

# **Reframing the Word Gap: Equity-Based Approaches to Supporting Early Language Development**

A Virtual Workshop  
September 22, 2022

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# Executive Summary

The Reframing the Word Gap workshop addressed the current state of and future directions for research on the early language environment and children's language development. This one-day workshop was hosted by the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) with planning support from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR), and the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD). The objectives of this Workshop were to: (a) critically examine strengths and limitations of existing interventions targeting children's language environments; (b) explore how equity-based approaches to supporting early language development hold the potential to improve child outcomes (e.g., school readiness and later academic achievement) that are directly linked to the reduction of health disparities in adulthood; and, (c) identify knowledge gaps, barriers to advancing the science, promising approaches, and needed tools to achieve these outcomes. Participants in this workshop were asked to prioritize consideration of the intersection of poverty with race, ethnicity, multilingualism, bidialectalism, and disability, and discuss how theoretical and methodological decisions can either dampen or promote a more inclusive approach to understanding of children's communicative experiences and development. Several themes emerged over the course of the day, covering a range of issues that need to be addressed to move the field forward. Key themes included:

- **Improving the ecological validity and accessibility of interventions.** Building cultural and linguistic adaptations into interventions from the outset, as well as considering the other demands on caregivers and available community resources, will inform steps toward acceptability and scalability.
- **Understanding the key components of interventions.** Clear documentation of intervention procedures and fidelity of implementation will lead to better understanding of the key components that drive change and will make room for adapting programs to the needs of different communities.
- **Working collaboratively with the community.** Researchers need to practice humility in their approach, avoiding a top-down approach to research and intervention and instead developing trusting and respectful

partnerships with community members to build programs that serve the goals and build on the strengths of the community.

- **Recognizing the social, historical, and political contexts that shape families' experiences and that influence research.** Understanding the history of how racism and other biases are embedded in our society and in research is a critical step in addressing those biases and not repeating the de-humanizing mistakes of the past.
- **Broadening the conceptualization of interaction quality and prioritizing measurement development.** Much work is needed to improve existing assessments of the language environment as well as to develop new measures to capture a wider range of dimensions of interactions. In addition, new measures are needed to capture external factors, such as systemic racism, that impact family, school, and community processes.
- **Building diverse and interdisciplinary research teams.** There is a need to grow a more diverse workforce of researchers and prioritize a wide range of perspectives in the research enterprise. Interdisciplinary programs, training, and discussions are important for making sure different ways of thinking about strengths and challenges are brought to the table.

# Opening Remarks and Introductions

Speakers: Virginia Salo, James A. Griffin, Alison Cernich

Dr. Salo opened the workshop at 11 a.m., welcomed the participants, thanked everyone for their support and participation, and provided logistical details for the day.

Dr. Griffin emphasized the long history of research related to the word gap, but that better understanding how we can support families is more important now than perhaps ever before—especially for those who have been historically marginalized or disproportionately impacted by tragedies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Griffin urged an open and honest dialogue about how we can take what we know and how we can move forward in addressing these issues and concerns to promote the healthy development of children and their families. Last, Dr. Griffin emphasized this workshop as the beginning of the discussion in which NICHD will be soliciting others to engage and to continue the conversation toward moving the science forward. He ended by saying the goal of this workshop and related activities is to build an environment to promote research towards identifying effective, culturally and linguistically responsive, and scalable approaches to enriching children's early language environment.

Dr. Cernich also emphasized the urgent need for sustainable action and culturally sensitive programs to support families as they foster their children's development, and that by better understanding the strengths and values that families and communities bring to the table we can better understand how to support them. She acknowledged the intersection in the United States of socioeconomic status with the other minoritized identities such as race, ethnicity, multilingualism, bidialectalism, and disability, and the importance of ensuring the work that is being done is reflective of the needs, priorities, and realities of the diverse communities NICHD serves. She highlighted how this conversation fits with ongoing NIH-wide and NICHD diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives, and that the workshop will foster a discussion of future directions to build a more representative inclusive and community-engaged body of work.

