

Executive Summary

Children's Growth and Classroom Experiences in Georgia's Pre-K Program

Findings from the
2011–2012 Evaluation Study



Study Overview

Georgia has one of the few state-funded universal pre-kindergarten programs in the United States, with the aim of providing pre-k services to all 4-year-olds whose families want their children to participate in the program, regardless of family income level. In the 2011–2012 school year, Georgia's Pre-K Program served a total of over 94,000 different children throughout the year in a variety of settings across the state, including local school systems, private settings, and blended Head Start/Georgia's Pre-K classrooms.

The 2011–2012 evaluation study included observations of classroom quality in a random sample of 100 Georgia's Pre-K classrooms and assessments of the language, literacy, math, general knowledge, and behavioral skills of a sample of 509 children attending these classrooms over the pre-k program year. The primary evaluation questions included:

- What are the outcomes for children attending Georgia's Pre-K Program?
- What factors predict better outcomes for children?
- What is the quality of Georgia's Pre-K classrooms?

Key Findings

Children's Outcomes

Children exhibited significant growth during their pre-k year across all domains of learning, including language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and behavioral skills. The sample of 509 children made positive gains from the beginning to the end of the pre-k program year on all of the assessment measures, including the areas of language and literacy (letter knowledge, letter-word identification, vocabulary, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness), math (math problem solving, counting), general knowledge (basic self-knowledge), and behavioral skills (social skills, problem behaviors). Children's growth in many areas indicated that they progressed at a greater rate during the time they participated in Georgia's Pre-K Program than would be expected for normal developmental growth.

Children who were Spanish-speaking dual language learners showed growth in skills in both English and Spanish, although their growth tended to be greater in English. For the English measures, similar to the full sample, they exhibited significant growth on all measures. For the Spanish measures, they exhibited growth in some areas of language and literacy skills (phonological awareness, phonemic awareness) and in math (math problem-solving, counting), with no change or decreases in the remaining areas.

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Factors Predicting Better Outcomes

Factors which predicted greater growth in skills included individual level of English proficiency, having a higher proportion of non-English-speaking children in the classroom, and attending a pre-k program in a local school system.

The most consistent predictor was the level of English proficiency, with children at lower levels of proficiency making greater gains in most language and literacy, math, and general knowledge skills. The one exception was phonological awareness skills, a higher-order set of skills, which showed the opposite pattern with less proficient children making less progress.

Classroom Quality

The global quality of classroom practices was in the medium quality range, as measured by the ECERS-R. The mean total score across the sample of 100 classrooms was 3.6, which represents the medium quality range. Individual classroom scores ranged from low to high quality, although the majority (85%) scored in the medium quality range.

In the area of teacher-child interactions, classroom practices were stronger in emotional support and classroom organization than instructional support, as measured by the CLASS. The average score was in the middle to high quality range on Emotional Support (5.5), in the upper end of the middle range on Classroom Organization (5.2), and in the low to middle range on Instructional Support (2.8).

In general, program, teacher, and classroom factors that were examined did not predict differences in the quality of classroom practices. The predictors that were examined included the type of program (local school system vs. private), lead teacher certification (Georgia Professional Standards Commission certified vs. not certified), lead teacher years of experience teaching pre-k, and percentage of non-English-speaking children in the classroom. One factor was a significant predictor for one measure, indicating that teachers who had greater experience teaching pre-k had classrooms with higher global quality.

Conclusions

Based on this random sample of classrooms from the 2011–2012 Georgia's Pre-K Program, children made significant gains across all domains of learning during their pre-k year, with even greater than expected progress for many areas. Children who were Spanish-speaking dual language learners showed growth in skills in both English and Spanish, even though the primary language of instruction in these classrooms was most likely English. Further, children with different characteristics (boys and girls, different family income levels) generally showed similar gains during the pre-k year. It is worth further exploration to determine what factors of local school system programs that are associated with greater gains for children may be different from private programs, both in terms of the resources available and the populations served, in considering future directions for quality improvement. The quality of classroom practices tended to be in the medium range, below the high quality level. Compared to a study¹ involving a 2008–2009 sample of Georgia's Pre-K classrooms, the 2011–2012 sample showed gains in Instructional Support consistent with the emphasis of quality improvement efforts, although there were slight decreases in other areas. Recommendations related to improving quality and further enhancing children's acquisition of skills pertain to reduction of class size and the addition of bilingual supports during children's classroom experiences. In sum, these findings suggest that as a universal program, Georgia's Pre-K Program can offer a beneficial experience for all children.

¹ Maxwell, K. L., Early, D. M., Bryant, D., Kraus, S., Hume, K., & Crawford, G. (2009). *Georgia study of early care and education: Findings from Georgia's Pre-K Program*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

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The Executive Summary and full report of this study are available at <http://fpg.unc.edu/projects/georgia-pre-kindergarten-evaluation> or at <http://www.decal.ga.gov>