

The Rationale for a Special Education Teacher's Primary Role in Presenting Intensive Instruction in a School's Tiered Intervention Framework

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Abstract: Identifying a special education teacher's primary role has been complicated by competing legislative demands emphasizing every student's academic achievement in the general education curriculum versus some students' needs for individualized instruction that addresses their noteworthy academic achievement deficits. One result is that school administrators have to decide whether a special education teacher's primary role will be to (a) provide accommodations that enable students with disabilities to remain in general education classrooms in accordance with the least restrictive environment requirement in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or (b) present the intensive instruction called for by a student's performance in the school's tiered intervention framework. This paper argues that a special education teacher's primary role is to present intensive instruction. The paper (a) reviews the evolution of the current dilemma, (b) explains both accommodations and intensive instruction, and (c) presents a rationale for a special education teacher's primary role as a presenter of intensive instruction. The paper concludes with a brief discussion about how school administrators can establish this primary role for special education teachers while meeting related mandates through the work of other educators.

Keywords: Tiered intervention frameworks, Multi-tiered system of supports, Intensive instruction, Accommodations, Special education teachers

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Introduction

In 2001, the United States Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB Act, 2008), which directed schools to measure every student's academic achievement to establish a school's success. Successive legislation (i.e., Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015)) has maintained this focus. Thus, what has been referred to as the era of school accountability has existed for nearly a quarter century.

Shortly after the NCLB Act's passage, another federal law that addresses special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), established two closely related mechanisms schools could use to address every student's academic achievement. One mechanism was a tiered intervention framework known as response to intervention (RTI). The other was early intervening services (EIS).

A tiered intervention framework is an organizational scheme designed to match a school's system of interventions to its students' needs (Potter, 2023). Frameworks have been designed to address three needs: academic, behavioral, and social-emotional (Lane et al., 2016). For clarity, this paper explains a framework designed to address students' academic needs.

In a tiered intervention framework, a school's interventions are categorized according to their structure and purpose. The categories are referred to as tiers, and a three-tier framework is described most often. Graphically, the framework is depicted as a triangle with Tier 1 at the base, Tier 2 atop Tier 1, and Tier 3 atop Tier 2. This depiction explains why Tier 2 and Tier 3 are sometimes called higher-level tiers.

Tier 1 consists of instruction presented to all students in the general education classroom. The purpose is to enable every student to attain the grade-level core curriculum academic achievement standards. At a minimum, Tier 1 instruction is supposed to be effective with at least 80% of a school's students.

Tier 2 involves targeted, supplemental instruction. Targeted refers to focusing on essential skills a student has not mastered while receiving Tier 1 instruction. Supplemental means that a student receives Tier 2 instruction while continuing to receive all of the Tier 1 instruction the school provides. The goal is for a student to master the skills taught in Tier 2 and then return to Tier 1 without needing any more supplemental instruction.

Tier 3 is intensive instruction for students demonstrating persistent, significant academic achievement deficits. Persistent refers to the fact that the students exhibit these deficits even after receiving Tier 2 instruction. Hence, these students have been referred to as nonresponders (Fuchs et al., 2014). Significant means the students must learn academic content much lower than that identified by their age-designated, grade-level core curriculum academic standards. By the design and operation of a school's tiered intervention framework, these students are to be provided the most intensive instruction available. In most instances, this instruction is a student's special education. However, this is not always the case, meaning some students without an individualized education program (IEP) receive Tier 3 instruction. Danielson et al. (2019) reported that approximately five percent of a school's students will need Tier 3 services, which includes 80%-90% of special education students whose IEP services align with the criteria for what is considered to be Tier 3 services (Shapiro, n.d.).

Over time, various frameworks have been designed to address different student needs. For instance, RTI has an academic focus, while a positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) framework has a behavioral focus. A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework has evolved as an integrated framework that

simultaneously addresses students' academic and behavioral needs (Danielson et al., 2019). Presently, the MTSS framework has gained prominence via the ESSA, which mentions the framework five times and characterizes it as an approach for improving the outcomes of students with disabilities and English language learners (Danielson et al., 2019). Furthermore, Bailey (2018) reported that reviews of this country's 50 state Department of Education websites documented evidence of MTSS initiatives or guidance for using an MTSS. Hence, Bailey concluded that this framework will be sustained.

Early intervening services (EIS) are another mechanism schools can use to address their students' academic needs. EIS are services for students who have not been identified as needing special education but need additional academic and behavioral support (i.e., support beyond what is provided in Tier 1) to succeed in the general education environment. While these services are for all students, grades K-12, the IDEA emphasized kindergarten through grade 3 students. According to Yell and Walker (2010; as reported in Yell, 2016), "The purpose of EIS is to identify young students who are at risk for developing academic and behavioral problems while they are still in general education settings, and then to address these problems by designing interventions in a systematic manner using research-based academic and behavioral interventions along with progress monitoring systems. The advantages of an early intervening model include (a) identifying students early in their school careers using a risk rather than a deficit model, (b) emphasizing research-based practices in intervention, and (c) focusing on student outcomes rather than services received" (pp. 334-335). Thus, EIS aligns with the services in a tiered intervention framework.