# Session 1: Setting the Stage

Moderator: Lisa López

## Mapping the Landscape of Interventions for Preventing Disparities in Early Language Learning Opportunities

*Judith Carta*

Dr. Carta discussed the historical and current landscape of early language intervention research. Key points included:

- Hart and Risley's work challenged prevailing views on language development as unmalleable and hereditary, showing that children's early environments played a role in learning and that early language experience could influence both short- and long-term outcomes.
  - This led to a shift, with researchers turning to identify ways to enrich children's early learning experiences and preventing the adverse effects of disparity in early language environments.
- Common and core threads among the many different language interventions:
  - Focus on promoting responsive interactions using two main strategies:
    - 1) following the child's lead and creating joint attention episodes and
    - 2) recasting–repeating and expanding on a child's utterances.
  - Focus on shared book reading contexts or conversations embedded in everyday routines and play.
- Existing interventions range in focus on parents and other family members or caretakers in the home, childcare providers or early educators, other community members; and have been implemented in a variety of settings including in-home visiting programs, pediatric and public health settings, childcare programs, libraries, even laundromats.
- What we know about the impact of these interventions:

- Strong consistent evidence that parents can learn specific language supporting strategies and that those approaches can improve children's language.
- No evidence that parenting interventions are differentially effective across the range of socioeconomic status (SES), however very few studies have been done specifically within low SES groups. Only a quarter of language intervention studies include low-SES children.
- Difficult to know which kind of intervention is most effective because published study reports provide incomplete information about training procedures and fidelity of implementation.
- Work with children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is also limited and primarily focuses on children preschool age and older from Latinx and/or Spanish-speaking backgrounds. Importantly, these interventions are often only adapted linguistically and not culturally.
- While the studies typically meet high standards of scientific rigor, this work is often low in ecological validity and readiness for scale-up.
- We need to know more about and promising new directions:
  - What works best for whom, with a focus on children from diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic groups
  - How language environment interventions work within the contexts of the real lives of families.
  - Factors that influence the implementation of these interventions and how to bring them to scale to influence population-level outcomes.
  - Employing strengths-based approaches that build on community and cultural values
  - Advancing measurement and providing new ways to monitor programs and provide feedback
  - Developing multi-sector community-wide interventions for promoting early communication

- Using brain imaging to document changes resulting from intervention

## **A Dimensional Model of Language Experience: Developmental Influences Across Multiple Neurocognitive Domains**

*Rachel Romeo*

Dr. Romeo discussed considering the multidimensionality of qualitative features of language input. Key points included:

- Growing evidence to suggest that qualitative aspects of children's early language experience seem to be more strongly related to developmental outcomes than input quantity.
- Language experience promotes not just language development but development across several domains, including executive function, attention, IQ, socioemotional skills, among others.
  - Results from a 9-week intervention with families from primarily lower SES backgrounds and their 4- to 6-year-old children, which focused on promoting turn taking and meaningful language found: 1) a dose-response relationship between increase in conversational turns and increases in children's language, nonverbal IQ, and executive functioning; and 2) increase in conversational turns was correlated with cortical thickening in regions supporting language and nonlinguistic cognition.
- A push to consider different dimensions of language input qualities including conceptual, linguistic, and interactive aspects of the language input.
  - Preliminary analyses suggest that these qualitative dimensions are stable over time and that linguistic and interactive features support language development whereas conceptual and interactive features support executive function development. This highlights the importance of the interactive component of language input.
- Future work could benefit from further expanding this dimensionality of qualitative features of early language experience to better reflect the range of experiences children receive.

# Promoting Equity in Early Child Development: Population-Level Impact

*Alan Mendelsohn*

Dr. Mendelsohn discussed considerations and population-level efforts to promote equity in early childhood development. Key points included:

- Need to focus on primary prevention before disparities emerge. Pediatric primary care presents an opportunity to address the need for universal access and low cost.
- Two models that have successfully leveraged pediatric primary care:
  - Reach out and Read (ROR): a very low-touch program that involves giving out children's books with some guidance and modeling and currently reaches millions of children each year.
  - The Video Interaction Project (VIP): an enhancement to ROR, in which parents get feedback on video-recorded interactions with their child to identify and reinforce strengths in interactions around toy play and shared reading. VIP is prepared for scaling, and Randomized Clinical Trial (RCT) evaluations have found positive impacts both on parent-child interactions, but also in non-target areas such as reduced screen time, reduced physical punishment, reduced parenting stress, and improvements in child outcomes across domains.
- Need for the development of multi-level, multi-platform intervention.
  - One example is Smart Beginnings, an integrated, tiered model linking pediatric primary care to home visits, which has evidence for high family engagement, enhanced parent-child interactions, and reduced child problem behaviors.
- Need to think about cross-domain interventions, as there are examples of language-focused interventions having an impact on child behavior and self-regulation as well.

