

# WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

## Educators' Perceptions of Domain-Related Areas in the Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core

Andrea M. Noel\*  
Kathleen M. Lord

State University of New York at New Paltz

This pilot study surveyed the perceptions of early childcare providers, teachers, and administrators about four general areas represented in the Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core domains—approaches to learning, social, and emotional development, pre-literacy, and general knowledge—and how these relate to children's ability to succeed in kindergarten and subsequent schooling. Results reveal that while administrators and teachers agreed on the importance of each area, teachers who had high numbers of dual language learners and/or served children in urban areas viewed pre-literacy skills as very important, especially in comparison with general knowledge. Implications of this pilot study for practice and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* Common Core, dual language learners, early childhood education, English language learners, general knowledge, prekindergarten, preschool, school readiness, standards

**This** article reports the results of a pilot study designed as the first phase of a broader research program investigating the role of global content knowledge in young children's school readiness and later literacy achievement. Our survey examined the perceptions of early care providers, teachers, and administrators about the relative importance of areas related to four domains outlined in a document issued by the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core (PkFCC) (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2011): The survey asked educators to rate the importance of "a child's ability to succeed in kindergarten and later in school" in each of the following areas: pre-literacy skills, dispositions toward learning, social and emotional maturity, and general knowledge. We are particularly interested in educators' views of the importance of children's general knowledge (part of the Cognition and Knowledge of the World domain) in comparison to other domains, and specifically pre-literacy skills (part of the Communication, Language, and Literacy domain). In the long term, we aim to replicate and extend our findings to develop and test developmentally appropriate teaching and care strategies that support monolingual and bilingual children's knowledge development. Because children require prior knowledge when learning new content (Kintsch, 1997; Marzano, 2004), disparities in knowledge disadvantage children from impoverished backgrounds and dual language learners (DLLs). Acknowledging educators' perceptions is the first step in preventing, as well as bridging, the knowledge gap.

We based our research on literature for monolingual and dual language children, including the need for quality early education, the meaning of school readiness, and the role of emergent literacy and general knowledge that supports later school success.

The quality of early childhood education and care is crucial to all children's later development, learning, and health. Heckman (2011) calls attention to the need for investments in early child development for pragmatic, financial, and even noble reasons, as achievement gaps likely have their genesis prior to school entry (Grissmer & Eiseman, 2008). Other studies reveal the importance of stimulating, loving, and stress-free early environments to optimize child development and learning (Hart & Risley, 1995; Thompson & Haskins, 2014).

Discussions of school readiness often involve deciding who is responsible for readiness. In the past, this responsibility had been placed primarily on the child (Gesell, 1930, 1948; Ilg, Ames, Haines, & Gillespie, 1978). Following the publication of such documents as the one from the PkFCC (New York State Education Department, 2011), states are assuming some responsibility for readiness. Though these documents still focus almost exclusively on child characteristics and not on what schools and communities must offer, the current definition of readiness is broader and posits that the school and greater community must share responsibility (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Noel, 2010; Stipek, 2002). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) provides a definition that describes a "ready" school as one that offers curricula to meet all children's needs, whether or not the children possess the desired skills, dispositions, or dominant language.

Moreover, Neuman (2010) has written persuasively that general background knowledge is as essential to emergent literacy as phonological awareness, book/print concepts, and phonics. Focusing on general knowledge for all children, especially those living in poverty and DLLs, is critical (Chapin, 2006; Grissmer & Eiseman, 2008; Hart & Risley, 1995). In early childhood classrooms, teachers build preschool children's background knowledge by developing oral language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and listening comprehension (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008; Noel & Lord, 2014). Furthermore, supporting the concept knowledge of young DLLs in their home language creates a foundation for later academic achievement (Shin, 2010). Based on ample evidence that supports the relationship specifically between knowledge and school achievement (see Fisher & Frey, 2009; Hirsch, 2003; Marzano, 2004), it is quite possible to conclude that early knowledge development is one way to prevent and bridge the achievement gap (Grissmer, Grimm, Aiyer, Murrell, & Steele, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

We studied children's learning and development from an ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which analyzes multiple variables and how they interact to support children's development and learning. Our overall research goals not only consider the impact of variables associated with the child (e.g., activity level and level of content knowledge), but also examine how variables associated with the larger environment (including the perceptions of administrators and teachers) influence such factors. Variables associated with the home, school, community, and the greater society all warrant serious consideration. The principles of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) are also critically important to our work (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2011). Learning environments and activities designed by adults who embrace DAP are first and foremost designed around children's developmental characteristics, their individual needs, and their family/cultural context. Early education, which helps children develop in all areas, must be based on DAP.

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do early childhood teachers and administrators weigh the importance of *approaches to learning, social and emotional development, pre-literacy skills, and general knowledge* on a child's ability to succeed in kindergarten and later in school?

