



The home-literacy environment of young children with disabilities[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Some studies have reported that young children with disabilities have qualitatively distinct home-literacy environments and interests than young children without disabilities. Such differences may contribute to differences in the early-literacy skills of children with and without disabilities. This study was designed to measure three distinct features of the home-literacy environment for children with and without disabilities (frequency of storybook reading, literacy teaching during book reading, children's print interest; hereafter frequency, teaching, and interest) and determine the extent to which these may vary for the two groups of children. Parents of 692 preschool-aged children (57% with disabilities), all enrolled in inclusive early children special education classrooms, completed a comprehensive assessment of the home-literacy environment in fall of the academic year. Children's teachers completed an assessment for each child on their early-literacy skills. The home-literacy environments of children with and without disabilities was distinguishable only for children's interest; frequency and teaching were comparable. Importantly, children's interest was positively associated, concurrently, with early-literacy skills. This study helps to pinpoint which aspect of the home-literacy environment distinguishes between children with and without disabilities. Findings also suggest the potential importance of identifying avenues to improve the print interest of young children with disabilities.

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The literacy skills that preschool-aged children exhibit before entering formal schooling and beginning to learn to read, usually at age 5 or 6 years, provide an important foundation for reading achievement (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001; Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Justice, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2006; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Several early-literacy skills found to be consistently strong predictors of future reading achievement in word recognition and/or reading comprehension include print knowledge, emergent writing, and phonological awareness (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). Print knowledge refers to children's emerging knowledge of the forms and functions of print, including the distinguishing features and names of the individual alphabet letters (Justice & Ezell, 2001). Emergent writing refers to children's developing understanding of the orthographic and compositional aspects of written language (Cabell, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2009). Phonological awareness refers to children's developing sensitivity to the sound structure of spoken language (Storch &

Whitehurst, 2002). Convincing evidence shows that preschool-aged children with well-developed print knowledge, emergent writing, and phonological awareness are likely to be better readers in their future than children with under-developed skills (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

With the importance of early-literacy skills to future reading achievement well-established in the developmental literature, there is increased attention directed toward identifying children who exhibit difficulties in developing early-literacy skills in a timely manner. The rationale for doing so is that interventions can be introduced that serve to enhance these skills, so as to potentially reduce a child's risk for future reading problems (Wilson & Lonigan, 2009). For instance, parents can receive training on how to read books with their children in ways that improve specific early-literacy skills, such as print knowledge (Justice & Ezell, 2000). Some work suggests that early interventions delivered to children with lags in early-literacy development can significantly improve their future reading abilities (Gillon, 2002; Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012).

One population of children considered to be at elevated risk for exhibiting lags in early-literacy development is children with developmental disabilities. This is particularly true for children with language impairment, in which children's language skills lag seriously behind same-age peers. The majority of children with

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developmental disabilities exhibit language impairment, either as a primary etiology (primary language impairment) or secondary to other conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, or hearing loss. A number of studies have shown that children with impaired language skills perform relatively poorly on measures of early-literacy skill, especially as compared to non-impaired peers (Boudreau & Hedberg, 1999; Cabell, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2009). Further, a recent investigation sought to determine the percentage of children with language impairment who exhibited an at-risk profile of early-literacy skill that signified heightened risk for future reading problems, using latent class analysis (Justice, Logan, Kaderavek, Schmitt, Tompkins et al., 2015). Children considered to have at-risk profile were those who exhibited significantly depressed early-literacy skills across multiple domains (e.g., print knowledge, emergent writing, phonological awareness) relative to other children with impaired language. Of the 218 preschoolers in the study, nearly 70% were in at-risk profiles, exhibiting significantly depressed skills across multiple domains of early-literacy skill. Profile membership was associated with the severity of children's language impairment: children with more severely affected language skills were more likely to be placed in an at-risk profile.

