Addressing Barriers
to Learning   *Vol. 24, #3*

Providing More Special Assistance *In the Classroom*

School improvement efforts need to increase attention to how to enhance special assistance in the classroom. This requires enhancing both understanding of the process and enabling new forms of staff collaboration.

The following is Chapter 10 from Part II the Center's recent book *Improving School Improvement.* The entire book has been put on the Center's website as another free resource. Access at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Topics covered:

School Improvement Must Broaden the Approach to Response to Intervention

Doing More to Demystify Remediation & Special Education

Ensuring a Wide Range of Accommodations

Coda: A note about special assistance and ESSA

A s we have stressed in the preceding chapters, if personalization is insufficient, school improvement needs to ensure that special assistance is provided in the classroom and is pursued in a sequential and hierarchical manner. Because the science-base is still limited, a great deal of the process remains a matter of rational trial and appraisal. Over time, staff using authentic/dynamic assessment can acquire an appreciation of what is likely to work with the student and what will not.

Teacher Johnson's work with Larry's minor reading problem and Joan's more severe problem may clarify matters a bit more and highlight implications for school improvement.

Mr. Johnston's first efforts to help Larry improve his reading skills involved a variety of reteaching strategies. The activity focused on current reading tasks in which Larry had indicated an interest. The reteaching strategies were not simply a matter of trying more of the same -- more drill, for example. He tried alternative procedures ranging from commonly used explanations, techniques, and materials (such as another example or analogy, a concrete demonstration, a memorization strategy) to less common, specialized, *remedial* techniques (such as a multisensory method). After working on this level for a week, Mr. Johnston found that over the preceding years, Larry had not learned a number of prerequisites widely viewed as reading-readiness skills. For example, Larry had difficulty following directions involving more than one point at a time, and he had problems ordering and sequencing events described to him. He also seemed to have little awareness of the relationship between the spoken and the printed word. As he assessed these problems in his daily work with Larry, Mr. Johnston pointed them out, and they agreed to include them as a major focus of instruction. As had happened with other students, Mr. Johnston found that once the missing prerequisites were learned, Larry had little problem learning basic reading skills.

Joan's situation, however, proved to be more difficult. Because her problem was more severe, Mr. Johnston focused from the start on absent reading prerequisites. As he worked with her over a period of several weeks, he found she had trouble learning most of the prerequisites he taught her and retained only a small amount of what she learned. Thus, he moved on to try to detect any dysfunctional learning mechanisms that might be interfering with her learning. Over a period of weeks, it became clear that Joan was having widespread difficulty discriminating sounds and was continuing to have severe trouble recalling what she had learned the day before. Rather than have her continue to experience failure, Mr. Johnston shifted the focus of instruction. The time usually spent on reading instruction was devoted to helping overcome factors interfering with her learning. Activities she wanted to do were identified; as she had trouble, he worked with her using techniques that stressed multisensory involvement. To improve her retention, he encouraged her to take smaller amounts, and together they identified a variety of interesting activities with which she could immediately apply and practice what she was learning. At first, Joan was hesitant to try things that she had failed at previously. Mr. Johnston did not push. He followed her lead and, at the same time, increasingly encouraged her to risk exploring new things. It should be noted that one of Mr. Johnston's goals with Joan was to help her increase her feelings of competence. When he first began working with her, however, she perceived the special help as another sign of her lack of competence, and this made her feel worse. Such a reaction is common. In the end, as was usually the case with such students, Mr. Johnston found Joan's progress to be slow but steady.

School Improvement Must Broaden the Approach to Response to Intervention

A personalized special assistance plan is informed by analyses of learning and performance, and specific objectives are formulated in discussions with the student and key family members. The focus is on identifying the levels of intervention needed and processes and outcomes that the student values and perceives as attainable. Subsequent modifications are based on continuous analyses and frequent conferences. Broadly conceived and implemented as authentic/dynamic assessment, Response to Intervention (RtI) can play a key role.

Although RtI is a prominently advocated strategy, it generally is used in too limited a way. That is, the tendency is to use it mainly to analyze responses made to *instruction*.

