A Special Educator's Guide to Successfully Implementing Evidence-Based Practices

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A feeling of anxiety washed over Mrs. Thompson as she prepared her first-grade class for reading. Many of the students at her school love reading, but most of the students in her new inclusive class do not. The class was composed mainly of students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and students at risk. All of her usual strategies had been unsuccessful and she was frustrated. Have you felt overwhelmed like Mrs. Thompson? Do you wish you had a guide for implementing evidence-based practices? If so, read on . . .

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are shown by high-quality research to meaningfully improve student outcomes. An EBP is not a cure-all (Gallagher, 2004), but when chosen wisely and implemented appropriately it can be used as a guide to the practices most likely to work for students with disabilities (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2008). Using an EBP can help eliminate many of the frustrations and guesswork from teaching by providing specific approaches for improving student performance. The following is intended to serve as a step-by-step guide for special educators in understanding, locating, selecting, and successfully implementing an EBP.

Evidence-Based Practices and the Importance of Implementation

EBPs are instructional approaches that have proven to be effective through rigorous research (see box, "What Makes a Practice Evidence Based?"). When implemented with fidelity, or as designed, EBPs in special education have been shown to meaningfully improve the performance of students with disabilities (Cook, Tankersley, & Harjusola-Webb, 2008). For this reason, it is important that educators seek out EBPs and incorporate them into their daily instruction to help all students realize their full potential. To be considered an EBP, the program or practice must be shown to be effective by multiple research studies that meet strict criteria related to research design, quality, and effect on student outcomes (e.g., Gersten et al., 2005; Horner et al., 2005). Although not guaranteed to work for everyone, EBPs have been shown to be effective for the majority of students. Despite the considerable potential of EBPs to improve student outcomes and ease teachers' burdens for finding the most effective instructional practices, educators must be aware of how to locate and effectively apply them.

To help teachers effectively apply EBPs, we provide a list of prominent sources of EBPs for students with disabilities in Table 1 and a 10-step implementation framework for planning successful integration of EBPs (see Figures 1 and 2).

A 10-Step Implementation Process for EBPs

Using an EBP does not lessen the important role of an effective teacher. However, some practices are consistently more effective than others (Forness, Kavale, Blum, & Lloyd, 1997), and EBPs are such practices. EBPs grew out of the medical field, which

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What Makes a Practice Evidence Based?

EBPs are supported by multiple high-quality research studies designed to determine whether a practice causes positive changes in student outcomes. Although a variety of approaches for identifying EBP exist, the following guidelines are often used in special education:

- **Group Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Studies**
  At least two high-quality or four acceptable-quality studies must support the practice as effective, with a weighted effect size across studies significantly greater than zero. High-quality studies must meet criteria in at least three of the following areas: description of participants, intervention and comparison condition, outcome measures, data analysis, and at least four of eight "desirable" indicators, such as attrition rate (Gersten et al., 2005).
- **Single-Subject Studies**
  Five or more high-quality studies with 20 or more participants that meet criteria related to participants and setting; independent and dependent variables; baseline; and internal, external, and social validity must support the practice as effective (Horner et al., 2005).
- **Qualitative Studies**
  Although qualitative studies are useful for many purposes, they are not designed to determine whether a practice causes improved student outcomes (McDuffie & Scruggs, 2008).

outlined a model for practitioners to follow for choosing, appraising, implementing, and analyzing a treatment (Fineout-Overholt, Melnyk, & Schultz, 2005). The 10-step guide described in the following and summarized in Figures 1 and 2 is aligned to the medical framework and tailored to education, with the intention of assisting special educators in effectively integrating EBPs into instruction.

Step One: Determine Student, Environmental, and Instructor Characteristics

Mrs. Thompson asked her colleague, Mrs. Alexander, who was experiencing success with a similar class, about her "secrets of success." Mrs. Alexander said that she used a variety of EBPs. She suggested that Mrs. Thompson's first step should be to think about the students in her class and her own personal teaching style because it is important to match those variables to an EBP in order to have success.

The first step is to successfully determine relevant student, environmental (e.g., classroom), and teacher characteristics that an EBP must match or address. The following are some of the important characteristics to identify and evaluate before choosing an EBP:

- Student characteristics: age/grade, subject, language/culture, disability/learning need.
- Environmental characteristics: class grouping, available time, resources, funding.
- Instructor characteristics: knowledge, experience, teaching philosophy, teaching style.

