

# Identity Texts and Literacy Development Among Preschool English Language Learners: Enhancing Learning Opportunities for Children at Risk for Learning Disabilities

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*There is little research on English language learners (ELLs) in relation to learning disability (LD) assessment and identification. More important, there is a scarcity of research on models and strategies that enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for ELLs prior to an LD diagnosis. We describe in this article an innovative language intervention program involving the creation of bilingual, student self-authored identity texts. Called the Early Authors Program (EAP), the intervention stands as an example of how spaces and opportunities for literacy development among young ELLs can be created in a classroom instructional environment. The EAP, which reached 800 families, was evaluated using a combination of methods and instruments. The goal of the evaluation component was to collect data spanning one year from 325 randomly selected participating children in both control and experimental groups. Among its several beneficial outcomes, the EAP had demonstrably positive effects on children's language scores and appears to have strengthened their identities and fostered their self-esteem. Because a proportion of these students would be at risk for LD, we propose the implementation of programs of this type generally for ELL children, and especially for those considered likely to have future school-related difficulties.*

There is mounting evidence of the significant rate of language minority children identified as having reading difficulties (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Researchers have also found that poor school achievement is frequently an outcome for children whose home language is not English (Lee, 2002; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D'Emilio, 2005). In many cases, young English language learners (ELLs) are labeled learning disabled (LD). By the time these young children are identified as such, however, important opportunities may have been missed that could have strengthened their language skills and thus precluded such identification in the first place (Klingner & Artiles, 2003; Ruiz, Vargas, & Beltran, 2002). The common practice of placing young ELL students in minimally demanding environments results in fewer opportunities to develop initial literacy skills and become familiar with English in print form. We believe that it is not fruitless to offer such opportunities, if for no other reason than that the capacity of these children to learn literacy skills has yet to be determined.

LD diagnoses for ELLs have been presumed to be correct by teachers and other educators, but in fact the picture is more complicated. Opportunities for strengthening basic literacy skills are particularly important for ELLs because of the difficulty in distinguishing garden-variety language acquisition difficulties from genuine learning disabilities (Stanovich, 1988). A further complication arises because an exclusionary clause in the definition of learning disabilities presented in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) specifies that a child can only be classified as LD if he

or she has had adequate opportunities to learn and appropriate instruction in a language that the child can understand (Hehir, 2002). These complications may have particularly grave consequences for ELL children, including their significant representation in the LD category (Klingner & Artiles, 2003; Mercer, 1973).

Several researchers have cast doubt on the correctness of these overly common assignments of a learning disability or educable mentally retarded (EMR) diagnosis (for a survey of the problem, see Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). An early study by Finn (1982) concluded, "It is possible that Hispanic students with poor English proficiency are misclassified as EMR when bilingual programs are not available" (p. 372). In other words, the chance to get a start in literacy will turn out to be of benefit to the very substantial subset of ELL children who are not LD and will counteract the tendency of the present assessment system to generate that diagnosis. It may be added that interactions around literacy provide teachers with an excellent basis for observation and assessment. Klingner and Artiles (2003), in their review of the disproportionate representation problem, noted a tendency of school personnel to attribute intrinsic weaknesses to ELL children. In response to this biased approach, they remarked, "Without classroom observations, evaluation teams cannot know whether a student has had adequate opportunity to learn in an appropriate, culturally responsive environment" (p. 68).

There is little research on ELL children in relation to LD assessments, especially with respect to the years before the assessment is made. Ruiz et al. (2002) discussed an example case in which a child, Diego, produced almost no oral or written language while in the second grade and whose testing process only began during his third-grade year. As it turned out, Diego was diagnosed as LD, and a program addressing that diagnosis was put into effect beginning in grade 4. Because the authors do not address the issue directly, one can only speculate as to what the child's fourth-grade capacity and performance would have been like had an engaging program in basic literacy been in place since kindergarten. Ruiz et al., like many others, did not consider the benefits of an educationally beneficial pre-identification program.

The present article describes an innovative language intervention program—the Early Authors Program (EAP)—as an example of how spaces and opportunities for literacy development among young ELLs can be created in the instructional environment of community-based typical urban child care centers. The EAP combines effective teaching, appropriate recognition of the value of home language maintenance, and strong support for both cognitive engagement and personal identity investment in the learning process. The EAP was first implemented in Miami-Dade County, Florida, with the goal of promoting early bilingual literacy in preschool

children. In the course of the program, 1,179 children from 800 families in 32 early childhood centers were exposed to bilingual literacy development through writing and illustrating their own dual-language books, or “identity texts,” in which they themselves appeared as the protagonists. The books—written in English and the home languages of the children (usually Spanish or Haitian Creole)—were based on family histories, the children’s lives, and the children’s interests. Parents, family members, and 57 educators also wrote books. In all, a total of 3,286 books were produced. The program used a pretest-posttest experimental design and random selection of children for both experimental and control groups. Among its several beneficial outcomes, the EAP had demonstrably positive effects on the children’s reading scores and on their identities and self-esteem.

We have good reason to believe that a number of the children involved in this intervention would not normally have been provided with appropriate instructional opportunities and were therefore at risk of LD misdiagnosis. The original investigation and its main findings have been reported elsewhere (Bernhard, Winsler, Bleiker, Ginieniewicz, & Madigan, 2005). The focus of this article is discussion of EAP findings in relation to the literature on the content and effectiveness of LD education, especially for ELL students. First, the main principles on which the EAP is based are presented. Then, a description of the program setting and background is provided. The third section covers the methods and procedures used for the EAP’s development and implementation, and the results obtained. The final section contains a discussion of the findings, with a view to recommending the widespread implementation of student authorship programs similar to the EAP with the population of ELL who are at risk of a diagnosis of LD.

### THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EARLY AUTHORS PROGRAM

The EAP is based on eight core principles that have been derived mainly from Freire’s philosophy of transformative education (Freire, 1970). The EAP principles have also been informed by other important sources, particularly, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking’s *How People Learn* model (1999), and Cummins’ *Academic Expertise* framework (2000). Thus, the EAP principles synthesize elements from critical theory, feminist/womanist theory, critical pedagogy, bilingual education, antibias education, cognitive psychology, and identity theory. The eight principles are as follows.

1. *The EAP encourages educators to recognize and use the wealth of knowledge (i.e., cultural capital) that both children and family members can bring with them to the school setting.* Children and family members have a wealth of knowledge that they can bring into the school (Ada, 1988). The EAP encourages educators to recognize and activate this cultural capital (family knowledge,

skills, beliefs, concepts, languages) in order to create a learner-based transformative approach that stresses positive identity building and that is rooted in the awareness of the social context of the child and the value of family ties. Various authors have demonstrated connections between developing a positive identity and increased academic achievement. Indeed, nurturing a student's identity involves not only recognizing the forms of prior knowledge (including home languages) he or she brings to the class, but also incorporating them into classroom learning (Cummins, 2001, 2002). Insight into students' home environments and cultural contexts provides ways of understanding how children make sense of their world (Westby & Atencio, 2002). Gonzalez and Moll (2002) argued that for education to be effective, it is crucial for educators to be involved in the contexts in which their students live. When educators direct their efforts toward learning and understanding how all children experience the world, and when they strive to become familiar with the complex context (including culture and language) in which students, educators, and families live and learn, they are better equipped to respond to students' needs and concerns (Klingner & Artiles, 2003). By cultivating an optimal learning environment—instructing a child in his or her first language, using a child's prior knowledge and personal experiences, and increasing educator-student interaction through the use of journals and discussions (Ruiz et al., 2002)—educators and school personnel can provide greater opportunities for ELL students to achieve academic success and can prevent the unnecessary streaming or misdiagnosing of children into special education environments.

2. *The EAP encourages students and educators to develop a critical stance in relation to social reality and pedagogy.* In accordance with critical theory, the EAP helps students understand that social reality is a human construct and is therefore imperfect. As students understand the constructedness of their role as a member of various communities—their family, their classroom, their school, their neighborhood—they can increase their sense of belonging and responsibility, make constructive contributions to their communities, and share in the meaningful experience of making the world a better place to live (Freire, 1982, Giroux, 1988). The EAP is also an expression of critical pedagogy. Most educational systems have profound contradictions between what they propose and what they do. For example, although educators might declare that the national education system has an egalitarian goal—aspiring to teach all students to the best of their abilities in order to help them become lifelong learners and productive members of society—in truth, the enormous inequalities between schools (Kozol, 1991) and the inability of the system to overcome social differences perpetuate those same circumstances, resulting in the marginalization of whole groups of people who are unable to access the greater social benefits. Even worse, learners

unwittingly accept the blame for poor school achievement and become convinced that the limitations in their lives are of their own doing (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor & Freire, 1987). Critical pedagogy works to close these gaps and undo such erroneous and damaging self-perceptions.

3. *The EAP emphasizes the equality of all human beings.* As supported by feminist/womanist theory, the equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, is emphasized within the EAP. Furthermore, a nourishing, supportive, safe, and caring environment is fostered to provide students with a better place in which to learn and grow (Gilligan, 1982; hooks, 1984).

4. *The EAP positively values diversity and inclusion.* Within the EAP, a sense of respect is extended to all human beings beyond gender equality, emphasizing the need to know, understand, respect, and celebrate people of all ethnic, cultural, and linguistic origins, of all religions and sexual orientations, and at all levels of physical and mental ability (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1992). Ethnocentrism is seen as a very extensive problem, and to counteract the biases and oppression (e.g., racism, linguicism, homophobia, ageism, ableism) that are prevalent in most societies, the EAP adopts an antibias education approach. Although to designate an approach as “anti” might sound negative, when there is something that can be very harmful to many, potential negative consequences could be mitigated by clearly stating a negative position on such issues (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989; Lee, Menkhart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1997).

5. *The EAP promotes the development of bilingualism.* Language is one of the strongest elements in one’s self-definition as an individual and a social being. Attending to and valuing a child’s home language in the school context is an important way to show respect for the child and his or her family, community, and culture. All children can benefit from learning two or more languages, and a good education should provide the means to do so effectively. All children have the right to retain, develop, and enrich their heritage language while at the same time learning a national language. Education is about addition and enrichment, not subtraction or reduction. When a child abandons, rejects, or loses the home language because of lack of appreciation of that language on the part of school and community, full communication between parents and children may be impaired. This in turn may alienate the child from the family, with many resulting negative effects. Speaking two languages offers many more opportunities for human growth and certainly creates greater opportunities to work on behalf of humanity (Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Fishman, 1989; Krashen, 1999).

