

Academic Interventions Implemented to Teach Students with Emotional Disturbance

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Need for Intervention

Behavioral and academic concerns

The concerns surrounding educating children with emotional disturbance are complex and multi-faceted. This is because the issues facing these children are compounded when students do not receive interventions at a young age; accordingly, their behaviors continue to deteriorate, thus becoming more intense and disruptive. In the end, this affects both their academic achievement and ability to function around others.

Resources, timing, and expertise

According to Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott (2002) meeting the challenges presented by these problems requires a significant amount of resources, time, and expertise, especially when the aim is to obtain behavioral and academic improvements. Furthermore, Duda, Michelle, Dunlap, Fox, Lentin, and Clarke (2004) express that timing is crucial, as studies show that the best results are achieved when these students are still in elementary school. To change their behavior and improve academic abilities, it is best to expose these children to highly structured behavioral intervention programs that use research-based academic, behavioral, and ecological interventions.

Purpose of the Study

Research Study

Possibility of improvements

Over the last several years, a vast amount of research has been conducted concerning children with behavioral and emotional difficulties. As stated previously by Duda et al. (2004) these students can make considerable behavioral and academic improvements if the proper interventions are implemented early. According to Eber et al. (2002) in order to make differences in the students' academic abilities and behavior, the interventions need to be positive, collaborative, culturally appropriate, sustained for the needed duration, and evaluated regularly.

Focus of study

The focus of this qualitative research study is the examination of academic interventions implemented by special education behavioral teachers, special education behavioral paraprofessionals, and general education teachers who work daily with students with emotional disturbance. "Which academic interventions did special education behavioral teachers, special education behavioral paraprofessionals, and general education teachers implement with students with emotional disturbance and which of these interventions were most effective in bringing forth improvements?" is the research question posed for this study. The premise of the study is that, if these interventions are indeed collaborative and

conducted early enough, students should be able to successfully participate behaviorally and academically in general education classrooms with support.

Academic Research Based Interventions

Comparison of Academic Progress of Students

Learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. A vital aspect to consider when analyzing the progress of these students is their academic achievement. This is because better-educated persons are more prepared to support themselves in the future. In a study conducted by Anderson, Kutash, and Duchnowski (2001), academic progress of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) was compared to the academic progress of students with learning disabilities over a five-year period. This study consisted of 42 students with emotional and behavioral difficulties and 61 students with learning disabilities. Achievement tests scores were evaluated for this study when the participants were in kindergarten or first grade and then again in fifth or sixth grades. Other factors, such as early retention, attendance records, time spent in special education classes, and behavior offenses were also taken into consideration in determining the results. This study found that students with emotional and behavioral disorders had higher achievement scores than students with learning disabilities when initially tested in kindergarten or first grade. However, by the second administration of achievement tests, students with learning disabilities had significantly higher scores than the students with EBD. These results occurred despite the fact that students with emotional and behavioral disorders received significantly more full-time services than the students with learning disabilities (Anderson et al., 2001).

Individualized Curricular Modifications

Definition

According to Kern, Delaney, Clarke, and Childs (2001), individualized curricular modifications are varying ways to complete academic tasks specified to meet the distinct needs of students. A teacher allowing a student to access a computer to type his or her spelling words instead of writing the words by hand is an example of individualized curricular modifications.

Problematic behaviors in academic tasks

Fortunately, there are techniques that can be utilized to improve academic instruction so that students with emotional and behavioral disorders can maximize their education and control undesirable behaviors. Students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD) often exhibit problematic behaviors during academic tasks. A study conducted by Kern, Delaney, Clarke, and Childs (2001) hypothesized that certain individualized curricular modifications could assist students with EBD and help eliminate undesirable problematic behaviors during academic tasks. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders were then given various ways to complete academic tasks. For example, when given writing assignments, the boys had the opportunity to either handwrite the assignment or use a computer. The results of the study indicate that having the opportunity to self-select different transcribing methods actually decreased problematic behavior.

Verbal Reinforcements (Praise)

Definition

According to Sutherland, Wehby, and Yoder (2002), verbal reinforcement, also commonly referred to as praise, is positive or affirmative comments stated verbally to students when they demonstrated appropriate academic or behavioral tasks.

