

Preschool Language and Literacy Classroom for At-Risk Children

By Rebecca Mental, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Cleveland, Ohio has a literacy crisis. Six out of 10 adults are functionally illiterate (Seeds of Literacy, 2018), and only three of 10 children achieve a score of “kindergarten ready” on a state test that includes emergent literacy skills (Ohio Department of Education, 2017). Emergent literacy skills are the building blocks of reading and include oral language proficiency, phonological awareness skills, print knowledge, and alphabet knowledge. Children who enter kindergarten with low emergent literacy skills face an uphill battle to catch-up to their peers, and often remain behind their peers in scholastic achievement for years to come (Hilbert & Eis, 2014).



6 out of 10 adults in Cleveland are functionally illiterate (Seeds of Literacy, 2018), indicating that they likely did not acquire sufficient emergent literacy skills as children.



Only 3 out of 10 children in Cleveland test as kindergarten-ready (ODE, 2017)

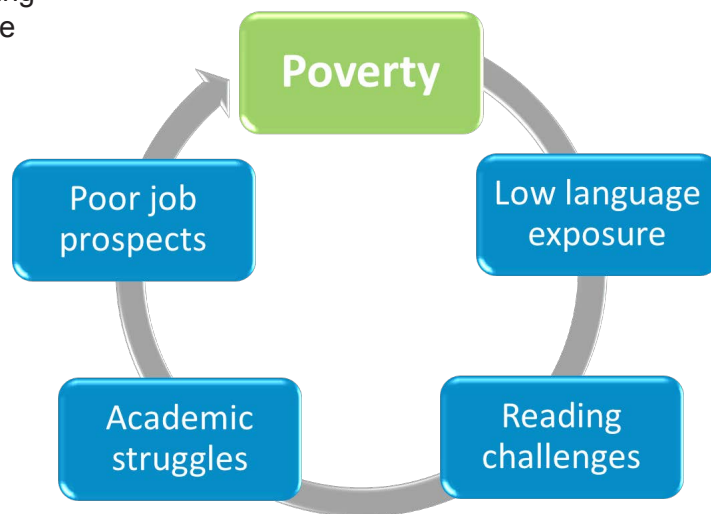
Noe and colleagues (2014) noted that there is no greater risk factor for reading difficulty than living in poverty. Children from impoverished backgrounds often don’t receive adequate early language and literacy exposure in the home, leading to a lack of emergent literacy skill development. With almost half of Cleveland children living in poverty, the root cause for the literacy crisis seems clear.

Low emergent literacy skills feed directly into the cycle of intergenerational poverty that traps many families in Cleveland. That is, a child who lives in poverty often has sub-optimal exposure to early language at home, which leads to delays in emergent literacy skills. Then, these poorly developed emergent literacy skills lead to reading challenges as a child gets older, contributing to academic struggles. Then, poor academic achievement leads to decreased job prospects as adult. Then, these decreased job prospects keep the individual ensnared in poverty. Sadly, the individual’s own children, who are born into poverty, often repeat this cycle.

Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center (CHSC) joins the community in our concern about the literacy crisis in Cleveland. We recognize the important role that speech-language pathologists (SLPs) can play in the development of emergent literacy skills in preschool-aged children. To this end, CHSC developed the Preschool Language and Literacy Classroom (PLLC). In the PLLC, the SLP leads a series of three 45-minute, highly-structured classroom lessons focused on emergent literacy skills, with each visit based around a specific storybook. Target skills include building familiarity with authors and illustrators of books, knowing how to orient and turn pages in a book, building a conceptual framework that print carries meaning, practicing phonological awareness activities including rhyming, building understanding of word relationships, learning to answer questions about the story, vocabulary building, and grammar instruction.

During PLLC, the SLP serves as a role model for the classroom teacher to make certain that the teacher can reinforce the lesson in subsequent classes. This ensures that emergent literacy skills are strengthened even after the conclusion of the program. Preschool educators have been shown to lack adequate knowledge about how to teach emergent literacy skills; many focus primarily on socioemotional development, rather than providing explicit literacy instruction (Lonigan et al, 2013).

Every student and teacher receives a copy of the book used in the PLLC to further reinforce the new skills.