Concerns About a Special Education Teacher's Primary Role

The RTI and EIS approaches mostly direct educators' efforts outside special education. In fact, RTI has been referred to as a preventative approach, meaning it functions to prevent a student from being misidentified as a student who needs costly, labor-intensive special education services when the root cause of the student's academic achievement deficit is improper instruction rather than an innate disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). However, within RTI, the needs of students with disabilities have to be addressed since RTI serves as a mechanism for accounting for each student's academic performance.

This situation, along with other aspects of the IDEA (2004), means that schools have to develop two types of services for many students with disabilities: services that directly support an individual's daily performance in a general education classroom and services that address a student's need for remedial academic instruction due to demonstrating a persistent, significant academic achievement deficit. Thus, an issue that has emerged is establishing a special education teacher's primary role. One view is that this role involves providing students with accommodations, whereas the other is providing students with intensive instruction (Fuchs et al., 2014).

Supporting Students With Disabilities in General Education Classrooms Through Accommodations

In accordance with the IDEA's general least restrictive environment requirement, the default placement for a student with a disability is the general education classroom where the core curriculum is taught. When necessary, the student is to be provided supplementary aids and services to support this placement and access to the general education curriculum (Bailey & Zirkel, 2024). Additionally, due to school administrators' concerns about their students' performances on annual statewide academic achievement tests, they want students with disabilities in general education classrooms to receive instruction directly addressing the core curriculum academic standards covered on the state tests.

A noteworthy supplementary service involves providing accommodations. Accommodations refer to changes surrounding the conditions of teaching and learning that enable a student to surmount limitations resulting from their disability. Accommodations have been categorized as one of four types.

- a. Presentation accommodations involve the way information is presented. An example is a text-to-speech program that enables content to be presented orally rather than exclusively through text.
- b. Response accommodations address how a student conveys an answer. Accordingly, instead of writing a response, a student can dictate it to a scribe.
- c. Setting accommodations pertain to the environmental arrangement. A student prone to distractions and needing frequent redirection to remain on task might be seated at the front of the classroom, next to the teacher's desk.
- d. Timing accommodations pertain to how long a student is permitted to complete a task or when a student does so during the day. For example, a student who experiences fatigue resulting from a health impairment can be permitted to complete a test across two consecutive days and allowed 1.5 of the allotted time to do so.

Importantly, accommodations do not change the targeted learning outcome. That is to say, students who receive accommodations work to achieve the grade-level core curriculum academic standards all students in a general education classroom work to attain. Likewise, accommodations do not directly address a student's academic achievement deficit. Hence, while sound reasons were explained previously for providing accommodations to enable students with disabilities to remain in general education classrooms, data indicate the vast majority of special education students will require Tier 3 intensive instruction as documented in their IEP (Shapiro, n.d.). This outcome will be based on a student's performance in the school's tiered intervention framework.

Supporting Students with Disabilities Through Intensive Instruction

In a tiered intervention framework, intensifying instruction occurs across tiers. Intensifying instruction involves manipulating alterable variables to make a student's instruction more individualized and effective than prior instruction. Hence, a key feature of intensive instruction is its focus on individualization in a way that is not possible in a general education classroom.

A general education classroom teacher may adapt instruction for one or more students. Still, the teacher focuses on moving the group forward according to the core curriculum's scope and sequence. Conversely, when instruction is intensified, a teacher focuses on an individual student and improving his performance on an academic standard relative to his prior performance. In other words, the student serves as his control or reference point.

Two commonly referenced alterable variables for intensifying instruction are group size and dosage. Instruction is intensified when the size of the group receiving instruction is reduced, resulting in a lower pupil-to-teacher ratio. This instructional adaptation, by itself, can result in more individualized instruction for a student who can remain on-task longer because he is not subject to a greater number of distractions in a larger group that causes him to be off-task. More often, a change in group size allows the teacher to employ new evidence-based strategies, such as increasing a student's opportunities to respond and receive behavior-specific feedback.

Dosage involves the amount of time a student receives instruction. Intensifying instruction occurs when a student's dosage is increased. Increasing the time a teacher engages in effective instructional strategies, including guided practice, asking questions, checking for understanding, and correcting errors, has been associated with increased academic achievement (Rosenshine, 2012).

For most students with disabilities, their intensified instruction is their specially designed instruction (SDI), or special education, under the IDEA. This equates to Tier 3 instruction, a logical extension of the instruction intensified across Tier 1 and Tier 2 in their school's tiered intervention framework. The student's SDI often addresses academic content several years behind the student's grade level (Powell, n.d.) and is presented in a special education placement, such as a resource room.

