

A study of teachers' perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education: Importance-performance analysis

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Abstract: This study analyzes kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the importance and performance in early childhood language and literacy education in hopes of identifying practical ways to support early childhood language and literacy development. The research questions were as follows. First, how do kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the importance differ from their perceptions of performance in early childhood language and literacy education? Second, what does an IPA analysis reveal about kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of specific areas of early childhood language and literacy? Analyzing a sample of 200 kindergarten and daycare teachers responsible for classes of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, we examined differences in importance- and performance-related perceptions regarding early childhood language and literacy education. Our analysis focused on four areas (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in 22 sub-items. The results revealed similarities and differences between kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The IPA analysis showed that Quadrant 1 had a high proportion of listening, speaking, and reading, mainly featuring elements related to attitude and comprehension, while Quadrant 3 had a high proportion of writing, mainly featuring elements related to the technical aspects of language, such as phonemes, fluency, and accuracy. Exploring the extent to which teachers' perceptions of the importance of each area of early childhood language and literacy education are connected to practice, the results of this study highlight the need for specific support and education in areas where discrepancies exist between perceptions and implementation.

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Introduction

In October 2023, the Korean government announced the "First Comprehensive Plan for the Guarantee of Basic Academic Skills (2023–2027)" to establish a national education responsibility system. This plan was implemented against the backdrop of declining basic academic skills and learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Education, 2022). A study investigating the developmental status of children whose early childhoods coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic (Financial News, 2022) found that one in three struggled to achieve age-appropriate development and required professional assistance; the study also showed that developmental shortfalls were particularly pronounced in social and language development.

Early childhood is a critical period for the amplification of both oral language development through speaking and listening and literacy through reading and writing (Morrow, 2012). Young children naturally develop oral and written language abilities through immersion in meaningful literacy environments in their daily lives and various linguistic interactions with the people around them. The language's basic functions are listening, speaking, reading and writing, further classified as oral language for listening and speaking, written language for reading and writing. Oral language, the most common language activity for children, includes experiences as a speaker or listener, understanding shared information, and organizing and delivering content using a variety of vocabulary (Park et al., 2012). These experiences play an important role in improving children's communication skills and promoting cognitive, social and

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emotional development (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020). Oral language is acquired naturally from a young age, so explicit teaching and learning are often inactively pursued. However scholars have emphasized that intentional teaching is necessary to provide diverse experiences and enable children's active participation in oral language (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020). Conversely, written language is considered a learned and developed domain with planned and systematic support, unlike oral language (Söderbergh, 1986). However, from infancy, children are exposed to written language daily by observing their parents or teachers reading, acquiring information through various media such as picture books, and showing an interest in environmental print such as name tags and signs. Furthermore, they see characters as tools for recording their emotions or thoughts without regard for time or space, allowing them to practice basic writing skills. As a result, educational support for developing written language in contexts related to children's play and daily life is increasingly important (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

Currently, teachers play a crucial role in providing quality language and literacy environments and supporting linguistic interactions in early childhood education institutions. The fact that teachers' perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education can vary widely significantly impacts children's language and literacy experiences and development (Scull & Raban, 2012; Wenglingsky, 2000). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that teachers' literacy-related perceptions influence literacy education environments in classrooms, literacy curricula, and ultimately, the literacy development of children (Eom, 2009; Kim & Kim, 2006; Oh, 2010). Studies highlighting the disparity between teachers' perceptions and actual practices of early childhood language and literacy education (Choi, 2005; McCutchen et al., 2002) have suggested that a gap sometimes exists between teachers' perceptions and the content implemented in educational settings. In reality, the differences between what teachers perceive as important in early childhood language and literacy education and what is demanded in educational settings confuse or create difficulties for many teachers (Kim et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013; Yoon, 2007). Cash et al. (2015) reported that teachers' levels of understanding of language and literacy education have a greater impact on the development of children's language and literacy than teachers' perceptions. Put simply, the varying results of prior research regarding the relationship between teachers' perceptions and the implementation of early childhood language and literacy education highlight the need for a closer examination.

