Integrating Evidence-Based Reading into Middle-School Instruction: Exploring Sustainability

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Abstract

Reading comprehension models implemented in content classrooms boost adolescent reading achievement. Yet, few researchers examine how such models are incorporated into teachers’ daily instruction. We used extended observations and interviews to examine the integration of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), an evidence-based reading comprehension model, into the instructional practices of fifteen middle school content teachers. High integration teachers embedded CSR lessons into their curriculum and reinforced CSR strategy use throughout the week. These teachers felt supported in their efforts by colleagues and school administrators. There is much to be learned from the ways in which teachers engage in the art of integrating new methods into their teaching.

Methods

CSR: The Larger Study

In our five-year study, researchers worked with an urban school district to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of CSR across 18 middle schools (Boardman et al., 2016). University researchers supported the school district to provide CSR support in the second year of implementation. In year five we examined sustainability after university support was removed and all support for CSR was provided by the school district.

Setting/Participants

Participants included 15 CSR teachers: one social studies, one science and one language arts teacher from five case-study schools.

Data Collection/Analysis

Participants were observed daily for a week by university researchers. Two researchers used the Implementation Validity Checklist- Revised (IVC-R), an observation protocol for recording teacher/student behaviors adhering to the CSR model (Buckley et al., 2017), to determine fidelity to CSR. Participants were interviewed following their observations. We used a qualitative, concurrent triangulation approach to confirm or disconfirm findings from our data sources.

Literature Review

Sustaining evidence-based practices over time is challenging, yet research indicates certain key features: (a) appropriateness of the practice for the context, (b) continued ongoing support (i.e., training, coaching), and (c) adapting practices for the context (Klinger, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). While fidelity to an evidence-based practice may support sustainability, other research suggests that sustainability is linked to contextual factors. Even when found effective in randomized efficacy studies, evidence-based practices are often sustained in some settings but not others (Buckley et al., 2017). We suggest that models such as CSR, which may be interpreted as an add-on to regular instruction, may be particularly vulnerable to issues of sustainability. A focus on fidelity to measure quality both initially and after research support has ended may end a key contextual factor - how teachers integrate that practice into their regular teaching routine.

Findings

In order to better understand sustainability of evidence-based practices that foster academic literacy, we need to know more about how these practices are integrated into teachers’ instructional routines.

Six participants demonstrated high integration of CSR, consistently using more CSR components and strategies on both CSR and non-CSR days and using small group collaborative structures more on their CSR days compared with other teachers in our study. Five participants demonstrated moderate integration of CSR. This category showed the most variability. Four participants demonstrated marginal integration of CSR. Compared with other teachers in our study, marginal integration teachers consistently used fewer CSR components and strategies on both CSR and non-CSR days. Overall fidelity in year five was comparable to moderate integration teachers, but lower than high integration teachers in our study. However, fidelity for the CSR lesson observed during our week of instruction was considerably lower.

Implications

Teachers with higher integration of the CSR model appropriated CSR in richer conceptual ways, using the model to foster academic literacy as a means toward developing disciplinary knowledge. Often, content teachers may not identify as reading teachers, so integrating evidence-based reading comprehension strategies into content teaching involves a shift in conceptual thinking. Such shifts in thinking take time. For school leadership, this means being cognizant of quickly shifting school foci to adopt ambitious instructional innovations. For professional development providers, it means providing differentiated coaching (Klinger, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013) that builds capacity for relevance, examining theory (e.g., what is academic literacy) and practice (e.g., guide teachers in using data and observation to see impact of the practice). Emphasize fidelity of implementation for learning the core features of the practice which supports teachers with low self-efficacy in teaching reading. Then, foster productive adaptations that support the seamless integration of the practice into existing content instruction.

This research was supported by grant U398B100143, Investing in Innovation (I3), U.S. Department of Education.