

To Change the Things I Can: Making Instruction More Intensive

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Abstract

When students do not respond adequately to core instruction, teachers must provide instruction and intervention that is more intensive and, therefore, more effective. However, for many educators, it is often unclear what it means to intensify instruction and how intensive instruction differs from high-quality core instruction. This article describes eight empirically supported methods for intensifying instruction for struggling learners along with specific suggestions, examples, and a planning guide for intensive instruction.

Keywords

effective instruction, intensive intervention, multitiered systems of support

In post-Sputnik 1960, about 42% of adults age 25 years or older had only an eighth-grade education (Snyder, 1993). Despite the era's educational reforms, students who could not meet the demands of a more rigorous curriculum could leave school entirely. Half a century later, the expectation in today's cultural and sociopolitical climate is that all students will receive and graduate from a high-quality K–12 education. Furthermore, those who fail to make adequate progress during that core instruction should receive more intensive, supplemental methods of instruction. More intensive instruction should consider the students' specific difficulties and use instructional strategies to overcome them and bolster learning.

Once relegated to the domain of special education, specialized services are now more commonly incorporated into schoolwide frameworks that make intensive instruction more readily available to all learners who struggle in school. Multitiered systems of support (Sugai & Horner, 2009), such as response to intervention, are frameworks in which students deemed unresponsive to core instruction (Tier 1) may receive targeted interventions (Tier 2) that will boost learning outcomes. Students who are unresponsive to interventions then receive instruction with increased intensity (Tier 3).

Unfortunately, implementing supplemental intervention is not a simple or easily feasible task for many schools (VanDerHayden et al., 2016). One potential reason for this

is that the steps of intensifying instruction may not be clearly understood, particularly when personnel lack appropriate expertise (National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2013). Effective teaching is dynamic and requires educators to consider a variety of data on each student as well as many other contextual variables, including the availability of resources or the quality of core instruction. Hence, educators must exercise careful professional judgment to determine which factors will leverage the best outcomes for their students in any given situation.

This article provides teachers, interventionists, and administrators with a set of actionable instructional variables that can be altered to increase the intensity of instruction and, subsequently, increase the likelihood of productive learning outcomes for students who struggle academically. It is not an exhaustive or rank-ordered list but merely an overview of eight key variables that may bolster the effect of instruction for struggling learners (see Table 1). The examples provided illustrate how teachers can incorporate each recommendation into practice.

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Table 1. Actionable Variables for Intensifying Instruction.

The following actionable instruction variables outline key factors for increasing the intensity of instruction for students that experience learning difficulties.

- Adjust the amount of time (frequency, latency, and duration)
- Reduce the size of instructional groups
- Optimize the fit between students' needs and the purpose of the intervention
- Increase opportunities to respond (OTRs)
- Increase motivation to learn
- Increase feedback (frequency and specificity)
- Change the method (program, intervention, modality)
- Consider students' cultural norms and values

Student Name <u>Taylor Williams</u>		Date <u>3/14/16</u>
Core Teacher <u>Ms. O'Neil</u>		Interventionist <u>Ms. Miller</u>
Content Area <u>Math</u> Specific academic concern <u>Computing fractions</u>		
Quantitative Factors	Current Instruction	Intensive Instruction
Dosage		
• Frequency	1x/day 5 days/week	3 days/week
• Duration	50 minutes	30 min./session
• Latency (time b/w sessions)	daily	2x/day
Reduce Group Size	27 (whole class)	4 students
Rate of Opportunities to Respond (OTRs)	1 per minute	3 per minute

Figure 1. Sample completed template for planning intensive instruction: Quantitative factors.

Although the bulk of the recommendations stem from the research literature surrounding students with high-incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities in reading or math, the intent of this article is to provide a broadly applicable set of strategies that are likely to benefit learners who struggle, regardless of content area or disability status. The eight variables have been loosely categorized by alignment with quantitative (see Figure 1) and qualitative instructional factors (see Figure 2). Additionally, the planning template in Figure 3 allows teachers to compare students' current program of instruction with the variables described below.

