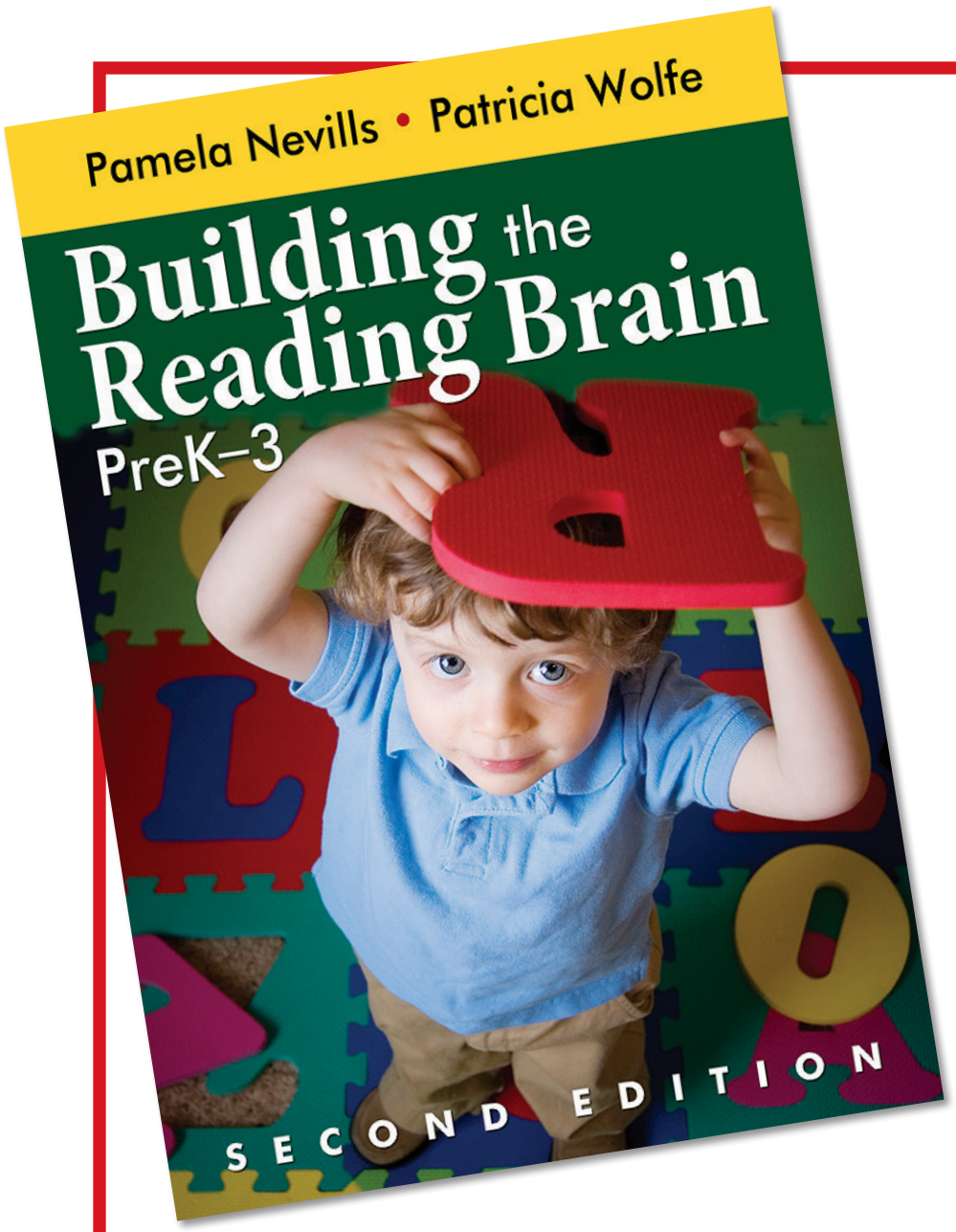

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are less likely to be able to hear the phonology associated with print, something we know is essential for learning to read. Second, Neuman (2001) refers to a familiarity hypothesis: Children who are familiar with books and stories develop mental models that go with reading different kinds of text. With familiarity comes comfort with reading.

The third hypothesis the researchers identify is the most powerful—the knowledge gap. Individuals learn, really learn with a depth of understanding, what they are able to access through print. The good news reported by Neuman (2001) is that something can be done about the knowledge gap. Teachers can provide carefully constructed educational environments that are rich with exposure not only to direct instruction but also to large numbers of books to captivate young minds.

