

Spotlight on Implementation: Explicit Instructional Programs and Community Support

Portales a Aprender Leer

What problems has Portales solved?

- How to teach phonological awareness to preschoolers who speak little or no English
- How to integrate explicit skill instruction within a child-centered model
- How to coordinate supplemental instruction for preschoolers who need extra practice with phonological awareness

The Portales a Aprender Leer project is funded through an Early Reading First grant serving an ELL population of children from migrant Hispanic families employed by the meatpacking industry. The program is a partnership between the University of Nebraska, Lincoln and South Sioux Community Schools. Currently, the population is 100% ELL. However, next year, this percentage will drop because the state wants the program to broaden from a focus on migrant children and include children with disabilities.

The director reports that Nebraska has had one of the highest proportional increases of migrants in the country. The growth has been a little over 400% in the last five years. “South Sioux City, their kindergarten population, ten years ago was 100% Caucasian essentially and now it’s probably closer to 60, 70% Hispanic. [The program is] very fortunate, that our attrition rate. . .is somewhere around 80% [at the end of the year]. . . English reading acquisition has gone very well [in our program] and the [kindergarten] teachers have really had to change how they’ve approached [teaching] because prior to the Early Reading First project, these kids would come in essentially with no English.”

The program supports two sites, with four classrooms, four lead teachers, and approximately 100 students. One site is located at the Siouxland Family Community Center, which is a conglomerate of social agencies located on-site at the meatpacking plant that provides a variety of services to the migrant population. The public elementary school site is affiliated with programs such as a Title VII Bilingual Education Preschool; State Funded Early Childhood Preschool; District Special Education Preschool, and Migrant Education Even Start.

Ongoing support received from the school district and the community has contributed to the program’s success and expansion. The school district has provided professional development activities to the preschool staff. Teachers received on-site training in dialogic reading and participated in the district’s week-long summer institute on early literacy practices.

The director reports that the school district has also provided support through its “expansions and systematic building of classroom space for preschools [because the population has grown].” The school district values Portales as an instructional model and the school principal “would actually like to move one additional classroom into another elementary school because he believes it has a real positive impact on his kindergarten teachers, too. . . They’re able to observe and see some of the techniques we’re using. . . [and it helps with] easing transition, too.”

Community support for the programs comes from various sources, including the Siouxland Family Community Center and the local meatpacking industry. “We get tremendous support from the meatpacking industry [and] the Head Start organization. We’ve had to really be in partnership with them because they also serve that population so they’ve been very supportive of our efforts and a tremendous support. Other positive support is the numerous write-ups in the local press. . .about how well kids are doing and the outcomes and what the school district is doing trying to prepare kids, this population [children from migrant families], to be successful in school.”

The strength of this innovative program is its explicit instructional and supplemental programs that enable teachers to provide formal instruction and also extend into a more incidental type instructional approach. The programs are structured and give teachers a clear picture of implementation. Teaching along a developmental continuum of phonological awareness skills is the heart of this program. Teachers learn to run the language programs and, as a part of learning these programs, become skilled at teaching phonological awareness skills, such as phoneme blending and segmentation, when they’re using more child-centered kinds of instructional approaches. As a result, instruction is successfully integrated into daily curriculum activities.

Portales uses a clear, explicit “model > lead > test” instructional sequence. The teacher models it, then the teacher and children do it together, followed by children practicing independently. Error correction is immediate. Supplemental programs are added to build language and pre-reading skills to improve the effectiveness of the core curriculum.

An important aspect of this program is its clear scope and sequence with lessons that are based on a mastery-oriented approach — teachers do not move forward unless the students have mastered the skills. Student grouping and regrouping is based on changing skill levels, with lower-performing children receiving more instructional opportunities in smaller groups that can lead to one-to-one instruction.

On-site coaching with continual observation to ensure practices are implemented with a high degree of fidelity has been key to the program’s effectiveness. Teachers have one coach that is shared and in the classroom all the time, and there is an emphasis, both externally and internally, on coaching and providing teachers enough scaffolding to provide scaffolded student learning. The program’s professional development, coaching, and teacher study teams focus on creating a professional learning community. As the director explains, “There are time constraints in bringing people on-site and doing training so there’s a professional learning community that allows us to select [what we call] smart goals. You know, what are we working on? What are some areas that we need to strengthen? And then the teachers along with the coach and also some, depending on the needs, other professionals within the school district that will do an internal study of it and work on that professionally.”

Portales’ innovative instructional features and strong community support have resulted in positive student outcomes. The program’s two-year, pre-post evaluation reported that 88% of Portales children demonstrated significant gains on the PPVT and statistically significant progress from pre- to post-test on PPVT-III, PALS upper case, PALS lower case, PALS letter sounds, PALS concept of word, PA – IGDI Rhyme, PA – IGDI Alliteration, and IGDI Picture naming. The director added that the children are leaving the program with such high skills that the kindergarten teachers are being challenged.

(Quotes from Portales a Aprender Leer Project Interview)