THE ROLLINS READ RIGHT FROM THE START-Y PROJECT

YEAR 1 EVALUATION (2011-2012)

Executive Summary

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The YMCA Metropolitan Atlanta

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Introduction
Ample empirical evidence indicates not only that school readiness is fundamental for later academic achievement, but also that many children enter school lacking the skills they need to succeed in school. Much of that research has focused on the early language and literacy skills that are associated with and predictive of conventional reading and writing skills. Preschool and pre-K have become critical components of strategies designed to increase school readiness and prevent later reading failure.

As one of only a few states that offer universal pre-K programs, the state of Georgia is poised to take a leadership role in efforts to offer high quality early language and literacy instruction to all children prior to formal school entry in kindergarten. Meanwhile, as one of the largest childcare and early childhood education providers in the metropolitan Atlanta area, the YMCA of Metro Atlanta (hereafter referred to as the Y) is an important partner in efforts to ensure children’s school readiness. The Y is committed to providing high quality early learning programs for all children, and actively sought out opportunities to support its teachers to do so.

Thus, beginning in 2011, the Y partnered with the Rollins Center for Language & Learning at the Atlanta Speech School and the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta to implement Read Right from the Start: Georgia Pre-K Professional Development Project in more than 80 preschool and pre-K classrooms in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Read Right (as it is referred to hereafter) 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 pre-k teachers and teacher assistants. Findings from previous comprehensive program evaluations of Read Right indicate that both children and teachers benefit from participating in the program. In just its first year, this partnership included more than 160 lead and assistant classroom teachers and more than 1500 3-5 year old children.

In order to tackle the challenge of “scaling up” Read Right while also preserving program quality, the Rollins Read Right-Y Project sought to capitalize on innovations in web-based learning opportunities. Therefore, the sites were separated into two groups during Year 1:

- **Group 1: Standard Support:** teachers at these sites received on-site coaching and “live-training” professional development workshops throughout the course of the year. Thus, Read Right as implemented in these sites was similar to its implementation in previous years. These sites included: Arthur M. Blank Family Youth YMCA and YMCA Academies of South DeKalb at Lithonia and at Snapfinger.
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- **Group 2: Standard + Online Support**: teachers at these sites received on-site coaching, “live training” professional development workshops, and “online” web-based support through e-Learning modules throughout the course of the year. These e-Learning modules were developed and delivered by the Rollins Center. This blended learning approach represents a more scalable, cost-effective implementation of Read Right. Teachers at these sites will gradually receive less “live training” and more “online” e-Learning throughout the course of the project. These sites included: Andrew & Walter Young Family YMCA, and Chattahoochee YMCA/Head Start Academy, Dean Rusk YMCA Head Start Academy.

The Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was two-fold. The first objective was to examine classroom quality and 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. Because previous comprehensive information such as this was unavailable for these sites, data gathered during Year 1 served as a baseline. The second objective was to compare classroom quality, instructional practice, and student performance in the Standard Support Group to teachers and children in the Standard + Online Support Group. Because neither random nor systematic (e.g., matching) sampling was used to determine which sites were assigned to the specific groups, it was very important to ascertain whether or not comparisons between these sites were biased and inappropriate.

Challenges to the Year 1 Evaluation

First, unforeseen circumstances prevented the planned delivery of the e-Learning modules during Year 1. Rollins proposed an ambitious schedule for on-line content delivery, but underestimated the time needed to prepare a final product. Nevertheless, the first online course, with four e-learning modules, supplemental readings and videos, and discussion questions, was produced and delivered in the spring of 2012. Rollins facilitators and Y coaches supported the delivery of the online course (i.e., group delivery of the module with follow-up on supplemental readings and discussion questions). For the purposes of this evaluation, because these modules were delivered in the spring at nearly the same time that end-of-year post-testing occurred, the two groups received virtually the same implementation of Read Right during Year 1. It is important to note that all teachers received the same quantity and quality of coaching, as had been delivered in previous years of Read Right (a strategy that was planned for Year 1 of the project). The impact of variation in the amount of live training and e-Learning will be the focus of later evaluations of the project.
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Second, it was important to consider the significant amount of diversity that existed both within and across these sites. The sites were diverse not only in their student body (e.g., socioeconomic status, language ability at the beginning of the school year), but also programmatically (e.g., Head Start/Early Head Start, Georgia Pre-K, Teach for America,) and physically (e.g., geographic location, size of the center). These complexities are a positive and welcome consequence of the current state of affairs in the metropolitan Atlanta area and the state of Georgia. That is, there is much excitement and enthusiasm about providing high quality early learning experiences to as many children as possible and the diversity of the Y is simply an example of those efforts. Nonetheless, the diversity also complicates the examination of which programs result in improved outcomes for what kinds of classrooms, teachers, and children.

Several steps were taken to overcome some of these challenges. For example, a sample of children and classrooms that was representative of all of the participating Y sites was recruited to participate in the evaluation. Care was taken to ensure that classrooms were similar as much as possible; however, when this was not possible, it was considered in the analyses. In addition, multiple measures of critical instructional practices and early language and literacy skills were used to describe outcomes. Finally, specific groups of children were isolated in the analyses to provide a more fine-grained examination of for whom Read Right is most impactful.

