THE Y-READ RIGHT FROM THE START PROJECT

YEAR 2 EVALUATION

(2012-2013)

Report submitted to:

The YMCA Metropolitan Atlanta

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Research and Evaluation Team
Executive Summary

Responding to research evidence on the importance of high-quality early language and literacy instruction and on strategies to support teachers in delivering such instruction, the YMCA of Metro Atlanta (hereafter referred to as the Y) partnered with the Rollins Center for Language & Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School (hereafter referred to as the Rollins Center) to bring Read Right from the Start to several of its sites. Read Right is a research-based professional development initiative focused on strengthening and enriching the language and literacy development of young children by providing intensive training sessions, seminars, coaching, and mentoring to early childhood education teachers and teacher assistants. Beginning in 2011, Read Right was introduced into more than 80 preschool (3 year olds) and pre-K (4 year olds) classrooms in the metropolitan Atlanta area. By its completion, this partnership will have served more than 160 lead and assistant classroom teachers and 1500 3-5 year old children.

The following report details findings from the second year of Read Right’s expansion into Y preschool and pre-k classrooms. Children and teachers were recruited from the following sites to participate in the evaluation: Andrew & Walter Young Family YMCA, Arthur M. Blank Family Youth YMCA, Chattahoochee YMCA/Head Start Academy, Dean Rusk YMCA Head Start Academy, YMCA Academies of South DeKalb at Lithonia and at Snapfinger, and Paulding Head Start YMCA. Together, these sites represent the diversity of programming, size, location, and child and family demographics across the Y.

Researchers from Georgia State University evaluated classroom quality, instructional practice, and student performance independently during the 2013-2014 academic school year. As in Year 1, the purpose of the Year 2 evaluation was to examine teachers’ instructional practices in the classroom and children’s early language and literacy skills at the beginning and end of the preschool and pre-K year. Outcomes were examined separately for children who began the year demonstrating oral vocabulary knowledge that was below age-level expectations. Finally, the Year 2 evaluation also explored outcomes for teachers and children who participated in the project for two years.

Student Outcomes

Overall, both preschool (3 year olds) and pre-K (4 year olds) children demonstrated growth in early language and literacy performance during the school year. As expected, pre-k children demonstrated stronger skills than preschoolers, reflecting age-appropriate developmental and instructional differences. Positive results were found for children in both age groups.
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Among preschoolers, at the end of the school year:
- 78% were performing at or above average in vocabulary
- 86% were performing at or above average in print and alphabet knowledge
- nearly 70% were performing at or above average in oral language and reading readiness, compared to only 54% and 38% at the beginning of the year, respectively

Among pre-kindergarteners, at the end of the school year:
- 82% were performing at or above average in vocabulary
- 95% were performing at or above average in print and alphabet knowledge
- over 70% were performing at or above average in oral language, phonological awareness, and reading readiness, compared to only 61%, 73%, and 52% at the beginning of the year, respectively.

As in Year 1, children who began the year with stronger vocabulary skills usually achieved average early language and literacy scores at the end of the year. However, very few children began the year with below average oral vocabulary skills: only 14 children in preschool classrooms met this criteria and 18 in pre-K classrooms. Following recommendations from Year 1, Read Right increased its emphasis on supporting these students. At the end of the year, a noticeable number were performing within the average range in two skill areas: vocabulary and reading readiness. Specifically, among children who were struggling at the beginning of the school year:
- 33% of preschoolers and 40% of pre-kindergartners were performing in the average range, in oral vocabulary, compared to 0% at the beginning of the year.
- 64% of pre-kindergartners demonstrated average reading readiness, compared to only 6% at the beginning of the year.

Finally, pre-kindergartners who spent two years in Read Right classrooms demonstrated steady growth and solidly average performance in oral language skills, print and alphabet knowledge, and reading readiness. On average, these students achieved higher scores on early language and literacy measures at the end of the school year than their peers who attended Read Right classrooms for only one year. They also demonstrated greater growth in oral language skills during the year. Specifically, among children who attended Read Right classrooms for two years, at the end of the school year:
- 80% were performing in the average range in general oral language ability
- 81% were performing in the average range in phonological awareness
- 97% were performing in the average range in reading readiness
- 99% were performing in the average range in print and alphabet knowledge.
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Classroom Quality and Instructional Practice

Overall, preschool and pre-kindergarten teachers showed growth in their early literacy and language practices over second year of the project. Classroom observations indicated that both preschool and prekindergarten teachers improved the quality of their instructional practices. As in Year 1, increases were greater for pre-kindergarten teachers than for preschool teachers.

Observations of how well teachers’ implemented Read Right strategies revealed that pre-kindergarten teachers increased their fidelity to TALK principles (i.e., how much and the quality of they language they use to engage children throughout the day) and the quality of their book reading (i.e., interactive repeated story reads). An examination of individual fidelity items reveals that teachers were mostly successful when “tuning in” to children’s utterances, with nearly 85% of teachers including four or five back and forth exchanges in their conversations with children by the end of the year. Importantly, this was an instructional practice that many teachers had difficulty implementing effectively and consistently during the previous year.

