

Chapter 11

Studying and Addressing Listening Levels of Children in a Rural Poverty–Stricken Area

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports the work of a teacher educator/researcher as she supported teacher candidates to assess and tutor struggling readers in a public school in a rural, economically depressed, yet diverse, area. Alerted by the scores for listening comprehension the candidates were finding over several semesters that indicated little reading potential for the students being assessed, she worked with the school's principal to reassess one group of students at the end of the year to determine growth, and therefore potential success, of the school's new intervention program in raising listening levels. No significant results were found, yet school personnel made no change in their program to address it. The teacher educator/researcher subsequently followed the implications of the research to provide instruction in listening skills to students in two other schools. The chapter closes with a discussion of what may truly make a difference in developing listening skills for the children in this community beyond a commercial program.

INTRODUCTION

Listening is the most basic of the language arts. It is the mechanism by which, in effect, we become human and learn how to interact with other humans (Donnellan et al., 2020; Sampson et al., 2003; Tomasello, 1992; White et al., 2013). As infants listen to the world around them and begin to distinguish that certain sequences of sounds, especially the sounds of speech uttered by their caregivers, have specific meanings, they begin to imitate those sounds. Eventually, they learn that they can have their needs met by using those spoken sounds. This then is the beginning of oral language developmentally. Many definitions of listening have been offered (e.g., Harris & Hodges, 1995; Opitz & Zbaracki, 2004); distilling these definitions down to their most simple form, listening can be said to be *intentional hearing*. Hearing is

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easy to do for anyone with the physical capacity; listening is not so easy and not necessarily automatic (Sampson et al., 2003). Unfortunately, listening is probably the most neglected language art because of the assumption that it is automatic (Opitz & Zbaracki, 2004; Sampson et al., 2003; Szabo et al., 2016). These researchers and others (e.g., Babayigit & Shapiro, 2020; Diakidoy et al., 2005; Snow et al., 1998) propose that effective listening must be taught, either by early caregivers or by teachers in schools. If listening skills are not learned from interactions with caregivers and are not taught later in school, the results can create a barrier to learning from which many children may never recover.

BACKGROUND

Over thirteen years ago, the author moved from a suburb of a large southwestern city in the United States to teach at a branch campus of a university in a nearby state. The branch campus was located in a highly rural area that is also one of the most poverty-stricken regions of the state. According to the U.S. Census QuickFacts (U.S. Department of Commerce, n.d.) for the county in which the branch campus is located, the population density is 17.9 persons per square mile, clearly indicating the rurality of the area. In terms of economics, the median income per household between 2015 and 2019 was estimated to be \$37,061. Those living at or below the poverty level were estimated to be 21.9% of the total population. Other important demographics include the ethnic makeup of the population; although white persons account for 65.1% of the population, American Indians are tabulated at 17.1%, Black or African American at only 8.1%, and those claiming two or more races at 7.3%. Additionally, while 82.9% are high school graduates and 13.4% hold college degrees, only 72.9% of households owned a computer and 39.4% did not have broadband Internet access.

The author was aware that the community she had moved into was economically depressed. She was also well aware of the impact of poverty on literacy skills (Murnane et al., 2012). But the area is not just poverty stricken; it is highly rural, part of a large Native American nation. According to Showalter and colleagues in *Why Rural Matters 2018-2019* (2019), as of 2017, more students in the United States attended rural schools than all of the top 85 largest school districts combined. The report goes on to state “Nearly one in six of those rural students lives below the poverty line, one in seven qualifies for special education and one in nine has changed residence in the previous 12 months” (p. 1). That context impacts the schools, how they are staffed, and what the goals of the teachers and the students are. The state where the author teaches is one of “the three most racially diverse in the nation” (Showalter et al., 2019, p. 2). Moreover, only one other state spends less on rural students. Roscigno and Crowley (2001) describe in their analysis of data then available how intricately intertwined school and family resources are in rural communities. As researchers (Aiken et al., 2020; Azano, 2015; Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003) point out, rural schools face thorny and complex challenges including limited resources, difficulty in employing highly qualified teachers, fewer specialized professionals, apathetic behaviors on the part of students who do not see the value in the education they are offered, and outmigration or the fact that to benefit from schooling, students may have to move away from the rural community they may prefer to remain in.

Regarding literacy specifically, the county in which the author teaches is located in what is often referred to as a “book desert.” According to the Interactive Book Desert Map published by Unite for Literacy (McGuffee, 2014), it is estimated that only between 21 to 30% of the homes in the county owned more than 100 books. As several researchers (e.g., Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2002) point out, poverty is not the only factor that can be blamed for failure to learn to read, but it is a

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