

Initiating and Sustaining a Meaningful Teacher-Researcher Collaboration in a Preschool Curriculum Design DEC 2012

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Abstract

This session describes the process of enhancing an existing evidence-based curriculum to incorporate elements of universal design by establishing a collaborative partnership between practitioners and researchers. The ongoing collaboration with preschool teacher partners contributed to refining the curriculum making it both evidence-based and applicable to teachers' current classroom practices.

Rationale

Research demonstrates that a neither a top-down (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011) nor a bottom up approach to change is effective (Fullan, 2008). Therefore, researchers and practitioners should establish a collaborative partnership to effectively develop curricula that are both research based and practical. The development of curriculum is only the first step. We must consider the teachers who will ultimately choose to implement the curriculum (Lieber et al., 2009). Both the researchers and teachers must have ownership of the process through which change occurs (Fixsen et al., 2005). It is important thus, that teachers are part of the collaborative team that develops, refines, and evaluates a curriculum.

Context of the Study

The aim of Children's School Success Plus (CSS+) is modify and pilot an existing evidence-based curriculum (CSS curriculum, Odom et al., 2010) so as to include UDL principles, instructional individualization, and progress monitoring strategies to improve developmental outcomes for preschoolers with disabilities or at risk for disabilities. Refinement of CSS references the work of Sandall and colleagues (2002) who visualized early childhood inclusion as a set of stacked building blocks with the base a high-quality early childhood program and more specialized supports including curriculum modifications, embedded learning opportunities, and specialized instruction nested on top. The decision for when and what form the supports should take is determined through assessment and linking desired child outcomes to curriculum content and individualized child supports.

To support the implementation of the curriculum in preschool classrooms, the revision process was guided by an ongoing collaboration with preschool teacher partners to refine the curriculum and ensure that it was both evidence-based and applicable to current classroom practices. In CSS+ we are working with 4 teachers in 3 programs in 3 states (12 teachers total). Two programs are Head Start programs (Maryland and Indiana) and one is in a school district's pre-K program

(Kansas). All three programs have a history of routinely including children with disabilities, and represent a rural setting (Indiana), an urban setting (Maryland), and a suburban setting (Kansas).

Research Process

CSS+ is being conducted in three phases that coincide with the three years of the project. In the first phase, the focus was on the development and refinement of CSS+ materials to address UDL components, instructional individualization, and strategies for child progress monitoring. In the second phase of the study, a feasibility study occurred in which the teachers implemented sections of the curriculum in the classroom. The usefulness and appropriateness of the curriculum were evaluated by the teachers using weekly reflective logs, focus groups, and through regular (monthly) teacher-researcher meetings. Classroom observations were conducted during at two-week intervals. A study exploring change in teachers' understanding of early literacy was conducted in year two using interview and survey data. In the third and current phase, teachers are implementing the revised curriculum in their classrooms. Researchers are assessing a sample of preschoolers with disabilities in order to provide initial evidence as to whether exposure to the CSS+ curriculum and teachers' use of it with a high degree of fidelity positively impacts child outcomes.

Lessons Learned

While CSS+ findings are emerging as the study progresses, we are building our work upon three lessons learned from the previous CSS grant (Lieber at al., 2010): 1) Curriculum change requires a partnership between the teachers and the change agents; 2) Curriculum change requires time, resources, and continuing support; 3) curriculum change requires a positive organizational climate and a clear decision-making structure. Results from the study investigating the impact of implementing the CSS+ curriculum on teachers' understanding of early literacy indicated that teachers had a more complex understanding of emergent literacy, which positively influenced the sustainability of curriculum implementation.

In this presentation, we will discuss the situations we are encountering in our ongoing collaboration with preschool teacher partners to refine the curriculum and make it both evidence-based and applicable to teachers' current classroom practices. It is expected that the teachers' involvement in refining the curriculum will increase teacher buy-in, foster curriculum implementation, and consequently contribute to meaningful developmental gains for children at-risk for disability.

Implications for Further Research

While we believe these collaborative efforts within the CSS+ project will increase curriculum implementation and long-term sustainability in these preschool classroom, further time and evaluation is needed to support this assumption. We are hopeful that such efforts of bringing research-based curriculum to the classrooms will increase teacher buy-in and contribute to meaningful developmental gains for children at-risk for disability.

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For More Information

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