



Dale Walker¹, Alana Schnitz¹, Judith Carta¹, Charles Greenwood¹, Kathryn Bigelow¹, and the BWGRN Leadership
Joshua Allison-Burbank² (Discussant) with Natalie S. Pak and Jessica Meese
University of Kansas, Juniper Gardens Children's Project¹; Center for Indigenous Health & Johns Hopkins University²

Overview

- Research has documented the important role that early communication interactions have on children's language, literacy, social, and academic development.
- Researchers affiliated with the Bridging the Word Gap Research Network (BWGRN) have expanded on a model addressing factors impacting language learning opportunities (Ford et al., 2020).
- Through evidence reviews, we identified effective language intervention practices and areas needing further research (Walker & Carta, 2020).
- We outline nine research principles (Carta et al., 2025) to expand the framework of language intervention research and advance equity.
- The principles offer guideposts for informing how intervention research can be conducted in ways that are contextually, socially, and culturally grounded (Bruno & Iruka, 2022; Meek et al., 2020).

Research Goals

- BWGRN affiliated researchers collaborated with community-based partner organizations to expand the vision for language intervention research beyond deficit-based narratives to enhance practice and outcomes.
- We illustrate how the research principles inform and guide the design and implementation of equity-focused language intervention research conducted across six Collaborative Research Entities (CREs):
 - *KC Brain Builders*
 - *Promoting Communication Strategies for Advancing Language in Kids (PC TALK)*
 - *Story Friends eBooks*
 - *Creating Everyday Spaces for Early Language and Literacy Learning: Role of the Trusted Messenger*
 - *Talk With Me Baby (TWMB CONNECTS)*
 - *Háblame Bebé*



<https://bwg.ku.edu/conference-presentations/>

Research Principles

Reframing Language and Equity

1. Focus on increasing equity in children's language learning opportunities instead of gaps.
2. Develop strengths-based interventions that recognize families' language and culture.
3. Engage diverse stakeholders in co-creating language interventions to increase cultural relevance, linguistic and social validity.

Designing Culturally Grounded Research

4. Create interventions that are practical, readily accessible, and easy to use in homes, child care, and community.
5. Include information about participants to inform what works with whom, under what circumstances.
6. Use measures sensitive to children's development and aligned with values of diverse cultural and linguistic groups.

Building Sustainable Partnerships

7. Recruit research team members who reflect racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity and range of ability of the populations with whom we work.
8. Expand efforts to develop the next generation of culturally diverse community-engaged researchers.
9. Develop community coalitions that engage multiple sectors and result in collaborative partnerships for promoting language interventions.

Methods

- Coordinated multi-site studies across six CREs, supporting cross-sector partnerships, shared research and dissemination protocols, building capacity for scholars and community partners.
- Methodological approaches used across studies included mixed methods, single-subject analyses, longitudinal, and randomized control trials.
- Studies were implemented through partnerships with community child care, home-based intervention programs, healthcare, and in everyday spaces with families and children birth – 5 years from underserved and culturally and ethnically diverse populations.

Summary Discussion and Future Aims

- Equity-focused principles reshape how interventions are designed, implemented, and evaluated.
- The principles facilitate the use of more inclusive research methods that build upon the strengths of families and children, educators, clinicians, healthcare providers and communities representing diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, and ability backgrounds.
- This collective research contributes to understanding the changes and innovations necessary in research, practice, and policy, to advance equity in children's language learning.
- Create evidence-based practices that build on family and caregivers' strengths.

Aims for Future Research

- Involve communities and diverse stakeholders in creation and implementation of practices.
- Document extent to which practices work, and for whom.
- Disseminate broadly to make a meaningful difference in outcomes of children and families from diverse backgrounds.

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (HHS) under UA6MC27762 & U6DMC42197 (Carta et al.) MCH BWGRN, and R40MC49145 (Walker & Bigelow) MCH FIRST PC TALK. This information, content and conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. Additional support was received through the Kansas Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center (U54 HD090216). We acknowledge the contributions from the BWG Leadership Network members and collaborating partners. Presented at the Conference for Research Innovations in Early Intervention (CRIEI), Mission Bay, San Diego, CA. February 2026.
Citation for Principles: Carta, J. J., Walker, D., Bigelow, K. M., Greenwood, C. R., Schnitz, A. G., & Bridging the Word Gap Research Network Leadership Team. (2025). Advancing equity in early language learning: Expanding the frame for intervention research. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 68, 3357-3368. Contact: Dr. Dale Walker: walkerd@ku.edu Website: www.bwg.ku.edu/