



Emergent literacy profiles among prekindergarten children from low-SES backgrounds: Longitudinal considerations[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2011

Received in revised form 26 February 2013

Accepted 14 March 2013

Keywords:

Emergent literacy
Oral language skills
Preschool
Prekindergarten
Profiles
Person-centered

ABSTRACT

This study represents a longitudinal follow-up to a prior investigation that identified five profiles of emergent literacy skills among children in the fall of their prekindergarten year. Here, we examined: (a) how profile patterns changed from fall to spring, (b) the extent to which children remained stable in their profile membership, and (c) possible factors that may explain children's movement in profile membership from fall to spring. Participants were 484 children enrolled in needs-based programs. Eight measures of emergent literacy, across oral language and code-related domains, were administered in both the fall and the spring of the prekindergarten year. Latent profile analysis was used to classify children into fall and spring profiles ($N = 484, 369$, respectively). Although there were fewer profiles identified in the spring, children's membership within the profiles was characterized by a degree of stability, especially in the extremes of performance. Among children who shifted membership from fall to spring (35%), movement to a more desirable profile was primarily associated with children's emergent literacy skills, particularly oral language, at the beginning of the prekindergarten year.

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Decades of research consistently show that children from low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) backgrounds perform at a level well below their more-advantaged peers with regard to literacy achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This achievement gap is apparent at kindergarten entry and persists throughout the school age years (Chatterji, 2006; Denton & West, 2002; Duncan, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2002), with individual differences in children's literacy skills demonstrating remarkable year-to-year stability (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996; O'Malley, Francis, Foorman, Fletcher, & Swank, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Torgesen & Burgess, 1998; Wagner et al., 1997). In efforts to reduce this disparity, researchers have increasingly focused on examining the efficacy of preventive interventions that aim to catch children "before they fall" (Torgesen, 1998, p. 1; see also Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka,

& Hunt, 2009), and educational policies continue to direct funds towards implementation of early literacy interventions. An important complement to such efforts is basic research that studies the developmental trajectory of early literacy for low-SES children, particularly research that identifies individual differences that may contribute to long-term literacy outcomes. For instance, are there certain children within this high-risk group who appear most vulnerable to poor literacy outcomes and who, in turn, might benefit most from preventive interventions?

There appears to be considerable heterogeneity among low-SES prekindergarten (pre-k) children with respect to their emergent literacy skills (Zill & Resnick, 2006). In this regard, low SES is considered a group-based risk factor (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), such that being a member of this group increases the likelihood that a child will exhibit literacy difficulties but that there are children who will "beat these odds," so to speak, whereas others will not. Related to this point, a recent study showed that low-SES children exhibit five distinct emergent literacy profiles at entrance to pre-k, and that on the basis of these profiles, some children appear to be at greater risk for poor literacy outcomes (about 45% of the sample) in the long-term as compared to others (Cabell, Justice, Konold, & McGinty, 2011a). The present study serves as a longitudinal follow-up to that work and was designed to examine the stability of these profiles over an academic year of pre-k. Given that research with primary-grade pupils indicates that children's literacy performance in relation to peers remains stable over time (Francis et al., 1996;

[☆] We thank the many teachers, children, and research staff who made this study possible, with special mention to Amy Sofka, Alice Wiggins, Elizabeth Cottone, Khara Pence Turnbull, and Sarah Friel. This research project was supported by Grants R305G050057 and R305F050124 from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.

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Juel, 1988; O'Malley et al., 2002; Torgesen & Burgess, 1998), our aim was to determine the extent to which this stability is apparent during pre-k. Specifically, we studied the extent to which emergent literacy profiles apparent at the start of pre-k were similar to those at the end of pre-k and whether children's membership within those profiles was stable over time.

1. Theoretical model of emergent literacy

Emergent literacy skill is a general term that describes specific competencies of young children that are precursors to future reading achievements in either word recognition or comprehension (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). These foundational skills can be divided into two domains, or strands, namely, oral language skills and code-related skills (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Oral language skills include grammar and vocabulary in both the expressive and receptive modalities, and are seen as primary contributors to later achievements in reading comprehension. Code-related skills include print concepts, alphabet knowledge, emergent writing, and phonological awareness, and are seen as primary contributors to later achievements in word recognition. It is important to note that we consider phonological awareness a code-related skill, and not an oral language skill, because phonological awareness is distinct from oral language skills in its relation to later reading achievement (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Speece, Roth, Cooper, & De La Paz, 1999) and, in its most complex form (i.e., phonemic awareness), is causally related to helping children "break the code" of reading (Ehri et al., 2001).

