The Benefits of Differentiated instruction for At-Risk Learners

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Abstract

K-12th grade students in the United States enter public classrooms with many learning styles, language proficiencies and abilities. Through differentiated instruction strategies, pre-service teachers and teacher educators can meet the needs of all students including at-risk learners. In this article, the authors identify at-risk students as having multiple suspensions and or expulsions, transiency, low-socioeconomic status or living at poverty level, single parent households, foster care and teenage pregnancy (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2010). The chapter will provide practical ways for differentiating content and instruction for at-risk students. Independent study, extended time for assignments, providing resources such as materials and support personnel are mentioned in this chapter (Grant, Popp & Stronge, 2008). Along with this is incorporating technology to meet the needs of at-risk learners. It is the hope that pre-service teachers and teacher educators will be equipped with strategies that they can use in the classroom to help at-risk learners succeed academically, socially, emotionally and physically.

Key Words: Differentiated instruction, at-risk learners, foster system, school support programs

Identifying At-Risk Students

Gavigan & Kurtts (2010) report that every year in United States roughly 1.2 million students dropout of school (pg. 1). A high school dropout in 2013 earns an average of $19,000 a year (Davis, 2013). This is far less than the $28,000 a high school graduate makes a year and a college graduate who makes $51,000 (Davis, 2013). When children and adolescents drop out of school, it is estimated that the United States loses almost $320 billion in personal earning each year (Davis, 2013). Youths who drop out of school are usually linked with negative employment. They are not able to provide necessary skills in an increasing technology-dependent workplace (Child Trends Databank, 2015). Perreira, Mullan and Lee (2006) reported that in 2000, high school dropouts are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as compared to their high school counterparts who have graduated.

With the advent of Common Core in 2009, the push is for all students to graduate with the 4 C's- critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication in order to successfully compete globally and maintain a stable career for life (National Education Association, 2015). However, this is not the situation for youths who drop out of school. They lack the 4C's, which can hinder them when competing in the global workforce. According to Child Trends Databank (2015) obtaining a high school diploma is connected to higher incomes and occupational status. Youths who drop out with little education and skill levels are more than likely to live in poverty and receive government help such as Medicaid and Food Stamps (Child Trends Databank, 2015). More than likely it is difficult to make ends meet without a high school diploma. Dropouts who are faced with meager earnings may continue to live with their parent's or relative's homes as they are not able to afford paying rent or mortgage.

Youths can also face negative life outcomes due to the choices made in dropping out of school. These young adults are more likely to become involved in crime, experience poor health or face mental health issues (Liem, Dillon, & Gore, 2001). Helfand (2005) contend that tens of thousands of students who drop out before 12th grade can lead to more incarcerations in state prisons and billions of dollars in lost revenue. It is for this reasons that negative outcomes such as lack of employment and life circumstances can become an economic burden on society when youths drop out of school.

Once at-risk youth leave the school system, they are usually long forgotten. It is not easy to get a hold of them as they may relocate elsewhere. Without a permanent address or phone number listed, it is difficult to follow their progress. School personnel may not have the means to follow up on their whereabouts and convince them to return to education.

Who then are at-risk students? Gavigan & Kurtts (2010) report that over half of the nation's dropouts are Latino or African American students. The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) reported in 2014, five percent of whites ages 16 to 24 were not registered in school and had not finished high school, compared with seven percent of African American students, and eleven percent of Hispanics. Fry (2003) described the reason why more Hispanics are dropping out of school than African Americans or Asians is because of the great amount of immigrants in this age group who never attended school in America. Betts and Lofstrom (2000) suggest that when young Hispanic immigrants arrive to the United States, they are not "dropping in" to high school, which is the reason why they have low levels of educational accomplishment. Put slightly differently, Hispanic immigrants who are not enrolled in the educational school system have contributed to the high dropout rates in America.

As for African Americans, the reason why they have a high dropout rate than whites is because of family factors such as family composition, parental education, and family income (Cameron and Heckman, 2001). To expand on this further, when African Americans have parents who are undergoing stresses due to financial difficulties, out-of-school employment, family needs, or even family dynamic changes such as marriage or childbirth, this can pull students away from school (Jordan et al, pg. 2, 1994).