There have been some efforts to determine why so many children with disabilities are susceptible for lags in early-literacy skill as compared to typically developing children. It is possible that these children's literacy difficulties simply reflect an additional "symptom" of an underlying language disability (Scarborough, Fletcher-Campbell, Soler, & Reid, 2009); however, some research has suggested that the literacy problems observed among children with disabilities can also be environmentally based, resulting from impoverished literacy experiences provided by caregivers in the home environment (Light & Smith, 1993; Marvin, 1994; Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Scarborough, 1991). For instance, parents of children with disabilities have been reported to read less often with their children and to have relatively low priorities for their children's literacy growth as compared to parents of children who are typically developing (Light & Smith, 1993). Such work has contributed to the perspective that the literacy difficulties of children with disabilities may stem from limitations in the home-literacy environment. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that this literature has several salient shortcomings. First, many of the studies of the home literacy environment of children with disabilities have involved very small numbers of children (Fitzgerald, Roberts, Pierce, & Schuele, 1995), thus it is difficult to know how well any results can generalize broadly to children with disabilities and their families. Second, many of these studies have not included comparison samples of children who are typically developing (Al Otaiba, Lewis, Whalon, Dyrland, & McKenzie, 2009; Skibbe, Moody, Justice, & McGinty, 2010), thus limiting any conclusions that can be made about the distinctiveness of the home literacy environment for children with disabilities.

One study sought to overcome these limitations by conducting secondary analysis of a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of households across the United States. Specifically, Breit-Smith, Cabell, and Justice (2010) used data from the National Household Education Survey administered by phone to more than 25,000 heads of households in the U.S. in 2005. The survey content included information about children living in the home as well as the frequency of three specific home-literacy experiences (e.g., How often they tell stories to their children; How many minutes per day they read to their children; How often they visit the library with their children). Responses to these items for 478 caregivers with children (<6 years of age) with disabilities were compared to a randomly selected subset of parents with typically developing children ($n=478$). Among this large, nationally representative sample, there were no significant differences in the

home-literacy activities experienced by children with disabilities as compared to those without. Given the nature of the sample, being both large and representative, such findings raise questions about whether the home-literacy environment experienced by children with disabilities is, in fact, different from that of their typically developing peers.

Before proceeding, it is important to further clarify what is meant by the home-literacy environment. The home-literacy environment, as informed by a large body of quantitative and qualitative work, serves to represent the literacy-related resources and models available to young children, as well as the ways in which and frequency with which children engage with these resources alongside others and on their own (Van Steensel, 2006), which some researchers call the "active HLE" (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). Although a number of studies have focused exclusively on the frequency with which parents read to children and explicitly teach their children about reading and writing (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Scarborough, Dobrich, & Hager, 1991; Sénéchal, 2006; Sénéchal, Lefevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998), including those studies referenced in the preceding paragraphs, Van Steensel has argued that a broadened conceptualization of the home-literacy environment that captures the child's interests as an active part of this environment is needed to advance the field.

Thus, an additional limitation of the literature concerning the home-literacy experiences of young children with disabilities is that it has not considered children's interest toward print, or motivation to engage in interactive reading activities, as a salient aspect of this environment; this is the aspect of the environment that researchers refer to as the "active HLE" (Burgess et al., 2002). Rather, much of the prior research on home-literacy experiences for children with disabilities has focused on how often their parents engage in certain literacy-related activities, such as parent-child storybook reading, or the number of literacy-focused materials in the home, such as storybooks. For young children, engagement with others is a central mechanism through which they learn, as emphasized by several prominent developmental theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Sy, Gottfried, & Gottfried, 2013). With respect to early-literacy development, experts have suggested that children internalize knowledge about written language that is shared within the context of literacy-based interactions with others (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998). Children's interest toward engaging with others in such events, such as soliciting help to read words in their environment or asking for help to write their ideas, can be conceptualized as a unique feature of the home-literacy environment that should be represented distinctly from other aspects of the environment, which often represent how often parents initiate literacy-focused activities, such as reading to their children. Work by Fritjers et al. (2000) found a very small correlation (-0.13) between children's literacy interest and parent-initiated aspects of the home-literacy environment, such as the frequency of library visits and parent-child book reading (Fritjers, Barron, & Brunello, 2000). Further, their work showed that both children's print interest and parent-initiated literacy activities were unique, positive, and significant predictors of children's early-literacy skills. This study suggests that the home-literacy environment includes both parent-initiated and child-initiated literacy activities, representing both as potentially influential to understanding individual differences in the home-literacy environment and children's literacy development.

In the present study, we contribute to this literature and seek to address the unresolved question as to whether the home-literacy environment of children with disabilities can be distinguished from that experienced by children who do not have disabilities. Children in the present study were drawn from inclusive early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms that served approximately equal numbers of children with disabilities and typically develop-

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