

Academic Supports and Curricular/Instructional Modifications

Module 16

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Mr. Wallace has recently been assigned to an inclusion classroom with three new students with both emotional and academic problems. Billy, who often engages in acts of aggression, also has an attention deficit. Despite his ability to write properly formed letters and use punctuation and capitalization correctly, Billy struggles with poor handwriting and is easily discouraged. He often refuses to take notes or write in his daily journal and pesters his classmates instead. Elise is a student who uses English as a second language (ESL) and rarely talks or interacts with her peers. She has difficulty with pronunciation and verbalization in addition to her sight reading deficits. She often stumbles or rushes through reading, skipping words or whole lines entirely. Jake is an “escape artist” with a deficiency in math. He can complete basic single-digit math operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) but when presented double-digit problems he bolts for the door. After observing their classroom behaviors and assessing their academic performance for a few days, Mr. Wallace concludes that their academic difficulties have a profound impact on their behavior. Billy, for instance, engages in conversation or aggressive behavior with his peers when his teacher presents writing assignments. Elise withdraws by putting her head down on the desk when she is called upon to read, either orally or silently. Jake walks around the room when given difficult math problems. Their general education teacher admits he basically lets them do as they please as long as they do not disrupt the class, a situation that benefits no one.

Description of Academic Support

In this scenario, Mr. Wallace confides with Billy, Elise, and Jake’s teacher that there are supports and modifications available to aid with the students’ academic progress and to help make classroom assignments less challenging for them. However, prior to considering any intervention or strategy, Mr. Wallace must first ask himself a few important questions:

1. Which supports and modifications that are available are sanctioned by the state and local school district?

2. How may the student's strengths be used to aid planning and implementation of the support or modification?
3. Does data already exist that indicates specific academic supports and modifications for the student and do these accommodations remove barriers to accessing the general curriculum?

Only after answering these questions can appropriate academic supports and curricular modifications be considered (Hatcher & Waguespack, 2004).

Billy (Writing)

Billy's situation is not uncommon for students with emotional disabilities. Students with emotional disabilities, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, consistently score well below average on writing portions of standardized tests. It is essential that writing difficulties be addressed in the lower grade levels before they become increasingly more difficult to correct in later years. Writing is the key to personal expression and academic success. An inability to master basic writing skills has the potential to pose life struggles well beyond high school (Yell, Meadows, Drasgow, & Shriner, 2009). Fortunately for Billy, Mr. Wallace can suggest to his teacher the implementation of the following supports and modifications for his writing deficiency:

1. Accept keyword responses instead of complete sentences.
2. Provide advance notes or assign a "note taking buddy" who is willing to share notes with the student.
3. Reduce the amount of text to be copied from the board and/or allow the student to write notes in the margins or blank spaces in the book.
4. Use alternative methods such as oral response or high-end assistive technology such as the computer or an AlphaSmart keyboard.
5. Accept spelling errors and/or allow the student to use electronic spell-checkers or spelling dictionary.
6. Allow the student to use low-end assistive technology such as pencil grips, large pencils, erasable pens, markers on a white board, or specially lined paper.
7. Allow the student to use the computer or planning programs to search for ideas before writing (Hatcher & Waguespack, 2004).

For instance, Mr. Wallace knows Billy's note taking can be made easier by providing alternative instructional materials, such as video recordings or computer software, that cover the same topic. To further aid with his note taking, Billy can be provided with prepared lesson notes and graphic organizers or he can be assigned a peer note-taking buddy who is willing to share notes. Billy is adept at the computer so he may also benefit from assistive technology such as a notebook computer or AlphaSmart keyboard. His teacher could also allow him to audio tape his assignments or present them orally.

Elise (Reading)

For Elise, her oral and sight reading deficits combined with her foreign culture and language background makes achieving academic success especially difficult. Reading is an essential life skill that must be mastered in order to maintain an independent lifestyle beyond high school.

Fortunately, Mr. Wallace shares with her teacher that there are several supports and modifications available to help improve her oral and sight reading skills. He suggests the following to accommodate her sight reading deficiency:

1. Provide an advance summary of the text and key vocabulary.
2. Allow the student to read questions in advance.
3. Use graphic organizers to arrange and sort important text or concepts.
4. Use alternative formats such as an audio recording of the text.
5. Use alternative materials such as lower reading level text that covers the same or similar content.
6. Use mnemonic devices.

