Purpose

This brief addresses the selection and appraisal of curricula and interventions using an evidence-based practice framework.

Summary

Federal guidelines mandate the use of empirically supported educational practices, yet it may be difficult for some educators to identify and critique such practices. Several online resources offer practice recommendations based on the best available evidence for curricula and interventions. When empirical support is not available, quality can be appraised using research-derived curriculum checklists. Professional judgment should influence the decision-making process to ensure a "good fit" with the school's values and goals.

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The Selection and Appraisal of Curricula and Interventions
By Sarah A. Weddle

Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to offer guidelines to assist educators who are tasked with locating and selecting empirically supported curricula and interventions or who need to appraise the quality of the curriculum currently employed in their schools. Educators must have access to the best available evidence regarding curricular options in order to integrate it into the evidence-based practice decision-making process (Slocum, Spencer, Detrich, 2012). Therefore, in this brief, the answers to the following questions are addressed:

How can educators find curricula or interventions with strong empirical evidence?

How can educators appraise the quality of curricula or interventions for which limited research is available?

Finding Empirically Supported Curricula and Interventions

Based on recent evidence-based practice initiatives, a number of organizations have been commissioned to appraise the quality of educational programs and disseminate the results in usable formats for educators. One of the best examples is the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). The WWC conducts systematic reviews of scientific studies and determines the merit of curricula and interventions based on pre-established methodological criteria. Once a review is completed, the results are published in a variety of formats to be useful to teachers, administrators, and researchers *(e.g., Intervention Reports, Practice Guides,* and *Quick Reviews).*

In addition to the WWC website, several other agencies host websites of information related to specific or broad education topics (e.g., early reading curriculum, tier 2 behavior supports). Importantly, these evidence-based resources are free to users (see box 1).

Box 1

Evidence-Based Web Resources
- What Works Clearinghouse (ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc)
- Promising Practices Network (promisingpractices.net)
- RtI Action Network (rtinetwork.org)
- Florida Center for Reading Research (fcrr.org)
- Evidence Based Intervention Network (ebi.missouri.edu)
- Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (pbis.org)
- PBIS Apps (pbisapps.org)

Appraising the Quality of Curricula and Interventions

Of course, there are fewer risks involved in selecting a curriculum or intervention that has substantial evidence validating its efficacy. However, in many cases there may be no empirically supported curriculum or intervention available. Limited evidence does not indicate that there are no effective options; just that little is known about the efficacy of the available options. In situations where there are few or no "research-validated" curricula and interventions, it may be helpful to look for the next best type of evidence. This could be evidence that the curriculum was guided by research in the initial design and development. Several curriculum checklists exist to help educators determine whether programs have the essential research-based components (see box 2). In general, the following components are indicative of high quality curricula and interventions (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2008; Archer & Hughes, 2011).

1. Detailed scope and sequence of learning objectives and coverage of content.
2. Clear directions for implementation, including materials, target skills, and wording.
3. Specific content for teaching such as word lists, sounds, activities, math problems, etc.
4. Explicit instruction including introducing a topic, modeling and demonstrating, providing sufficient opportunities to practice, and corrective feedback.
5. Supplemental activities for diverse learners, including appropriate ways the program can be modified or extended.
6. Formative assessment and progress monitoring.

Professional Judgment, Client, and Context

Professional judgment should be used to ascertain the extent to which an intervention aligns with a school's goals, objectives, and values. To make a "good fit" estimate, professionals should determine if outcomes addressed in the intervention or curriculum correspond with the school's primary aims and values (Forman & Burke, 2008; Albin et al., 1996). Educators have the responsibility of integrating the best available evidence with relevant contextual variables to ensure effective curricula and interventions are selected and implemented.

Box 2

About the Author

Sarah Weddle is a graduate student in the Educational Psychology Department at Northern Arizona University. She currently works as a graduate research assistant under the supervision of Dr. Trina Spencer at the Institute for Human Development's Child Development and Language Lab.

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