Important studies such as this one help educators to understand the differences that potentially could be represented among schoolchildren from different socioeconomic groups. Realize, also, that information reported in this study only represents the environmental impact on children from English-speaking families. Teachers are faced with another set of considerations when children learn English as a second language.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

In an ideal educational environment, students whose first language is not English are assessed for English language skills immediately on entering the school system. In the 1999–2000 school year, an estimated 9.3 percent, or 4.4 million, American students were English learners (ELs). Of these, 77 percent were native Spanish speakers (Antunez, 2002). Each student who is not proficient in English needs a reading program that is tailored to that student's specific needs. While assessments that determine the level of competence a student possesses in both English and the child's primary language are needed, some additional questions can add meaningful information to help the classroom teacher to make instructional decisions:

- Does the child's primary language have a Roman alphabet? A written form?
- Does it contain phonemes, and how do the phonemes compare to English sounds?
- Can the student fluently speak, read, and write the primary language?
- How well does the student speak English?
- How old is the student?
- What staff, programs, and resources are available to teach this student? (Antunez, 2002)

The student's fluency in English, along with an assessment of available school resources, is used to determine the language of initial reading instruction. For students who are not proficient in English, answers to the

previous questions prompt decisions about the type of program—primary language, English only, or bilingual (integrated primary language and English)—that will be appropriate when these choices are available. Unfortunately, many districts and states do not offer a range of appropriate choices, and many students do not receive the support they need to succeed with written and spoken English.

Children who lack exposure to adequate oral language preparation in their native language, who live or have lived in an unsafe environment, who lack a family that provides loving care, or who have had little formal schooling are best served in a bilingual program (Linquanti, 1999). A bilingual program can help develop oral language for ELs in both their native language and in English. Language development in one language tends to nurture development in the other when schools provide an environment that allows children to learn in both languages (Cummins, 2000).

Children who come into the formal education system already speaking and reading well in their native language are often placed in a regular classroom that provides an English-only program. The background information about language that they already possess provides a foundation for instruction in an English-only program. These programs are particularly successful when they have instruction provided in a varied format that actively engages students in speaking, reading, and writing. And research validates the advantages of bilingualism developed at an early age.

Judy Foreman (2002) reported on intellectual advantages for children who grow up in bilingual homes. Since they deal with language abstractions early in life, they develop strategies to resolve differences. Abstract tasks—one study involved building with LEGOs and another larger-sized block—do not create a problem for 4-year-old children who speak dual languages. It is as if they are able to ignore obvious visual tasks that are incongruent. A monolingual child is generally not able to complete this task satisfactorily until one year later. Children with dual languages are also able to switch back and forth between different rules and codes between the two languages they are learning. This ability is most likely due to the discovery by neuroscientists that both languages operate from the same language pathway, involving Broca's area. However, brain scans reveal that when a person learns the second language later, after puberty, two separate parts of Broca's area register activity (Foreman, 2002). An additional caveat for bilingualism is reported by Dahlberg (2007): A team of Canadian researchers treating patients for dementia found that patients who spoke two or more languages developed dementia on the average four years later than their single-language peers. Older, dual-language individuals continued to be better at paying attention even when distractions were present.

During the time English language is developing, the issues for learners are diverse. Although their needs for decoding are similar to those of their English-speaking peers, ELs may need additional practice and modified instruction through the regular education program. One difficulty ELs

experience is that the sounds of English phonemes are often different from those in their native language. For example, Spanish-speaking children are familiar with similar sounds for the consonants *b, c, d, f, l, m, n, p, q, s,* and *t* in their primary language. However, the vowels are named differently. There are challenges to teaching decoding skills, phonemic awareness, and phonics for children who are learning English. However, teachers can effectively teach skills necessary for reading competence if they have adequate knowledge about their students and about their native language (Antunez, 2002). Teachers who lack background in the primary language of their students frequently benefit from receiving expert consultation from another educator. Realistically, with the many languages children bring, this is often not possible.

Although their needs for decoding are similar to those of their English-speaking peers, ELs may need additional practice and modified instruction through the regular education program.

Often, school districts have an inadequate number of appropriate assessment instruments and trained personnel to determine if a child has English language acquisition needs and if those needs occur in tandem with a learning disability. Special education programs in certain districts show an overrepresentation of ELs. To counteract overrepresentation of non-English speakers who receive special education services, schools are urged to identify children with limited or no English ability early and to create school environments with instructional strategies that have proven to be successful for these students at risk (Ortiz, 2001). What Works Clearinghouse (2007) offers insights into what works for reading, mathematics, and English language development: peer tutoring and response groups. Peer tutoring assigns partners (a tutor and a tutee) who read together and complete assignments. Peer response groups give a group of four to five students shared responsibilities for completing an assignment. Both methods have high improvement indices for English language students and their classmates (WWC Intervention Report, 2007).

Two particular instances have been provided as environmental issues that block student success with reading: low socioeconomic status and lack of exposure to English. We also know that biological or neurological differences among children are a cause of disparities in reading achievement.

Understanding the need for assessment, having a plan for reading instruction that targets most children, and providing intervention for those students with special needs are appropriate expectations for our public school systems. First, we will look at reading assessment information and instructional responses for normally progressing readers, followed by assessments and intervention programs for students who need special consideration.