For instance, Mr. Wallace suggests to her teacher that he offer extra time for her to respond to questions, provide cues and prompts, allow her to use an outline when giving oral reports, and inform her of oral reading assignments in advance. If feasible, he also recommends audio taping more lengthy oral reports instead of presenting them live. Other instructional modifications and supports to help Elise improve her reading include providing her with advance organizers, outlines, and study guides in addition to introducing relevant vocabulary and concepts beforehand. Elise can also be taught how to highlight and underline important information as well as how to use simple assistive technology items like line-keepers or a piece of paper to cover text not being read.

Mr. Wallace is also well aware of Elise's cultural differences and knows that her situation is particularly sensitive. As a student who speaks English as a second language, he knows there are additional factors to consider during the curriculum development process:

1. The extent of the discrepancy between current skill level in comparison to the requirements of the general curriculum must be determined.
2. Learning preferences and needs must also be identified.
3. Language ability must be assessed.
4. The teacher must be familiar with the student's culture, customs, language, and background.
5. Design and modify the curriculum for goals, expectations, content, scope, pacing, and materials.
6. Decide how multicultural perspectives based upon the student's background and native culture may be incorporated into the curriculum.
7. Develop the adapted lesson plans and materials.
8. Review the lesson plan and materials to ensure they are culturally acceptable as well as appropriate to age and skill level.
9. Consult resources and experts within the community that may provide further insight into the student's culture and heritage.
10. Ensure progress monitoring systems are culturally and linguistically appropriate (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998).

Mr. Wallace knows Elise's cultural differences require her teacher to adjust his teaching methods so that they are not in conflict with her cultural norms. He's researched the customs of her country of origin and has suggested that her teacher introduce her culture and customs as part of instruction or as a report topic for her. Mr. Wallace understands that sharing about her country

and culture will help ease the social divide between her and her fellow students and make her feel more welcome (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2009).

Jake (Math)

Many students with disabilities lag behind their grade-level peers in mathematics proficiency, especially in regard to basic math operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division). Failure to grasp fundamental mathematical concepts poses a real challenge to student success beyond high school. Mr. Wallace is fully aware of this fact, even though Jake is not, so he knows he must advocate on Jake's behalf to implement appropriate instructional strategies to improve Jake's math performance. For a start, to accommodate Jake's mathematics deficiencies, Mr. Wallace can consider four simple strategies:

1. Allow the student to use math tables or a calculator for computations.
2. Highlight important terms and details in word problems.
3. Use visuals, such as flowcharts or props, to demonstrate problem-solving steps.
4. Provide clear and concise instructions for assignments and tasks (Hatcher & Waguespack, 2004).

Jake's problems with fluency and proficiency are impeding his motivation to improve his fundamental math skills. To counter Jake's dislike for math, Mr. Wallace knows he must intervene now by providing him with additional structured mathematics opportunities with the following criteria:

1. Set the student's goal for the introduction of new information at a reasonable skill level (e.g., >85%).
2. Design practice activities with an emphasis on new information and systematic practice of previously learned information.
3. Schedule regular fluency-building practice sessions of (typically three 20-minute sessions per week).
4. Develop and implement a progress monitoring system.
5. Develop and implement a motivation regimen.

It is important for teachers to balance instruction and practice time. Although proficiency and fluency-building activities are critical to mathematics learning, teachers should not withhold the introduction of new information or struggling students risk lagging further behind. A mastery of basic math operations is an essential component of higher mathematics such as algebra and geometry. Those who struggle will continue to do so in all areas of mathematics (Yell et al., 2009). To assist with mathematical instruction for students, teachers can follow this 10 step plan:

1. Base all instructional changes upon data-driven assessment results.
2. Involve peers with practice and assignments.
3. Keep the parents informed of instructional strategies and student progress.
4. Implement cognitive behavioral techniques to encourage student engagement.
5. Use instructional design features to achieve reasonable performance levels prior to the introduction of new material.
6. Teach the principles of mathematics to mastery before more advanced concepts.

7. Establish realistic goals and keep students informed of their progress.
8. Monitor progress on a weekly basis and provide a means for students to track their progress.
9. Reinforce student progress and teach self-reinforcement techniques.
10. Take advantage of computer-based instructional methods and resources (Vaughn & Bos, 2009).

The Teacher (Instructional Methods)

Besides addressing the deficiencies of each student, Mr. Wallace is also aware that the teaching style and delivery of instruction is just as critical to Billy, Elise, and Jake's academic progress. Students with disabilities, especially those with learning disabilities, often have problems acquiring and retaining information and instructions. Fortunately, Mr. Wallace offers their teacher instructional modifications that may prove helpful to all three students, namely:

1. Break down large learning activities into more manageable smaller ones.
2. Use visuals and graphic organizers.
3. Provide study guides.
4. Offer analogies, stories, and examples.
5. Use mnemonic devices.
6. Provide multiple opportunities to review new information.
7. Use advance and post-organizers and provide summaries of lesson content.
8. Provide students with interactive and hands-on activities (Miller, 2009).