Preschool Language and Literacy Classroom for At-Risk Children *continued*

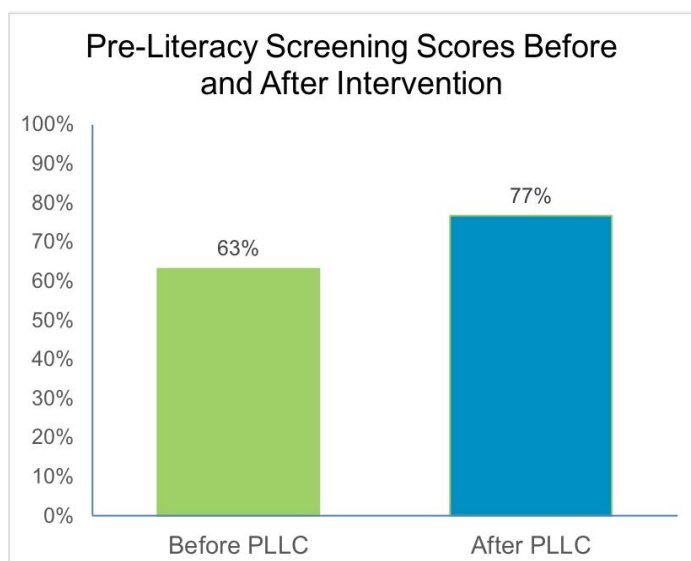


Figure 1. Pre-literacy screening scores before and after PLLC in a group of children at multiple preschool settings in Summer, 2018. Significant increases in screening scores were measured in the group.

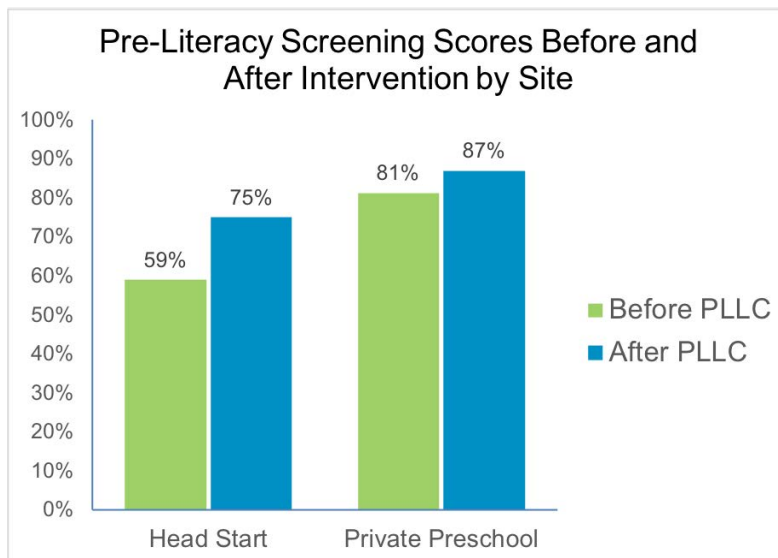


Figure 2. Pre-literacy screening scores before and after PLLC in children at both Head Start and Private Preschool sites. Children at Head Start sites made the greatest improvements.

During Summer, 2018, over 200 children at a variety of preschool sites in Greater Cleveland attended three-session PLLC programs. A sample of children from each classroom completed a pre-literacy screening measure before and after the PLLC program. The screening assessed a variety of emergent literacy skills. After *only three visits* the children demonstrated significant improvements in emergent literacy skills (see Figure 1). Differences were most notable in children from Head Start classrooms, as compared to children in private preschools (see Figure 2). Children in Head Start classrooms are vulnerable in many ways, but are at-risk for reading difficulty. These outcomes suggest that the PLLC program can level-the-playing-field for these children, as their scores after PLLC approach the emergent literacy scores of the children in the private preschools. Further research is warranted to determine if a longer (i.e., more sessions) or more intensive (i.e., more sessions per week) PLLC program would provide further benefit for children. Regardless, it is extremely promising that a low-cost intervention like PLLC can make a positive impact on children in Cleveland who are at-risk for reading difficulty.

Intervening early for preschool children through programs like PLLC is critical for addressing the literacy crisis in Cleveland. Once a child enters a K-12 program, it is likely too late to "catch up," when pre-literacy skills have not been solidly established. CHSC aims to continue to grow the PLLC, both through an increased number of classroom visits and an expansion of the number of classrooms served. We are also introducing standardized pre-literacy screening measures so that the children can be compared to national benchmarks. Ideally, children who attend PLLC could be followed into their subsequent years of education to determine, for instance, if they meet the mark of "kindergarten ready," or if their 3rd grade reading levels come closer to what would be necessary for future academic success. Future studies and longer-term outcome measures will help us to improve the quality and impact of PLLC.

Through the expansion of programs and services like PLLC, CHSC aims to help Cleveland break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

REFERENCES

- Hilbert, D. D., & Eis, S. D. (2014). Early intervention for emergent literacy development in a collaborative community pre-kindergarten. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42(2), 105-113.
- Lonigan, C. J., Purpura, D. J., Wilson, S. B., Walker, P. M., & Clancy-Menchetti, J. (2013). Evaluating the components of an emergent literacy intervention for preschool children at risk for reading difficulties. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 114(1), 111-130.
- Noe, S. Spencer, T.D., Kruse, L. & Goldstein, H. (2014). Effects of a tier 3 phonological awareness intervention on preschoolers' emergent literacy. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 34(1), 27-39.