

# Introduction

It is an exciting time to be working with preschool English learners! The importance of the preschool years for later reading and writing is well established. There is increasing interest in and dedication to ensuring that young English learners acquire strong early literacy foundations. There is burgeoning research on best early literacy practices in general, and there are similar studies specific to English learners. Professional development is increasingly provided for preschool teachers. These circumstances establish the promise of providing high-quality literacy programs for preschool children. The goal of this book is to respond to this current positive climate by providing a resource that contributes to young children's early literacy competence, which in turn leads to later reading success.

However, the optimism engendered by these developments in the early childhood field must be tempered by the reality that many reports document large differences in the quality of preschool programs. While the emotional needs of young children are typically supported in preschool settings (e.g., La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003), preschools differ markedly in the degree to which they stimulate the academic foundations for learning in specific areas such as literacy and math (e.g., Dickinson, McCabe, & Clark-Chiarelli, 2004; Whitehurst & Masetti, 2004). In addition, children more at risk for difficulties in achieving school success are also less likely to have the benefit of high-quality preschool experiences (e.g., Helburn & Bergmann, 2002; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; McGill-Franzen, Lanford, & Adams, 2002). At-risk status is most consistently defined as low family income, but it also includes minority status and speaking a primary language other than English (e.g., Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Snow et al., 1998). There is also a significant overlap between family income and speaking a primary language other than English. In 2003, 71% of Hispanic fourth-grade students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (Wirt et al., 2004), and 22% of children under the age of six had parents who were immigrants (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). For

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these reasons, creating high-quality literacy experiences for preschool English learners is an educational priority. Still, there is variability within the overall patterns. There are programs where English learners are achieving critical early literacy competencies, and there is a growing knowledge base on how to foster their literacy learning. This book has two primary goals that can contribute to narrowing the distance between actuality and possibility.

The first goal of this book is to enable the reader to reach a deep understanding of the intellectual, emotional, and social foundations of literacy for preschool English learners. To promote an understanding of these foundations, I hope to help you step inside a child's mind to appreciate how it must work to learn these essential foundations. A second way that I hope to promote deep understanding of these foundations is by helping you to internalize knowledge of the specific language and literacy domains important for preschool learners to master. These critical literacy domains include strong language skills, knowledge of the alphabet, and the ability to pay attention to and manipulate the sounds in words. Whether you are a teacher, a student, an administrator, a parent, or another interested party, this knowledge will help you promote the development of literacy skills in preschool English learners.

The second goal of this book is to contribute to the development of highly effective teachers who can translate their understanding of preschool literacy into practices that will lead children to high levels of literacy competence, engagement, and enjoyment. Potential literacy teachers include parents and other family members and family care providers as well as preschool teachers. I hope this book will help you to think like a child, to understand what is required for a child to learn about language and literacy, and to implement preschool practices that ensure this advancement occurs. Creating effective and engaging literacy experiences and environments where children eagerly apply their understandings to real literacy activities is key. My experience as a teacher, a researcher, and an advocate for English learners and their families is that there are no limits to literacy for young English learners.

I have been very fortunate to have had input from hundreds of teachers, site administrators, trainers, and regional and state literacy leadership groups. These individuals include early education and care professionals working within Head Start; state-funded organizations; and family, friend, kin, and private provider settings. They have helped shape my understanding of the important topics and issues to examine in this book. Their wisdom, thoughtful questions, and keen observation of children have been a source of great personal learning for me. These same individuals have made it clear to me that there is both a hunger and a need for early care and education professionals to have a greater knowledge of

preschool literacy, English learners, and their families, communities, and cultures in order for them to deliver on the mandate to ensure the language and literacy achievement of English learners. By providing professional development I have learned that early childhood professionals are very capable of achieving and internalizing a sophisticated understanding of preschool literacy, the practices that support it, and the unique linguistic and cultural/social influences on it that English learners bring. These experiences have encouraged me to set the learning bar high for early childhood educators, knowing that as with children, it is what is inside minds that will determine what they are able to accomplish.

## RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE

A strong commitment to using research to guide practice is represented in this book. I have been studying and publishing studies on the literacy development of English learners for 15 years. Studies that I have published on English learners are discussed in several chapters. The research base on English learners and English-only preschool children presents the early childhood field with an important challenge to continue recent trends to change and improve traditional approaches to preschool literacy. This research evidence leads to four points about preschool literacy that indicate the direction for continuing change in preschool literacy teaching:

- Preschool children can achieve sophisticated early literacy competencies (e.g., Report of the National Reading Panel [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000]).
- Preschool children learn in diverse ways and are dependent on both teacher-guided and child-guided experiences (e.g., Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Ehri & Roberts, 2006; Graue, Clements, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004).
- Preschool children who *enter* kindergarten with higher levels of literacy skills and language competencies are likely to be better readers (e.g., Adams, 1990; Duncan et al., 2007; Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Snow et al., 1998; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).
- There is growing evidence of the teaching practices that promote what children can learn and need to learn, and some practices are more effective than others (e.g., Debaryshe & Gorecki, 2007; Fischel et al., 2007; Han, Roskos, Christie, Mandzuk, & Vukelich, 2005; Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Consortium, 2008).

