Intentionally Intensify Classroom Practices to Support Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities can benefit when educators implement universal, or Tier 1, proactive practices within a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework. (See Why implement Tier 1 PBIS for students with disabilities? What does research say?) Based on decades of research supporting PBIS, including emerging evidence for students with disabilities, the Center on PBIS recommends that educators:

- Intentionally and inclusively support all students, including students with disabilities, with classroom PBIS (Simonsen et al., 2020),
- Develop a full continuum of support with a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) approach in their classroom (Simonsen et al., 2021), and
- Provide a strong foundation of robust and differentiated Tier 1 classroom PBIS to support and respond to students’ social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Center on PBIS, 2021).

Consistent with these recommendations, we supported three elementary educators to intentionally intensify their use of three targeted classroom practices to support students with disabilities: (a) proactively prompting, (b) actively engaging students with opportunities to respond, and (c) specifically praising students’ academic, social, emotional, and behavioral skills. In this brief, we address two evaluation questions:

1. What are the effects of supporting educators to intentionally intensify their practice on their overall implementation of targeted classroom practices (i.e., prompting, engaging, and praising)?
2. What are the effects of educators intentionally intensifying their classroom practices on the behaviors of students with disabilities?

1. Supporting Educators to Intentionally Intensify Classroom Practices

In this section, we introduce the participating educators, describe our support, and briefly summarize changes to their practice while receiving support.

Meet the Educators

Three elementary educators volunteered to participate and intentionally intensify their classroom practices. Each educator described herself as a white female, a certified and experienced educator (see Table 1), and a mentor for pre-service professionals (i.e., student teachers and interns). Each educator selected 15-min of instruction when she experienced challenges supporting an identified student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Participating Educators</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
<th>Teacher C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>&gt;20</td>
<td>16-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Elementary + SPED</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade level taught</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected instructional activity</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Morning Meeting</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before receiving any support to intensify their practice, each educator implemented the three targeted practices in their classroom at rates that were supportive of most students. Trained observers counted educators' use of practices and sampled students' behaviors during the selected 15-min of instruction each day during the Spring 2023 semester (i.e., math for Teachers A and C, and morning meeting for Teacher B). Table 2 presents practice rates (practices per minute) for each educator before receiving support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Practice rates before targeted professional development</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
<th>Teacher C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prompts</td>
<td>0.3 per minute (once every ~3 min)</td>
<td>1.2 per minute</td>
<td>0.2 per minute (once every 4 min)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to Respond</td>
<td>2.0 per minute</td>
<td>7.0 per minute</td>
<td>2.2 per minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Praise</td>
<td>0.4 per minute (once every 2-3 min)</td>
<td>0.6 per minute (once every ~2 min)</td>
<td>0.6 per minute (once every ~2 min)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this level of implementation, most students in each classroom were academically engaged, and they were occasionally off-task (see “overall classroom behavior” in Table 3). However, the participating students, identified with disabilities, were less engaged and more off-task than peers (see “participating student with a disability” in Table 3). We introduce the three participating students in the next section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Average student behavior(^1) before educators intentionally intensified practices</th>
<th>Classroom A</th>
<th>Classroom B</th>
<th>Classroom C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AE(^2) OT(^3)</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>OT</td>
<td>AE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Classroom Behavior</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating Student with a Disability</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Student behavior summarized as percent of sampled opportunities, \(^2\) AE = Academically Engaged, \(^3\) OT = Off-Task

Targeted Professional Development (PD)
We used a targeted professional development (PD) approach (e.g., Simonsen et al., 2020) to support educators’ intentional and intensive implementation of prompts, opportunities to respond, and specific praise to support their identified student with a disability. First, we provided a brief (~20 min) training on one of the key practices that
(a) highlighted the critical features, examples, and application of the practice to support their identified student with disabilities and
(b) provided a brief overview of self-management (described next).
Following the training, we sent each educator weekly email reminders, and educators self-managed their use of the first practice daily. That is, each educator:

(a) set a goal to intentionally intensify their practice implementation to meet the needs of one student identified with a disability,
(b) counted their use of the practice, when it included their identified student, using a golf counter during the selected 15-min instructional activity (see image on right), and
(c) celebrated when they met their goal for intensified implementation.