Responding to this need, this study examined kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions in hopes of identifying practically effective strategies for supporting early childhood language and literacy education. To this end, it analyzed the differences kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance- related perceptions regarding early childhood language and literacy education in four areas (listening, speaking, reading, writing) with 22 sub-items and identified areas that need improvement for future education. Teachers' importance-related perceptions were designed to find out what they consider important in terms of early childhood language education, and performance-related perceptions of were designed to find out how much support they provide in terms of implementing the early childhood language curriculum. The research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1. How do kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the importance differ from their perceptions of performance in early childhood language and literacy education?

Research Question 2. What does an IPA analysis reveal about kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of specific areas of early childhood language and literacy education (listening, speaking, reading, writing)?

Method

Research Participants

A total of 200 kindergarten and daycare teachers responsible for classes of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds participated in this study. Table 1 shows the general backgrounds of the study participants.

Table 1
General Backgrounds of Participants

Category		N(%)
Age	Under 25	42(21.0)
	25 and over, under 30	65(32.5)
	30 and over, under 35	47(23.5)
	35 and over	46(23.0)
Education	Vocational college graduate	30(14.9)
	Bachelor's degree	94(46.8)
	Master's degree or higher	76(37.8)
Experience	Less than 3 years	43(21.5)
	3 to less than 5 years	40(20.0)
	5 to less than 10 years	72(36.0)
	10 years or more	45(22.5)
Age group of the class responsible for	3 years old	43(21.4)
	4 years old	50(24.9)
	5 years old	82(40.8)
	Other	25(12.4)
Total number of teachers		200(100.0)

Questionnaire and Procedure

To assess kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education, we first reviewed the current national language education curriculum, the 2019 revised Nuri curriculum (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019), and prior studies related to early childhood language and literacy education (Kim & Kim, 2016; Park et al., 2013; Park et al., 2012; Seo & Byun, 2021) before developing a preliminary questionnaire through researcher consultation. We verified content validity through written reviews by five professors specializing in early childhood language and literacy education at universities and three kindergarten teachers with at least five years of extensive field experience. The final questionnaire consisted of 22 items: 6 for listening, 6 for speaking, 5 for reading, and 5 for writing, with importance and performance for each item rated on a Likert 5-point scale. The questionnaire was designed to find out teachers' perception and implementation of the contents in each of the four language areas and was presented in the following manner. For example, 'How important do you think the formation of 'attitudes towards listening' is in early childhood language teaching?', and 'How much practical support do you provide for the development of 'attitudes towards listening'?. Table 2 shows the areas of the questionnaire and their reliability levels.

Table 2
Questionnaire Items and Reliability by Area

Area	Number of Items	Item Number and Content	Cronbach's α	
			Importance	Performance
Listening	6 items	(1) Attitude towards listening, (2) Receptive vocabulary level and ability, (3) Sentence comprehension, (4) Story comprehension, (5) Awareness of phonology(6) Recognition of specific phonemes	.851	.817
Speaking	6 items	(7) Attitude towards speaking, (8) Speaking skills, (9) Sentence structure, (10) Expressive vocabulary level and ability, (11) Accuracy of pronunciation, (12) Pronouncing specific phoneme combinations	.812	.846

Reading	5 items	(13) Attitude towards reading, (14) Frequency of reading behaviors, (15) Correspondence between letters and sounds, (16) Number of characters and words readable, (17) Reading fluency and accuracy	.821	.843
Writing	5 items	(18) Attitude towards writing, (19) Frequency of writing behaviors, (20) Number of characters and words writable, (21) Writing accuracy, (22) Story composition	.807	.865

