Improving Teaching Skills for Early Childhood Education (ITSECE): Summary Report

Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority and Melbourne Graduate School of Education

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Background

The E4Kids study (Tayler, 2016) reported that in Australia, the quality of instructional support enacted in early childhood education programs did not achieve a quality level that is associated with gains in child outcomes (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010). Further, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2018a; 2018b) has consistently found that nationally, the Quality Areas requiring the most attention are those that address intentional teaching, responsive teaching and scaffolding, critical reflection, and the enactment of the assessment and planning cycle. In light of these findings, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) partnered with The University of Melbourne to validate and trial the use of Improving Teaching Skills for Early Childhood Education (ITSECE) – a self-reflective tool that draws on constructs of instructional support embedded in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Pre-K (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008). Instructional Support does not focus on a curriculum, but rather on interactional processes that encourage children’s higher order thinking, sustained engagement and language capabilities. The focus is on ways in which educators promote children’s thinking and understanding, expand children’s learning and encourage participation, and stimulate children’s language acquisition.

Aims

ITSECE was designed to be a professional development program that focuses on the improvement of early childhood educators’ teaching skills through targeted self-reflection on key elements of intentional teaching and instructional support: questioning, explaining and providing feedback. It was proposed that the ITSECE tool could be used systematically by educators to focus on intentional teaching strategies that have been associated with gains in child outcomes.

The ITSECE tool was developed by Dr Karin Ishimine within the broader E4Kids study (Tayler, 2016). However, the tool required rigorous field testing to determine its validity, and whether it identified similar teacher interactions to the CLASS Instructional Support indicators. In addition, it was necessary to assess the effectiveness and usability of ITSECE in the field, and whether educators’ use of the tool for self-reflection was associated with changes in their practice over time.

Methods

The ITSECE study was implemented in two phases: in Phase 1 the ITSECE tool and the training materials were tested and refined, and in Phase 2, 19 participating lead educators from eight participating services in Victoria were trained to use ITSECE as a self-reflective tool. The lead educators were requested to use ITSECE to reflect on a planned group experience, once per week, for a total of 22 weeks. Independent researchers attended each site to complete CLASS and ITSECE observations at three time points: Terms 1 to 3, 2019. At these points, CLASS and
ITSECE observations were conducted simultaneously. In addition, the lead educators agreed to use the ITSECE tool to reflect on their delivery of the same planned, group learning experience. This provided three sources of data to determine: (1) the quality of CLASS Instructional Support, (2) whether CLASS and ITSECE were sensitive to the same Instructional Support indicators, and (3) whether participants’ ITSECE self-reflections on their practice (questioning, feedback and explaining strategies) aligned with observers’ assessment of the same teaching strategies using ITSECE and CLASS. At the end of the project, focus groups were conducted with participants to ascertain their perspectives on the applicability and feasibility of the ITSECE tool as well as its contribution to their professional learning and use of intentional teaching strategies.

Key findings

In summary, the ITSECE study findings include the following:

- The ITSECE tool is a valid measure of instructional support provided through intentional teaching. There were significant and positive correlations between the three dimensions of CLASS Instructional Support and each of the three ITSECE strategies across the three time points. Content, criterion and construct validity were all rated as good. The internal consistency of the items was good and factor analysis suggested that a two-strategy model better represented the items than the three-strategy model tested in this project.
- Overall, the quality of Instructional Support (measured by CLASS) was found to increase across the ECEC settings over the 22-week study period.
- The average score for Instructional Support at Time Point 3 was above the threshold identified by Burchinal and colleagues as a quality level that has been positively associated with gains in child outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2010).
- The number of ITSECE self-reflections completed by participants was highly variable, with more frequent use found to be significantly associated with higher CLASS Instructional Support scores at the mid and final time points of the project.

The following key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the focus group data:

- Educators spoke of benefits to intentional and reflective teaching, and confidence in their own practice, through participation in the project.
- Educators reported a positive impact on their professional practice: this included keeping ITSECE strategies ‘front of mind’, and an improvement in their use of language within educator-child interactions. There was an increased focus on planning for small group experiences and reflections on the applicability of strategies with different group sizes, ages and abilities.
- The time required to complete ITSECE paperwork was reported to be a challenge.
- Educators suggested supporting documents, additional feedback and refresher training would assist with continued use of ITSECE. Further, taking a whole-team approach and including peer mentoring and coaching were recommended.
Recommendations for future implementation

Based on the key findings, we recommend:

- Converting the three-strategy model to a two-strategy model comprising Discussing and Explaining strategies (as demonstrated by the factor analysis of ITSECE);
- Ensuring leadership support and appropriate threshold conditions are in place at participating services;
- Developing a collaborative professional learning culture and applying a whole team approach, hence providing opportunities for team reflection, peer mentoring and coaching;
- Reducing the weekly paperwork requirements, and/or discussing the adaptability of the tool for different purposes during training;
- Providing refresher training and additional online supporting resources (e.g. webinars, online videos);
- Supporting educators to adapt strategies for use with different group sizes, ages and abilities, and;
- Considering the option of renaming the tool for communication and identification with the early years sector.
References