6. *The EAP emphasizes the importance of aesthetic experiences in the learning process.* The EAP considers that aesthetic experiences should be an integral part of the learning process and sees a focus on such experiences as essential to good teaching. The search for beauty in all its forms is inherent to all cultures, as is the drive to surround life with aesthetically pleasant realities. Every culture has aspired to make its creations beautiful no matter how utilitarian the purpose. Whether their inspiration resulted in woven baskets, clay pots, birchbark canoes, feathered arrows, or self-made books, people throughout the world have made sure their creations were pleasing to the eye, the touch, and the ear. This natural inclination toward beauty produces a relaxed attentiveness that is conducive to learning while fostering the sense of value of self. Students deserve to be taught in aesthetically beautiful environments, surrounded by inspiring music, creative visuals, and excellent literature (Greene, 1995).

7. *The EAP emphasizes meaning and deep understanding.* The EAP attempts to express in a very concrete way the kinds of instructional emphases and language interactions required to build students' academic expertise. Optimal instruction includes three distinct foci: meaning, language, and use. The focus on meaning entails the development of critical literacy rather than surface-level processing of text. Knowledge is more than just the ability to remember. Deeper levels of cognitive understanding are required to transfer knowledge from one context to another. This implies that instruction for deep understanding involves reading between the lines rather than simply literal comprehension of text (Bransford et al., 1999). The focus on language involves promoting not just explicit knowledge of how the linguistic code operates but also critical awareness of how language operates deep within society. If students are to participate effectively within a democratic society, they should be able to "read" how language is used to achieve social goals: to elucidate issues, to persuade, to deceive, to include, exclude, and so on. The focus on use component parallels the New London Group's (1996) transformed practice but expresses in more concrete ways what this might look like within the classroom context. It argues that optimal instruction will enable students to generate knowledge, create literature and art, and act on social realities themselves. Learners should be supported in taking control of, and self-regulating, their own learning. When students take ownership of the learning process and invest their identities in the outcomes of learning, the resulting understanding will be deeper than when learning is passive (Bransford et al., 1999).

The emphasis on meaning and deep understanding challenges approaches that rely on simple transmission of knowledge and skills from teachers to learners. Exclusive reliance on transmission pedagogy, although thought to rest on "scientific evidence," is likely to entail memorization

rather than learning for deep understanding, minimal activation of students' prior knowledge, and passive rather than active learning.

8. *The EAP recognizes that the way students are positioned in relation to the teacher, to other students, and to the learning community in general can affect their identity investment and cognitive engagement.* Identity negotiation and identity investment are also central in any conception of teaching for deep understanding. Teacher-student interactions and other interactions within the learning community (including the classroom, the school, the family and broader community, and virtual communities enabled through electronic communication) create an interpersonal space within which knowledge is generated and identities are negotiated. Learning will be optimized when these interactions maximize both cognitive engagement and identity investment (Cummins, 2002).

The EAP makes explicit the fact that classroom instruction always positions students in particular ways that reflect the implicit (or sometimes explicit) image of the student in the teacher's mind. How students are positioned either expands or constricts their opportunities for identity investment and cognitive engagement. The nested pedagogical orientations in Figure 1 represent a continuum ranging from relatively constricted to more expanded opportunities for identity investment and cognitive engagement (Cummins, 2001, p. 125).

Learning takes place in a social context, and a supportive learning community encourages dialogue, apprenticeship, and mentoring. Learning is not simply a cognitive process that takes place inside the heads of individual students; it also involves socialization into particular communities of practice. Within these learning communities, or what Gee (2001) termed *affinity groups*, novices are enabled to participate in the practices of the community from the very beginning of their involvement.

#### THE EARLY AUTHORS PROGRAM: BACKGROUND AND SETTING

The EAP was originally implemented in the City of Miami, in Miami-Dade County, Florida, during 2003–2004. Over 50% of Florida residents with incomes below the poverty level cannot read at an eighth-grade level. Twenty percent of Florida's children live in poverty and are likely to live in families in which the parent with the most education has not completed high school. An increasing number of students drop out of school before reaching ninth grade, resulting in a community that is increasingly divided between the prosperous and those struggling to survive.

In Miami-Dade, more than half of the residents were born in a country other than the United States. Miami-Dade County's 2.2 million individuals, representing approximately 13% of Florida's population (Proctor &



### THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC EXPERTISE

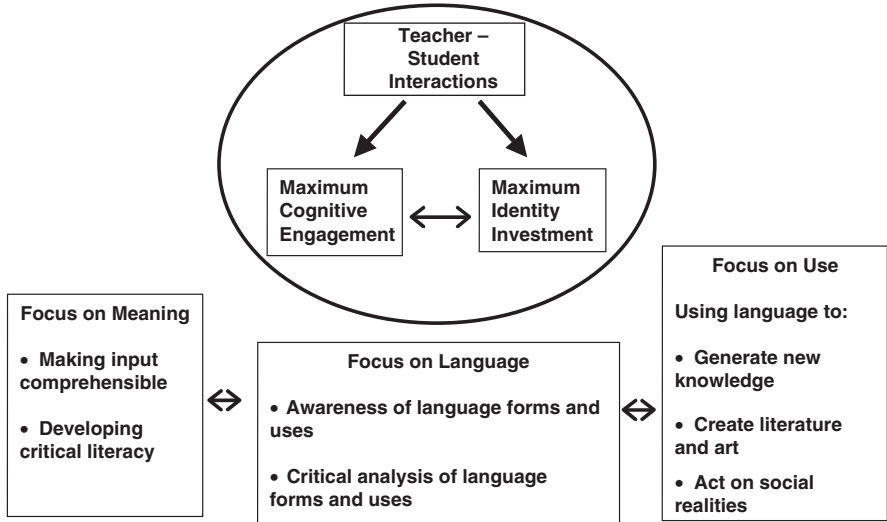


Figure 1. Academic Expertise Framework.

