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Triumph Through Tragedy, One Student at at Time

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Triumph Through Tragedy, One Student at a Time

Abstract

The EF-4 tornado that struck Mayfield, Kentucky on the evening of December 10, 2021 caused tremendous destruction to the entire community of Mayfield. Two education professors at a neighboring university sought to help students in the Mayfield Independent School District and were able to do so via funding from a KEEP mini-grant. 81 of their college students were trained in Response to Intervention (RtI) practices and provided individual and small group instruction to students in Mayfield for 2 hours a week for 17 weeks during the 2022-2023 school year. Altogether, struggling students in Mayfield received 1,377 hours of RtI instruction from college students to help them recover academically in the aftermath of a horrific tornado.

Keywords

Mayfield Tornado, Response to Intervention, Higher Education, Diversity

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Context

On December 10, 2021, an EF-4 tornado created a devastating path of destruction 160 miles long through the center of Mayfield, Kentucky and other surrounding towns. Over 80 people lost their lives in what would become the deadliest tornado in Kentucky's history (Guyer, 2022). Two education professors from a nearby university knew the tornado would have significant impacts on the students in the Mayfield Independent School District, but they did not know to what extent. Families had lost their houses and were staying in shelters or with friends. Workplaces had been destroyed, leaving many Mayfield residents unemployed. Roads were barricaded by fallen trees and debris, making traveling difficult. The school bus garage had been destroyed so Mayfield had to borrow buses from neighboring towns such as Paducah and Graves County (Guyer, 2022). Students did not return to school until January 10, 2022, and the remainder of the school year required patience and persistence as staff and students learned to navigate through grief and uncertainty in the aftermath of this tragedy.

Like other schools throughout the United States, the Mayfield Independent School District had just endured nearly two years of COVID-19 and the delays that accompanied it. Students were already playing catch-up academically. The education professors predicted that this tornado was bound to set students even further behind and began to brainstorm ideas on how to help. They immediately thought about one of the classes they offer each semester called EDU 380. One of the goals of this course is to expose students to the process of Response to Intervention (RtI) in action so that they fully understand the benefits of this assessment model. The class emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, and students are placed in school systems

where they can embrace socioeconomic and cultural differences and understand how to teach diverse learners.

Literature Review

RtI is a multi-level assessment model used for the early identification of reading, math, and social disabilities in students. RtI screens students to identify those at risk for academic or behavioral disabilities, and there are three tiers in the system (Catts et al., 2015). Tier 1 intervention usually meets the needs of 80-85% of all classroom students. Tier 2 provides small group instruction for the 15-20% of students who do not respond to tier 1 instruction. Finally, tier 3 provides intense intervention for the 5% who do not respond to tiers 1 or 2. Students who continue to need assistance beyond tier 3 may be considered for special education placement (Catts et al., 2015). Providing access to RtI while in kindergarten may eliminate or reduce difficulties that may appear in first grade as students continue to learn to read (O'Connor et al., 2014).

Educators find that students in third grade reading below grade level also struggle with science, math, social studies, and foreign language because so much academic information is provided to students in written form. While students maybe able to recite details from a book, the higher order skills of drawing conclusions or evaluating the importance of ideas presents a challenge (Wanzek et al., 2018). As students advance and reading assignments become more complex, students continue to fall further behind. RtI helps to identify struggling students early, therefore avoiding years of academic failure. Proficiency in reading is key to students' success in all subject areas.

Methodology

The education professors did not have a lot of time to brainstorm their action research project; assistance was needed in Mayfield as quickly as possible. All they knew was that they had to solve the problem the tornado had created and help as many students as possible catch up academically. In order for RtI to be successful, schools require the assistance of teachers, classroom aids, and trained volunteers who can work with students in individual and small groups instruction. The education professors thought that perhaps they could hire a few staff members in Mayfield to train their EDU 380 students on RtI practices. Then, once a week for two hours, their students could work with any students who were struggling in Mayfield. However, where were they going to get the money to train the RtI instructors as well as cover the cost of the federal background checks that the EDU 380 students needed to volunteer in Mayfield? If they employed three teachers (elementary, middle, and high school level) and paid them each a stipend of \$150 for the RtI training, the total would be \$450. Federal background checks cost \$51.25 per student, and there were currently 39 students enrolled in the fall EDU 380 sections and 42 in the spring sections, for a total of 81 students. Federal background checks for 81 college students would cost \$4,151.25. Altogether, the education professors would need to come up with \$4,601.25 in order for their college students to assist students in Mayfield after the tornado.

