

The Six Ps of Implementation Fidelity

By Chris Perry

If you were to wager a guess on the percentage of educational initiatives that were implemented as intended and successfully yielded results, which would you guess?

- A. 75%
- B. 22%
- C. 50%
- D. 33%
- E. 8%

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While research varies a bit on the terminology used to describe both “implementation” and “results,” the most commonly used statistic that answers the question above is answer D: 33% (Lyons 2018). Think about that for a minute concerning your classroom, school, or district. According to typical implementation patterns, only one out of three of your current initiatives, behavior plans, interventions, strategies, and other practices will be implemented as intended and yield the results you seek! In this article, we will explore how pre-planning for implementation using a fidelity framework can enhance implementation outcomes regardless of the size of your initiative.

Educators are often quite aware of the difficulties with initiative implementation, as we have seen countless initiatives come and go over the course of our careers. Many times, initiatives are complex and nebulous, so it is very difficult to monitor whether an initiative is being implemented as intended and is achieving its intended impacts. The most straightforward definition of fidelity comes to us from Sanetti and Collier-Meek (2019) as “the degree to which the intervention was implemented as prescribed or intended.” As straightforward as this definition is, sometimes the practice of monitoring fidelity is anything but.

The Six Ps

To combat this difficulty, Cultivate Education has begun to advocate for and support our partner schools in reflecting on implementation from a fidelity lens, upon the onset of our partnership. Whether the initiative is large or small, the “Six Ps” of the Cultivate Fidelity Framework have been transformative in providing space for district partners to be able to acknowledge many of their frustrations in trying to implement a previous or existing initiative with fidelity, as well as in identifying where to devote their energies to advancing implementation. In the table, each of the six categories of fidelity is defined and the primary questions to consider are provided.

To illustrate these categories of fidelity, let’s use a fairly common classroom example. As the teacher, you are

planning to incorporate 30 minutes of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) instruction into your daily class schedule using a district purchased curriculum.

The **Purpose** fidelity of this initiative might be to improve the social and emotional skills and competencies of your students. A lack of clarity in purpose behind your efforts will lead to ambiguity in why you are dedicating 30 minutes of instruction time to this effort, and will be felt by your students as well. If you can’t clearly articulate why these skills and competencies are important for students, then how likely are they to buy-in?

The **Paper** fidelity refers to the guidance documents (such as a curriculum, scope and sequence, lesson calendar, or standards progression) that articulate what the instructional plan is. Without this fidelity feature, there will be variance and a lack of coherence within your implementation. Furthermore, if more than one teacher is involved in an initiative like this and it isn’t clearly written out how it should be implemented, it is highly unlikely that the pacing, instruction, and outcomes will be similar.

The **Process** fidelity in this case refers to how well you follow the Paper plan for implementation. Curricula often come with some sort of fidelity monitoring tool, such as a walkthrough, observation, or self-reflection form. What often happens is that schools may use these fidelity forms for the first or second year of implementation, but then increasingly rarely afterwards. This situation does a supreme disservice to those educators who did not receive that initial training or fidelity monitoring, as there is often nonexistent continuous support for initiatives after the first few years of implementation. Most importantly, students miss out on the benefits of a spiraling and long-term implementation of this curriculum, and only have the opportunity to develop a patchwork of the desired skills and competencies.

The **Perception** fidelity is a commonly overlooked aspect within an initiative, especially as it relates to social-emotional content. Alternatively known