Praise by teachers and academic compliance

In a study conducted by Sutherland, Wehby, and Yoder (2002), it was hypothesized that students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) performed better academically, and participated better, when praised by teachers. The study consisted of twenty self-contained classrooms for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Each classroom was staffed with a full-time teacher and paraprofessional. The average number of students in each classroom was 10.8. Each teacher who participated in the study was observed for ten sessions, each lasting fifteen minutes. The observations occurred during times that the teachers participated in explicit, teacher-led academic instruction. The results indicate that students who were praised responded to academic tasks. Students who were not praised by their teachers were less likely to respond to academic requests. Praise was an essential and effective teaching method to promote students with EBD to respond to academic requests.

Dialogue Journals

Definition

According to Konold, Miller, and Konold (2004), dialogue journaling is an academic intervention in which frequent written correspondence between a student and teacher occurs. Many ways to implement the intervention of dialogue journaling exist. The most frequent type of implementation occurs when a teacher provides the student with a particular topic or question. The student responds to the topic or question by writing in a journal. The teacher then provides the student with a written response in the journal, generating communication.

Benefits

The researchers found that dialogue journals provide the students with positive attention and validation of their feelings and needs. They encourage less motivated students to write and provide teachers opportunity to model effective writing and social skills. The journaling process also allows students to express themselves and form relationships with adults.

Specialized Reading Programs

Definition

According to McLaughlin and Reid (2001), specialized reading programs are specifically designed to improve the decoding, comprehension, and fluency skills of students.

A multitude of specialized reading programs exist, ranging in complexity.

Specialized reading program study

McLaughlin and Reid (2001) conducted a study in which nine elementary students with behavioral disorders participated in a specialized reading program. The reading program contained fourteen workbook pages of programmed reading per day. The program was conducted in two different variations. In the first variation, the students were allowed to read and complete as many pages as they liked within one hour. The second variation included teacher participation, wherein the instructors paced the students on the 14 workbook pages, daily. Students not completing the teacher-paced variation reading assignment were required to stay after school until the assignment was completed.

Descriptions of participants

The participants in the study were male students who exhibited an array of disciplinary problems including verbal aggression, physical aggression, lying, truancy, and low academic interest. The students were 2.3 to 4.6 years behind in reading at the time of the study. The participants were

members of a self-contained classroom with special education services for students with behavioral and emotional difficulties.

Results of Study

On average, students completed one to two pages each day during the times of self-pacing. Teacher-paced instruction resulted in completion of the entire daily 14 workbook pages. This study provides important insight on a beneficial instructional method in assisting students with behavioral and emotional difficulties.

Quality Teacher Feedback

Definition

According to Reagan (2003), the academic intervention, quality teacher feedback occurs when teachers provide students with specific verbal or written comments to assist them in improving their understanding and comprehension of an academic objective.

Benefits

Reagan (2003) outlines how high quality feedback given by teachers can enhance the learning opportunities of students. The article confirms that verbal or written comments to students reinforce desirable behaviors, informs the student of their progress, and allows students to build upon learning opportunities. Feedback is especially beneficial for students with disabilities. In general, there are several types of feedback geared to maximize specific learning situations.

Types of quality teacher feedback

According to Reagan (2003), there are three various types of appropriate feedback for verbally answered questions. The first type is the three-termed contingency trial feedback, in which the teacher asks a question, the student answers, and the teacher informs the student if the answer is right or wrong. The second type is referred to as the differentiated feedback, in which teachers vary their feedback depending upon one of the four types of student responses. The third type is corrective feedback, wherein teachers add supplemental information to the student's response. During corrective feedback, teachers supply miscalled words during oral reading; this type of feedback enhances student comprehension, shapes reading skills, and improves student motivation. Finally, Reagan describes two appropriate feedback models for homework assignments - the elaborated feedback routine and the written feedback model. The former is implemented when the teacher provides detailed feedback upon completion of written assignments, while the latter requires teachers to provide both positive and corrective comments.

Direct Instruction and Mediated Learning

Definition of direct instruction

According to Mills, Cole, Jenkins, and Dale (2002), direct instruction is a method that involves direct, fast-paced, highly structured teaching.