Special assistance adds an array of interventions that provide critical assessment data for understanding a student's problems and for refining intervention plans. A broad analysis considers (a) motivational as well as developmental considerations and (b) whether the problem requires a deeper look. For example, a broad approach to RtI can help answer such questions as: Does the problem stem from the student not having acquired readiness skills? Does it arise from "critical student dispositions" that have produced avoidance motivation to curricula content and instructional processes? What accommodations and interventions are needed to ameliorate the student's problems? And, when problems persist, what other external and internal factors must be considered?

Doing More to Demystify Remediation & Special Education

Special assistance may require use of remedial practices. Such practices too often are viewed as the sole province of special education. This perception has to change as efforts are made in regular classes to enhance special assistance and include more special education students.

While remedial practices are perceived as being quite different from those used in regular teaching, the differences often are not as great as appearance suggests. One facet of school improvement involves helping staff understand that regular and remedial procedures generally draw on the same instructional models and basic principles. Some remedial practices are simply adaptations of regular procedures, with the added application of psychotherapeutic principles. This is even the case with some packaged programs and materials specially developedfor problem populations. (See *What Works Clearinghouse* – https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ .)

What may make a remedial procedure effective is that it replaces practices a student has experienced as ineffective with strategies that enhance motivation and match current capabilities. Novel procedures, in particular, can have significant motivational and attention-inducing value. Exhibit 10-1 highlights features that make remedial strategies appear different.

Exhibit 10-1

What makes remedial instruction different?

The answer involves the following factors:

1. *Sequence of application.* Remedial practices are pursued after the best available nonremedial practices prove inadequate.
2. *Level of intervention focus.* Specialized psychoeducational procedures to facilitate learning may be applied at any of three levels outlined above.
3. *Staff competence and time.* Probably the most important feature differentiating remedial from regular practices is the need for a competent professional who has time to provide one-to-one intervention. While special training does not necessarily guarantee such competence, remediation usually is done by staff who have special training. Establishing an appropriate match for learners with problems is difficult and involves a great deal of trial and appraisal. Additional time is essential in developing an understanding of the learner (strengths, weaknesses, limitations, likes, dislikes).
4. *Content and outcomes.* Remedial efforts often add other content and outcome objectives to address missing prerequisites, faulty learning mechanisms, or interfering behaviors and attitudes.
5. *Instructional and other intervention processes.* Remediation usually stresses an extreme application of instructional principles. Such applications may include reductions in levels of abstraction, use of multisensory practices, technological applications, intensification of the way stimuli are presented and acted upon, and increases in the amount and consistency of direction and support – including added reliance on other resources in the classroom (e.g., paid aides, resource personnel, volunteers, peer tutors, technology). Use of special settings outside regular classrooms is a last resort.
6. *Resource costs.* Because of the factors described above, remediation is more costly than regular teaching (allocations of time, personnel, materials, space, and so forth).
7. *Psychological Impact.* The features of remediation are highly visible to students, teachers, and others. Chances are such features are seen as "different" and stigmatizing. Thus, the psychological impact of remediation can have a negative component. The sensitive nature of remediation is another reason it should be implemented only when necessary and in ways that strive to produce positive perceptions all around.

Basically, efforts to deal with interfering factors involve
8. direct actions to address major external/internal barriers to learning and behaving
9. helping students strengthen themselves in areas where they have weaknesses or vulnerabilities
10. helping students learn ways to compensate, as necessary, when confronted with barriers or areas of weaknesses
11. special accommodations.

Ensuring a Wide Range of Accommodations

School improvement calls for classrooms to offer a variety of content and process options and accommodations. This is especially essential in addressing learning, behavior, emotional, and physical problems.

Accommodations to Address Individual Differences

Options and accommodations are intended not only to address differences in capability, but to affect students' motivation by involving them in activities they value and believe are attainable with appropriate effort. For example, classroom assignments and rules can be changed to better account for youngsters who are very active and/or distractable. For such students, this involves relaxing behavioral expectations and standards a bit, at least for a period of time (e.g., widening limits for them so that certain behaviors are not an infringement of the rules).

