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Project READERS: An Evaluation of Rural Professional Development with Distance Coaching in Response to Intervention and Early Reading Supports¹

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Background and Purpose

Without appropriate intervention, the majority of students with reading difficulties in early elementary grades continue to struggle with reading by the time that they reach high school (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996). Given the importance of reading for all academic domains, early intervention is critical for ensuring that students can continue to achieve in school. To adequately support students, additional professional development is often required for rural teachers to attain the necessary knowledge and skills to identify and monitor specific reading needs and the provision of appropriate instruction.

Project READERS (Response to Effective Assessment-Driven Early Reading Support) is an ongoing multi-cohort randomized trial examining the impact of professional development for rural K-3 teachers in Response-to-Intervention (RTI) and early reading supports for students. Teachers within the study participate in workshop-based training and distance, web-mediated coaching throughout the school year in the use of data to identify and regularly monitor individual students' reading needs and the implementation of appropriate research-based interventions. Through online, live video coaching, teachers receive access to expertise in data-based decision making and intervention that is often unavailable in their local rural community. The purpose of the project is to evaluate the impact of professional development with distance coaching on rural teachers' knowledge and practice and students' reading outcomes.

Method

Participants and Setting

Participants in this ongoing study include kindergarten through third-grade teachers and interventionists from more than 80 rural schools in the Midwestern and Northeastern U.S. Schools have been randomly assigned in approximately equal numbers to either a professional development or a business-as-usual (control) condition. All participating schools have been classified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) as rural or remote towns based on their location relative to urbanized areas and clusters identified by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Procedures

Teachers participating in the professional development condition have received workshop-based professional development provided throughout the school year along with regular distance coaching with a highly trained instructional coach. The workshops and coaching have focused on using student data to make instructional decisions and implementing a toolkit of research-based reading interventions with groups of students. Coaching has also been provided both outside of class time with classroom teachers and with interventionists during the actual delivery of interventions with students via a "bug-in-the-ear" approach. A table outlining the content for the workshop-based professional development and distance coaching is provided below.

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey and direct knowledge assessments, teacher logs, and videotaped classroom instruction are currently being used to assess the impact of the professional development on teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and practices. Student outcomes are being assessed using a screening assessment (DIBELS Next) and standardized achievement test (Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement). A multi-level, growth curve analysis will be used to evaluate the impact of the intervention on student and teacher outcomes.

Results

Although too early to report the study's primary outcomes, initial findings suggest that rural teachers have positive perceptions about the utility and impact of the professional development and distance coaching approach. Videotaped sessions illustrate the importance of select coaching characteristics (e.g., modeling and feedback that includes explicit error correction) in supporting effective instructional practices. Information obtained from teacher logs also suggests that teachers who have received professional development with coaching are able to utilize data-based decision making to identify and effectively implement interventions for their students.

Discussion

Given rural teachers' professional development needs and resource constraints, findings from this study will have important implications pertaining to the effective use of professional development from a distance to support rural teachers in meeting the needs of their students. Information obtained from this study will also be useful in determining how to best assist rural teachers in bolstering students' reading performance.

Research Opportunities and Challenges

Many school stakeholders have been cooperative and eager to participate, and they have been interested in the research process and the educational practices in which they have been trained. Many school administrators and teachers have reported strong benefits of participation in this project for their staff and students. However, the initial recruitment of rural schools for this project was challenging, given the need to integrate professional development into existing rural school policies and practices for RTI and student reading instruction. In addition, ongoing communications have often been required with school administrators to maintain investment and buy-in into the practices implemented by teachers who often maintain multiple roles within their rural schools. Some schools in remote rural areas have also experienced difficulty in maintaining a high-speed internet connection necessary for the distance technology. Regular consultation with the school stakeholders has been effective in addressing the presented challenges.

Future Research

The findings from this study will have important implications for professional development

supports in rural schools. However, future research examining implementation barriers and enablers will also be important for determining which aspects of the professional development experience are optimal for supporting rural teachers. This research could also investigate the influence of organizational factors on implementation efforts.

References

- Francis, D. J., Shaywitz, S. E., Stuebing, K. K., Shaywitz, B. A., & Fletcher, J. M. (1996). Developmental lag versus deficit models of reading disability: A longitudinal, individual growth curves analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88, 3–17.

Table 1
Professional Development Activities for Project READERS

Professional Development Component	Description
Teacher Institute (Interventionists were also encouraged to attend)	<p>Five-day training throughout the school year focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day 1: Rationale for Project READERS & data-based decision making; administration & scoring procedures for DIBELS Next screening and progress monitoring assessments • Day 2: What & why of RTI; critical content and key, research validated instructional delivery techniques for effective reading instruction; overview of problem solving and intervention planning process • Day 3: Using screening data to identify students in need of intervention supports; determining level for progress monitoring and setting ambitious goals for students; analyzing reading data to identify skill areas to target for intervention • Day 4: Key elements of effective intervention; flexible grouping practices; monitoring fidelity of intervention delivery; documenting intervention; a preview of interventions used within the Project READERS toolkit • Day 5: Understanding data needed for decision making; analyzing intervention data; making decisions based on analyses of data; alterable components for modifying or intensifying intervention
Interventionist Training	<p>Four-day training focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The management of small group instruction/behavior • Explicit instructional techniques • Implementation of each intervention from the Project READERS toolkit • Intervention documentation (including assessing fidelity) <p>All training involved didactic instruction on the rationale for explicit instructional techniques, modeling of specific formats/aspects of lessons from each intervention, and practice with feedback.</p>
Data-Based Decision Making (DBDM) Coaching (General Education Teachers)	<p>DBDM coaching conducted via live, protocol-driven video conferencing with individual teachers focused on using data to inform instruction/intervention. Protocols for each session involved applying content covered in each of the five Teacher Institute days. Each session was guided by six primary steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide updates on progress/tasks from the previous coaching session 2. Review content from the Teacher Institute relevant to the next step in the process 3. Review relevant data (e.g., screening, progress monitoring) 4. Provide guided practice, with the coach modeling first and then the teacher practicing with a student 5. Preview the next coaching session 6. Set teacher & coach next steps
Intervention Implementation Coaching (Interventionists)	<p>Using videoconferencing software with a headset and microphone, interventionists received support from coaches during their implementation of intervention with students. Coaches provided feedback in real-time using the following protocol:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide positive feedback to the interventionist and students 2. Redirect students attention by providing a brief assignment 3. Quickly and softly describe the concern 4. Provide a rationale for suggested change 5. Praise students for working & quickly ask about task 6. Model suggested changes for the interventionist 7. Have interventionist repeat the activity that was interrupted for feedback 8. Provide positive feedback for interventionist