



Rising Pre-K Summer Transition Program 2016: Summary of Semi-Structured Interviews with Lead and Assistant Teachers

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Georgia is known nationally for its universal pre-kindergarten program, Georgia's Pre-K, which is available to 4-year-old children across the state from all income levels. A recent evaluation of the program indicated that participation in Georgia's Pre-K had significant positive effects on children's language, literacy, math, and general knowledge skills, but additional supports were needed for Georgia's growing population of children from homes where English was not the predominant language (Peisner-Feinberg, Schaaf, Hildebrandt, & Pan, 2015; Peisner-Feinberg, Schaaf, LaForett, Hildebrandt, & Sideris, 2014). Based on that finding, DECAL decided to provide a summer program to support dual language learners (DLLs) as they make the transition to pre-kindergarten, starting in the summer of 2013.

In 2016, this Rising Pre-K Summer Transition Program (RPre-K) operated in 41 classrooms for six weeks in June and July and was offered for free to participating families. Children in the program were from low-income families who primarily spoke Spanish at home. Several components were in place to meet the program's overall goal of preparing children for success in Georgia's Pre-K. First, RPre-K class size was small, with a maximum of 14 children, and each class had both a lead and an assistant teacher, one of whom spoke Spanish. Second, the RPre-K classrooms were required to use a specific curriculum, the dual-language edition of *Opening the World of Learning (OWL)* (Dickinson, et al., 2011), to support language development and pre-kindergarten readiness. Teachers and assistants received a half-day orientation to the OWL curriculum, as well as a half-day introduction to working with DLLs provided by the Rollins Center. Third, all classrooms participated in workshops led by the Alliance Theatre Institute, designed to address early learning literacy and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) standards through arts based instruction. Finally, a half-time transition coach was hired for every class to help families meet transition needs and to offer parent educational activities.

Study Procedures

To better understand the experiences of lead and assistant teachers, interviews were conducted during the RPre-K program. The sample of teachers interviewed was selected at random from all 82 lead and assistant teachers. The sample was stratified into four cells: (1) lead teacher, first summer teaching RPre-K; (2) lead teachers, returning; (3) assistant teacher, first summer teaching RPre-K; (4) assistant teachers, returning. An equal number of teachers was selected in each cell. All but one of the originally selected teachers agreed to participate. The one who declined was replaced by another teacher in the same cell. Thus, the final response rate was 97% (32 out of 33) and the sample was equally divided among the four groups of teachers.

Three members of the research team interviewed the 32 participating teachers. Respondents were given a choice to complete the interview in English or Spanish. Five chose Spanish, and the remainder selected English. Teachers responded to a series of questions about: 1) how well prepared they felt to work with DLLs, 2) challenges and rewards, 3) evaluations of the training they received from the Rollins Center and on the OWL curriculum, 4) goals for the summer and how they determined and worked toward those goals, 5) suggestions for further professional development training, and 6) evaluations of the Alliance Theatre Education program.

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Those done in Spanish were translated into English by the individual who conducted the Spanish interviews. A member of the research team who had not served as an interviewer reviewed the transcribed interviews and summarized the themes.

Preparation

Teachers were first asked to rate how prepared they felt to work with dual language learners, using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicated *not at all prepared* and 5 indicated *very well prepared*. The mean response was 4.12. Seventy-two percent ($n = 23$) of the teachers responded with a 4 or 5, indicating they felt well prepared. Eight others responded with a 3 (*neutral*), while only one indicated she did not feel prepared. With one exception, no lead or assistant teacher who had two or more summers' experience working in RPre-K responded with less than a 4 or 5, while those who indicated they were less prepared had only one summer's experience with RPre-K. All but one of the Spanish-speaking teachers felt well prepared.