Braun et al.'s (2018) findings regarding urban schools' MTSS implementation are germane when determining the special education teacher's role with respect to providing this instruction. The general education teachers Braun et al. interviewed reported they needed to acquire much more knowledge about intensive instruction. According to these teachers, their schools struggled with intensifying instruction beyond the small numbers of students who readily responded to the first type of Tier 2 intensive instruction provided. These teachers' reports highlight a significant difference in preservice teacher preparation for general versus special education teachers and the focus of their work as practicing teachers. Whereas general education teachers focus on strategies for moving a group of students forward, special education teachers focus on the needs of individual students.

Special Educator's Primary Role: Present Intensive Instruction

Some tiered intervention framework advocates have characterized the dichotomy that has emerged as being "special education as accommodations versus special education as intensive intervention" (Fuchs et al., 2014). To be clear, every student's special education must involve specially designed instruction and supplementary aids and services, which might include accommodations. Thus, providing accommodations or intensive

instruction for students with disabilities is not an either-or proposition. Instead, the issue at hand is the extent to which a special education teacher engages in activities involving (a) the provision of accommodations or similar support services as opposed to (b) specially designed instruction that is intensive instruction. Below are four reasons that support the position that the special education teacher's primary role is to present intensive instruction to students with disabilities.

- a. General education teachers report that they do not possess the requisite knowledge for presenting the intensive instruction these students require (Braun et al., 2018).
- b. In accordance with the logic of a tiered intervention framework, these students' intensive instruction is supposed to be the most intensive a school is equipped to present. This intensive instruction is highly individualized, meaning it does not comport with general education teachers' training that focuses on groups of students.
- c. These students' intensive instruction aligns with the specially designed instruction called for in the IDEA that special education teachers have been trained to provide.
- d. Accommodations can be provided outside of special education, within Tier 1 of a school's tiered intervention framework. For instance, the general education teacher could implement effective accommodations in Tier 1 through the principles of universal design for learning (UDL). Once a student's disability is documented, a Section 504 plan could establish the student's accommodations (Bailey & Zirkel, 2019). Similarly, if a student receiving special education services demonstrates appropriate progress through the exclusive provision of accommodations, the student's special education services would be discontinued, and the student provided a 504 plan. In other words, the student would demonstrate they do not need specially designed instruction, which is the heart of special education services.

Special Educator's Secondary Role and Related Concerns

Special education teachers will be available to address all matters stipulated in the IDEA (e.g., writing an IEP). However, some of these will not be their primary responsibility, particularly providing accommodations that are not interventions that directly address a student's academic achievement deficit. Instead, accommodations should be handled in Tier 1 by the general education teacher with help from others, such as a properly trained paraprofessional, who cannot address matters that a special education teacher must handle.

A related concern impacting establishing a special education teacher's primary role is the United States Supreme Court's outcome standard for students with disabilities. According to this standard, a student with a disability is to make progress appropriate in light of their circumstances (Yell & Bateman, 2017). Notably, this progress may not result in a student demonstrating mastery of all grade-level core curriculum academic standards. This circumstance means it is fair to ask why a particular student's special education would be centered on receiving accommodations in a general education classroom where the academic achievement standard is unattainable. Instead, in this instance, the logical course of action would be for the special education teacher to provide specially designed instruction, which is the intensive instruction called for via the student's progression in the

school's tiered intervention framework. The special education teacher may be the only full-time school staff member qualified to perform this work.

Conclusion

Schools face myriad, sometimes conflicting mandates as they work to address each student's academic needs. Such is the case when schools try to simultaneously address the IDEA's general least restrictive environment requirement and present intensive Tier 3 instruction to a student with a disability because the student demonstrates a persistent, significant academic achievement deficit. Both matters impact a school's ability to document its success via its students' performances on mandatory annual statewide academic achievement tests.

Two issues must be resolved for schools to meet these mandates adequately. One is providing schools with the necessary resources. For example, urban schools in high-poverty settings need adequate resources to address formidable challenges beyond their direct control, including high staff turnover rates, having no choice but to employ relatively inexperienced teachers, and meeting the needs of students who arrive displaying significant academic and behavioral support needs. A second issue is deciding how to deploy the school's special and general education teachers. This matter is directly under a school's control and can be resolved logically. That is to say, special education teachers may be the only teachers in the school with in-depth knowledge and advanced skills who can implement intensive instruction. Conversely, general education teachers could provide accommodations by practicing the principles of UDL while receiving support from adequately trained paraprofessionals.

Armed with knowledge about accommodations and intensive instruction and, as appropriate, the skills to provide both, general and special education teachers can collaborate to address every student's academic needs. One result will be an increase in the probability that a school will demonstrate success on the annual statewide academic achievement tests. Moreover, the school will serve as an example of how conflicting legislative mandates can be managed.

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