He also knows all three students can benefit from additional individual supports such as scaffolded instruction and peer-assisted learning. Scaffolding is the adaptation of instruction in such a way that students are adequately challenged and encouraged to learn new skills. Scaffolding is based upon Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development." It is an explicit and systematic process that requires mastery of easier skills before the introduction of more complex skills. Breaking down skills instruction into smaller and more manageable parts ensures students understand the process is a series of individual steps and that each step must be mastered before introducing the next step in the process. Mr. Wallace knows the use of scaffolding should follow these guidelines:

1. Break down tasks into smaller components.
2. Teach easier skills to mastery before introducing more complex skills.
3. Slow pace of new skill introduction to provide more time for practice.
4. Use small groups.
5. Have students share their thought process while completing tasks.
6. Teach strategies for managing complex skills.
7. Model all steps of each task and skill.
8. Provide guidance during the students' first attempts at the new skill.
9. Provide praise with the successful completion of each skill step.
10. Use concrete materials during the initial steps of skill instruction.
11. Use a variety of materials (Vaughn & Bos, 2009).

Many students will also benefit from peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS). PALS targets critical reading and some math skills deficits through extensive practice and peer-tutoring. Each

low-proficiency student is paired with a more-proficient student who is trained by the teacher as a peer-tutor for the less-proficient student. Pairs are arranged based upon proficiency, namely the highest performing student in the first group is assigned to peer-tutor the highest performing student in the second group, and so on. These pairs are divided into two teams and are awarded points based on progress thereby encouraging both teams to work harder toward achieving success. The social benefits of the program can be just as powerful as its academic results so the program can be especially helpful for students with social skills deficits and/or emotional and behavioral problems.

The PALS program engages struggling readers in three, 10-minute activities per session: partner reading, paragraph shrinking, and prediction relay. The first 10 minutes of each session is devoted to partner reading where the higher-performing student reads aloud the text selection for the first five minutes followed by the less-proficient student who will then dictate the sequence of events from the passage. During the paragraph shrinking activity, for the first five minutes the more-proficient student continues reading the passage and summarizes each paragraph read. The lesser-performing student does the same for the next five minutes. The next 10 minutes is devoted to a prediction relay, a four-step activity involving prediction, reading, checking, and summarizing. The higher-achieving student goes first by making a prediction then reads the selected text, pausing after each paragraph to adjust the prediction. After five minutes, the lower-performing student does the same. The remainder of the session is devoted to a two-minute retelling activity and for session preparation and transitions.

More proficient students are taught tutoring skills by their teacher to aid the instruction of their lesser proficient peer partners. It is imperative that peer-tutors practice tutoring so they become thoroughly aware of their responsibilities. The student tutors, along with their teacher, closely monitor the effectiveness of the program based upon the progress of the tutee during each session. Prompting cards are utilized to keep the students on task and the session on track. Throughout the lesson, whenever errors are made by the tutee, the tutor points them out and instructs the tutee to reread the text. If the tutee fails to offer an answer, or makes an incorrect answer, the tutor will provide the answer. Points are awarded for correct answers and how well the tutor and tutee feel they performed during the activities so it is in their best interest to do their best. It is a team effort that “wins” the session (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010; Miller, 2009; Vaughn & Bos, 2009; Yell et al., 2009).

Discussion on Research on Academic Supports

Research has shown that students with emotional disabilities consistently perform below their non-disabled peers and, if interventions are not implemented in a timely manner, their academic performance will continue to worsen over time. However, until the past few years, strategies and interventions to improve the academic progress of students with emotional disabilities have largely focused on the student’s emotional and behavioral deficiencies to the exclusion of instructional interventions. Up until recently, most accepted behavior management practices focused on the systematic application of consequences immediately following the behavior as opposed to the behavioral antecedents or environmental influences (Yell et al., 2009). Now, however, there is a dramatic reversal in thinking. It is widely accepted that academic performance has a profound and lasting influence on student behavior and emotional well-being. We now recognize that quality instruction is the most easily accessible and

economically viable intervention strategy for students with emotional disabilities (Gable, Hendrickson, Tonelson, & Van Aker, 2002).

