

Research: The Unit Organizer Routine

Overview

The Unit Organizer Routine is used by a teacher to introduce a unit of study in a subject-area course (e.g., English literature, social studies, U.S. history, biology, geography). It is also used throughout the unit to maintain students' focus on the unit, and it is used at the end of the unit to review the information that has been covered. The research was conducted with six secondary social studies and science teachers. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and group discussions. Quantitative data were gathered by collecting unit test grades. A single-subject, multiple-baseline design was used to evaluate teacher implementation of the routine. Teachers were observed over an eight-month period as they began, maintained, and gained closure on units. At the end of each unit, students were asked to reconstruct the unit for researchers by describing the content of the unit and then by arranging the key words on post-it notes to show unit themes and relationships.

Results

The teachers' performance as instructors changed markedly after three hours of instruction about the routine. In fact, they all performed the routine above mastery levels (i.e., 80% of the required instructional behaviors) immediately after the instruction. They became explicit with students about (a) the information to be learned, (b) the relationships among chunks of content, and (c) the activities that would be used to aid learning. The teachers reported that before the use of the routine, they often lost sight of the "big picture" of the unit and frequently became bogged down trying to cover masses of information. As a result, students had difficulty understanding the relationships among the clusters of information. The construction of the Unit Organizer helped them focus their instruction and helped students understand relationships.

Additionally, the unit test performance of students with and without learning disabilities in the teachers' classes increased an average of 10 points above baseline when the Unit Organizer Routine was used to introduce each unit of study. Seven of the eight students with LD who participated in the study and who were earning failing scores on unit tests during baseline earned average scores of 72% or higher on unit tests after their teachers started using the Unit Organizer Routine.

Conclusions

The Unit Organizer Routine can be helpful to both teachers and students. When teachers create the Unit Organizer, they plan their units in a new way and become more focused and explicit about the information that is covered. When they share the Unit Organizer with their students through the use of the routine, students retain more information and earn higher grades on unit tests.

Reference

Joint Committee on Planning for Students with Disabilities. (1995). *Planning for academic diversity in America's classrooms: Windows on reality, research, change, and practice*. Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning.