

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Capitalizing on Early Literacy Standards in Play

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Children's play is a primary vehicle for learning in early childhood classrooms. In order for teachers to effectively support learning, they must become attuned to how children are demonstrating progress towards important educational goals, such as those described in states' Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS). In the research study which this article is based on, we investigated preschool teachers' ability to identify evidence of early literacy developmental milestones in children's play, connect these milestones to ELDS, and plan reasonable learning-rich extensions that built on children's developmental readiness. We found that teachers were largely able to identify evidence of literacy development using vignettes and envision evidence-based pedagogical extensions that would support children's learning. This was most evident in the areas of phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge and least evident in areas related to engagement and comprehension. Implications and recommendations for teachers and professional development are provided.

Keywords: teacher knowledge, literacy, early childhood, standards

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS) have been developed in each of the 50 United States and throughout the world to support teachers in knowing what to expect across domains for young children. These standards describe what children at various ages and stages (e.g., older toddler, young preschooler) should know and be able to do across domains (e.g., cognitive development, health and physical development, language development and communication). Many resources and much time has been devoted to supporting early childhood educators in knowing these standards so that they can use them in their classrooms (Scott-Little et al., 2007). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of knowledge around teachers' use of these standards. In particular, the ways teachers use these standards in their instruction is an area of research interest.

We were particularly interested in exploring how sensitive preschool teachers were to early literacy developmental milestones in children’s play and how they were able to connect these milestones to ELDS and plan reasonable learning-rich extensions that built on children’s developmental readiness. We purposefully use the term “sensitive” to denote teachers’ ability to notice and respond to anecdotal evidence of development demonstrated in play. We consider children’s play to be a stimulus in the early childhood environment to which teachers have a varying ability to identify as evidence of development. We believe this sensitivity is a precursor to effective instruction when teachers plan instructional activities and extensions based on their observations.

Our interest in teachers’ sensitivity to these standards in play stems from the central role of play in early childhood education. Play is highly regarded as a developmentally appropriate approach to early childhood education because it promotes active, meaningful, and joyful learning (Ginsburg, K. R. & Committee on Communications and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2007; NAEYC, 2020b; VanHoorn et al., 2015).

We focused our investigation around early literacy given the critical nature of foundational literacy development in early childhood classrooms (Adams, 1990). In the pre-kindergarten period, children must develop strong oral language skills; the necessary precursors to lead to proficient word reading, such as phonemic awareness and concepts of print; and the executive function necessary to coordinate the complex task of reading, such as self-regulation and motivation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Scarborough, 2001).

Current Study and Key Findings

In the study upon which this research-to-practice summary is based (Jordan & Sumrall, 2023), we explored how well preschool teachers were able to identify developmental milestones in children’s play, connect those milestones to ELDS, and plan reasonable learning-rich extensions that built on children’s developmental readiness. Data were collected from eight female preschool teachers working in a state-funded Pre-K classroom within a state located in the southeastern United States. Teachers were interviewed using the Preschool Literacy - Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PL-PCK) Interview Protocol (Authors, 2023). The interview protocol consists of a written description of two play scenarios, each containing multiple evidences of children engaging in early literacy in their play. The second scenario also included a child’s work sample (i.e., a drawing that included some writing). These scenarios can be seen in Jordan and Sumrall (2023).

For use with this protocol, the authors organized the The Language Development and Communication domain from the state’s ELDS into six **subdomains**, which are subtopics that fall within the domain. These subdomains included: (a) interest and motivation to read, (b) comprehension and use of information in books, (c) book knowledge, (d) phonological awareness, (e) alphabet knowledge, and (f) writing. Each of these subdomains is an important aspect of the science of reading and necessary for proficient reading development (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Scarborough, 2001). Within each of these subdomains are **developmental indicators**, which are the specific statements of expectations for children’s development and learning that are tied to particular age levels. Although the states’ ELDS document includes developmental indicators for infants, younger toddlers, older toddlers, and younger preschoolers, we focused solely on

development indicators for older preschoolers since our participants taught children in this age group (48 months - 60+ months).

From this study, it is clear that teachers are able to identify anecdotal evidence of literacy development using vignettes depicting children at play and envision reasonable and evidence-based pedagogical extensions to advance their learning. Teachers were most adept at identifying evidence of development in play in the subdomains of *phonological awareness* and *alphabet knowledge* and least adept in *interest in and motivation to read* and *comprehension and use of information in books*. Largely, teachers were able to plan reasonable literacy-rich extensions that were not only appropriate, relevant, and based on evidence-based teaching strategies, but extensions also directly expanded upon the play described in each of the scenarios. Some teachers did describe general non-evidence-based responses to the depictions of children's play, such as non-specific praise or broadly responding that they would ask the children open-ended questions about their play. When asked which subdomains their extensions would support, teachers were usually accurate and oftentimes recognized that their extension would support development across multiple early literacy subdomains.