2. How do the perceptions of early childhood teachers and administrators related to pre-literacy skills compare to their perceptions of general knowledge?
3. Do the numbers of DLLs, the community's poverty status, or its rural/urban nature influence educators' perceptions of each area in Question 1?

### **Data Collection**

We collected data using a survey designed with Qualtrics (2013). For each area, we provided a general definition. For general knowledge, we stated "the amount of experience and knowledge about the world *and* knowledge that relates to traditional school subjects." Pre-literacy skills were described as "writing letters, holding a book properly, phonemic awareness, phonics, etc." Social and emotional maturity was defined as "whether a child is able to separate easily, is adaptable, and can regulate his/her emotions." Disposition toward learning concerned "whether a child is persistent, curious, engaged, motivated, and able to take directions." Respondents chose between "very important," "moderately important," or "not important."

Initial survey questions asked respondents to provide demographic data and indicate how important they believe each area is to a child's ability to succeed in kindergarten and later in school. We then asked just caregivers and teachers to answer questions related to the number of DLLs in their classes, the community poverty status, and its rural/urban nature. A little over 500 respondents answered the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

The current research analyzes the answers of 191 teachers who were either care providers, prekindergarten, kindergarten, grade one, or grade two teachers (85% worked primarily with preschool-age children) and 62 were early education administrators. We compared the answers of teachers and administrators for research questions 1 and 2 ( $N = 253$ ). For the third question, we analyzed answers only from care providers and early childhood teachers ( $N = 191$ ).

As this is a pilot study, we were less concerned with the generalizability of our data and distributed the survey to all interested parties via a link on the professional website of the second author. In order to maximize the response rate, we emailed the survey link to Head Start and childcare centers. We also contacted administrators in early childhood settings, early care providers through Childcare Council webpages, and K–2 teachers in schools, and sent emails to professional and personal contacts in the early childhood field. The responses were anonymous.

We utilized descriptive statistics to present demographic data of respondents. Frequency counts of answers to each category were subjected to chi-square analyses (Preacher, 2001).

## **Results**

The respondents were overwhelmingly female (teachers 98%, administrators 95%) and the vast majority were from the northeastern United States (72% teachers, 71% administrators). Teachers (but not administrators) also answered questions about their schools' demographics. Forty-eight percent worked in urban areas, 81% worked primarily with children in poverty, and 35% indicated they taught high numbers of DLLs, while 29% and 36%, respectively, indicated they had low or no DLLs in their care.

### **Research Question 1: Teachers' and Administrators' Ratings of Each Area**

Teachers and administrators agreed on the importance of each area. Based on a 3-point scale (very important, moderately important, not important), almost all (97% to 100%) respondents indicated that approaches toward learning, social and emotional maturity, pre-literacy skills, and general knowledge were either very or moderately important. Both teachers and administrators, however, were more likely to answer "moderately important" for the general knowledge domain. Furthermore, administrators were

more likely than teachers to consider general knowledge to be “very important.” This finding was significant ( $p = .02$ ). (See Table 1.)

Table 1

*Perceptions of Areas Related to PkFFC Domains: Teachers (N = 191) and Administrators (N = 62)*

Area	Very Important		Moderately important		Not Important	
	Teacher	Admin	Teacher	Admin	Teacher	Admin
Pre-literacy skills	161 (84%)	47 (76%)	29 (15%)	13 (21%)	1 (<1%)	1 (2%)
Disposition toward learning	173 (91%)	57 (92%)	17 (9%)	4 (6%)	0	0
Social-emotional maturity	179 (94%)	58 (94%)	12 (6%)	3 (5%)	0	0
General knowledge	*100 (52%)	*43 (69%)	85 (45%)	18 (29%)	5 (3%)	0

\*Denotes significant difference  $< .05$ .

### Research Question 2: Pre-Literacy Skills vs. General Knowledge

When we compared educators’ perceptions of general knowledge with pre-literacy skills, we found a significant difference. Both administrators and teachers ( $p = .00$ ) viewed pre-literacy skills as more important than general knowledge. However, when we looked only at the administrators’ answers, they reported that pre-literacy skills were as important as general knowledge ( $p = .323$ ). (See Table 2.)

Table 2

*Teachers’ and Administrators’ Perceptions of Pre-Literacy Skills Compared to General Knowledge*

Area	Pre-literacy skills		General knowledge	
	Very important	Moderately important	Very important	Moderately important
Teachers and administrators (N = 253)	*208 (82%)	*42 (17%)	*143 (57%)	*103 (41%)
Teachers (N = 191)	*161 (84%)	*29 (15%)	*100 (52%)	*85 (45%)
Administrators (N = 62)	47 (76%)	13 (21%)	43 (69%)	18 (29%)

\*Denotes significant difference  $< .01$ ; data not included from educators who perceived constructs as “not important.”

### Research Question 3: Teachers’ Perceptions Based on Demographics

Results revealed several interesting findings.

