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Desired Versus Actual Literacy Learning Practices in Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education

Carol M. Trivette
Kassie Morgan
Tracy Masiello
Anya Robyak
Carl J. Dunst

ABSTRACT

Findings from a national survey of the appropriateness and use of early literacy learning practices with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in Part C early intervention and Part B (619) preschool special education are presented. Participants were parents of children involved in either type of program, early intervention and preschool special education practitioners, and technical assistance providers offering training to the practitioners. Results showed that there was modest-to-strong agreement that early literacy learning was desired for young children with disabilities or delays, but there is much less agreement about the extent to which the practices were used widely in either type of program. Implications for training are described.

Parents', practitioners', and technical assistance providers' beliefs about the importance of early literacy learning practices and the extent to which the practices are used in Part C early intervention and Part B (619) preschool special education is the focus of this *CELLpaper*. The study was conducted at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (*CELL*), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The major aims of *CELL* are to: (1) synthesize available research evidence on effective early literacy learning interventions, (2) identify and develop evidence-based practices from this research, (3) implement and evaluate the use of these evidence-based practices, and (4) conduct both general and specialized technical assistance promoting the adoption and sustained use of evidence-based early literacy learning practices.

The adoption and use of any practice, evidence-based or not, is dependent upon one's beliefs about the value and appropriateness of a practice for any given setting or with a targeted population (e.g., Fang, 1996; Moyles, 2001). Research in early intervention and preschool special education indicates that practitioners' beliefs influence their adoption and use of inclusion (Lieber et al., 1998; Marchant, 1995), natural environment (Shelley-Sireci & Racicot, 2000), family-centered (Dunst, 2002), and other early childhood (Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996; Campbell & Halbert, 2002; Royeen, Cromack, DeGangi, Poisson, & Wietlesbach, 1996) practices. Research also indicates that parents' beliefs and attitudes influence their judgments of the potential value of early intervention and preschool special education for their young children with disabilities or delays (Bailey, Scarborough, Hebbeler, Spiker, & Mallik, 2004; Hinojosa & Anderson, 1991; McWilliam et al., 1995; Reichart et al., 1989; Stallard & Lenton, 1992).

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The practice constituting the focus of the study reported in this *CELLpaper* was the preliteracy, emergent literacy, and early literacy learning of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with identified disabilities or developmental delays in early intervention and preschool special education programs (Dunst, Trivette, Masiello, Roper, & Robyak, 2006). The study was conducted to obtain baseline information about the degree to which parents, practitioners, and technical assistance providers agree that early literacy learning practices are appropriate for young children with disabilities or delays, and to ascertain the degree to which early literacy learning practices are currently being used in early intervention and preschool special education.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 230 parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities or delays; 508 early intervention and preschool special education practitioners; and 140 early intervention or preschool special education technical assistance providers and trainers. They were recruited through announcements sent to Part C early intervention and Part B (619) preschool special education State Coordinators, regional and state parent training centers, regional special education resource centers, the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC), and the PACER Center.

The study participants were from 48 States, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories. The majority of the survey respondents were female (91%). The parent respondents were mostly the mothers of the children receiving early intervention or preschool special education (83%).

Table 1 shows selected background characteristics of the participants. The participants' ages were quite varied, with the technical assistance providers being somewhat older than the practitioners, and the practitioners being somewhat older than the parents. The largest majority (71% to 92%) of the study participants had college degrees.

The parents' children were almost equally divided into three age ranges (birth to 3, 3 to 5, and 5 to 8). The largest majority of the children had identified disabilities or developmental delays (92%). The percentages of children currently receiving early intervention, preschool special education, or special education were almost identical to the distributions according to child age.

The majority of the practitioners (79%) had 6 or more years of experience working with young children with disabilities. Most practitioners were educators or speech and language therapists (79%).

Table 1
Background Characteristics of the Study Participants

Parents	Percent	Practitioners	Percent	Technical Assistance Providers	Percent
Age (Years)		*Age* (Years)		*Age* (Years)	
< 18	1	19-29	10	19-29	1
19-29	10	30-39	25	30-39	13
30-39	50	40-49	22	40-49	30
40-49	30	50 +	43	50 +	57
50 +	9				
Education		*Education*		*Education*	
High School	8	High School	3	High School	3
Some College	21	Some College	3	Some College	5
Undergraduate Degree	40	Undergraduate Degree	35	Undergraduate Degree	22
Masters/Doctorate	31	Masters/Doctorate	59	Masters/Doctorate	70
Child Age (Year)		*Professional Backgrounds*		*Years Providing Technical Assistance*	
0-3	31	Educators	62	0-5	34
3-5	38	Speech/Language Therapists	17	6-10	19
5+	31			11-15	20
		Occupational/Physical Therapists	7	16+	27
		Other	17		
Child Diagnosis		*Years of Experience*			
Identified Disability	78	0-5	21		
Developmental Delay	14	6-10	17		
Other	8	11-15	15		
		16+	47		

The technical assistance providers had varying years of experience training early childhood practitioners. They provided training to Part B (619) preschool special education (35%), Part C early intervention (33%), Early Head Start and Head Start (25%), child care (14%), and other early childhood (e.g., Even Start; 6%) personnel.

