Over the last decade, Latin American countries have made a good deal of economic progress; nevertheless, widespread social inequality persists in the region (UNESCO, 2013). Therefore, one of the greatest challenges facing the region today is how to advance in both equity and quality of education. In this sense, the development of literacy skills is crucial to improving opportunities to learn for all students. In this chapter, we understand early literacy as the ‘set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing’ (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998: 849). This multidimensional notion combines processes related to meaning, which refers to the extraction, construction or production of meaning through oral or written language (e.g. vocabulary, concepts about print, oral and writing production, and oral comprehension); and code, which refers to mastering the alphabetic principle and reading words (e.g. alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, knowledge of sentence structure and phoneme-grapheme correspondence) (Connor, 2011).

This chapter offers an overview of early literacy provision in Costa Rica and Chile, two Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. Though they are in different phases of change, both countries are striving to improve the quality of early literacy. The analysis of these two cases may provide valuable insights for stakeholders and researchers in the 20 Spanish-speaking countries in the region, with an estimated 400 million speakers of Spanish as a first language.

The chapter addresses the following questions: How should early literacy be taught based on the nature of Spanish as a writing system and language in Latin America? How do Costa Rica and Chile define early literacy learning in their official curricula? Are the curricula more focused on code-based or meaning-construction skills? How wide is the gap between the intended curriculum, pre- and in-service teacher training, and the actual implementation of learning opportunities for early literacy in Chile? What are the main challenges for early literacy in countries like Costa Rica and Chile?

Similarities between early literacy provision in Costa Rica and Chile

There are some marked similarities between these two countries with regard to early literacy provision.
Lessons from Costa Rica and Chile

Early literacy with a semi-transparent orthography and a simple phonological system

Spanish has a simple phonological structure, with 24 phonemes (five vowels and 19 consonants), although pronunciation varies to some degree throughout Latin America (22 phonemes) and Spain (23 or 24 phonemes) (Ardila and Roselli, 2014; Defior and Serrano, 2014). The most common syllable structure is consonant–vowel (CV) (52.6 per cent) and consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC) (19 per cent) (Guerra, 1983) and the longest syllables are composed of five phonemes.

The Spanish writing system consists of 27 letters and five digraphs (ch, ll, rr, gu, qu) and is considered to be a semi-transparent orthographic system. Defior and Serrano (2014) pointed out that even though eight phonemes are represented by different graphemes, only four graphemes represent multiple phonemes. Additionally, two graphemes pose a challenge for learning to decode (h and x).

The highly consistent alphabetic principle in Spanish makes the decoding process easier to master for Spanish-speaking children than for those using opaque systems; even so, the main challenge for the former group is still learning to spell. The semi-transparency of the writing system and the simplicity of spoken Latin American Spanish have educational implications that should be taken into account, especially because many early literacy instructional proposals in Latin America have been drawn from French and English (Seymour, 2005; Bravo-Valdivieso and Escobar, 2014). These implications include the following:

- In Spanish, code-skills are rapidly acquired with systematic activities, and learning challenges are related to specific letters (c, g, y, r, h), syllabic composition (CVV, CVVC, CCV, CCVC, CCVVC, CCVCC) and word length (three or more syllables).
- Unlike in English, effective instructional practices to develop phonological awareness focus on phonemes rather than onset-rime (Guardia, 2014).
- The development of code-skills at the word level through systematic and explicit phonics instruction can be consolidated between the first and second grade.

By contrast, the development of meaning-construction skills poses a major learning challenge; it is therefore necessary to invest more time and resources into developing comprehension through oral language.

Early literacy in the centralized educational policies of Costa Rica and Chile

In both Costa Rica and Chile, the Ministry of Education sets the educational policy for early childhood education, which includes students ranging in age from nought to six, while elementary school starts when children turn six years old. In both countries, the early literacy education policies are centralized to ensure the same learning objectives for all students; however, in both cases, the policies permit open and flexible curricula, allowing schools to determine how to achieve early literacy learning goals.