**Impoverished vs. non-impovertised communities.** The majority of teachers ( $N = 154$ ) described the community that their center or school served as mostly poor. Thirty-seven respondents reported working with students of medium- or high-income families. There was *no* significant difference in perceptions regarding the importance of pre-literacy skills or general knowledge based on the poverty status.

**Urban vs. non-urban.** Chi-square analyses revealed significant differences between how teachers rated pre-literacy skills based on whether their school or center was in an urban or non-urban area. Teachers in urban settings ( $N = 92$ ) more often rated pre-literacy skills as very important when compared to ratings from teachers from rural/suburban areas ( $N = 98$ ) ( $p = .004$ ). There was no significant difference among teachers' ratings of the importance of general knowledge.

**Dual language learners (DLLs).** Comparisons of three groups of teachers—those with high, moderate, and low numbers of DLLs—were significant ( $p = .04$ ). Further comparisons also revealed a significant difference between teachers with high or moderately high numbers of DLLs ( $N = 123$ ) and those with low numbers ( $N = 68$ ). Those with high numbers of DLLs were more likely to rate pre-literacy skills as very important ( $p = .015$ ). Teachers' views, however, of the importance of general knowledge did not vary significantly based on the number of DLLs. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

*Perceptions of Teachers (N = 190) Based on Poverty, Community SES, and DLLs*

	Area: Pre-literacy		Area: General knowledge	
	Very Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Moderately important
Poor ( $N = 154$ )	133 (86%)	21 (14%)	81 (53%)	68 (44%)
Moderate/ Wealthy ( $N = 37$ )	28 (76%)	8 (22%)	19 (51%)	17 (46%)
Urban ( $N = 92$ )	*85 (92%)	*7 (8%)	50 (54%)	42 (46%)
Non-urban ( $N = 98$ )	*75 (77%)	*22 (22%)	50 (51%)	42 (43%)
High/mod #DLLs ( $N = 123$ )	*110 (89%)	*13 (11%)	71 (58%)	51 (41%)
Low #DLLs ( $N = 68$ )	*51 (75%)	*16 (24%)	29 (43%)	34 (50%)

\*Denotes significant difference  $<.05$ ; data not included from educators who perceived constructs as "not important."

### Discussion and Educational Significance

These results indicate that the educators in our sample reported that the survey areas—approaches to learning; social and emotional development; pre-literacy, and general knowledge—were highly related to the domains set out by the PkFCC (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2011) and very important to school readiness and later academic success. Administrators valued general knowledge more than teachers did. In addition, teachers' perceptions about general knowledge and pre-literacy skills were influenced by the number of DLLs in their classes and the urban/rural setting of their teaching site; teachers with high numbers of DLLs and in urban settings viewed pre-literacy skills as very important.

These results revealed variations in perceptions about the value of general knowledge compared to pre-literacy skills. Eighty-two percent of both teachers and administrators indicated that pre-literacy skills were very important, whereas only 57% described general knowledge as very important. When we looked

just at administrators, we found that they placed significantly greater importance on the role of general knowledge.

After confirmation of these results, our future work will investigate the reasons for this difference and find ways to support teachers and society's efforts to build children's content knowledge in developmentally appropriate ways. Grissmer et al.'s (2010) work implies an increased focus on general knowledge for young children. Our preliminary results indicate that this may be an adjustment for teachers, who have repeatedly learned about the importance of the specific literacy skills as outlined by the National Early Literacy Panel [NELP] (2008). Changing beliefs about teaching is not an easy feat (Pajares, 1992).

We must look specifically at the impact of strong general knowledge on DLLs. This includes how it helps shape later literacy skills across the disciplines, the transferability of this knowledge if it is learned in another language, and the specific variables that have an effect on the growth of such knowledge. Our preliminary results indicate that teachers with large numbers of DLLs and those from urban communities believe pre-literacy skills are more important than general knowledge. This assumption needs more research attention: Which pre-literacy skills are most important to DLLs? What is the role of general knowledge in DLLs' future academic success? If this knowledge transfers, how does it influence later academic success?

These results provide evidence that early childhood educators find the four surveyed areas meaningful to their work with young children. Thus, it is very likely that teachers are using the PkFCC document (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2011) to guide their work with preschool children. The document, however, should be expanded. Policymakers and researchers must now move toward the crucial question of who is responsible for supporting these characteristics. What are the specific responsibilities of communities and governments in children's readiness and school success? To support all children, especially DLLs and children living in poverty, such specifics need to be incorporated into local, state, and federal policy documents, and appropriate funding must be allocated.

Across New York State, universal preschool education is on the rise. This is an especially important opportunity for DLLs and children living in poverty. Helping teachers maintain developmentally appropriate practices while simultaneously supporting children's content knowledge and pre-literacy skills are crucial. This preliminary research explores an important first step.

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author: noela@newpaltz.edu