceived standards for child outcomes, curriculum content, and teacher/care giver preparation help establish clarity of purpose and a shared vision for early literacy education.
 - States and districts should establish standards for early literacy that are articulated with K-12 programs and reflect consistency and continuity with overall program goals.
 - Early literacy curricula, teaching and care-giving practices should be evidence-based, integrated with all domains of learning and understandable to staff members.
2. Early literacy programs should be designed to provide comprehensive support for all children with clear adaptations for children with special needs.
3. Support for the early literacy development of English language learners must be specified with language learning opportunities in both the home language and English provided where feasible.
4. Early literacy assessment should be age-appropriate and employ multiple means of collecting, synthesizing, and making use of information to support children's overall development, improve the quality of care giving/teaching, and the total program.
5. Program outreach should reflect respect for the diversity of cultures, and linguistic backgrounds of children and their families as well as support for families as children's first teachers.
 - Parent involvement programs should have a strong early literacy component that guides parents and care givers in providing appropriate early literacy experiences at home.
6. *Highly capable early childhood professionals are needed to implement today's more challenging early literacy expectations.*
 - Standards for early childhood professionals - administrators, teachers, caregivers, educational support professionals - should require that staff members be qualified to meet early literacy standards according to their roles and responsibilities.
 - Improved pre-service education and professional development to prepare and support professionals to meet increased demands and challenges associated with high quality early literacy education. Includes -
 - Knowledge of how young children learn, (including brain research) and how they are best taught.
 - Knowledge, respect, and support for the diversity of children's families, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds are important to early literacy
 - The ability to integrate and build on all of the domains of a child's development -- physical, social-emotional, cognitive, language -- to foster literacy development.
 - The ability to work collaboratively with a variety of professionals and social agencies to meet children's needs

- Effective and prudent use of television, digital media at home and in school settings - area that many are still struggling to understand
- Effective use of technologies in professional development

Note: The above must be considered in terms of the context in which many early childhood educators work. Low wages, stress, and the need to support the literacy levels of some early childhood educators have implications for the success of professional development.

Question #4. What did my work, as an evaluator of Early Reading First, reveal about what needs to be done to improve federal efforts?

My work with Early Reading First largely confirmed the recommendations already offered. For the most part, I saw exceptionally effective early childhood programs with a high degree of emphasis on early literacy. Clearly, the quality of instruction was grounded in high quality professional development, effective use of literacy coaches, and the collaborative efforts of all staff members. My hope is that we might learn from ERF in the following areas:

Assessment, used wisely, can be a catalyst for positive change. Because ERF is a federally funded project, assessment received major attention. My hope is that we can distill what was learned from ERF to determine more effective and efficient ways to monitor children’s ongoing progress. Particular emphasis should be placed on authentic types of assessment that help teachers and caregivers make use of what they learn and offer guidance for professional development.

Family literacy remains an area in need of more inquiry and application of what is known to be effective. What families know and do has direct impact on young children’s language and literacy development. The need is particularly critical in areas where children have the greatest need.

Professional development (includes all personnel and the selection and training of literacy coaches) -- Quality support for children’s development rests in the hands of the adults that care for them. Effective professional development that is informed by evidence, a shared vision of expectations, and supported by sufficient resources, will produce the quality of early education that all children deserve.

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