The Costa Rican education system is managed by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP). Early literacy instruction entails two levels: (a) Preschool (ages four to six) and (b) the content area Spanish Language for Cycle I of Elementary School (which includes the first, second and third grades, for children ages six to nine). Currently, the Costa Rican system is substantially revamping its understanding of two developmental processes previously ignored.
or misunderstood: *early childhood* is now seen as a particular stage of development to be taken into account alongside other considerations when defining educational goals and methods, and *early literacy* is viewed as a particular stage in children’s language development that should be promoted separately from other goals (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2011). In the past, Costa Rica has had practically no coordination between the preschool and elementary education levels, as they have been perceived as strictly distinct from one another. Literacy acquisition has long been considered a concern solely for the elementary level, since it was expected to commence only when children reached the age of seven, during the first grade.

Costa Rica’s National Reading and Writing Policy⁴ has declared that literacy for children with disabilities and multilingual language learning is a national priority (MEP, 2013b). In Costa Rica, multilingual literacy involves fostering competencies in a foreign language (usually English or French), in Costa Rican Sign Language and in Spanish as a second language for the indigenous and deaf populations. This policy charges the MEP with certain duties, such as developing study programmes, reading materials, methodological guides, good practices and teacher-training courses.

The current Chilean national curriculum for children aged nought to six was enacted in 2001; it is organized around three pillars, one of which is *Communication* (including verbal and artistic language), and includes two stages: the first preschool cycle (ages nought to three) and the second preschool cycle (ages four to six) (MINEDUC, 2001). In 2008, the Ministry of Education published *Study Programs* for the second preschool cycle, which help guide teachers in attaining learning goals, but do not suggest learning goal sequences organized by educational domains or a minimum number of hours to devote to each learning goal. For the elementary school grades, the Ministry of Education has issued both *Study Programs* and *Educational Plans*, which establish a minimum number of hours per domain and educational level. From the first to the fourth grade, it is expected that 304 out of 1,140 hours a year be devoted to *Language and Communication*. In schools where *Indigenous Language* is offered as a course, it is expected that 152 hours more be allocated for this subject (MINEDUC, 2012).

The current Chilean early literacy curriculum establishes common learning goals, but does not provide detailed guidelines about the teaching practices that should be used to attain such learning goals (OECD, 2012).

**Early literacy curriculum: code-based or meaning-construction skills?**

Both the Costa Rican and Chilean curricula lack a model specifying how to integrate and emphasize code-based and meaning-construction skills. To illustrate this issue in more detail, Mendive and Meneses (2017) analysed the Chilean curriculum (nought to 8 years old) for *opportunities to learn* (Meneses et al., 2014; Porter et al., 2007), defined as the presence of a skill in a literacy- or language-specific content. Based on Connor (2011), each learning goal (LG) was classified as either *meaning-focused* or *code-focused*.⁵

The analysis revealed that the official Chilean curriculum emphasizes meaning-construction over code-based skills in the teaching of language and early literacy to children between nought and eight years old. Across grades, over 80 per cent of LGs are meaning-focused, but the figure is even higher in the first cycle, where 100 per cent of LGs are devoted to that focus. This emphasis sits in stark contrast with the purported balanced-curriculum approach.

In the meaning-construction category, the main LG domain across all grades, except the first grade, concerns knowledge about how people communicate in a specific context, referred to as *pragmatic or social communication knowledge* (Figure 10.1). In the first and second cycles, *oral production* is the second most frequent domain, along with *print knowledge* in the
second cycle. Even into the elementary grades, *pragmatic or social communication* still prevails. Finally, in the elementary school grades, there is a clear emphasis on LGs oriented towards developing *strategies for understanding* and *reading comprehension*.

In summary, although the curricula from both countries espouse a balanced model to develop literacy, in the Chilean list of LGs, meaning-construction skills are emphasized over code-based skills. A similar analysis of the curriculum in Costa Rica and other countries could help identify which early literacy approach is being conveyed to teachers.

