



Evaluating the implementation of Check & Connect in various school settings: Is intervention fidelity necessarily associated with positive outcomes?

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous school dropout prevention programs. However, few of them have undergone a rigorous implementation evaluation to understand their effects. This research presents two studies that evaluated the intervention fidelity and differential effects of Check & Connect (C&C), a targeted school dropout prevention program aimed at promoting student engagement and achievement. A total of 145 elementary school students (Study 1) and 200 secondary school students (Study 2) from two French-Canadian school boards (regional districts grouping elementary and secondary schools) received the C&C intervention for two years. In both studies, a clinical monitoring form was used to compare the intervention fidelity of each program component and active ingredient with what was initially planned. The relation between intervention fidelity and the effects of C&C on student engagement and achievement was analyzed using multiple linear regressions. Overall, the results show that intervention fidelity varies across elementary and secondary schools from one component to another and from one site to another. Furthermore, the association between the fidelity of each component and positive outcomes varies, depending on the implementation site. This evaluation supports the relevance of every component of C&C to favor engagement and academic achievement among at-risk elementary and secondary school students, while suggesting that the importance of certain program components may vary, depending on contextual influences on implementation and outcomes.

1. Introduction

School dropout and its many social, developmental, and economic consequences are well documented (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). Schools and educators are increasingly expected to implement evidence-based interventions to deal with this public health issue and to prevent students from leaving the school system without a diploma or a professional qualification. However, many factors can influence the successful implementation of these intervention programs (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Research has shown that organizational factors, such as human and financial resources, and community-level factors, such as public policies and funding, can influence program implementation, which in turn can impact the outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Knowledge of these factors can help decision-makers select appropriate and realistic interventions for their schools. Nonetheless, evidence-based programs implemented in the real world and

not in a controlled environment are required to stand the test of reality and demonstrate their effectiveness in a natural setting (Flay, 1986; Flay et al., 2005; Greenberg, 2004). Implementation evaluation can thus be highly useful both to gain a better understanding of program effects (or lack thereof) and to identify key ingredients to prioritize for future implementations (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004a). To enhance our understanding of the contributing factors in the success of evidence-based programs, this research aims to evaluate how implementation of the Check & Connect (C&C) school dropout prevention program in a real-world setting is associated with the effects of the program in terms of student engagement and achievement.

1.1. Program evaluation: linking implementation and effects

Program evaluation refers to the collection, analysis, interpretation, and communication of information about program operating modes and

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effects. It involves a critical approach and systematic data collection through which the value of an intervention can be judged (Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004b). In the program evaluation field, implementation evaluation consists in the examination of what has been done compared with what was initially planned, in terms of actions and activities designed to put into practice a given intervention (Rossi et al., 2004a). Implementation-related information can be useful to better understand the effects of a program. By using information on successful outcomes in combination with what has been implemented across multiple sites, essential components of the program can be identified (Durlak, 1998).

According to Durlak (1998), implementation evaluation is usually completed in distinct steps through which such implementation components as program adherence and intervention fidelity can be examined (Dane & Schneider, 1998). Intervention fidelity can be very informative, as it refers to the correspondence between the intervention that was planned originally and the intervention that was implemented in reality, in terms of active ingredients and time allotted to the program actions and activities (Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder & Sandler, 2011). It also refers to the extent to which the implementation process adheres to the theoretical core components of the program (Darrow, 2013; Schultes, Jöstl, Finsterwald, Schober & Spiel, 2015).

Previous studies have shown that intervention fidelity is associated with positive program outcomes (Burke, Oats, Ringle, Fichtner & DelGaudio, 2011; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). It has been demonstrated that most intervention programs are effective only once a certain level of implementation is reached. However, an implementation that conforms perfectly to the plans is seldom seen: positive effects are often generated with a 60% implementation rate and fidelity rarely exceeds 80% (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In real-world settings, evidence-based interventions are often implemented hastily, to respond to urgent needs, without any real desire to evaluate their implementation. Furthermore, unforeseen contextual influences in real-world settings can facilitate or hinder the ability to implement programs with fidelity. These contextual influences can be located at many levels, including individual (participants, intervention providers, etc.), organizational (school policies, leadership issues, etc.) and social (political context, funding, etc.) levels (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Elliott & Mihalic, 2004).

