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# Lessons from the Past and Challenges for the Future: Inclusive Education for Students with Unique Needs

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# Lessons from the Past and Challenges for the Future: Inclusive Education for Students with Unique Needs

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**Abstract:** The school-age population of students is becoming increasingly more culturally and linguistically diverse. There is mounting recognition that English Learners (EL) represent a unique group of students who have special educational and linguistic needs. This article considered the needs of learners with diverse special needs such as (a) learning and behavior challenges and (b) English Learners identified as students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). We highlighted some potential lessons to be learned from past-to-present efforts to serve students with behavior problems. Selected evidence-based practices were featured that are applicable to learners with special needs, thereby supporting the development of effective inclusive education, especially for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

**Keywords:** at-risk; English Learners (ELs); inclusive education; refugees; SLIFE; special education

Most students benefit from an egalitarian philosophy whereby our system of public education has sought to do the "greatest good for the most students" [1], some students struggle to perform successfully within such a system and manifest learning and/or behavior problems that may be serious enough to impede their classroom performance and put them "at-risk" for failure. Some of these difficulties may be behavioral in nature and negatively affect their ability to interact appropriately with classmates or with adults [2]. Other issues relate to learning make it difficult for the student to profit from the general education program [3]. Still, other students grapple with cultural norms that are outside of their awareness. Not surprisingly, school personnel is finding it increasingly difficult to know how to best serve these students' diverse needs to alter an otherwise negative life trajectory [4].

Students who manifest learning and/or behavior problems often profit minimally from the established curriculum offered to all students. They do not receive the education they need to ameliorate their academic and/or behavioral deficits. Instead, they suffer through repeated suspensions and expulsions for the behavior that was problematic and reflective of their conditions. The consequence is an abbreviated or interrupted formal education, high drop-out rates, and academic achievement levels that undermine their ability to become productive citizens [5].

Over the years, education and treatment programs for students with challenging special needs suffered from a lack of understanding of the nature and needs of these students [6]. In some cases, academic and treatment programs consisted of curricula, instructional materials, and interventions that had little empirical support and consequently failed to sustain an adequate educational program [7]. Students often were moved through a curriculum without attaining any real academic competence. Too few teachers possessed the skills or were provided the technical support to be effective in delivering quality instructions [3]. Some students withdrew while others acted out to escape from the vagaries of inadequate instruction. In short, general education programs and, in some

cases, highly restrictive special education classrooms served as obstacles to academic achievement and social adjustment for students who exhibited serious learning and/or behavior problems [8].

## 1. One Size Does Not Fit All

There came to be a recognition that effective education should not be a "one size fits all" approach. Researchers such as Deno [9] noted the critical importance of diversity or array of services for students with special needs, and authors such as Lovitt [10] and Deschler, Shumaker, Lenz, and Ellis [11] argued that educational programs needed to adapt to the instructional needs of the student. Similarly, English Learners who have learning problems would benefit from educational programs that are responsive to their culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as well as services designed to support any other special learning needs [12].

That same literature underscored the critical role that achievement plays in student adjustment and success. Students who are successful receive good grades, teacher recognition, and peer acceptance. This recognition and academic success often is well received by students and helps to create an environment that the student finds gratifying. However, this success often is elusive for students who struggle with unmet instructional needs. In these cases, students often receive low grades, are the target of teacher admonitions regarding their unacceptable behavior, and are marginalized by their peers.

Along with an understanding of the role of student success and the importance of adapting instructions to facilitate that success came research on curriculum-based assessments, establishing of relevant instructional goals, and implementing of instructional plans and evidence-based interventions that serve as the foundation of effective instructional programming for all students, especially students with special needs [13]. Indeed, in the last several decades, we witnessed a tremendous increase in our knowledge of strategies that can be used to positively impact the performance of students who are academically at-risk or have challenging behavior. Research has systematically built a database upon which empirically-based strategies have been developed [2,7]. Some of that research revealed what was ineffective [1], but a great deal of research hinted at relationships that needed to be explored and built upon to develop educational programs that fostered student success [14]. What resulted was the development of a body of literature that distinguished promising practices from those that were either ineffective or inappropriate to deal with the needs of children and youth exhibiting academic deficits or challenging behavior [14]. Some researchers believe this literature has not been translated adequately into school-based practices [15]. However, an examination of current classrooms suggests that a growing body of empirical research has been adopted successfully into daily instruction [5].