### Early literacy teacher preparation: space to improve

Although education reforms in Costa Rica and Chile have progressed to different stages, for these countries to successfully implement their goals, they both require coherent and profound teacher education to promote early literacy. As mentioned briefly above and further explicated later in this chapter, Costa Rica is in the midst of enacting reforms to improve early literacy provision. Teacher practices and attitudes towards the new content prescribed by the reforms will be crucial to their success. Costa Rican preschool, first- and second-grade teachers have to fully understand the rationale behind the reforms, commit to them and apply them consistently in their classrooms. They also need to be aware of the importance of explaining the curricular changes to families. To do so, the MEP is offering all in-service public teachers a short training, which is currently being implemented.

On the one hand, the situation in Costa Rica is favourable, as both educational authorities and technicians have demonstrated unanimous commitment to the reforms, backed by suitable academic and financial resources and supported by the professional credentials of current teachers, which should facilitate understanding of the causes, goals and content of the curricular reforms.

On the other hand, there is also uncertainty and a variety of restrictions. First, it’s not clear whether there are enough instructional support resources available to teachers, students...
and families to assist them in implementing the reforms. Second, beyond official diplomas, do teachers have a sufficiently solid understanding of the principles of childhood, language and literacy development so as to implement the reforms in a reliable and effective way? Third, how well can the MEP sustain these policy reforms in the long run if future teachers continue to enter the system poorly prepared and insufficiently aware of core elements of the reform, such as literacy development and early literacy? Should the MEP be permanently retraining teachers? Logic suggests that pre-service teacher education should be adapted to the new norms, but this is problematic for the MEP, because initial teacher training is in the hands of autonomous universities, both public and private.

In Chile, the teaching profession has undergone a series of changes and been subject to contradictory social pressures. On the one hand, enrolment at the 48 institutions that offer education majors for either the preschool or elementary school levels increased significantly between 2000 and 2008 (Cox et al., 2010). Private universities provide most of the majors, although they have newer programmes and adhere to lower-quality regulations than traditional universities. On the other hand, burgeoning social demand to improve the quality of pre-service and in-service training has highlighted the lack of teacher specialization in the disciplinary domains (Ávalos, 2010; Cox et al., 2010).

Consequently, the 2004 OECD report about education policy in Chile emphasized the gap between children’s capacities – as expected in the official curriculum following the reform changes – and teacher knowledge and practices for promoting more complex opportunities to learn.

The Chilean Ministry of Education has developed pedagogical content knowledge standards for prospective teachers, which are also used to guide the National Certification System Evaluation (INICIA). Unfortunately, preschool teacher standards are too general to serve as guidelines for the literacy curricula of teacher training programmes. Our own analyses of INICIA results reveal that around 50 per cent of evaluated teachers demonstrate an unacceptable level of content and pedagogical knowledge in the language area.

The scarce up-to-date research regarding Chilean educators’ knowledge about how to teach reading and writing in early childhood suggests that pre-service programmes offer few specific models for teaching early literacy, and few practical chances to rehearse and reflect on the knowledge acquired (Adlerstein et al., 2016; Cisternas et al., 2013; Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011).

Although there are some parallels between Costa Rica and Chile in initial literacy provision, in the next section we will paint a more detailed portrait of the state of affairs in each country, looking at the major challenges for early literacy in Costa Rica and Chile.

Costa Rica’s case: policy transition

Costa Rica’s reforms are an attempt to correct the serious discontinuities between the preschool and early elementary school grades and the resulting weak performance in literacy. A very upsetting outcome was the high proportion of children forced to repeat first grade because they failed to achieve the goal of learning to read Spanish during the school year. Between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of students who had to repeat the first grade annually ranged from 10.8 per cent to 14.7 per cent, the highest of the six grades comprising the elementary level (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2011; Rodino, 2010). Besides, quite a few first-grade students who are promoted to the second grade are nonetheless placed into ‘curricular adaptation’, meaning that from that point forward, they will be taught and evaluated with a simplified study programme because they have learning difficulties.
Lessons from Costa Rica and Chile

No studies have been carried out to quantify the issue, but observations suggest that the assumed ‘learning difficulties’ are diagnosed based on the fact that these students finish first grade without being able to read (decode) at an acceptable level.