## General Discussion

- Emphasis on the importance of thinking carefully about how we define and measure language input beyond just words and vocabulary and need to better understand linkages with child outcomes across different domains.
- Requires careful and intentional development of new measurement tools. Without that, we won't know what, to what extent, or why interventions are having an impact.
- How can we navigate the push toward precision and rigor in interventions while also ensuring ecological validity and accessibility?
  - Focus on identifying the key ingredients or core components intervention that really drive positive change while maintaining room for adapting features to different settings.
  - While interventions embedded in wrap-around support programs are resource-heavy, we must think critically about what a language intervention can provide for families facing more immediate needs in the absence or in the context of other types of support.
  - Must have a sense of humility when bringing our ideas of precision to the real world. And it is critical to think about the whole range of places and aspects of real life that interventions can be embedded within and adapting the form of intervention to the context.
- Universal interventions that are not stigmatizing are often the most equitable and most well-received.
- Emotional valence of the interaction may explain some of the cross-domain (e.g., socioemotional) effects. Positive affect in parent-child interactions can be a protective factor for children yet is one of the more understudied aspects of interactions and is tricky to measure.
- When we apply a dimensional lens to interaction quality, it allows us to pinpoint those factors that will be more tractable and malleable than others. For example, when we focus on words—at some point it is not plausible to be constantly talking and the focus on this can become burdensome or even demeaning. Whereas focusing on qualitative features of the interactions can feel more accessible.

- Orienting toward identifying different qualitative dimensions can lead to the question of ease of implementation: How difficult is it? How much are we asking people to change?
  - This could lead toward developing a sort of menu to choose what is best for each child or context.
  - This can lead to empirical questions about what factors are driving the child outcomes we see, comparing language versus other qualitative dimensions.
- App-based interventions likely won't be effective unless they involve and promote contingency in real life.

## Session 2: Applying an Equity Lens

Moderator: Michelle Sarche

### **A Strengths-Based Approach to Intervention Research: Addressing the Who, What, How, and When of Equity-Centered Research**

*Iheoma Iruka*

Dr. Iruka discussed the necessity of addressing the sociopolitical context of existing research and the impact of equity-centered, strengths-based approaches to intervention research. Key points included:

- Researchers need to be more precise in the language used to describe the communities we are working with (e.g., avoiding terms such as “disadvantage”, “at risk”, or “vulnerable”) and be aware of the implications this has on the work and how it is interpreted.
- It is critical to be reflective and honest about the lens we are applying and to recognize the power of the language we use to communicate information—being mindful of the downstream impacts on programs, policies, and people.
  - The 1965 “Moynihan Report,” written by then Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan, concluded that the breakdown of the nuclear family structure was the primary problem source for Black Americans. Using

the same national data but with a culturally grounded perspective, Robert Hale identified unique strengths within Black families and communities including strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, high achievement orientation, and religious orientation.

- Racist viewpoints have been historically ingrained in our political and social systems and these sentiments are still present and continue to dictate whose voice and perspective gets centered and whose viewpoint is marginalized.
- Our framing and approach to the research matters because it shapes the questions we ask, the potential solutions we find, and the communication of the findings.
  - Findings from seminal research studies, such as the Carolina Abecedarian Study, are often framed such that the interventions prevent children from becoming the “drains on society” they might otherwise have been with no recognition of the context, oppression, and dehumanization of these communities.
    - We should not throw these studies out, there is much to be learned and gained from this work, but the research needs to be considered in terms of the context in which it was done, whose perspective is being centered, and how it is being communicated.
  - A “color-blind” lens will not solve, but rather perpetuate, these problems by ignoring the context of racism.
  - Need to understand the difference between an asset-based lens and a deficit-based lens; where the former emphasizes the opportunity and possibility that already exists within a community and recognizes the broader context and history, and the latter emphasizes problems that need to be fixed and internal factors driving those problems.
  - Researchers need to pivot away from perpetuating assimilationist racist views and toward embracing an antiracist perspective throughout the entire science process (i.e., research team positionality, questions, theories, methodology, data collection/data collectors, analyses).