Dalaker, 2003), have a median household income of \$29,000. Miami is one of the poorest cities of its size in the United States. Over 150,000 children are under 5 years of age, and over 60% of the children in the county speak first languages other than English (Proctor & Dalaker, 2003). The EAP was implemented as part of a larger effort toward increasing the literacy levels of low-income children (aged 1–5) receiving subsidized child care services.

The EAP used an approach similar to that undertaken by Ada and Campoy (2003) with elementary- and high-school-aged children across the United States. However, the EAP focused on younger children. Ada and Campoy have inspired elementary and high school teachers throughout the nation to engage in the student authorship concept based on their own theory of transformative education, which is very much informed by the work of Paulo Freire. However, until the EAP project was launched, no one had carried on this type of work with young children, and certainly not to this extent.

The EAP is a literacy model designed to promote language development and familiarity with the printed word among at-risk preschool children. The emphasis of the books created by the participants was to allow children and families to communicate through their personal stories and family photographs, thus engaging in cognitively meaningful ways with language and investing their own identities in the language learning process.

The EAP reached 800 families. It was evaluated using a combination of methods and instruments. The goal of the evaluation component was to collect data spanning one year from 325 randomly selected children in both control and experimental groups.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

The overall implementation of the EAP in Miami-Dade County reached 1,179 randomly selected children from 800 families enrolled in participating centers. It involved 57 educators at 32 child care centers (including center-based and family-based daycare centers serving children ranging from infancy to age 6), and 13 literacy specialists/interventionists. Participating EAP and control centers enrolled mostly children in poverty who received government subsidies for child care.

The evaluation sample consisted of 367 children (280 EAP and 87 control), of whom 51% were male. In terms of ethnic background, 48% were Hispanic/Latino, 44% African American (including those of Caribbean/Haitian origin), 5% Caucasian, and 3% Other/Haitian. This ethnic distribution is representative of the overall urban community. On average, children were 37.3 months ( $SD = 13.3$ ) old at pretest and 48.4 months of age ( $SD = 13.3$ ) at posttest. The control group and EAP group were comparable in terms of child gender and ethnicity. However, by chance, the assessed control group ended up being a little older than the EAP group at pretest,  $F(1,365) = 22.03, p < .001$ . This group difference in age is taken into account in various ways in the analyses below.

As indicated next by the children's generally low national percentile scores on literacy measures, these diverse children in poverty as a group are at considerable risk for poor achievement in early elementary school.

### PROCEDURE

In *Authors in the Classroom*, Ada and Campoy (2003) reported on the empowering effect of transformative education and provided examples of ways to implement the approach. A group of educators and researchers in Miami-Dade County worked with Ada and Campoy to design a program for use in early childhood centers based on the principles outlined in their book. The focus of the 12-month intervention period was the authoring, reading, and storytelling of books by the children, families, teachers, and caregivers at the 32 participating centers. A second component involved teaching children to recite rhymes and poems in their home languages. For

this purpose, educators were given books and resources with children's oral folklore, including traditional art, literature, and sayings. As a third component, the educators were trained to relate letters of the alphabet to children's names and the names of family members and friends.

Other EAP activities included (1) on-site coaching and monitoring by literacy coaches or specialists who were responsible for providing support to educators who were implementing the EAP in their classrooms; (2) monthly parent workshops that were held to focus on the family's role in reading and talking to their children, and on sharing their knowledge and experiences as they interacted with their child in bookmaking activities; and (3) assessor training.

### *The Bookmaking Component*

The books were produced collaboratively by the children, parents, caregivers, and educators. The children themselves, their relatives, friends, and even their pets were the main characters or protagonists in the stories. The children's homes and the early childhood centers were the settings for the stories. Thus, the books—which were given titles such as *I Am* and *Where I Come From*—became “identity texts” in which the children's identities were incorporated into the stories, increasing their pride in themselves and their families. The books served as mirrors in which the children's identities were reflected. Reading these very meaningful books engaged the children and helped them to develop affective bonds to literacy.

Each classroom was equipped with computers, digital cameras, color printers, and a laminator. The focus on technology-mediated experiences was seen as a way to broaden the approaches and methods used to support literacy initiatives (see Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996). During the intervention period, the authoring of books was integrated into regular classroom activities. The adults took photographs of the children as they went about their daily activities and discussed these with the children. Children were encouraged to use their home languages and English in describing the photographs. The words used by the children to describe the photos were written underneath with markers or pencils, or they were word-processed on computer so that the children had the chance to experiment with a variety of writing tools. Family photographs were also copied or scanned and incorporated, along with children's drawings. Once the final collection of pages was printed with the use of color printers, the books were laminated and bound. Laminating made the books durable enough to withstand repeated use and to ensure that they could be read for a lifetime. The books made with the children were displayed in the classroom book or library area, and an additional copy was sent home. A

number of books were also displayed for a month-long period at a local children's museum. Once the evaluation project was completed, the centers kept and continued to use the technology and bookmaking equipment in the classrooms.

