Autonomy and Accountability: Teacher Perspectives on Evidence-Based Practice and Decision-Making for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine teacher perspectives about evidence-based practices (EBP) and decision-making for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Given the current EBP movement, our study sought to understand practitioner definitions and perspectives on EBP and decision-making. Interview data from nine special education teachers who work with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities were conducted, and then transcribed and coded in order to examine their perspectives and beliefs about how organizations, people and tools influence their understandings of EBP. Findings demonstrated that how teachers conceptualized EBPs and described their decision making about instruction was complex and painted a multi-faceted image of how they conceptualized organizational constraints, considered the value of research, and what tools were available to them.

The evidence-based movement is an international effort across several fields including medicine (Drake, Latimer, Leff, McHugo, & Burns, 2004; Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996), psychology (Chambless & Hollon, 1998), and education (Slavin, 2002) to make better use of findings from research in typical service settings. The purpose is to produce better outcomes for consumers of the services such as students, patients, and clients (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). The focus across all disciplines is in increasing practitioner use of evidence-based practices (Chorpita et al., 2011) as they provide services to important stakeholders.

In education, federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) have brought greater attention to the use of “scientifically based research” (NCLB, 2001) as a basis for decisions on which instructional practices should be used with students across the country. In general education, work to disseminate evidence-based practices to teachers in classrooms has been undertaken, in large part, by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) through classroom practice guides and intervention reports that review instructional practices against a rigorous standard of evidence (WWC, 2013).

In the field of special education, similar work has been done in defining evidence-based practices (EBPs) through efforts by the Council for Exceptional Children and leading researchers on quality standards for research methods (e.g., Odom et al., 2005), standards for determining if a practice is evidence-based (CEC, 2008; Cook, Tankersley, & Landrum, 2009), and factors that contribute to the im-
plementation of evidence-based practices in special education (Cook & Odom, 2013; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2008; Odom, 2009). Indeed, the field of implementation science is actively seeking to identify components of implementation that can contribute to increasing practitioner use of evidence-based practice (Cook & Odom, 2013; Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013; Odom, Cox, Brock, & the NPDC, 2012). This work defining EBPs in special education has also been conducted by the Autism National Professional Development Center (NPDC) and the National Autism Center’s National Standards Project (NAC, 2009) in order to determine evidence-based practices that can be used by practitioners to improve outcomes for children and youth with ASD. These efforts to identify evidence-based practices in special education continue to be a work-in-progress. Until recently, the WWC did not include interventions for students with disabilities in their reviews, and this new focus on special education has only included students with high incidence disabilities, not those with low incidence disabilities such as intellectual disabilities and neurodevelopmental disabilities.

For almost as long as there has been work focused on determining EBPs in education, researchers have lamented what is often called the research-to-practice gap—the lack of implementation by practitioners what researchers have determined to be effective or the continued implementation of what researchers have determined to be ineffective. The research-to-practice gap has been discussed thoroughly across the past few decades (Cuban, 1993; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Greenwood & Abbott, 2001; Gunter & Brady, 1984; Odom, 2009; Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm, & Klingner, 1998). Implementation science seeks to diminish the research-to-practice gap and increase practitioner use of evidence-based practices (Fixsen et al., 2005). Much of the work on implementation has focused on this goal of how to increase implementation by practitioners. However, practitioners come with their own sets of perceptions regarding evidence-based practices, their own particular contexts, and these affect implementation of practices (Boardman, Arguelles, Vaughn, Hughes, & Klingner, 2005). In all the work focused on decreasing the research-to-practice gap, little attention has been paid to the perspective of teachers and other school district personnel.

