

C o n c l u s i o n

Conclusion

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The symposium closed with small group discussions designed to facilitate the integration of the research presentations. Participants were also asked to identify the practical implications of the research findings for the education of early childhood educators, for policy development, and for future research. The small groups were created to represent the various stakeholders involved in early childhood education. Each group included faculty members who teach early childhood education, researchers, speech-language pathology consultants to child care centres, and program administrators from various provincial and federal organizations. The conclusions presented in this chapter are not attributed to any one group member. Rather, they are a compilation of the conclusions and suggestions discussed by the groups.

Main findings

The participants noted a general agreement among several longitudinal research studies (Dickinson; Goelman; McCartney) that quality day care has a long-term, positive impact on language and literacy development. Moreover, it was clear that there is a great deal of variation in the quality and amount of interaction between child care providers and children, which points to inservice training to elevate both quality and quantity. This is especially important for caregiver interactions with children who have language impairment (Dickinson; Girolametto; Wilcox) and with English-as-a-second-language (ESL) children (Dickinson, Wilcox). However, participants recognized that what constitutes an optimal language learning environment is not entirely clear (Wilcox; Warr-Leeper; Dickinson vs. Girolametto). While Wilcox, Warr-Leeper, and Dickinson suggested that teachers could learn evidence-based strategies that have been proven to be effective in promoting language development, Girolametto and Weitzman maintained that strategies designed to promote dyadic interaction are not necessarily successful in polyadic contexts, and that the

language input provided to children in group settings is, by its nature, complex and not finely-tuned to the children's language levels. Nevertheless, those researchers who investigated the impact of inservice training on child care providers were in agreement that inservice training has clear benefits for children's involvement in interaction, language learning, and early literacy development (Sénéchal; Girolametto; Warr-Leeper; Wilcox; Dickinson). However, inservice training programs differ in content and format. Thus, one unanswered question concerns the issue of which type of inservice training is the most helpful.

Education/training

In the small group discussions, several practical implications were raised concerning the education of early childhood educators and their continuing education. Overall, the participants suggested that a strong focus on the facilitation of language and literacy skills should occur within education programs at college and university. First, education programs should include coursework and internships that focus on the facilitation of language and literacy skills and include an evaluation process that evaluates both theoretical learning and practical application. At the next level, working child care staff should have systematic continuing education and periodic performance appraisals that include an evaluation of language and literacy facilitation skills. Therefore, proficiency in the facilitation of language and literacy skills should be viewed in the context of lifelong learning, initiated during postsecondary programs in early childhood education and continued throughout the child care provider's career. Participants suggested that the content of education/in-service training should include information on the development of language and early literacy skills (including book reading, print awareness, phonological awareness, narrative awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and early writing skills). They suggested that classroom learning on these topics should be supplemented by practical internships in which students receive modelling and coaching to develop their skills in facilitating language and literacy skills. For working child care staff, continuous evaluation and self-evaluation should be augmented by consultations from speech-language pathologists to model and coach language and literacy facilitation skills with different groups of children and through different activities. Systematic efforts to train language and literacy facilitation skills must impart the message that responsive language interactions and early literacy experiences have a direct impact on children's language and literacy development. At a fundamental level, this viewpoint is essential to the long-term success of all education and inservice training experiences.

One important area where there is little knowledge concerns the interactions of child care providers with children who have language disorders or are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The impact of diversity on language facilitation strategies is not very well understood. These children, due to their different characteristics (e.g., ease with which they initiate, topic maintenance skills, comprehen-

sion ability) may stimulate their care providers to interact in ways that may not be responsive to, contingent to, or consistent with learning strategies supported by the culture of the home. Discordant learning styles include cases in which children from certain minority groups are discouraged from initiating with adults in the home environment, whereas child initiations to adults in the child care environment may be highly-valued and rewarded as a means of eliciting responsive language input from the adults.