The complex contextual influences on program implementation can be better understood with the help of the implementation drivers framework (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom & Wallace, 2009), which introduces three distinct implementation drivers that work together towards the best possible program outcomes: Organization drivers, competency drivers, and leadership drivers (Fixsen et al., 2009). Organization drivers offer the best possible organizational conditions (i.e. funding, policies) in order to implement the intervention. Competency drivers ensure the implementers' self-efficacy by providing them with training and coaching, while leadership drivers offer support to competency drivers through technical and adaptive leadership strategies (Bertram, Blase & Fixsen, 2015). According to the implementation drivers framework, all three drivers work together toward the best possible program outcomes and illustrate the complexity of contextual influence occurring during implementation (Fixsen et al., 2009). These potential contextual influences can complexify attempts to learn from successful experiences to effectively renew these interventions in other contexts (Bertram et al., 2015; Fixsen et al., 2009).

1.2. School dropout prevention programs

School dropout prevention programs, which are in abundance (Klima, Miller & Nunlist, 2009; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; Tanner-Smith & Wilson, 2013), can be divided into two main streams: remediation intervention and outreach intervention (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godber, 2001). Remediation programs are intended to prevent the occurrence of dropout by targeting precise risk factors. Conversely, outreach interventions target the promotion and development of positive

outcomes to foster students' active engagement in school, ultimately aimed at promoting school perseverance and success (Christenson et al., 2008; Christenson, Stout & Pohl, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

Student engagement generally refers to students' involvement and participation in school (Finn, 1989). It has previously been defined by three components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004): behavioral, affective, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement refers to a student's conduct in class, including participation and respect for norms and rules. Affective engagement refers to a student's emotions towards schoolwork as well as school attachment and bonding. Finally, cognitive engagement refers to a student's use of self-regulation and meta-cognitive strategies in schoolwork. Hence, outreach interventions targeting student engagement are useful with both elementary and secondary students, as they aim to promote positive developmental outcomes. From elementary school to junior high school, these dimensions have been shown to be crucial in promoting students' academic success and perseverance in school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

1.3. Check & Connect: a targeted student engagement promotion program

The Check & Connect (C&C) intervention program was developed by a team of researchers from the University of Minnesota in the early 1990s (Christenson et al., 2012). The primary goal of this targeted outreach intervention program is to promote students' engagement and success in school as a way to favor their school completion (Christenson et al., 2012). The C&C intervention program has four main components: the *mentor*, systematic monitoring of students' behaviors and attitudes (*Check*), individualized interventions (*Connect*), and bidirectional communication with *families* (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2010; Christenson et al., 2012). It also comprises some active ingredients, such as *feedback on monitoring data*, *problem-solving interventions*, and *promotion of school success* (Christenson et al., 2012). In the program, every selected student is matched with a *mentor* for a minimum of two years. The development of a close and significant relationship between the student and his or her mentor is a key feature of C&C (Christenson et al., 2012). *Mentors* have central roles in the intervention, as they persistently promote student success, perseverance, and engagement in school. Furthermore, the once-a-week implementation of all the active ingredients of the program relies solely on the mentors (Anderson et al., 2004; Christenson et al., 2012). The *Check* component refers to the systematic monitoring of alterable disengagement indicators, including school attendance, tardiness, participation, and homework completion, which can be altered by interventions. The *Connect* intervention refers to individualized interventions put in place for targeted students based on their "*Check*" data. These differential interventions are based on each student's needs and must be offered weekly. During these *Connect* interventions, mentors should, among other things, provide *feedback* to students on their monitored data, solve problems with them and address any obstacles to being an engaged learner, and *promote* school success to teach academic or social skills that assist students in meeting school environment expectations. For example, if an increase in absenteeism is noticed on the monitoring forms, the mentor and the mentee will seek plausible solutions together during their *Connect* meeting using problem-solving strategies and will set objectives for the coming weeks. The mentor also promotes school success throughout the meeting by helping his or her mentee set career goals, for example (for more details, see Christenson et al., 2012). Finally, weekly communication between the mentor and the *family* ensures parents' involvement in the student's academic experience (Anderson et al., 2004) and favors the development of a trusting relationship between the two parties, who will then collaborate to promote the student's engagement and perseverance.

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