Evidence of insufficient literacy achievement persists. Costa Rican children who complete elementary school typically develop basic reading and writing competencies. However, not all reach a suitable level of proficiency enabling them to successfully meet later educational and employment demands. Periodic exams by the MEP in Spanish showed unsatisfactory achievement, while PISA 2010 reading results revealed that students were evenly distributed into thirds: one-third scored at the minimum acceptable level of achievement, one-third below that level and only another one-third above (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2013; Rodino, 2013). PISA 2012 replicated these results.

Thus, the former MEP administration set as a strategic priority for the 2011–2014 term the strengthening of literacy competencies, which it planned to achieve by transforming the teaching of Spanish across all educational levels. The MEP also devised a new national Reading and Writing Policy for the entire system. The MEP began to design study programmes in 2011 that were approved in 2013 (Spanish for cycle I) and 2014 (preschool). Implementation commenced one year later.

Curricular reform in preschool

The former preschool study programmes, eliminated in 2014, had been in effect since 1995 (for five- to six-year-olds) and 2000 (for four- to five-year-olds) (MEP, 1995, 2000). These study programmes were based on a very general and limited notion of human development, marked by the following flaws:

- an unbalanced view of child development with a focus on social and emotional, but not cognitive development;
- a restricted interpretation of language development with a strong focus on daily oral language – especially conversation – but little or no encouragement of pre-reading and writing skills;
- no notion of the literacy development continuum and its emergent literacy stage;
- weak assessment of early learning outcomes, particularly regarding cognitive and language development, due to the lack of a well-defined evaluation framework and instruments;
- extreme disparities between the class structure and environment at the preschool level and the next grade level (first grade), plus no actual preparation of children to transition smoothly between levels.

Further exacerbating these limitations, the former preschool authority held and enforced an even narrower interpretation of early literacy. An official statement was released against ‘inducing conventional reading and writing processes in the preschool classroom’ because doing so would allegedly encourage ‘fictitious processes far away from the characteristics, needs, and interests of preschool children’ and thus would support an ‘academic practice’ that ‘distorts the goals of preschool education’ (MEP, 2004). Teachers were dissuaded from displaying writing in the classroom – letters and common words, including children’s names, simple everyday sentences, printed posters or big books, and the like were discouraged. Any pedagogical work on emergent literacy skills was considered inappropriate and even harmful for five- and six-year-olds.
However, the new policy and study programmes (MEP, 2014a) have ushered in significant and developmentally sound reforms, mainly because they:

- are structured as unified documents with a single conceptual and methodological framework that encompasses the study content and activities for the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels, lending it a sense of sequence and cohesion;
- provide teachers with an explicit and clear account of its developmental and pedagogic approach, making it a reference for daily consultation and further professional development;
- detail the general knowledge and skills students are expected to have acquired upon completing preschool and make strides towards defining learning outcomes and providing a framework for designing assessment instruments;
- address student diversity by defining three performance levels at which teachers can place students in order to assist in individual progress;
- favour a balanced view of child development with equal attention to all of its dimensions – in particular, cognitive and literacy development;
- take into account the literacy development continuum and foster emergent literacy skills (e.g. phonological awareness, word segmentation, vocabulary building, oral and written expression, oral and graphic text comprehension and creation, motivation towards reading as a source of enjoyment and learning, identifying written language in the environment and writing the student’s name). They also stipulate daily reading periods, a literate environment and all kinds of communicative exchanges;
- require teachers to smooth the transition to the next school level and restore the valuable goal of preparing preschoolers for the challenges of elementary school with a dual purpose: to foster their later academic performance and to level the playing field for children from disadvantaged or culturally different families.