After about 2 weeks, we met with each educator to train the next key practice. The educators adjusted their self-management plan to support implementation of both practices (i.e., setting a goal, counting, and celebrating their use of two practices), and we sent email reminders for both practices. After another 2 weeks, we met with each educator to train them on the third key practice. Then, they adjusted their self-management to support all three skills, and our email reminders included all three practices. After a few weeks, we provided a final review to emphasize how to efficiently implement the practices in concert.

Teachers A, B, and C self-managed with varying levels of fidelity: Teacher A self-managed (fully or partially) during 100% of observations, Teacher B during 93% of observations, and Teacher C during only 28% of observations.

**Intensified Implementation of Classroom Practices**

While participating in Targeted PD, each educator enhanced their use of one or more of the classroom practices overall (**Figure 1**). Given that they implemented practices at levels that were supportive of most students before Targeted PD, these were intentional changes to support their students with disabilities.

During Targeted PD, **Teacher A** provided an average of:

- 0.2 prompts per minute (once every 4 minutes),
- 2.6 opportunities to respond per minute, and
- 0.5 specific praise statements per minute (about once every 2 minutes).

On average, **Teacher B** provided:

- 0.6 prompts per minute (about once every 2 minutes),
- 5.9 opportunities to respond per minute, and
- 0.8 specific praise statements per minute (about once a minute).

On average, **Teacher C** provided:

- 0.3 prompts per minute (about once every 3 minutes),
- 2.5 opportunities to respond per minute, and
- 0.9 specific praise statement per minute (about once a min).

**Figure 1.** Changes in educators’ practice rates before and during targeted PD
In sum, all teachers increased their use of specific praise. Teachers A and C increased their use of prompts and opportunities to respond. In contrast, Teacher B implemented practices at high rates before targeted PD, and her prompts and opportunities to respond decreased as she focused on (a) intentionally including her identified student in practices and (b) increasing praise. (Her overall rates of each skill remained high.)

2. Effects of Educators Intentionally Intensifying Implementation

In this section, we introduce the participating students and summarize the effects of educators’ intentional implementation of classroom practices on students’ academically engaged and off-task behaviors.

Meet the Students

Each educator identified one student with a disability who engaged in behaviors that interfered with their learning. The parents of each student identified their child as a male, who spoke English, with services documented on either an Individualized Education (IEP) or 504 plan. Student A was in second grade, Student B was in Kindergarten, and Student C was in first grade. Parents of Students A and C identified them as Black or African American, and Student B’s parents preferred not to answer questions about race.

Changes in Student Behavior from Intentionally Intensifying Implementation

When Teachers A and B self-managed with fidelity and intentionally intensified their implementation of targeted practices, behavior of participating students, identified with disabilities, improved. Teacher C did not implement with fidelity, and her student’s behaviors declined relative to baseline levels (see Figure 2).

With Teacher A’s intentional implementation of classroom practices and self-management, Student A was more academically engaged (87% of opportunities) and less off task (8% of opportunities) relative to his prior levels.

Similarly, Student B was more academically engaged (67% of opportunities) and less off task (32% of opportunities) relative to his prior levels.

In contrast, Student C’s levels of academic engagement (58% of opportunities) decreased and off-task (42% of opportunities) increased, relative to prior levels. Other factors may have interfered with the Teacher C’s implementation fidelity and/or Student C’s behavior.

Figure 2. Changes in students’ behavior before (baseline) and while their teacher intentionally implemented targeted practices (intervention).
Big Ideas

In response to the evaluation questions, we offer two big ideas:

1. Targeted PD may be an efficient way to support educators to intentionally intensify classroom practices to better support students with disabilities.
2. When educators (a) participated in Targeted PD, (b) self-managed with fidelity, and (c) intentionally intensified targeted classroom practices, participating students with disabilities were more engaged and less off-task.

These findings suggest the need for additional research to identify more effective and efficient ways to support educators’ in creating positive, proactive, and inclusive environments by intentionally intensifying practices to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms.

References


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