Implementation of a school-wide prevention programme-teachers' and headmasters' perceptions of organizational capacity

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on schools' organizational capacity to implement a Swedish school-wide programme, Prevention in School (PS). It is based on semi-structured interviews with seven headmasters and 13 teachers from seven Swedish schools. The interviews were analyzed by the use of qualitative content analysis.

The findings show that the adoption of a comprehensive intervention like PS challenges the school organization as the staff encountered a variety of organizational barriers when implementing the programme. Factors connected to lack of consensus, collaboration and insufficient programme management were the main barriers that were identified. Teachers wanted a more extensive support from their headmasters in terms of participation in different programme activities. It was emphasized that peer coaches need to be prepared for their task, although the headmasters found it difficult to be able to choose those teachers who they perceived as the most suitable.

It is concluded that leadership, coaching and staff selection need particular attention when implementing a programme like PS, since those factors have been defined as important implementation drivers, both in this study and previously.

1. Introduction

A variety of preventive school programmes have been developed during the last decades (Catalano et al., 2003) and the school setting is considered as a natural arena for interventions that target problematic behaviour among youth (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003). Initially prevention researchers and practitioners focused on single problem behaviours and measures aimed at individuals (Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002) This has changed over time and today comprehensive programmes with aims of altering social regularities are advocated; much since they have an impact on all children and it is difficult to know which children are at risk of getting problems in the future (Berryhill & Prinz, 2003; Catalano et al., 2002; Flay, 2002).

In general, there are important contextual aspects to consider during implementation of prevention programmes in school settings. The general demands of the schools have increased (Greenberg et al., 2003) and lead to an intensified workload and feelings of stress among teachers (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Day, 2002; Stenlås, 2009). Adding a new programme to an already stressful work situation may be perceived as overwhelming and frustrating (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). Implementation of preventive interventions also requires certain organizational capacities (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009; Greenberg et al., 2003; Greenhalgh, 2005; Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2006). School-wide programmes are particularly challenging, as they put high demands on the school and are more dependent on the whole organization than more narrowly focused programmes. School-wide programmes require all teachers' engagement and collegiality, common planning time (Berryhill & Prinz, 2003) and supportive headmasters (Payne, 2009).

1.1. Theoretical implementation frameworks

Based on the last decades of implementation research, several theoretical frameworks for the conceptualization of implementation determinants have been developed. One of these describes the process of implementation as progressing through four stages: exploration, installation, initial implementation and full implementation, though the process is not always linear and the stages are to be seen as interconnected (Fixsen et al., 2009). The model (shown in Fig. 1) holds that implementation drivers (also known as

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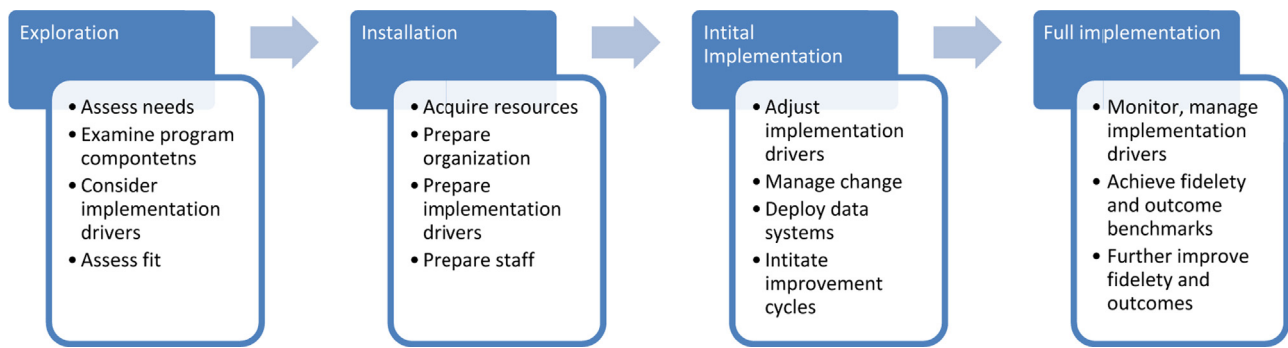E-mail address: maria.ingemarson@sll.se (M. Ingemarson).