We created the questionnaire as a mobile Google survey, and the response time was approximately 15 minutes. We collected data from May 24 to June 2, 2023, targeting 220 teachers responsible for classes of 3- to 5-year-olds. The study was conducted through snowball sampling, where teachers who participated in the survey were asked to forward the survey link to teachers they work with. After explaining the purpose and content of the study, we sent those who agreed to participate a link to the Google questionnaire. After excluding respondents who missed responses or responded insincerely, we selected a final sample of 200 participants.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the collected data using SPSS 26.0. To answer the research questions, we calculated the importance- and performance-related means and standard deviations for each of the four areas and 22 items and conducted paired samples t-tests. A paired t-test was conducted to verify the difference between teachers’ perceptions of importance and implementation of early childhood language education, and Importance-Performance Analysis(IPA) by area and items was conducted to identify further improvements related to early childhood language educational support. In the IPA, the horizontal axis represented the performance scores, and the vertical axis represented the importance scores, with the axes' standards set to the overall average of each dimension, positioning the importance and performance of each item on a two-dimensional chart (Martilla & James, 1977). Accordingly the IPA matrix was conducted by measuring the importance- and performance perception of kindergarten teachers’, with the performance based perception on the x-axis and the importance based perception on the y-axis. The importance and implementation are organized into four quadrants based on the average value of each score. The first quadrant with both high importance and implementation was analyzed as the maintenance enhancement area, the second quadrant with high importance and low implementation as the focus improvement area, the third quadrant with low importance and low implementation as the gradual improvement area, and the fourth quadrant with low importance and high implementation as the maintenance management area.

Figure 1
Importance-Performance Analysis Matrix

Importance	High	Quadrant 2 Concentrate Here	Quadrant 1 Keep up the Good Work
	Low	Quadrant 3 Lower Priority	Quadrant 4 Possible Overkill
		Low	High

Performance

Results

Difference in Kindergarten Teachers’ Importance -and Performance- Related Perceptions of Early Childhood Language and Literacy Education

Table 3 shows the differences in kindergarten teachers’ importance- and performance-related perceptions of the various dimensions of early childhood language and literacy education. Listening received the highest importance average score, 4.09(SD.518) and performance average score, 4.09(SD.575), followed by speaking(importance: M-3.98, SD-.524/ performance: M-4.08, SD-.606) reading(importance: M-3.83, SD-.624/ performance: M-3.85, SD-.748), and writing(importance: M-3.66, SD-.668/ performance:

M-3.56, SD-.822). The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between importance and performance for items related to sentence comprehension(importance: M-4.36, SD-.625/ performance: M-4.19, SD-.764) and awareness of phonemes(importance: M-3.49, SD-.814/ performance: M-3.63, SD-.937) in the area of listening. For speaking, the analysis revealed statistically significant differences in attitudes towards speaking(importance: M-4.53, SD-.575/ performance: M-4.77, SD-.459) and speaking skills(importance: M-4.10, SD-.754/ performance: M-4.37, SD-.732). Meanwhile it showed no statistically significant differences for any of the reading items, indicating relatively small differences in importance- and performance-related perceptions. Finally, for writing, statistically significant differences in numbers of writable characters and words(importance: M-3.42, SD-.882/ performance: M-3.28, SD-1.033) and story composition(importance: M-3.73, SD-.966/ performance: M-3.56, SD-1.101).

Table 3

Analysis Results of the Differences in Importance- and Performance-Related Perceptions of Early Childhood Language Education

Area	Sub area	Importance		Performance		t
		M	SD	M	SD	
Listening	Attitude towards listening	4.59	.578	4.67	.578	-1.512
	Receptive vocabulary level and ability	4.29	.639	4.23	.726	1.120
	Sentence comprehension	4.36	.625	4.19	.764	2.786**
	Story comprehension	4.45	.582	4.50	.634	-1.035
	Awareness of phonology	3.49	.814	3.63	.937	-2.117**
	Recognition of specific phonemes	3.35	.819	3.32	1.036	.417
	Overall listening	4.09	.518	4.09	.575	-.030
Speaking	Attitude towards speaking	4.53	.575	4.77	.459	-5.310***
	Speaking skills	4.10	.754	4.37	.732	-4.814***
	Sentence structure	3.78	.773	3.82	.901	-.657
	Expressive vocabulary level and ability	4.06	.731	4.11	.782	-.826
	Accuracy of pronunciation	3.94	.706	3.99	.921	-.713
	Pronouncing specific phonemes combinations	3.48	.814	3.41	.993	1.086
	Overall speaking	3.98	.524	4.08	.606	-2.287*
Reading	Attitude towards reading	4.24	.737	4.28	.828	-.752
	Frequency of reading behaviors	4.01	.737	4.14	.872	-1.972
	Correspondence between letters and sounds	3.89	.801	3.90	.943	-.075
	Number of characters and words readable	3.61	.861	3.53	1.017	1.162
	Reading fluency and accuracy	3.41	.936	3.42	1.090	-.136
	Overall reading	3.83	.624	3.85	.748	-.431
Writing	Attitude towards writing	4.15	.798	4.04	.940	1.567
	Frequency of writing behaviors	3.89	.797	3.80	.887	1.330
	Number of characters and words writable	3.42	.882	3.28	1.033	2.142*
	Writing accuracy	3.15	.984	3.11	1.115	.466
	Story composition	3.73	.966	3.56	1.101	2.207*
	Overall writing	3.66	.668	3.56	.822	2.026*