- The R<sup>3</sup>ISE (Racism + Resilience + Resistance Integrative Study of Childhood Ecosystem) model is a conceptual and integrative framework for examining the many ways that different forms of racism impact children's development. A primary goal of developing and applying this model is to ensure that racism and its impact are visible and not ignored.

## **Community Collaboration in Intervention Development: A Call to Action**

*Lauren M. Cycyk*

Dr. Cycyk discussed the importance of community collaboration in research and intervention development. Key points included:

- Of the very few early language and/or literacy interventions that have been adapted for young children from culturally or linguistically minoritized backgrounds:
  - ~50% included linguistic adaptations to account for home language(s) or language varieties.
  - <20% incorporated adaptations accounting for the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of the target participants.
  - <25% consulted with members of the cultural linguistic community targeted by the intervention while in the process of developing the intervention.
  - <50% collected any data on the social validity of their intervention from participants with minimal attention to cultural fit.
- When we base our adaptations on the priorities or preferences identified *for* the community instead of *with* the community, we miss the opportunity to learn of adaptations that uniquely address strengths and needs of the community that may not have been considered by the research team; we rely on stereotypes and propagate antiquated and inequitable approaches that may threaten child and family outcomes; and we continue to marginalize populations that have historically been marginalized from science.

- Intervention development teams need to develop trusting and respectful partnerships, regularly involve community members and participants in development efforts, and include scholars who identified with the cultures and languages of the target communities.
  - An example of this is Language and Play Every Day en español (LAPE-e).
- Prioritizing community collaboration can support development of scalable interventions that are both meaningful for participants and still very likely to support behavioral gains.

## **Taking a Strengths-Based Approach to Black Children’s Language and Literacy Development**

*Nicole Gardner-Neblett*

Dr. Gardner-Neblett discussed the impact of racism on the evaluation of Black children’s language and literacy skills. Key points included:

- Language assessments that use storytelling are much more inclusive and equitable than typical standardized language assessments.
- Analysis using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study cohort:
  - Across the whole sample, toddler language skills were associated with oral narrative skills in preschool, but the narrative skills did not predict later emergent literacy.
  - For African American children, regardless of SES, preschool oral narrative skills mediated the link between early language and later emergent literacy.
- This finding suggests a potential point of intervention and raises the question of why we don’t see better outcomes for African American children’s reading at a national level.
- Race plays a role in teachers’ assessment of children’s oral narrative skills.
  - An experimental study showed that when asked to assess lower quality stories told by either a hypothetical Black or hypothetical White child, White teachers rated the Black child’s story more unfavorably

than the White child's story, even though the stories were exactly the same.

- In explaining their impressions of the Black and White child storytellers, White teachers were more likely to mention negative aspects about Black children's language skills compared to White children's language skills.
- This work has important implications for how we assess children's language skills and the extent to which the learning environments, teachers, in particular, are supporting children in their language development.

## General Discussion

- Need for both intentional use of community-based participatory research and for supporting scholars who are themselves from the communities we seek to support—to grow a more diverse workforce of researchers.
- There is a tendency to dehumanize those seen as “other.”
  - There are examples of this playing out and causing harm in research, assessment, and teaching. Children and families need and deserve to be fully seen for who they are.
  - Allowing race to be subconscious, to not talk about race and racism openly and honestly, perpetuates stereotypical dehumanization.
- We can move the science forward in a productive way through:
  - Sustained, intentional, partnerships and engagement within communities that are different from our own. Researchers need to get out of the “university bubble.”
  - In addition to personal self-education and cultural humility, diversifying our research teams and community engagement can help to identify where we have implicit and explicit biases.
- Integrating the needs for cultural humility and engagement with a push for new measurement development:
  - Who decides what good language looks like, what good interactions look like, and what quality looks like in an adult-child interaction? Is

there a universally applied definition? Have families been consulted on their opinion of what a good interaction, and what healthy language development looks like?

- If we are striving to recognize our own biases, maybe we can start with evaluating the measures we use to capture language and identify the biases inherent in those.
- Understanding the history of how racism and biases are baked into the world and our society is an important step in addressing those biases. Being willing to talk about it, define it, and measure it.
- Applying a level of curiosity to understanding our own particular lens. Researchers need to approach this work with a lot of humility and intentional, thoughtful engagement with different groups.

