

# Increasing awareness of “school talk”: A focused intervention for pre-kindergarten children who speak a non-mainstream English dialect

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## BACKGROUND

### Rationale

- The achievement gap between African American (AA) and European American students persists (e.g., NCES, 2009)
- Dialect Mismatch* between African American English (AAE) and the language of instruction, Mainstream American English (MAE), may contribute to this achievement gap.
  - Morphosyntactic and phonological differences between AAE and MAE may interfere with comprehension for AAE-speaking children listening to SAE (e.g., Beyers & Kam, 2009; de Villiers & Johnson, 2007).
  - Non-Mainstream American English (NMAE) is associated with lower language and literacy scores from kindergarten through second grade (e.g., Patton Terry & Connor, 2012; Patton Terry et al., 2012).
- Programs to teach NMAE-speaking children about MAE have been directed primarily at older children (Lybolt et al., 2009).

### Purpose of this study

To develop an effective curricular supplement to teach pre-kindergarten children about the differences between MAE and AAE in the context of an emergent literacy curriculum.

## METHODS

### Participants and Classrooms

- 21 children from two Head Start classrooms.
- One classroom functioned as an active control.
  - Experimental classroom: Received the TALK curriculum
  - Control classroom: Received the Kindness curriculum (focusing on mindfulness and self-regulation) for the same amount of time.
- All children were attending kindergarten in the fall and were from low-socioeconomic status (SES) families.

Table 1. Demographic information on participants

	Number of boys/girls	Number of African-American children	Number of Spanish-speaking children	EVT-2 pretest standard score (SD)
Experimental classroom	6/7	10	2	98 (8.6)
Control classroom	2/6	4	4	91 (11.9)

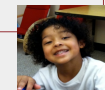
## TALK CURRICULUM

### TALK Principles

- Uses evidence-based practice language & literacy instruction
- Builds metalinguistic skills in children who speak NMAE
- Combines embedded and direct instruction at an age-appropriate level.
- Preselects phonological and morphosyntactic NMAE-MAE contrasts
  - Phonological contrast: e.g., final consonant cluster deletion (*toll/told*)
  - Morphological contrast: e.g., obligatory plural marking (*two cats*)
- Also preselects pragmatic skill targets
  - E.g., indirect questions (*Can you read your teacher's mind?*)

### TALK Structure

- Head Start Kindergarten Readiness program supplement
- Led by supervised graduate students in speech-language pathology
- 7 weeks, 4 days per week
  - 1 hour per day of TALK: Opening Circle, Rhyme Time, Talk Time, Closing Circle
  - 1 hour per day classroom facilitation
- See [www.learningtotalk.org/publications/presentations](http://www.learningtotalk.org/publications/presentations) to download TALK manual.



## PROGRAM EVALUATION

Pre- and post-testing included the following:

- Norm-referenced measures of sentence comprehension (EPS subtest of TACL-3) and expressive vocabulary (EVT-2)
- Norm-referenced measures of phonological awareness: blending subtest from the CTOPP, rhyming and combining words subtests from the TOPAS
- Kindness curriculum measures of self-regulation and executive function.

Pre- and post-testing also included an experimental measure of lexical comprehension of MAE (see Figure 1 below):

- Word pairs with final consonant clusters/singletons (cold vs. coal)
- Word pairs with plurals/singular (cats vs. cat)
- In both cases, the latter word is ambiguous in AAE but not in MAE.
- Both final consonant cluster reduction and obligatory plural marking were targets of instruction in the TALK curriculum.



Figure 1. Stimuli examples from MAE lexical comprehension task.

## RESULTS

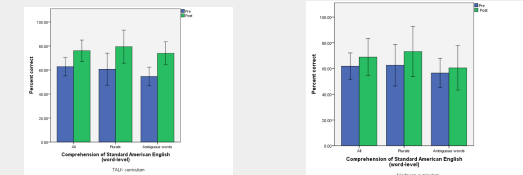


Figure 2. Mean accuracy scores (and standard errors) for lexical comprehension of MAE (left bars: all words combined across both stimuli sets; middle bars: plural/singular contrast; right bars: ambiguous words only across both stimuli sets. Children from TALK curriculum on left and from Kindness curriculum on right. Blue bars: pretest; green bars: post-test.

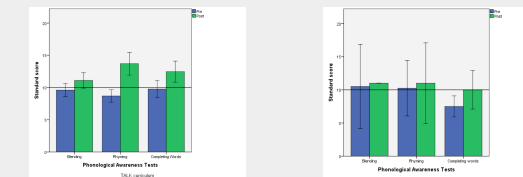


Figure 3. Mean accuracy subtest standard scores (and SE's) for three measures of phonological awareness for TALK (left) and Kindness (right) programs. Blue bars: pretest; green bars: post-test.

- Significant increase in comprehension of MAE in children in TALK curriculum (Fig. 2).
- Significant increase in phonological awareness for children in TALK curriculum (Fig. 3).
- Very positive responses from parents, based on qualitative analysis of questionnaires.

## DISCUSSION

- These results suggest that a relatively short-term program can enhance both comprehension of MAE as well as phonological awareness in African American-speaking children from low-SES families.
- We are currently analyzing data from teacher questionnaires and school-based literacy assessments to evaluate whether these short-term gains carried over into the kindergarten year.
- We plan to modify the program so that it includes a teacher-training component.

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