**Perspectives of Practitioners**

Several explanations for the lack of implementation of EBPs have been proposed, including the separation of the research and practice communities (Greenwood & Abbott, 2001; Huberman, 1990), and the lack of a venue for researchers and practitioners to work together to develop EBPs that could be effectively implemented in the classroom (Gersten, Woodward, & Morvant, 1992). Keogh (1994) points out that researchers need to understand the context for implementation of their research findings, an understanding that would be facilitated by learning from practitioners. The very few studies that have examined teacher perceptions have focused on teachers of students with learning or emotional/behavioral disabilities and have not included those who teach students with developmental or intellectual disabilities. As well, they used surveys rather than interviews. In one of these studies, Boardman and colleagues found that although some teachers did express the desire for other teachers to use research-based practices, special education teachers were “used to doing ‘what works’ for individual students, regardless of what they might be ‘required’ to do” (Boardman et al., 2005, p. 172). Some of the teachers studied did not express positive opinions about the implementation of EBPs in their classrooms (Boardman et al.), and teachers frequently do not implement what they do not see as beneficial to their students (Nolen, Horn, Ward, & Childers, 2011). In addition to these perceptions, teachers have also mentioned time as a constraint that limits their ability to implement EBPs (Klingner, Ahwee, Piloniet, & Menendez, 2003), and have reported that they “simply could not do everything” expected of them for implementation with fidelity (Boardman et al., 2005, p. 174). In addition, special educators have also reported tensions between the general case and the individual case. That is, negotiating between a practice benefiting a wide-range of students versus a practice benefiting one particular student with a specific set of needs. In response to pressures to implement
EBPs, teachers have expressed a concern that the practices are not necessarily best for their individual students in special education who vary widely from child to child (Boardman et al., 2005; Jones, 2009; Klingner et al., 2003; Nelson, Leffler & Hansen, 2009). Teachers have expressed the viewpoint that many EBPs they have been encouraged to use do not “meet the unique needs” of their students with disabilities” (Boardman et al., 2005, p. 174). Learning more about the perspectives of teachers of students with developmental and intellectual disabilities will help researchers better understand the unique context these teachers work in and perhaps help bridge the research to practice gap. Rather than blaming teachers for lack of implementation, it is important to understand the larger contextual variables that affect teacher perceptions and interpretations of EBPs, teaching, and their students.

**Historical Significance**

In thinking about how best to understand the perspectives of teachers in the area of EBPs, it may be helpful to think of the inclusive education movement of past years. At that time, there was debate on how to implement inclusion in the most appropriate and meaningful way and what the best models of implementation might be (Weigle, 1997). Many questions were asked as to how inclusion might be best implemented and whether teachers had the time, resources, and knowledge needed to successfully implement it (Wolery, Gessler-Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Lisowski, 1995). Teachers themselves were concerned about inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms and a gap developed between what was promoted and what was practiced. However, as teachers became more accustomed to inclusion, and received the supports they perceived necessary, their perceptions became more positive over time (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006) and implementation also improved. We wonder if perhaps the evolution that occurred across the inclusion movement, from apprehension to acceptance, provides a possible trajectory for the evidence-based movement. We can only begin to determine if this is correct by talking with practitioners about their experiences and how they interpret the EBP movement currently underway.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences, opinions, and perceptions of teachers of students with developmental and intellectual disabilities related to the implementation of EBPs in a deeply contextual manner. We wanted to know more than whether teachers use EBPs and instead delve into how they understand their work, their students, and the constraints and affordances found in their contexts.

We sought to do this through a study of special education teachers and special education directors in four school districts. This larger study was designed to understand the contexts in which decisions about practice and evidence are made from a sociocultural perspective. The purpose of the larger study was to extend the research on practitioner perspectives on EBP and begin to understand the contextual factors at play in the challenge of implementation.

Within this larger study, there was a smaller group of teachers of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities that we wanted to better understand as a unique subgroup with their own perspectives and challenges. In order to learn more about their experiences, we asked the following questions:

- How do special education practitioners make decisions about what practices and policies to use?
- How do special education teachers interpret and enact the idea of “evidence-based practice”?
- What factors (school policy, training, professional development, etc.) shape their interpretations and actions?

In order to answer these questions, we developed a conceptual framework that helped illuminate the tensions inherent in any complex system like schools and school districts.

**Conceptual Framework**

While much of the implementation literature has located the “problem of implementation” at the practitioner level, we wanted to take a broader, more holistic approach to examining the problem of implementation.
Starting with Rogoff’s (1995) articulation of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, we sought to examine how we could look at the layers and systems of implementation contexts. While the ecological systems model captured the levels of systems and hierarchies, we found it lacked the ability to capture the interactions that take place between levels as we wished. We then combined the notion of levels with Engestrom’s Cultural Historical Activity Theory (2001), we then developed the following conceptual model (see Figure 1).