In sum, the following report details findings from the first year of Read Right’s expansion into Y preschool and pre-kindergarten classrooms. Researchers from Georgia State University evaluated classroom quality, instructional practice, and student performance independently during the 2011-2012 academic school year.

Student Outcomes

Overall, preschool and pre-K children in both Standard Support and Standard + Online Support classrooms demonstrated improved early language and literacy performance at the end of the school year. Children in both classrooms made similar gains during the year, suggesting no differential effect by the type of support teachers received. This finding is not surprising because, as noted previously, teachers did not receive significantly different kinds of support during year 1. That said, children’s performance did differ in important ways. Specifically:
- on average, performance among children in the Standard Support group was significantly different from children in the Standard + Online Support group at the beginning of the year, with those in the latter group exhibiting weaker early language and literacy skills. Among both preschoolers and pre-K children, this gap
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typically did not change during the year. Thus, comparisons between these two groups may be inappropriate at the student-level during Year 1 and subsequent years of the project (see below regarding comparisons at the classroom level).

- on average, pre-k children demonstrated stronger skills than preschoolers. Importantly, 4-year-old children are expected to perform better than 3-year-old children on these measures. In addition, for many 3-year-olds, this was likely their first year of formal instruction. Their performance may reflect this significant change in their daily lives, as well as age-appropriate developmental differences in their language and literacy abilities.

- children who began the year with stronger vocabulary skills usually achieved average early language and literacy scores at the end of the year. Over the course of the year, these children exhibited the greatest gains in more advanced oral language skills, like expressive vocabulary, oral syntax, and phonological awareness.

- despite significant gains, on average, children in all classrooms who began the year with low oral vocabulary skills did not achieve average early language and literacy scores at the end of the year. Over the course of the year, these children exhibited the greatest gains in foundational skills, like receptive vocabulary and print and alphabet knowledge. Children who are struggling in all classrooms need additional support to close the achievement gap between themselves and children who are performing in the average range.

- in contrast to oral language skills, print concepts and alphabet knowledge were relative strengths among all children in all classrooms. This finding is not surprising, as it is commonly observed in the research literature that print-based skills are more easily improved at this age than oral language skills.

- pre-K children who had strong oral language skills ended the year exhibiting strong early language and literacy skills, with 75% demonstrating at or above average global oral language ability, 70% demonstrating at or above average phonological awareness ability, and 94% demonstrating “readiness” for formal reading instruction. That is, the overwhelming majority of pre-K children were ready for kindergarten. Meanwhile, the majority of preschoolers were on a trajectory towards being ready, with 70% demonstrating at or above average global oral language ability and 88% demonstrating at or above average print and alphabet knowledge.
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Classroom Quality and Instructional Practice
Overall, teachers receiving either Standard Support or Standard + Online Support showed growth in their early literacy and language practices over the school year. No significant differences were evident between teachers as a result the type of professional development they received (e.g., Standard Support vs. Standard + Online Support). Again, this finding was not surprising, given that teachers received similar professional development during Year 1. Rather, classroom observations indicated that:

- both preschool and pre-K teachers were generally providing emotionally sensitive quality of care to children.

- on average, preschool and pre-K teachers in both groups increased the quality of their language interactions with children, as evidenced by the ELLCO-2 and the CLASS observations. Specifically, teachers improved the quality of their book reading behaviors (as evidenced by increases in ELLCO-2 Books and Book Reading scores) and increased the frequency and quality of their emergent literacy and language activities (as evidenced by both their ELLCO Print and Early Writing and CLASS Literacy Focus scores).

- on average, preschool and pre-K in both groups of teachers increased the quality of instruction they offered children, as measured by their CLASS Instructional Support scores.

- although most teachers improved the nature of their talk and conversations with children, they were not doing so consistently. Their scores were still relatively low at the end of the year. However, previous research demonstrates that it takes significant time and effort to improve the quality of language interactions of practicing teachers. Thus, the positive trajectory demonstrated by most teachers is promising.

- all teachers improved their ability to faithfully implement interactive repeated storybook reading activities during large group activities, but were inconsistent in their language-based interactions during free choice activities.
Recommendations
In sum, the first year of the Rollins Read Right-Y Project was positive. The findings are similar to those observed in previous year of Read Right. As Year 2 approaches, the results lend themselves to the following recommendations and considerations:

1. despite gains during the year, most classrooms (particularly preschool classrooms) were still relatively low in language and literacy stimulation throughout the school year. Thus, considerable improvement in teachers’ language and literacy practices is still needed. This finding is not surprising, especially given that previous Read Right implementations and considerable research evidence indicate that teachers need support for more than one year in order to implement high-quality language practices in early childhood environments consistently.

2. additional support should be given to children who are struggling with early language and literacy skills throughout the year. Given that many children within these classrooms are likely experiencing formal instruction for the first time, it is important to examine their performance carefully to distinguish between difficulties due to lack of previous instruction or to genuine learning or language difficulties. Importantly, irrespective of the source of the difficulty, children who are struggling can benefit greatly from instruction designed to address their weaknesses directly.

3. children and teachers who participated in the Year 1 evaluation should also participate in the Year 2 evaluation. Having two 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.

4. 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 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.

5. focus groups with participating teachers and instructional coaches would provide valuable information on their impressions of the professional development. Their voices are key to understanding the conditions under which these activities might result in sustained instructional practice after the project has ended.