### *Specialist and Assessor Training*

Thirteen literacy specialists were hired to provide support to teachers who were implementing the EAP in their classrooms. The literacy specialists also established a professional relationship with each site and conducted meetings with the center director as needed. The initial training for the literacy specialists began with a 3-day session conducted by Ada and Campoy to review the principles of transformative education and its relationship to children's language and literacy development. The next two training sessions provided support for the authoring process and an opportunity to share examples of books made by parents and children in previous implementations of dual-language authoring programs. All literacy specialists were equipped with laptop computers and digital cameras and were trained in their use. In addition, the literacy specialists participated in professional development seminars held every Monday. They discussed the progress of the program and notes from their journals, which dealt with application of the concepts in both home and school environments. The professional development seminars were conducted by the lead literacy specialist, who had a master's of arts degree in early childhood education. The assessors for the EAP were doctoral students enrolled in the local university's educational psychology program. They participated in a 5-day training session facilitated by the project investigators in which they received training in the LAP-D (see below) and in the PLS-R (see below). LAP-D training was delivered by the test developers, and PLS-R training was conducted by a speech pathologist.

### *Family Meetings*

Part of the project involved four 2-hour parent/family member meetings at each site. During the meetings, parents and/or family members engaged in simple writing exercises using prompts from their life experiences. The writing activities provided a springboard for discussion around key themes. "I am" books, "Where I come from" poems, and "ABC" books and stories about children's names were authored by the family members. In addition to being placed in the classroom, these books were taken home as a way to enhance families' ties with the written word. A total of 73 books were created by family members in the context of these sessions.

## DEPENDENT MEASURES AND ASSESSMENTS

All child assessments took place in a quiet separate room or area at the child care centers. The pretest started two months prior to the intervention and took 3 months to complete. The posttest lasted 2 months and took place after the intervention had ended. Because of scheduling difficulties, child attendance, and limited community funding for assessors, not all children were assessed on all measures at pre and post. Specific sample sizes for each measure at pre and post are noted below.

*LAP-D*

For children 30 months of age or older, the trained assessors individually administered the Learning Accomplishment Profile–Diagnostic Edition (LAP-D; Nehring, Nehring, Bruni, & Randolph, 1992). Children were assessed using either the English or Spanish standardized versions of the LAP-D, depending on the child’s dominant language as identified by the child’s teacher. The LAP-D was created to assist educators in selecting developmentally appropriate teaching strategies and to measure initial and exit skills of children in intervention programs to assess project effectiveness (Nehring et al.). The LAP-D is a norm-referenced, standardized developmental assessment instrument that yields raw scores, standard scores, age equivalents, and national percentile scores in four domains (three of which were used here): (1) language (two subscales: naming and comprehension); (2) cognition (two subscales: counting and matching); and (3) fine motor (two subscales: object manipulation and fine motor writing). The LAP-D has been shown to have good internal consistency reliability (.76 to .92) and reasonable construct validity in terms of correlations with other standard assessments of developmental competencies (Nehring et al.).

*PLS-R*

The Preschool Language Scale–Revised Fourth Edition (PLS-R; Zimmerman, Steiner, & Evatt Pond, 2002) was individually administered to the children to provide an accurate picture of a child’s expressive (Expressive Communication Scale) and comprehension (Auditory Comprehension Scale) language skills. Again, this instrument was administered either in English or Spanish, depending on the child’s dominant language as identified by the child’s teacher. The skills tapped by the PLS-R at all ages are considered important precursors for literacy development (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). The test-retest stability coefficients for the PLS-R have been reported to range between .82 and .95 for the two subscale scores and from .90 to .97 for the total language score (Zimmerman et al.).

### *Teacher-Reported Child Literacy Skills*

In addition to the above direct assessments with the children, children's child care/preschool educators were asked to complete an Interaction with Books Survey, which was developed for the present project to assess teacher reports of children's literacy interest and engagement with books and stories. The survey was distributed to the educators by the assessors before the intervention commenced. The educators filled out the instrument and returned it to the assessors within 2 weeks. The Interaction with Books Survey was completed in English, Spanish, or Haitian Creole by the educator. There were eight items on the survey scale: (1) reads or plays with books on own; (2) requests to be read to; (3) shows relevant emotion during book reading; (4) identifies characters; (5) can retell storylines; (6) can describe setting; (7) can tell beginning and end; and (8) can tell causal events in the story. These items were selected based on the literature on children's meaningful story book experiences, cultural practices, and play experiences with literacy (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1998; Hart & Risley, 1995; National Association for the Education of Young Children & International Reading Association, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

### *Early Steps to Reading Success (ESRS)*

To assess the quality of the classroom literacy environment and literacy-promoting practices on the part of educators in EAP classrooms, educators/caregivers participating in the EAP intervention completed the Early Steps to Reading Success (ESRS) survey (Matsumura & Boscardin, 2002) before and after the implementation of the EAP. The ESRS is a teacher self-report instrument that evaluates literacy aspects of both educators and teaching settings. The ESRS questionnaire has two sections: one measuring instructional practices, and the second measuring environmental changes. The Instructional Practices section asks educators to indicate how often, during a recent typical week, they provided certain types of instructional activities. The Literacy Environment Checklist section was used to rate the use of books in the classroom, availability of writing materials, environmental print policies, and literacy instruction practices.

### *Literacy Specialist Interviews*

An exit interview was conducted with each of the literacy specialists. The interviews, which were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded, evaluated literacy specialists' perceptions in the following domains: (1) effects on

children's identity and self-esteem, (2) print knowledge and motivation, and (3) educators' understanding of transformative education.

## RESULTS

Our findings showed that the educators reported high satisfaction and sustainability for the EAP. Educators embraced the EAP project and believed that they were able to carry out the intervention effectively. They also felt that they could continue to do so on their own. The teachers saw much collaboration among the specialists, the children, and the parents. Numerous books were created, and the educators engaged in most of the EAP literacy-related activities in the classroom. The EAP project appeared to have considerable positive effect on the literacy environment of the classrooms and was also successful in significantly increasing the number of literacy-related activities engaged in by the educators. The most pertinent results for this article are that the children's language and cognitive skills, as measured by standardized instruments, showed considerable gain.

### LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Table 1 provides children's overall language scores (composite of expressive and comprehension) on the PLS-R by group and by time. The table also provides this information for all children combined and separately for the 3–4-year-olds and for those 2 years old and younger. The numbers reported in the table refer only to children who had both pre- and posttest data on that particular assessment. Table 1 also provides children's developmental age equivalent scores minus their actual chronological age at time of assessment. This is because (1) the age range of the children is very wide, thereby making developmental age scores limited in their interpretation; (2) the control group children who were assessed, by chance, started slightly older than the EAP children at pre; and (3) we wanted to control for potentially different intervals of time between the pre- and postassessment across children. This score essentially provides a developmental lag estimate indicating how far behind (in the case of a negative number) or how far ahead (in the case of a positive number) the child is with his or her language development compared with national norms for the child's current age. For simplicity, only overall language total scores (expressive and comprehension scores combined) are reported here because the same exact patterns were seen for both receptive and expressive language.

Mixed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on children's total PLS-R language scores, run separately for each age group and with time (pre, post) as the repeated measure and group as the between-subjects factor, revealed a

**Table 1. Developmental Age (DA) Scores and Developmental Age Relative to Chronological Age (CA) on the PLS4 by Group and by Time**

<i>PLS4 Language Total</i>	All Ages Combined		2 Years or Younger		3–4-Year-Olds	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<b>EAP Group</b>						
<i>DA Scores</i>						
	31.79* (13.61) <i>N</i> = 127	41.56* (15.08) <i>N</i> = 127	23.34 (8.72) <i>N</i> = 76	32.67 (10.77) <i>N</i> = 76	44.37* (9.12) <i>N</i> = 51	54.80* (10.01) <i>N</i> = 51
<i>DA–CA Scores</i>						
	– 2.83 (6.07) <i>N</i> = 126	– 3.00 (8.66) <i>N</i> = 126	– 2.85 (5.35) <i>N</i> = 76	– 3.50 (7.92) <i>N</i> = 76	– 2.78* (6.99) <i>N</i> = 50	– 2.12* (9.76) <i>N</i> = 50
<b>Control Group</b>						
<i>DA Scores</i>						
	42.00* (12.45) <i>N</i> = 31	47.54* (10.57) <i>N</i> = 31	33.64 (12.24) <i>N</i> = 14	42.07 (11.64) <i>N</i> = 14	48.88* (7.57) <i>N</i> = 17	52.06* (7.19) <i>N</i> = 17
<i>DA–CA Scores</i>						
	.16 (7.16) <i>N</i> = 31	– 2.00 (7.25) <i>N</i> = 31	.71 (6.52) <i>N</i> = 14	1.63 (5.41) <i>N</i> = 14	– .68* (7.82) <i>N</i> = 17	– 5.08* (7.50) <i>N</i> = 17

\* $p < .05$ , *F* for group by time interaction.

significant group-by-time interaction when all age groups were included,  $F(1, 156) = 8.51, p < .01$ , and also when only the 3–4-year-olds were considered,  $F(1, 66) = 11.47, p < .01$ . The 3–4-year-old EAP children made significantly greater gains in language development from pre to post (about 10 months) compared with the control children (about 3 months). By including children’s pre and post scores in the repeated measures ANOVA, the focus is on within-child change over time, regardless of the age of the children at any given time point. Children under 2 years of age, however, made similar gains (about 9 months) on average from pre to post in language development regardless of their group status. There was no group-by-time interaction for the younger group of children. Figure 2 displays the pattern of the PLS-R results by group.

A more interesting and complete picture on the language development of these children comes from the analyses on children’s developmental lag (DA-CA) scores. Overall, and for the 3–4-year-old children in particular, children in the EAP group stayed about the same (for all ages combined) or improved (for 3–4-year-olds) in terms of how behind they were compared with national norms for their specific age, whereas the developmental lag for the control group worsened over time. That is, although EAP 3–4-year-olds started and remained about 2 months behind the national language



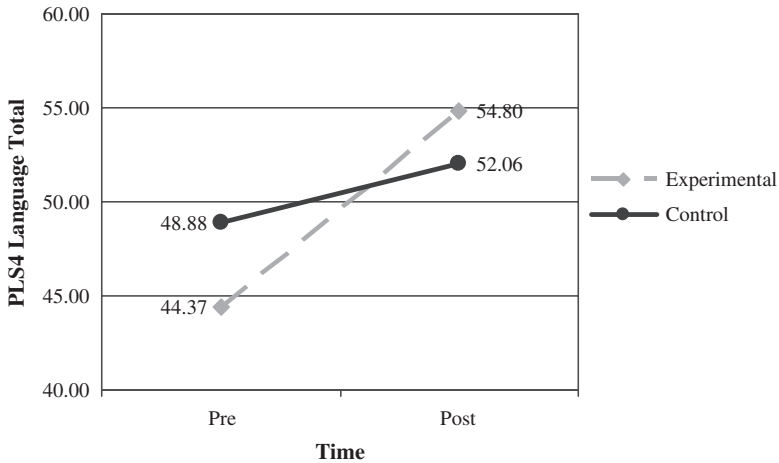


Figure 2. Gains Made on the PLS-R Language Total Age-Equivalent Scores from Pre to Post for 3–4-Year-Olds in the EAP and Control Groups.

norms for their age, preschoolers in the control group fell behind by more than 5 months at post, group-by-time interaction,  $F(1, 66) = 5.78, p < .05$ . Thus, as has been described before in the literature (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999), although children in extreme poverty continue to make small absolute gains in literacy development, without intervention, they continue to fall further and further behind in comparison with national norms for their age group. The EAP intervention described here appeared to (1) increase children's absolute language skills, more so than that seen among control children and (2) prevent the children from continuing to fall further behind in comparison with national age norms.