Definition of mediated learning

According to Mills, Cole, Jenkins, and Dale (2002) the mediated learning model consists of students working together to solve problems. The students are encouraged to interact with each other and often times are allowed to select their own materials or activities.

Context of the Study

Location of Study

This study took place in a school district located in a city in West Texas. The three elementary schools that participated in this study all had the specialized behavioral classrooms. The selected schools were located in different areas within the city; each represented various socioeconomic demographics. This particular school district was selected as the setting for this research because it offered the unique behavioral special education classes, specially designed for students with emotional disturbance.

Data Sources

Special Education Behavioral Teacher Participants

Three varying groups of individuals were the participants in this study. The three special education behavioral teachers were automatically selected because they were the only eligible elementary specialized behavioral teachers in the school district. These teachers provided varying degrees of support to the students with emotional disturbance. The level of support depended greatly on the behavioral needs of the students. Some students demonstrated chronic, severe disruptive behaviors and remained in self-contained behavioral classrooms. In these situations, the special education behavioral teachers were responsible for teaching all academic subjects, as well as implementing behavioral techniques to improve the behaviors of the students. As the students exhibited behavioral improvements, they were gradually placed into general education classes. These teachers then closely monitored the students' behaviors and academic achievements.

Conversely, some students with emotional disturbance did not display chronic, disruptive behaviors. These students were behaviorally able to participate fully in general education classes. In these cases, the special education behavioral teachers monitored the students' behavioral and academic achievements. The special education behavioral teachers offered support to the general education teachers. However, the students were not in the self-contained behavioral classrooms. Other times, students with emotional disturbance remained in the self-contained behavioral classrooms for a portion of the school day, only later to attend general education classrooms; in these cases, both the special education behavioral teachers and general education teachers were responsible for teaching these students.

Special Education Behavioral Paraprofessional Participants

The second group - three paraprofessionals, worked daily with students with emotional disturbance. Each of the three special education behavioral teachers who participated in this study had two full time paraprofessionals working with them. However, only one paraprofessional per behavioral classroom was selected to participate in this study. The researcher used purposive sampling in this study in order to "increase the range of data exposed and maximize the researcher's ability to identify emerging themes and take adequate account of contextual conditions and cultural norms" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p.82). The researcher used purposive sampling so that she was able to select paraprofessionals to participate in the study with diverse ethnicities, ages, genders, and experience working in behavioral classrooms.

General Education Teacher Participants

General education teachers encompassed the third category of participants in this study. The researcher purposely selected a total of three general education teachers to participate in this study. The researcher

also used purposive sampling here, so as to select general education teachers with varying ages and experience. The researcher chose the general education teachers who, at the times of the interviews, taught students with emotional disturbance. In some instances, the general education teachers selected for this study were responsible for teaching the students all of his or her academic subjects. In other instances, the general education teachers spent only limited time with the students because the students' disruptive behaviors prevented them from inclusion in the general education setting.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews

The data for this study was collected using interviews. Each participant in the study was interviewed once for a total of nine interviews. The researcher met the participants individually in their classrooms during a time they preferred, anticipating that each interview would take approximately thirty minutes to conduct. However, this time varied greatly depending on the individual participant. The researcher also asked the participants' permission to tape record the interview; after each, the interviews were immediately transcribed. During the interviews, the researcher also wrote annotations on the participants' responses. After the interviews, she took copious and meticulous notes on the environment of the classrooms, including types of bulletin boards, the arrangement of desks, additional furniture, and teaching resources.

The nine participants in this study were asked questions concerning their implementation of the following researched-based academic interventions: (a) individualized curricular modifications, (b) praise by teachers, (c) dialogue journals, (d) specialized reading programs, (e) quality teacher feedback, (f) direct instruction, and (g) mediated learning. The participants were also asked to select the two academic interventions that in their professional opinions produced the most academic improvements in their students with emotional disturbance.

Data Analysis of Participants

Academic Interventions at a Glance

Do the Participants Implement These Specific Interventions?