Although the available literature validating the use of academic interventions is scarce, it is undoubtedly beneficial for teachers to consider academic deficiencies as a source for student's emotional and behavioral problems. Students with emotional disabilities are often prone to academic-related difficulties such as straying off-task, an inability to complete assignments, refusing to participate in class activities, and/or absenteeism. In light of these academic difficulties, teachers must provide their students with the academic supports necessary for them to succeed academically. Students often misbehave out of frustration when academic tasks do not match their skill level. This mismatch can initiate a failure cycle that perpetuates the student's academic frustrations which, in turn, fosters problematic behaviors that can lead to disciplinary action. If nothing is done to stop it, this pattern is repeated over and over again. It's an unfortunate—yet preventable—cycle that can lead to delinquency and incarceration (Yell et al., 2009).

Students tend to view academic supports positively. Students with and without disabilities feel that not only do academic supports facilitate their learning, but they also feel teachers who implement them care more about their academic progress. They value teachers who show an interest in their learning by providing slower-paced instruction, more thorough explanation of concepts and assignments, and employ a variety of instructional methods and learning opportunities to ensure the success of every student.

When to Introduce Academic Supports

Whenever students fail, or are at risk of failing, teachers should make the necessary changes to instruction and implement effective supports to ensure student academic success. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education and the right to participate in the same general curriculum as other students within the public education system. IDEA further guarantees that students with disabilities cannot be removed from age-appropriate classrooms due to modifications to the general curriculum (Miller, 2009).

Guidelines for Implementation of Academic Supports

Before providing accommodations to students, teachers should be aware of certain factors:

1. Know the differences between an accommodation and a modification. Accommodations are minor adjustments to instruction that do not significantly alter teaching methods or lesson outcomes, while modifications cover the same or similar content but with different expectations and sometimes follow a parallel curriculum.
2. Be aware of and consider multiple available accommodations.
3. Consult other teachers and the student to identify the accommodation(s) that will best meet the needs of the student.
4. Assess the accommodation for effectiveness and adjust it or consider an alternative accommodation if the student continues to struggle academically (Boyle & Scanlon, 2009).

Accommodations generally fall into four categories: presentation accommodations (such as auditory, multisensory, tactile and verbal alterations to instruction), response accommodations (such as access to assistive technology or organizers), setting accommodations (such as alternate locations for completing assignments or test taking), and scheduling accommodations (such as extended time for tests and assignments or alternative scheduling) (Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, Hall, 2005). Accommodations can also include shorter activities and assignments, visuals and graphic organizers, study guides, analogies and examples, mnemonics, multiple opportunities for review, advance and post-organizers, and hands-on participation (Miller, 2009).

Teachers should recognize that every accommodation must match the student's needs and goals. However, accommodations should not significantly alter lesson objectives and content or be an undue burden for the student, the teacher, school resources, or the environment (Boyle & Scanlon, 2009). Instructional accommodations, modifications, and supports provide strategies for students with disabilities a better understanding of educational objectives without altering the grade level requirements of the curriculum (Wood, 2002). Once implemented, academic supports must be assessed for effectiveness and adjusted or replaced if they do not exhibit student progress.

Cautions Regarding Academic Supports

Teachers who implement academic supports and instructional modifications should take a “whole curriculum” attitude toward adopting strategies. More often than not, teachers are more likely to institute reading supports over mathematical supports. Reading modifications tend to include modifying goals, materials, and instructional methods, while modifications for math tend to involve environmental and time management changes (more time to complete tasks, relocation to a quieter room), or lowering/deleting task objectives. Although general educators tend to follow adaptations and modifications when adequately supported or prompted to do so, they also tend to select strategies that are easiest to implement (Miller, 2009).

Teachers should be wary of over-accommodating students. Too many supports can be just as detrimental as not providing enough. Teachers should avoid the temptation to be overzealous when selecting supports and accommodations by choosing only the options that are most suitable to the needs and goals of the student. Teachers need to select supports and modifications based upon need, not availability.

With the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), along with the current demand for greater teacher accountability, special educators are under increased pressure to ensure that the students perform well on high-stakes district and statewide assessments. In order for these students to perform well on these assessments, special educators often focus their attention on content-area tutoring at the expense of teaching learning strategies. To avoid this “tutoring trap” teachers are advised to create a vision plan for the special education program and share it with all educators; select goals on learning new skills and strategies; teach study skills during resource time; communicate accommodations to the students' general education teachers; encourage differentiated instruction within the general classroom; rely on the paraeducator, volunteer, or peer-tutor to keep track of long-term and short-term goals; teach proper methods for students to ask for assistance; develop and assign classroom routines; encourage general educators to implement research-based strategies; integrate technology into instruction; provide modeling of strategies; promote

tolerance of corrective feedback and error correction; formulate a master schedule based on student needs to avoid favoring a select few students; encourage reflective learning; refrain from providing answers on assignments and tests; collaborate with fellow special educators and continually seek out professional growth opportunities (Lock, Conderman, & Pedersen, 2007).

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