



Experimental impacts of a teacher professional development program in early childhood on explicit vocabulary instruction across the curriculum[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effects of a coaching-based teacher professional development program on Chilean kindergarten teachers' explicit vocabulary instruction. Classroom videotapes gathered during the cluster-randomized evaluation of the Un Buen Comienzo (UBC) program were analyzed to identify the intervention impacts of training. The offer of training increased the probability that literacy instruction would occur by 26 percent and that vocabulary support would be provided during literacy by 25 percent. Controlling for the presence of literacy instruction, training increased literacy instruction by 13.68 min and increased vocabulary support during literacy by 2.87 min. However, training reduced the probability that other-topic instruction would occur by 25 percent and the probability of vocabulary support during other topics by 39 percent. Implications for the scope and focus of language-based teacher professional development are discussed.

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The potential of early childhood education (ECE) to improve a variety of developmental outcomes for children has led to expansion of such programming to support equity in opportunities for children across the globe. This agenda is reflected in the goals of UNESCO's Education for All and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2000). Improving literacy skills is central to these efforts, and expanding early care and education is recognized as a way to provide strong support for foundational skills (UNESCO, 2007), which include oral language. Research conducted in the U.S. has shown that teachers in a variety of ECE settings do not

consistently engage in the literacy practices shown to support children's language development (Dickinson, Darrow, & Tinubu, 2008; Gest, Holland-Coviello, Welsh, Eicher-Catt, & Gill, 2006). In low- and middle-income (LAMI) countries, access to ECE has been a predominant concern, rather than specific approaches to improving quality (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011).

Chile is a middle-income country with substantial economic and educational inequality. In response to concerns about the persistent inequalities in educational outcomes, Chilean policies over the last 20 years have greatly expanded access to public kindergarten and prekindergarten, achieving levels of access similar to those in the U.S. (Mendive, Weiland, Yoshikawa, & Snow, 2014), despite the fact that these grades are not compulsory. Recent research, however, has found that ECE classrooms in Chile exhibit only mediocre levels of quality, with little time spent on learning activities, particularly instruction in literacy and vocabulary (Herrera, Mathiesen, Merino, & Recart, 2005; Strasser, Lisi, & Silva, 2009; Villalón, Suzuki, Herrera, & Mathiesen, 2002). Additionally, much of the work examining the nature of instructional time in Chilean classrooms has focused on language and literacy activities, and less is known about other types of instruction. To improve the quality of vocabulary instruction in Chilean early childhood classrooms, more needs to be known about the nature of vocabulary support currently provided.

Teacher professional development programs have the potential to improve the quality of teacher–child interactions, including the

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instructional support for language and literacy provided (Hindman & Wasik, 2012; Landry, Swank, Anthony, & Assel, 2010). What is not yet clear is whether these practices can be effectively disseminated to the varied classroom contexts in low- and middle-income countries. This study describes the nature of the vocabulary instruction practices of teachers taking part in Un Buen Comienzo (UBC), a teacher professional development program designed to improve the quality of early childhood education in Chile, and then examines the causal, experimental impacts of this program on these practices. This study adds to the current literature in two ways. First, the analysis of explicit vocabulary instruction covers the full range of instructional topics, providing a unique opportunity to learn more about the variety of ways Chilean teachers may provide explicit vocabulary support. Second, this study examines practices in both treatment and control classrooms, allowing for a better understanding of practices typical in these classrooms without intervention, as well as a more precise understanding of the ways a quality-improvement intervention changed the type of vocabulary support provided. From this analysis we can generate a better understanding of how this type of training may or may not be effective in the Chilean context, which could also inform implementation of these practices in other, similar contexts.

ECE classroom supports for vocabulary development

Hart and Risley's (1995) classic study and many others that have followed in the U.S. and Latin America (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Hoff, 2006; Schady, Galiano, & Souza, 2006) have identified class-based differences in vocabulary that surface around two years of age and widen throughout childhood. Oral language, particularly vocabulary, plays a central role in children's ability to comprehend written text, and these differences are of concern because poor vocabulary has been associated with a risk of school failure (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Kim & Pallante, 2012; NICHD, 2005). A long history of research into the home context has shown that children's language development is supported by responsive parent-child conversations, during which parents use many words and talk about things not in the here and now (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005; Weizman & Snow, 2001). However, the nature of parent-child interactions has been shown to vary systematically by socio-economic status (SES) in the U.S. and South America, differences that largely explain the association of SES with children's vocabulary (Coddington, Mistry, & Bailey, 2014; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006).