Another segment of the student population that tends to be overlooked is foster youths. Foster youths have a higher dropout rate than most student groups. According to Frerer, Sosenko & Henke (2013) foster youth are less likely than other disadvantaged youth to complete four years in high school, register in community college or continue in community college for a second year. Without specific, intentional support systems in place, students identified as foster youths face many barriers to achievement. They encounter many life stresses and insurmountable odds due to the lack of family support and resources from schools and community outreaches to address their needs (Frerer, Sosenko & Henke (2013). Life stresses are brought about due to unforeseen circumstances resulting from movement from one foster home to another due to following reasons: 1) sexual abuse; 2) physical abuse; or 3) neglect (Frerer, Sosenko & Henke, 2013). Because of the abandonment and lack of positive nurturing received at home, this might lead to anger or depression, running away from a foster placement or even instances of suicidal tendencies. Foster youths often times go home to a chaotic situation that can be unpredictable. The need for consistency, safety, love and intimacy is not fully experienced when foster youths live with uncaring nonrelative foster parents, indifferent relatives who serve as foster parents, group home placements or institutions. All who are mentioned might not take an interest in their academic success.

In 2013, there were about 400,000 youth who are in the United States foster care systems (Grant, 2014). Foster youths are very likely to succumb to addictions from substance abuse as a coping mechanism. Grant (2014) believes that as many emotional needs are not fully met, foster youths can resort to substance abuse to fill the void they are feeling in their life. According to Grant (2014) each foster youth is likely to have a parent with a history of substance abuse or come from communities where violence is ubiquitous with easy access to drugs. Research conducted showed that 34% who reported being in a foster care utilized drugs compared to 21% of youth who never have been placed in the foster care system (Grant, 2014). The types of drugs that foster youth have experienced include but are not limited to are the following; marijuana, methamphetamines, cocaine and alcohol (Grant, 2014).

Foster youths are also victims of human trafficking because they cannot find a sense of belonging, love, affirmation and protection. For these reasons they find themselves seduced by traffickers who at first make them feel secure and loved but only to find themselves used for financial gain (Post, 2015). According to Saar (2014) child trafficking and exploitation are mostly found among foster care children living in homes or group homes.

In 2013, 60 percent of the child sex trafficking victims out of the 105 children recovered by the FBI nationwide raid, which included 76 cities were children who belonged in the foster care system (Saar, 2014). This alarming data shows how vulnerable at-risk foster youth are when placed with nonrelatives, relatives or even residential placements. Post (2015) notes that the average age of children who are trafficked into prostitution that are picked up by the police is usually 14. For these reasons, at-risk foster youth might have difficulties focusing or being academically successful in school as they are experiencing trauma from neglect, substance abuse or even child sex trafficking.

At-risk students may also exhibit the following characteristics besides ethnicity. They are the following: 1) personal factors such as multiple suspensions and expulsions due to mental health issues, disability or behavioral issues; 2) family factors such as homelessness, transiency or living in out-of-home care; 3) community factors such as low-socioeconomic status or living at poverty level due to parental unemployment and/or low educational attainment; 4) single parent households; 5) personal factors such as teenage pregnancy and 6) school related factors such as unsupportive school environment and damaging relationships between teacher and student (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2010).

When teachers, administrators and/or counselors identify at-risk students, the test lies in keeping them in school and not out of school. Grant, Popp & Stronge (2008) believes that many at-risk students have an increased likelihood of experiencing challenges in attending, succeeding, and staying in school. In order to prevent more students from dropping out of school each year, best practices in teaching include the use of differentiated instruction as well as student engagement.

How Differentiated Instruction Has Helped At-Risk Learners

Differentiated instruction was found to be helpful in a 30 years research study on at-risk students in Los Angeles public schools and a lab school at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Conducted by two UCLA psychologists, Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor found that at-risk students should not be pulled out of classrooms to be counseled, punished or suspended due to aggressive behaviors or bullying as it interfered with their academic progress and peer relationships (Adelman & Taylor, 2008). Adelman and Taylor discovered keeping at-risk children in stimulating, caring classrooms helped them to stop acting out, learn and share their unique talents to other classmates (De Angelis, 2012, pg. 46). It is for this reason that they encouraged schools to consider making innovative changes to classroom instruction (DeAngelis, 2012, pg. 46). This includes changing teaching methods to help teachers handle at-risk students. Instead of placing at-risk students with one teacher, the classroom should have support personnel to handle behavior issues, boredom and reading proficiency. Support personnel could be in the form of counselors, instructional aides and retired teachers. Although this form of differentiation would be costly in terms of personnel and monetary resources, the gains in at-risk student achievement would likely be quite high.

Sabine Parish is considered a poor, low-performing school district in Louisiana. The Parish implemented Adelman and Taylor's model in 2007-2010 (DeAngelis, 2012, pg. 46). DeAngelis (2012) reports that after three years of utilizing Adelman and Taylor's model on at-risk students, not only did graduation rates rose from 73 percent to 81.2 percent but the academic performance increased from 37th place in 2003 to 14th place in 2012. This goes to show that differentiated instruction does work when proper resources and district support are in place.

