Implementing Dialogic Reading with Culturally, Linguistically Diverse Preschool Children

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The purpose of this research-to-practice article is to describe dialogic reading (DR) as a professional development intervention that took place in a state-funded public universal prekindergarten program, partnering with a university. Our goals were to use a research-based literacy program to measure child outcomes related to vocabulary development in English and Spanish. Through our professional development, faculty at our university provided in-service workshops, consultations, and reflections within community of practice meetings. Children varied in their home language experiences and we used a few data sources to provide insights about children's home language abilities. We categorized children's language exposure as English only, bilingual, and Spanish dominant. Teachers' fidelity of implementation of weekly DR lessons learned during in-service training was monitored by university faculty. Practical implications of the findings to replicate this research with diverse populations are provided for early childhood teachers.

Keywords: bilingualism, preschool curriculum, literacy, research and community partnerships

DIALOGIC READING

Shared book reading is an effective way to build vocabulary and is a widely accepted daily practice in early childhood classrooms because it gives children a chance to be active participants in the reading session (Collins, 2010; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). Dialogic reading (DR) is an evidence-based approach to shared book reading that has been documented by Zevenbergen and Whitehurst (2003). DR was first described by Whitehurst et al. (1988) and is a particular type of shared book reading that includes strategic questioning and responding to children while reading a book. Through carefully controlled studies with preschoolers in home and early childhood settings, researchers (Whitehurst et al., 1988, 1999) found the way we read to children is just as important as how frequently we read to them. In these settings, they investigated

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the effects of DR by itself on receptive and expressive vocabulary (Whitehurst et al., 1988) and on later literacy skills (Whitehurst et al., 1999) and concluded the manner in which an adult reads with a child is critical to the development of that child's vocabulary and expressive language skills.

The goal of DR is for children to become storytellers. It involves repeated readings and conversations about books with small groups of children. Children will ask more questions and engage in more dialogue when they listen to a story multiple times (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). The value of holding DR sessions with small groups of children has also been researched (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Children have more opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations in a small-group setting rather than in a large group.

When learning to use DR strategies one is taught to use two acronyms (i.e., CROWD and PEER) to help remember the DR prompts (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The letters in CROWD stand for the kinds of questions (the prompts) one can ask while reading aloud—*completion, recall, open-ended, wh-,* and *distancing*. For example, (a) *completion* prompts, that is, The dog is _____; (b) *recall* prompts, for example, Do you remember what the boy did?; (c) *open-ended* prompts, for example, I wonder why the girl would do that. What do you think?; (d) *wh-* prompts, that is, Who _____? What did _____? When did _____? Where was _____? Why did _____?; and (e) *distancing* prompts. PEER stands for *prompt, evaluate, expand*, and *repeat*. These strategies ask one to prompt the child while reading aloud. They include (a) *prompting* the child to label objects in the books' pictures (pointing to an illustration, teacher says, "What is this called?") and talk about what is going on in the story (teacher asks children to retell the gist of the plot), (b) *evaluating* the child's verbalizations (teacher tells child that she or he gave a great answer because she or he said _____), (c) *expanding* the child's verbalization (child says, "The dog" teacher says, "Which dog? What does he look like?") and (d) *repeating* expanded verbalizations (teacher says, "Yes, the brown dog with the white spots") DR teaches adults to be more interactive while reading with children through the use of questions and prompts. Additionally, conversations between children and teachers make the experience more enjoyable for children, which may impact oral language and later reading behaviors.

There is little research on classroom outcomes, although DR has been recommended as an effective curriculum practice to help young dual language learners (DLLs) acquire English (Espinosa, 2010b), and DR has proven to have a positive outcome on vocabulary and comprehension skills (www.whatworks.ed.gov). Therefore, it was important to provide professional development and a research opportunity for three prekindergarten teachers because they serviced a large number of DLLs. So, preschool vocabulary development through DR was the focus of our professional development.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The school and the university have established a partnership where, among other components, we trained and coached the prekindergarten teachers and teacher assistants and met with them often to discuss different aspects of their work with their children during DR. This professional development was practice focused (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009) and considered a "community of practice" (Buysse, Castro, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2010), which involves communication between collegial partners, training, and coaching for short-term, focused, small-scale projects.

The content of this professional development enabled the teachers to use DR with the school's curriculum, The Creative Curriculum for Preschool (Dodge, 2010), and emphasize vocabulary development for the children in the program, particularly the DLL children. Teachers were taught DR questioning strategies and how to build children's vocabulary. At a faculty meeting, for example, teachers used the Read Together, Talk Together program (RTTT; Pearson Early Learning, 2002) to learn about and practice CROWD and PEER techniques (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003), which were previously described.

At the faculty meeting the teachers also watched an RTTT video and received a handout that summarized the key points in the training. They then practiced with an RTTT text that they would not be using in class and were encouraged to practice the technique with other pieces of literature.

Next, we and the teachers selected the Tier 2 words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; mostly nouns that frequently occur in texts and are used by mature language users in everyday conversations) that they would emphasize during their dialogic read-alouds. Teachers received a book containing pictures of the 32 targeted words to use when they were teaching and assessing the 32 words during their DR sessions. Teachers were also encouraged to point to illustrations of these words when they appeared in the texts.

Teachers also received boxes with play props for each of the texts. These props reinforced both the children's growing vocabularies and their comprehension of the stories. Working lunches, casual conversations, coaching, and observations reinforced the teachers' use of the pictures of the words, the play props, and the CROWD and PEER conversational prompts.