Accommodations help establish a good match for learning. For students with significant learning, behavior, and emotional problems, interveners use many special accommodations (see Exhibit 10-2). School improvement plans need to ensure a full array of accommodations are used in personalizing instruction and providing special assistance.

Exhibit 10-2

Examples of Special Assistance Accommodations

For easily distracted students:
- identify any specific environmental factors that distract students and make appropriate environmental changes
- have students work with a group that is highly task-focused
- let students work in a study carrel or in a space that is "private" and uncluttered
- designate a volunteer to help whenever students becomes distracted and/or start to misbehave, and if necessary, to help them make transitions
- allow for frequent "breaks"
- interact with students in ways that will minimize confusion and distractions (e.g., keep conversations relatively short; talk quietly and slowly; use concrete terms; express warmth and nurturance)

For students needing more support and guidance:
- develop and provide sets of specific prompts, multisensory cues, steps, etc. using oral, written, and perhaps pictorial and color-coded guides as organizational aids related to specific learning activities, materials, and daily schedules
- ensure someone checks with students frequently throughout an activity to provide additional support and guidance in concrete ways (e.g., model, demonstrate, coach)
- support student efforts related to self-monitoring and self-evaluation and provide nurturing feedback keyed to student progress and next steps

For students having difficulty finishing tasks as scheduled:
- modify the length and time demands of assignments and tests
- modify the nature of the process and products (e.g., allow use of technological tools and allow for oral, audio-visual, arts and crafts, graphic, and computer generated products)

See the following page for examples of the types of accommodations highlighted by federal law (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

Exhibit 10-2 (cont.)

504 Accommodation Checklist

Various organizations concerned with special populations circulate lists of 504 accommodations. The following is one that was downloaded from website of a group concerned with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (see http://www.come-over.to/FAS/IDEA504.htm).

Physical Arrangement of Room

- seating student near the teacher
- seating student near a positive role model
- standing near student when giving directions/presenting lessons
- avoiding distracting stimuli (air conditioner, high traffic area)
- increasing distance between desks

Lesson Presentation

- pairing students to check work
- writing key points on the board
- providing peer tutoring
- providing visual aids, large print, films
- providing peer notetaker
- making sure directions are understood
- including a variety of activities during each lesson
- repeating directions to student after they are given to the class: then have him/her repeat and explain directions to teacher providing written outline
- allowing student to tape record lessons
- having child review key points orally
- teaching through multi-sensory modes, visual, auditory, kinestetics, olfactory
- using computer-assisted instruction
- accompany oral directions with written directions for child to refer to blackboard or paper
- provide model to help students, post the model, refer to it often
- provide cross age peer tutoring
- to assist the student in finding the main idea underlying, highlighting, cue cards, etc.
- breaking longer presentations into shorter segments

Assignments/worksheets

- giving extra time to complete tasks
- simplifying complex directions
- handing worksheets out one at a time
- reducing the reading level of the assignments
- requiring fewer correct responses to achieve grade (quality vs. quantity)
- allowing student to tape record assignments/homework
- providing a structured routine in written form
- providing study skills training/learning strategies
- giving frequent short quizzes and avoiding long tests
- shortening assignments; breaking work into smaller segments
- allowing typewritten or computer printed assignments prepared by the student or dictated by the student and recorded by someone else if needed.
- using self-monitoring devices
- reducing homework assignments
- not grading handwriting
- student not be allowed to use cursive or manuscript writing
- reversals and transpositions of letters and numbers should not be marked wrong, reversals or transpositions should be pointed out for corrections

- do not require lengthy outside reading assignments
- teacher monitor students self-paced assignments (daily, weekly, bi-weekly)
- arrangements for homework assignments to reach home with clear, concise directions
- recognize and give credit for student's oral participation in class

Test Taking

- allowing open book exams
- giving exam orally
- giving take home tests
- using more objective items (fewer essay responses)
- allowing student to give test answers on tape recorder
- giving frequent short quizzes, not long exams
- allowing extra time for exam
- reading test item to student
- avoid placing student under pressure of time or competition