## **Session 3: Identifying Barriers to Progress and Pathways to Move Forward: Panel Discussion**

Moderator: Susan Neuman

Panelists: Margaret Burchinal, Natasha Cabrera, Ashley Darcy-Mahoney, Jill Gilkerson, Lisa López, Julie Sweetland

The discussion panel engaged both panelists and other workshop participants in conversation around how to move the science forward and away from a deficit lens. Key themes included:

- Approach the science from a strengths-based perspective.
  - Build off the kinds of activities that are already present in the everyday context and provide participants with something that they value. For example, classroom-based programs can be implemented more effectively when they also solve a problem the teacher has and wants solved.

- Focus on the strengths that come from a family speaking in their native or home language. In developing *Háblame Bebé*, researchers thought up front about the ways that families experience sociolinguistic racism and helping parents by dispelling myths about bilingualism and encouraging parents to interact with their children in the language that they feel most comfortable expressing themselves in a loving way.
- Acknowledge what parents and caregivers are already doing well and build from there. Bring them into the conversation and let them guide what they feel good about and are comfortable with.
- Community engagement, collaboration, and/or partnerships can advance the research and build trust.
  - Much of the current research focuses on mothers and children, and rarely do we learn about fathers, their community, or the neighborhood.
  - The broader community plays an important role in shaping how families interact and what resources children have access to.
  - Expand research setting to different community settings including laundromats, salons and barber shops, public libraries, local science centers.
  - Scientists should focus on how to disseminate the science to families in ways that are accessible to their community. For example, working with a local radio station to broadcast parenting tips.
  - Shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach by having conversations with communities or holding focus groups with families to identify what they see as problems, rather than coming into the community with what we think are the problems.
- Increasing scientific rigor does not mean sacrificing families' engagement.
  - Begin with asking what parents/caregivers want for their children to drive how you make programs more successful at meeting those goals.

- Developing this intentional research agenda that incorporates families' needs and heterogeneity may need to get creative and go beyond traditional research designs (e.g., RCTs).
- We need to be careful to avoid creating a false dichotomy that families can either be concerned with basic needs *or* with fostering healthy development for their children—that just dehumanizes them in another way.
- Addressing research bias is not just an intellectual pursuit, but a daily practice. Recognizing biases in our approaches, questions, and tools can help increase the rigor of our science.
- There needs to be simultaneous attention to methodological rigor hand in hand with new framing and approaches to the science.
- Training the next generation of scientists to work with diverse communities.
  - Challenge some of the outdated information they're encountering in textbooks
  - Involve students when developing community relationships (teaching by doing).
  - Be open to feedback from the students in the lab who identify with those communities with who you are working.
- Our scientific lens and framework matters.
  - The terms we use and the way we define a concept (e.g., Word Gap) influences our understanding about the topic and how we view children and families. For example, "Word Gap" already creates this deficit lens.
  - While looking at individual biomarkers and mechanisms and fine-grained analyses are important, they also need to be complemented by looking outward at the systems and policies that influence how families operate. For example, work showing a link between paid family leave and early child development.
  - There needs to be a shift toward focusing on the protective and promotive factors. The concept of intervention itself leads us to think

narrowly that the problem exists at the individual level rather than broadly at the systemic level.

## Session 4: Seating the Research in Broader Context

Moderator: Deana Around Him

### Start with Equity: Zooming Out and Considering Context

*Shantel Meek*

Dr. Meek discussed the importance and impact of considering the broader socio-historical and political context in which families are living when conducting research on language development. Key points included:

- The “fish in the lake” metaphor, developed by the Racial Equity Institute, describes the different layers of racism and how we might think about and approach our work.
  - Briefly: if you notice an issue with one fish you might ask what was wrong with that fish, but if you notice an issue with half the fish in a lake you might ask what is wrong with the water in the lake. If you then notice the same pattern in many lakes, you might ask what’s wrong with the groundwater that is feeding all the lakes.
  - Intervention is important, but we can’t just focus on the fish and ignore the groundwater.
  - Applying this metaphor to work on the “word gap”—there needs to be a deep interrogation and communication about the root of the “gap,” considering that today’s society grew from a system with intentional disparities baked in, and this is the context in which historically marginalized families are living.
  - The media and policy attention on the “word gap” ultimately communicates that the “fish” need fixing while ignoring the groundwater that polluted the lakes that are making the fish sick.