**Curricular reform in Spanish language for cycle I of elementary school**

In Costa Rica, the preschool and cycle I reforms were formulated simultaneously. However, the process for the latter set of reforms was quicker and less contentious than the former because the first grade and the subject of Spanish language have historically been the level and content area responsible for early literacy instruction. Moreover, there was a clear agreement among MEP authorities, elementary curriculum technicians and national experts concerning the deficiencies in this field and the changes that needed to be made.

The current study programme (MEP, 2013a) heralded substantial changes, including the following:

- The first and second grades are now viewed as a unit extending from six to eight years of age. Much attention is paid to their effective integration by strengthening the connection between study content and teaching practices, and reducing administrative stumbling blocks, such as the first-grade deadline previously imposed on children for learning to read and, specifically, decode. The intimidating and ineffectual practice of having poor readers repeat the first grade has been eliminated.
- Recommendations were issued to school principals to assign each group of students the same teacher for the first and second years.
- The adoption of a communicative-functional approach expands the focus of the definition of early literacy success. While the former programme fundamentally emphasized
Lessons from Costa Rica and Chile

code-based skills, the new one adds in meaning-construction skills, the result being a balanced-skills approach.

- Grammar is not ignored, but is rather explored using the children’s own language products. The goal is to achieve autonomy of expression with grammatical correctness.
- Teachers are guided to create plenty of spaces for students’ text production, both oral and written, using multiple mediation strategies, with an emphasis on dialogues, reading and writing workshops.
- Learning outcomes are regularly documented and evaluated by teachers using techniques they can select from a set of alternatives suggested by the study programme (e.g. daily work observation, checklists, performance records, numerical and descriptive scales, interviews, teacher diaries and student portfolios). Every three months, teachers prepare a qualitative performance report for each family including information about the child’s progress. The MEP Evaluation Department has provided a model for this quarterly report, and annual reports have supplanted the former first-grade exams and passing/non-passing grades (MEP, 2013a).
- Special effort is being made to supply teachers with support resources, either by including them in the study programme (e.g. instructional activities and assessment instruments) or by appending them as additional materials (e.g. theoretical readings about neuroscience and cognitive and literacy development) (MEP, 2014b).

Costa Rica’s policy has always been to let teachers select their own methods for literacy instruction. However, the study programme suggests several methods – typically the phonetic, syllabic, ‘eclectic’, and global or whole-language methods – and even proposes a preferred method. For instance, the current programme suggests the phonetic method, but not as a requirement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers use a variety of methods, sometimes in combination.

Literacy education follows the national policy on the inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream classrooms (Law 7600, 1996). The cycle I Spanish programme starts by taking into account each student’s ability level and works from there up through explicit instruction. The public school system also has some support teachers who assist the regular classroom teachers in handling children with learning difficulties, mainly in Spanish and Maths. They are assigned to one school and rotate across grades and classrooms; sometimes they assist several schools. However, their number is insufficient to meet the needs of the whole system.

One weak aspect of early literacy instruction is that reading and writing resources are not equally available to all children. One-quarter of the country’s public schools (about 1,000 schools) have school libraries with a considerable number of books, including the official list of two hundred titles suggested for the elementary level. The rest of the schools have a monthly budget to buy materials, but principals have the discretion to allocate funds for other school demands and teachers must take initiative to request specific books. On average, preschool classrooms may have 30 books in the so-called ‘reading area’ for children to play with, while first-grade classrooms seldom have more than ten.

**The challenges ahead for Costa Rica**

The policies described in this chapter are certainly good news for early literacy education in Costa Rica. At present, hopes are high, but so too are the obstacles ahead. The first challenge will be to implement the new study programmes, which will be put into practice nationwide in 2015. This initial implementation will be a trial period for Costa Rica.
Thus, the main issues facing current and future literacy provision in the country are related to modifying current conditions. In brief, the main issues Costa Rica will need to address are as follows:

1. **Study the changes that are under way.** In order to avoid any conceptual or operational interference in the new study programmes, all of the factors that might impact their implementation ought to be studied and managed by the MEP.