	Behavioral A	Behavioral B	Behavioral C	Para. A	Para. B	Para. C	General A	General B	General C
Curricular Modifications	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Verbal Praise	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dialogue Journals	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Specialized Reading Programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Quality Teacher Feedback	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Direct Instruction	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Mediated Learning	Yes	No	Yes						

Discussions and Implications

The researcher conducted interviews with nine participants in this study concerning the implementation of a variety of researched-based academic interventions so that the research question, “Which academic interventions did special education behavioral teachers, special education behavioral paraprofessionals, and general education teachers implement with students with emotional disturbance and which of these interventions were most effective in bringing forth improvements?” could be thoroughly answered. In an attempt to answer this profound question, the researcher uncovered several themes of great interest.

Theme One - Implementation differences among participants

The researcher inquired of the participants if they put into practice a total of seven research-based academic intervention which included: (a) varying ways to complete academic tasks, (b) verbal praise, (c) dialogues journals, (d) specialized reading programs, (e) quality teacher feedback, (f) direct instruction, and (g) mediated learning. The information provided to the researcher indicated that special education behavioral teachers and special education behavioral paraprofessionals utilized slightly more of the academic interventions than did the general education teachers. Special Education Behavioral Teacher B and Paraprofessional B employed six interventions each. Three participants, Special Education Behavioral Teacher A, Special Education Teacher C, and Paraprofessional A all used five interventions. Conversely, Paraprofessional C implemented four academic interventions.

However, General Education Teacher A made use of all seven academic interventions with her student with emotional disturbance. Quite the opposite was true of General Education Teacher B and General Education Teacher C. General Education Teacher B only used three of the aforementioned academic interventions and when provided with the opportunity did not offer any additional academic interventions that she used. Whereas, General Education Teacher C put into practice four of the academic interventions, however she did mention one additional academic intervention during her interview, which was sending her student with emotional disturbance to receive academic assistance from the behavioral staff.

As the researcher stated earlier, the behavioral staff members used slightly more academic interventions than did the general education teachers. However, the difference between the numbers of academic interventions the behavioral staff members implemented and the number of academic interventions the general education teachers used was so slight, the researcher was reluctant to draw an unwavering conclusion.

Theme Two - Most effective academic interventions

A much more noteworthy theme erupted concerning the academic intervention selections of the three individual groups of participants. Each participant in this study was asked to choose two academic interventions, which in their experience had proven to be the most effective in teaching their students with emotional disturbance. One intervention in particular, verbal praise was preferred time and time again by eight of the nine participants. Verbal praise was selected more often than any other academic

intervention as being the most productive when teaching students with emotional disturbance. The widespread use of verbal praise was confirmation that verbal praise was undeniably an effective and successful intervention.

The second academic intervention that was selected most frequently by the nine participants was quality teacher feedback. According to Regan (2003), the intervention of quality teacher feedback was greatly beneficial to students with disabilities because it reinforced desired behaviors, informed the students of their progress, and built upon learning opportunities. All nine participants unanimously reported the utilization of only two academic interventions, verbal praise and quality teacher feedback. Three of the participants, Paraprofessional C, General Education Teacher B, and General Education C selected quality teacher feedback as one of the two most successful interventions in which they implemented while instructing their students with emotional disturbance. If all of the academic interventions were listed in order of the participants who proclaimed them to be most successful, praise would be number one and quality teacher feedback would have been ranked as number two.

Two participants selected varying ways to complete academic tasks as one of the two most effective academic interventions. Varying ways to complete academic tasks was chosen by Special Education Behavioral Teacher A and Paraprofessional B as one of the most successful interventions in which they implemented with their students with emotional disturbance. Though only two behavioral staff members deemed varying ways to complete academic tasks as most beneficial, five of the six behavioral staff members, excluding Paraprofessional C stated that they used this intervention numerous times a day to six times each week and commended this intervention highly.

Conversely, only one of the general education participants, General Education Teacher A expressed that she utilized this intervention. Both General Education Teacher B and General Education Teacher C were firm in their decisions not to utilize varying ways to complete academic tasks. General Education Teacher B and General Education Teacher C implied that their students had to complete assignments using the same mode as their other students unless specified as an accommodation.