Additional Approaches and Strategies

Not all at-risk students exhibit bad behaviors in school. Some are experiencing socio-economic disadvantages related to homelessness, high mobility, poverty, single parent households and pregnancy that are not within their control. Teachers can differentiate instruction for at-risk students by meeting three types of needs. The first type of need is academic. Teachers can provide extended time for at-risk students to complete projects or homework that might be difficult to complete due to their home situation. Students who come from single parent homes might find that it difficult to complete homework as their home environment might not support homework activities. For teenagers who give birth during school time, they might need more time to complete assignments as the demands of taking care of a child takes precedent. Grant, Popp & Stronge (2008) emphasize that time in the classroom may be very limited for at risk students, units of learning that can be completed in short periods of time may be adopted (pg. 17).

In working with homeless, high mobility and pregnant students, effective teachers differentiate their lessons in such a way that content and skills can be mastered in a relatively brief amount of time. This means delivering unit lessons in shorter increments versus an extended amount of time as there is an uncertainty of school attendance. Grant, Popp & Stronge (2008) mentioned that teachers should implement cooperative groups and hands-on activities when teaching as it has been associated with better academic achievement of at-risk students (pg. 17). Activities such as learning centers, the use of manipulatives and realia are a few ways to keep at-risk students interested and engaged. Differentiated instruction such as The Dinner Party, Choral Reading, Strategy Corners, Writing Roulette, and Movie Posters all call for at-risk students to be involved in group learning. Popp and Xu (2012) assert that teachers should build a relationship with their students by taking an ownership into their learning process and involvement during teaching time. Therefore, teachers serve as an advocate, team player and supporter in order to make a difference in the academic lives of at-risk students.

The second type of need is technical. Technical needs include areas of assistance such as providing teaching supplies, homeless shelters, in-take shelters, clothing and referrals to agencies (Popp and Xu, 2012). Homeless students might find it challenging to complete assignments because there might not be a proper desk or workspace to complete homework. Migrant students can find it difficult to complete homework because they are moving from place to place. The reality is that at-risk students who live in impoverish situations are not able to afford basic materials to help them complete their work. Grant, Popp and Stronge (2008) recommended that teachers give a portable light, clipboard, paper, highlighters, pens and pencils for at-risk students who are in these situations. When school items are provided, it takes the stress and worry out of completing assignments.

The last type of need for at-risk learners is affective. Popp and Xu (2012) contend that at-risk students need to sense that school is a supportive, nurturing and caring place. The teacher is the primary person in the classroom who can provide this affective need by showing encouragement, respect and sensitivity.   Sewing the seeds of love begins with building an atmosphere of trust, establishing the highest expectations and appropriate behavior (Wong, 2009). When teachers develop a sense of belonging and attend to their emotional needs, they are more inclined to stay in than out of school (Popp and Xu, 2012). Therefore the teacher serves as a helper and facilitator and not an authoritarian to the at-risk student in the classroom. This can also be applied towards at-risk foster youth. Personalized tutoring with caring teachers in an individualized setting before school, lunch or after-school can be effective in supporting foster youths assignments, homework or tests. Mentoring from caring adults in the community is equally as important in providing foster youths with positive role models that are absent in their lives. Volunteers such as ministers, pastors and senior citizens can serve as motivators and encouragers to at-risk foster youth. Lastly, personal counseling through school based Student Assistance Program is another form of targeted intervention that can go a long way towards helping them cope with their challenges and find success.

School support programs

The responsibility of educating an at-risk student cannot fall solely on teachers. Teachers are exceedingly overwhelmed with large class sizes. Additionally, they are held accountable for students standardized test scores, classroom performance and all of the evolving changes in content standards from new education reforms such as the Common Core.   Teachers are spread thin with time spent outside of the classroom for required professional development trainings. A systemic school-wide approach that supports what teachers do in the classroom with students is absolutely critical in transforming at-risk students into champions in life.

Various programs can be implemented in schools in an effort to address and support the needs of at-risk students. First of all, it is important to reach out to students as early as possible before it is too late for remediation. With the passage of each subsequent school year, it becomes increasingly difficult for a credit deficient student to make up graduation credits.   In many high schools across the nation, administrators and counselors play a pivotal role in developing programs that target struggling Freshmen. At Ramona High School in Riverside, California, at-risk freshmen with failing grades are paired up with mentors in a program called Link Crew. The school has a significant student population that is socio-economically disadvantaged. Over 80% of its students receive free and reduced lunch. Approximately 40% of Ramona's 2,100 students are identified as English Language Learners. For the most recent school year, it was reported that only 38% of its students are on track to meet admissions eligibility at California public institutions of higher education.   Ramona also has seen an increase in the number of undocumented students from Latin America and Mexico. These students could be at-risk due to living in impoverish conditions and lacking governmental benefits such as financial aid for college which are often unavailable.