Eight Actionable Variables

Adjusting the Amount of Time in Intervention

Service can be intensified by manipulating intervention time in three primary ways. First, teachers can increase the frequency of the supplemental instruction or the length of each session (i.e., referred to as the dosage) to provide students more opportunities to learn. For example, Torgesen et al. (2001) offered students two 50-min sessions per day rather than the single 30 min of daily reading intervention typically provided in elementary settings. When deciding

Qualitative Factors	Current Instruction	Intensive Instruction
Optimize Fit		
• Instructional Focus	Core Math Instruction	Numbers and operations
• Students' primary needs	Overall Math Skills	Fractions Computation
Motivational Strategies in use	Classroom level incentives and positive acknowledgements	Tracking form and goal setting
Feedback		
• Frequency	end of each session	after each practice problem
• specificity	Be sure you have formed equivalent fractions before you start adding	Nice job showing your work while adding those two fractions! That helped to locate where you made a mistake in finding the least common denominator so that you could correct your answer
Pedagogical Method		
• Program/Intervention	Enlighten Math (Core program)	Fraction Face-Off
• Modality	Inquiry-based instruction	Explicit instruction
Cultural relevance	No specific attention	Use of culturally relevant exemplars and story problems that include names and images that reflect the student's cultural identity

Figure 2. Sample completed template for planning intensive instruction: Qualitative factors.

how to adjust the frequency and dosage, teachers might consider the age and attention span of the students. Younger students or those who might fatigue from exerting active and concentrated effort might benefit from a couple shorter sessions per day rather than a single longer session. Schutte et al. (2015) found that shorter, distributed practice was more effective at improving third graders' math fact fluency than longer but fewer practice opportunities.

The second way that intervention time can be manipulated is by extending or shortening the lag time or latency between instructional sessions based on the learning objective and depth of understanding required. Reducing latency between instructional sessions is associated with improved short-term retention of discrete learning tasks, such as building vocabulary and promoting automaticity of math facts (Swehla et al., 2016). One approach would be to intervene more frequently each day as described above. However, some students or learning objectives may require a longer latency period or additional processing time between sessions. Lengthening the interval between sessions is associated with improved long-term retention of learning (Pavlik, Bolster, Wu, Koedinger & MacWhinney, 2008; Swehla et al., 2016).

The final way that intervention time can be manipulated is by offering students more overall time to improve their skills or extending the duration of the intervention. Those who were not responsive to Tier 1 or Tier 2 instruction are not likely to make rapid improvements in Tier 3. Research suggests that elementary and secondary students who struggle the most can require multiple years of intervention to demonstrate substantial gains (Kamps et al., 2008; Vaughn et al., 2011).

Student Name _____ Date _____ Core Teacher _____ Interventionist _____ Content Area _____ Specific academic concern _____		
Quantitative Factors	Current Instruction	Intensive Instruction
Dosage		
• Frequency		
• Duration		
• Latency (time b/w sessions)		
Reduce Group Size		
Rate of Opportunities to Respond (OTRs)		
Qualitative Factors	Current Instruction	Intensive Intensive
Optimize Fit		
• Instructional Focus		
• Students' primary needs		
Motivational Strategies in use		
Feedback		
• Frequency		
• specificity		
Pedagogical Method		
• Program/Intervention		
• Modality		
Cultural relevance		

Figure 3. Template for planning intensive instruction.

A sample plan for a student who is learning computation of basic fractions is shown in Figure 1. The students' instruction will be intensified by increasing the frequency from 1 day per week to 3 days per week, but the sessions will be shorter (e.g., 30 min instead of 50 min).

Reduce the Size of Instructional Groups

As the size of the intervention group gets smaller, the likelihood of effectiveness increases (Vaughn et al., 2003). For students experiencing learning difficulties, lower teacher-to-pupil ratios have been associated with better outcomes (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014), but there may be a point of diminishing returns. One-on-one instruction may not be cost-effective because it has been shown to result in

statistically similar effects as instruction delivered to groups of three students (Helf, Cooke, & Flowers, 2009; Vaughn et al., 2003). In general, smaller groups enable teachers to provide more individualized instruction and to respond more readily to students' individual learning needs. Reducing the size of instructional groups also may improve the teachers' ability to monitor students' progress, maintain on-task behavior, increase student-teacher interactions, and provide performance feedback (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Wortruba, & Algozzine, 1993).

To make these learning opportunities effective, teachers should form the groups with students experiencing similar academic difficulties so that instruction efficiently focuses on the specific areas of need (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Tieso, 2003).

Although the exact size of effective intervention groups is dependent on many factors, it is recommended that teachers aim for groups in the range of three to five students (Torgesen, 2006). This is reflected in the quantitative factors for the math intervention group described in the Figure 1 sample plan.