The other direct child assessment completed only by the EAP children who were 3 years of age and older was the LAP-D. Table 2 lists both absolute developmental age-equivalent scores and the national percentile scores at pre and post for children in the EAP. Similar to the use of the DA-CA scores on the PLS-R discussed previously, the national percentile scores for the LAP-D compare how the children were doing at pre and post relative to the national standardization sample norms for the child's age at each time point. Thus, increases on this metric indicate not only an increase in actual skills developed within the child (as do the age-equivalent scores) but also gains made in terms of how the child compares with national norms. Although the control group did not receive this measure, the pattern of results for EAP children on the language development portion of this assessment is the same as that seen on the other measure of language development, the PLS-R, for which a control group was present.

**Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for 3–4-Year-Old EAP Children’s LAP-D scores**

	Pretest	Posttest
Language Total		
Developmental Age*	43.11 (10.76)	54.53 (10.01)
National Percentile <sup>†</sup>	36.93 (27.71)	43.94 (22.05)
<i>Language Naming</i>		
Developmental Age*	43.31 (12.23)	54.28 (10.52)
National Percentile	36.77 (31.52)	41.69 (23.85)
<i>Language Comprehension</i>		
Developmental Age*	42.92 (10.67)	54.77 (11.38)
National Percentile*	37.08 (28.74)	46.19 (29.38)
<i>Cognitive Matching</i>		
Developmental Age*	46.24 (12.59)	56.49 (11.14)
National Percentile	48.48 (34.26)	50.65 (29.37)
<i>Cognitive Counting</i>		
Developmental Age*	48.05 (11.19)	56.49 (10.64)
National Percentile <sup>†</sup>	61.19 (31.59)	52.19 (28.26)
<i>Fine Motor Manipulation</i>		
Developmental Age*	47.57 (12.26)	57.44 (10.92)
National Percentile	52.35 (32.86)	52.47 (32.03)
<i>Fine Motor Writing</i>		
Developmental Age*	48.01 (10.50)	57.44 (9.80)
National Percentile*	60.73 (29.71)	51.08 (30.75)

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ .

Children in EAP classrooms made considerable gains from pre to post in their absolute expressive [naming  $t(47) = -5.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ] and receptive [comprehension  $t(47) = 7.47$ ,  $p < .05$ ] language skills. More impressive, however, was the fact that in the language domain (and only in the language domain), considerable gains were made in national percentile scores from pre to post, indicating that children receiving this intervention are not simply acquiring average language skills that would be expected from simply getting older, but that they are gaining ground in terms of how they are comparing with other (nonpoor) children nationally. On average, children moved from the 37th percentile nationally to the 46th percentile on language comprehension,  $t(47) = -2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ , and similar gains were seen in children’s composite language scores,  $t(47) = -1.97$ ,  $p = .06$ . The changes we found should not be attributed to the expected general gains from more advanced age and maturation. These at-risk EAP children actually lost ground nationally in their percentile scores in the areas of counting and matching and fine motor skills. We propose that this effect strengthens the position that the EAP intervention in language is efficacious and specific. We will take up this point again in the discussion.

## OTHER GAINS

As mentioned above, the EAP project also appeared to have a considerable positive effect on the literacy environment of the classrooms and was successful in increasing the number of literacy-related activities engaged in by the teachers. A frequently cited answer to the question of what children learned was the effect of the program on children's identity and self-esteem. The literacy specialists reported that the children in EAP sites "felt like they were being successful when they recognized the letter of their name or just a letter in general." In terms of identity and self-esteem, one of the literacy specialists whose language and cultural heritage was English said,

I think making their own books . . . to see themselves in the books and to talk about themselves. . . . And, I think there was a lot of pride when the book was finished . . . when they got their final book, they shared it with the class and they just beamed. They were so excited to show their book and they felt so proud.

A number of the literacy specialists expressed their understanding of the children's gains in terms of the importance of involving educators, parents, and children in the process of literacy. One specialist focused on the importance of involving the child as reflected by the following statement:

These books were personal because they included the photos of the children, and the children were able to see themselves in the book, which was one of the main points of the program—for it to have meaning for the child because the child was actually the protagonist of the book and they were the main character of the book.

A statement made by a literacy specialist of Hispanic heritage who is bilingual in Spanish and English identified her understanding of the impact that such a program had for the educators, parents, and children involved in the program:

I think that the program was absolutely an amazing experience, and I was honored and privileged to be a part of it. I see its value, and I really hope that the outcomes of what we feel have been very successful, really show as a success . . . because I see the success in the parents, I see it in the teachers, I see it in the students, and I think it was a wonderful experience and I'm glad I was a part of it . . . I feel that the growth on the emotional end of the Early Authors Program is huge with parents, caregivers, students, the literacy specialists themselves. I think that that's where the value lies. It might show in the

academic and I hope it does, but again because the philosophy is a two-part philosophy, emotional and academic, an assessment is not going to show all of the growth that really has taken place.