Reasons given by those who felt well prepared included: 1) being able to speak Spanish or knowing some Spanish words, 2) having previous experience teaching Georgia's Pre-K and/or RPre-K, 3) having taught Spanish-speaking children before, and 4) having had training or coursework in teaching DLLs. Several credited the training and materials provided. When asked to say more about previous experiences that had prepared them, teachers added diversity training or having worked with Hispanic populations, which helped them become more familiar with their cultures. Some also noted that being mentored by other teachers had helped them. One teacher who felt well prepared said: "Based on personal experiences like with my ESOL¹ endorsement, and for all the six years that I've taught Pre-K, I have had probably ten to twelve Hispanic students or students that speak another language in my classroom....[That] gave me some insights into their culture and their home languages, and gave me a chance to learn a few words in their language so I could speak to them more."

Those who expressed less sense of preparedness said they did not know what to expect (not having had previous experience in RPre-K), could not speak Spanish, or were unsure how to apply DLL teaching strategies, specifically how to incorporate both languages in the classroom. For instance, one teacher said: "Because I'm learning alongside with them, it's brand new to me, and it's brand new to them. I mean I know my home language, but teaching it to somebody else who is learning another language is totally new to me."

¹ ESOL refers to English Speakers of Other Languages

Challenges and Rewards

A question about what aspects of the summer program were most challenging elicited a wide range of responses, but many focused on language barriers: not being able to understand the children when they spoke Spanish, not being able to communicate directives or concepts, and not being able to talk with parents. Also challenging were getting the children used to routines and getting them engaged in the activities. For instance, one teacher said: "Probably just having some of the students come in there that have never been to school, and then you know of course they're Spanish speaking, but they had never been to school. So having them come in and getting them used to actually being in the classroom going through that routine." Other concerns centered on the curriculum and the difficulties of fitting everything in. Some thought the OWL curriculum was too fast paced or advanced for this summer program and age group, making comments such as: "Some aspects of the curriculum are I think a little too vigorous for this age group. Like I would go through the weekly planners, and I'd have to dumb it down a lot. For instance...by week three they want us to do compound words. These students at this age – they're still way too young to understand the concepts of that. They're still trying to understand what the letters are, and like letters form words, and their name is a word."

The teachers also talked about what aspects of the summer program had been most successful or rewarding. Most mentioned how rewarding it was to see the children becoming comfortable with school and learning how to interact and communicate in both languages. They had witnessed the children becoming excited about school, learning a new language, getting used to routines and transitions, and making friends as they overcame their shyness. One said: "It's just really rewarding to see them go from speaking no English at all to we've just been in this what, two or three weeks now, and some of the kids are speaking you know two and three word sentences in English now just based off of a few weeks of the bilingual education." A few also noted that it was rewarding to get the parents to participate and learn more about what to do with their children related to school readiness. An assistant teacher remarked: "I feel that children are moving forward and the other thing I like is that parents are also getting trained so they could know what to do with their children, and for me that's the best. I'm fascinated with the program. They give parents ideas, simple things they did not know they could do and thus they will be more prepared. I'm in love with the program."

Rollins Center Training

The second set of questions addressed the training provided by the Rollins Center on how to work with DLLs. Teachers were asked to rate this training on a scale of 1 to 5 for how well it prepared them for this task (1 = *not at all effective*, and 5 = *very effective*). Of the 29 teachers who received the training, 10 rated it as being effective and 12 as very effective. Five teachers rated it a "3", and two teachers rated it as not at all effective. The mean score was 4.0. The seven teachers who rated it as less effective, with one exception, had only one summer's experience in RPre-K. There was no difference in these responses by lead or assistant teachers or by primary language. Those who rated it highly noted that the presentations of various scenarios, examples of different types of students and how to work with them, and tips about how to integrate both languages in the classroom were especially useful.