Cultivate Fidelity Framework		
	Definition	Primary Questions
Purpose	The reason for your school system engaging in this work. This addresses your Why behind the initiative	Why is your system engaging in this initiative? What area of concern does this initiative address? How does this initiative connect with other existing initiatives?
Paper	The documents, protocols, resources, etc. that your system has agreed to use as guidance and structure the implementation of this initiative. This addresses your What and the How To behind the initiative.	What are the agreed upon standards, practices, and strategies for this initiative?
Process	The degree to which your system is consistently implementing the specifics within your documents, protocols, resources, etc. This addresses your How Much and How Well behind the initiative.	How are you measuring the implementation of the specific steps within your Paper initiative?
Perception	Gathering feedback from stakeholder groups regarding their impression of the implementation of this initiative. This addresses your Who and the s behind the initiative.	How do various stakeholder groups view the Purpose, Paper, and Process implementation?
Product	Identify the types of outcomes you intend to get by engaging in this initiative. This addresses your Where and Which behind the initiative.	What are the outcomes you intend to influence with this initiative?
Persistence	If fidelity is established and products (outcomes) are equitable, this initiative will be woven into the operations through intentional planning for long-term sustainability and innovation. This addresses your When behind the initiative.	How do you intend to utilize data for decision making, build capacity, and sustain this initiative in the coming years?

Note: A pdf version of this chart can be found at www.cultivateeducation.org/resources

as “social validity” in research, this piece speaks to how the recipients of the initiative, in this case the students, perceive what this SEL instruction is all about, their level of buy-in to the initiative, and understanding of the benefits of their participation and advancement in the selected skills and competencies. Without keeping an eye on perception, an initiative is likely to be viewed with apathy by those that are the intended benefactors, as they will begin to see that the initiative is not responsive to their ideas and perspectives.

The **Product** fidelity in this example refers to whether students are gaining the social emotional skills and competencies that you identified in your Purpose. If students do not gain those skills, or even gain them inequitably, this can lead to frustration with the initiative.

The **Perseverance** fidelity within this example refers to how you intend to sustain the initiative as well as how to assist in generalization of the student skills and competencies. Without planning for fading procedures for the current set of SEL skills, as well as progressively building within the instruction and lessons, the initiative is likely to stagnate and degrade over time.

Implementation Challenges

Accounting for all six of these fidelity categories together within one initiative allows the implementer or implementation team to progressively evaluate the totality of the initiative, and more accurately pinpoint specific areas to improve. For instance, if this SEL initiative example collects Perception data that indicates that the students are not seeing the value of this instruction, the teacher can look at the Process and/or Product data to determine if they have been able to teach the lessons and whether the students are gaining the skills and competencies as intended. If Process and Product data look favorable, it may be appropriate to reconnect students with the Purpose of the work, as well as share both the Process and Product data with them to allow them to see the growth that everyone is making.

One difficulty educators often encounter is that existing Process fidelity tools do not adequately measure the features of the intervention/initiative they are trying to monitor.

In many cases of initiative implementation failure, we get to the end of the school year, and even after herculean implementation efforts, our student outcomes are no different than the year before. If we do not have implementation fidelity data, we cannot accurately triage this situation and determine what went wrong. For instance:

- Did all staff know why we were engaged in this effort and how to access and use the materials? Perhaps this isn't known because no one kept track of who was involved in creating the initiative and who was trained. (No Purpose or Paper fidelity)
- Was the instruction provided adequately and consistently? Perhaps we don't know because an intervention log was not kept. (No Process fidelity)
- How was the initiative viewed by the students? Perhaps we don't know because students were never surveyed or asked. (No Perception fidelity)

Collecting implementation data according to the Six Ps allows us to conduct this type of problem-solving effort, so when we fail to achieve an improvement in student outcomes (Product), we can look back and see that we didn't adequately train the right people, didn't gather buy-in from the students themselves, or any number of other common implementation shortfalls.

Crucial Role of Process Fidelity

While no fidelity category is more important than the others, Process fidelity is a common area of implementation struggle. As Sanetti and Kratochwill (2009) clearly articulated, “most implementers struggle to deliver interventions as intended for more than 10 days.” For many of the same reasons that diets and exercise plans are difficult, it is hard to change our habits and be consistent, even when we are very motivated and have a great plan in place! Viewed from a slightly different angle, recent research from Alley et al. (2023) found that “process fidelity was positively and significantly associated with achievement of program start-up and competency.”