Fig. 1. Implementation stages (Fixsen et al., 2009; Bertram et al., 2013).

core implementation components) are needed at each stage throughout the process. The drivers, which constitute the required infrastructure for implementation, are defined as organization drivers (systems level intervention, facilitative administration, decision support data systems), competency drivers (coaching, training, staff selection) and leadership drivers (technical and adaptive leadership) (Bertram et al., 2013; Fixsen et al., 2009).

With regard to the adoption and institutionalization of prevention programmes in particular, a comprehensive review by Durlak and DuPre (2008) has identified several domains of importance, one of which pertains to organizational capacity. Table 1 gives an overview of the types of factors falling within this domain; i.e. general organizational factors, specific practices and processes and specific staffing considerations (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

1.2. PS – a Swedish school-wide programme

Prevention in School (PS) is a school-wide programme at the universal prevention level, developed by Swedish researchers and practitioners to improve the school climate and to prevent problem behaviour such as disorder in class (Sundell et al., 2007). The programme targets all students in the school years 4–9 (age 11–16), and builds on the involvement of all staff. As reported elsewhere (Bodin et al., 2013) the development of PS was inspired by the Norwegian PALS (Ogden et al., 2012) a programme adhering to the School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support model (Sugai & Horner, 2002) The present study was performed together with a randomized controlled trial, in a research project funded by the Development Centre for Child Mental Health at the National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden. The trial was commissioned with the primary aim to study effects of the PS-programme on classroom climate and student's problem behaviour (Bodin et al., 2013). A second aim, which is also the aim of the present and a forthcoming study on programme and provider characteristics, was to investigate factors related to implementation of the PS-programme. The programme is described in further detail below.

1.3. Programme structure and components

In PS, schools work under supervision of external consultants. The major structural features are shown in Fig. 2, and can be summarized as (a) a decision making process on whether to implement PS or not, lasting approximately one semester and where 80% of the staff need to be in favour of implementation, (b) the creation of a local steering group responsible for the programme implementation, supervised by programme consultants, (c) the three core components Norm work (work with school rules and consequences for norm-breaking behaviour), Positive leadership (positive behaviour support in class) and a termly Parental forum.

If the school management shows interest in PS the decision making process starts with an introduction for all staff held by the external consultants (Sundell et al., 2007). Then a survey (Hellqvist & Sundell, 2007) about the school environment is distributed to staff and students, to guide a decision whether to adopt the programme or not. As PS is about establishing a common approach a clear majority need to be positive. If 80% agree to an implementation a final decision to adopt PS can be taken. A local steering group with teacher- and management representatives is created for the planning and monitoring of the PS-work.

The external consultants train and supervise the teachers and work together with the steering group. They spend approximately 50–60 h during 1–1.5 years at each school, holding scheduled lectures, meetings and workshops about the three core components. Between the seminars, the teachers get assignments to solve and try out the PS approach in the classrooms. The consultants also train teacher representatives to coach their peers in the Positive leadership component. The training of the peer coaches takes place in parallel with the coaches' training their peers. The monitoring of the use of techniques connected to the components is conducted by discussions within the teacher teams. After the initial 1.5 years, the programme is supposed to be sustained through peer coaching and the PS-steering group (Sundell et al., 2007).

1.4. Study preconditions

Although parts of the PS programme had been tried in collaboration with four schools during development, it had not been used in its full, final format before the trial. Prior to implementation, programme modifications were done in terms of additional training sessions, specification of manuals and new techniques, as well as classroom observations and a questionnaire for further monitoring of the work. Due to the contracted time for the research project, the schools were given approximately three weeks to consider whether to participate or not, instead of one semester as stipulated in the programme. Thus one of the major structural features of PS was not fulfilled.

1.5. Study aims and research questions

The core assumption in this study is that the school organization is crucial when implementing a school-wide programme like PS. The study aims at exploring teachers' and headmasters' perceptions of the schools' organization and their ability to implement the PS-programme. The following research questions guide the study:

- Which school organizational factors are crucial to the implementation of PS?
- How do these factors influence the implementation of PS?