2. **Improve initial teacher training, particularly in early childhood development and literacy development, emphasizing the literacy continuum and early literacy.** Initial teacher training is provided by universities, which are autonomous institutions. Hence, the MEP cannot directly compel them to teach specific content. However, the MEP can and should discuss with teacher training institutions the ways in which their teaching programmes can better adhere to national policies, supervise their academic quality and put in place strategies for hiring well-prepared new teachers.

3. **Develop a variety of teaching and learning resources for literacy development, particularly early literacy.** Resources must include theoretical and instructional materials, other classroom resources (such as age- and culture-appropriate children’s books), teacher support groups (for exchanging good practices or advice on how to deal with particular difficulties) and, ideally, mentoring experiences.

It’s important that Costa Rica build a rich assortment of resources for literacy and early literacy education in Spanish – resources that would address a variety of topics and real educational problems, and would be up-to-date, well-researched, well-designed and made available to all teachers. Other Latin American countries are facing a similar challenge.

**The Chilean case: from curricular implementation to early literacy teacher preparation**

Unlike in Costa Rica, where reforms are under way, Chile is in the midst of ongoing efforts to implement the curriculum modifications developed a decade ago.

**Curricular domains and teacher implementation at the classroom level**

Although the Chilean system emphasizes meaning-construction over code-based skills (Mendive and Meneses, 2017), there are differences between the official curriculum and the curriculum actually put into practice. In effect, oral language skills are underdeveloped in the early childhood years (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011), despite the fact that the national curriculum emphasizes these skills (e.g. oral production and pragmatic or social communication knowledge; see corresponding percentages in Figure 10.1).

Research suggests that the curriculum is not necessarily the primary factor guiding the content taught in preschool classrooms, because in the second cycle the most frequently implemented domains emphasized code and meaning – exposure to literacy and phonological awareness (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011) – while the least frequently implemented domain was vocabulary. Conversely, the national curriculum is more closely tied to what is taught in elementary classrooms (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011). The most frequently implemented domain observed was reading comprehension – which is consistent with the national curriculum’s emphasis (Figure 10.1) – while the least
Lessons from Costa Rica and Chile

frequently observed domains were oral comprehension and vocabulary, both of which are also underrepresented in the national curriculum (Figure 10.1).

**Early literacy assessment: does it inform teaching?**

Interviews reveal that the teachers plan and evaluate early literacy instruction without considering the diversity of student performance levels, despite the fact that the large-scale study with the students of same teachers identified three early literacy performance levels from the second cycle to second grade (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011).

Observational studies have revealed a trend towards implementing whole-group rather than small-group activities (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011), even after interventions that aimed to encourage individualized teaching (Strasser et al., 2016a). These results suggest that teachers have difficulties in dealing with differences in motivation, attention and levels of learning in their students, a finding that also has been self-reported by early childhood teachers (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011).

**The challenges ahead for Chile**

Three challenges for Chile are critical to improving the quality of early literacy provision: (a) a recalibrated early literacy curriculum, (b) a more supportive early literacy curriculum and (c) more specific early literacy training in teacher programmes, considering both pre- and in-service teachers.

**A recalibrated early literacy curriculum**

The frequency and distribution of LGs in the Chilean early literacy curriculum underrepresent some domains and overrepresent others. Because vocabulary plays a central role in language and literacy development (Dickinson, 2011; Strasser and del Río, 2013), it is remarkable that proportionally few LGs are targeted towards developing vocabulary (Figure 10.1). The lack of explicit vocabulary instruction in pre-service training helps explain the low level of explicit vocabulary instruction in Chilean classrooms. On the other hand, pragmatic or social communication knowledge is the most represented domain in the early literacy curriculum (Figure 10.1) – though apparently absent from daily lessons (Facultad de Educación PUC/MINEDUC, 2011). Nonetheless, the ability to understand the intentions of others is less a matter of instruction, and more the result of maturational processes which develop at similar ages cross-culturally (Trevarthen, 1988), and which grow incidentally from opportunities for joint attention and activities (Tomasello, 2011). A more strategic goal could be to teach students turn-taking skills and to consider other people’s opinions and contributions (Resnick et al., 2009).