Those who viewed the training as less effective noted several aspects that influenced their rating. For some, the half day training did not provide time to elaborate on any details of how to implement the program. Two of the teachers who had not done RPre-K before said the training was not enough and needed to be more basic as it seemed geared toward returning teachers, while two experienced

teachers said it was repetitive for those who had taught before or who had courses related to DLL or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Two wanted more information on how to teach in a DLL classroom and on Hispanic cultures. Two others noted that the Rollins training did not line up well with the OWL curriculum.

When asked to expound on what aspects were most effective, teachers again mentioned the use of examples of different students and how to teach them, strategies for learning to use both Spanish and English effectively, and ideas for how to talk with children and present vocabulary related to the books they read. One teacher noted: "She hit all the notes on what we needed and what we were required to have to teach the program." Less effective aspects included the training not being aligned with the OWL curriculum and the need for more specific information and ways to work and communicate with the children. Suggestions for making the training more effective included providing more details, examples and activities that they could do with the children, having more hands-on activities, connecting it more to the OWL curriculum, and making it a full day. For example, one teacher said: "I feel it was a very short time and was too fast. Maybe there were people who had taken it another year and they already knew or had an idea of what to expect, but for me, I am new here... For me, a longer and wider explanation would have been better because I felt it was very quick, so we just saw one page quickly and then the other page and then the following, and as I say, when you're new at this you want to know more. You want things to be explained better to be able do things right."

OWL Curriculum Training

Teachers were queried with the same set of questions regarding how well the training on the OWL curriculum prepared them for RPre-K, using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *not at all effective*, and 5 = *very effective*). Fifteen of the 29 teachers who received that training rated it as *effective* and six as *very effective*. Five teachers rated it a "3" and three others, all of whom were lead teachers, rated it as *not very effective*. The mean score was 3.8. Those who viewed the training as being effective said their rating was based on the presenter providing a good overview as well as details of the curriculum and resources. Teachers who rated it as not being that effective, and even a few who indicated it was effective, said that the presenter just went over the book, which they could have done themselves. They wanted more information about how to deliver the program and integrate it in the classroom. Several noted that the training was not broken down enough, and provided no details or depth about the curriculum nor ideas for altering it for varying classroom situations. They thought the training time should be extended to allow for hands-on activities and additional information about how to implement the program. One teacher said: "Go more in depth and explore some of the activities and things that were in the OWL curriculum book ...a lot of it feels like it's just rote, like you just say exactly what's in the book, and the kids don't understand it as well as if you had interacted with it before and knew kind of how to work with it."

Aspects of the OWL training that were most and least effective reflected these more general comments. Teachers viewed as most effective the presentation of the book and the different activities that were in the book, as well as the resources available to them. A few mentioned that they liked being shown how to use the CDs and interactive books and the emphasis on promoting both languages. Viewed as less effective were aspects such as there not being enough new information and the training being done at too fast a pace. Many commented on the need for more detail about the curriculum and modeling how to use it. They wanted more of a focus on lesson plans and how to execute them. Several were

concerned that the curriculum was too advanced for the age group. One assistant teacher summed up the main criticisms: “It’s half a day. So you’re still cramming in. As far as coming back to work, and you’re reading through it yourself and looking at it to actually break down, then it’s actually too hard for three- and four-year-olds... They want us to teach compound sentences and things like that in week two, when in week two, half of them still don’t even recognize their own names. So I think it’s moving a little too fast for this age group.”

Suggestions for improving the training to make it more effective built on these evaluations, but also included a critique of the curriculum for being too far above the children’s heads. Training could be improved by giving more examples and strategies, doing more hands-on activities, expanding on what is in the book, and going into more depth. Several teachers said they would like the presenter to walk them through a lesson in more detail—show what a day would look like in the OWL curriculum. Several mentioned wanting the curriculum in front of them and having written materials they could take with them—just presenting information on the screen was not sufficient. A few also noted that having a smaller class size or breaking the training into groups based on levels of teaching experience would have been beneficial.

