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Background

- Hart and Risley (1995) found that the number of words parents addressed to their children between 6-36 months of age varied greatly based on socio-economic status. By age 3, the estimated difference in the number of words heard between children from poor and professional families reached 30 million words (Hart & Risley, 2003).
- Children who had parents talking more often had accelerated growth in vocabulary. Overall language exposure and use before age 3 predicted children's language skills and school success through the third grade (Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994).
- While knowledge of the word gap has existed for two decades, knowledge and interventions have had limited impact in solving the large problem of the national disparity in language development between children from high- and low-income backgrounds.
- The Bridging the Word Gap Research Network (BWGRN) was charged with developing a national research agenda designed to identify the highest priority research areas and recognize existing research needs related to the word gap.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the BWGRN national research agenda survey of a diverse set of stakeholders. The study addressed the following research questions:

- Did major stakeholder groups and/or persons with different demographic characteristics differ in the new parent strategies research topic they viewed as the one most likely to make the biggest difference in bridging the word gap?
- What reasons were indicated by stakeholders for selecting new parent strategies research topic that would make the biggest difference in bridging the word gap?

Methods

The BWGRN conducted a national web-based survey with a wide of variety stakeholder groups (e.g. researchers, practitioners, policymakers, private funders, and health professionals). Stakeholders were first asked to rate the importance of each of 16 pre-identified research areas, and then asked to select the one research area that will make the biggest difference in closing the word gap. Stakeholders provided a written response describing why the specific research topic was selected.

Participants

A wide variety of stakeholders (N = 1028) responded to the online survey. A total of 279 (27.2%) respondents identified "**Developing new strategies to help parents and other family members talk and interact with their young children**" as the top-ranked research priority.

Procedures

Comments from the 279 respondents that identified *new parent strategies* as the top-ranked research priority were reviewed by the first two authors. An iterative content analysis approach was used to identify four main themes within respondents' written comments. Each coder independently coded more than a quarter of the written responses. Agreement was compared on all coding decisions, and coders came to consensus on any items where there was not initial agreement.

Design and Data Analysis

Question 1: Respondents were aggregated into four stakeholder subgroups and four sociodemographic subgroups.

Question 2: Thematic analysis was used to categorize stakeholders' written responses by the first two authors. Inter-rater reliability was established at 89.3%.

Results

Question 1 – Respondents Characteristics

Characteristic	N	%
Stakeholder Group		
Early Childhood Professionals & Home Visitors	113	31.6%
Researchers	36	21.3%
Community Members	22	20.8%
Health Care Professionals	61	29.6%
Sociodemographic Group		
White	221	27.3%
Respondents of Color	58	26.9%
Graduate Degree	205	26.8%
Less Than Graduate Degree	59	28.9%

Figure 1. Differences Among Stakeholders by Sociodemographic Characteristics in Identifying *New Parent Strategies* as the Top Research Priority

Results

Question 2 - Reasons Provided for Selecting New Parent Strategies as the Top Research Priority

- Parents are influential (58.65%)
 - Parents are a child's first and best teacher and highlighting the importance of parent-child interactions for bridging the word gap.
- Parents need education (34.96%)
 - Parents need to be empowered and understand that they can make a difference in their child's language development.
- Technology is interfering with language (7.14%)
 - Parents communicate less due to higher levels of technology use.
- Technology should be used to improve language (1.5%)
 - Technology should be used to get the message out about the importance of interacting and talking with children.
- No additional information (9.77%)
- Comment related to another research area (6.77%)
- Other comments (2.63%)
 - Including comments related to literacy

Implications and Future Directions

Overall, development of new parents strategies was consistently ranked across all stakeholder groups as the most important for bridging the word gap. Empirical studies support the vital role parents play in promoting children's growth and readiness for school (see for example, Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Denham, Renwick, & Holt, 1991; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006). Parents' self-efficacy and their beliefs about their influence on their children's development are strong predictors of their children's learning and later school outcomes (Hess, Teti, & Hussey-Gardner, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Therefore, engaging parents as partners in intervention is deemed by many to be an essential ingredient for promoting children's language (see Roberts & Kaiser, 2011).

- How can the results of the survey be applied to intervention practice and policy?
- What should the first steps be in addressing the top-selected research priority?
- How can BWGRN continue to involve diverse stakeholder groups in planning for implementation of research that is based on the research agenda?