Conceptualizing High-Quality Instruction for Students With Extensive Support Needs

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Introduction

In the United States, a federal law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), has prompted schools to use a tiered intervention framework to provide appropriate services to their students. According to Danielson et al. [1], the law authorizes a tiered intervention framework known as a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to improve outcomes for English language learners and students with disabilities. Moreover, Bailey [2], documented widespread interest in tiered intervention frameworks in the United States by noting that a review of Department of Education websites for all 50 states indicated that every state referenced initiatives or guidance related to implementing these types of tiered support systems. Currently, tiered intervention frameworks have been designed to address students' academic, social/emotional, and behavioral needs [3]. However, for clarity, at the outset of this paper, the frameworks are discussed only concerning students' academic needs.

The fundamental premise of a tiered intervention framework is matching each student with needed services from a school's system of interventions [4]. This system is described in terms of tiers, characterized by their design and purpose. A rudimentary system consists of three tiers. Tier 1 is designed to present high-quality instruction in a general education classroom to enable each student to master grade-level core curriculum academic standards. Tier 2 consists of supplemental instruction, meaning students who receive Tier 2 instruction simultaneously receive Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 instruction is targeted in that it addresses specific core curriculum academic content a student has not acquired due to receiving Tier 1 instruction. Also, Tier 2 instruction is presented from either a standard program or via a problem-solving approach [5]. Lastly, Tier 3 instruction is presented to students who exhibit significant, persistent academic achievement deficits despite, in most instances, receiving both Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction. These students are characterized in several ways, including treatment resistors and non-responders [6]. They receive intensive instruction, which is individualized instruction that results from adapting alterable variables from previous instruction.

As was indicated above, a foundational feature of a tiered intervention framework is high-quality instruction. This instruction is often referenced with respect to Tier 1, where the focus is on getting every student to acquire their grade-level core curriculum academic standards. A basic two-part definition for high-quality instruction is that it involves (a) a focus on an appropriate curriculum (i.e., the core curriculum academic standards) and (b) the use of evidence-based practices to teach it [7]. Hence, an example of high-quality beginning reading instruction is when a first-grade teacher instructs students about phonics skills, which are one of the five elements of effective beginning reading instruction [5,8], and uses explicit instruction, an evidence-based practice [9].

This example highlights the importance of considering curriculum and instructional elements comprising high-quality instruction. That is to say, an evidence-based practice may be based on studies that included students in general education classrooms and not students with significant disabilities. In this instance, the practice would likely be inappropriate for students with extensive support needs. Similarly, for various reasons, these students will work to master different curriculum content.

Hence, this paper explores the meaning of high-quality instruction concerning students with extensive support needs who present a range of intellectual, communication, behavioral, and other characteristics that result in significant academic achievement deficits. After examining the meaning of the terms comprising high-quality instruction, the basic two-part definition concerning students with extensive support needs is reviewed. Mindful that practitioners must address contextual issues

intertwined with high-quality instruction, four of these issues are discussed in the second half of this paper. These issues must be addressed so that the conditions are in place for high-quality instruction with students with extensive support needs.

Unpacking the Definition of High-Quality Instruction for Students With Extensive Support Needs

An appropriate starting point for examining the meaning of high-quality instruction concerning students with extensive support needs is defining the individual terms. The first term, high, can be defined as "a successful moment." Thus, when someone refers to experiencing a "teaching high," they are referencing a moment when they have presented effective instruction, meaning instruction that resulted in a student mastering a targeted learning outcome, such as correctly stating the sum for an addition basic fact. The second term, quality, can mean the distinguishing characteristics of something. Concerning presenting effective instruction, its characteristics include (a) the intricate features of this instruction, such as allowing for a large number of opportunities to respond, followed by the presentation of behavior-specific feedback, and (b) its application to meaningful curriculum content. Finally, the third term, instruction, means a teacher's planned actions when she attempts to impart knowledge and skills to her students. Having examined the meaning of high-quality instruction in detail, the next step is to explore the curriculum and evidence-based practices relevant to students with extensive support needs. These are discussed below.

Curriculum

In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [10], a federal law in the United States which has the most direct impact on the provision of special education services to students with disabilities in public schools, both the academic achievement and functional performance needs of students with extensive support needs must be addressed [11]. With rare exceptions, the curriculum for a student with extensive support needs will include more than just academic content.

