



# Language- and literacy-learning opportunities in early childhood classrooms: Children's typical experiences and within-classroom variability



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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined the language- and literacy-learning opportunities of 400 young children enrolled in 81 early childhood classrooms to address two research aims: (1) to describe typical language- and literacy-learning experiences afforded to young children in classrooms, and (2) to investigate the extent to which young children had different experiences within classrooms. Results revealed that participating children, on average, spent over 18 min, or 20% of their day, learning in key language and literacy domains. Further, our findings highlight considerable between- and within-classroom variability in language- and literacy-learning opportunities and suggest that young children are afforded different experiences in their classrooms, particularly in specific learning domains. Future investigations ought to further unpack classroom educational practices to ensure that all young children develop the requisite knowledge and skills necessary for academic success in kindergarten and beyond.

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## Introduction

Over the past 25 years, young children's language- and literacy-learning opportunities have received increased national attention (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012; Barnett, Robin, Hustedt, & Schulman, 2003; National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 2002). This movement is partly due to findings from rigorous research studies that highlight the importance of these opportunities in early childhood education, including links with later academic skills, such as decoding, spelling, and comprehension (Mol & Bus, 2011; NELP, 2008). Young children in rich classroom environments with ample language- and literacy-learning opportunities show greater gains in these two critical learning domains as compared to peers who are not afforded similar experiences (Burchinal et al., 2011; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). Moreover, best-practice and child early learning

standards developed over the past 5–10 years have heightened stakeholders' emphasis on the inclusion of critical language and literacy practices in early childhood classrooms. The general goal of these standards is to establish a strong language and literacy foundation and to enhance children's opportunities for school readiness and later academic success (Bodrova, Leong, & Shore, 2004). Children enrolled in classrooms aligned with standards demonstrate higher literacy skills, for example, as compared to those students without similar academic opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). As a result of the increased emphasis on young children's educational learning environments, there is a need for a rich, contemporary investigation of children's language- and literacy-learning opportunities in early childhood classrooms.

The present study is situated in Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) ecobiological model, which posits that four areas, namely *process*, *context*, *time*, and *person*, interact to impact a child's development. Proximal processes, which are arguably the most important of these sources because they serve as the primary method with which young children learn in the classroom environment, include children's frequent interactions with adults, peers, materials, and concepts. The remaining three sources (context, time, and person) influence children's proximal processes. In the present study, we incorporate all four domains with the primary

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emphasis on children's language- and literacy-learning opportunities (proximal processes). These interactions capture the *context* in which they occur (e.g., content domains) and the amount of *time* that is spent in the language- and literacy-learning activities. Further, we are interested in investigating whether individual children have similar language- and literacy-learning opportunities in classrooms (*person* domain). Notably, the goal of the present paper is not to explicitly test this model but to use it as a theoretical framework to guide our work with regard to the interplay among these four considerations as related to the between- and within-classroom experiences of young children.

### Language- and literacy-learning domains

Theory and extant research converge on a number of language and literacy knowledge, skills, and activities that deserve substantial attention during the early childhood years (Bruner, 1975, 1981; NELP, 2008; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). This accumulating evidence suggests that early experiences show strong predictive associations with later literacy achievement, play a causal role in outcomes, and are malleable with rich activities and instruction (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; NELP, 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 2002; Piasta et al., 2012a,b,c). For these reasons, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers agree that young children benefit from extensive opportunities to advance their oral language (e.g., vocabulary) and emergent literacy (e.g., print knowledge, phonological awareness, and writing) in early childhood classroom environments. Approaches to providing young children with ample opportunities include shared book-reading experiences, interactions/discussions with peers and adults, adult-mediated activities, and access to a variety of print materials (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002; Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010; Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Because a considerable number of research studies support the incorporation of shared book reading in classrooms, we also highlight this instructional activity as one method of building oral language and emergent literacy (NELP, 2008).

#### Language knowledge and skills

Oral language development during the early years is particularly important because of relations with later literacy achievement, including word reading and reading comprehension (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; NELP, 2008; Scarborough, 1991; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002) and is directly related to the amount and quality of exposure (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). Early childhood proponents thus advocate that oral language ought to be a central component of early childhood education (Mol & Bus, 2011; NELP, 2008; Snow et al., 1998), as entwined in curricula (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002; Justice et al., 2008) and daily activities (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Early et al., 2010).

Vocabulary, in particular, has received considerable attention because the understanding and use of words is critical for literacy achievement, especially reading comprehension (Catts & Kamhi, 2005; McGregor, 2004). Thus, many interventions, particularly shared book reading (Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1994), discussion of rare words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002), and other explicit means of vocabulary teaching (Gonzalez et al., 2011; Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2011) have aimed to improve young children's vocabulary skills (Darrow, 2009; NELP, 2008).

#### Emergent literacy knowledge and skills

Because most conventional reading skills (e.g., word identification, reading comprehension) cannot be formally assessed during

the preschool years, researchers more appropriately focus on young children's emergent literacy skills, including print concepts, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and emergent writing as discussed below. Such skills are predictive of future literacy and develop prior to and during the early years (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; NELP, 2008; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and are amenable to instruction (NELP, 2008). Below, we briefly review each of these important emergent literacy domains as well as those classroom learning opportunities supportive of other aspects, such as word identification (e.g., decoding and spelling) and reading comprehension (e.g., inferencing, retelling, building background and conceptual knowledge).

Print concepts refer to general knowledge of the purpose and conventions of print (e.g., directionality and the concepts of letters and words). Early instruction in this domain shows not only proximal impacts on children's print knowledge (Justice, McGinty, Piasta, Kaderavek, & Fan, 2010) but has also lasting impacts on more conventional literacy skills through first grade (Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012). Although specific early childhood education recommendations are variable, it is generally accepted that young children benefit from "regular and active interactions with print" as well as classroom environments that contain a lot of print (International Reading Association [IRA] and National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1998, p. 32).

Alphabet knowledge encompasses the identification of letters and corresponding sounds (Justice & Ezell, 2004; McGinty & Justice, 2009) and is moderately to strongly predictive of future decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension skills (Badian, 1995; Hammill, 2004; NELP, 2008). Evidence suggests that young children benefit from alphabet instruction (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Walton & Walton, 2002), particularly when focused on both letter names and letter sounds (Jones, Clark, & Reutzel, 2013; Piasta, Purpura, & Wagner, 2010). National standards for kindergarten (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) as well as many state early learning standards indicate that letter name and letter sound learning are important goals for children (Bracken & Crawford, 2010; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012).

Phonological awareness is defined as the detection and manipulation of the sound structure of language (Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti, & Longian, 2008) with ongoing and overlapping development of specific phonological skills such as sound manipulation, segmentation, deletion, and rhyming (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Phillips et al., 2008). Phonological awareness skills measured during preschool consistently predict decoding, spelling, and comprehension in later years (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008) and are considered a primary causal factor in reading difficulties (Anthony, Lonigan, Driscoll, Phillips, & Burgess, 2003; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994). Phonological awareness develops with continued and brief exposure to language and literacy and is particularly malleable and sensitive to intervention; researchers recommend between 10 and 15 min per day of instruction (Ehri et al., 2001; Lonigan et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2008).

Formal development of conventional word identification (i.e., decoding, encoding) and reading comprehension (e.g., inferencing, retelling) skills is necessarily expected during preschool years. However, it is quite possible that some preschool-aged children begin to develop these skills and that early childhood educators target them during classroom activities. For example, some young children identify labels, signs, and other forms of environmental print, which may serve as a precursor to later word identification skills (Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Teale

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