## DISCUSSION

There is evidence that the EAP project had a number of beneficial results for the participating ELL children. The most salient evidence was the improvement in language and literacy scores. The dramatic increase in EAP children's scores can be explained, we suggest, by focusing on the essential elements of the program. The children's experiences as authors allowed them to see themselves in their self-made books and to talk about their own lives and interests. This identity investment resulted in increased pride, both in themselves and in their families. Additionally, in working with highly personally meaningful texts, the children were cognitively engaged and developed an affective bond to literacy. Thus, cognitive engagement and identity investment emerged as educationally important contributors to students' literacy development. We label the literature created by the ELL participants "identity texts" insofar as students invested their own identities in producing them. The young students, through the mirroring and self-imaging provided in the texts, were able to experience and reflect upon their identities in a positive manner.

There is every reason to believe that a majority of the more than 1,000 children in the study would have encountered serious learning difficulties. In 2003, U.S. national reading achievement (NAEP) scores for Black and Hispanics in fourth grade show 60% and 56%, respectively, performing below the basic level (less than proficient for grade level), even with accommodation, and the trend for the decade is essentially flat (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Researchers have cited other government statistics, indicating that the LD percentage is approximately 9% for the ELL primary-school population, compared with about 14% generally (McCardle et al., 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). We suggest that the success of the program confirms our initial expectation, one shared by other ELL educators, that a number of these children either lacked opportunity to develop their skills or were, for other reasons, beginning to fall behind either in preliteracy skills or basic predictors of grade school performance. Most of their difficulties, we presume, were likely of the "common garden variety" (Stanovich, 1988) and not necessarily LD, though they were compounded with issues of social and cultural classroom context.

On the basis of the above statistics, it is reasonable to propose the working hypothesis that a significant portion of the ELL children—let us say,

approximately one tenth—would be at particular risk for being labeled as LD (McCardle et al., 2005). The identities of the students in this portion are, of course, not known, and hence, with an abundance of caution, we would say that we lack direct evidence of the extent to which their scores improved, if indeed they did. Yet some general considerations lead us to think that there is some indirect support for the hypothesis that students did benefit from increased exposure to literacy materials and greater cognitive engagement. Looking at the group as a whole, there was, all in all, a pervasive high level of student engagement according to the teachers' reports.

Overall, there is evidence of benefits to those with common learning difficulties, although we have no direct evidence of improvements in the hypothesized portion of children who are at risk for LD. Hence, it is reasonable to recommend that programs such as the EAP should continue to be offered and investigated with similar target populations in other settings. Such programs are intended for implementation in the 3 or 4 years prior to the usual time of LD diagnosis, namely, from preschool to grade 2 or 3.

The value of the EAP derives from the principles that sustain it. It is a program that could never be replicated exactly, nor should it be. This point applies specifically to its methods and procedures. Exact replication of the techniques of the EAP is not required, though fidelity to its principles certainly is. As we see it, the "package" is defined according to its basic principles; it does not depend on fine details of procedure. Even if a particular procedure was outlined in detail, it would be inappropriate to transfer those specifications directly into a different environment.

The significance of our work is to encourage engagement with literacy at an early age. Such involvement should be based on an understanding of the value of placing each human being in the role of protagonist, not only in books but also, ultimately, in life more generally. Connecting young students' knowledge of literacy from the home with the school appears to provide a sound way of enriching their literacy development (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003). The appeal of the project is that it can be implemented at no great cost, and without the need for external support. Any teacher can implement a process of authorship with his or her students, given experience, sensitivity, and basic training in the principles covered here.

The present study calls into question a procedurally oriented approach to the design of "evidence-based curricula." A preconceived set of detailed tactics to obtain specific results is not a strategy of choice. One example is spending so many minutes of drill on a certain concept. Qualitative and ethnographic approaches such as the EAP take into consideration that a preset intervention or specified set of pedagogical procedures does not, in and of itself, determine a particular outcome. The character of an intervention is determined by its context. From the present data, including the

evidence of gains, we suggest that the particular procedures that are developed in this case did fit within the context.

This point about context has implications for answering an ongoing question, one that is especially relevant for minorities: Given that the reported incidence of low academic performance (see above) ranges from approximately 50% to 85% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004), what is the true incidence of low academic performance, of substandard outcomes, and so on—that is, those that are not due to the disabling context? Or more specifically, in terms of basic capacities of these students, how many are actually so far below grade standard as the reports indicate? There is reason to doubt such characterization. We suggest that children's engagement with a poorly chosen activity is used as evidence of limited inherent academic ability, often leading to an inaccurate picture, including the labeling of some portion of those children as scholastically underachieving or as learning or reading disabled. The alternative suggested by the present study is that the difficulties of one or more pupils in a classroom should first be the objects of study and should be then followed with a group-based intervention that does not presume academic, cognitive, or other inherent deficits in these students. The argument is that only after a specifically adapted "organic" program such as the EAP is implemented is it appropriate to bring in standardized measures and draw conclusions about related scholastic capacities and abilities. This is in accord with AERA's *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (American Educational Research Association, 1999), which include the requirement that "opportunity to learn" is crucial to consider in making high-stakes decisions regarding student placement or special education status. Otherwise, the outcomes of "individual measures" are arguably, in the main, evidence of the system's poor performance.

## CONCLUSION

The EAP gave participating children an experience with literacy and brought about significant growth in language. In addition, the children appeared to have made other gains, including strengthened images of self-identity and improved self-esteem. Implementation of this program and similar programs, based on the approaches we have discussed, can ensure that young children, including those likely to experience school-related difficulties, are gainfully engaged in developing as learners who are better prepared to succeed in the academic world and the world at large.

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