

ABSTRACT

Successful completion of research in K-12 schools requires more than just access, it also requires cooperation of school personnel. This presentation will share the story of a successful research partnership that was formed during an NSF funded project to improve science learning of middle school students with learning disabilities (LD).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- "Gatekeepers are those who give access to a research field. Their role may be in allowing investigators into a given physical space, or it may go further in granting permission for research to be conducted in a particular way" (Homan, 2001, p.1).
- Researchers often approach administrators who understand and support the complexities of conducting research in school settings (Elpers & FitzGerald, 2013).
- Principals who serve as gatekeepers for research projects act as the direct link to the parents and students; their position enables them to forge the road between theory and practice (Elpers & FitzGerald, 2013).
- "Scientific fields trust gatekeepers to evaluate the quality of their research, both its methodological and ethical aspects" (Leahey, 2008, p. 4).
- When considering the role of gatekeeper, there is a difference between "formal legal power to require compliance and informal social power to influence behavior in the schools and districts" (Wanat, 2008, p. 205).



Highlights from the Gatekeeper's Narrative



Motivation to take on the role of "Gatekeeper"

"Our school and personnel (especially the Principal) is always excited to try new strategies with our students to help them excel academically and this study was/is an exciting opportunity."



Living the role

- Finding eligible students to participate in the program (looking through IEP's etc.)
- Obtain Parent/Student permission
- Answer parent phone calls and e-mails regarding questions and/or concerns
- Getting teachers (or doing it personally) to take their time to fill out the form discussing each potential student in regards to demographics etc.
- Finding the space
- Coordinated bus/transportation (permissions and working with transportation at central office)
- Working with the guidance director to finagle student schedules
- Talk with teachers during faculty meetings to explain who was in our building and explain the logistics of scheduling etc. Handling teacher pushback for the creative scheduling.
- Working with our TSPEC and ITRT to make sure the computers would support the software.
- Working with my security specialist to order and obtain enough classroom keys for program participants. Make school ID's for building.



Challenges experienced in the role

"I did not expect the amount of pushback and man hours I would spend talking with teachers regarding the students participation in the program and how the schedule wasn't conducive to the teacher's."



Gatekeeper identity

"...it was a natural fit to be the gatekeeper and go between for the school and the study since I understood both."

"I think any gatekeeper for a similar project would benefit from having a relationship with the researchers or school as it may be more of a challenge understanding the needs otherwise."

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

This was part of a larger NSF funded project, partnered with a suburban middle school, to improve science learning of middle school students with LD. The assistant principal served a dual role as a member of the research team, as well as the school gatekeeper for the study.

Participants included 11 students with identified learning disabilities in grades 6, 7, and 8. After obtaining student and parental permissions, the students were instructed in small groups during each of the three phases.

In Phase One students received explicit instruction in science content that included:

- investigating the basic sources of energy;
- describing the advantages and disadvantages of renewable energy;
- identifying key concepts of solar and wind energy and related terms; and
- comparing solar and wind power.

During Phase Two, students applied their knowledge of solar and wind energy in the planning process of creating a Serious Educational Game (SEG) to teach others about renewable energy sources using goal setting and storyboarding.

Phase Three consisted of students individually building their SEG on a computer using a specially developed software platform, as well as focusing on setting goals of tasks to be completed each session.



Example Student Serious Educational Game (SEG)

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