ECE programs and policies provide a context in which teachers can play an important role in strengthening children's language skills (Yoshikawa & Kabay, 2015). Specifically, recent research has shown that teachers can support vocabulary development during literacy instruction, particularly through book reading practices. Books contain more extensive vocabulary than found in the language of everyday conversations and provide rich contextual information about meanings, thereby expanding opportunities for exposure to and discussion of such words. Interventions that have trained early childhood teachers to engage students in interactive conversations about books have been successful in improving children's vocabulary outcomes in the U.S. and Mexico (Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst et al., 1999).

However, there is reason to suspect that these approaches are not as effective for children with limited language skills. A meta-analysis of evaluations of dialogic reading training with families found that effect sizes were substantially smaller for children with limited language skills (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Experimental studies of 4- and 5-year-olds in the U.S. and South America have found that, although students can learn new words

from repeated readings of stories (and the repeated exposure that results), they learned more words, and understood and could use words more effectively when words were explicitly identified with instruction in word meanings and opportunities to explore different usages (Coyne, McCoach, & Kapp, 2007; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; McKeown & Beck, 2014; Neugebauer & Currie-Rubin, 2009; Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Strasser, Larraín, & Lissi, 2013). Explicit instruction is different than implicit language learning opportunities, which expose children to many words in contexts that provide extensive information about their meaning and rely on children's ability to notice new words and infer the relevant meaning. Explicit instruction both highlights particular words and provides information about the meaning of each word, scaffolding the word learning process in ways that seem important for children struggling with language learning.

Explicit instruction is characterized by the explicit identification of words to be learned, but can vary in the types of information provided about the meaning of these words. Many of the studies of book reading interventions just cited have focused largely on the provision of declarative knowledge about words, that is, information about definitions and usage that students know they know and can talk about (Nagy & Scott, 2000). At the same time, deep understanding of word meanings requires adequate conceptual information about the underlying construct (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Nagy & Scott, 2000). When this concept is relatively concrete or already known, word learning is fairly straightforward and can often be managed through exposure alone, but when the concept is more abstract and requires some explanation, more explicit instruction is needed (Nagy & Hiebert, 2011). Studies have shown that instruction which included conceptual information, such as concrete examples of the words targeted, in addition to opportunities to use and discuss the words and their meanings in other contexts, was more effective than repeated readings or definitions provided during reading (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Coyne et al., 2007; Penno et al., 2002; Silverman, 2007). In general, the more explicit vocabulary instruction provided about words selected from books (both *total time* and *number of words*), the more words were learned. Additionally, the greater variety of information, both *declarative* and *conceptual*, provided about these words, the more words children learned. To identify the richness of the vocabulary support provided during explicit vocabulary instruction, it is important to quantify the provision of different types of information about word meanings, something that has not yet been tried in analyses of either the U.S. or Latin American classrooms.

Explicit vocabulary instruction can be provided during literacy activities, as described above, but it can also be combined with instruction in other topics, such as during math, science or social studies teaching. Effective instructional approaches of this type include programs that select words central to the larger curriculum, use multi-media (including non-fiction books, videos and teacher talk) to provide information about the meaning of the words, and introduce follow-up conversations and activities (such as dramatic play) to support deep processing of the concepts taught (Neuman, Newman, & Dwyer, 2011; Silverman & Hines, 2009; Wasik & Hindman, 2012). Researchers have argued that subjects like science and mathematics provide exposure to many new words, as well as to old words with new definitions, and that precise subject-specific meanings can usefully be identified during instruction (Peterson & French, 2008; Sarama, Lange, Clements, & Wolfe, 2012). Therefore, any analysis of explicit vocabulary instruction should not be confined to literacy activities, but should identify all instances of this type of support provided to children across the curriculum.

Another important dimension of explicit vocabulary instruction focuses on leveraging the interrelatedness of words. An understanding of one word supports understanding of other related words, which in turn deepens the conceptual understandings

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