Collecting these characteristics will be valuable in deciding which practice is the right fit.

Using an EBP does not lessen the important role of an effective teacher

Step Two: Search Sources of EBPs

Mrs. Alexander shared a list of sources for EBPs, and although Mrs. Thompson was apprehensive about getting information from the Internet, she started browsing the Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE) web site. Her fears began to fade as she explored the practices on the site and found new ideas, some of which seemed to potentially fit her needs.

Special educators often do not have the time or expertise necessary to independently analyze research studies on effective practices. For this reason, we located a variety of sources that conducted systematic evidence-based reviews and catalogued EBPs for students with disabilities. These web sites, along with the population(s) of students targeted, how EBPs are categorized, and additional resources provided are summarized in Table 1. These excellent resources eliminate much of the time and work associated with searching for, reading, and evaluating multiple research studies on different instructional practices to find out what works. Educators should revisit the sources periodically, as additional practices may be added when new reviews are conducted.

Step Three: Select an EBP

Mrs. Thompson was pleased to find that the BEE provided short summaries describing the practices reviewed and the characteristics of the students for which each EBP has been shown to work, as well as full research reports. The site also provided links and references with more information. Mrs. Thompson decided to try Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS; IRIS Center for Training, 2008) in which students work in pairs to improve reading fluency. PALS was designed to supplement existing reading programs for beginning and struggling readers. The characteristics described in the report matched her students, and she decided PALS would be a good fit for her and her students.

After reviewing EBPs of interest from the sources in Step 2, the characteristics in Step 1 should be considered and the most relevant and feasible practice should be selected. Selecting an EBP can be tricky. Perfect matches between EBP and student, environmental, and teacher characteristics are

Table 1. Sources for Evidence-Based Practices

Source	Population	Evidence-Based Classifications	Resources
Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE) www.bestevidence.org	Early childhood—high school reading Elementary—high school math English Language Learners Technology in reading & math	Strong evidence Moderate evidence Limited evidence (modest effects) Limited evidence (weak effects) No qualifying studies	Program description Contact information Web site Research reports
National Autism Center (NAC) www.nationalautismcenter.org (download the National Standards Report for EBPs)	Individuals with autism ages 3–21	Established Emerging Not established Ineffective/harmful	Program description Treatment strategies when possible Research study citations
National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders (NPDC on ASD) autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu	Individuals with autism ages 3–21	Evidence-based practice	Program description Contact information Web site Research citations Step-by-step instructions Implementation fidelity checklists Data tools
National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) www.nsttac.org	Secondary students Life skills	Strong Moderate Potential (needs additional research)	Program description Contact information Web site Research citations
What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) ies.ed.gov	Elementary—high school	Positive effects (++) Potentially positive effects (+) Mixed effects (+-) No discernible effects (0) Potentially negative effects (-)	Program description Contact information Web site Research citations Cost

