

Increasing the Use of Evidence-based Practices by Special Education Teachers

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Recently, a team of researchers in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of South Florida completed a study in which we investigated ways to increase the use of evidence-based practices by special education teachers. All of the teachers participating in the study were trained in Project CRISS®, and we knew CRISS met the criteria we had for calling a practice “evidence-based.” Therefore, we used CRISS as our *reading* intervention along with three other evidence-based practices: (1) formative evaluation, (2) increasing parent involvement, and (3) positive behavior supports at the classroom level. The teacher participants in the study taught students classified as having emotional disturbances, specific learning disabilities, and mental retardation at the educable level.

Our Goal

A major goal of the study was to develop methods that would help teachers overcome the usual barriers to implementation of sound instructional practices. At the beginning of the project, we met with teachers, some administrators, and parents of children who have disabilities to get everyone’s perspective on this problem. Not surprisingly, teachers reported they liked Project CRISS and the other practices we discussed, but they felt they had so many other things to do that implementation was suffering. This conflict between duties is frequently reported in published studies. Another point the teachers raised was they felt they needed more support and consultation focused on instruction. (We used a peer support system to meet with teachers and discuss issues of implementation. We feel this was probably not as effective as some type of formal consultation and teacher support, and we continue to discuss this with administrators.) Administrators agreed that clinical supervision of teachers had suffered serious reductions as budgets were repeatedly cut over the last few years. Our task focused on how to remedy the situation in ways that could be sustained after our study was completed. We did not want to repeat the typical research project in which grant funds provide resources that a district’s budget cannot sustain.

Our Strategy

Our strategy was to involve the teachers in developing “user-friendly” manuals that would help them implement sound instructional practices. These manuals, which we called *Effective Strategies Guides* (ESG), contained core strategies essential to each comprehensive practice. We developed four ESGs: (1) Reading (focusing on Project CRISS), (2) Providing Academic Feedback (formative evaluation), (3) Family Involvement, and (4) Positive Behavior Supports (PBS). They were created in an easy-to-use style for teachers and formatted in a way that would allow research observers to reliably assess how much of the ESGs’ content the teachers were using.

Teachers used the ESGs over a one and a half year period. For our study, we measured the degree to which they implemented each of the four practices. On average, teachers used approximately 52% of the materials in the ESGs, with Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) being the most used practice. The teachers indicated that classroom management was their biggest challenge, and they felt the PBS information was useful. Behavioral referrals were significantly reduced and students moved to more inclusive settings with non-disabled peers over the course of the study.

Our Results

In terms of reading (Project CRISS), we found that even though the participating teachers taught an array of subjects, they used the reading strategies just as much as a comparison group of reading teachers. Data showed a significant increase in the *average reading score* over time. More encouraging was the finding that *none* of the groups decreased in their scores even though typically students in special education continue a downward spiral with reading achievement as they enter the secondary grades.

In general, we feel the results of the study are encouraging. We plan to continue examining better ways to help teachers use the best available practices in their classrooms.

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