Effective teachers now have a better understanding of the importance of the frequent administration and interpretation of curriculum-based assessments for students who experience academic problems. Furthermore, many teachers utilize instructional procedures such as precise praise, contingency management, errorless discrimination, and many other techniques that came from the literature in special education [5]. Schools have adopted school-wide non-punitive management programs that selectively apply a variety of educational options to students who are experiencing academic and behavioral difficulties. Additionally, there is a recognition that the curriculum and instructional procedures need to reflect the needs of students with diverse special needs [5]. This is illustrated by classroom practices, in which students have instructional materials that reflect learning needs, such as prompting student responses, presenting instructional material at an appropriate level of difficulty and interest, and a classroom management system designed to promote appropriate student behavior [16].

## 2. Challenges Confronting Educators Today

One of the major challenges confronting educators is the need to develop an array of programs that meet the unique needs of students while also allowing for the most inclusion

in general education settings possible. Over the years, there has been a movement toward the imposition of a standardized curriculum in public education. This often resulted in educational programs that lack options and a diversity of pathways to graduation. In some cases, school curricula have taken a singular, inclusive pathway approach that requires students to enroll in a specific series of classes, often only in a general education setting and consisting of college preparatory classes. Under these conditions, students with special needs struggle to master the curricula, find them unresponsive to their needs, and eventually abandon any attempt to cope with a hopelessly flawed system. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that teachers often do not have adequate pre-service preparation and/or in-service professional development regarding how to meet the needs of students at-risk or who evidence learning and/or behavior problems [16]. Add current budgetary constraints and a prevailing philosophy that schools need only inclusive classroom settings, a toxic educational environment exists that is extremely problematic for students who require a range of services to succeed; disaster is unavoidable [4].

There also are some ramifications to the widespread implementation of research-based practices in public schools. Foremost has been the proliferation of instructional techniques and educational and behavioral interventions that were thrust upon guileless teachers and school administrators [17,18]. These interventions promised new and novel approaches and easy, "quick fixes" without much teacher or student effort that would result in a dramatic and positive change in student performance—especially in inclusive classrooms. The promises were akin to those made to Pinocchio by the voice that encouraged him to go to Pleasure Island and forgo any productive activity that would have resulted in real gains.

The reality is that these patent medicine cures may be harmful to students by replacing empirically-based interventions that might be labor-intensive with interventions that do not work. Teachers and parents often realize, perhaps too late, that many of the interventions that were touted to be effective and easy to use did not have the promised effect, which leads them to become distrustful of engaging in these interventions. The result is that students most in need of interventions often do not receive effective empirically-based treatment. Unfortunately, many general, as well as special education teachers, remain highly skeptical about current classroom practices [18].

Another compelling issue is the recognition of the critical role of assessment. In too many cases, assessment has been viewed in a summative high-stakes manner that largely serves to determine which students will be successful and which will fail in a standardized, one-pathway curriculum. While this standardized approach may be helpful in some respects, the need exists for a more balanced approach to assessment and the use of more formative assessment techniques that can help teachers to identify student problems in a timely manner and can lead to the development of meaningful instructional interventions that will change the trajectory of student performance [19–22].

Clearly, there are challenges facing the education of students who are at-risk. Fortunately, the field of special education has grown and has contributed much to the effective teaching of students with diverse needs. Research related to effective educational practice has given educators new tools and instructional practices that can be of benefit to students who experience learning and/or behavior problems. Even so, we acknowledge that the challenges posed by some students are so severe that the general education classroom is not always the most appropriate treatment setting [3].

The interventions that follow are not meant to be exhaustive but may be some of the more relevant interventions to meet the needs of students with diverse academic and behavior problems. Moreover, these interventions point to promising practices that are the result of research over an extended period and the vital role played by empirical analysis of best classroom practices [22].

## 3. Classroom Practices of Proven Effectiveness

A growing number of evidence-based practices are applicable to a diverse population of children and youth. Many of these emergent practices are aligned with the needs of the

students who are at the forefront of our deliberations. Those students who have no voice, who have no support system—these are the students for whom the following strategies have been chosen. Appropriate practices include (a) precise praise, delivered contingently on student performance of desired behavior; (b) opportunities to respond, giving students frequent chances to actively participate in classroom instruction; (c) contingency contracts, written agreements regarding specific expectations and associated rewards; (d) pre-correction, the anticipation of likely "stumbling blocks" and addressing them with students before they occur; and, (e) choice-making, giving students fixed choices regarding the order in which they wish to complete assignments [7]. In what follows, we discuss three evidence-based practices that we believe have special value within the context of our current conversation. Each has sufficient flexibility to address the needs of students with diverse learning, behavior, and language needs.

