



# Rethinking Intensive Instruction on Behalf of Students with Extensive Support Needs



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## Opinion Article

For more than a decade, the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) in the United States has championed an approach to presenting remedial instruction to students who are demonstrating significant and persistent academic achievement deficits in spite of receiving high-quality instruction in their general education classrooms [1]. This approach to remedial instruction, known as intensifying intervention, can be used with students who have been identified as having a disability that necessitates the provision of special education services as well as other students who are performing similarly in spite of not manifesting a disability.

Intensifying instruction involves adaptations to the high-quality instruction that is presented in general education classrooms and is proving to be effective with the vast majority of students (i.e., estimated to be 80% or more), but not everyone [2]. Specifically, the adaptations are to result in more individualized instruction that aligns with the instructional needs of the students who require remedial instruction.

Intensive instruction has routinely been explained in the context of a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) framework. This framework organizes a school's resources to match the educational needs of each student. For the sake of simplicity, a three-tier framework is often described [3].

## Intensive Instruction and Tiered Intervention Frameworks

Tier 1 refers to the educational services that are provided in a general education classroom to all students. These services consist of the high-quality instruction that was referred to previously. Its basic features are the use of evidence-based practices to teach an appropriate curriculum. For instance, high-quality beginning reading instruction would consist of evidence-based practices to

teach the following five fundamental tasks: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary/word study, and comprehension.

Tier 2 consists of remedial instruction for the few students who demonstrate academic achievement deficits in spite of receiving Tier 1 instruction. Hence, within an MTSS framework, intensifying instruction begins in Tier 2, where Tier 1 instruction is adapted. Commonly, two initial adaptations to Tier 1 instruction involve the presentation of remedial instruction in small groups and increasing the total amount of time a student is provided instruction. Thus, this remedial instruction is supplemental to Tier 1 instruction, meaning a student continues to receive Tier 1 instruction while also being provided Tier 2 instruction.

The NCII (2103) also calls for another essential adaptation, which is the use of a validated intervention platform. Essentially, this platform is a commercial program that has, through research, been shown to be effective in remediating the academic achievement deficits of students needing remedial instruction. For instance, a validated intervention platform may address the difficulties students are experiencing mastering learning outcomes that pertain to fractions. Typically, these platforms call for the two aforementioned adaptations of using small groups and increasing a student's time in instruction. Beyond these adaptations, recommendations have been offered for other ways to adapt, meaning intensify, Tier 2 instruction.

For instance, Fuchs et al. [4], discussed seven issues to address for the purpose of intensifying Tier 2 instruction. Altogether, these seven issues comprise what Fuchs et al. referred to as the Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity. Among the issues are (a) alignment, which involves ensuring that students are taught tasks they need to acquire rather than review; (b) strength, which emphasizes using evidence-based practices that have been validated with students needing remedial instruction; and,

(c) attention to transfer, which focuses on ensuring students can perform a task they learn during remedial instruction in a general education classroom, afterwards.

Estimates are that approximately 20% of a school's students will need to receive Tier 2 services, and that it will prove to be effective for all but 3%-5% of these students [3], who will still manifest academic achievement deficits and, therefore, need to be provided more intensive Tier 3 services. A majority of these students will have been identified as having a disability that necessitates the provision of special education services, but some of the students will not have been identified as such. Be that as it may, among the students with disabilities who will be provided Tier 3 services are those with extensive support needs, which will include students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

### Challenges Pertaining to Intensive Instruction on Behalf of Students With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

The challenge faced by those providing Tier 3 services to the aforementioned students is how to craft effective, purely individualized services for each student who requires them. A primary reason for this circumstance is that the types of validated intervention platforms used in Tier 2 simply do not exist for these students. Rather, much of these students' academic instruction often consists of a series of ad hoc experiences [5,6]. Moreover, there is no expectation that this situation will change in the foreseeable future [7]. Therefore, there is a need to rethink how the concept of intensive instruction applies to these students. The opinion expressed herein is that any consideration of appropriate intensive instruction for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities must address three fundamental issues: (a) the special education program a student is being provided, (b) the learning characteristics that are ascribed to these students, and (c) all seven issues identified by Fuchs et al. [4].

### Special Education as a Validated Intervention Program

In the United States, a student's special education consists of what is called specially designed instruction, or SDI. SDI is comprised of the content, methodology, and delivery of instruction that has been determined to be appropriate for a student with a disability. Content refers to the "what," meaning the tasks a student is to be taught. Methodology refers to the instructional strategy a teacher will use to teach the content. Delivery of instruction refers to who will present the instruction, when they will do so, as well as where they will do so (e.g., in a special education classroom). Altogether, a student's SDI results in his version of a validated intervention platform and, therefore, serves as the basis for the adaptations that will result in intensive instruction.

### Learning Characteristics of Students With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

The learning characteristics of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, particularly those students whose disabilities have been characterized as being moderate or more significant, have been noted to include (a) acquiring new content at a low rate, (b) learning less content, and (c) demonstrating difficulty maintaining and generalizing learned content [8-10]. To properly address these characteristics, a student's intensive instruction will have to be "fit for purpose." That is to say, teachers will need to employ instructional strategies that are appropriate for teaching task acquisition as opposed to other instructional strategies that are appropriate for teaching the maintenance and generalization of learned tasks.

### Applying the Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity

To date, this taxonomy's seven components have been discussed - almost exclusively - with respect to students receiving Tier 2 services, and the expectation that their academic achievement deficits will be resolved through their intensive instruction. Now, each component needs to be discussed with respect to how it can be configured to result in effective intensive instruction for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The following starting point for each component is offered for consideration.

#### Strength

This component refers to the need use evidence-based programs and practices. Thus, the issue that needs to be addressed is identifying evidence-based practices for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities that can be used to address their SDI.

#### Alignment

Alignment, with its focus on teaching content a student needs to acquire, will need to address both academic and functional content (e.g., activities of daily living/life skills) since both types comprise many of these students' SDI.

#### Behavior

A fair number of students with moderate-significant intellectual and developmental disabilities will require a behavior intervention plan in addition to the behavior supports that are the focus of this component. The supports address self-regulation that enables a student to remain focused during instruction, rather than behavior modification that focuses on teaching replacement behaviors for inappropriate behaviors.

#### Dosage

The issue to be addressed is providing students with the increased opportunities to practice a task while receiving

immediate feedback within their intensified academic learning time (i.e., increased dosage means increasing the time students receive instruction). Doing so will address acquisition challenges related to these students' lower rates of learning new content.

## Comprehensiveness

This component refers to the need to examine which elements of an explicit instruction approach are implemented. Given the research support for this approach with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities [12], teachers' efforts must result in the maximize use of the elements of explicit instruction within intensive instruction.

## Attention to Transfer

The aforementioned discussion of instruction that is fit for purpose also is relevant to addressing this component, which has to do with enabling students to generalize what they have learned.

## Individualization

While individualized instruction is at the heart of special education programming, intensive instruction needs to result in highly refined individualization through continual data-informed decision making that pertains to adaptations to the SDI for a student with an intellectual or developmental disability.

The NCII has established a foundation for thinking about the concept of intensive instruction. While this concept has been discussed in terms of students needing remedial instruction outside of special education, there exists a need to apply it with respect to special education programming, especially for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This short opinion piece offers one perspective on how this can begin to be

accomplished.

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