Although the domains of oral language and code-related skills are theoretically distinct with respect to their relevance to later reading comprehension versus word recognition (Roth et al., 2002; Speece et al., 1999; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), skills in both domains are directly predictive of children's progress in beginning reading instruction (NELP, 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2005). In this regard, children with well-developed oral language and code-related skills have an easier transition to conventional reading once formal instruction commences, usually in kindergarten or first grade (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; O'Malley et al., 2002).

Many studies have described the developmental course of children's acquisition of oral language and code-related skills during early childhood (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Vasilyeva, Waterfall, & Huttenlocher, 2008) and the risks that low SES poses to development of these skills (Chatterji, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995). Nonetheless, despite the fact that emergent literacy development comprises a variety of different skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, print concepts, alphabet knowledge, emergent writing, phonological awareness), this body of work has largely neglected consideration of the likelihood that an individual child may have strengths in some emergent literacy skills and weaknesses in others and that such individual profiles may have longitudinal importance, particularly to understanding risk and resilience in reading development. The present study, along with our prior work (Cabell et al., 2011a), contributes to this literature by describing *within-child patterns of performance* over an academic year of pre-k to understand individual differences among low-SES children in their emergent literacy development and the stability of these differences over time.

2. The stability of children's literacy skills

As used in the field of developmental science, stability generally refers to the progress children make in relation to their peers from one year to the next (i.e., relative rank; Wagner et al., 1997).

The question of whether pre-k children's emergent literacy skills exhibit stability over time is an important one, as research on reading achievement in the *primary grades*, when formal reading instruction begins, has clearly documented that children's literacy skills and ranking against peers are very stable from kindergarten forward (Francis et al., 1996; Juel, 1988; O'Malley et al., 2002; Scarborough, 1998; Torgesen & Burgess, 1998; Wagner et al., 1997). Successful readers are highly likely to continue being successful, whereas poor readers are highly likely to continue to struggle; not surprisingly, once children begin to read, the best predictor of future ability is prior ability (NELP, 2008; Scarborough, 1998). Relevant to the present study, stable disparities in children's conventional skills are evident even when considering only the population of low-SES children; seminal in this body of work, Juel (1988) reported that 88% of children who are struggling readers at the end of first grade maintain this relative position to the end of fourth grade. Such findings have been highly influential to the rise of response-to-intervention models of reading intervention in the primary grades, in which intervention is delivered not to children on the basis of absolute ability but rather whether their skills show change within the context of reading instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

The fore-referenced body of work on the stability of literacy achievement in the primary grades, coupled with the seriousness of this issue and its relevance to educational policy and practice, raises the question as to when in the course of development children's literacy skills begin to demonstrate stability. Some work has addressed this issue using group-based cross-time correlational designs (e.g., structural equation modeling). For instance, in a study of low-SES children enrolled in Head Start (N=626), Storch and Whitehurst (2002) reported that children showed remarkable stability within the oral language domain from the end of preschool to the end of kindergarten ($r = .95$). More recently, Kendeou and colleagues (Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009) found strong continuity in children's oral language during a slightly earlier timeframe ($r = .80$). In short, the continuity in individual differences in oral language is very high from preschool into kindergarten and accounts for up to 90% of the variance in kindergarten oral language skills. Moreover, year-to-year stability remains high from kindergarten to first/second grade ($r = .98$) and from first/second to third/fourth grades ($r = .94$) (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

In the code-related domain, estimates of continuity from preschool (M = 54 months) to end of kindergarten are also high (e.g., .93; Kendeou et al., 2009), although Storch and Whitehurst (2002) found a slightly lower stability coefficient of .62 for preschool code-related skills, accounting for 38% of the variance in the same skills in kindergarten but nevertheless demonstrating considerable continuity. Looking specifically at component skills within the code-related domain, phonological awareness skills have shown very high stability from the late preschool period. Lonigan et al. (2000) found a perfect positive correlation between children's phonological awareness skills at approximately 5 years of age (end of preschool) and one year later; in other words, there was no change in rank order or spacing in children's performance from late preschool to kindergarten. From kindergarten through fourth grade, year-to-year stability estimates for phonological awareness skills remain high ($r_s = .83-.95$) (Wagner et al., 1997). Consistent individual differences in print knowledge also persist across preschool and kindergarten, with a cross-time relationship of .85 reported for alphabet knowledge (i.e., letter names and sounds; Lonigan et al., 2000).

The present study contributes to this extant literature by evaluating the stability of children's emergent literacy skills during the pre-k year through examination of profiles of performance. We utilize a person-centered approach to describe individual differences in a population through the creation of subgroups who share

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