The symposium participants acknowledged that child care providers have difficult and stressful jobs. They work in hectic environments where resources are strained, child safety is of paramount concern, curriculum is fluid, and the children they supervise have many different needs. For these reasons, inservice training for child care providers may need to use a variety of different formats to facilitate the application of practical skills in challenging contexts. These formats may include hands-on training within a child care provider's centre, distance education opportunities, mentorship from master child care providers, and opportunities to visit specialized centres of excellence where facilitation skills are modelled and opportunities for guided practice are provided. Wilcox's use of "action research" in determining the needs of child care providers holds a lot of promise in creating an inservice training agenda that is appropriate for each child care environment and fully addresses each child care centre's unique needs.

Policy

Achieving high standards of language and literacy facilitation requires changes in policies that allocate funds for training, quality improvement, and professional development. If the overall objective is to improve the quality of child care, policy-makers and child care supervisors must clearly identify the expected staff and child outcomes and use evidence-based means of measuring these outcomes. One strategic means of achieving quality child care is to create mandatory continuing education programs for all early childhood educators. The budgetary implications of such a strategy includes additional financial support to permit child care staff to participate in these activities (e.g., funds to support substitute staff, payment of registration fees, and continued salary for those in training).

The symposium participants suggested that another strategy for enhancing language and literacy facilitation is universal, quality day care for all families, especially families at risk due to poverty, cultural differences, or handicapping disabilities. Many families choose child care centres that are affordable and/or geographically near their homes. Because of these constraints, they may utilize child care resources that offer less than optimal language and literacy facilitation. An even greater number of families elect to leave children in unlicensed home day cares where their quality is unknown. Unfortunately, the expense associated with quality child care means that those children who are most in need of language and literacy facilitation often

attend child care facilities where language facilitation is infrequent and the focus on early literacy development is inadequate.

Dissemination

The dissemination of research findings to policy makers, child care supervisors, parents, and child care providers is critical to transferring practical information from the research arena to the clinical arena. Academic researchers frequently publish their manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals, edited books, or other publications that are difficult for child care providers to access and read. Moreover, where clinical implications are discussed, they are frequently restricted to one or two paragraphs at the end of the manuscript and seldom include enough information to make their applications transparent. Research findings on language and literacy facilitation in early childhood settings need to be readily available, easy to understand, and straightforward to apply in classrooms. Several methods of dissemination were discussed by participants, including presentations, forums, and written publications. Suggested verbal dissemination methods included increased consultancy support so that speech-language pathologists can share information with individual child care providers, and the use of coaching and modelling methods with feedback. Forums and/or symposia designed for the faculty of child care programs, administrators, and policy makers were discussed as potentially appropriate means to provide important information to these stakeholders. Written methods of dissemination that were suggested included reader-friendly publications such as websites, magazine articles, and newsletters designed for parents and child care staff.

Research/development

The symposium participants highlighted the need for future research in a variety of practical areas. First, more research is required to understand the needs of ESL children and children from culturally diverse backgrounds. One goal of this research would be to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate resources for child care providers' use in facilitating language and literacy development. In addition, future research must disentangle the impact of individual facilitation strategies (as opposed to entire program packages) on children's language and literacy development. This would potentially identify specific strategies that are the most facilitative of children's language and literacy skills at diverse stages of development. Another line of research would identify individual differences in the needs and attitudes of child care staff. These would be examined in relation to the role they play in determining staff needs for different types of learning experiences or teaching strategies. Additionally, there is a great need for descriptive research to document the impact of funding policies on caregivers' and children's outcomes. Ultimately, resources and their utilization may dictate the quality of care, curricular changes, and the kinds of language and literacy outcomes that could be expected. Finally, long-term research is required to explore the progress of ESL children and children with special needs from birth to six years of age.

The symposium participants were asked to consider their own work environment and to consider which two practical changes they might make in their own area. The suggested changes are grouped into six areas, based on the work environments represented in the groups.