Academic content refers to that which is traditionally taught in subject matter areas such as mathematics, English/language arts, science, and social studies. In the United States, core curriculum standards pertaining to these traditional subject matter areas are statements of what students are expected to know and be able to do after receiving instruction. Students with extensive support needs will work to master access points, which are academic standards representing lower-level tasks tied to their peers' grade-level core curriculum academic standards.

Functional content is broadly defined to include matters that do not have an academic focus but need to be addressed to realize IDEA's purpose, which is to prepare students with disabilities for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. Thus, functional content involves topics such as orientation and mobility skills, social communication, and activities of daily living (e.g., personal hygiene skills, maintaining a household budget, and using public transportation). Unlike academic content, no published core curriculum standards exist for functional content. One result of this circumstance is uniquely defined functional curriculum content for students with extensive support needs.

As discussed previously, high-quality instruction must be applied to important curriculum content. A challenge facing educators identifying this content for students with extensive support needs is that, due to their learning characteristics, which include learning at a slower rate and learning less overall content than their neurotypical peers, planning teams will always be able to identify more important content the students need to learn than there is time available to teach it. This situation highlights the importance of prioritizing the curriculum taught to these students.

Evidence-Based Practices

An evidence-based practice is a teaching practice that has, through multiple, credible research studies, proven to be responsible for a desired change in a student's behavior [12]. A critical aspect of studies that support using an evidence-based practice with students with extensive support needs is that the studies involved participants with these needs. Altogether, evidence-based practices for students with extensive support needs include evidence-based strategies and high-leverage practices.

An evidence-based practice can refer to an evidence-based program or strategy [12]. An evidence-based program involves protocols for teachers to follow and materials to use. In some instances, relevant assessments are included. Notably, the whole program has been researched and shown to be effective. In a tiered intervention framework, evidence-based programs are referred to as standard programs in Tier 2. While numerous evidence-based programs have been developed for students needing Tier 2 services, these programs are lacking for students with extensive support needs who receive Tier 3 services, resulting in calls to change this circumstance [13].

An evidence-based strategy is a stand-alone instructional procedure that effectively teaches a targeted skill. Most evidence-based practices proven effective with students with extensive support needs are evidence-based strategies, also referred to as focused intervention practices [14]. Two noteworthy focused intervention practices, characterized as different types of systematic trial-based instruction, are discrete trial teaching and response prompting procedures [15]. Other important evidence-based strategies have been identified through work performed by organizations including the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice [16], the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder [14], and the National Autism Center [17].

Cox et al. [18], reported that teachers routinely combine focused intervention practices to present instruction, resulting in a unique multi-component instructional strategy. This resembles a type of technical eclectic approach [19], and represents the problem-solving approach sometimes used in a tiered intervention framework to craft Tier 2 interventions. The problem-solving approach highlights how a lack of standard programs and teachers' uses of a technical eclectic approach results in teachers considering promising practices for students with extensive support needs. A promising practice is an instructional strategy with some research evidence supporting its effectiveness but not enough to establish it as an evidence-based strategy [12].

High-leverage practices are frequently used practices in classrooms with students with disabilities and have been shown to improve student outcomes when implemented with fidelity [20]. Examples include promoting active student engagement and providing positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior. High-leverage practices have been identified for general and special education students, including those with extensive support needs [21]. High-leverage practices have also been extended to paraprofessionals who are invaluable members of instructional teams for students with disabilities [22].

Contextual Features Impacting High-Quality Instruction for Students With Extensive Support Needs

It is hard to imagine how effective instruction could be presented to students with extensive support needs by only addressing their curriculum and evidence-based strategies and not simultaneously addressing matters that result in the conditions under which a teacher attempts to present high-quality instruction. When a teacher tries to deliver high-quality instruction, the conditions in place will impact the degree of the instruction's effectiveness and efficiency. Accordingly, the following matters that affect instructional conditions are discussed: (a) establishing an appropriate environmental arrangement; (b) effective classroom management; (c) engaging in proper time management; and (d) conducting valid, reliable assessments [23,24].

Environmental Arrangements

Environmental arrangements refer to the set-up of the physical space where instruction is presented to students with extensive support needs. Appropriate environmental arrangements set the stage for proper classroom management protocols (discussed below) that result in safe, orderly environments where teachers present effective instruction.

