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Evaluating the Effectiveness of Free Tutoring Programs to Augment Student Success

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ABSTRACT

In hopes of resuscitating the scholastic propensity of underachieving students, administrators implement intervention programs such as after-school tutoring. However, there is a lack of clear, definitive regime for the substance and configuration of tutoring programs. Ensuring that compensatory education programs are effective will enable educators to advance a step further in the quest to completely ameliorate the achievement gap between at-risk students and students of mainstream America. The authors discuss practical ideas for implementation.

High-stakes testing has become the foremost paradigm of the American educational system. The "high stakes" test was designed and implemented in order to measure student aptitude and hold teachers accountable for their students. As early as the tender age of eight, elementary students across the nation can grasp the magnitude of high stakes tests and exhibit signs of excessive anxiety in anticipation of obtaining a passing score.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the need to investigate whether any difference in high stakes test scores exists among students who receive interventions such as strategic tutoring, traditional tutoring, or no intervention at all. Resulting effects of each intervention will be measured by the results of simulated standardized assessment tools and evaluated through formal observation. The results of the investigation will empower administrators to make informed decisions when planning to implement a supplemental program to serve at-risk students.

Data

Data emanated from the results of high stakes tests indicate that certain subpopulations, such as at-risk students, are still being left behind academically. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2003), since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first passed Congress in 1965, the federal government has spent more than $242 billion through 2003 to help educate disadvantaged children; yet, the achievement gap in this country between rich and poor white and minority students remains. Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) 2004-05 State Performance Report reveals that while 70% of the tested fourth graders in Texas met the standards for all three content areas (mathematics, reading, and writing), only 45% of at-risk students were able to obtain passing scores. Based on the results of this high-stakes test, at-risk students still have not attained the academic ability to match the progress of their more affluent counterparts. Closing the perpetual academic gap has become a monumentally esoteric feat. In effort to ameliorate the academic barriers faced by at-risk students, educational policymakers instituted the formation of compensatory education.

Tutoring Programs

In hopes of resuscitating the scholastic propensity of underachieving students, administrators implement intervention programs such as after-school tutoring. As indicated by Roe and Vukelich (2001), typically the purpose of tutoring is one of the following: 1) preventing academic problems, 2) providing remediation for those having difficulty, 3) maintaining students' current academic status, or 4) enriching children's academic abilities. Generally, the components of effective tutoring programs involve trained tutors, structured materials, and specific procedures for implementation.

Federal initiative P.L. 107-110, commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has allocated approximately two billion dollars to school districts in order to provide free tutoring services. The allotment for students at risk of dropping out in the Texas school finance formulas—called state compensatory education or

"accelerated instruction" funding—totaled more than $1 billion for the 2001-02 school year (Strayhorn, 2003). Children from low-income families enrolled in schools that have not yet made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for three years or more are eligible to receive supplemental services, including tutoring, remediation, and other academic instruction (Anderson & Laguarda, 2005).

Gewertz (2005) contends that states must evaluate the effectiveness of free tutoring under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, but a lack of resources might force them to compromise on the rigor of those evaluations. By anecdotal accounts, most states are not far along in designing evaluations and many experts question their capacity to design and implement high-quality evaluations (Gewertz, 2005). Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, Carole Keeton Strayhorn (2003), posits that to maximize the efficiency of scarce instructional dollars, school districts should analyze, on a program-by-program basis, each of their strategies designed for at-risk students. In short, in order to ensure that tutoring programs are effective according to federal protocols, they must be thoroughly evaluated on a consistent basis.

Tutoring Services

In a report to the United States Department of Education, Anderson and Laguarda (2005) discovered many inconsistencies within the population sample of six states and nine school districts. The content and structure of tutoring services varied widely across the case study sites, depending on the provider and in some cases, on the individual tutor (p.vi). Some providers had conducted alignment studies and purchased additional instructional materials to ensure that all state standards would be covered; others used state assessment results to develop tutoring plans for individual students; still others were unable to describe any strategy for aligning their services with state standards (p. vi). Training and supervision of tutors in 2003-2004 was not efficient; two well established national providers reported that they check on tutors regularly and conduct formal evaluations on their performance; other providers had no formal systems for supervising tutors (p. 50). The aforementioned inconsistencies may be contributed by the lack of guidelines and evaluative methods for tutoring programs. In addition, there is a lack of clear, definitive regime for the substance and configuration of tutoring programs. Even for those students who are getting tutored, there has yet to be a scientific national study judging whether students in failing schools are receiving any academic benefit, and there is no consensus on how that progress should be judged (Saulny, 2006).