Organization

- providing peer assistance with organizational skills
- assigning volunteer homework buddy
- allowing student to have an extra set of books at home
- sending daily/weekly progress reports home
- developing a reward system for in-schoolwork and homework completion
- providing student with a homework assignment notebook

Behaviors

- use of timers to facilitate task completion
- structure transitional and unstructured times (recess, hallways, lunchroom, locker room, library, assembly, field trips, etc.)
- praising specific behaviors
- using self-monitoring strategies
- giving extra privileges and rewards
- keeping classroom rules simple and clear
- making "prudent use" of negative consequences
- allowing for short breaks between assignments
- cueing student to stay on task (nonverbal signal)
- marking student's correct answers, not his mistakes
- implementing a classroom behavior management system
- allowing student time out of seat to run errands, etc.
- ignoring inappropriate behaviors not drastically outside classroom limits
- allowing legitimate movement
- contracting with the student
- increasing the immediacy of rewards
- implementing time-out procedures

Given the intervention principle of placement in the least restrictive environment needed, a student may be assigned to a special classroom and school (e.g., special education classes, alternative public or private schools). While often a controversial move, such placements frequently are recommended as another form of accommodation.

Some school organizational changes also are accommodation opportunities. "Looping" is an example (i.e., the teacher moving with students from one grade to the next for one or more years). Beside reducing student apprehension about a new school year and a new teacher, this allows for teacher continuity in providing special assistance and for relationship and community building and bonding between teachers and students and teachers and parents and among students.

Accommodations, Options, and Decision Making to Re-engage Students

It is worth reiterating that re-engaging a disconnected student requires increasing the range of valued options, facilitating the student's efforts to explore the options, and helping the student in making decisions about which options to pursue. The aim is to counter perceptions of coercion and control and enhance the student's feelings of self-determination. Shifting such perceptions can reduce reactance and enhance engagement in classroom learning.

For some disconnected students, it may be necessary to make changes to classroom content and processes that are perceived as quite different from those associated with previous bad experiences. This may mean *temporarily* putting aside current curricula and behavior expectations. The aim, first and foremost, is to reconnect the student with schooling.

Reducing Unnecessary Referrals

The motivation emphasis of personalization and in-classroom special assistance is key to reducing the number of youngsters seen as in need of out-of-classroom help. When motivational considerations are given short shrift, assessments and diagnoses are confounded, and special assistance may be guided in wrong directions. Concersely, as student engagement is enhanced and as those who have become disconnected from learning at school re-engage, assessment accuracy can be improved and errors corrected (e.g., special assistance can help identify false positive identifications of learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders).

A major aim of school improvement must be to ensure that referrals for special services occur only after extensive special assistance efforts in the classroom are pursued appropriately and proven unsuccessful. And, when such services are added, processes need to be in place to ensure the interventions are coordinated with what is going on in the classroom, school-wide, and at home.

Coda

A note about special assistance and ESSA. The Every Student Succeeds Act **(**ESSA) pays little attention to the implications of the many barriers to learning and teaching that arise daily at schools. In doing so, the legislation continues the marginalization of the host of school staff who provide special assistance to address students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems. An implicit message conveyed by the legislation is that the schools' role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students mainly involves improving instruction, enhancing safety, and establishing school-community partnerships that primarily focus on enhancing connections with community *services.* This message has hindered developing the type of approaches to improving instruction and special assistance highlighted in this book.

Of particular importance to improving special assistance in the classroom is retooling what ESSA labels as specialized instructional support personnel. The jobs of these personnel need redefining to include working collaboratively with teachers *in classrooms* for part of each day. Such collaboration is essential to ending the myths and expectations that teachers can do it all and can do it alone.

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As stressed throughout Part II, properly conceived and implemented personalized instruction and special assistance when needed expand the classroom's overall capability for accommodating a wider range of individual differences, vulnerabilities, and disabilities. This supports inclusionary policies, reduces unnecessary referrals for specialized services, and enhances equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

Schooling, of course, involves much more than classroom instruction. Whole child development and whole school improvement calls for reworking the way schoolwide student and learning supports are provided. We discuss this matter in Part III.

