

Why a strategy may fit here but not there

Results of an experimental study reported in the *Journal of Educational Research* show that an evidence-based intervention that improved reading achievement at Title I schools in one state was not as effective in another state. The researchers' analysis of the findings underscores the importance of matching improvement strategies to school contexts.

What strategy did the researchers study? Helen S. Apthorp and colleagues studied a year-long supplemental vocabulary program that included 20 minutes of daily read-alouds and related oral-language activities. Fifteen 3rd-grade teachers in seven Title I schools across two sites were randomly assigned to use either the intervention or their usual instruction.

What were the characteristics of the two study sites?

Site A included four schools in an Alabama district that employs a standards-based approach to reading and language arts and participates in statewide professional development emphasizing the five components of reading instruction. In each school, more than 92% of the students were black, none were identified as Limited English Proficient, and at least 90% were eligible for subsidized meals.

Site B included three schools in two neighboring districts in New York. These schools employ a balanced literacy approach that emphasizes embedded skill instruction. In each school, at least 74% of the students were white, 5% or fewer were identified as Limited English Proficient, and 24% to 35% were eligible for subsidized meals.

Researchers surveyed teachers, collected teacher activity logs, and conducted classroom observations. Reading achievement tests, along with pre-tests and post-tests in oral and sight vocabulary, were given. At the outset, the New York students were performing at or above grade

level, while the Alabama students were performing predominantly below grade level. In both sites, all teachers using the intervention met at least two of three criteria for implementation fidelity (the degree to which the intervention was delivered as intended).

How did the results differ at each site?

At the end of the year, the Alabama students who received the intervention performed significantly higher in vocabulary and reading achievement than students in the same site who did not receive the intervention. In the New York site, however, no positive effects were observed.

How did researchers explain the differing results?

The researchers say it's likely that the students in the New York site already knew the vocabulary words targeted by the intervention. Also, the stand-alone program may have conflicted with the site's balanced literacy approach.

What contextual factors seem to matter most?

A study of reading achievement in Vermont elementary schools found no relationship between two factors — socioeconomic status and the nature of literacy instruction — and literacy achievement test scores. Most important were the quality of implementation and the fit of an instructional program to the context of the school. The Vermont study identified four contextual factors of schools that met or exceeded state reading standards: program stability, shared vision, knowledgeable K-4 teachers, and multiple opportunities for students to read and discuss books.

What's the message for coaches?

Coaches may need to guide school staff in selecting improvement strategies that “fit” school context. Such care can improve the likelihood that the selected strategy will positively affect student achievement. ♦

References

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