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Literacy and its Impact on Child Development: Comments on Tomblin and Sénéchal

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Introduction

Only within the last decade has the concept of “literacy” become a central focus in early education. Previously, experts rarely viewed literacy as an essential aspect of healthy growth and development in young children. The current rate of reading problems among school children remains unacceptably high. Estimates show that about 40% of fourth graders struggle with reading at even basic levels and there is a markedly disproportionate representation of children who are poor and who belong to ethnic or racial minorities among those who struggle with reading.[1] The paradigm shift of the last decade, which received a great push forward with the 1998 publication by the United States’ National Research Council titled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, has increasingly emphasized early education as the context in which solutions to these pressing problems are most likely to have effect. Early education is the time in which young children develop skills, knowledge and interest in the code-based and meaning aspects of written and spoken language. I refer to these abilities and interests here as “pre-literacy” abilities to emphasize their role as precursors to conventional literacy. The current

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emphasis on pre-literacy as an essential part of early education draws upon two growing bodies of research showing that:

1. Individual differences among children in pre-literacy skills are *meaningful* – early differences contribute significantly to longitudinal outcomes in children's reading achievement;[2] and
2. The prevalence of reading difficulties is more likely to be influenced through *prevention* rather than *remediation*, since once a particular child shows a reading delay in elementary school, the odds suggest that a return to healthy progress is quite unlikely.[3]

Research and Conclusions

Experts Tomblin and Sénéchal provide timely and relevant discussions of current literature on pre-literacy development and its short- and long-term relationship to other developmental competencies. My reading of their texts suggests that three important points require further elaboration: decoding precursors, the language-literacy relationship, and the role of temperament and motivation.

First, the current cumulative research literature on early literacy development and its relationship to later reading outcomes identifies three unique predictors of reading competence: phonological processing, print knowledge and oral language.[2] Whereas the first two prepare children most directly for word-level skills (i.e. decoding), the third prepares children to comprehend text with little direct impact on decoding. Tomblin accurately notes that reading competence requires both decoding and comprehension, and Sénéchal emphasizes that children must first "learn to read" before they can "read to learn." Readers should recognize that the relationship between the two aspects of reading is multiplicative, meaning that both sides of the equation (Decoding X Comprehension = Reading) require some value other than 0 for reading to be functional.[4] Neither Tomblin nor Sénéchal adequately emphasizes the importance of ensuring children's development of decoding precursors during the years of early education. Children will never be able to read to learn (i.e. comprehend) if they cannot successfully decode. Children who enter beginning reading instruction with inadequate pre-literacy ability will be unable to keep pace in decoding instruction, which undermines the eventual transition to reading for meaning. Early education is the time in which educators can most readily improve children's odds of becoming a reader by giving them the pre-alphabetic competencies (print knowledge and phonological awareness) that will enable them to profit from decoding instruction.

Second, both Tomblin and Sénéchal emphasize the role of oral language in literacy development yet do not emphasize the relationship of literacy to language development. Scholars increasingly view the integrative relationship between language and literacy as *reciprocal*. Children's engagement in literacy activities, such as storybook reading or listening to rhymes, requires a metalinguistic focus in which oral or written language is the object of attention. Children's ongoing engagement in literacy activities and their developing propensity towards considering language as an object of attention become primary routes for language development. Once children begin to read, even at the most basic level, their reading of text becomes the greatest source of novel words and concepts, complex syntax and narrative structures, which then further propel their language development forward. In short, literacy is an essential vehicle for furthering children's language competencies in both the preschool years and during early and later schooling, and the relationship between language and literacy is more than a "one-way street" – language provides a base from which to explore and experience written language, which in turn further builds children's language competencies.

Third, the role of temperament and motivation in influencing children's pre-literacy accomplishments and experiences requires further consideration than is provided by Tomblin and Sénéchal. Tomblin notes the overlap among internalizing behaviours (e.g. anxiety and depression) and literacy difficulties, and Sénéchal notes that some children may avoid reading experiences, particularly those who view themselves as poor readers. The role played by early motivation, self concept and temperament in pre-literacy development requires greater attention in general, particularly when we consider how to facilitate other internal competencies (e.g. phonological processing and vocabulary) in prevention programs. Most early educators know that a child's motivation towards literacy is one of the most important contributors to pre-literacy success. By seeking out literacy experiences on their own or in the context of interactions with others, children essentially implement their own pre-literacy interventions! A small yet converging body of research shows that children's motivation towards and engagement in literacy activities varies considerably from child to child and relates uniquely to children's literacy gains from these activities.[5] Some children actively resist pre-literacy experiences, such as storybook reading, and children who have under-developed language skills or who are inexperienced with literacy at home may be more likely to resist literacy activities. The scientific literature has not yet shown why some children resist literacy activities and how this resistance relates more generally to children's temperament. Nonetheless, approaches to supporting young children's engagement in and motivation towards literacy experiences require consideration as one of the more important design characteristics of effective interventions.

Implications for the Policy and Services Perspectives

Current policy and service perspectives are derived from three unequivocal findings in the literature. First, children with an under-developed oral language base will exhibit great vulnerability for achieving reading competence, which in turn inhibits ongoing language development. Second, it is much more difficult to remediate reading problems than it is to prevent them. Third, it is possible to shift the odds towards better literacy outcomes for children with high-quality, intensive, systematic pre-literacy programs delivered to preschoolers and kindergarteners prior to the manifestation of reading problems.

Integrating policy, practice and research

Significant gaps persist in integrating policy, practice and research and in conducting research that can be readily applied to real-world programs. Tomblin emphasizes the need for future research on the mechanisms that produce literacy problems for children with language difficulties. The body of research on such mechanisms is one of the more well-developed and well-funded areas of research in the United States, and it has unequivocally shown the importance of oral language, phonological processing and print knowledge as causally linked to a child's ability to learn to read. What is currently needed is an increased focus on how best to facilitate linkages among policy, practice and research to ensure the effectiveness of real-world efforts to improve literacy outcomes for young children, particularly those who arrive in these programs with under-developed literacy and language skills. Sénéchal offers several evidence-based suggestions for promoting pre-literacy skills for young children, such as playing word games and reading books. The extent to which such activities are effective for children with language weaknesses, have a longitudinal positive effect and can be integrated into existing interventions has yet to receive careful examination.

Does quality matter?

Policy-makers, practitioners and researchers have rarely considered how the quality of adult-child interactions focused on literacy might matter, whether playing word games or reading books. Developmental theories of how children develop pre-literacy abilities presume that the quality of interaction matters greatly, with children's skills progressing more quickly and more readily in instructional interactions that are characterized by sensitive, responsive and non-controlling adult input. When provided with systematic, research-based early literacy interventions, the quality of teacher delivery of these interactions can vary immensely, and this variation appears to make great differences in children's literacy outcomes. As we design policies and services for young children that are designed to reduce the risk for reading failure

through prevention, we must ensure that the relationships and interactions children have with adults – which provide the context in which children's knowledge, skills and interests will grow – are of the highest quality.

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