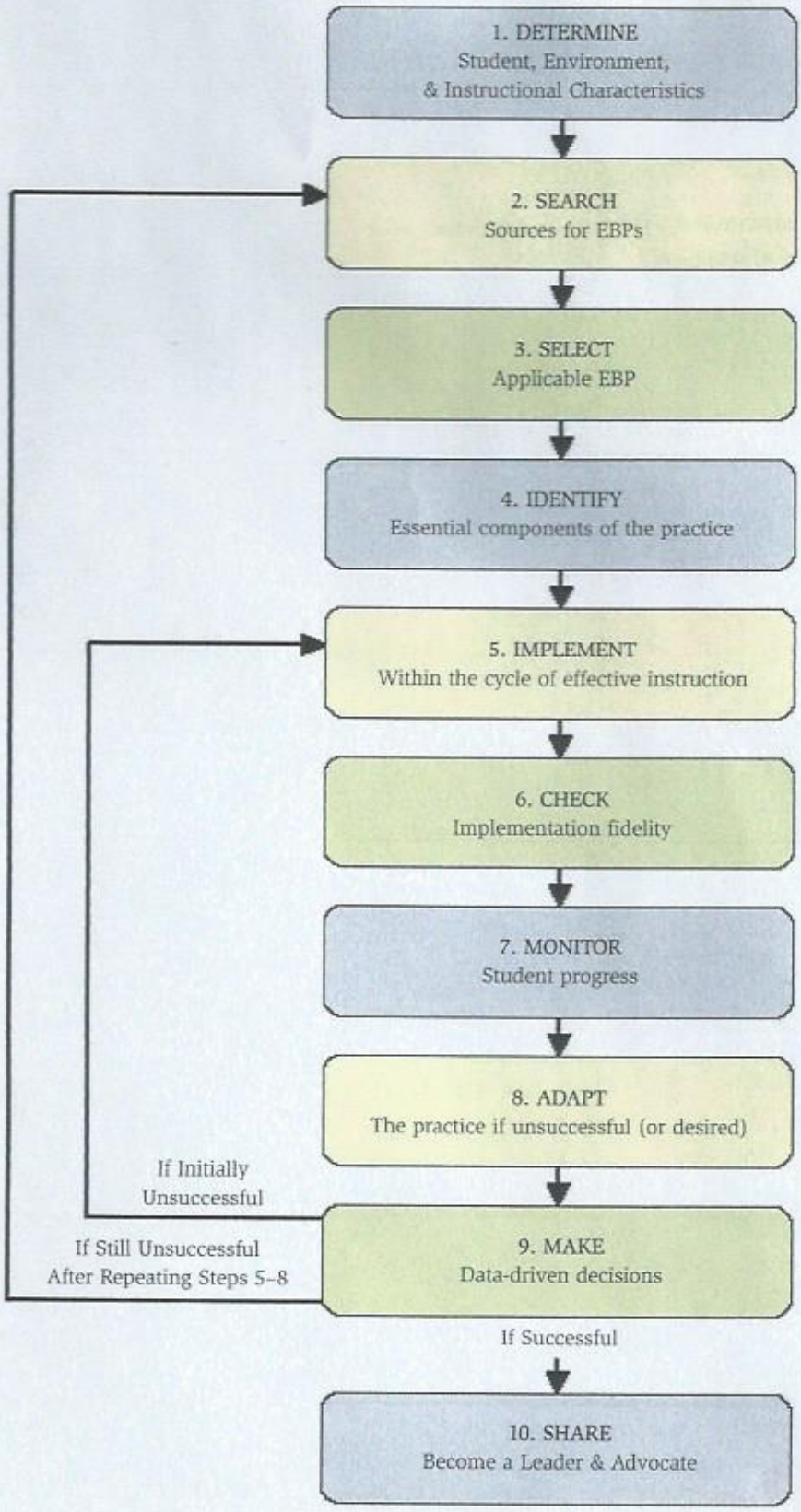
unlikely; but the closer the match, the more likely it is that the desired outcomes will be achieved (Cook, Tankersley, & Harjusola-Webb, 2008). All of the EBP sources in Table 1 provide references for the studies used. The studies provide detailed information on the specific student, environmental, and teacher characteristics with which the practice has been shown to work. Some characteristics such as student disability and content area may need to be weighted more heavily than others (e.g., teaching style). Teachers will need to use their judgment in deciding which relevant EBP is most likely to work for them and their students.

Step Four: Identify the Essential Components of the Selected EBP

For information on how to implement PALS, the EBP that Mrs. Thompson selected, she followed a link on the BEE's web site to IRIS (http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu) training modules that includes step-by-step instructions, printable materials, and even video demonstrations of the practice in action. She reviewed the directions and identified core elements of the practice to make sure that she wouldn't miss any important steps.

After selecting an EBP to implement, educators should identify the essential components of the practice. If critical elements of the EBP are omitted or fundamentally altered, the positive effects reported for the EBP in the

Figure 1. Flowchart for 10-Step EBP Implementation Process



Note. EBP = evidence-based practice.

research studies are unlikely to be duplicated (Cook & Smith, 2012). Therefore, identification of these key elements needs to occur prior to implementation in order for educators to understand how to deliver the intervention correctly.

Several evidence-based practice sources, such as the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders, include step-by-step instructions and implementation fidelity checklists for EBPs featured on their site (see Table 1). These are great resources for quickly identifying the essential components of an EBP. If step-by-step instructions are not available, educators can access original research articles to identify the essential components of EBPs.