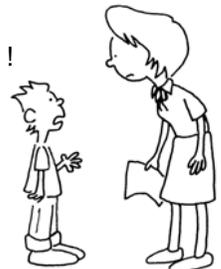### A Few Online Resources from the Center at UCLA Relevant to Part II

Over the years, the Center has developed resources for use in school improvement efforts, especially professional development. In addition to those listed at the end of Part I, the following are a few examples containing material related to Part I. These online resources provide more extensive coverage of some of the topics highlighted in Part II.

- *Classroom Learning Support Survey* –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/classroomsurvey.pdf

- *Addressing School Adjustment Problems* –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/adjustmentproblems.pdf

- *Response to Intervention (RtI)* (four modules for continuing education)

  I: RtI: Improving Conditions for Learning in the Classroom –
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rtii.pdf
  II: Implementing Response to Intervention Sequentially & Effectively
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rtiii.pdf
  III. Response to Intervention: Beyond Personalization
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rtiiii.pdf
  IV: Pursuing Response to Intervention as One Strategy
      in a Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/rtiiv.pdf

This is the third time I've had to tell you off this week, what have you got to say about that?

Thank heavens it's Friday !

About Center Resources

Past issues of this e-journal are archived as an ongoing resource on the Center website at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newsarchive.html

Here is a sample of the topics (with direct links)

Volume 24, Number 2:
- Improving How Schools Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching:
     Escaping Old Ideas and Moving Beyond Current Trends
- More Police on School Campuses?
- Bringing Empirically Supported Prototypes/practices to Schools
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring19.pdf

Volume 24, Number 1
- School Improvement, School Transformation – Some Straight Talk
- MTSS: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools
- School-Community Collaboration: What's Going Wrong?
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter19.pdf

Volume 23, Number 4
- About Resilience and Schools
- Minimizing Referrals out of the Classroom
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall18.pdf

Volume 23, Number 2
- Time for Straight Talk about Mental Health Services and MH in Schools
- Improving School Climate Starts with Understanding that it's an Emerging Quality
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring18.pdf

Volume 23, Number 1
- Evolving School Improvement Plans to Better Address Barriers to Learning
     and Teaching
- Who Else is Working to Transform Student/learning Supports
- Two Cautionary Notes:
     >About Piecemeal Approaches
     >About Settling for an Integrated Services Initiative
- Center Assistance for Transforming Student/ Learning Supports
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter18.pdf

Volume 22, Number 4
- Revitalizing Local Control: Transforming Student/Learning Supports and
     Enhancing Equity of Opportunity
- Escaping Old Ideas to More Effectively Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching
- Saving Starfish is Not Enough!
- Addressing Attendance Problems: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement
- Focus on School Adjustment Problems: INVEST NOW . . . OR PAY LATER!
- Grit – Another Buzzword? Student Motivation – a Fundamental Intervention Concern!
- Personalization: Don't Let it Become Another Buzzword
- Working with Disengaged Students
        http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/fall17.pdf

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UPCOMING Policy Report

How Well Do State Legislatures Focus on Improving School Efforts to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching & Re-engage Disconnected Students?

The federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) has stimulated states to revisit school improvement. Previously, our Center analyzed ESSA and the related consolidated state plans using the lens of how the federal legislation and state plans address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Such analyses provide a critical look at school improvements meant to reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps. (Links to these previous analyses are at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html.)

The analyses of ESSA indicates the focus on student/learning supports continues to be ad hoc, piecemeal, and scattered. The analysis of state plans indicates poorly conceived approaches that continue the long-standing fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching. In general, the plans emphasize pursuing discrete problems with discrete interventions. In doing so, student and learning supports for addressing complex learning, behavior, and emotional concerns often are implemented redundantly, with counterproductive competition for sparse resources and poor outcomes. This tends to maintain the marginalization of student and learning supports with respect to the school improvement agenda.

To round out our analyses of state efforts to improve how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students, we have surveyed state legislation. We are in the process of preparing our policy report highlighting what we found and offering some suggestions for legislative attention.

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Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?

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or contact us – E-mail: Ltaylor@ucla.edu or Ph: (310) 825-3634
Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter *(ENEWS)?*
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