

Title:

The Implementation of a Two-Year Reading and Dropout Prevention Intervention with High School English Learners

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Abstract

Background/Context:

Perhaps one of the most at-risk subgroups in schools are English learners (ELs) in high school with significant reading difficulties. One reason they are considered at heightened risk is the severe consequences of low reading ability and the limited school time remaining to remedy their reading problem. Reading difficulties are associated with increased likelihood of dropping out of school or failure to complete high school on time (Hernandez, 2011), challenges contributing to the economic and social welfare of society including lower rates of participation in the work force (National Research Council, 2011), and overall lower earnings than individuals who complete high school (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Developing and validating appropriate and effective interventions for at-risk, adolescent ELs who are struggling readers is essential given their representation in U.S. public schools and the increasingly important role they play in the nation's success.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question:

The purpose of this randomized control trial (RCT) is to determine the efficacy of two interventions that have not been evaluated with ELs: (1) an intensive, individualized reading intervention and a dropout prevention program (based on Check & Connect) (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). Our research questions include: (1) What are the effects of an intensive 2-year reading intervention on the reading achievement of ELs who are struggling readers compared with a school-implemented comparison group, and (2) What are the effects of a dropout prevention intervention on student engagement outcomes, such as attendance, behavior referrals, and a self-report measure of student engagement?

Setting:

We are implementing this research in three high schools in a large urban school district in Texas in which about 30% of its student population is currently Limited English Proficient (LEP).

Population/Participants/Subjects:

There were 358 eligible ninth grade participants. We used multiple criteria to identify 8th grade students who qualified to participate in the study starting in 9th grade. Participants are former ELs or current ELs. Participants are also identified as students with reading difficulties based on their scoring at or above one-half of a standard error of measurement of the state-established passing score on the reading portion of their 8th grade state accountability assessment.

Intervention/Program/Practice:

For students randomized to the reading intervention, RI was provided daily through intensive instruction in word study, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. RI classes were held for approximately 90 minutes every other day for the entire school year for 2 years (during their 9th- and 10th-grade years) and were scheduled during participants' elective periods. Students assigned to the dropout prevention program met with dropout prevention advisors weekly and participated in support meetings to discuss school attendance, behavior issues, and failing grades on an as need basis. Students in the BAU comparison condition participated in schools' typical instructional program.

Research Design:

The design of the study included three treatment conditions (RI only; (DO) only; RI and DO [RIA+DO] and one business as usual condition (BAU). Eligible participants ($n = 358$) were blocked by school and randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Participants remained in the same condition throughout their 9th and 10th grade years.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Participants were provided reading and school engagement assessments in September and May, at the beginning and end of each academic year of the intervention. Reading assessments measured students' reading comprehension, word reading, sentence-level fluency and comprehension, and vocabulary learning. The self-report engagement measure assessed student' behavioral-, academic -, and psychological engagement, student-teacher relationships, as well as goal setting and problem solving. We also collected data from schools reporting on rates of referrals for behavior problems and attendance reports at the end of each academic year.

The effect of reading intervention on students' reading performance (Research question 1) was evaluated using multigroup latent growth analysis (Muthén & Curran, 1997). For the purpose of this analysis, two distinct groups (i.e., treatment and comparison) were formed from the four groups that were originally randomized. The treatment group consisted of participants assigned to RI only and RI+DO, and the comparison group consisted of participants assigned to DO only and BaU.

The effect of dropout prevention on students' engagement (Research question 2) was estimated using multi-group multiple-indicator growth models (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2011). To compare absence rate and number of disciplinary referrals at the end of 10th grade multi-group regressions were conducted. We combined the DO only and RI+DO groups and compared it to the combined RI only and BAU comparison group to estimate treatment effects in school engagement.

Findings/Results:

Effects of reading intervention. Findings revealed significant effects for the treatment condition on sentence-level fluency and comprehension ($g = 0.18$) and on a proximal measure of vocabulary learning ($g = .41$), but not on standardized measures of word reading, vocabulary, or reading comprehension (g range: -0.09 to 0.06).

Effect of dropout prevention. On the student self-report engagement measure, there were no significant differences between the treatment and comparison group on the subscales of behavioral engagement ($g = -0.14$), academic engagement ($g = -0.13$), psychological engagement ($g = -0.18$) student-teacher relationships ($g = -0.15$), and goal setting and problem solving ($g = -0.17$). There were also no significant differences on number of disciplinary referrals. The intervention did have a significant impact on attendance rate at the end of tenth grade for students who scored 0.5 standard deviation above the sample mean absence rate or higher.

Conclusions:

These results indicate that adolescent ELs do improve their basic reading skills and learn taught vocabulary when provided extended reading instruction. However, these gains may not result in large differences in reading comprehension. Reading success in high school requires not just mastery of foundational skills, but wide-ranging content knowledge and vocabulary. In addition, the outcomes on measures of engagement suggest that having a mentor during early years of high school is not sufficient to change

perceptions about engagement, and that more research is needed on whether intervening earlier and in additional ways will yield positive results.

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