

The National Early Literacy Panel Report and Classroom Instruction: Green Lights, Caution Lights, and Red Lights

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The National Early Literacy Panel and Preschool Literacy Instruction

Green Lights, Caution Lights, and Red Lights



The high level of acceptance in US society of the preschool years as a critically important time for building early literacy skills has led to a flurry of activity in early childhood research and policy. The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report *Developing Early Literacy* (2008) is just one example of this activity; in the upcoming years it may well affect preschool teaching as much as the National Reading Panel report (NRP 2000) affected K–3 literacy instruction, shaping early literacy teaching by promoting specific practices.

The NELP report is part of a larger movement in the past decade to ground educational practice in scientifically based research results (Shavelson & Towne 2002). While applauding the movement, we recognize that the journey from research

to practice requires a critical eye to ensure that teaching practices recommended by researchers do make sense. In this article we examine recommendations for practice emanating from the NELP report and related documents designed to lead educators toward better early literacy classroom practice. We begin by describing the recent influences on early literacy, including the NELP report and other documents that interpret the report's findings. We then review the implications of literacy practice for preschoolers recommended in the NELP report and in publications that draw on NELP. Our intention is to make clear for practitioners, administrators, policy makers, and those involved in early childhood professional development which of the instructional recommendations made for early literacy are warranted and which may well create problems for some children's later reading success if implemented by preschool teachers.

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Recent influences on early literacy policy and practice

National influences have been felt increasingly in preschool education over the past decade (for example, multiple national research panels, Common Core State Standards adopted by 44 states), and the Internet has opened the door to

voices that influence policy makers as well as practitioners. Three sources of evidence guided our critical reflection on the appropriateness of recommendations for practice resulting from the NELP report: analysis of the report itself, documents published that attempt to interpret the report for a nonresearcher audience, and discussions of the report as evidence of popular interpretations in the field.

The National Early Literacy Panel

In 2002, Congress assembled the National Early Literacy Panel to “summariz[e] scientific evidence on early literacy development and on home and family influences on that development” (NELP 2008, iii). The panel’s findings appear in a final report, *Developing Early Literacy*, written primarily for researchers. Like that of a number of other educational research panels, the purpose of NELP was to inform policy and practice, in this case by determining what educators and families can do to best support young children’s language and literacy learning. In addition, the NELP report was intended to provide recommendations related to literacy instruction materials for families and teachers, and professional development materials for early childhood teachers, family-literacy practitioners, and preschool program administrators.

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Documents related to the NELP report

Since publication of the NELP report, other organizations have developed resources to help interpret its findings and to establish guidelines for early literacy education. For example, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) published *Early Beginnings: Early Literacy Knowledge and Instruction* (Goodson et al. 2009) as “a guide for early childhood administrators and professional development providers.” Subsequently, other government organizations have endorsed *Early Beginnings* by, for example, distributing it at meetings such as the 2010 Early Literacy Conference in Chicago, hosted by the US Department of Education. Also, the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) published *What Works: An Introductory Teacher Guide for Early Language and Emergent Literacy Instruction* (2009), which is “based on the National Early Literacy Panel Report.”

These two documents are concrete examples of how the NELP findings are being used to recommend policy and practice. The two documents can be valuable resources for early childhood teachers and administrators when interpreted appropriately, but we have

concerns about their application in early literacy teaching. First, knowing what is an appropriate interpretation of the full NELP report can be difficult for teachers and families, who are not typically trained to read research. Second, although some documents are excellent resources that accurately present information from the NELP report (such as *What Works*), we believe other resources (like *Early Beginnings*) include inaccurate interpretations that, if applied in early literacy instruction, could hinder children’s long-term literacy development.

The buzz on the street

We also searched a wide range of print resources and Internet sites used by literacy professionals, families, and the general public, looking for current talk about early literacy. In this age of Internet influence, we wondered what impact the NELP report was having outside mainstream print publications. We were surprised to find very little discussion of instructional implications other than in sources in some way directly connected to NELP (for example, a special issue of *Educational Researcher* about NELP [McGill-Franzen 2010b], the NIFL and NCFL websites, and blogs directly affiliated



with NELP or NRP). We do, however, integrate the buzz we did find into the subsequent discussion.

Recommendations for preschool literacy teaching

We have categorized recommendations from or based on the NELP report using the following system:

Green lights—recommendations that make good sense when considering NELP’s research findings and the complexities of preschool education: go and apply them in your classrooms!

Caution lights—recommendations that give us pause: be careful about how you use these.

Red lights—recommendations that cause us to freeze in our tracks: these practices are really *not* good ideas for the preschool classroom.