*p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Results of the Importance - Performance Analysis for Early Childhood Language and Literacy Education

Figure 2 shows the IPA results for each area of early childhood language and literacy education, with listening and speaking located in Quadrant 1 (keep up the good work), meaning perceived importance and performance were high, and reading and writing located in Quadrant 3 (lower priority), meaning perceived importance and performance were low. Figure 3 presents the IPA results for each specific item. Areas or items that participants perceived as important but not implemented or less important but implemented were not included appear.

Figure 2

IPA of Early Childhood Language Education by Area

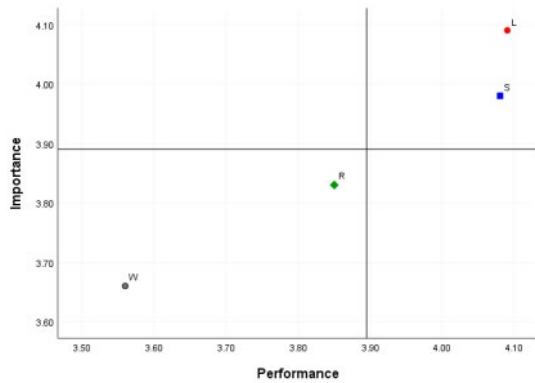


Figure 3

IPA of Early Childhood Language Education by Item

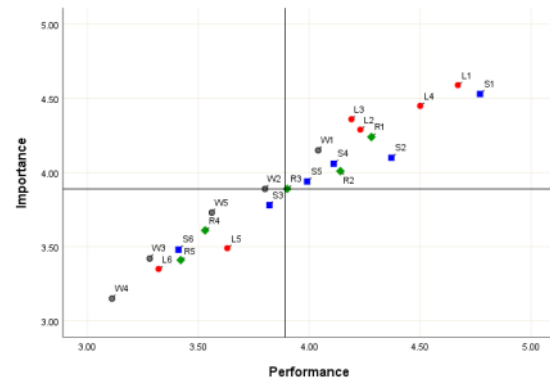


Table 4 shows the IPA results for each specific listening, speaking, reading, and writing area with 12 of the 22 total items (54.5%) in Quadrant 1 and 10 (45.4%) in Quadrant 3. Quadrant 1, which importance and performance perceptions on the language education are both above average, has a high proportion of listening, speaking, and reading items, mainly featuring those related to attitude and comprehension. Meanwhile, Quadrant 3, which importance and performance perceptions on language education are both below average, has a high proportion of writing items, mainly featuring those related to the technical aspects of language, such as phonology, phonemes, fluency, and accuracy.

Table 4
Importance-performance Analysis of Early Childhood Language Education Items

Category	Area	Item	Total (%)
Quadrant 1 (keep up the good work)	Listening	L1. Attitude towards listening	12 items (54.5%)
		L2. Receptive vocabulary level and ability	
		L3. Sentence comprehension	
		L4. Story comprehension	
	Speaking	S1. Attitude towards speaking	
		S2. Speaking skills	
		S4. Expressive vocabulary level and ability	
	Reading	S5. Accuracy of pronunciation	
		R1. Attitude towards reading	
		R2. Frequency of reading behaviors	
	Writing	R3. Correspondence between letters and sounds	
		W1. Attitude towards writing	
Quadrant 3 (lower priority)	Listening	L5. Awareness of phonology	10 items (45.4%)
		L6. Recognition of specific phonemes	
	Speaking	S3. Sentence structure	
		S6. Pronouncing specific phonemes combinations	
	Reading	R4. Number of characters and words readable	
		R5. Reading fluency and accuracy	
	Writing	W2. Frequency of writing behaviors	
		W3. Number of characters and words writable	
		W4. Writing accuracy	