In our model, understandings and decisions about practice are made within a complex web of organizational, social and instrumental factors. Focusing the conversations around implementation on individual factors ignores the other levels or “planes” as Rogoff (1995) calls them, which interact with individuals. In our model, people, tools and organizations remain in tension around the process of decision-making and implementation. In this study, we used a more socio-cultural perspective to investigate the relationships between individual and collective dimension of policy and practice, with particular attention to how these dimensions interact in the context of practitioner interpretations and responses to the evidence-based practice movement.

Throughout the study, we considered our conceptual framework “open” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as we continually refined our understandings and conceptualizations of the relationships between the different factors based on the emerging data.

**Method**

**Participants**

In order to get a more comprehensive view of how EBP is thought of throughout levels of schools and districts, we interviewed both special education teachers and administrators. Four school districts in the Northwest participated in our study. Three districts were suburban (B, E, and S) and one district was urban (H). We focused our analysis on teachers at the elementary school level. In each district, we interviewed the district Special Education director or administrator, two teachers of students with developmental disabilities, two teachers of students with emotional/behavioral disabilities, and two teachers of students served primarily in a resource room setting. This paper is focused on the subset of teachers working with students with developmental and intellectual disability.

Our subsample of teachers who taught students with intellectual and developmental disabilities consisted of 9 teachers. All teacher names are pseudonyms. District B had two teachers in our study; May had been a teacher for 12 years while Adam taught for 5 years. Three teachers were from District E; Cassie had taught for 10 years, Mary for 11 years, and Jane for 20 years. District S had Sally who taught for 10 years and Kristy, who taught for 10 years. Jack, who was a teacher for 8 years, and Hannah, who taught for 2 years, were teachers in District H. All taught in self-contained classrooms and taught elementary-aged students with a wide variety of disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders (ASD), Down syndrome, developmental disabilities, and multiple disabilities. All classrooms were multi-age, typically spanning three grade levels (kindergarten through second grade, third grade through fifth grade).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews, which were conducted by members of the research team. The interview protocol is located in Table 1. All interviews were between 45–90 minutes long, and were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. They were then uploaded into Dedoose for analysis.
Dedoose is a software tool for qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis. As data was collected, the research team met as a group using open coding. The team used low inference descriptors on paper and then in Dedoose, in order to capture what was emerging in the data. The results of the open coding process were discussed and code definitions were refined by the group. Those codes were used on all remaining interviews. Next, we examined the coded excerpts collectively, looking for themes and categories. Analytic memos were used to describe and develop the themes emerging from the data. At each point, we returned to the conceptual framework, revising as necessary. Next, the

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TABLE 1

**Interview Protocol for Special Education Practitioners**

We are interested in learning more about how teachers make decisions about curriculum and instruction, particularly in the context of current policies around “evidence-based” practice. We don’t hold a view about whether these policies are good or bad...we are trying to find out what teachers think.

**Intro/Description**

How long have you been teaching?
Where did you do your preservice training?
Tell me about the work you are doing here
Can you describe your classroom setting and the kids you serve?
What curriculum resources do you rely on?
Tell me about a typical day in your classroom? (for each major activity, probe for “what are you doing (curriculum and instruction) and why?”)

**Classroom Practices**

They say teachers make a thousand instructional decisions every day...how do you make instructional decisions for the kids you work with? (Let the person talk about this, then . . .)
So let’s talk about one or two students as examples. Tell me about one of your kids...what kinds of instructional strategies or practices are you using with this child? (get concrete descriptions of practices)
Teachers don’t usually make these kinds of decisions in a vacuum...what people influence your thinking about these decisions? Can you give me an example? How does this influence process play out?
When you use data to make decisions, what kinds of data do you find most useful? Can you give me an example? (if the following issues don’t come up, try to probe for each)