Optimize the Fit Between the Needs of the Student and the Intervention

Intensive interventions target some skills more heavily than others, rather than relying on more general intervention strategies. This requires reliable and ongoing assessment of students' current abilities (Kamps et al., 2008) as well as purposeful planning of lessons (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2001). Those lessons need to break down complex tasks into smaller components or steps and then progress in a systematic fashion from easier to more difficult concepts. Figure 2 depicts an example plan to address students' specific mathematics skills and knowledge.

Another means of optimizing the fit is to adjust the makeup of the intervention groups in one of two ways. The first is to make them more homogeneous by purposefully forming temporary, flexible intervention groups of those students who have similar needs. It is critical that teachers limit the use of homogeneous groups to short-term, highly focused interventions in order to avoid tracking students on a permanent path of achievement based on prior performance (Tieso, 2003). By frequently assessing students, teachers will know as soon as a student reaches the learning objective and, therefore, can be transferred out of the intervention group to avoid potential tracking. Similarly, frequent assessment allows the teacher to determine the response of all students in the group so that instructional modifications can be made to further increase the effectiveness of instruction.

The other means of adjusting the intervention groups is to make them heterogeneous to capitalize on peer models, increase practice opportunities, and offer peer feedback. Peer tutoring, in which pairs of students with differing levels of performance engage in a shared task, has been identified as an effective instructional strategy (Wexler, Reed, Pyle, Mitchell, & Barton, 2015). Peer-mediated interventions, such as peer-assisted learning strategies, have shown positive effects for elementary students in multiple reading skills (Calhoun, 2005). Teachers should consider the unique needs of each student when determining whether heterogeneous or homogeneous intervention groups will provide the greatest benefit for students. The decision also may be contingent upon the goal of each lesson.

Increase the Rate of Opportunities to Respond

Teachers provide *opportunities to respond* (OTRs) whenever they ask students to write, speak, or move in ways that

demonstrate their learning and skill development. Increasing OTRs has been identified as an effective method for promoting student engagement and achievement (Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004; MacSuga-Gage & Simonsen, 2015; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). This becomes more feasible when the group sizes are reduced and the instruction is better aligned to students' needs. Such conditions allow the teacher to ensure each student is actively involved in the lesson because there are fewer total students among whom the teacher's attention is divided. OTRs include repeated practice of targeted skills, which has been shown to improve the learning of students with academic difficulties (Goldman, Mertz, & Pellegrino, 1988).

To increase OTRs, teachers first determine the current rate at which students have the opportunity to interact with instruction. This can be done with a video recording or the help of an observer who can record OTRs. The rate of OTRs per minute can be calculated by dividing the total number of observed OTRs by the total observation time in minutes. Once the baseline is determined, teachers can set a goal for increasing OTRs. Techniques such as choral response, group cloze reading passages, gestural response (e.g., fist to five, thumbs-up/thumbs-down), and electronic student response systems can then be incorporated to offer more OTRs. In the plan shown in Figure 1, the overall rate of OTRs is increased from two per minute to three per minute. By working in a small group, the students receiving the intervention are getting a greater share of the OTRs because those opportunities are divided by only four rather than 27 students.

Increase Motivation to Learn

Motivation to learn can profoundly impact student learning outcomes. Although offering students some choices in their learning activities or materials and establishing meaningful contexts for the work are often recommended (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008), it is difficult for students who are struggling to be motivated to persist at something with which they experience little success. Self-efficacy, or the belief that one can learn and perform at a certain level, shapes the choices students make about the activities they will do and the amount of effort they will put forth (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Students who do not believe they can be successful may engage in task avoidance (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Conversely, students who find their schoolwork meaningful and their teachers supportive have been shown to exert effort to achieve (León, Núñez, & Liew, 2015).

To increase motivation to learn, there are a number of specific actions teachers can take. Teachers should begin by ensuring that the difficulty of the learning task is within the students' current ability level (Brophy, 2013; Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Second, teachers should work with students to set meaningful performance goals tied directly to the learning task (Hruska, 2011; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Next, teachers should learn about students' interests and work to incorporate texts and materials that reflect those interests. Last, teachers should consider supplementing difficult text with supports, such as images and graphic organizers, to engage students who may otherwise avoid tasks with extensive reading required (Brophy, 2013).

The motivational strategies in Figure 2 are focused on students' setting goals and tracking their progress. Students who learned to set goals have demonstrated improvement in academically beneficial behaviors (Hruska, 2011; Margolis & McCabe, 2006; Stevenson, 2016).

