Commentary on “The Benefits of Precision Teaching for Educational Psychologists”

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Commentary on "The Benefits of Precision Teaching for Educational Psychologists"

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Abstract

Purpose – This commentary aims to reflect on the paper by Kubina et al. (2024).

Design/methodology/approach: It offers an overview of the existing evidence base for precision teaching to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and some of the wider considerations around training for educational psychologists.

Findings: Precision teaching approaches can yield positive outcomes when delivered to high levels of fidelity.

Originality/value: This paper advocates for training opportunities for educational psychologists so they can use precision teaching strategies with their learners and work effectively with teachers.

Key words: Educational Psychologists, Precision Teaching, Fluency, Celeration

Classification: Commentary

Introduction

Kubina et al. (2024; this issue) highlight how precision teaching (PT) can help amplify educational psychologists' capacity to support students. By providing operational definitions and pinpoints for observable target behaviour(s), it is possible to adopt a more meaningful approach to assessment. By design, the Standard Celeration Chart (SCC) offers an accurate representation of data change and patterns (Calkin, 2005). Using learning pictures to guide decision making can help educational psychologists to problem solve with their students—that is, they can adopt successive and systematic strategies until they identify an approach that has a positive effect on the target behaviour (Kubina, 2021) and enables learners to retain, endure, and apply skills (Johnson & Layng, 1996). This can help facilitate conversations with school staff around strategies that they can employ to support students' gains between intervention sessions (Kubina et al., 2004; this issue).

Understanding the evidence-base

Reviewing published research can help us to ascertain expected outcomes when using PT within particular contexts (e.g., with different populations, on different scales, within different settings). However, it is important to note that historically PT practitioners have disseminated their work to the wider community through channels other than peer-reviewed journals (Binder, 1996) such as at SCC 'chart share' events in cities, universities, and schools (Lindsley, 1991). Calkin (2002) estimated that by February 2000, practitioners had used over 1-million SCCs to record data—the majority of which have not been published online.

That said, the published evidence base surrounding the use of PT to support individuals with learning and developmental disabilities is largely positive. For example, Ramey's (2016) review of 55 studies highlighted promising outcomes across targeted domains of numeracy, literacy, vocational/daily living skills, and other behavioural repertoires. Since its publication, others have reported similar findings (see for example Vascelli et al., 2023; Vostanis et al. 2020); with assessments suggesting that learners and practitioners view PT approaches positively (see for example Datchuk, 2017). In applied settings, these are pivotal factors in deciding whether to terminate or continue using the approach (McTiernan et al., 2022).

Much of the literature reports on the efficacious use of PT (i.e., those with extensive training/knowledge of charting conventions designing and delivering programmes to high levels of fidelity). In the context of the practice of educational psychologists, these data are useful as they are likely to have a level of background knowledge that will support implementation (Owen et al., 2022). Educational psychologists are also well placed to train/support teachers in more scalable approaches to PT in classrooms (Sundhu & Kittles, 2016), with evidence suggesting that coaching can improve outcomes from educational interventions including PT (Kraft et al., 2018; Owen et al., 2021; Roberts and Norwich, 2010).

Considerations for professional training

In the United Kingdom, the British Psychological Society (2023) outline the standards for the accreditation of doctoral programmes in educational psychology. This aims to uphold training quality beyond the threshold required to register with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) after graduation. Following the ethos that educational psychology programmes should be diverse and respond to local/changing circumstances, the way in which institutions meet the standards is not prescriptive. This means that institutions are not obligated to provide their doctoral students with the knowledge and experience to use PT in their practice. However, educational psychologists registered with the HCPC must engage in continual professional development that will benefit themselves and the stakeholders they work with (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2022). With a growing evidence base in support of the use of PT in mainstream, special education, and alternative settings it is important that practicing educational psychologists have access to (1) high-quality training provision to learn how to apply the principles of PT to fidelity in practice—this includes a comprehensive introduction to charting conventions—and (2) a wider community of precision teachers who they can share best practice with.

Conclusion

From the literature, we can ascertain that when practitioners deliver PT to high levels of fidelity it is a promising approach for supporting skill development. The is not a mandatory requirement at present for trainee educational psychologists to gain experience of PT during their doctoral-level studies. As such, we should consider whether there are enough opportunities for HCPC registered educational psychologists to receive robust training and integrate into the wider

PT community. As the system gains more practitioners with expertise in this approach, we can begin to open communication/training channels with teachers and support learners on a wider scale.

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