## 4. Group-Oriented Contingency Management

Group-oriented contingency management is an effective intervention that can be implemented in various ways [23]. One approach takes the form of group-interdependent management, whereby the performance of a small group is judged on the overall averages of the children. For example, the performance of each student may be evaluated and then added to the scores of the other students. A preselected criterion is applied to judge the success of the group (e.g., an average of eight out of ten correct responses) as they work for a common reinforcer. Teachers should begin with a lower performance standard to ensure success and promote "student by-in"; however, it is important to increase expectations to ensure that students perform up to a mastery level [24]. A group-interdependent approach encourages a high degree of cooperation among students and can have an impact on not only classroom behavior but also promote a sense of belonging. That sense of belonging is especially important to students from diverse cultures. Furthermore, a group-interdependent approach decreases the probability that students will engage in bouts of antisocial behavior [24]. Even so, it is important to observe the group to ensure that one or more students do not attempt to complete tasks for students they perceive as less capable and more likely to have a negative impact on overall team performance. A group-interdependent contingency does require tasks and performance criteria that are attainable for all students. Last, it is useful to keep in mind that a group-interdependent arrangement may not be useful with students who do not value or seek peer approval or recognition [24].

A second option is a group-dependent contingency in which the performance of one or few students determines whether the group is judged to be successful and earns the reinforcer. There are various approaches that the teacher can take in its implementation. For example, during an activity, the students might be unaware of which classmate's performance would be selected. Once the task is completed and the student is identified (sometimes referred to as the "hero") [23,25], they usually receive an increased amount of prosocial attention from peers. The group-dependent arrangement tends to increase student verbal interactions and peer attention, which the teacher can capitalize on to increase the student's social integration. The student may be chosen at random, or the teacher might select purposely a student, with the goal being to increase that students' social status. A drawback of a group-dependent arrangement is that students should be performing on the same academic level, and it is "all-or-nothing". That is, everything hinges on the performance of a single student. It, therefore, is incumbent upon the teacher to have knowledge of every students' capabilities. Teachers must be aware of possible issues of cultural sensitivity that might affect the selection of the student as well.

The third approach is a group-independent contingency arrangement, during which the performance of each student stands alone; that is, their performance is judged apart from all other students [26]. This arrangement is analogous to student grades, meaning that one student's grade in math is not dependent upon how well (or how poorly) another student performed in the same subject area. Teachers often combine a group-independent

arrangement and a contingency contract to strengthen the potential impact of the contingency arrangement. While students often express a preference for a group-independent contingency, research and experience have shown that the other two options usually are more effective in changing pupil's behavior. Students from diverse backgrounds may prefer the anonymity associated with a group-independent arrangement, but again, the other options are preferable.

Overall, group contingencies work best when implemented in small groups or with "teams" of students (e.g., 4–5 students) [23]. Regardless of the contingency arrangement, it is important to define clearly how, what, and when the reinforcer is available, based on an accurate measure of each student's performance. Teachers might administer a fixed-choice reinforcement inventory survey to students, observe what high probability behavior students engage in during less structured periods of class time, or simply poll students regarding their choices of reinforcers (e.g., social, activity, tangible). The group contingencies afford teachers a range of options, require a minimum amount of instructional planning time, are relatively non-obtrusive, and easy to implement. They not only have been demonstrated to be effective in improving academic performance and classroom conduct, but they also can facilitate student social integration and promote a sense of solidarity not found with individual interventions. This may be especially significant with students who vary according to culture and/or language.

Group-contingency arrangements do have a few drawbacks, one of which is that one or more students might seek to sabotage the teacher's efforts to successfully manage group instructions. If that occurs, one option is to pull that student(s) from an existing team and create a "team-of-one". The student no longer participates in a team comprised of classmates. A teacher might position that student in close physical proximity to an existing team to observe when they are reinforced. This "conspicuous reinforcement" has been known to motivate some students to seek reinstatement back into a team. It also might be useful to develop a function-based intervention plan based on an analysis of the motivation behind the student's misbehavior associated with attempting to sabotage their teammates' efforts [26].

## 5. Errorless Learning

Based on experimental learning research, errorless learning is designed to minimize or eliminate the possibility of errors occurring. It contrasts with trial-and-error learning, in which the student attempts to complete a task and, if they are wrong, the assumption is that the student would learn from corrective feedback from the teacher [27]. That assumption is not always true; students with a history of learning and/or behavior problems may perceive teacher feedback as punitive and be less inclined to participate in subsequent instruction [16].