Step Five: Implement the Practice Within a Cycle of Effective Instruction

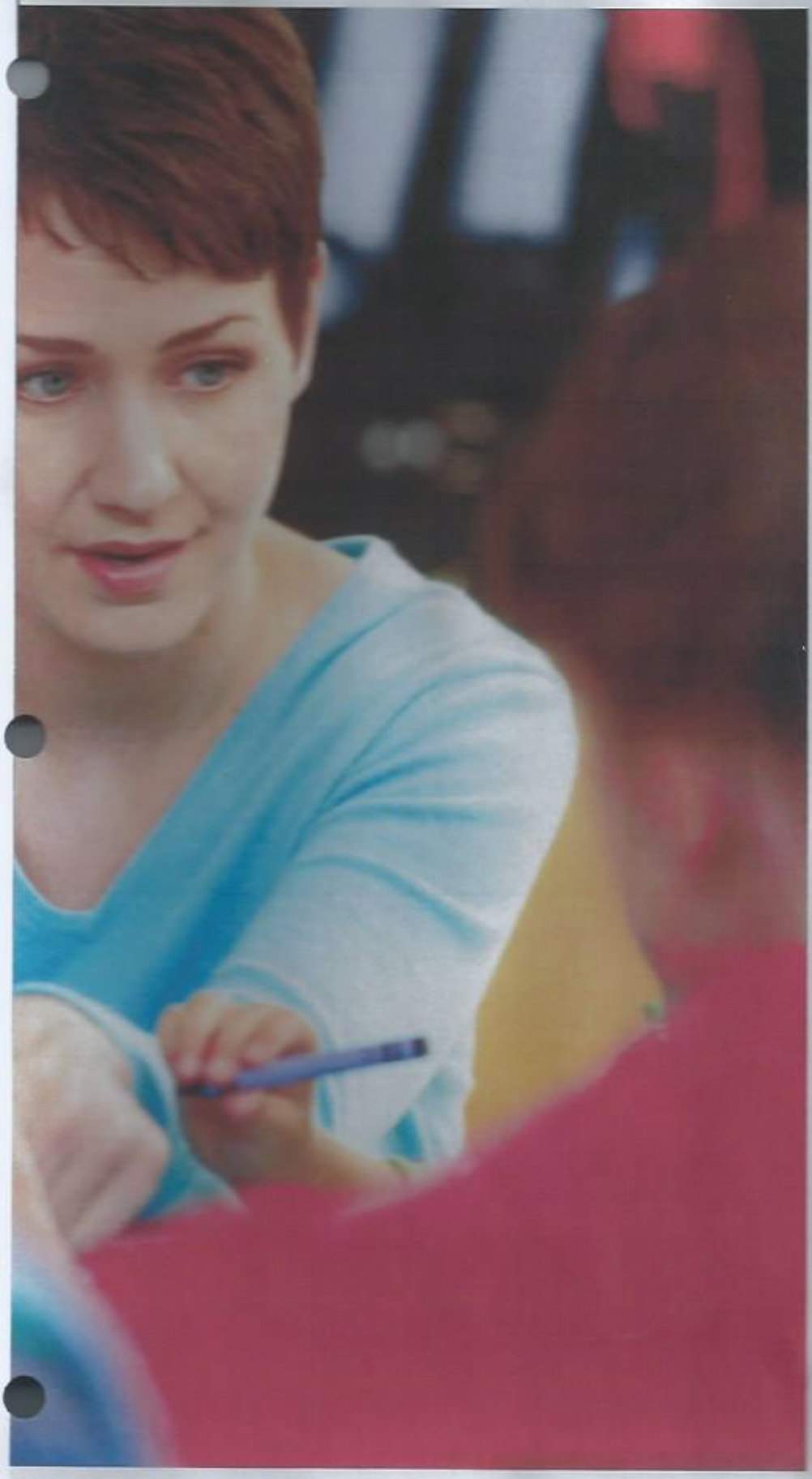
When it came time to implement PALS, Mrs. Thompson felt confident but knew the practice wouldn't work if her general instruction and classroom management weren't effective. She knew that sometimes she went through material too quickly, so she focused on presenting PALS with enthusiasm, but with appropriate pacing. She also set a buzzer in her pocket at 30-second intervals to cue her to stop and reinforce appropriate student behavior. In addition, she used reading material that the students were familiar with and enjoyed, so that they weren't learning difficult content the first time they tried PALS.

