Early Learning Partnership Virtual Discussion Series
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Language Development in Early Years and the Reduction of the Learning Gap
From evidence, to programming to achieve the Learning Goals

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The story line

A. The global learning crisis and the role of Early Childhood Education (ECE) to improve literacy

B. The language gap: evidence from Latin America and the US

C. Options for policies and programs to operationalize language development reducing the learning gap

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A. Globally, impressive increase in access to education, yet the learning crisis remains

- Despite the access success story since 2000,
  ‘250 million children worldwide cannot read, write or do basic math, 130 million of whom are in school’

- Access and quality issues for ECD

(UNESCO GMR 2014; GEM 2016)
Quality challenges for the pre-primary programs
(GPE profiles in 48 countries, 2014)

- Obsolete programs, and/or non implemented curricula, unknown impact on child development and early literacy
- Need for adequate furniture, equipment, library, pedagogic materials, children books
- Unsatisfactory sanitary conditions in preschool institutions
- Very few teachers with higher education degree
- High incompatibility of teacher training with practical teaching practices and early child development requirements
- Salaries of kindergarten teachers are still very low compared to salaries of production workers

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Early Childhood Care and Education has an important role to play to address the learning crisis

The evidence:

- Good quality ECCE results in **cost-savings and increased efficiency in primary education**: higher attendance and achievement, lower repetition and drop-out rates, less remedial and special education (GEM 2016)

- Student achievement surveys (PISA and PIRLS) clearly show on average in participating EU-28 countries, students who attended ECCE outperformed those who did not by 35 points – the equivalent of almost one full year of formal schooling (Eurydice 2014)
How? by promoting language development and emergent literacy especially for the most disadvantaged children

- Language development and emergent literacy experiences help young children (esp. the poorest and most disadvantaged) to have a good start in school, to develop reading skills on time, and to improve their learning outcomes and human potential.
Entry point: language development and emergent literacy as predictors of improved learning

- This is a **predictor of success** for all young children, but especially for young children from disadvantaged contexts.
The basics for emergent literacy development

Reading and literacy is connected with:

**Emergent literacy skills**

(Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy 2007)

**Emergent literacy** includes: oral language and vocabulary, alphabet exposure and knowledge, phonological awareness and print awareness

(Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998)
B. Findings from the field: the language gap
Comparing language development in early years (in Latin America)

Some findings from studies measuring the child development across countries:

1. The Regional Program of indicators of child development (PRIDI) with focus on the 4 domains of Early Childhood Development

2. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (in Spanish) with focus on receptive vocabulary

Vocabulary scores by wealth quartiles:
vocabulary scores of Ecuadorian children aged 36 to 72 months
by wealth quartiles

Parsons, K. & Schady N., 2005

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The language gap (in Latin America)

• **First finding**: children in richer households have higher levels of cognitive and language development

• **Second finding**: the difference in cognition and language generally become larger as children age

• **In sum**, a number of studies in Latin America and the Caribbean show that there are important differences in child development within countries
The language gap in the USA

- Low income children in the US build their vocabularies more slowly and speak fewer words overall than the higher-income children.

Hear 616 words per hour
Hear 2153 words per hour

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"The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3” US study, B.Hart and T. R. Risley 2003

Disparities in Early Vocabulary Growth

Cumulative Vocabulary (Words)

College Educated Parents
Working Class Parents
Welfare Parents

Child’s Age (Months)


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Options for programming (i)

Contact with print during shared reading, has significant impact of children’s early literacy skills (reading, spelling, comprehension)

This finding has important implications on the primary prevention of reading difficulties

• (Piasta Justice, McGinty, Kaderavek 2012)
Options for programming (ii)

• **Curricula interventions** in existing settings may be more **cost effective** and provide improvement of quality and emergent learning, if well designed and implemented.

• Bangladesh targeted measures, like daily story reading, several stories introduced each week, and teaching instructors on how to read and talk about stories.

• Observed improvement in activity and program structure as well as in child outcomes.

• **Cost 1,50 USD** per child per year.

• (Moore, Akhter, Aboud (2008)

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Options for programming (iii) How to develop language and prepare children for literacy? (Catherine Snow, Harvard Graduate School)

- Maximizing language and literacy
- Quality curricula in order to reduce the language gap

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Learning to talk by talking: A developmental approach to maximizing language and literacy skills (C. Snow)

- **The question:** How to promote language development and via language, literacy development?

- **Why?** Worries about literacy skills later in school (PISA data, US students lag behind in literacy skills.

- **Created awareness:** The study of Risley and Hart on language and social disparities

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How to address the disparity issue?

- One response is to talk more to children (but many programs support this)

C. Snow proposes:

- To think the gap not as a gap to access to **vocabulary** but as a gap to access to **knowledge**

Thus, to promote opportunities for children to talk
Birth to Age 5: Responding to Attempts at Communication

- How language and literacy skills can be maximized in the developmental stage from birth to age five?

Research finding: 220,000 questions by age 4 that ask information and explanations. They receive 60-70% responses. (Chouinard M. Children questions: a mechanism for cognitive development)

- Opportunities to learn, coming from children (C. Snow)
  • Using Questions to Generate Rich Conversation
  • Dialogic Reading

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Pre-School to 4th Grade: Curricular Topics for Talking About (C. Snow)

How language and literacy skills can be maximized at this stage?

- Indicators of Instructional Quality
- Child Interests; Adult Domains
- Strategies for improving instruction in early childhood education (ECE) through primary school by leveraging children's interests and questions to great effect

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C. Snow argues that « *If the content is well designed the language will take care of itself* »

- In a quick expansion of preschool settings the quality matters and especially the quality of instruction in addition to the quality of a safe environment where the child feels loved and protected.

- « *The instruction quality is a challenge, especially in settings where teachers are not well trained, and resources are poor with no access to rich curricula topics* »

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Indicators of instruction quality
(C. Snow)

➢ Teacher language (Snow suggests to provide to teachers rich topics to improve their language)
➢ Intensity of instructional activities
➢ Integration of language with content
➢ Presence of a quality curriculum

Pedagogical principle: Start from the topics and interests and questions that children ask to build rich and powerful early childhood curricula

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Promising early literacy interventions

- “Albania Reads” early literacy program (UNICEF support 2009-12) equipped about 930 pre-schools with mini-libraries and trained pre-school teachers in pedagogical skills to enhance early literacy, together with additional orientation on modern ECD approaches. Impact: curricula implementation and improvement of teaching and learning process.

- Modernization of ECD in Moldova (World Bank GPE) enhanced the quality of preschool services by:
  - revising inclusive national policies and curricula
  - providing modern teaching and learning materials, including a package of quality books in all rural pre-primary settings
  - implementing a system-wide professional development/mentoring program
  - using an instrument to measure children’s learning readiness
ECE could play a crucial role in addressing the learning crisis and the internal disparities if focus is on:

A. Policies and resources increasing quality of ECE reaching the most disadvantaged children

B. Implementing programs (curricula) well designed, accompanied with quality materials, promoting language development and reducing the language gap
Key Bibliography

- Catherine Snow, 2015: *Learning to talk by talking: A Developmental approach to maximizing language and literacy skills*, Lectures, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University


- *Culture and Policy in Early Childhood Development*, SARA HARKNESS, PhD, CHARLES M. SUPER, PhD University of Connecticut, USA (Published online July 2010)

- *Sustainable development goals UNESCO*