- It is vital to consider the array of stressors that interfere with the quantity and quality of time that parents get to spend with their kids and to acknowledge that these stressors are not even across groups, but are disproportionately inflicted on families of color, on immigrant families, among others. These stressors are particularly challenging for families with intersecting identities affected by multiple systems of oppression.
- The original word gap research found differences in spoken words based on SES, but in the United States, race is associated with every domain of financial well-being.
  - Comparing groups with different economic well-being without paying attention to how race and income has been purposefully tied together throughout history is problematic for many reasons.
- Case study of emerging bilinguals: English-only policies are a key tactic of White supremacy and colonialism to eradicate culture and influence what parents do at home (e.g., Spanish-speaking parents not allowing Spanish to be spoken at home) and are still in place in many states and cities across the United States today. So, when we think about the broader context that families are living in, we have to consider whether it is enough to simply say talk to your child in the home and how we might expand the way we think about supporting families (e.g., advocacy for bilingual instruction at school, support in accessing public resources that are only communicated in English).
- Are we designing and measuring the effectiveness of interventions in a way that really takes account of the broader context of support that families need and that families receive?

## General Discussion

- Much of the research around dual and multilingual households and learners misses the fact that many Indigenous communities are additionally working to revitalize and sustain their languages, which hold their worldviews within them.
- This context requires us to think critically about how we are conducting research related to language and the learning environment, such that the approaches that emphasize Western standards of rigor and generalizability may have much less relevance to certain communities.

- When thinking about communicating the complexity of the research to policymakers, it is important to know where to direct whatever the message is. For example, talking with funders about priorities and what is missing in the field and how these missing pieces are skewing our ability to scale up programs.
  - Important to know what is ready to scale up and what needs more research and be able to lay that out clearly.
- How can we think about better preparing the next generation of researchers to think about this broader context in their research programs?
  - Understanding the history of how programs, policies, and research has unfolded and the context in which research was done over time
  - Incorporating more policy work into developmental psych curriculum, or more cross-disciplinary training more broadly
- There is a real power in shifting the lens from thinking about achievement gaps at the child level to opportunity and resource gaps at the family and community level. Those are real and historically embedded, and cause disparities in whatever set of outcomes we are interested in.

## **Session 5: Policies, Practices, and Systems: Panel Discussion**

Moderator: Ann Kaiser

Panelists: Jessica Barnes-Najor, Caroline Ebanks, Danielle Ewen, Lisa Gennetian, Marina Rodriguez, Dana Suskind

The discussion panel engaged both panelists and other workshop participants in conversation around the broader context in which the research is situated. Key themes include the following:

- Unite research and policy to broaden our perspective and increase impact.
  - The intersection of research and policy challenges us to think about how we can give providers and families the space and time and resources to even implement evidence-based interventions. In many

cases, that comes down to money and security (e.g., housing, hunger, economic issues).

- The early childhood space is at a disadvantage in the policy world because we don't have the money behind the messaging that adult-centric groups do, so we have to think like the policymakers/legislatures in building the kind of evidence that will be convincing to create a society that truly centers children and families.
- The more research-backed evidence we have that raises up examples of what can be accomplished with certain investments the better we can argue for it. Scientists can ask thoughtful questions about how policies impact child outcomes.
- Research is received in different ways in different communities. Upper-middle class, English-speaking, mostly White families tend to think bilingualism is great and want support for bilingual programs; whereas families where English is not the primary language in the home hear that they need to learn and speak only English—that their home language is “bad.” What this looks like in policy is that people are willing to invest in bilingual programs in high income areas, but only emphasize English-language learning programs in low-income areas.
- Interdisciplinary (for example, across psychology, economics, policy) programs, training, and discussions are important for making sure different perspectives are heard from and different ways of thinking about strengths and challenges are brought to the table.
- There is a disconnect between the research and the community.
  - Research is used to inform the launching of new programs or to refine existing programs, which is why it is so critical to think about how we frame the research that we're doing, how it is messaged, and whether it can meet the needs of families and communities.
  - The projects that really make an impact, are those that are truly co-constructed with the communities, families, and educators.
  - Educators and families need simple, straightforward, and accessible information and resources. Using the elevated academic language of

researchers with people on the ground is a huge barrier to uptake and collaboration.