Goals for Children

The next set of questions shifted to the goals teachers had for their children in the summer program. Four goals were predominant: First, teachers wanted to get the children comfortable with coming to school. They wanted them to feel excited, happy, confident, and safe. The second goal focused on getting the children to learn the basics—letters and numbers. The third main goal was helping the children learn the routines and transitions. The fourth goal centered on enhancing their communication skills in both languages. A few teachers added goals of building the children’s social and emotional skills and fostering independence. Teachers determined these goals through their previous experience in the classroom and working with children, and by observing these current children in the classroom and what they needed.

Asked how they worked toward these goals, teachers responded with specific information about the activities they promoted: initiating hands-on activities that elicit communication, games and stories that engage the children, working on communication skills, getting the children to use words. They also worked with the children to help them overcome shyness and to make friends. One lead teacher provided an example: “One particular little girl, she was very scared coming. She did not want to come here, and basically I kind of pulled her out to the side, and we sit down, and we talk. ‘What is it that you don’t like about coming to school?’ And she’ll tell me, and then we work through that. She wants to make friends. So I make sure that when we go outside, we get a little group of kids together, and we’ll play together, and then eventually like kind of steer myself out of it, and let her see how she does with the other students.”

Professional Development Needed to Meet Goals

Teachers were asked their views about what kinds of professional development activities would help them meet these goals. Responses included a wide range of specific ideas, but can be subsumed under a few general themes. One primary need for many was more detailed training and materials on strategies and activities to use on a daily basis with dual language learners. Another need was to learn more about how to use and incorporate both languages—more instruction on when to use English and when to use

Spanish. Other requests were for more training about different Hispanic cultural groups, which they felt would promote more understanding about Latino children's home culture and how that may influence what they do in the classroom. A few teachers wanted more training in working with children with special needs, or behavioral problems, or separation anxiety. A few also mentioned that they would like to learn from and observe other teachers.

Alliance Theatre Education Program

The interview ended by asking teachers to evaluate their experience with the Alliance Theatre Education Program. Thirteen of the respondents had not yet had experience with the program, but the other nineteen had highly favorable impressions. They talked about the ability of the program to get the children excited about reading books, and how much the children enjoyed the stories, music, props, puppetry, and artwork. Teachers noted how engaging in this program led to the children demonstrating creativity, imagination, and language expression, carrying over what they had experienced in the program to regular classroom play. All nineteen said they would recommend it to other pre-K teachers. In their own words: "It has all the elements or tools to encourage the child for learning"; "They get excited about reading books. It makes a book come to life and seem interesting with the drama and the music and the activities they do. So whatever book they're reading they really grasp onto it, and it makes them want to read more books;" "Children loved it, [the presenter] brought some arts and crafts to do, it was a good surprise because everyone had something in their hand...they sang, dramatized, and used finger play-- it was very interactive and children used their creativity and imagination." Teachers had few suggestions for ways to improve the program. Although two teachers thought the crafts might be too advanced for the children, the main message was that they wanted the presenters to come more often and stay longer.

Conclusions

Overall, both lead and assistant teachers recounted positive experiences with RPre-K. They witnessed the success of the program through children becoming more comfortable with school routines, overcoming their shyness and dependence, and learning to communicate in two languages. They evaluated many aspects of the Rollins training as helpful, and the OWL curriculum as comprehensive and detailed. While mostly positive, the teachers also pointed out areas for improvement, primarily: 1) the Rollins training and the OWL curriculum could be better aligned and integrated; 2) the OWL curriculum could be simplified for the age and skill level of the students; and 3) both training sessions could be improved by including more examples and hands-on experiences of how to implement broader instructional strategies for DLLs and OWL lessons in the classroom. In future years, DECAL might consider incorporating additional professional development in broad essential knowledge and teaching strategies for working with DLLs (U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, 2016), along with specific professional development that gives explicit guidance, training, and coaching support for teachers implementing DLL teaching strategies and the OWL curriculum (e.g., LaForett, Peisner-Feinberg, & Buysse, 2013).

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