Green lights

Throughout the NELP report and related resources, several implications for instructional practice are quite consistent with the wide body of research in early childhood education (see Neuman & Dickinson 2002, 2011; Dickinson & Neuman 2006) and recommended early literacy practices of recent years (see IRA 2009; NAEYC 2009). Interpretations of the NELP report, both *Early Beginnings* (Goodson et al. 2009) and *What Works* (NCFL 2009), appropriately identify alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language as essential elements of early literacy instruction. These three variables represent activities that have been part of quality early childhood programs for years and are frequently found in classroom schedules and lesson plans.

But for applications of research reports like NELP, it is not enough only to recognize appropriate instructional activities; it is also important

that teachers and families understand *why* they are appropriate. What makes the practices listed earlier (alphabet knowledge and so on) appropriate for instruction—and sets them apart from some other NELP-identified variables—is that the research related to them directly studied the impact of teaching alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language to young children. Accordingly, there were consistent and positive effects of instruction on children’s literacy development. For example, exposing preschoolers to additional language enhancement, ranging from specific target-word learning to encouragement of enriched play experiences or enhancement of creative thinking, produced marked differences in children’s expressive and/or receptive vocabulary skills (Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst 1988; Tyler et al. 2003). In addition, preschoolers performed better on early spelling tests and word-decoding tasks when teachers spent classroom time practicing letter-sound relationships and phoneme segmentation with them (Ball & Blachman 1991; Foster et al. 1994). Therefore, we know that instruction in these areas is possible, effective, and fits with the overall early childhood curriculum and

daily schedule, and that the relationship between these variables and later literacy achievement is a meaningful one for designing instruction.

Caution lights

Not all of the NELP recommendations can be so directly applied to practice. We see the need for caution when considering *what* is taught and *how* early literacy instruction is carried out for some of the recommendations drawn from the NELP report.

The what of early literacy instruction. A federal research report like NELP’s can influence what is included

Interpretations of the NELP report appropriately identify alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language as essential elements of early literacy instruction.



in or excluded from the preschool day. We agree with the anonymous poster to NAEYC's discussion board on Facebook who said that

literacy is only one piece of the larger early learning puzzle. Efforts to improve children's early literacy skills must be integrated with broader goals for children's development, such as their social and emotional growth and their exposure to new ideas and content. Strong early literacy programs should be coupled with strategies that emphasize the whole child. (see www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=5060433361&topic=7439)

Our concern is based on a history of federal research reports that have narrowed early childhood curriculum, as was seen in the response to the National Reading Panel report (NRP 2000). Following the NRP report and the related Reading First initiative (www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html), many schools with students characterized as "at risk" for reading failure drastically increased time spent on literacy activities, while de-emphasizing other important content learning, like math, science, and social studies. This practice likely resulted in better word decoders but also may have left children with less background knowledge for comprehending challenging content area texts in the middle grades (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman 2007). Early childhood administrators and policy makers must use caution to avoid similar changes to preschool curricula.

We see the need for a second caution light related to interpreting the predictors of later literacy achievement identified by NELP. The NELP report categorized predictor variables by their strength. Strength is measured by how consistently two variables occurred together (for example, how often does a child with good alphabet knowledge in preschool become a good reader in grade 1 or 2?). But such relationships can be (and have been) easily misinterpreted. The most important thing to understand about



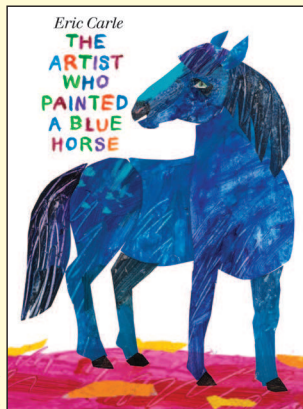
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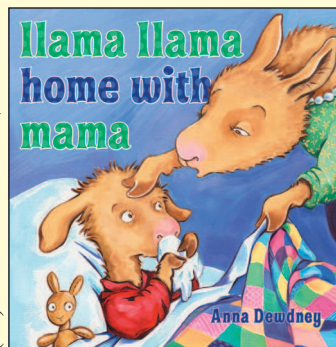


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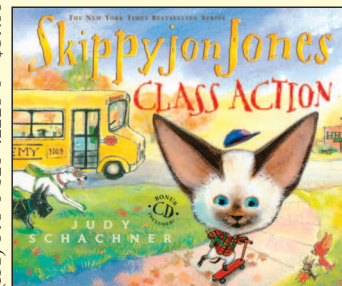
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predictor variables is that stronger predictors are not necessarily more important in achieving the sought-for outcome.

For example, basic skills (like alphabet knowledge) are easier to learn, teach, and measure than more complex skills like oral language. It is difficult to measure oral language skills because development occurs on so many levels (such as articulation, vocabulary, grammar, or practical use). On the other hand, it is easy to measure alphabet knowledge; we can simply ask a child to identify letters. Partly because of this difference in developmental and assessment complexity, it is harder to measure the relationship between a variable like oral language and later literacy achievement. So, even though NELP reported only a moderate relationship between oral language and later literacy achievement, experts agree that oral language is, in fact, an extremely important part of literacy development (Cunningham & Stanovich 1997; Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek 2010).