Survey

Table 2 shows the survey items used to assess desired and actual use of three early literacy learning practices. The three desired practice items were identical on the surveys completed by the parents, practitioners, and technical assistance providers. The three actual practice items included on Table 2 are the ones completed by the parents. The practitioners and technical assistance providers completed the same three items stated in terms of the use of the practices with young children (practitioners) and judgments of practitioners' adoption of the practices (technical assistance providers). Each item was scored *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neither agree/disagree*, *agree*, or *strongly agree*. The survey also included questions about the background characteristics of the survey respondents (age, education, etc.), the kinds of programs that were serving the children, the ages of the children receiving services, and the children's disability status. The survey was completed online using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com).

Data Analysis

The percentage of the three subsamples of participants who scored an item *strongly agree* was used as the index of strong endorsement and strong use of the practices. Strongly agreeing with each survey statement was considered the best estimate of a practice being *highly desired* and *consistently used* with young children with disabilities or delays.

The data were examined in a number of ways to ascertain factors associated with differences in the survey respondents' ratings of the literacy practices. First, we examined the similarities and differences in the parents', practitioners', and technical assistance providers' judgments of desired and actual use of the practices. Second, we examined the extent to which participant background characteristics and program characteristics were related to respondents' ratings.

Table 2
Early Literacy Learning Practices Survey Items

Type of Practice	Scale Items
Desired Practices	It is important for children, birth to five years of age, to learn beginning skills to read, write, and spell.
	Learning beginning skills to read, write, and speck should be part of all early intervention and preschool special education program practices.
	Children's IFSPs or IEPs should include outcomes, objectives, and activities to help preschool children learn beginning skills to read, write, and spell.
Actual Practices[a]	Early childhood professionals working with my child talk to me about how important it is for him or her to learn beginning skills to read, write, and spell.
	My child's early intervention or preschool special education program helps him or her learn beginning skills to read, write, and spell.
	My child's IFSP or IEP includes activities to help him or her learn beginning skills to read, write, and spell.

[a] Parent items. See the text for a description of how the practitioner and technical assistance provider items were worded.

RESULTS

Respondent Differences

Figure 1 shows the percentages of parents, practitioners, and technical assistance providers who *strongly agreed* that the literacy practices were desired and used with young children with disabilities and delays. Most parents (69% to 77%) indicated that the literacy practices were appropriate for young children with disabilities or delays but that the practices were not being used by early childhood practitioners with their children. Smaller percentages of the practitioners (14% to 58%) and technical assistance providers (46% to 63%) *strongly agreed* that the literacy practices were appropriate for young children with disabilities or delays, and few of the practitioners and technical assistance providers indicated that the practices were being used with the children. Most noteworthy is the discrepancy between the parents' and both the practitioners' and technical assistance providers' judgments of the desirability and use of the practices.

The small percentages of practitioners and technical assistance providers who *strongly agreed* that the practices were appropriate and used with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities or delays led us to reexamine the data in terms of the survey respondents who either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* about the desirability and use of the practices. Ninety-three (93) percent of the parents, 83% of the practitioners, and 90% of the technical assistance providers *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the practices were appropriate. However, the same kind of discrepancy found

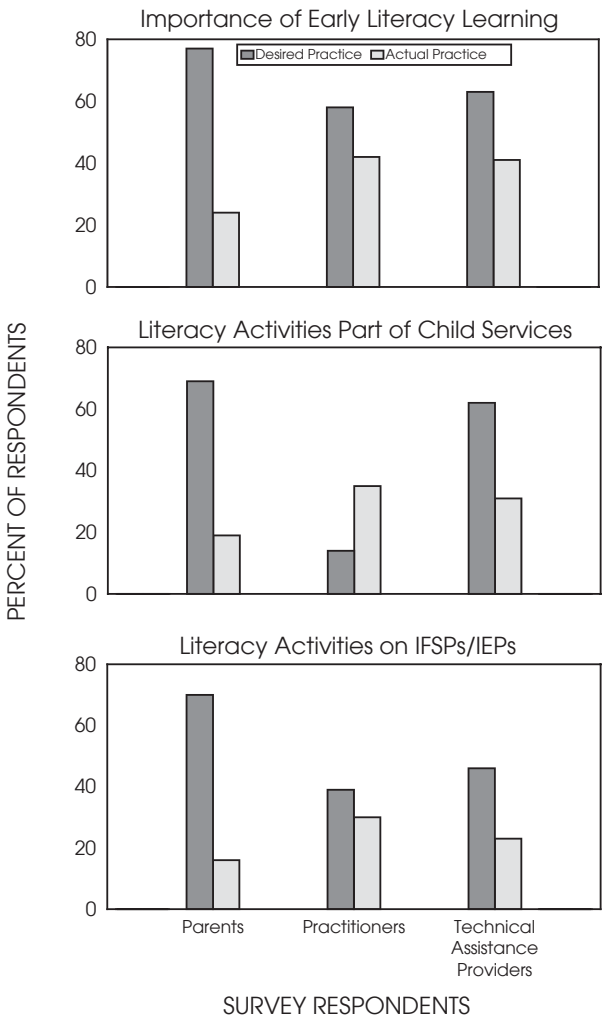

Figure 1. Percentages of survey respondents who strongly agreed that early literacy learning is important for young children with disabilities and delays, children are provided literacy interventions, and literacy outcomes and goals are included on IFSPs and IEPs.

in the primary analysis was also found in the secondary analysis of survey respondents' judgments about the use of the practices. Whereas 79% of the practitioners and 69% of the technical assistance providers *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the practices were being used with young children with disabilities or delays, only 52% of the parents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the practices were being used with their children.