Speech-language pathologists/consultants

- give opportunities to child care staff to conduct self-assessments of language and literacy facilitation skills
- put more energy into developing training programs and follow-up procedures
- give child care staff information to assess and track language development and early literacy knowledge
- learn more about the day-to-day environment of child care
- share books and early literacy suggestions with child care staff

College and university faculty

- survey educational programs and their course content on language and literacy development
- provide internship experiences with lots of practice and feedback
- use more hand-over-hand to train student child care providers in language development
- provide electives in speech-language pathology training programs so that students could focus on learning how to consult to other professionals

Administrators

- address stresses on child care staff that hinder their ability to interact with children and facilitate language and literacy acquisition
- make it easier for staff to obtain inservice training in language and literacy facilitation skills
- build collaborative relationships with child care staff and families, community resources, and all related professionals (e.g., speech-language pathologists, librarians)
- include an evaluation of language and literacy facilitation strategies in annual performance reviews

Policy makers

- increase funding support to improve quality of child care programs
- incorporate criteria on caregiver-child interaction and language/literacy facilitation so that child care centres can obtain wage subsidies

The participants identified a lack of funding for new initiatives as the major obstacle to many of the above suggestions. The provision of adequate funding is of crucial importance to permitting quality improvement and, ultimately, to the language and literacy outcomes of all children in early childhood settings. Some participants perceived the lack of funding as a result of the limited value placed on the education of children by provincial and federal governments. The overall impact of funding problems is that child care professionals are viewed as having low status in terms of wages, support for continuing education, and resources.

A second identified obstacle is a shortage of time available to follow through on many of the initiatives noted above. For example, connecting various professionals, families, and community resources requires a time commitment from all stakeholders, as well as a leader willing to organize and facilitate sustaining relationships. There is a need for more dialogue to build a mutual understanding of objectives and outcomes, particularly between child care professionals and the speech-language pathologists who consult to child care centres. There is also a need for child care centres and their staff to communicate with each other and to share information. One participant noted that child care centres often exist in a vacuum, with almost no connection to what goes on in neighbouring centres. Although there is a recognition that all must work together to implement change, there is limited time (and money) to realize this goal in the short term.

Another obstacle is the education gap among professionals and researchers. There is a need for clear communication by faculty in early childhood education programs to develop an understanding of language and literacy development. Moreover, it is essential that these individuals stress the role that child care professionals play in language development to increase the understanding that child care practitioners can make a difference to children's language development. Education is the key to helping child care staff improve their own vision of their profession and of what high-quality care can do for children.

In summary, the symposium participants identified a number of practical changes derived from the research presentations. However, for the most part, the obstacles to implementing these changes appear to be deeply-rooted in a deficiency in financial resources, a lack of time for adequate communication, and an insufficient commitment from policy makers and community leaders.

Conclusion

The research findings presented at this symposium included a variety of research thrusts, including longitudinal research on the long-term effects of day care on children's language and literacy development, an examination of strategies that child care providers use to facilitate language and literacy development, and efficacy studies examining the impact of teacher training. Taken together, they represent a synopsis of the last decade's research in early child care settings, focusing exclusively on language and literacy outcomes for young children. The symposium participants were able to draw several important conclusions from the findings. First, there is still much work to be done by all stakeholders to improve the language environments of young children in group care. Second, there is a need for inservice training on language and literacy, and collaborative ways for all stakeholders to approach this task. No one solution was proposed. Rather, participants acknowledged the need for a variety of resources (e.g., courses, Web-based learning, distance learning, hands-on learning) to address the needs of all child care professionals. Finally, the frustration of working within a political system that constrains financial resources makes it difficult to pursue the most desirable options for training, research, and development. Without increased funding, many of the proposed solutions for ameliorating child care environments are difficult, if not impossible. Despite these challenges, this symposium was an important first step in sharing information and communicating with the various stakeholders (e.g., researchers, educators, professionals, administrators) in early childhood education. Participants reached a greater understanding of the potential of child care centres to create environments that are facilitative of language and literacy learning and, most importantly, helped to identify ways to move forward.