The researcher found it interesting that two of the three general education teachers refused to implement this intervention by any means regardless of the possible benefits to their students with emotional disturbance. Studies by Kern et al. (2001) show that the employment of individualized curricular modifications resulted in decreased problematic behaviors and increased on task behaviors for students with emotional disturbance.

Mediated learning was not selected by any of the participants in this study as being the most effective academic intervention. However, eight of the nine participants, excluding General Education Teacher B put into practice this intervention with their students with emotional disturbance. The researcher thought that this was a noteworthy phenomenon and worthy of investigation. The researcher contended that although mediated learning was not deemed as the most effective intervention it was still extremely significant and vital in the teaching of students with emotional disturbance. The data supported this conclusion because of its widespread use across both behavioral and general education classrooms.

Theme Three - Assistance from behavioral staff

The final theme involved the most effective academic intervention selection of General Education Teacher A and General Education Teacher C. Both of these general education teachers expressed that the assistance their students with emotional disturbance received from behavioral staff members was most beneficial. Assistance from the behavioral staff was originally not included in the list of seven

academic interventions. However, both General Education Teacher A and General Education Teacher C offered this approach when the researcher inquired if the participants would like to discuss any other interventions they implemented with their students. General Education Teacher A explained in her interview that behavioral staff members came into her classroom and assisted their student with emotional disturbance. On the other hand, General Education Teacher C asked her student with emotional disturbance to go to the behavioral classroom to receive additional assistance with his assignments.

This theme demonstrated the collaboration and alliance between the general education teachers and behavioral staff members. These teachers had devised plans among themselves to best meet the needs of their students with emotional disturbance, whether it was the behavioral staff members actually going into the general education classroom or the student leaving the general education setting for a designated period of time so that he may go to the behavioral classroom to receive additional academic assistance. This phenomenon supported previous research conducted by Katz and Mirenda (2002) reiterating that students achieve greater academic success when teachers share their expertise, ideas, and worked together in a collaborative manner.

Summary of Answers

All students are different and have diverse academic needs. An intervention that demonstrates remarkable academic results with one student may not be as successful with others. It is important to note that the only academic intervention in this study that was deemed as most effective almost unanimously by the participants was verbal praise. However, the researcher contends that the readers of this study must not only take into consideration the interventions that were considered by the participants as most effective, but also those interventions that verified wide spread use by both the behavioral staff members and general education teachers alike. Three interventions in particular, quality teacher feedback, varying ways to complete academic tasks, and additional academic support from the behavioral staff all demonstrated tremendous importance in this study.

According to Eber et al. (2002), numerous academic interventions are required and teachers and paraprofessionals must tailor the interventions to their specific students. The readers of this study must not think that the use of one particular academic intervention will create extraordinary academic success for all students with emotional disturbance. The use of one academic intervention is simply not sufficient in meeting the needs of students with emotional disturbance. In order to teach students with emotional disturbance effectively and to the high level of excellence they deserve, special education behavioral teachers, behavioral paraprofessionals, and general education teachers must continually assess the academic needs of their students and revise their interventions as necessary.

Future Research

This research has opened pathways to two possible future studies.

Research Possibility One

This study could be replicated a number of times increasing the number of participants. Instead of utilizing nine participants, future studies could encompass more behavioral teachers, paraprofessionals,

and general education teachers with even more awareness in selecting participants of ethnic, age, and gender diversities.

Research Possibility Two

An in depth study involving students with emotional disturbance, as participants would also be particularly interesting. This future study proposal would consist of academic interventions being utilized with students with emotional disturbance and then a researcher charting their progress over a predetermined set period of time. With the implementation of documents and records, interviews, and observations the researcher would be able to compare the interventions that brought forth the greater amount of improvements and those interventions that yielded poor or unimpressive results.

Summary

In order for students with emotional disturbance to achieve maximum success, it is imperative that dedicated educators utilize numerous academic, behavioral, and ecological interventions. This study has provided necessary information concerning an assortment of academic interventions and their levels of effectiveness as perceived by educators who work with students with emotional disturbance daily. The key factor is that a combination of interventions must be implemented over a substantial period of time for true benefits to be achieved. Educators must continually evaluate the needs of their students and devise plans customized specifically to meet those needs. Determination and collaboration of all those involved with the students are also essential features in acquiring success.

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