Deeper examination of the data reveals that teachers who had received one versus two years of Read Right professional development differed in their general uptake of the intervention. Although many first year teachers were able to increase the quality of their language and literacy instruction, these increases were smaller than for teachers who were implementing for the second year. These differences were most notable for both preschool and pre-kindergarten teachers’ instructional interactions with children and the quality of language and book reading interactions.

A closer examination of teachers who had participated in the project for two full years also revealed a regression in the quality of teachers’ language and literacy practices during the summer months. That is, while these teachers demonstrated considerable increases during Year 1, they lost ground over the summer and began the school year slightly lower than when they ended it the previous year. Encouragingly, these teachers quickly regained these skills and more during Year 2. They generally increased their skills more during Year 2 and at a faster rate than they had during Year 1. In fact, at the end of the second year, the quality of these teachers’ practices increased substantially, especially among preschool teachers (who demonstrated the lowest level of quality during Year 1).

Finally, results from teachers’ language modeling interactions with children during Year 2 suggest that teachers were able to increase their instructional quality. At the beginning of
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the school year, only 34% of teachers were providing consistent quality language stimulation to children. In contrast, at the end of the school year, 56% of teachers were rated as providing quality language instruction, a 22% increase.

Recommendations

In sum, the second year of the Rollins Read Right-Y Project was very positive. The findings are similar to those observed in Year 1 of the Rollins Read Right-Y project, and (in the absence of a control or comparison group) suggest an increasingly impactful effect of Read Right on student and teacher outcomes. The results lend themselves to the following recommendations and considerations:

1. Overall, the means suggest that most children were performing in the average range during the school year. If these levels of performance can be maintained, then focus should turn to accelerating growth in student performance on those skills that did not change significantly during the school year. Results suggest that possible areas of focus include vocabulary among preschoolers and vocabulary and phonological awareness among pre-K children.

2. The Year 1 evaluation revealed that preschool and pre-K teachers needed additional support to improve the quality of their instruction and interactions with children. Observations of increasing fidelity to the implementation of Read Right strategies and overall classroom and instructional quality among teachers who participated in Read Right for two years likely reflects continued support for these teachers during Year 2. Although the data suggest that there’s more to do, particularly among preschool teachers, teachers are on a positive trajectory. Their growth should be celebrated and practices that support them should continue in Year 3.

3. The Year 1 evaluation also revealed a core group of students who begin the year struggling with oral language skills. Those children did not make significant gains over the school year. Responding to these findings, focus on supporting this group of children increased, and it very likely contributed to the positive changes that were observed in specific early language and literacy skills. Read Right and Y facilitators, coaches, and teachers should be commended for changing their practices to respond to this need. Moreover, these practices should continue in Year 3, as teachers continue to develop their ability to respond to children’s unique learning needs.
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4. Encouragingly, only few children demonstrated relatively weak oral language skills at the beginning of the school year. However, the results suggest that there is wide variation in early language and literacy skills among preschoolers and pre-kindergartners. Such variability is typical at this age, and should be expected. Steps can be taken to ensure that teachers can identify which children need support with which skills, and modify their instruction accordingly. This kind of differentiated instruction can be achieved through small group and center time instruction, where teachers are already working to improve their intentionality. As teachers become more consistent in the quality of their instructional practice, they will then be able to apply those practices to small groups, where children who are struggling can benefit greatly from instruction designed to address their weaknesses directly.

5. Although positive gains in teachers’ instructional practices in both Years 1 and 2 are encouraging, considerable variability exists in teachers’ implementation of Read Right instructional practices. Teachers should continue to receive intensive and focused professional development and coaching targeting their language and literacy skills in order to increase the quality of their instruction. In addition, a closer examination of what coaches are doing to support teachers in implementing Read Right strategies and which coaching practices are most effective in helping teachers change the quality of their literacy and language instruction is warranted.

6. The “summer slide” teachers experienced between Years 1 and 2 suggests a clear need for a professional development “booster” to occur between implementation years. It’s important to consider that most classrooms were only 9-month classrooms, not year-round. Neither children nor teachers may be participating in educational activities during the summer. Considerable research demonstrates that it is challenging to change teacher’s practices in meaningful and sustainable ways, and the evidence here clearly confirms that research. Teachers need support over the summer in order to ensure that they don’t lose the momentum of positive changes experienced in the first year of the project.

7. Children and teachers who participated in the Year 1 and 2 evaluations should also participate in the Year 3 evaluation. Having up to three years of information on these individuals will allow for more in-depth analysis of the impact of Read Right on classroom quality, instructional practice, and student performance.

8. As the project continues, it will be important to clearly distinguish between the activities and experiences of teachers in the two (or three) professional development
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groups, including documenting the specific components of the Standard + Online Support blended learning approach (e.g., e-Learning modules, Learning Management System software application, Train the Coach, etc.). Remaining faithful to this design is necessary to determine if teachers require Standard Support to implement evidence-based early language and literacy instructional practices consistently. The absence of comparison and control groups limits our ability to infer causal relationships between Read Right, professional development teacher and coach behaviors, and student outcomes.