Correlates of Responses

Analyses of the correlates of the survey respondents' ratings found that few personal or program factors influenced study participants' responses, and the few factors that were related were not unexpected. For example, the percentage of parents who *strongly agreed* that the practices were desirable for young children with disabilities or delays tended to increase birth to school age, although there was generally high agreement at all ages. Similarly, parents of children in Part B (619) preschool programs more *strongly agreed* that the practices were desirable compared to the parents of children in Part C early intervention programs. It is of interest to note that the practices were considered highly desirable regardless of child disability, type of delay, or identified condition.

Larger percentages of practitioners working in Part B (619) preschool special education programs indicated that the practices were both desired and used with children who they served compared to Part C early intervention practitioners. The same pattern of results was found for technical assistance providers training Part B (619) compared to Part C practitioners. Larger percentages of educators and speech and langue therapists indicated that the practices were both desired and used compared to occupational or physical therapists.

DISCUSSION

A considerable body of evidence exists demonstrating that both parents' and practitioners' beliefs influence the use of early literacy learning activities with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (DeBaryshe, Huntley, Daly, & Rodarmel, 1992; Karther, 1996; Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006; Miller & Smith, 2004; Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996). Findings reported in this paper indicate that there was modest-to-strong agreement that early literacy learning is appropriate for young children with disabilities or delays, but there is much less agreement regarding the extent to which literacy practices are used with the children. In both the primary and secondary analyses of the survey data, parents reported considerably less use of the practices compared to the practitioners and technical assistance providers. The discrepancy was most apparent for the survey item asking whether literacy outcomes or goals are included on children's IFSPs and IEPs (see Figure 1).

Despite these differences, the results are nonetheless encouraging in terms of the survey respondents' judgments of the desirability of early literacy learning practices for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities or delays. Between 75% and 94% of the three desirability items were rated *agree* or *strongly agree* by all three groups of survey respondents. Both social marketing (Andreasen, 2002; Kotler & Roberto, 1989; Sensiper, 1999) and social norms marketing (Linkenbach, 1999, 2002; Linkenbach, Perkins, & DeJong, 2003) research and practice indicate that adoption or modification of targeted behavior is more likely to occur when the targeted behavior is judged desirable. This appears to generally be the case among the respondents in this study. Therefore, increasing parents' and

practitioners' use of early literacy learning practices with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities or delays seems possible due to the high degree of desirability reported in this study.

The fact that parents of older preschoolers and practitioners and technical assistance providers in Part B (619) preschool special education indicated that the literacy practices were both desired and more frequently used was not unexpected. Older preschoolers, and especially children approaching kindergarten age, are expected to have mastered the kinds of readiness skills that prepare them for more formal schooling, including, but not limited to, reading and writing (e.g., Hiebert & Papierz, 1990; Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). Notwithstanding this commonly held belief, preliteracy, emergent literacy, and early literacy learning opportunities are generally considered appropriate throughout the preschool years (e.g., Honig, 2004; Knapp-Philo, Notari-Syverson, & Stice, 2005; Lawhon & Cobb, 2002; Parlakian, 2003; Soundy, 1997; Zeece & Churchill, 2001).

The challenge of introducing early literacy learning practices broadly into early intervention and preschool special education is increasing knowledge and awareness of the kinds of practices that are appropriate for young children with disabilities and delays, and providing practitioners materials that they can use as part of their day-to-day work with young children and their families. This is being accomplished in *CELL* through the development of user-friendly evidence-based practice guides (Dunst, Trivette, Masiello, Roper et al., 2006) and the provision of technical assistance promoting the adoption and sustained use of the practice guides (Dunst, Trivette, Masiello, & McInerney, 2006). Awareness of evidence-based literacy learning practices is being accomplished by general technical assistance and dissemination of *CELL* products and materials through the Center website (www.literacylearningpractices.org). Knowledge and use of *CELL* products and materials is being accomplished through specialized technical assistance. The goal is to broadly infuse early literacy learning practices in both early intervention and preschool special education throughout the U.S. and its jurisdictions.

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AUTHORS

Carol M. Trivette, Ph.D., and Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., are Co-Directors of the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute in Morganton and Asheville, North Carolina, respectively, and Co-Principal Investigators of the Center for Early Literacy Learning. Tracy M. Masiello, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist at the Puckett Institute, and Kassie Morgan, M.A., and Anya Robyak, M.Ed., are Research Associates at the Puckett Institute.