Effective teaching consists of more than merely choosing the best program or practice to implement. Even the most effective practices can have little impact on student outcomes if implemented through ineffective teaching (Billingsley, 2004). Some components of effective instruction that are a foundation for successful EBP implementation include

- Maximizing academic engagement.
- Using appropriate pacing.
- Preteaching key vocabulary.
- Previewing instruction.

Figure 2. 10-Step Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) Implementation Process Checklist

Process	Steps
1. Determine student, environmental, and instructor characteristics	❒ Identify age/grade level(s) of students ❒ Identify area of student need ❒ Review teacher, class, and school variables o Teacher's expertise/ability to implement new strategies o Teacher's philosophy/style and alignment to instructional methods o Schedule/available class time o Additional personnel o Additional resources/funding
2. Search sources of EBPs	❒ Search available sources for EBPs ❒ Review potential EBPs to implement
3. Select an EBP	❒ Cross-reference EBP to student need and instructor ability ❒ Determine cost and available funding if applicable
4. Identify essential components of the selected EBP	❒ Locate implementation fidelity checklist if available *If not available:* ❒ Identify and list essential components of EBP ❒ Create an implementation fidelity checklist
5. Implement the EBP within a cycle of effective instruction	❒ Plan a known lesson with compatible objectives ❒ Follow step-by-step instructions or implementation fidelity checklist to ensure critical components are included in step-by-step lesson plan ❒ Identify and create all necessary materials ❒ Embed EBP within effective instruction, which includes: o Pace appropriately o Preview instruction o Review previous instruction o Monitor student performance o Circulate and scan instructional environment o Recognize appropriate behavior o Exhibit enthusiasm o Display awareness of what is happening o Use wait time after questioning
6. Monitor implementation fidelity	❒ Utilize implementation fidelity checklist to self-assess implementation fidelity ❒ Request observation and feedback using implementation fidelity checklist
7. Progress monitor student outcomes	❒ Select or create a progress monitoring tool. o Consider commercially or freely available Curriculum Based Measurements (CBM) ❒ Consistently collect data on students' progress ❒ Analyze data and evaluate effectiveness
8. Adapt the practice if necessary	❒ Are all student outcomes increased with the use of the EBP? *If yes, no adaptations are necessary. If not:* ❒ Review implementation checklist and request additional observation ❒ Is implementation fidelity optimal? *If no, try implementing again with fidelity. If yes:* ❒ Plan adaptations while maintaining integrity of the essential components
9. Make instructional decisions based on progress-monitoring data	*If adaptations have been implemented:* ❒ Consistently collect data on students' progress ❒ Analyze data and evaluate effectiveness
10. Become a leader and an advocate	❒ Identify colleagues interested in implementing EBPs ❒ Celebrate EBP successes and lessons learned ❒ Share EBP implementation results and materials ❒ Create peer mentoring/coaching community ❒ Build a Community of Practice



- Reviewing previous instruction.
- Monitoring student performance.
- Circulating and scanning the instructional environment.
- Recognizing appropriate behavior.
- Exhibiting enthusiasm.
- Displaying awareness of what is happening in the classroom.
- Using wait time after questioning (Brigham, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1992; Brophy & Good, 1986; Cook, Tankersley, & Harjusola-Webb, 2008).

Effective teaching techniques combined with the use of an EBP provide the opportunity to maximize student outcomes.

Step Six: Monitor Implementation Fidelity

Mrs. Thompson was excited to try the new practice. She took care to script out how she would model, explain, and implement PALS for the first time, referring to the list of essential components. It seemed to go well as the students worked in their pairs and remained engaged in the lesson. She shared the implementation fidelity checklist that she made with Mrs. Alexander and asked her to observe and give feedback on her implementation of PALS.

During initial implementation of a new instructional practice, educators need to clearly teach all of the components, procedures, and expectations to the students. The practice should then be implemented regularly and monitored with an implementation fidelity checklist to ensure the integrity of the practice. Ideally, an observer uses the fidelity checklist regularly (e.g., weekly) to collect data to help assess if the EBP is being implemented correctly. If an outside observer or coach is not available, teachers can self-assess using the checklist. Fidelity can be assessed in many ways (Durlak & DuPre, 2008), but it typically includes assessing the number of critical elements or steps accomplished and number and length of lessons. Teachers can use implementation fidelity data to identify areas they need to emphasize or on which

they need to receive additional training to ensure the practice is implemented as designed.