We address this issue in response to examples of serious misinterpretations of NELP's findings. For example, in *Early Literacy: Leading the Way to Success—A Resource for Policymakers* (RMC Research Corporation 2009), the section describing the strongest predictor variables is titled "Most Important Skills." Concluding that the strongest predictor-variable correlations from NELP indicate the most important skills to teach is a gross misapplication of the NELP findings, one that could have troubling, unintended consequences if applied in educational policy and practice.

Others, such as Dickinson, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek, have discussed concerns with this same issue. In their article about NELP's findings on oral language, Dickinson, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2010) conclude:

Taken together, our argument is that the NELP report has the unfortunate and unintended outcome of minimizing the crucial contribution of oral language to reading. The report overlooked the fact that language is *unique* among precursor abilities in its pervasiveness for both early and later reading competencies and for the duration of its effects on reading comprehension as code breaking turns into meaning making. The underrepresentation of the importance of language may have resulted, in part, from the developmental period that the panel was directed to examine and from the decision to tally direct effects and use them as the sole metric for determining the relative importance of predictor variables. (308)

The how of early literacy instruction. As explained previously, some NELP recommendations—teaching alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language—are essential in early literacy instruction. However, it is necessary to proceed with caution when deciding how to develop these skills in young children.

Take, for example, the learning goal "knowing the names of printed letters" recommended for practice in *Early Beginnings* (Goodson et al. 2009, 6), which states that a child should be able to "label letters correctly." On one level, we are in full accord with this goal; but we also see the potential for such a recommendation leading to skill-and-drill activities that empha-

size memorization rather than rich, conceptually based learning. Consider one of the recommended activities in *Early Beginnings*: "Show a set of letters and ask the child to name them in order as quickly as they can" (Goodson et al. 2009, 10). We worry that practices like this will replace richer experiences, like book reading and center time infused with language and literacy. Without high-quality models of instructional practice, the vague language in NELP-related documents could be applied in inappropriate ways. This concern echoes that of NAEYC's (2009) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice: "At the preschool and K–3 levels particularly, practices of concern include . . . fragmented teaching of discrete objectives" (4).

A related issue is the inclusion of play as part of the preschool literacy curriculum. Because play is not explicitly mentioned in NELP or any of the related documents, we fear that the limited amount of time currently allowed for play in preschool and kindergarten curricula will decrease even more. It is *very* possible to integrate literacy concepts into child-initiated choice center time—we refer specifically to play that may occur as part of a library, writing, block, sand, water, or theme-inspired dramatic play center (pet shop, café, veterinarian's office, grocery store). The authors' experiences with three federally funded Early Reading First grants (see www.uic.edu/educ/erf) have yielded successful results on traditional measures of literacy achievement by including literacy- and content-related dramatic play in the daily activities of preschoolers (for example, DeStefano & Rempert 2007; DeStefano, Rempert, & O'Dell 2008). In many cases, we increased the total amount of child-initiated choice time. The keys to success were (1) a rich, integrated curriculum with quality instructional materials; (2) language, vocabulary, and interactional scaffolding by teacher and assistant; and (3) excellent instructional differentiation also

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carried out by teachers and assistants in all parts of the school day—especially during center time.

When center time activities are connected to the curricular theme, multiple opportunities for vocabulary exposure exist. Add high-quality conversation that is scaffolded by a knowledgeable teacher or assistant, and children can learn many new words across multiple content areas. For example, when teachers strategically position themselves at the library center and ask children to “read” familiar storybooks, children work on concepts of print and vocabulary *and* story comprehension. A writing center can help children practice and master phonological awareness, letter identification, and concepts about print. In addition, a writing center where children are encouraged to create invitations for a puppet show or menus for a restaurant in the dramatic play center provides an *authentic* purpose for engaging in a literacy activity. When authenticity is replaced by more skill-and-drill activities, we often see children’s play and engagement decrease. For this reason, we are signaling caution.

Red lights

Several of the predictor variables identified by NELP may not be developmentally appropriate or effective for early childhood classroom practice. Rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters/digits, RAN of objects/colors,

phonological memory, and visual processing are all factors the NELP report identified as strong or moderate predictors of later literacy achievement; however, this does not mean that we should instruct children in these skills. Like a number of other early childhood professionals (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek 2010; Paris & Luo 2010; Schickedanz & McGee 2010) and even certain members of the panel (Shanahan 2009; Strickland 2009), we strongly disagree with drawing a straight line from these variables to instruction. Unlike the variables recommended earlier for instruction (see “Green Lights” section) that are supported by research documenting the effectiveness of instruction, the RAN variables are better conceptualized as a *result* of learning. In other words, children who already know letters, numbers, colors, and so on tend to be able to name them quickly, but they did not learn the letters, numbers, and colors simply by being asked to name them quickly.