**Decision Making**

There’s a lot of talk these days about “evidence-based” or “research-based” practice.
People have lots of different interpretations of this idea. What does the term mean to you?
To what extent do you think this idea is relevant to your own decision making? Why? Can you give an example?
In what kinds of situations do you tend to look for evidence-based practices?
What sources of information about evidence-based practice do you find useful?
Are there some downsides or challenges to approaching instructional decisions from this perspective? Can you give me an example?
Are there some ways in which you think this (ebp) approach is really working well? Can you give me an example? (if the informant mentioned working in multiple classroom or school settings, ask about the extent to which their decision making was affected by these settings)

**Policy**

Tell me about some of your District policies related to ebp. (probe for federal and state policy issues as well)
To what extent do general ed concerns or policies impact ebp issues for you?
What district resources and supports do you draw on? (probe for these kinds of things?)
In your experience, how does district policy and practice affect your efforts to implement EBP? Can you give me some examples?
Are there any written policies or guidelines for ebp in your district or school? Could we get copies?
In an ideal situation, how might you imagine using evidence-based practices? What kinds of supports would be most helpful?
What have I forgotten to ask you that you think important for me to understand about these issues?
data were analyzed by position, district, theme and across cases by small subgroups of the research team; this manuscript reflects the results of the data analysis on the teachers of students with developmental and intellectual disabilities. The data were triangulated within districts between different informants. After the final analysis was completed on the entire data set, we returned to the findings from this subgroup of teachers to explore similarities and differences between the large group and this smaller subset.

Results

Survey research on EBP implementation has focused primarily on reported use of EBPs within a classroom context. While teachers in this study did mention specific use of EBPs during interviews, more telling was the descriptions of how organizational factors influenced both their access to tools, resources, and their positionality within the site. With a few exceptions, this group of teachers who taught students with intellectual and developmental disabilities talked about operating with relative autonomy and flexibility, yet the autonomy came along with reduced access to district resources and supports, diminished accountability, and a position on the fringes of “mainstream” school and district culture.

Several themes emerged from the data from this subgroup of teachers. While the group of teachers was similar in many ways to the larger sample of teachers, they were more likely to mention feeling isolated and detached from the larger organizational context. They also had a more mixed understanding of “evidence” and were skeptical of companies using the terms “research-based” as a marketing strategy. For these teachers, “evidence” often included observational, behavioral and anecdotal information from students and parents. Additionally, these teachers reflected on their limited access to appropriate tools, such as curricula, professional development and school resources.

As we analyzed our data and refined our conceptual framework, it became apparent that the major themes did not line up with the points of the triangle in our model; instead the themes reflected the tensions experienced between people and tools, tools and organizations, and people and organizations as represented in our simplified final model in Figure 2.
Organizational Tensions

Within the organizational contexts of their schools and districts, these teachers articulated two ideas, which seemed to be held in tension: autonomy and accountability. In varying ways, this group of teachers described what seemed both like a blessing and a curse: lack of accountability to school and district administration, and greater freedom and autonomy to use their professional judgment to make instructional decisions. Kristy explained these two ideas in relation to how she made decisions about how to structure and set up her classroom: “I guess I would say it comes from me. It’s kind of the nice thing and the kind of not so nice thing, that nobody is really checking up on you. So, if you wanted to have free play all day, well . . . okay.” These two concepts of autonomy and accountability were often mentioned in tandem.

Teachers identified the sense of autonomy as both a strength and a weakness. “If there is a weakness in intensive support programs, it would be a lack of accountability. I don’t really answer to anybody. I don’t collaborate with anybody on curriculum or resources, um I wish that I did,” said Mary. Yet Sally indicated that she appreciated the ability to do what she wanted.

So I make my own assessments, I write my own curriculum, I write my own IEPs, so that’s actually why I like my job because there’s very little district involvement . . . Most administrators are afraid to step into my classroom cause I’ve got kids with volatile behaviors and they feel that I’m the expert so they keep the door closed and say, she does great, and they keep going.

Figure 3 represents the positioning of this subgroup of teachers working with students with DD. In describing their organizational tensions, teachers experienced both tremendous autonomy (which they often appreciated) which corresponded with a significant lack of accountability and oversight. Figure 3 is our attempt at hypothesizing how position within these organizations influences autonomy and accountability.

Likewise, Adam expressed how administration influenced his decision-making.