Step Seven: Progress Monitor Student Outcomes

The students seemed to be engaged and learning, but Mrs. Thompson didn't really know for sure whether PALS was improving outcomes for all of her students. So she decided to use weekly curriculum-based measurements for oral reading fluency, which assessed the number of words read correctly in a minute from grade-level passages, to reliably monitor students' performance.

Before implementing an EBP, a progress-monitoring plan needs to be created to track the effects of its implementation across time. Although they are highly likely to work, an EBP—like any practice—may be ineffective for specific students for any number of reasons. Moreover, the effectiveness of an EBP can change over time because of such factors as changes in implementation and students' needs. It is important, then, to monitor student progress through regular, formative assessments to evaluate the ongoing effectiveness of the practice. By using an appropriate progress monitoring tool, educators generate reliable data and feedback on the effects of the EBP, which they can use as the basis for instructional decisions (see Step 9).

One commonly used progress-monitoring tool is curriculum-based measurement (CBM), which is short and simple to administer, provides reliable (i.e., consistent) and valid (i.e., meaningful) measures of student performance, and yields results that can be graphed to show progress over time (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007). These formative assessments should be done frequently—as often as twice weekly, depending on student need—and can be as short as 1 minute to administer. The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (2007) suggested that CBM is the optimal progress-monitoring procedure for teachers. Some EBP sources, such as the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders, provide progress monitoring and data collection tools for identified EBPs. The National Center on Response to Intervention (www.rti4success.org) provides a useful chart rating the effectiveness of a variety of progress monitoring tools.

Step Eight: Adapt the Practice If Necessary

After 3 weeks, Mrs. Thompson was very pleased that CBM results indicated that the performance of most of her students was improving. For the few students who did not show meaningful improvement in reading fluency, she decided to adapt the practice slightly by building background knowledge and preteaching key vocabulary to help make the material more accessible and increase its effectiveness. Mrs. Thompson was careful not to change any of the essential components of PALS when she added these adaptations.

After implementing and becoming familiar with an EBP, teachers may be able to improve its effects on student outcomes by adapting the practice to optimize its fit with their teaching style, learners' needs, or both. Overly rigid implementation can sometimes reduce the positive effects of a practice because special educators usually need to individualize and personalize instruction to meet the unique needs of their students (Harn, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, in press; Hogue et al., 2008). Adapting EBPs in ways that maximize their fit without altering the essential components of the practice is an important way for teachers to take ownership of an EBP, increasing the likelihood that it will be maintained and increasing its effectiveness.

Effective teaching techniques combined with the use of an EBP provide the opportunity to maximize student outcomes.

Teachers should use the expertise accumulated over their careers (Whitehurst, 2002) to guide the adaptation of EBP to meet the unique needs of their students without diluting its effectiveness by altering essential elements. Savvy educators will also access the wisdom of other experts when considering how to adapt EBP. It is important to closely monitor the progress of students (see Step 7) to evaluate the effects of the adaptation.

Step Nine: Make Instructional Decisions Based on Progress-Monitoring Data

After continuing to monitor progress, it was clear that the adaptations were helping, and all but one of Mrs. Thompson's students were now making meaningful gains on their weekly CBM assessments. Mrs. Thompson asked a mentor teacher to observe her to ensure that she was using effective teaching skills and implementing the practice with fidelity—which she was. Then, for her one student not showing sufficient gains, she recommended more PALS sessions as a Tier 2 intervention.

If an EBP is achieving desired outcomes for target students, teachers should continue to monitor progress to ensure continued gains, but no adaptations are needed. If some students are not performing adequately in response to the EBP, teachers should consider the following to help decide the best course of action:

- Make sure that the EBP has been implemented and progress monitoring has been conducted for a sufficient amount of time—a few weeks or more. Both the students and teacher need time to get used to new practices. Collecting and evaluating progress monitoring data over time will help to accurately determine how the student is responding to the EBP.
- Examine the implementation fidelity (see Step 6). If one or more critical elements of the EBP are not being implemented appropriately (e.g., student participation), then these issues should be addressed before deciding that the EBP is ineffective.
- Check that the EBP is being implemented in the context of effective

What if I Don't Find an EBP That Fits?