Oral production is a domain implemented at a rather low rate in Chilean classrooms; however, research shows that the ability to produce oral narratives is related to reading comprehension (Oakhill and Cain, 2012) and school success (O’Neill et al., 2004). More pre-service and in-service training is required for teachers to learn how to develop and assess oral language skills through practical pedagogical strategies (modelling and rehearsal) and thus facilitate implementation.

Two LG domains are missing from education for children aged nought to six: exposure to literacy in the first cycle (ages nought to four) and oral comprehension throughout the entire period. The absence of LGs oriented towards reading books aloud to children in the first cycle is especially noticeable, in light of its relevance for developing vocabulary (Strasser
et al., 2016b), oral comprehension (Strasser et al., 2013) and Spanish syntactic knowledge (Pérez-Leroux et al., 2012).

Reading comprehension – present in elementary level LGs – might be better developed if the preschool curriculum included LGs about oral comprehension and knowledge of strategies for reading understanding. In addition, some LGs are needed to promote cognitively complex processes, such as inferences, self-monitoring and causality (Strasser and del Río, 2013). Finally, LGs should include not only narratives but also explanatory texts (Bridges et al., 2012).

Overall, it seems that teachers have grasped one portion of the national curriculum to a greater extent than the other. They are indeed implementing domains related to meaning-construction skills and the use of texts, such as exposure to literacy in the second cycle, text comprehension and strategies for reading understanding, while paying less attention to oral language domains, which include vocabulary and print, pragmatic or social communication knowledge.

A more supportive early literacy curriculum

The Chilean curriculum is still far from being a tool to help teachers develop meaning-construction skills in students. There is a dearth of specificity in the early literacy curriculum at different levels; in particular, there is scant instructional guidance on how to implement LGs, especially for the first and second cycles. For instance, there is a lack of specificity regarding the quantity and types of words that should be learned as vocabulary items, as well as the types of texts to which students should be exposed. Moreover, learning objectives are very general and there is a lack of complex progression in some domains across grades (i.e. some learning goals in the areas of pragmatic and social communication skills, oral production and vocabulary are redundant across grades), which makes it difficult for teachers to plan and evaluate their teaching. Desirable specifications would provide more guidance for instruction and assessment to adjust teaching to classroom diversity, with special study programmes for the first preschool cycle, and for all levels, defining LGs through observable behaviours and increasing the complexity of learning progressions.

More specific early literacy approaches for teacher training programmes

There is consensus that Chilean educational policy needs to shift its focus from school system coverage to boosting educational quality by basing teacher education on profound disciplinary and strong pedagogical content knowledge, and implementing a practice-based curriculum (Ávalos, 2010; Cox, 2007; Cox et al., 2010). Nevertheless, no specific research is yet available about the impact of the quality of teacher education programmes on teacher effectiveness in the language and literacy domain.

Early literacy instructional practices are complex and teachers need intensive opportunities to learn them. A recent study of the effectiveness of professional development programmes has shown how difficult it is for preschool teachers to devote less time to traditional practices (e.g. teaching letters and words) and spend more time implementing novel practices (e.g. teaching vocabulary) (Mendive et al., 2015). Therefore, future teacher-training programmes should consider:

- How to improve the quality of language input to build on and expand child talk and thinking (Hamre, et al., 2012). For example, systematically incorporating book reading would expose children to higher lexical diversity, more syntactic complexity and more talk
about vocabulary, without having to displace or upgrade the teacher workforce (Dickinson et al., 2014).

- **How to develop practical knowledge about teaching in small groups**, including classroom management strategies and the use of formative feedback to build children’s language skills, along with policies to reduce the teacher–child ratio. In Chile, the teacher–child ratio is 1:22 in classrooms for three- to six-year-olds. By contrast, in the US, this ratio is 1:13 (MINEDUC, 2014).