As an example, Cultivate Education recently had a consult series with a grade-level team that was struggling to support a student with rather disruptive behaviors. During our initial meetings, the team had very little difficulty in identifying the Purpose - the why behind interventions being needed, as well as the Paper - what was already being done to support the student. The conversation crawled to a halt once we ventured into Process fidelity questions such as “how are you monitoring how often the student uses the calming corner?” This is extremely common within initiatives regardless of size, as it becomes logistically challenging to determine how to monitor if each of the features of our initiatives were completed.

When considering how to measure Process fidelity, the basic question we seek to answer is, “What evidence is there that shows that we are doing what was initially stated and planned?” Table 2 below provides examples of effective Process fidelity measures.

One difficulty educators often encounter is that existing Process fidelity tools do not adequately measure the features of the intervention/initiative they are trying to monitor. This is especially common for Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) that have intervention features that are uniquely tailored to the needs and skills of the student. One common solution is to make your own fidelity monitoring tool using a basic template. In the case of the recent consult meeting,

this lack of Process fidelity led to feelings and evidence of inconsistency and anxiety around implementation efforts, as well as a lack of improvement in the student’s behavior (Product).

	Process Fidelity Measures <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Walkthrough Tools• Checklists• Observations• Intervention Logs• Student Work
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Prevent, Teach, Reinforce

In the example school that struggled to identify their Process fidelity steps, we utilized the intervention structure of the Prevent, Teach, Reinforce model (Dunlap et al., 2018) as a way to categorize the Paper features of the existing intervention plan. We then applied those features onto a Process fidelity form that allowed the school staff to self-reflect on their utilization of those strategies each day of the week. Using this model enabled teachers to develop specific strategies and practices to more comprehensively support student needs, including a built-in Process fidelity self-reflection form that staff reviewed at the end of the week to keep tabs on Process fidelity.

Using this simple type of Process fidelity monitoring allowed the staff to better track the specific strategies and practices they were implementing and directly correlate their efforts to the changes in student behavior and learning. The student began to make improvements as measured by frequency and duration of emotional outbursts. We were then able to use times of day, days of the week, and specific activities in which the student tended to struggle more, and then the implementation plan was recalibrated to provide better support.

Fidelity at the District-Level

As a district-level example, Cultivate Education recently partnered with a mid-sized school district in

Process Fidelity Self-Reflection Form						
	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Weekly Total
Prevent						
Teach						
Reinforce						
Daily Total						

Note: A pdf version of this chart can be found at www.cultivateeducation.org/resources

the Midwest to conduct a large-scale implementation audit of their district Strategic Plan. This Strategic Plan was originally developed by their district leadership team and approved by the school board, so the Purpose behind this was already established. This Strategic Plan contained over 75 indicators across 3 objectives. Indicators ranged from “Develop a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) protocol for literacy” to “Identify and engage community partners.”

Using a customizable Implementation audit process, we found evidence of the Paper fidelity category in 68% of the indicators, but only 10% of the indicators had Process fidelity in place. Like many organizations, this district was well on its way to developing detailed plans regarding the “how to” and “what” they intended to do as an organization but needed to spend more time developing systems to monitor the “how much” and “how well” of their efforts. The Cultivate Education team is continuing to support this school system to finalize the remaining Paper implementation documents, in addition to building fidelity tools for monitoring the Process fidelity in the future.

While there are many forms, templates, methods, and measures for keeping track of implementation fidelity, there is little doubt about both the importance of such monitoring and its inherent difficulty. How can we hope to improve student outcomes if we are not willing to diligently monitor and examine our own efforts and use this information to refine what we do and how we do it? As in the timeless

words of Philip Stanhope, the 4th Earl of Chesterfield from the year 1746, “Whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well.” If we truly seek to implement initiatives above our current 33% implementation success rate, then planning for fidelity monitoring has to be a central tenet.

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