Several years ago, Ramona High School developed action steps to raise its graduation rate. Intervention programs were instituted to target freshmen whose low academic performance placed them at-risk of not graduating with a high school diploma. As part of the Link Crew program, positive role models and leaders from the Junior and Senior class work with an identified group of at-risk students several times a year. Studies have shown students connect better with successful peers and upperclassmen who can relate to their challenges and offer guidance. Blad (2014) contends that this is a positive feedback loop where by the act of helping the school out, the older student will deepen his or her own education while at the same time helping out their peers to achieve academically. At-risk students may not always respond well to educators but they certainly will look up to mentors who may share their similar backgrounds and challenges. Some of these mentors might have even experienced the same challenges along the way but rose to their full potential.

At each Link Crew Freshman Summit held each quarter, the leaders go over each freshman's grades and offer strategies to help them pass their classes. These leaders also discuss ways in which freshmen students can become more involved in school. Research has shown that the more connected a student is to school the greater the likelihood of student success. Blum (2005) believes that school bonding, school climate and student engagement helps to build school connectedness and academic success. When students are involved in clubs, community service, sports and other co-curricular activities, they will tend to take their studies more seriously and devote the time needed to focus on school. Blum (2005) asserts that students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school that provides various opportunities to excel and get involved in. Providing a healthy setting where at-risk students can thrive, learn and grow from senior leaders is vital to academic growth.

Link Crew Leaders also encourage at-risk freshmen to attend an after-school tutoring program and inform them of ways to seek help. Ramona High School's Help Center utilizes the talents of college bound seniors who tutor at-risk students in Math and English. Additionally, there is another after school program on campus that offers free tutoring in Math and Science from local college students studying at the University of California, Riverside. Four days a week they at-risk students achieve in Math and Science by offering one-on-one assistance for about an hour afterschool. It is the goal of the Link Crew mentoring program to help at-risk freshmen get back on track and gain the self-motivation and self-confidence necessary to experience newfound success. Interventions such as the Link Crew program has made an impact on the lives of at-risk students as many have turned around their academic performance.

Apart from the Link Crew program, Ramona High School offers several special classes for at-risk students called Pathways for Success. It is a self-contained elective course designed to assist a classroom of 20 freshmen students with low skills and a historical pattern of underachievement. The Pathways for Success teacher works with a small cohort of students to provide them with support in critical skill areas such as organization, time management, and study habits. These teachers monitor their progress daily and support them with the completion of work assigned from other classes.

There are at-risk students who have the skill set and potential to do well in school but are misguided by poor choices and distracted by priorities that conflict with academic success. These students will do well in school programs that focus on college and career readiness. The spark may be lit for a highly capable at-risk student through certain programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). If the student knows someone believes in his or her ability, the student will rise to the standards of which he or she is capable of performing. AVID is a proven college readiness program for traditionally underrepresented student populations that are low income and minority backgrounds. Ramona High School in Riverside, California has one of the top five AVID programs in the nation. It has a very large and successful program that supports first generation college bound students including those who were previously in at-risk circumstances. At an early juncture in their high school careers, some of these AVID students had grade point averages that did not fully reflect their potential and capabilities. Once these at-risk students were placed in AVID, they developed a positive mindset of being college material. Their lives have been transformed from being in AVID. With at-risk students who do not have the family support at home, they have found the kind of family support from AVID that helps them push through challenges. Through the AVID program, students receive tutoring from college students, attend college field trips, and listen to guest speakers from various colleges and different careers.

Promoting a college going culture can definitely have a huge impact on transforming the trajectories of at-risk students. Ramona High School has weekly Tuesday college gear days. Every teacher posts a graduation and college A-G poster in their classroom.

Each teacher also displays a banner of the institution they attended for college. Celebrating student success is equally important. Rewarding all students, especially at-risk students, is paramount. At-risk students want to be acknowledged for their efforts. The rewards associated with being recognized at student assemblies for grade improvement, good attendance and citizenship will inspire them to continue to do well in school. All too often, at-risk students have dealt with failure and are surrounded by negativity and a general sense of hopelessness. They need to find a purpose in life which begins with recognition for their positive turnaround and success.

Conclusion

It is imperative that differentiated instruction is in place to meet the needs of diverse learners. As educators become aware that not all children learn the same way in school, providing different techniques and teaching strategies is essential to their academic growth. Knowing the students' needs and wants is primary in figuring out what kind of differentiation is exactly needed. When differentiation is identified and implemented consistently, success can occur in the form of high achievement, as evidenced in the high graduation rates and academic performance at Sabine Parish, Louisiana. There is no doubt that the overall educational goal is for all students to become college and career ready when proper differentiated instruction is in place.

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