- One of the foundational issues is that our research teams do not look like the communities we are studying, in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, income-level. It is so important to diversify the field of researchers to support individuals with lived experience to be at the table.
- We also need to build the skills within researchers to create trusting, bidirectional relationships with community members. A big part of this is instilling humility.
- Until we begin to really lift-up and honor those lived experiences as a part of the research process, as collaborators in the research process, we will see our research continue to feed into the systemic racism that's embedded in our early childhood systems
- Shifting the focus from individual outcomes, which is a very Western, colonial framework, toward community level outcomes which more often fit the priorities of the communities themselves.
- Consider the many roles that caregivers play in society, and the many members of society that care for children.
  - There is a tendency of a unidimensional view of parents as caregivers of their children, but in the spirit of considering the broader context, we also need to think about parents in all of the roles they play in their family, community, and society.
  - Collaboration with childcare providers will give critical insight into the everyday *how* of serving a diverse community of families—what kinds of communication tools do families and caregivers like and believe will actually help them in their everyday lives.
  - Pediatric primary care has often been excluded from implementation funding but is a key venue to scaling up universal interventions with families.
  - Sustainable impact requires intervening at multiple levels, through multiple platforms and services, as opposed to piecemeal funding of individual programs.

# Overall Discussion and Closing Remarks

## Equity- and Strengths-Based Approaches for Supporting Language Development: Where Do We Go from Here?

*Carol Hammer*

Dr. Hammer summarized many of the key themes of the day and discussed opportunities for moving the field forward. Key points included:

- We know that language development in the first five years of life is critically important and have identified many effective language facilitating strategies.
  - While parents and caregivers can learn these strategies, effect sizes of interventions are small to moderate.
- There is a very limited number of intervention studies that involve families from under-resourced communities who are culturally and linguistically diverse.
  - Parents and caregivers have many strengths that aren't being studied or tapped into, and parents are often being blamed for the word gap.
  - There are differences between cultural groups in terms of beliefs, practices, and priorities yet often the real hinderance is the circumstances of poverty.
- We need to understand the historical context of the word gap research.
  - The prominent research of that era applied a harsh deficit framework to the language of families who were not from a White, middle-class, educated background.
  - We cannot repeat the egregious objective failures of the past by failing to celebrate the cultural and linguistic strengths of families and children and neglecting to develop culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

- We need to acknowledge and address issues in the educational system, which is based on the values and practices of the U.S. White middle-class culture, and which gives individuals from that background significant advantage.
  - The system does not build on the diversity of family's strengths across cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- We need research that helps us understand the families we serve.
  - Qualitative and mixed methods studies can provide insight into family's views and beliefs and priorities.
  - Put aside preconceptions of what an interaction *should* look like and be open to learning and observing the different ways that different families have of supporting their children's development.
  - Better understand that broader contexts in which families, particularly families in poverty, are operating and the challenges that they face.
- Use this better understanding and collaboration with the communities to build programs and interventions that meet families where they are and support them in meeting their goals in ways that lift-up their strengths.
  - Similarly, classroom and center-based programs need to incorporate, build on, and be responsive to the cultures, languages, and dialects of the children in the class.
- Across interventions studies, we need to understand the essential ingredients and think about scalability from the beginning.
  - Improve our assessments, both in terms of norming for different populations, and translating.
  - Develop new measures to capture aspects of interactions and the broader context that aren't being measured.
- Shifts in research practices need to be paired with shifts in other aspects of the research endeavor.

- Training for peer reviewers of manuscripts and grant proposals to evaluate whether the design integrates and meets the needs of the children and families included in the study.
- Researchers can work with their university government relations offices to coordinate efforts in advocating for funding priorities in this area.
- Policymakers are paying attention to the early years, but now we need to be promoting support for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

## **Adjournment**

Dr. Salo thanked the participants and encouraged everyone to continue building on the conversations that were started during the workshop. She emphasized that this meeting was one step in an ongoing effort to move the field forward, and to look out for more opportunities to engage in this work and to further this discussion on promoting equity in research on children's early language experiences.

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