Effectiveness of Tutoring

Existing data regarding the effectiveness of tutoring for elementary students are limited and inconclusive. Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, and Schumaker (2001) conclude that one factor that may contribute to the controversy over the effectiveness of tutoring might relate to a previous lack of clear distinction among instructional tutoring, assignment assistance tutoring, and strategic tutoring and the failure of researchers and authors to recognize that distinction as they write about and investigate the effects of tutoring. As a result, some educators question the value of after-school tutoring.

With dollars short and AYP and HQT hanging as double pendulums, educators are frequently left to their own investigation to determine whether a method meets the current SBR standard of NCLB, and the onus for making fiscally and programmatically responsible decisions about the programs and practices that are used in schools continues to fall to local personnel (Simpson, LaCava, and Graner, 2005). Goodyear (1991) asserts that it becomes harder for teachers to know how their interventions can be helpful, and what precise purposes they serve. To successfully implement an intervention, teachers must remain cognizant of the learner's academic deficits and needs. To say that an instructional program or practice is grounded in scientifically based research means there is reliable evidence that the program or practice works (Simpson, LaCava, and Graner, 2005).

Implications for Educators

One powerful way to provide low achieving students with needed practice- with the opportunity to learn to read- is to tutor them (Morris, 2006). Citing use of an evidence-based model, Morris explores the possibility of utilizing paraprofessionals or teacher assistants as tutors to work with at-risk students. According to Morris (2006), over the past decade, several first-grade intervention programs, including Reading Recovery (Pinell, Lyons, DeFord, Byrk, & Seltzer, 1994), Success for All (Slavin et al, 1996), and Early Steps (Santa and Hoein, 1999), have demonstrated that one-to-one tutoring can significantly raise the achievement of at-risk beginning readers. Outcomes of five studies were synthesized in Morris's report. Each of the studies featured (1) twice-weekly tutoring lessons that included guided reading, word study, and reading for fluency, and (2) supervision of the tutoring by a knowledgeable reading teacher (Morris, 2006). Findings of this study indicated that non-certified tutors might be effective if provided with adequate training, coaching, and evaluative feedback. In five studies that used variations of the same tutoring model, the tutored students consistently outperformed the control group: average effect sizes were .72 for word recognition, .84 for passage reading, and .71 for comprehension (Morris, 2006). "Balanced instruction and presence of a knowledgeable supervisor of tutors" were the key components of an effective tutoring program according to Morris.

Much akin to the findings of Anderson and LaGuarda, researchers have found that due to various circumstances, many students are unable to partake in the free tutoring mandated by NCLB. For instance, Richard surmises that in rural communities, tutoring resources are scarce. State officials and advocates for students in rural America say that many thousands of students in small and remote school systems are not getting the free tutoring that is their right under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (Richard, 2005). As stated by Richard (2005), the U.S. Department of Education estimates that about 226,000 students of the roughly 2 million who qualified received free tutoring services under the NCLB in the 2003-2004 school year, nearly double the number getting tutoring in 2002-2003. One solution to the lack of available tutors in rural areas is the implementation of online tutoring services. Participating families in rural districts in those three states receive computers so their children can talk with tutors who are certified teachers, using headsets and microphones, during two-hour online sessions (Richard, 2005). However, as one interviewed educational expert contends, "for many students, it's just not an intensive enough intervention" (2).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, educators must consistently evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in order to determine their impact on student success. Such a query may serve as an apparatus of transformational change in streamlining the content and structure of tutoring programs. Ensuring that compensatory education programs are effective will enable educators to advance a step further in the quest to completely ameliorate the achievement gap between at-risk students and students of mainstream America.

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