Additional sources listed here evaluate and summarize educational research and provide information on the effectiveness of practices and curricula. Although these sources do not identify specific practices as evidence-based, educators can use the information reported to make an informed decision as to the effectiveness of practices reviewed. Many of the sources in Table 1 also include information on promising practices.

- National Center on Response to Intervention (www.rti4success.org)
- Florida Center for Reading Research (http://www.fcrr.org)
- Doing What Works (dww.ed.gov; a companion web site to the WWC)
- Promising Practices Network (www.promisingpractices.net)
- IRIS (http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu; a resource for free online training modules).

teaching (see Step 5). Teachers may wish to have an expert colleague, coach, or mentor come and observe them implementing the EBP in order to provide feedback on improving general teaching effectiveness (e.g., enthusiasm, wait time, classroom management).

- Assure that the EBP has been adapted (see Step 8) to optimize its fit with the students, instructional environment, and educator strengths.

tified as EBPs but have been shown to be promising practices (see box, "What If I Don't Find an EBP That Fits?").

Step Ten: Become a Leader and an Advocate

After her initial success, Mrs. Thompson thanked and shared her first experiences with Mrs. Alexander, who offered to meet regularly during their common prep period to discuss successes and challenges in continuing to implement the new practice. After sticking with PALS for a couple of months, Mrs. Thompson continued to see increases in reading fluency with her students. She shared her experience with the rest of the department, and when Mr. Yoshita, a new teacher, came to her for advice, she coached him on how to find and implement an EBP. Many other teachers became interested and started meeting regularly to help each other with EBPs.

Collecting and evaluating progress monitoring data over time will help to accurately determine how the student is responding to the EBP.

If continued progress-monitoring data (see Step 7) indicate that a practice is not effective with a particular student or group of students even after addressing these issues, the nonresponding students may be "treatment resistors," one of the relatively few individuals for whom the EBP will not be effective (Torgesen, 2000). In this case, it is time to increase the intensity of the EBP (if it is having some positive effects) or select another EBP (if it is having minimal, no, or negative effects). If another EBP is not found that is a match, teachers can turn to practices that are not yet identified as EBPs but have been shown to be promising practices (see box, "What If I Don't Find an EBP That Fits?").

Educators tend to look to colleagues for guidance (Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009), particularly if they share similar students, grade levels, and subject areas. As teachers become knowledgeable about implementing an EBP, sharing their expertise with their colleagues will help spread the use of the most effective teaching practices. Teachers will produce "practice-based evidence" for an EBP through sharing their positive experiences (Simons, Kushner, Jones, & James, 2003). Teachers put special trust in this practice-based evidence, because, in contrast to many research studies, it comes from trusted colleagues who have used the practice in real classrooms. Practice-based evidence can compel other teachers to adopt the EBP, influence school culture, and help reach a "tipping point" in which use of an EBP becomes the norm (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, & Sugai, 2009).

Instructional innovations (e.g., adoption of an EBP) without structured and consistent support are less likely to be sustained by teachers over time (Odom, 2009); therefore, teachers need support with the implementation of EBP. Creating a supportive community culture, which includes administrative and peer support, is extremely valuable (e.g., Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). One way to do this is to create communities of practice. Communities of practice are groups of people who have a common goal, such as improving student learning. They work together regularly to develop and apply worthwhile practices through collaborative inquiry, research, and skill building (Lassonde & Israel, 2009; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). After ample time to implement, monitor, and adapt the practice, these communities could then share their materials, suggestions, and testimonials with other teachers or even an entire faculty, and invite others to try implementing their EBP with the newly created expert cadre serving as coaches and mentors. This would help to create a "scaling-up" effect where small groups of individuals become experts in a practice and gradually spread the expertise and interest to larger and larger groups (Odom, 2009), creating

widespread and sustained implementation of an EBP.

Final Thoughts

When students are not responding to "business as usual" and not making desired gains, teachers need to ask themselves if they have really tried the most effective teaching approaches available. Many teachers are not aware that EBPs have already been identified and may be the key to success. Teachers can use this step-by-step guide as they begin the process of incorporating EBPs in their classrooms.

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