We were surprised, however, with how unfamiliar most teachers were with the developmental indicators and subdomains, even when presented with a condensed list of the subdomains and developmental indicators. When teachers were asked qualitatively about their familiarity with the ELDS document from which the developmental indicators and subdomains were taken, most indicated that they had heard of it, received some level of training on it, and had access to it somewhere within their classroom. Nevertheless, teachers also unanimously self-reported that the ELDS document was not something they had been provided much time or insight into how to use in relation to the children in their classrooms. Universally, they indicated that they would benefit from more professional development on what it means for them, their students and their teaching.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Early Childhood Teachers

One of the most important reasons for the development of ELDS is to increase program quality by enhancing the knowledge and skills of teachers (Petersen et al., 2008). There is a great deal that can be learned regarding the content and use of ELDS. We recommend that teachers not only become highly knowledgeable of children's development across domains and content areas, but more importantly, learn how to *use* this information to inform their instructional practices. Since much learning occurs in play in early childhood classrooms, teachers must become adept at recognizing developmental milestones in children's play and in turn, use this knowledge to plan and implement learning opportunities that are sensitive to children's interests and developmental readiness.

These teaching and learning opportunities may occur in naturalistic (unplanned) and intentional (planned) ways throughout the day. Teachers need to understand and be prepared to support learning in both ways. For example, there are numerous naturalistic opportunities throughout the day where children's progress towards standards can be seen and expanded upon such as free play,

group time and during conversations with peers and adults. Teachers must recognize the opportunity for learning in the moment and be prepared to provide thoughtful, intentional learning extensions that are sensitive to children's developmental readiness.

Teachers can also use their observations of children, including those of children at play, to plan curriculum that will continue to support children's growth and development towards the standards. For example, teachers can plan learning activities or provide materials that specifically relate to children developing proficiency in goals outlined in their states' standards (Kluth & Straut, 2001). In some cases, teachers may put out materials in a learning center and invite children to manipulate the materials. Teachers may plan large or small group time activities targeted to teach specific skills outlined in ELDS (Gronlund, 2006). In daily routines, teachers may build opportunities for children to practice specific skills outlined in ELDS documents. There is a time and place to use standards in both naturalistic and planned ways, and to best support children's learning, educators must be prepared to capitalize on both.

Lastly, we would like to discuss implications for teachers that specifically relate to early literacy, since ELDS in this domain was the focus of this study. The teachers in this study demonstrated difficulty in accurately identifying developmental indicators and connecting those accurately to subdomains of literacy, even with a list of subdomains provided. We encourage teachers to become better informed on the components of literacy, by familiarizing themselves with their states' ELDS, aligned documents such as the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (2015), seminal research reports (NELP, 2008; NRP, 2000), and prominent theories of literacy development (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Scarborough, 2001).

Professional Development

The effective implementation of a standards-based education in a developmentally appropriate manner requires educators to have a complex understanding of child development and early education. The process of using standards requires teachers to be able to identify where individual children are in relation to specific indicators articulated in the standards and identify what skills and abilities children need to make progress (Scott-Little et al., 2003). With this knowledge in mind, teachers must be able to provide enriching educational experiences that are appropriate for individual children's developmental levels and interests that will foster growth towards the achievement of ELDS (Gronlund & James, 2008). Due to the high-complexity of effective implementation of standards, it is clear that additional support and professional development efforts are needed.

Significant effort has gone into the states' development of ELDS documents and their alignment to national standards such as the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (2015), but more work is needed to support teachers' knowledge, understanding and most importantly, their use of ELDS. Although short-term efforts such as one-time trainings and conferences/workshops are the most common form of ELDS professional development, it is recommended that training be comprehensive, ongoing and include a focus on *how* standards can be used (NAEYC & NACCRRRA, 2011; Petersen et al., 2008; Scott-Little et al., 2003). Based on the results of this study, we would recommend that professional development opportunities go a step further and

help teachers learn to identify standards in more authentic contexts, such as using case studies/vignettes, children’s work samples and even video recordings of children at play. While introductory training is important, even necessary, professional development must grow in complexity and be relatable to the everyday work of teachers. If we expect teachers to develop the appropriate content knowledge of ELDS as well as the ability to use them (pedagogical content knowledge; Shulman, 1986), they must be better supported through ongoing, in-depth professional development.

Specifically related to early literacy, we recommend that professional development explicitly break down the subdomains of language and literacy to enhance content knowledge and build a solid foundation for early literacy instruction. We found that the two subdomains in which participants were least able to identify evidence of development in play were *interest in and motivation to read* and *comprehension and use of information in books*. Therefore, we strongly encourage professional development that emphasizes how young children engage with text, literary language, and with various genres of text for young children. The call for greater focus on children’s literature and engagement with text has been echoed by others (Ripp, 2016; National Council of Teachers of English, 2018) and deserves our attention.

CONCLUSION

Play has long been revered as an essential part of early childhood. Therefore, it is critical that early childhood teachers become skilled at identifying ELDS, including language and literacy standards, during play and effectively use this knowledge to plan and implement appropriate learning opportunities. Given the importance of ELDS, teachers must continue to be supported through ongoing professional development that considers the full complexity of their use. Professional development must be expanded to include more in-depth and ongoing opportunities for teachers to identify children’s progress towards standards in authentic contexts, such as children at play. Likewise, we encourage teachers to embrace their own professional learning and deepen their knowledge of the subdomains of literacy through reading seminal research reports referenced above and continuing to engage in reading professional literature such as those in this journal.

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