Early-Literacy Findings Unveiled

ByKathleen Kennedy Manzo, *Education Week at edweek.org,* January 8, 2009

Teaching small children about letters and sounds before they begin formal schooling helps them develop a broad range of literacy skills deemed essential to learning to read later on, according to a long-awaited research synthesis by a national panel of experts, released here today.

Other popular approaches in early-literacy instruction—such as teaching parents to teach skills and concepts of print, reading to children, and literacy and language instruction in preschool and kindergarten classrooms—are also effective, mostly in building oral language and other specific skills in emerging readers, the panel found.

“Literacy skills start developing the moment we’re born, and it is literacy that enables a person’s ability to participate in society,” said Timothy Shanahan, the chairman of the National Early Literacy Panel and a member of the National Reading Panel. “This new report shows the scientific validity of earlier and more targeted investments in literacy development.”

The literacy panel convened in 2002 to review the research on early literacy, a task that required a survey of thousands of potential studies. In its report, **“Developing Early Literacy,”** the panel identifies the skills it found to be precursors to later reading success, including alphabet knowledge, the understanding of the sounds associated with letters, vocabulary, and the ability to write individual letters and remember information. The most effective instruction for preschool children, therefore, works to build those skills.

“These findings suggest that there are a number of things we can do and areas we can focus on to make a difference in children’s lives early on,” said Mr. Shanahan, who is also a professor of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “We shouldn’t leave children’s literacy development to chance.”

Too Much Code?

While the report is based on a meta-analysis that combines the effects found in nearly 300 quantitative studies that resulted from the panel’s literature search, many areas could not be studied because of a lack of empirical data, members said.

The commonly recommended practice of reading to children, for example, was found to have only a moderate effect on children's oral-language development and knowledge of print features, a finding that is likely to surprise the many experts in early literacy who have touted the value of a child sitting in a parent's lap with a book or listening to a teacher read a text. The studies on shared reading were simply not adequate to determine whether those practices are sufficiently effective in building the foundations for reading proficiency, according to the panel.

The balance of existing research in favor of code-related interventions—there were far more empirical studies on teaching basic literacy skills, like naming letters, the results of which are easy to quantify—led to stronger findings in that area. Instruction that is "code-related," meaning that it builds knowledge of the alphabetic principle, had the greatest impact on children's overall literacy skills, according to the panel's analysis of 83 studies on that topic. That instruction was most effective when conducted with individual children or in small groups.

At a time when many states have been considering expansion of public preschool programs, the findings are intended to inform policymakers and educators seeking to improve early-literacy instruction, panel members said. During the campaign, President-elect Barack Obama proposed his own $10 billion preschool program to better prepare children for kindergarten. The report and the high interest in the topic are likely to fuel discussions on how to infuse formal literacy instruction into programs for young children and how best to prepare educators to do so. But play time and nap time should not be substituted with structured activities that may not be age-appropriate, experts say.

"The report is all about code because code is what has been studied, but what we know is that code alone is not going to solve our educational problems," said Susan B. Neuman, a prominent early-childhood literacy researcher who served as assistant secretary of elementary and secondary education at the U.S. Department of Education during President George W. Bush's first term. Ms. Neuman, who was asked to review a number of studies for the panel, said that a lot of sound empirical research was not considered for the review because it did not fit the screening requirements. Many qualitative studies on effective instruction, she said, could help guide the field as well, but were not part of the panel's review.

“My hope is that this report will be taken along with the findings of other reports that show the importance of developmentally appropriate practice to create comprehensive programs that promote early literacy,” Ms. Neuman said. Building vocabulary and background knowledge are known to be critical for later literacy skills, she added, but those topics do not get as much coverage in the report.

Translating the research into practice will mean crafting lessons that teach skills through activities that appeal to 3- and 4-year-olds, said panel member Susan Landry, the director of the Children’s Learning Institute in the pediatrics department at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

“Hopefully, this report will lead to wider acceptance of the importance of focusing on skill development in these programs,” she said. “But what we always have to keep in mind is that we are dealing with very young children, so the instruction needs to be playful and engaging.”

The $2 million study was financed by the National Institute for Literacy. The federal agency is drafting a series of guides to help child-care professionals, preschool teachers, and parents incorporate the panel’s findings.

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