

 **Special Issue**

The National Early Literacy Panel Report: Summary, Commentary, and Reflections on Policies and Practices to Improve Children's Early Literacy

Guest Editor's Introduction

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This special issue was a joint effort of two *Educational Researcher* (ER) editorial teams, including former ER editors, led by Greg Camilli. Current ER associate editor Deborah Dillon and her editorial colleagues then partnered with Anne McGill-Franzen and Timothy Shanahan to oversee the manuscript review and revision process. In the introduction, McGill-Franzen provides the rationale for a critical examination of the National Early Literacy Panel report, in particular the implications of this important research synthesis for the development of policy in early literacy. She also establishes a context for each of the commentary pieces that follow.

Keywords: early childhood; language processes; literacy

Based on a growing awareness of the importance of the early years and a concomitant understanding of the seemingly intractable literacy achievement gap during the school years between children of poverty or nondominant cultures and those of more economically advantaged and mainstream communities, the National Institute for Literacy convened an expert panel—the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP)—to identify and synthesize the relevant research on the early precursors to school success in literacy. The panel's report, *Developing Early Literacy* (NELP, 2008; available at <http://www.nifl.gov/earlychildhood/NELP/NELPreport.html>) is the subject of this special issue of *Educational Researcher* (ER). Its methodology and major findings are summarized for the special issue by Timothy Shanahan, chair of the panel, and Christopher Lonigan (pp. 279–285).

The nine contributors who comment on the NELP report for this special issue have a long-standing commitment to the early literacy field; they also have broad-based research expertise, an understanding of early literacy practice, and a grasp of the ways in which policy reports, such as the NELP report, if left unexamined, can influence research and pedagogy with unintended consequences. The views of these authors as well as those of the panel are widely respected, and their insight is critical, particularly now as early literacy policy is taking shape on a national level. In their rejoinder to the commentaries Lonigan and Shanahan (this issue of ER pp. 340–346) acknowledge the gaps in what we know about early literacy development but submit that the report reflects the extant research base in the field. Every member of NELP, as well as critics of the report, recognizes the power that literacy confers on individuals—to say *transformative* is to sound clichéd—but power it is, and that is why we care, why we study, and why we argue and write.

A Sense of Urgency—Pedagogical Implications

Running throughout the commentaries is a sense of urgency about the need for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers to understand the limitations as well as the strengths of the NELP report. This sense of urgency is well founded. The National Reading Panel (NRP) report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), the prototype of the NELP report, has shaped the view of scientifically based research and evidence-based practices for at least the past two decades. Emboldened by the aura of science around the NRP, Congress established Reading First as an initiative in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, with the policy tools and funding that the government believed would “eliminate the reading deficit”

(p. 10). Although the NRP did transform instruction, it had minimal impact on student achievement, particularly the achievement of poor and minority children, whose progress languished under the restrictions of a particular national literacy policy and what became known as SBRR (scientifically based reading research).

The NELP did not review large-scale evaluations of Head Start, Reading First, or Early Reading First—evaluations that might have tempered some of the panel’s findings. The results of the final year of the Reading First Impact Study (RFIS) found that Reading First had indeed changed the face of instruction in participating schools but not that of achievement. RFIS (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008) found a significant impact on the amount of instructional time spent on the five NRP essential components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension—including a positive and significant impact on decoding in Grade 1. However, there was no significant impact on reading comprehension in Grades 1, 2, or 3.

If the history of the NRP is prologue, the findings of the NELP may be interpreted as a mandate to teach primarily code-based skills in early childhood programs—programs where teachers’ expertise in early literacy is still marginal (McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, 1999–2000; Powell, Diamond, Bojczyk, & Gerde, 2008) and opportunities for professional development are constrained by the limited financial resources available to day care, Head Start, and other early childhood programs for income-eligible children (McGill-Franzen, Lanford, & Adams, 2002).

Understanding Past Literacy Policy to Predict Future Responses

Far from simply casting a critical eye, the commentary authors in this issue of *ER* provide perspectives that look backward and forward—backward in that they revisit previous reports, meta-analyses, and research syntheses, asking not only what we have learned from the past but also what we need to acknowledge, clarify, and challenge for consumers of this most recent scientifically based research report. For example, in the lead commentary, Pearson and Hiebert (this issue of *ER*, pp. 286–294) masterfully locate the NELP report within the universe of scientific reports on reading research, spanning more than five decades’ worth of policy contexts.

