Detecting Early Warning Signs in Children at Risk for Learning Disabilities

ARESEARCH TEAM AT FPG RECENTLY COMPLETED A REVIEW OF RESEARCH THAT UNDERSCORES the importance of recognizing and responding to critical early warning signs of learning difficulties in young children. The paper, "Recognition and Response: An Early Intervening System for Young Children at Risk for Learning Disabilities," discusses a new systematic approach that can help early educators and parents ensure early school success for all children, including those at risk for learning difficulties. The proposed Recognition and Response system was recently endorsed by the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Background

The report indicates that the basis for the Recognition and Response system can be found in Response to Intervention (RTI), which emphasizes prereferral prevention and intervention for school-age children who are at risk for learning disabilities. Support for RTI, as well as the Recognition and Response system can be found in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which outlines RTI as an alternative method for identifying learning disabilities in school-age children, according to the paper authors, Drs. Mary Ruth Coleman, Virginia Buysse, and Jennifer Neitzel. RTI is a promising approach that is currently being used with children in kindergarten through grade 3. The authors suggest that RTI can easily be adapted to meet the needs of younger children ages 3 to 5, particularly those who may be at risk for early learning difficulties.

The Recognition and Response System

In the Recognition and Response system, there is limited reliance on formal evaluation, identification, and labeling. Instead, the Recognition and Response system emphasizes a systematic approach to responding to early learning difficulties that includes assessing the overall quality of early learning experiences for all children and making program modifications, tailoring instructional strategies, and providing appropriate supports for individual children who struggle to learn.

The Recognition and Response system includes four essential components:

1. **An intervention hierarchy** that reflects increasing levels of intensity of instruction and intervention that correspond directly to children's needs for support.
2. **Screening, assessment, and progress monitoring**, which involve an integrated assessment plan that relies on multiple methods and sources of information (e.g., observation, checklists, work sampling, curriculum-based assessments) and can be used to determine which children are meeting key benchmarks, which children are in the process of developing these skills, and which children are not making adequate progress.
3. **Research-based curriculum, instruction, and focused interventions** in which teachers use assessment as part of an integrated instructional system to make improvements in the general early childhood program and to provide focused interventions for children who require additional supports. The authors recommended that future efforts should focus on identifying standard research-based interventions. They proposed development of a "toolkit" from which teachers could extract specific practices to respond to individual learning characteristics within each tier of an intervention hierarchy.
4. **A collaborative problem-solving process for decision-making** in which assessments are used to inform decisions, thus creating a dynamic link between the recognition and response components. The problem-solving process is collaborative, systematic, and used by teachers, parents, and specialists to make practice decisions and to evaluate their effectiveness for individual children.

Recommendations for the Early Childhood Field

Further research is needed for future development, evaluation, and adoption of the Recognition and Response system. The authors will continue to conduct research at FPG by analyzing how the components of the Recognition and Response system are being developed and implemented by five state partners also funded by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation. Funding for further research of the Recognition and Response system also is being sought to address the following recommendations:

1. Further develop the Recognition and Response system by a) specifying in more detail each of the four components (i.e., guidelines for implementation at each tier; screening, assessment, and progress monitoring tools, research-based curriculum that address early childhood developmental domains, how to engage teachers, families, practitioners in the problem-solving process) and b) creating the tools and resources related to implementing each component.
2. Evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of the Recognition and Response system through both quantitative and qualitative research (e.g., cross-case analysis).
3. Use professional development as the primary vehicle for disseminating information about the Recognition and Response system to front line early childhood professionals— teachers, teaching assistants, specialists, and administrators.
4. Develop and evaluate dissemination strategies (consisting of print, electronic, and oral presentation methods) to communicate information about the Recognition and Response system with a wide audience that includes parents of young children, researchers, policy makers, and the general public.
5. Develop (or adapt) existing public policies related to program standards and professional competencies to support the widespread adoption and implementation of the Recognition and Response system throughout various sectors of the early childhood field (e.g., child care centers and homes, public and private pre-k programs, Head Start).

Conclusion

The findings of the paper suggest that RTI is a promising approach that could be effectively translated into practice in early childhood settings, particularly because of its focus on sound instructional principles (e.g., effectively teaching all children, intervening early, using research-based interventions and instruction, monitoring student progress, using assessment data to inform instructional decision-making). Previous research suggests that the implementation of RTI in kindergarten has resulted in a decrease in the later incidence of placement in special education. Therefore, intervening in early childhood settings using the Recognition and Response system could produce positive outcomes for young children who are at risk for learning disabilities. ∎