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Building on Past Successes: Designing, Evaluating, and Providing Effective Treatments for Persons for Whom Typical Instruction Is Not Effective

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of my experiences in special education as a teacher and subsequently as an intervention researcher providing background on where we were in providing instruction to individuals with disabilities 40 years ago (prior to legal protections and supports) compared with the present. This article acknowledges the progress that has been made in providing opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in the educational system including greater access to the general education classroom for increasing numbers of students with disabilities. However, stakeholders including special educators have inadequately targeted academic and behavioral improvements as their goals for individuals with disabilities. This is largely because the research base for students with disabilities with intensive academic and behavior needs is underdeveloped. Several recommendations are provided including increased funding for research on individuals with persistent learning and behavior problems that addresses how to acquire a more complete knowledge base about effective intensive interventions for these students.

Keywords

instruction; classroom; reading; special education

Beginning in 1973 as a teacher in a residential school for the seriously emotionally disturbed, continuing as a resource room special education teacher and then a Title 1 reading specialist, and most recently as a university professor, I have pursued practices for improving educational opportunities for students for whom typical instruction is not effective. Along the way, I have participated in the development and implementation of numerous treatments, some of them rather whacky (e.g., cutting small holes in the middle of

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paper and determining whether students were “right” or “left” eye dominant), but the vast majority were co-influenced by extant research and practice knowledge.

Advances: Opportunity, Access, and Outcomes

When Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 was passed in 1975, I was a special education teacher in Flowing Wells Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona. The law provided landmark legislation for individuals with disabilities, yielding previously unavailable opportunities for them to attend public school and to be provided with appropriate education. Prior to the passage of P.L. 94-142, we placed students in special education based on a single teacher’s judgment and with no parent consent. We also had no Individualized Education Programs and no real educational goals. Furthermore, many students with disabilities were not provided any education. Prior to P.L. 94-142, individuals with disabilities were not guaranteed educational opportunities and instead local districts could decide whether or not they would accept students with disabilities based on their own criteria. Often local principals or even individual teachers decided whether youngsters with disabilities would be allowed to go to school or attend classes. Thus, many individuals with disabilities did not attend school and missed the life experiences and opportunities provided to individuals without disabilities. The law improved the identification of individuals with disabilities, providing them appropriate educational opportunities, evaluating the success of these opportunities, and providing due process protection for youngsters and their families. Furthermore, this law created an international model for how to identify and provide educational services for students with disabilities.

During the first 20 years of implementing P.L. 94-142, the focus was on identifying and providing services to students with disabilities. For the majority of these students, educational services were provided in the special education classroom or resource room with minimal meaningful access to general education settings and curricula. For the last two decades or more, the focus has shifted from providing services for students to assuring access to instruction in general education settings. This shift from opportunity to access is exceedingly important for individuals with significant disabilities and their families who are too frequently marginalized within special education and never appropriately included in educational settings with access to general education curricula. However appropriate it may be to focus on access to general education for students with disabilities, it has also raised numerous contentious issues about whether students with disabilities are provided meaningful education in the general education setting and whether students with disabilities, particularly those with learning and behavior problems, are provided adequate and appropriately intensive academic and behavioral interventions (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). I suggest that along with maintaining the important foci of assuring *opportunity* and *access* for students with disabilities, we take stock of the extent to which these opportunities and access are yielding sufficiently robust educational and behavioral *outcomes* for individuals with disabilities.

Improving Student Outcomes Through Interventions

I posit that developing and implementing research-based, individualized and intensive treatments are the most important issue for students who do not adequately profit from typical instruction. Particularly in the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), accountability was embedded within NCLB establishing a focus on outcomes. Although enormous progress has been made in providing opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in the educational system and greater access to the general education classroom has been realized for increasing numbers of students with disabilities, educational stakeholders including special educators have inadequately targeted academic and behavioral improvements as their goals for individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, in cases where they have targeted academic and behavioral goals they have legitimately been at a loss for how these goals might be realized. This is largely because the research base for students with disabilities with intensive academic and behavior needs is underdeveloped (Fuchs et al., 2010).

My colleague Jeanne Wanzek and I address the issue of inadequate focus on intensive interventions proposing three considerations: (a) Services for many students with academic and behavioral disabilities need to be reconceptualized so that they are provided appropriate treatments by highly credentialed individuals, (b) considerable investment in research is needed to assure the development of research-based practices for students with academic and behavioral disabilities, and (c) improved training of special education personnel is essential so that they have the knowledge and skills to assess, monitor, and instruct students with academic and behavioral disabilities (Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014).

For nearly 25 years, special educators have been discussing the extent to which students with disabilities can be provided an effective education in the general education classroom (e.g., Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Fuchs et al., 2010; Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990; McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, & Haager, 1994). The question asked most frequently is not whether access to the general education classroom is appropriate nor whether opportunities to acquire curriculum goals in the general education classroom is desirable, but rather whether effective instructional outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly learning and behavior problems, can be realized without intensive interventions provided by specially trained personnel.