(*None in Quadrant 2 or Quadrant 4)

Conclusion and Discussion

Using an IPA of teachers' perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education, this study aimed to identify practical strategies for supporting early childhood language and literacy education. As they relate to the research questions, our findings were as follows:

First, in our examination of differences in kindergarten teachers importance- and performance-related perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education, participants gave the importance of and performance within the listening area equally high scores. This suggests that teachers view the listening area as important and believe they are effectively implementing the related curricula. Meanwhile, they gave performance within the speaking and reading areas higher scores than importance. This can be interpreted as a positive signal that teachers are actively implementing speaking and reading curricula. Conversely, they gave the importance of the writing area higher scores than performance, indicating that while they consider writing important, it may not receive sufficient time and effort in practice.

Examining the components of each area, while we found no significant difference between the importance and performance scores for attitude and receptive vocabulary in the listening area, the participants gave sentence comprehension statistically significantly higher importance than performance scores. This highlights the need for actual implementation of lessons to enhance sentence comprehension, which is foundational for understanding communication contexts and overall content as well as for developing story comprehension skills (Potocki et al., 2012). Conversely, for awareness of phonology, performance received statistically significantly higher scores than importance. This may stem from the widespread use of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made language development in situations where vocal delivery was hindered and facial expressions or lip movements were concealed more difficult (Charney et al., 2021; Green et al., 2021). Furthermore, phonology awareness is a core aspect of listening and speaking abilities (Porta et al., 2021), and teachers generally recognize it as crucial in literacy education.

In the speaking area, all components received higher performance than importance scores, and the differences were statistically significant for attitudes toward speaking and speaking skills. Attitudes toward speaking and speaking skills are essential for forming relationships and creating effective communication environments in early childhood (Nordberg & Jacobsson, 2021). The fact that masks conceal facial expressions and mouth shapes, causing changes in sound and negatively impacting communication (Crimon et al., 2022), explains why teachers had to increase their efforts in this area. Meanwhile, since young children's pronunciation may be immature or inaccurate (Jalongo, 2013), specific methods and resources to improve speaking skills and attitudes may be necessary.

In the reading area, the analysis revealed no significant differences between perceived importance and performance, except for numbers of readable characters and words, where importance received higher scores. This aligns with Lynch and Owston's (2015) finding that teachers place significant importance on words in literacy education. This emphasizes the need for whole language approach to early childhood education that encourage the natural acquisition of words and self-learning in daily contexts. Choi et al. (2022) stresses the importance of enhancing foundational literacy by focusing on receptive vocabulary and basic reading skills, underscoring the need to inspect and enrich language environments in classrooms and institutions for emergent literacy from a perspective that emphasizes natural word acquisition.

Lastly, the writing area received the lowest overall importance and performance scores, with importance and performance receiving roughly similar scores. Among the components, numbers of writable characters and words writable received statistically significantly higher importance than performance scores. Young children's writing is more comprehensive in scope and intent than that of adults, including not only the use of symbols in the form of letters that others can recognize, but also drawings and scribbles (Kim, 2010). The current national curriculum reflects this view of early childhood writing, but it can be a dilemma for teachers in that parents have high expectations and demands for writing education in order to prepare their children for elementary school (Kim & Park, 2020; Park & Park, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the value of early childhood writing and reflect efforts

to develop writing by understanding the process and content of writing from the perspective of young children. In that regard, writing is crucial in laying the foundation for children's literacy and reading achievements. In particular, writing experiences that connect and associate various words are vital for literacy development (Gerde et al., 2012), underlining the need for teaching methods that provide meaningful writing environments through topic-related words or word cards.