Errorless learning is an antecedent modeling strategy that can afford students a substantial number of opportunities to respond correctly and, in turn, receive positive teacher praise. With errorless learning, the teacher might introduce an instructional task and not only give the question but also the correct answer: "What is 2 plus 2? 2 plus 2 is 4." Given the question and the answer, the student is likely to give the correct answer: "2 plus 2 is 4" ("Good adding"). Within this instructional arrangement, student frustration is minimized, and it is likely that a sense of "positive behavioral momentum" emerges; initial student success would lead to a willingness to participate more actively in subsequent instructions [24]. In conducting errorless learning, a teacher identifies the task to be taught and the level of prompting that likely is required for the student to get it right, depending on the instructional skill being taught (e.g., verbal prompt, gestural prompt, physical prompt) [27]. Data are collected on pupil performance and the level of prompting provided the student; across time, higher-level prompts are gradually and systematically faded. Because students often experience success, they tend to engage in less challenging behavior. Learning by saying or doing a task correctly from the beginning avoids mistakes

and eliminates the possibility that the student would hold an incorrect response in their long-term memory [27].

## 6. Peers-Assisted Learning (PAL)

The Fuchs Research Group conducted 35 years of rigorous research on PAL programs and reported that it repeatedly produced positive academic and behavioral student outcomes [28,29]. PAL consists of a tutorial arrangement in which one student is the tutor, and the other student is the tutee; the students take turns in these two roles, alternating from one activity to the next. Parenthetically, the teacher always castes the more proficient student in the role of tutor first. The teacher instructs the students regarding preparation for instruction and how to organize the materials as well as emphasizes the importance of teamwork for achieving success in whatever subject matter area (e.g., arithmetic, spelling, reading).

In preparing the two students, the teacher models and "thinks aloud" for them, showing the expected behavior of both the tutor and tutee, and then asks the students to emulate the expected behavior and provides corrective feedback to shape their performance. The expectations must be taught directly and systematically, including how to give and receive feedback to each other during a tutoring session, along with praise for persistence in the face of a difficult task. The teacher also should model for the students' nonconstructive behavior (e.g., horseplay, off-task behavior) and constructive behavior (e.g., eyes on the partner, active listening). It is important to always end on constructive behavior, so that is what the students have as their memory of the teaching session [29].

Teachers often prepare contingency contracts, one for each student participating in the PAL tutorial program. The contract stipulates the behavioral expectations for serving in the PAL program and the reinforcers to be earned for satisfying those expectations, along with the criteria and timeline for doing so. As with most contracts, the initial agreement should impose modest expectations and within a brief period so that students experience success in achieving their goals. A condition of "positive behavioral momentum" is established so that the student envisions future success. Subsequent contracts will impose higher performance standards over a longer period. Even so, it is important for teachers to provide students with precise praise for their hard work and dedication and offer corrective instruction, as needed [26].

## 7. Selecting an Intervention

In choosing an intervention, teachers should pose the following questions: Has the intervention been reported in a peer-refereed journal? Has the intervention been replicated at least four times with the student population to which I wish to apply it? There is a risk associated with drawing conclusions about the effectiveness based on its impact on a different age group or category of students. Does the intervention fit the current program, and is it consistent with the skillset of those responsible for its implementation? To what extent must the instructional staff learn new skills to implement the intervention with high fidelity? Does the intervention fit within the current data collection system, or can reasonable adjustments be made to make it possible to assess routinely the effectiveness of the intervention [24,30]?

Regardless of the intervention, it is essential to consistently assess its impact on student behavior and be prepared to make timely modifications in the intervention. Data not only need to be collected on the effectiveness of the intervention but also on the fidelity of its implementation—the degree to which the intervention is implemented as it was originally planned. Absent these data, it is impossible to distinguish between a potentially sound intervention that is poorly implemented and one that is not properly aligned with the function of the problem behavior. The frequency with which these data are collected is dependent, at least in part, on the intensity and severity of the problem behavior. Ultimately, the likelihood of successful implementation and the sustainability of data-based and evidence-driven practices hinges on the existence of a "culture" that supports and reinforces their use [31].

## 8. The Increasing Diversity of School Populations and the Changing Demands of Students At-Risk—A New and Challenging Imperative

Increasingly, there is a population of children and youth from other cultures and linguistic backgrounds who share many of the same needs as students who manifest behavior and learning problems. There are differences in these at-risk populations regarding the origin and nature of their presenting problems, but they do share a common bond regarding individualization, focused classroom instruction, and specialized curricula. They additionally share the need for teachers with specialized training in how to meet the unique needs of EL students. Unfortunately, a largely "sink-or-swim" approach is a common practice applied to the education of students who speak a language other than English [32]. While some states require teacher training in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), others do not. Thus, states vary in their mandates for special certification and training of teachers of English Learners [33].