The National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) data provide a portrait of how poorly individuals with disabilities are doing in reading compared with their nondisabled peers. Between 2002 and 2013, the mean NAEP fourth-grade reading scores for students without disabilities have been increasing statistically significantly from 220 to 227. However, during this same time period, the reading scores of individuals with disabilities have been on the decline from 188 to 184, also statistically significant (National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2011). This is further complicated by findings from the U.S. Department of Education, OSEP (Aud et al., 2011), reporting that students with disabilities are increasingly accessing general education instruction with 50% of students with disabilities having spent 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms in 2002 whereas by 2011, there was an increase to 60% of students

with disabilities spending 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms. Interpreting the NAEP data in light of the statistics on the increasing number of students with disabilities spending more than 80% of their time in general education settings is compelling.

While it is difficult to identify the precise reasons why students with disabilities are making little progress in academic areas such as reading, observational studies reveal that students with disabilities spend very little time reading silently (6–10 min) or reading aloud (3–13 min) (Chard & Kameenui, 2000; Swanson, 2008; Vaughn, Levy, Coleman, & Bos, 2002; Wanzek & Kent, 2012). Recent observation studies report that students with reading disabilities spend very little time actively engaged in learning, and there is no evidence of differentiation in engaging students based on their specific learning needs (McIntosh et al., 1994; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004; Wanzek, Roberts, & Al Otaiba, 2014). There is little evidence that sufficiently intensive interventions are provided to students with disabilities.

What do we know about intensive interventions for students with academic and behavioral disabilities? Actually, there have been relatively few studies conducted with individuals with identified disabilities that could be classified as intensive. Wanzek and colleagues synthesized findings from studies identified as providing extensive interventions (i.e., more than 100 treatment sessions for students in kindergarten through 3rd grade and more than 75 sessions for students in 4th through 12th grades; Wanzek et al., 2014; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007). The mean effect sizes for all outcomes in reading were larger for studies conducted with students at the elementary grades than for students in fourth grade and above. However, these syntheses represent all students at risk, not only students with disabilities, and defined intensive based on the number of sessions provided which was necessary as it was the one criterion that authors consistently provided. There are other and perhaps even better ways to characterize intensive interventions. More time each day for instruction, improving instructional quality by providing even better prepared and trained teachers, and personalizing instruction so that it is provided one-on-one with instruction tailored to the individual needs of the student are examples of ways in which interventions can be made more intensive. The National Center on Intensive Intervention at American Institutes for Research (n.d.) describes intensive interventions as being necessary for students with persistent learning and behavior problems despite adequate instruction. The center's approach, data-based individualization (DBI), is to make interventions more intensive by adjusting instruction based on ongoing data regarding student's performance.

Next Steps

What do I consider to be necessary and promising research for individuals with persistent learning and behavior problems? There are many good answers to this question but for this brief commentary, I will focus on only one. I recommend that we fund and conduct research on individuals with persistent learning and behavior problems that addresses how to acquire a more complete knowledge base about effective intensive interventions for these students. Currently, we have made important progress on access to general education settings and curricula for students with disabilities. In addition to this important work, we need to better

understand and implement interventions that provide better academic and behavioral outcomes for these students. Improving complex academic knowledge and skills in reading, math, and behavior is unlikely to result from brief interventions or ones that are provided casually. We require better understanding of the conditions under which students with persistent difficulties succeed, the instructional mapping required to assure that interventions are appropriately designed to meet students' learning and behavior needs, and better specificity about how features of interventions can be designed to meet the learning challenges of students with intensive learning and behavior needs. For example, when students demonstrate attention problems as well as academic learning problems, are there features of interventions that can be blended into the instruction to enhance the academic outcomes as well as increase attention to task?

Although these next steps will not be easy to implement, I believe that they are necessary to assure adequate progress in providing effective interventions for students for whom typical instruction is not effective. The first step is to develop a much better knowledge base about effective practices for improving academic and behavioral outcomes for students with significant difficulties and disabilities. This will require a substantial investment in research, innovation, and practice. The second step is to design the necessary schooling for individuals who are not responding to typical instruction and to design schooling that maximizes their opportunities to succeed. The third step is to prepare a cadre of educational specialists who are knowledgeable and effective at assessing, monitoring, instructing, and communicating about students with significant learning and behavior problems.

Reflecting over the 40 years I have been a special educator, I am aware that we have made enormous strides in policy. I also believe that much of the research in special education has served as the intellectual engine fueling research in general education (e.g., assessment, progress monitoring, interventions, and research design). I am less satisfied with the progress we have made in the instructional practices provided to students who do not respond to typical instruction. Students who are least able to independently learn and teach themselves require the most precise and impactful instruction. Perhaps the greatest challenge worth accepting is to conduct research improving knowledge of intensive intervention and to implement the intensive instruction required.

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