

Contextual factors contributing to quality implementation of the PAX good behaviour game in Estonia: the view of experienced coaches

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Summary

Social-emotional learning can lead to better social- and self-awareness, more skilled self-management, as well as a higher quality of personal and social decisions (Weissberg et al., 2015). In Estonia and internationally, PAX good behaviour game (PAX GBG) has demonstrated positive results in students' social-emotional skills, as well as academic achievement (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Kellam et al., 2008; Streimann et al., 2020). However, it is known, that programme outcomes depend on the quality of the implementation process (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In Estonia, research examining programme implementation quality and the contextual factors that support or hinder the quality implementation of PAX GBG has yet to be carried out. In order to understand better: 1) how programme coaches see programme implementation quality of PAX GBG in the Estonian context; and 2) what teacher- and school contextual factors coaches consider to contribute to the quality implementation, it was decided to interview 11 experienced PAX GBG coaches. The coaches that were chosen had up to four years of experience involved with different teachers at different schools.

Methods

Purposeful sampling was used to invite those eligible who had at least four consecutive years of coaching experience. Eventually, 11 coaches were interviewed, consisting of two males and nine females. All had between 4 to 7 years of experience coaching 7–36 teachers from one to four different counties of Estonia. A semi-structured interview was used to answer two research questions.

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- 1) What do the experienced PAX GBG coaches see as the quality of programme implementation?
- 2) What, in the view of the experienced coaches, are the teacher- and school-related factors that support or hinder the quality implementation of PAX GBG?

Theory-driven coding was used to answer the first research question based on the critical implementation process components: adherence, dosage, quality of delivery, and participant responsiveness. To answer the second research question, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed.

Results

Each of the interviewed coaches had a different idea of what the quality of the implementation process looks like in the classroom. Two coaches described all four implementation process aspects as implementation quality; two coaches described just one (adherence, and quality of delivery, respectively). Most often, coaches described occurrences related to the quality of delivery (eight coaches) and participant responsiveness (8 coaches), which they recognised as implementation quality in their practice. Despite being the most often studied aspects of implementation, adherence and dosage were considered less frequently (described by six and four coaches, respectively). With respect to adherence, coaches often state that some degree of adaptation by teachers is beneficial to implementation quality. Some coaches also described additional aspects of what they saw as implementation quality, such as characteristics of teacher professional development and practice.

Coaches also described several teacher-related or school-related factors that they saw as contributing to or hindering implementation quality. The main themes that emerged through a thematic analysis were: a) teacher characteristics, b) programme support system structural characteristics, c) teacher-coach relationship characteristics, and d) feedback and recognition.

Teacher characteristics was the largest theme with most subcategories, such as individual traits, attitudes towards implementing the programme, psychological resources and including students in implementation. Positivity (an important trademark characteristic of PAX GBG), openness to new experiences, persistence and self-assurance were among the traits that the coaches referenced as important. Personally acknowledged benefits or interest towards the programme, as well as the way of conceptualising programme implementation (long-term benefit of children versus disciplinary control), were both seen as important attitudes towards implementation. The inclusion of children in

decision-making and responsibility for programme activities was seen as an important means of boosting implementation quality. Regular coaching with school visitations was seen as the most relevant aspect of the programme support structure. Three aspects of the teacher-coach relationship were seen as relevant: trustworthy and supportive contact, encouragement to implement more programme features, and helping the teacher make a specific plan for the class, regarding the programme's implementation options. Among feedback-related factors were positive feedback and support from administration and other school staff members, positive feedback from one's class (including positive impact on complicated situations), and general recognition or ripple from the community or society.

Discussion

The current study adds to the discussion about the relevance and conceptualisation of SEL programme implementation quality (Berkel et al., 2011; Dane & Schneider, 1998; Durlak, 2016) and the teacher- and school related factors that may contribute to that (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Some of the factors that have been shown as promising in previous research but have not been researched frequently enough to make more conclusive decisions about them were also shown as relevant in the current study, thus adding to the validity of those factors for enhancing implementation quality (such as the quality of staff relations, or teacher attitudes towards teaching social-emotional competencies). Teacher-coach working relationship quality, which has been shown as relevant in many studies, was also revealed as highly important in the current study. Several novel factors were also suggested for having relevance for quality implementation of SEL programmes, such as teachers' (programme providers') individual traits, the type of feedback teachers receive for their implementation process, as well as the manner teachers include their students in making decisions about daily implementation. The paper also adds to the relevance of quality of delivery and participant responsiveness as important indicators of implementation quality in implementation research. Despite the fact that dosage and adherence are most often measured as indicators of implementation quality, this paper, alongside Berkel et al. (2011) and Humphrey et al. (2018), suggests that quality of delivery and participant responsiveness may be highly relevant for implementation quality and programme outcomes and deserve more operationalisation in studies that look into implementation quality aspects as modifiers of student outcomes in evidence-based SEL programmes. The study also supports programme adaptation as a relevant implementation quality indicator.

Suggestions for enhancing the implementation process of PAX GBG in Estonian classrooms were offered, including enlarging the circles of feedback for teachers and making students' progress more visible, among other things.

Keywords: PAX GBG, implementation quality, contextual factors