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Introduction to the Special Issue: Challenges and Solutions to Implementing Effective Reading Intervention in Schools

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Abstract

This special issue focuses on challenges and solutions to implementing effective reading intervention in schools in the United States. Researchers often develop interventions that prove effective in efficacy studies but then show no impact when implemented at scale in public school settings. The authors of the intervention studies presented here describe a number of common implementation problems stemming from research in primary grades, middle grades, and high schools. Solutions to these implementation problems include establishing researcher–practitioner partnerships to address the systems-level challenges, suggestions for how to obtain buy-in from teachers, and recommendations for reforming preservice and in-service teacher education. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

In spite of federal funding efforts to improve reading from initiatives such as Reading First, Striving Readers, and Response-to-Intervention (also called Multitiered Systems of Support), impacts have been negligible (Boulay, Goodson, Frye, Blocklin, & Price, 2015; Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008) or even negative (Balu et al., 2015). Only about one-third of fourth- and eighth-grade readers were at or above the proficient level on the 2015 National Assessment of Education Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Therefore, implementing effective reading interventions is crucially important in public schools to address these low levels of proficiency.

Researchers often develop interventions that prove effective in efficacy studies but then show no impact when implemented at scale in public-school settings. Familiar problems with implementation are time lost to test preparation, testing, and student misbehavior; several new programs/curricula happening at the same time; inadequate fidelity to treatment protocols; difficulty scheduling time for treatment of sufficient duration and intensity to meet the needs of at-risk students; lack of alignment across tiers of instruction; and poor preservice and in-service training of teachers. Thus, the central problem addressed in this special issue is how to overcome the many systems-level challenges in K–12 public education in order to implement effective reading interventions in elementary, middle, and high schools for the vast numbers of students reading below grade level.

Each Article’s Contribution to This Central Focus

The LaRusso, Donovan, and Snow article, “Implementation Challenges for Tier One and Tier Two School-Based Programs for Early Adolescents,” provides data documenting partial implementation of a classroom-based program and an intervention program in fourth through eighth grades in urban schools: the Tier 1 Word Generation program to improve academic literacy in content-area classrooms, and the Tier 2 STARI (Strategic Adolescent Research Initiative) intervention that aims to improve fluency, word study, and comprehension in below-level students. The article uses teacher reports and rankings of obstacles to implementation, as well as teacher interviews, to analyze why many teachers did not complete the programs. Strikingly, the Word Generation teachers mostly mentioned organizational issues such as constraints on and disruptions to instructional time, whereas the STARI teachers mentioned obstacles located inside the classroom, such as disruptive student behavior.

The Wanzek and Vaughn article, “Implementation of a Text-Based Content Intervention in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms,” examines the implementation of a text-based content intervention, Promoting Acceleration of Comprehension and Content Through Text (PACT), in middle and high school social studies classes. Teachers demonstrated high

implementation fidelity and quality for the instructional components of building background knowledge and teaching key content vocabulary, but lower fidelity and quality of implementation for the instructional components of critical reading and knowledge application.

The Foorman, Dombek, and Smith article describes “Seven Elements Important to Successful Implementation of Early Literacy Intervention.” The elements are the importance of researcher–practitioner partnerships, determining the need for intervention, selecting assessments and using data, evaluating curricula and instructional materials, scheduling time, training and monitoring interventionists for fidelity, locating space, and maintaining open communications. Examples are provided from research and from the authors’ randomized trial of early literacy interventions with at-risk students in grades K–2 in 55 schools across Florida.

Michael Coyne and colleagues’ article, “Delving Into the Details: Implementing Multitiered K–3 Reading Supports in High-Priority Schools,” describes a reading initiative in kindergarten through grade 3 where school teams served high percentages of students at risk for reading difficulties in low-performing schools. The authors claim that in order for classroom and intervention tiers of support to work at a school-wide level, practitioners must move beyond surface-level implementation and delve into the details of building systems, structures, and routines.

The importance of preparing preservice and in-service teachers to deliver intensive reading intervention to students in special education is the topic of the final article by Lemons, Al Otaiba, Conway, and De La Cruz. They highlight what special educators need to know to implement data-based individualization. Additionally, they provide recommendations for improving professional development using findings from federally funded projects.

Commentaries on these five articles are provided by Rekha Balu and Fred Doolittle, Vibeke Grøver, and Russell Gersten. The Balu and Doolittle commentary, “Learning from Variations in Fidelity of Implementation,” is particularly relevant to studies such as those of Word Generation and STARI described in the LaRusso et al. article, who report implementation fidelity to be highly variable. Balu and Doolittle suggest studying whether the variability is within or across schools so as to learn whether implementation problems are issues of teacher training or issues of school or district policy. Gersten’s commentary, “The Tyranny of Time and the Reality Principle,” identifies the overarching theme of the articles as how researchers learn to adjust their view of ideal implementation to the reality of school life. Grøver’s commentary, “Implementing Interventions: Building a Shared Understanding of Why,” focuses on three challenges to implementing reading interventions: (a) identifying institutional barriers to change, (b) identifying intervention components that are not commonly part of the teachers’ repertoires and need attention and support, and (c) building

researcher–practitioner partnerships and a shared understanding of why an intervention would improve reading instruction.

Conclusion

These articles illustrate the challenges of implementing effective reading interventions in school settings. Solutions are more readily found in the primary grades because teachers are accustomed to teaching reading to a diverse classroom of students and have greater flexibility in scheduling intervention for at-risk students. But, no matter what the grade level of the intervention, all authors agree that high-quality implementation requires building researcher–practitioner partnerships that value the importance of effective reading intervention and share a willingness to build the necessary infrastructure. This infrastructure includes (a) professional development that fosters deep knowledge of and accountability for instructional routines and practices that are not typically part of teachers' repertoires, and (b) removal of such institutional barriers to change as rigid scheduling and disruptions of instructional time due to mandated initiatives and test preparation.

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