Increase the Frequency and Specificity of Performance Feedback

Providing students with timely and specific feedback enables a pathway for continuous improvement by helping students understand the particular behaviors that contributed to their success, or lack thereof, on a task (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). In other words, effective feedback statements identify the specific student actions to replicate or avoid in order to improve performance. For example, teachers should aim to make statements such as "Excellent job chunking that word" or "Be sure next time you keep the ones and tens columns lined up when adding two-digit numbers." This provides clearer direction to students than generic feedback, such as "Good" or "Nice job." By planning out anticipated feedback, teachers can increase the likelihood of providing specific statements. The plan in Figure 2 includes an example of feedback for students learning to add fractions.

Change the Program, Intervention, or Method

If the current intervention or method of instruction has been done with verified fidelity over time and with sufficient data but is not yielding the desired result, the current treatment may need to be changed (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006). Improving outcomes may require altering the pedagogical approach or the curricular program to one better suited to address the student's specific learning difficulties. As the sample in Figure 2 shows, a student whose progress in mathematics problem solving stagnates while participating in inquiry-based instruction may need a change to more explicit instruction (Fuchs et al., 2008).

It is important that these decisions to change the program or method not be made capriciously. Complex skills (e.g., comprehension) take longer to improve than more discrete skills (e.g., letter-sound correspondence). In addition, the progress-monitoring measure may not be sensitive to the particular skill being targeted. For example, oral reading fluency measures are among the most popular means of tracking students' reading progress (Graney & Shinn,

2005), but they typically are not designed to detect reading prosody or inference-making ability. Other conditions that must be evaluated prior to changing interventions include whether (a) the intervention was conducted with fidelity and (b) the child was active in participation. These issues highlight the need to engage in thoughtful planning and decision making whether selecting the initial intervention or determining when and what change in that intervention is warranted.

Consider Students' Cultural Norms and Values

Teachers must ensure instructional methods are respectful of and responsive to students' cultural norms and values. Implementing culturally responsive instructional practices can increase students' willingness to engage in instruction, improve motivation, and increase achievement (Gay, 2000, 2002). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an area of considerable growth in recent years, but many teachers may not know how best to operationalize culturally relevant practices within their own classrooms (Barnes, 2006). To begin, teachers should establish open channels of communication with students and families by inviting students and families to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns surrounding the child's education. Giving parents and students a voice in the process of education will enable effective collaboration and promote a sense of empowerment. Teachers then can work with students and families to set meaningful learning goals that are consistent with their own norms and values as well as select meaningful reinforcement strategies that may bolster motivation and help students sustain effort over the long term (Swain-Bradway, Loman, & Vincent, 2014; Fallon, O'Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012).

Teachers also can improve cultural relevance by using instructional images and examples that are reflective of students' own cultural experiences (Robinson-Ervin, Cartledge, & Keyes, 2011; Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012; Vincent et al., 2011) and by offering students opportunities to share experiences that demonstrate their unique culture. In Figure 2, the intensive intervention is made more culturally relevant by adjusting the names and images in story problems as well as the content of the exemplars. These relatively simple changes are a first step in making the instruction more responsive to students' experiences.

Cautions and Next Steps

Changes to a student's instructional program should be made with caution. First, altering the instructional program of any student with an individualized education program (IEP) may require formal amendment of the IEP before such changes can take effect. Failure to follow due process for amending an IEP can lead to a violation of federal and state regulations.

Second, altering instruction to increase effectiveness for students with persistent learning difficulties can be a complex task that requires a keen awareness of students' needs as well as knowledge of how best to tailor instruction to meet those specific needs. Years of training and practice may go into achieving consistently positive results, so teachers should set reasonable goals for building their expertise. The eight key variables for intensifying instruction are not intended to downplay or oversimplify the process of data-based decision making, but they can be used to guide teachers, administrators, and interventionists involved in instructional planning for intensive interventions across learning domains and content areas. There are many logistical, environmental, social-emotional, and other related factors that must be considered in providing effective instruction and intervention. Educators must take great care to ensure that such conditions are conducive to learning.

Finally, there also are many factors affecting students' ability to learn that may be outside of the teacher's control (e.g., family support or prior educational history). Such factors are numerous and may have profound effects on a child's learning outcomes. However, educators must not enable outside factors to force a sense of helplessness. There are many actions and practices that teachers can employ to positively affect student learning. The recommendations presented in this article serve to focus attention on the actionable variables teachers can manipulate to improve the effectiveness of instruction for all students.

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