- **How to deal with student diversity**. Teachers must be familiar with tools to evaluate and detect both special needs and progress in specific early literacy domains; in addition, they must be aware of how to use strategies to plan their teaching according to different performance levels.

Besides improving the quality of teacher training, it would also be beneficial to promote the social value of teaching. In Chile, teachers currently earn less than other university graduates. Within the teaching profession, early childhood teachers are paid even less; on average, they earn 9 per cent less than elementary school teachers after ten years, and as compared to other related professionals, they earn between 95 per cent and 128 per cent less over the same time period (MINEDUC, 2014). On the other hand, more regulation is needed to prevent teachers who receive better pre-service training from systematically working with children from more affluent backgrounds, as is the case nowadays (Ortúzar et al., 2009).

**Final considerations**

Improving both pre- and in-service teacher training for early literacy is an urgent challenge, not only for the countries examined here, but also for the entire Latin American region. According to Fillmore and Snow (2002), teacher preparation poses a great challenge because prospective teachers must know how oral and written language is organized at different unit levels (graphemic, morphological, lexical, syntactic, textual, pragmatic and discourse levels) and used in everyday and academic contexts. Furthermore, teachers must be prepared to foster opportunities for early literacy learning as communicators capable of conveying language and literacy knowledge in their teaching and monitoring practices, thus effectively supporting language and literacy development across educational levels. More research about the effect of teaching practices on literacy learning in children, as well as the exchange of ideas and results in the region, will be necessary to inform the changes that should be made to teacher training, with a special focus on the challenges unique to the Spanish language, as we have suggested in this chapter.

In the realm of pre-service training, one challenge is that the governments in both Costa Rica and Chile have limited power to influence the curricula used by autonomous universities. Costa Rica and Chile should share their experiences with teacher certification systems and the implementation of standards for teacher preparation.

An expectation of this in-depth review of early literacy education in Chile and Costa Rica was to contribute to other countries in the region that are in the process of making crucial decisions in the early literacy domain. In a region of limited resources, the shared Spanish language might be an advantage when designing teacher resources, measurement instruments or curricular documents. For example, the Costa Rican set of resources to support teachers to document and assess child learning might be a good starting point that could be further adapted to cultural particularities.
Additionally, the fine-grained analysis of the learning goals of the Chilean curriculum presented here might serve as a useful guideline in analysing whether learning goals truly reflect the emphases of each country’s approach to teaching early literacy.

For Latin American countries, it will be crucial to advance from coverage to education quality, especially in early literacy provision. Coherence among the declared, enacted and assessed curricula, teacher preparation for literacy and language, and effective evidence-based strategies and resources will contribute to improving opportunities to learn for all children in the region.

Notes
2 The h has no corresponding phoneme, and x can be pronounced not only as different phonemes (/s/ ‘xilófono’, /j/ ‘México’), but also as a sequence of phonemes (/ks/ ‘examen’).
3 C = consonant, V = vowel.
4 In Spanish: Política nacional de lectura y escritura.
5 If the LG was broadly classified into the meaning-construction category, the LG was in turn coded into one of the following options: oral production, strategies for understanding, pragmatic or social communication knowledge, vocabulary, print knowledge, oral comprehension, genre knowledge, written production, exposure to literacy and reading understanding. Instead, if the LG was classified into the code-based skills category, it could in turn be coded into: phonological awareness, fluency, fine motor skills, knowledge of sentence structure, spelling, decoding words and alphabetic knowledge.
6 The commitment was unaffected by the 2014 change in administration. Although this should be the norm, since educational policies are state policies, this is often not the case in Latin American nations.
7 A considerable portion of elementary school teachers and practically all preschool teachers hold teaching diplomas from public or private universities (bachelor, licentiate and, at the preschool level, even master’s degrees).
8 Initial teacher training varies widely in breadth and depth depending on the quality of the university programme attended. At present, there are three public universities and over 20 private institutions that offer teaching programmes.

References
Lessons from Costa Rica and Chile


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