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While most of this evidence has been obtained with English primary language children, there is emerging evidence that much of it applies to English learners. The sources of evidence for these four points are cited within the book chapters and are discussed in relationship to the chapter topics.

With your help, preschool children can learn more about early literacy than what many believed they could learn, even relatively recently. This evidence calls for changing the expectations of what is considered developmentally appropriate literacy achievement in preschool—and this call is more critical for English learners and other groups of children at risk. There is growing evidence that high-quality instruction can positively influence children’s literacy learning in preschool (Mashburn et al., 2008) and that teacher-guided instruction is a critical component of the quality. This research suggests the importance of a significant focus on children’s language, literacy, and cognitive development in preschool (Karoly, Ghosh-Dastidar, Zellman, Perlman, & Fernyhough, 2008) and shifting the traditional balance between teacher-guided and child-guided instruction to include more teacher guidance within a well-structured and research-based curriculum.

Children’s literacy competence when they enter kindergarten is substantially related to their later success in reading. What happens in preschool has a strong influence on whether children will learn to read with ease or difficulty and the ultimate level of their reading skill. These relationships hold true for both English-only and English learner children. Because English learners are more likely to enter kindergarten with lower levels of early literacy, a strong focus on preschool literacy for English learners is particularly important (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Early childhood professionals who embrace this responsibility to prepare children for literacy success when they enter kindergarten are responding to the research evidence of what preschool children can learn and need to learn to become strong readers.

Studies focusing on preschool English learners are limited. However, the largely universal nature of how language is learned—which is rooted in biology—suggests there will be more commonalities than differences between children from different language groups. Results of several studies with early elementary English learners are consistent with this expectation, showing significant similarity between English learners and English-only children in early reading processes (Geva, Wade-Woolley, & Shany, 1997; Geva & Zadeh, 2006). There is also evidence from school-age English learners demonstrating the effectiveness of explicitly teaching beginning reading skills. Confidence that teaching practices, parenting practices, or other practices will lead to literacy learning for English

learners will be greater when research results have been found with that same group. Studies specific to preschool English learners are given prominence in this book. Research based on English-only children and older English learner children is included when it relates to aspects of literacy learning likely to be similar across language groups or when the evidence it provides is particularly strong or important. Throughout the book, I have indicated when research evidence is specific to English learners or has come from children who are English-only.

## **ORGANIZATION**

The book is organized so that you can select chapters and sections within chapters to pursue in a sequence that accommodates your interests. Following each section within the chapters are teaching and educational principles and/or exercises to apply your knowledge. These exercises are designed to help you consolidate your understanding and see how the topics in the book come to life through children, classrooms, and communities. A number of sections are devoted to hot topics in the field that have captured attention and debate. For example, the amount of oral English proficiency that English learners need to have in order to be ready for literacy instruction is one of these hot topics. Another is the appropriateness of explicit, group, and teacher-initiated instruction for preschool English learners. A third hot topic centers on the degree to which play leads to literacy development. These and other hot topics are examined through the lens of the available research. At the end of each chapter, all of the teaching and educational principles are listed together. Reviewing them should give you an integrated view of what a comprehensive teaching/educational approach for that topic will look like. Within each chapter, bulleted lists, graphic organizers, vignettes, research highlights, and self-reflections are abundant.

## **STORYTELLING**

I have assumed the role of a storyteller within this book—a storyteller of literacy ideas and the connections between them and the life they can lead in preschool settings. As a storyteller, I have tried to take complex ideas and ideas that may seem mysterious and strange at first and explain them with enough fact and logic that you will feel as though you can make them happen—“Of course that makes sense—I understand that story.” There is complexity in the language experiences of English learners who may also live within social and cultural organizations that are not familiar to you.

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Children's particular language background, their skills, their exposure to different languages, the language environment in the home, the literacy level of parents and other family caregivers, the family's immigration status and socioeconomic level, and how language is used among family members add to this complexity.

There is complexity in the domains of literacy learning and literacy teaching as well. In language there is vocabulary, pronunciation, story retelling, and pretend reading, for example. With the alphabet there are uppercase and lowercase letters, letter names and letter sounds, children's personal names, pretend writing, and alphabet books. Knowing sounds in words brings in rhyming, sounding out, and hearing the first sound in a word. There is even more complexity in learning how to select, orchestrate, and implement different strategies to teach all of this well. I apologize in advance for instances where I have missed the mark by either telling too much of the story with unnecessary detail or rushing along too quickly and leaving you behind and confused. I hope you find that the study, thought, effort, and time that this book will ask of you to hear its story will lead to your sense of empowerment as a teacher—a teacher who believes in and can create literacy experiences that result in *No Limits to Literacy for Preschool English Learners*.