School populations reflect the increasing diversity, with growing numbers of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds [34,35]. These students are often referred to as English Learners (ELs) and enter schools with various levels of English proficiency and come from cultural backgrounds that may differ substantially from those found in most American schools. Likewise, the parents of these children may not be able, due to language and cultural differences, to fully participate in school functions where there is an English-only orientation and a school structure that differs greatly from that with which they are familiar. In such cases, students and parents alike find themselves mired in an organizational morass that they have difficulty understanding or navigating successfully [36].

As with special education, some school practices impede English Learners' performance, which underscores the need for educational alternatives and greater flexibility in constructing educational programs that effectively address their unique needs. The challenges facing these children may be behavioral or echo learning problems, but they also can be reflective of issues related to language, cultural differences, or trauma. In the case of children in English language development programs, they have specific cultural and linguistic needs that should be accounted for in the curriculum and in the services provided by school personnel [37].

The common unitary approach of a one-pathway curriculum of public education has been a challenge for special educators, and it also negatively impinges on students who are English Learners. The reality is that our society is growing in complexity, and this burgeoning diversity demands educational programs that address the unique needs of all learners. These needs can be based on demonstrable learning and/or behavior problems, cultural and/or language differences, or past failures in school. Students who are refugees or asylum seekers often come from disastrous circumstances in which their education has been interrupted. They also may have been subjected to or witnessed traumatic events and separated from their families for an extended period.

The most recent data indicated that 10 percent of the student population in the United States is classified as English Learners [38], with an estimated 12–20 percent of them being considered SLIFE or Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education [39]. These students bring some of their traumatic experiences into school settings and may manifest serious academic and behavioral problems in the classroom. The number of students who are SLIFE is growing annually and creates a situation in which there is a compelling need to develop educational programs that address their unique learning and behavioral issues. As the literature base for empirically-based interventions grows, so too does the awareness that culture and language are critical factors that frame school-based practices [40,41]. Effective educational practices must be understood in relation to the student's background as well as the cultural context of the setting in which students learn and teachers teach [36,42].

The needs of many EL students reflect some of the same issues that have long confronted the field of special education. EL students who also are SLIFE have distinctive needs and often face difficulty finding their way through an "alien culture" and coping

with a language in which they may not be proficient. Additionally, some EL students have significant emotional difficulties because of a disturbing background or suffer from interrupted schooling that necessitates additional treatment (e.g., mental health supports) as well as enhanced educational programs (e.g., intensive tutorial instruction) [43].

Students in programs for Teaching English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL) share much of the same history as students who are at-risk and students who exhibit challenging behavior or suffer from a history of school failure. Certainly, there are differences within these two populations, but they share similarities as well. Moreover, the development of the empirical base for special education may have some unique lessons that can be applied to the development of programs to meet the diverse needs of students in TESOL programs.

As more and more students from different cultures and who speak different languages enter schools in the United States, there is an increasing need for culturally sensitive educational intervention programs [40] as well as effective and intensive behavior management interventions [2,16]. Many of the students coming to the United States exhibit problems reflective of the trauma they have experienced elsewhere that can create barriers to student adaptation to a new educational environment. The growing number of students that fit this category highlights the urgent need for professional development for teachers and school administrators on how to deal effectively with students who have unique learning and/or behavioral issues. The need also exists for schools to adopt school-wide management programs that are inclusive and are specifically designed to keep students in school and engaged in a relevant curriculum. As teachers become more adept at using appropriate teaching strategies and interventions, many of these students can be taught in general education settings; however, this is not always appropriate. Separate, dedicated environments that provide specialized, intensive interventions still will be required to make the education of all students possible [3].

## 9. Conclusions

The accumulated research has contributed to the available practices with which to serve students, whether in general or special education. We also have a growing body of information related to effective delivery models and interventions for at-risk learners, whether they are native speakers of English or English Learners identified as SLIFE, and regardless of their educational placement. However, it is incumbent upon the research community to continue to develop culturally and linguistically-based teaching techniques that have strong empirical support. At the same time, both preservice teacher preparation institutions and in-service professional development programs must be more responsive to the rapid changes occurring in the school-age population throughout the United States. Perhaps there are lessons we can learn from past-to-present attempts to serve students with learning and/or behavior problems that can profit from that effort.

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