PARTICIPANTS

Children

Seventy-two children (27 girls and 45 boys) in a universal, half-day prekindergarten program in a K–2 building in a suburban public school district in a northeastern state participated in this program. The children were in six classes. Seventy percent were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Some spoke English, some were bilingual, and some were Spanish dominant. Ages ranged from just over 3 years old to just over 5 years old.

Teachers

There were three teachers in the program. Two spoke English, and one spoke English and Spanish. Years of experience ranged from 15 to 3 years of classroom experience. Certifications ranged from nursery–6 plus special education kindergarten–12, to birth–2 and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), to nursery–6. Regarding the three teacher assistants in the program, two spoke English, and one spoke English and Spanish. Years of experience ranged from 20 to 1 year of classroom experience. One teaching assistant was certified in both general and special education, birth–2, whereas the other two individuals had teaching assistant certifications. The TESOL-certified teacher and the early childhood teaching assistant were university-salaried teachers. Others were paid by their district. Two teaching assistants lived in the community.

FINDINGS

Children's vocabulary improved. At the beginning, on average, children knew about 10 of the 32 words represented by the pictures shown to them. By the end of the program, on average, the children correctly named about 17 of the picture prompts. It was concluded that vocabulary increased for English-only (EO), bilingual (DLLs), and Spanish-dominant (DLLs) speakers with the EO-speaking children learning more words than the bilingual or the Spanish-dominant children. But whether or not the books were read in English or in Spanish did not impact student achievement; nor did their teachers' background. All children's word knowledge increased.

Also, based on our classroom observations, the teachers demonstrated fidelity (Vartuli & Rohs, 2009) to the DR routine, that is, they adhered to the curriculum in the organization of their lessons. They also demonstrated fidelity to teaching; that is, they explicitly taught targeted vocabulary words and used all materials in accordance with their training.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

We believe university–school partnerships are essential to make a professional development model work. Our university has partnered with a public school for 3 years, and we have seen the preschool curriculum change from a didactic teacher-driven instructional approach to a child-centered approach that is producing gains in vocabulary and emergent literacy skills. The teachers are reading storybooks and engaging children in repeating, correcting, and expanding their use of language around a book. Our findings demonstrate that DR professional development improved child outcomes on vocabulary, but we need further research to explore the impact university partnerships have on influencing teacher behaviors and attitudes toward professional development.

By including storybooks for Spanish-speaking children in the professional development DR intervention, teachers were building important literacy skills in the children. Research (Espinosa, 2010b; Tabors, 2008; Wong Fillmore, 1991) shows that reading and speaking to young DLLs in their native language builds proficiency in a second language. Furthermore, experts support the idea that learning two languages at the same time does not cause language delays and actually facilitates English language learning (August & Shanahan, 2006; Bialystok, 2001). The finding of our professional development intervention supports the importance of providing instruction and materials in English and Spanish to young DLLs.

We are encouraged by our experiences with the sustainability of our intervention. The teachers not only used DR with fidelity during the 8-week intervention, but they also continued to implement DR strategies during the rest of the school year and into the following year with a new group of preschool children. We provided initial professional development, and teachers sustained DR techniques well with little input from us.

Based on the outcomes of this study and the available evidence-based research on DR techniques, we provide several practices that might be used to maximize the benefits of DR techniques with culturally, linguistically diverse preschool populations.

Small-Group Repeated Readings

Research (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Morrow, 1988) has examined the benefits of repeated readings of a story. Stories selected for our study were read to the whole group first, followed by small-group dialogic readings. The amount and nature of comments and questions differed depending upon whether a new story or a familiar story was being read. The number of comments made and questions asked increased when repeated readings were done. Repeated readings are especially important for children with low ability (Morrow, 1988) or for those acquiring proficiency in a second language (Espinosa, 2010a). Ideally, children should receive DR three times per week in groups of no more than four or five children after the first whole-class reading.

Link Books to Monthly Theme

Try to select titles that relate to the monthly theme. If the monthly theme is families you might want to read *Peter's Chair* (Keats, 1998). Have children bring their baby pictures to school. Invite a child's parent with a small baby to the classroom. Themed play centers also facilitate conversation. Provide several plastic dolls for children to wash in the water table. Take small groups of children into the pretend play area and have them take on roles of father, mother, and babies. Rehearse common phrases that would be used in families, such as, "I need to change the baby's diaper," and "Let's make tacos for dinner." Offering scripts for children to follow during dramatic play and recasting play language are two ways to help facilitate interactions between English speakers and non-English speakers. Linking the books that you read in DR to themes, real-life activities, and play centers helps children learn vocabulary words and builds important literacy skills.

Realistic Props

Realistic props are very helpful to scaffold vocabulary and comprehension skills. With realistic props, it is easier for children to know the meaning of, for example, the words *cradle* or *fish* when the child is holding a realistic prop. Children usually define the meaning of an object by naming it, which requires an understanding of common terms. "This is a fish," one child will say to another, holding up a plastic fish. For a child acquiring a second language, seeing the pretend fish helps him or her understand what the other child is saying.

CONCLUSION

As previously stated, our university partnership provided a sustainable intervention to a public school state-funded prekindergarten program. DR is a great way to increase children's vocabulary, especially if they are DLL children. The preschool teachers with whom we worked were eager to learn and implement a technique that would help their children expand their word knowledge and increase their conversations related to books that had been read to them. Using DR questioning with small groups of children while repeatedly reading stories that were introduced to the whole

class is an easy and effective way to increase children's vocabulary. Linking these readings to monthly themes and adding realistic props are fun and useful ways to serve culturally and linguistically diverse preschool children.

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