It was right around this time that the education professors discovered the Kentucky Excellence in Educator Preparation (KEEP) mini-grant opportunity. Mini-grants would be awarded to individuals with proposals that aligned with the larger goals of KEEP, namely incorporating high leverage practices and evidence-based practices into multi-tiered supportive environments. They decided to apply because the idea of helping Mayfield students using RtI

seemed to align perfectly with the fundamental goals of KEEP. Fortunately, the professors were awarded a mini-grant of \$5,625.00 and set their sights on assisting the students in Mayfield with their academic recovery.

There were three staff members from the Mayfield Independent School District who trained the students in EDU 380 on the implementation of RtI using individual and small group instruction. Elementary education majors went to the elementary school, middle school education majors went to the middle school, and secondary education majors went to the high school. Classes began in August of 2022 and it took approximately four weeks for all of the college students' federal background checks to process. A large portion of the mini-grant covered the background checks and smaller portion compensated the RtI instructors. Finally, it was time to start helping in Mayfield.

Since EDU 380 met every Monday and Wednesday morning for two hours, the education professors decided that their students would travel to Mayfield every Wednesday morning to assist with RtI in place of class, for nine of the sixteen weeks in the semester. Students used their own transportation and carpoled when possible. At the elementary school, each college student was assigned a small group of students to assist. Since they had been trained in RtI strategies, they worked mostly with students in tiers 1 and 2. Several college students worked one-on-one with a student struggling in reading. Together, they practiced sight words, phonics, phonemic awareness, spelling, fluency, and vocabulary. At the middle and high school, each college student was paired with a struggling student in the class that corresponded with his/her major. For instance, math majors worked with students struggling in algebra or geometry. The classroom teachers appreciated the college students' help because more students were able to receive individual or small group assistance. One teacher remarked, "It's so easy for students to

fall through the cracks in larger classes. The more hands we have to help out, the better we're able to catch these students before they fall too far behind." All in all, Mayfield students were provided with two hours of free individual and small group instruction by college students every Wednesday for nine weeks in the fall and eight weeks in the spring.

Findings

Over the course of both semesters, college students formed close relationships with their assigned Mayfield students and both parties benefitted immensely from this arrangement. The students in Mayfield were able to receive individualized and small group instruction and the college students were able to sharpen their teaching skills and gain meaningful classroom experience. The purpose of this action research project was not to collect RtI data for test scores; the college students were not in Mayfield often or long enough for that kind of academic impact. However, the education professors wanted more hands in the classroom to help Mayfield teachers with their struggling students after the tornado. They wanted their college students to volunteer for as many hours as possible and form positive, meaningful relationships with the students in Mayfield who had lost so much. In the end, the education professors felt intense satisfaction knowing that 81 college students in EDU 380 had been able to volunteer in Mayfield for 1,377 hours during the 2022-2023 school year. None of this would have been possible without funding from the KEEP mini-grant.

Future Implications

All of the college students in EDU 380 are studying to become educators someday. Some will teach elementary school, some will teach middle school, others will teach high school, and several will teach special education at multiple grade levels. They all have deep desire to

positively impact future generations of students. Good teachers never stop learning. They collaborate. They create meaningful connections with mentors. They lead by example. They inspire people to dream, imagine, create, and celebrate, recognizing a deeper meaning behind what they do and why they do it (Bolman & Deal, 2014). The connections that the college students in EDU 380 made with teachers and students in Mayfield this past school year will serve them well in the years to come. They will be starting their practicum classes next semester. They will student teach after that. In 2025, they will begin to apply for jobs and start the interview process. Some of the teachers in Mayfield have already offered to be references for the college students in EDU 380. The education professors decided to partner with Mayfield schools again for the 2023-2024 school year in the hopes of providing even more assistance to the community while they continue to rebuild.

Nobody would dispute the negative impacts of the tornado in Mayfield on December 10, 2021, but blessings have arisen from this tragedy as well. Because of the KEEP mini-grant, the lives of 81 college students and countless students in Mayfield have been forever changed; the experiences they shared will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

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