The most critical environmental arrangements for students with extensive support needs pertain to their classrooms since these are the locations where teachers and students spend the most time. Environmental design features that must be addressed include (a) establishing clear lines of sight between each teacher and student so that instruction can be seen; (b) the teacher having instructional materials nearby and ready for use so that she maximizes academic learning time and observes students for displays of proper behavior; (c) ensuring the environment is aesthetically pleasing to increase student motivation and limit potential distractions; (d) proper climate control; and (e) managing student and staff movement to ensure smooth transitions and unnecessary lost academic learning time.

Locations beyond a traditional classroom need to be organized for teaching functional content. For instance, a restroom, where personal hygiene skills will be taught, must be designed using the same principles as when designing a classroom. Every environmental arrangement must account for the instructional arrangement used. Instructional arrangements refer to the pupil-to-teacher ratios during lessons. Effective instruction has been presented to students with extensive support needs across several instructional arrangements: whole class, small group, and 1:1. Importantly, instructional efficiency can be increased by presenting instruction with these instructional arrangements along with observational and incidental learning strategies.

Effective Classroom Management

Classroom management consists of the rules and routines teachers and students follow to establish a safe, orderly environment. These rules and routines must be established at the outset of the school year and then reviewed periodically [25]. Classroom management focuses on creating a comprehensible classroom, meaning one in which every staff member and student always knows where they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do [26]. Since a teacher who presents instruction to students with extensive support needs is often assisted by one or more paraprofessionals, the teacher must coordinate their work.

The impact of effective classroom management on students' school performances has been addressed in discussions about the cause-effect relationship between some students' challenges learning to read and their engagement in inappropriate behaviors, both school social behaviors and rule-breaking behaviors outside of school. Some claim that students' difficulties learning to read cause their subsequent engagement in inappropriate behaviors. In contrast, others claim a student's engagement in these behaviors is the reason for their substandard academic performance. Examining the strength of the correlation between these matters and whether one is the cause or effect of the other is beyond this paper's scope. Instead, examining issues concerning a teacher's creation of a safe, orderly classroom environment in which effective instruction can be presented is germane. While it may not be possible to identify the cause-effect relationship between a student's academic achievement and engagement in inappropriate behavior, as Stewart et al. [27], noted, it is reasonable to assert that no student will receive effective instruction in a disorganized, chaotic, unsafe environment.

An additional classroom management issue relevant to students with extensive support needs is using a behavior intervention plan for a student who engages in disruptive behaviors despite the teacher's implementation of relatively effective classroom management procedures. Teachers will need to be skilled with these highly specialized plans.

Proper Time Management

Time limitations impact a teacher's ability to present effective instruction to students with extensive support needs. That is to say, a school's year-long calendar and the length of each school day limit the amount of time for presenting instruction. Time limitations, combined with the (a) learning characteristics of students with extensive support needs that were discussed previously and (b) the fact that more curriculum content can be identified than there will be time to teach it, mean teachers must be mindful of time management regarding students with extensive support needs.

Rosenberg et al. [28], presented a paradigm for guiding time management so teachers are cognizant of the most critical time on task, which is academic learning time. In this paradigm, allotted time refers to the total time available, whereas allocated time is the portion of allotted time designated for teaching different subject matter areas. Engaged time is when a student attends to instruction during allocated time. Lastly, academic learning time is when a student attends to and engages in instruction at his learning level. High-quality instruction, therefore, is based on academic learning time.

Assessment

The use of proper assessments allows for data-informed instruction that is central to a tiered intervention framework. Two assessment types associated with a framework are general outcome measurements and mastery measurements. General outcome measurements consist of items that sample the curriculum taught across an entire school year and provide school personnel with data about a student's progress in the curriculum. Mastery measurements consist of criterion-referenced items directly aligned with a learning objective. Considering that students with extensive support needs will advance in individualized programs comprised of access points for academic content and unique functional content, mastery measurements are the most appropriate and will be used most often [29].

Conclusion

Within a tiered intervention framework, part of a school's efforts to account for the performance of every student will involve crafting a definition of high-quality instruction that is fit for purpose. Accordingly, this paper provides school personnel guidance for developing a definition for high-quality instruction that applies to their subgroup of students with extensive support needs. Numerous issues were addressed, including defining the terms comprising high-quality instruction, detailing the meaning of its two-part definition when applied to students with extensive support needs, and discussing four contextual issues teachers must address to increase the probability of presenting high-quality instruction. Educators are cognizant of the many challenges involved in instructing these students. Exploring matters about high-quality instruction for the students sets the stage for knowing the questions to ask and answering them correctly, thus assisting with one of the many challenges.

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