Our administrators are in our classrooms on a pretty infrequent basis and so if they do come in for like a drop-in observation or something they might see a challenging behavior or they might see something that we’re struggling with then they might have some kind of say. But, usually, it’s, the changes that we do make and the supports that we provide are primarily driven by the educational staff that are in here.

Adam’s point was generally supported by the interviews of the special education administrators, who spoke most often about policies and practices for students “at risk” and students with high incidence disabilities.

Similarly, when it came to identifying how district policy influenced their instructional decisions, teachers either indicated that there were no district policies in place, or that the district policies were often waived for their classrooms. Hannah from District H said in response to a question about how district policies impacted her classroom practices, “It doesn’t at all, I don’t feel any pressure from that, for me it would be myself and you know my sense of morality. And just you know this kid deserves this evidence based practice I need to go and read about it and then you know you get so emotionally invested in wanting to help that kid.

Others explained that the district policies around EBP didn’t apply to them or their kids. Cassie said, after acknowledging ways in which the district was using evidence to guide
decisions, and discussing the district’s movement to multi-tiered instruction and more intensive progress monitoring.

My kids are usually not included in that conversation because my kids are you know are already the bottom 10 percent. So my kids are already in tier 3, tier one being okay kids and then tier 2 and tier 3. So um my kids are usually excluded from that and um so there really is an evidence driven based here.

Even in districts with an ongoing movement to data-based decision making and evidence based practice, the teachers in our study experienced being left out from that dialogue. Sally said,

So most of the policies that are dictated by the district are forgiven in my classroom mostly because they don’t want to bother to train me or they don’t know how to adapt the material to be useful in my classroom. So when I call them to the mat, they back off because it’s more expensive or more difficult to make them, the district decisions applicable to my classroom, they don’t know how to do it so they kinda say, oh never mind, we were only kidding type of thing, or they don’t answer my emails.

While organizational tensions had an impact on teacher practices and decision-making, these tensions did not fully explain their perspectives on EBP. They do illustrate some of the larger challenges experienced by teachers on a regular basis, and also the substantive role of the practitioner in implementation.

Understandings of Evidence and EBP

The teachers of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in this study had varied beliefs, understandings and perceptions of the nature of evidence and the meaning of “Evidence Based Practice”. Several teachers referenced research literature. Kristy said,

Well, that it’s not just my own idea, that someone else actually did it. They really did some accurate data and did it on a number of people and lo and behold, it does work. It’s just finding it and figuring out how to implement it—it’s difficult.

This definition typically included a caveat about population-specificity. The teachers wanted to know that the research had been done on similar kids, with similar needs. Mary said,

I think it’s very valuable and I don’t want to just throw it out with everything else so I think it’s critical and important and should be a part of every teacher’s instructional practice for sure. I just want to make sure that whatever I’m using is research based on kids that learn the way my kids do.

Other teachers valued personal experience and knowledge. Jane said,

So when I’m thinking about instruction, I’ve been in the profession for twenty years and I kind of know where I started and what I’ve used that’s worked and what I’ve used that I don’t use anymore because it doesn’t really work and how that’s all come about.

Similarly, Cassie said that she valued evidence from multiple sources,

Um EBP is what can I gather-student work, student observations, their talk, information from the parents, that can be even like behavior. I have one kid who is having some behavior in the afternoon and I emailed the parents a couple times, you know what’s going on? Do you have any ideas of why he’s more anxious right now and stuff? To me that would be evidence that well he didn’t sleep well last night and that’s evidence of why he’s struggling.

Views and Perceptions of EBP

When asked directly about knowledge of and experiences with EBP, the teachers were among the more skeptical in our larger sample. The skepticism was directed in two main areas: the money and economics behind curriculum and materials, and whether the research was population-specific. Kristy illustrates the first point: “I think there needs to be an entity doing research that doesn’t have a vested economic interest and I don’t think there’s enough for us to require teachers to
use it, to make professional decisions, it’s not out there.” Similarly, Sally said,

It means to me that the products that are being sold, saying that they are research-based or evidence-based. Do they do the research outside of that company? So a company, say Hines is selling a product. Did Hines company do research on the effects of evidence of the success of that product outside of that company?” In response to a question about research-based or evidence-based practices, Cassie said, “So when I hear terms like that I say that people can skew anything to the way that they want it so that they can sell merchandise. I think that’s true with curriculum.