Second, examining the IPA results by area, listening and speaking were located in Quadrant 1 (Keep up the Good Work), where both the perceived importance and performance scores were above average; meanwhile, reading and writing were in Quadrant 3 (Lower Priority), where both perceived importance and performance scores were below average. Thus, the participants not only perceive the listening and speaking areas as important in early childhood literacy education but also believe they actively implement them. By contrast, the fact that the perceived importance and performance scores for reading and writing were somewhat lower highlights the need for support to enhance teachers' perceptions of the importance and implementation of these areas of early childhood language and literacy education.

Literacy refers to both the ability to produce, understand, and use texts appropriately in interpersonal communication (Graddol et al., 1994) and communication based on listening and speaking is a fundamental element of language and literacy development (Mousena, 2020). Experiences listening, speaking, and communicating within meaningful contexts lay the foundation for development, motivating and fostering autonomy in reading and writing. Therefore, in kindergarten settings, the role of teachers in providing multi-faceted support within meaningful literacy environments is crucial to effectively linking and expanding children's oral language experiences in listening and speaking to written language experiences in reading and writing.

Third, in the item-specific IPA, Quadrant 1 (Keep Up the Good Work) contained 12 items (54.5%), including listening (4 items), speaking (5 items), reading (3 items), and writing (1 item). The trend of high recognition and implementation of attitudes, receptive and expressive vocabulary understanding, and listening and speaking skills across the four areas is related to the communication content presented in the 2019 revised Nuri curriculum. Teachers prioritize the cultivation of correct attitudes towards listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as the ability to listen, understand, and express thoughts and feelings appropriately.

Quadrant 3 (Lower Priority), where both importance and performance were below average, contained 10 items (45.4%), including two items each from listening, speaking, and reading, and four items from writing. In particular, the perceived importance and performance levels of the phonology awareness and phoneme combination items in the listening and speaking areas were lower. Experts in early childhood education in Korea familiar with whole language approach, tend to view teaching abstract language knowledge and skills such as phonology and phoneme awareness to young children negatively (Lee, 2011). However, recognizing and effectively utilizing the relationship between speech and writing is crucial, necessitating the acquisition of language skills such as phonological rules and knowledge of consonants and vowels. Since this is essential for supporting early childhood literacy and language development, it should be incorporated into early childhood literacy education content in a developmentally appropriate manner (International Literacy Association, 2019). Therefore, the provision of ongoing education opportunities through pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, which enable kindergarten teachers to recognize the importance of this content and provide balanced instruction in manner suitable for development, is crucial. Moreover, content related to language skills like phonology awareness and knowledge of consonants and vowels in the current national early childhood language education curriculum needs to be reviewed and improved to bolster teachers' importance-related perceptions and implementation in these areas.

Additionally, importance- and performance-related perceptions of reading and writing abilities and accuracy were lower than average. This may be due to the fact that the current national language education curriculum suggests relatively low experiential levels for reading and writing achievements to cultivate in early childhood, such as "showing interest" and "trying to express," which may lower the perceived

importance and implementation of literacy skills and accuracy in educational settings. Nevertheless, reading and writing are crucial for laying the foundation of early childhood literacy (Gerde et al., 2012), and teachers' importance-related perceptions and implementation in these areas must therefore improve to ensure children have ample opportunities to read and write in meaningful ways in their daily life contexts.

Despite generating meaningful results, this study had several limitations. First, because it only examined the importance- and performance-related perceptions of kindergarten teachers in the Seoul metropolitan area, generalizing the findings is challenging. Future research on this topic should focus on data design to ensure generalizability. Second, the survey asked teachers to self-assess their actual language and literacy education practices, and teachers' perceptions and teaching realities may differ (McCutchen et al., 2002). To bolster scholarly understanding of language and literacy education implementation in early childhood education settings, subsequent research should analyze teachers' actual teaching practices as well as their perceptions.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study's exploration of the extent to which teachers' perceptions of the importance of each area of early childhood language and literacy education connect to practice specifically highlights the need for support and education in areas where discrepancies exist between perceived importance and performance. In so doing, its findings should help identify ways to support and strengthen the implementation of early childhood language and literacy education.

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