Although activities like the aforementioned recommendation from *Early Beginnings*, “Show a set of letters and ask the child to name them in order as quickly as they can” (Goodson et al. 2009, 10), may be part of a periodic assessment plan to monitor letter-naming fluency, such an instructional application of the NELP findings related to RAN could easily lead to a day filled with numerous skill-and-drill activities. This problematic application is appearing not only in teacher resources, but

in resources for parents and families as well. A recent *Child Care Aware* newsletter for families promotes RAN:

- Prepare cards with pictures of animals, people, toys, and colors. Ask your child to name the picture on the cards. Repeat the game until your child can quickly name the pictures.
- Show your child a deck of playing cards or a stack of cards with letters. Ask your child to name numbers and letters. Repeat . . . (see <http://ccaapps.childcareaware.org/en/subscriptions/dailyparent/volume.php?id=65>).

There is simply no research that concludes that practicing things like RAN improves literacy outcomes. In our view, these examples are inappropriate interpretations of the NELP findings. Such examples are the reason for our concern that misinterpretations of the NELP report threaten high-quality early childhood learning experiences that integrate play, exploration, and meaningful interaction with adults and peers in the daily schedule. In place of activities that are rich in concepts and interactions, we fear that instruction could become narrowly focused on basic skills through inappropriate teaching practices.

Moving forward

Writing large-scale research reports is no easy task for the professionals who undertake the job. Likewise, interpreting a document like the NELP report is no easy task for teachers, administrators, business leaders, and policy makers. We applaud the efforts of the National Early Literacy Panel and believe it is the responsibility of the panel’s funding agency and the panel members to swiftly and accurately interpret and disseminate the report’s information to the general public. Aside from a special issue of *Educational Researcher* (McGill-Franzen 2010a) entirely dedicated to

Green, Caution, and Red Light Literacy Lessons

Green Lights—Effective Teaching Practices

- Using developmentally appropriate ways of teaching alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language.
- Focusing on real (authentic) ways to teach early language and literacy concepts and skills.

Caution Lights—Remember . . .

- Children need instruction in content and developmental areas (math, science, social-emotional learning) and code-based aspects of literacy to thrive in long-term literacy development.
- “Strongest predictors” do not necessarily indicate where instructional emphasis should be placed. Oral language development, alphabet knowledge, and phonological awareness are *all* critical to early literacy development.
- Children need to practice real-life literacies infused in play and child-centered contexts (e.g., library and writing centers, dramatic play).
- Overemphasis on skill-and-drill practice (e.g., worksheets and flash cards) is not a developmentally appropriate or authentic way to teach foundational literacy skills.

Red Lights—Teaching Practices to Avoid

- Having children work on Rapid Automatic Naming of letters, numbers, objects, or colors.
- Direct lessons on phonological memory (remembering spoken information for a short period of time).
- Direct lessons on matching or identifying differences between visual shapes or symbols (visual processing).

the NELP report, this research has not yielded very much buzz on the street. We have found that certain support documents intended for parents, educational professionals, and policy makers have done a better job than others of interpreting the findings of the NELP report and aligning recommendations with high-quality early literacy instruction.

We identified many caution and red lights in *Early Beginnings* (Goodson et al. 2009) because it contains considerable potentially misleading information. It suggests activities that are the opposite of what we, the authors, believe constitutes high-quality early literacy instruction, but it has been distributed at professional meetings with no further elaboration! Better interpretations of the NELP report, like *What Works* (NCFL 2009), are more difficult to find and less frequently distributed. Researchers, teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers, and business leaders need to search extensively to discover documents like *What Works* or “Read with Your Child” and “Talk with Your Child” (available from www.famlit.org/free-resources/what-works). A Google search, for example, for “National Early Literacy Panel” yields a page and a half of other references to the NELP report before coming up with the National Center for Family Literacy’s website, and as research on Internet searches reveals, almost no one accesses sites beyond the first few listed.

It is our hope that this article, at a minimum, better informs the teachers and families of young children. Administrators and policy makers who read *Early Beginnings* (Goodson et al. 2009) and *Early Literacy: Leading the Way to Success* (RMC Research Corporation 2009) may not think twice about directly implementing the misleading information these documents present. We encourage teachers to speak out when or if someone asks them to directly use RAN or to focus almost exclusively on teaching the skills the National Early Literacy Panel identified as strongly related to later

Much research also supports the importance of other literacy practices, including, but not limited to, building knowledge and oral language through authentic play infused with language and literacy.

literacy achievement. Teachers need to know that much research also supports the importance of other literacy practices, including, but not limited to, building knowledge and oral language through authentic play infused with language and literacy.

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