The second area of skepticism had to do with whether the research was applicable to their particular group of students. Jack said,

I don’t think they’re have been any studies done on our classrooms, well our classrooms differ from district to district but um I think yeah, it’s been put to me, like we know more than what the researchers know about how to run a classroom like this.

Mary said,

I think it’s very valuable and I don’t want to just throw it out with everything else so I think it’s critical and important and should be a part of every teacher’s instructional practice for sure. I just want to make sure that whatever I’m using is research based on kids that learn the way my kids do.

Interestingly enough, when asked directly about EBPs, the teachers did not name specific identified practices (like on the NAC list, for example). However, in other parts of the interviews, such as when they described a typical day or discussed strategies for individual students, teachers identified using the following practices: ABA, DTT, Functional Communication, Time Delay, and/or Pivotal Response Training, among others. When asked about EBPs specifically, teachers more often mentioned packaged, commercial curricula and materials.

Overall, these teachers had a certain multi-dimensionality in their understandings and perspectives around EBP. While acknowledging the presence of research, they clearly articulated their skepticism and hesitance to blindly accept and implement any given practice for their students. Additionally, they referenced packaged curricula when asked directly about EBPs, but described using specific EBPs at other points in the interview, particularly when describing classroom practices and tools for specific students.

**Access to Tools**

The third main theme had to do with the practitioner’s ability to access appropriate tools and resources. We defined tools as materials or technologies used to measure student performance or make instructional decisions that teachers actually used to do something. We defined resources as people, practices, materials, or conditions that can be accessed to enable or support decision-making about or implementation of instruction or assessment. Throughout the interviews, it emerged that this group of teachers lacked access to general education curriculum and tools, population-specific curriculum and tools, and relevant professional development and support.

Given that all students must have access to the general curriculum, teachers expressed frustration at the lack of access to general education content and practices. When asked about specific general education policies and how they impacted classroom practice, Sally said, “So most of the policies that are dictated by the district are forgiven in my classroom mostly because they don’t want to bother to train me or they don’t know how to adapt the material to be useful in my classroom.”

Additionally, teachers identified that they lacked population-specific materials and curricula. Sally expressed her frustration by saying, “If they want to base things on appropriate evidence based practice and provide curriculum that way, there needs to be enough out there so we can select what’s good and I don’t really think there is.” Jack continues on a similar vein: “Even teaching a population like this, where there is hardly anything out there, um I really feel like we are pioneers.” Instead, many of their classroom decisions were based on what they came up with or created on their own.
Similarly, teachers noted a substantial lack of access to appropriate and relevant professional development. Mary said,

We have a lot of PD opportunities in the district. It is very rare that I can use any of those. Um to make it relevant is a huge stretch in many many ways. Um it’s always my goal and I go to every opportunity I can but to modify to a degree that it would work in here is definitely a challenge.

Professional development doesn’t include just workshops; Hannah mentions the need for specific assistance from consultants and experts: “If only I could have a nice consultant and be in my room and work with that student on that. It just, also, just the training aspect of it. . . . I’m not an expert, I still need to be trained.” Kristy noted the tension between wanting to be a part of the larger school community and needing to get more specific information by saying,

Sometimes too, teacher in-service days, you know, sometimes it doesn’t really apply and I’ve heard Annie talk about that too, that she really wants us to be seen as a part of the school culture and I understand that, but sometimes I wish that we can still be seen as a part of the professional school culture if we were off at a different, you know, “you guys are looking at the reading curriculum, we’re going to adapt it, something that dealt more with what we see”.

Finally, the teachers described their lack of easy access to the research literature. Jack describes this lack of accessibility:

If I’m implementing something I’m not so good at then I’ll go do some reading on it. The Autism modules online are helpful. I’d say mostly for things that I’ve heard of, when I, every time I try and type something in for a problem I’m having without knowing if there is any research on it, I can never find it, hardly ever.

He goes on to dismiss the idea that there is a substantial amount of research conducted with students who resemble his by stating,

Well just that there’s not a lot out there for me and maybe it’s hard to find. I feel like through my multiple programs, I’ve looked at a lot and there’s just not a lot out there. And I know why, this is a small fraction of the population. We’re not training them to be become future community leaders so there’s not a lot of interest in doing that research.