A number of the commentary authors also note that the panel did not examine learners’ background knowledge or conceptual knowledge—domains that arguably influence literacy development and within which literacy practice is deeply embedded. Nor did the panel include in its review studies that investigated the relation of early abilities to success in reading beyond the early grades. According to several commentary authors (see, in this issue of *ER*, Dickinson, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, pp. 305–310; Neuman, pp. 301–304; Teale, Hoffman, & Paciga, pp. 311–315), this approach greatly understated the contribution of oral language competencies and background knowledge to later reading achievement, particularly text comprehension, and overstated the contribution of what Paris (2005) has called “constrained skills”—those that are mastered by all readers, such as the

alphabet. In the final commentary, Paris and Luo (this issue of *ER*, pp. 316–322) examine confounding factors in the panel’s statistical analyses, calling into question the panel’s interpretations of the research. Paris and Luo’s approach is disputed by panel members Christopher Schatschneider and Christopher Lonigan in their rejoinder on the NELP methodology (this issue of *ER*, pp. 347–351).

Of particular concern to commentary authors Teale et al. is that the prominence and weight given in the report to children’s phonological processing and memory skills will be reified in practice, particularly in programs for income-eligible children, with scant attention to the more global language competencies that influence comprehension throughout development but whose effects are more visible in reading achievement and literacy practices beyond the primary grades (Teale et al., 2007). Similarly, Orellana and D’warte (this issue of *ER*, pp. 295–300) assert in their commentary that reductive indices of school literacy overlook the strengths that children from nondominant communities bring to school—practices that certainly will enhance all children’s participation in a multilingual, multicultural world.

Understating the Role of Oral Language in Comprehensive Literacy Development

Many prominent literacy researchers, including contributors to this special issue, have argued that oral language competency underpins comprehensive literacy development. Whitehurst and Lonigan (2001) identified two broad components or constellations that “cross-talk” in the process of reading (p. 13). One constellation is “outside” the printed word, and the other is integral to or “inside” the word. “Outside-in” sources of information, such as concepts or cultural knowledge, genre knowledge, and vocabulary, support children’s construction of meaning, whereas “inside-in” sources of information support children’s ability to decode; inside-in sources derive from within the word, such as letter names and sounds. How these interdependent domains of information “talk” to each other in the service of reading is suggested by several lines of research, including that of Dickinson and his colleagues in their commentary in this issue of *ER* and that recently reviewed by the National Research Council (Snow & van Hemel, 2008). Schickedanz and McGee (this issue of *ER*, pp. 323–329) also address oral language in their response to the NELP report. They critically examine the panel’s narrow interpretation of the effects of storybook interventions on children’s literacy development. They develop the view that inferential reasoning, not simply knowledge of words, as the panel reports, may be supported through the talk around the reading aloud of books.

Naïveté Regarding the Literacy Knowledge of Young Children and Their Families

The overarching purpose of NELP was to promote practices that support early literacy development—indeed the panel asked, “What can be done in U.S. homes, preschools, and kindergartens to better prepare children to succeed in learning to read and write?” (NELP, 2008, p. v). Several commentary authors expressed caveats about the panel’s review of effective interventions.

For example, family involvement is the focus of research by Dail and Payne, who with colleagues Edwards (2003) and McGee (Dail & McGee, 2008) have worked in the poorest rural regions in the country. In their commentary, Dail and Payne (this issue of *ER*, pp. 330–333) question many of the assumptions of the panel about the literacy resources and parent involvement in impoverished African American communities. They propose aggregating the results of qualitative case studies in a meta-synthesis to build evidence-based interventions that preserve the cultural dimensions of family literacy. Taking a somewhat different stance, Neuman argues in recent research (Neuman & Celano, 2006) and in her commentary in this issue of *ER* (pp. 301–304) that effective interventions must mediate a knowledge and technology gap between economically advantaged children and those who are poor.

The commentary by Gutiérrez, Zepeda, and Castro (this issue of *ER*, pp. 334–339) presents a compelling case for thinking of children who are learning two languages as “dual-language learners” (DLL), thereby acknowledging their multilingual and bicultural proficiencies (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). These authors point to the lack of empirical data on which to base recommendations for instructional practices for DLL, and the folly of extrapolating such recommendations from the NELP report.

Pearson and Hiebert take issue with the assertion by the panel that “most young children develop few conventional literacy skills before starting school” (p. vii). In their commentary (pp. 286–294), these authors also review the normative data on a common screening measure of alphabets and an analysis of the literacy content of kindergarten textbooks in use today. Pearson and Hiebert argue that approximately 33% to 50% of entering kindergartners have well-developed conventional literacy skills; that is, these children have already mastered the skills labeled as precursors to conventional literacy prior to school. What concerns these authors is the panel’s lack of interest in how top-quartile performers actually developed their extensive knowledge, and the pedagogical implications of this silence.

Echoing the sentiments of all of the commentary authors, Pearson and Hiebert suggest that the consequences of silence on pedagogical issues for which the research is lacking, ambiguous, or moot may be devastating for children who depend on school to become literate. These are the very children whom the NELP was intended to support. On this point—the importance of “things we don’t know”—there is mutual agreement by the panelists and commentary authors alike, providing us with a critical need for more research in this area.

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Manuscript received March 15, 2010

Revision received March 27, 2010

Accepted March 30, 2010