Research indicates that a robust vocabulary and conceptual knowledge base are essential for adequate reading comprehension and school success. Unfortunately, not all children acquire this knowledge in equal measure, resulting in large and early gaps between children. These gaps are largely attributable to experiences related to family socioeconomic background. It is promising that myriad intervention studies have suggested that these gaps can be narrowed with high-quality instruction. However, despite this knowledge, there is little evidence that this issue is being treated with urgency in some types of early childhood settings. Studies of classroom instruction in Head Start preschools and public school kindergartens indicate that vocabulary instruction is either completely absent or treated in a haphazard manner. What is less well understood is the presence and quality of vocabulary instruction in other early childhood settings, including non-Head Start center-based preschools and home-based preschools. It is important to investigate the state of vocabulary instruction in these settings, as a large proportion of children from low-income backgrounds are served in these settings. At the same time, it is also important to determine what professional development and curriculum-based efforts may be necessary to create early childhood settings that provide opportunities for all children to begin formal schooling with the vocabulary and conceptual knowledge necessary for school success.

This research program is in the early stages. At present, research has been funded to investigate the vocabulary support provided to non-Head Start preschools via a promising preschool intervention called Jumpstart (2011-Present totaling $20,000) and analyzing how that vocabulary support influences children’s vocabulary acquisition. This research has included the development of a classroom observation protocol that is a valid and reliable way to capture vocabulary instruction. Next steps are to use this observation protocol in a larger observation study of non-Head Start preschools and home-based preschools to begin to determine the state of vocabulary instruction in these widely-used early childhood settings.

Biographical Sketch
Dr. Julie Dwyer is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education at Boston University’s School of Education. She has presented her work at national and international reading and educational research conferences on vocabulary development and instruction in early childhood settings. She has published in The Reading Teacher, Early Childhood Research Quarterly, Journal of Literacy Research, and Early Childhood Education Journal. In addition, she is an appointed member of the editorial board for Reading Research Quarterly and serves as also a reviewer for Elementary School Journal, Journal of Literacy Research, and Early Childhood Research Quarterly. Publications related to her work can be solicited directly from Dr. Dwyer at dwyerj@bu.edu.