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Georgia's Pre-K Professional Development Evaluation



Georgia has been at the forefront of the pre-kindergarten movement since implementing its pre-k program in 1992 and creating the nation's first state-funded

universal pre-k program in 1995. Georgia's Pre-K, administered by Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), aims to provide high-quality preschool experiences to four-year-olds to help prepare them for kindergarten. Past research indicates that participation in state-funded pre-k is linked to higher academic and social skills in children when they enter school (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005), with higher quality programs linked to greater gains (Howes et al., 2008). Thus, the quality of classroom practices and teacher-child interactions is critical to ensuring that pre-k provides maximum benefits to children.

This study evaluated the impact of two professional development models—Making the Most of Classroom Interactions and MyTeachingPartner™—on teacher-child interactions in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms. At the start of each school year of this three-year study (2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14), lead teachers ($n = 486$ over the entire project) were randomly selected to participate and randomly assigned to one of the professional development models or a control group. Because of this rigorous design, we can be confident that any differences between the groups at the end of the study were caused by the professional development activities and that the findings reflect the type of change we would anticipate among Georgia's Pre-K teachers if these models were broadly implemented. Data collection included pre- and posttest classroom observations and teacher questionnaires, as well as coach/instructor questionnaires and administrative information regarding participation in the professional development activities.

Professional Development Models

The two professional development models evaluated in this study are designed to improve teacher-child interactions as measured by the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS)*. The CLASS focuses on three domains of teacher-child interaction: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The supports for both models were delivered by Georgia's Pre-K consultants, as part of their regular job duties.

Making the Most of Classroom Interactions (MMCI).

MMCI is a face-to-face professional development model, in which a group of teachers meets regularly with trained instructors to learn to identify and analyze effective interactions in classrooms and discuss ways to interact intentionally to increase children's learning. Teachers have access to an online library of video clips demonstrating best practice in various aspects of teacher-child interactions, and complete homework assignments that involve watching specific videos and practicing interactions in the classroom. For the current project, the 10 MMCI workshops were delivered over five training days.

MyTeachingPartner™(MTP).

MTP is a one-to-one, remote coaching model that provides specific feedback to teachers about Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support using a standardized coaching cycle format. Additionally, teachers have access to an online library of video clips demonstrating best practice in various aspects of teacher-child interactions.

Primary Evaluation Questions

This evaluation was designed primarily to address two major questions:

1. Were the interventions effective in improving teacher-child interactions in pre-kindergarten classrooms?
2. How were the interventions perceived by Georgia's Pre-K consultants and teachers?

In addition to these major questions, Georgia's Pre-K leaders were interested in examining whether the interventions were more effective in certain circumstances, for certain kinds of teachers, or with certain types of consultants.

Method

- 486 Georgia's Pre-K lead teachers were randomly selected to participate from counties being targeted for support by Georgia's Race to the Top (RT3) K-12 grant.
- Selected teachers were randomly assigned to one of three groups: 175 to MMCI, 151 to MTP, 160 to control.
- CLASS observations and teacher questionnaires were collected in the fall and spring.
- MMCI instructors and MTP coaches also completed questionnaires and participated in semi-structured interviews.

Summary of Evaluation Findings

	MMCI vs. control	MTP vs. control	MMCI vs. MTP
Emotional Support	MMCI > control	MTP > control	No difference
Classroom Organization	No difference	No difference	No difference
Instructional Support	MMCI > control	No difference	No difference
Knowledge of Effective Teacher-Child Interactions	MMCI > control	No difference	MMCI > MTP
Perceived Value of the Professional Development	MMCI > control	MTP > control	No difference
Relationship with the Coach/Instructor	Not applicable	Not applicable	MTP > MMCI

Results

The 10-session MMCI course, which used a cohort model to improve teacher-child interactions, was an effective means of increasing emotional and instructional support in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms. Further, teachers who took part in MMCI had greater knowledge of effective teacher-child interactions after participation than did their peers in the MTP or control groups and thought their professional development was more valuable than did their peers in the control group. Their relationships with their instructors were positive, but somewhat less positive than those reported by teachers participating in MTP. Interviews with MMCI instructors suggest that they had very positive experiences with the model and felt it was a good fit for the state.

Teacher-child interactions among teachers in the one-to-one MTP coaching group also showed some improvement, but less than the MMCI teachers. Emotional Support increased as a result of participation in MTP; Classroom Organization, Instructional Support, and knowledge of effective teacher-child interactions did not. MTP teachers saw their professional development activities as more valuable than control-group teachers, and MTP teachers reported more positive relationships with their coach than did MMCI teachers.

Conclusions

Georgia's Pre-K teachers benefited from and liked both the MMCI and MTP interventions. This study sought to test MMCI and MTP as possible ways to improve teacher-child interactions in real-world conditions, such as delivery of the intervention by program staff and randomly selecting teachers rather than asking for volunteers. When compared to teachers in the control group, MMCI resulted in improvements in two domains; MTP resulted in improvements in one domain. Pre-k teachers rated both interventions more favorably than did teachers in the control group.

MMCI is a feasible intervention for large-scale adoption. MMCI requires fewer staff members and less time to implement than MTP, which makes it more feasible and sustainable for large-scale implementation.

Georgia's Pre-K consultants, who served as MTP coaches and MMCI instructors, also expressed their support of the relative feasibility of MMCI. MTP coaches reported that although they valued the MTP experience, statewide implementation was not achievable and that its costs (in terms of time, money, and effort) were too great for the amount of benefit. MMCI, on the other hand, was generally viewed by instructors as both practicable and beneficial for teachers.

Additional research is needed to understand better the circumstances under which MMCI and MTP are most likely to support meaningful improvements in teacher-child interactions. The findings from this evaluation add to the literature about the MMCI and MTP interventions (e.g., Downer et al., 2009; Hamre et al., 2012) and provide some data about the factors (e.g., teacher education, ratios) that may influence the effectiveness of the interventions. There are many important questions still to answer about these interventions. For instance, is there a minimum, maximum, or ideal number of MTP cycles that yields the greatest change in teacher practice? This study provides important information about the likely attainable dosage within a large-scale implementation, which was less than the dosage received when MTP was implemented by its developers (Pianta et al., 2014). We need additional work, however, to understand the range of supports teachers and coaches need to ensure that the models are implemented in a way that provides maximum benefit.

Advancements in early childhood professional development are still needed. Using these well-defined, evidence-based professional development models, some statistically significant findings emerged. The improvements, however, were small and instructional support in all three groups remained in the low-to-middle range. Thus, additional work is needed, including refinement of existing models and creation of new approaches to professional development, to best support all pre-k teachers in engaging in high-quality interactions with their students.