Despite their skepticism of things called “research-based”, these teachers expressed their desires for continued professional development, population-appropriate tools and resources, and support for implementing general education curriculum. Additionally, the difficulty in finding research-based information was another clear barrier for these teachers.

Discussion

In this study, we wanted to understand the specific perspectives and opinions of teachers working with students with developmental and intellectual disabilities. We were particularly interested in how their organizational status influenced their understandings of evidence and evidence-based practice, and their access to appropriate material tools and supports. We also wanted to extend the literature base around teacher decision-making and implementation, framed within a sociocultural perspective.

Organizations

The impact of organizations and the interactions between organizations and people, and organizations and tools is evident across the data. One of the main themes from these data was the tension experienced by teachers of students with DD and ID. This tension might be expressed through the differences between the general case and the individual case. That is, practices and policies that work for majority of students may not necessarily work for specific students. In the cases of these teachers, each of their students represents the individual case—the general practices recommended to schools have not, and currently do not, work for their individual students. However, there is a strong desire to find and use evidence-based or research-based practices.
Many of the teachers also described a lack of oversight in their work and understanding of their day-to-day practices. This perception of a lack of understanding and oversight from administration may be an expansion of the general versus individual case tension. Indeed, school administrators are most frequently concerned with the general population (e.g., what practices and curriculum should be used to increase average student performance, how well the school may do on Annual Yearly Progress reports) and may be less concerned with individual cases. This would represent a mismatch in goals and priorities between teachers of students with DD and ID and their school administrators.

This tension of finding a balance between curriculum and practices that are recommended or prescribed for the general population and providing meaningful learning opportunities for their students with DD and ID then influences teachers perceptions and experiences with accessing tools and resources.

Given the current context of the “accountability” movement, it was somewhat surprising to find that the teachers in the study indicated significant autonomy and a substantial lack of accountability. Despite the intention of NCLB to raise academic achievement through additional accountability measures, it appears, from our study, that it has had little effect on classroom practices for students with intellectual disabilities. However, the teachers expressed a fair amount of personal agency and autonomy; perhaps grass roots efforts around EBP dissemination and uptake would be powerful.

Evidence

While some of the teachers referenced research as the definition of “evidence”, more commonly, they used a comprehensive definition of evidence which included observational, anecdotal, and personal information as well as research-based practices. Given that their definition of evidence was uniquely tied to student needs, moving toward a multi-dimensional definition of intervention fidelity may provide more useful information (Harn, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, 2013). The teachers in our study were clear that individual student needs were far and away the most important piece of “evidence” used to make decisions. Additionally, they wanted to know that research based practices had been validated on a similar population, in similar settings. This might point to the necessity of exceedingly clear descriptions of the target population of a particular EBP, or settings in which the EBP may work better than others. Additionally, continuing to measure social validity may help make practices appear to be a better “fit” for particular students and teachers.

Access to Tools

Our results on tool access mirror the results of Boardman et al. (2005) in their study of LD and EBD teachers’ views of research-based practices, where teachers indicated that lack of appropriate tools (including professional development) were significant barriers to implementation of new programs. Similarly, our teachers identified lack of appropriate tools, lack of access to those tools, and a relative inability to find applicable research and professional development as barriers to implementation. Given that curriculum and other packaged programs were often referenced in tandem with EBPs, it’s not surprising that they felt like there are few appropriate research-based programs and tools out there for their students.

It was encouraging to read about specific EBPs being used in classroom settings, even somewhat more “obscure” EBPs such as pivotal response. However, these specific EBPs were not mentioned in response to the question about evidence-based practice; perhaps these specific practices are so widely used that they have been taken up as “best practice”. Failure to identify these practices as specific EBPs may be one reason why reported use of EBP is so low. University professors and professional development personnel may want to be explicit in how they identify and use the term “evidence-based practice” when referring to specific teaching practices.

Implications

The qualitative data gathered throughout the inclusion movement from the perspectives of general and special educators (e.g., Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999;


Harn, B., Parisi, D., & Stoomklllmer, M. (2013). Balancing fidelity with flexibility and fit: What do we...


