

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Understanding the Impact of Teachers' Language Skills on Professional Development

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This professional development study explored how teachers' receptive language skills impacted their use of language enhancement strategies. Twenty-one Head Start lead and assistant teachers participated in an online in-service designed to support their use of language enhancement strategies. Findings show that teachers' receptive vocabulary predicted how often they used language strategies. Also, we found that prior to the professional development assistant teachers used fewer language enhancement strategies when compared to lead teachers. However, after receiving the professional development the gap between lead and assistant teachers' use of language enhancement strategies began to close.

Keywords: professional development, language, Head Start teachers

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Professional development in school settings can be influenced by environmental factors (e.g., students' skills, teachers' traits, school type; Desimone & Hill, 2017); factors which may influence the how effective a professional development experience is in supporting teacher growth. Factors such as age, educational experiences, years of teaching, and adult literacy levels may influence how a teacher engages with professional development (e.g., Desimone & Hill, 2017; Zaslow et al., 2010). Two factors not often studied, as it relates to professional development research, are teachers' language skills and their role in the class (lead or assistant). Lead and assistant teachers each play important roles in early childhood classrooms and yet little research has examined how the two groups might respond differently to professional development (Curby et al., 2012).

Teachers are the primary language models for children in preschool settings. And yet, we currently do not measure the language skills of our teachers have as part of our professional development efforts that may influence their ability to provide language-rich environments for children (Ascetta et al., 2019; Halle et al., 2009; Phillips et al., 2003). Teachers' knowledge of math and science

impacts their students' learning (Berends et al., 2002). It is critical then that we build the same understanding of how teachers' language ability might influence the creation of language-rich environments in early childhood settings (Zaslow et al., 2010).

THE CURRENT STUDY

Our study aimed to understand the possible relation between teacher initial receptive vocabulary skills and teachers' classroom roles on their use of language enhancement strategies. All teachers, 21 lead and assistant Head Start teachers, received access to the online professional development (i.e., language enhancement strategies and self-monitoring content) and individualized written feedback. The first author created online modules with pre-recorded mini lectures for each of the five language enhancement strategies (i.e., repetition, expansion, open-ended questions, narration, and self-talk; see Table 1 for definitions and examples).

TABLE 1. Definitions and Examples of Language Enhancement Strategies

Language Enhancement Strategy	Example
Repeat: Following a child's utterance, the teacher provides a repetition within 3 s. This includes (a) repeating words in the child's utterance. Not required that the child responds.	A child states, "car" and the teacher responds, "Yes a car."
Expansion: Following a child's utterance, the teacher provides an extension within 3 s. This includes adding new <i>descriptive</i> information to the utterance. Not required that the child responds.	A child reaches for cookie on the counter saying "cookie" and the adult responds, "You want a cookie."
Open-ended question: Teacher verbally prompts with a question that does not require a one-word response. Expected that a child will verbally responds using at least a two-word utterance.	Teacher asks, "What do you think will happen next in the book?"
Self-talk: Teacher verbally describes his/her actions. Not required that the child responds.	Teacher states, "I'm getting the cd player for music time."
Narration: Teacher verbally describes the actions of a student(s). Not required that the child responds	Child building in block area. Teacher states, "You're putting the blocks on top of each other."

Over the course of six weeks, teachers viewed each module and were then encouraged to practice the strategies daily. At the end of each week teachers submitted both an online self-monitoring form (e.g., written account of which language enhancement strategy they used and how often they used them) and a 10-minute video that recorded the teachers engaging with children during three different classroom activities: (1) a mealtime, (2) a whole/small group, and (3) free play. We measured teachers' receptive vocabulary using the PPVT-4 (e.g., a standardized language assessment used for people aged 2 to 99 years; Dunn & Dunn, 1997). As well as frequency count of how often teachers used the five language enhancement strategy during a 10-minute video both before and after the professional development.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, we found that teachers' roles in the classroom were associated with differences in both receptive language skills and their use of language enhancement strategies. First, teachers who scored lower on the PPVT-4 (i.e., lower receptive language skills) were associated with using fewer language enhancing strategies. Assistant teachers were more likely than lead teachers to have lower receptive language scores. Next, we analyzed how a teachers' role in the classroom might influence their use of language enhancing strategies both before and after receiving the online professional development. We found that the number, or frequency, of strategies tallied up from videos submitted by classroom teachers, increased for both lead and assistant teachers over time. Before engaging in the online training lead teachers on average used 42 language enhancing strategies and assistant teachers used 26 strategies. Both groups responded well to the intervention demonstrating increased average strategy use; lead teachers approximately 68 strategies and assistant teachers used 44 strategies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The next section will discuss how our findings contribute the understanding of how to best design professional development to support language strategies in early childhood settings. Very little is known about the role that individual teachers' language skills play in the creation of language-rich environments for young children (Halle et al., 2009; Phillips et al., 2003). We found that teachers' receptive vocabulary skills, when measured by the PPVT-4 were surprisingly different. We are unsure at this point how this may directly impact creating a language-rich environment for young children. More research is needed to understand how that may or may not translate to classroom settings with preschool-aged children. We do know from parenting literature that when adult caregivers have lower vocabulary levels, we see similarly lower average vocabulary levels in young children (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995). Little research has examined the predictive nature of teachers' receptive language skills and how it may impact instruction. One size does not fill when it comes instructing young children and perhaps the same applies for professional development for teachers.

Lead and assistant teachers bring with them unique strengths and expertise; it would make sense that teachers would respond differently to a language-based professional development. Examining of the dynamic relation between participants' characteristics (like role and receptive language) and

features of professional development is essential to strengthening our early childhood workforce, ultimately promoting improved positive long-term outcomes for children. Our findings point to how teachers might benefit from differentiated professional development experiences –tailored to their levels of prior knowledge and skills. This may mean some teachers would benefit from a more intensive intervention which provides additional coaching sessions and for a longer period. This could allow assistant teachers to increase their consistent use of instructional strategies. Knowing more about the teachers’ skills could help aid us as a field in designing more effective professional development experiences.

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