

Academic Enablers: Assessment and Intervention Considerations

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In their program of research to develop the *Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES)*, Drs. James C. DiPerna and Stephen N. Elliott (2000) have demonstrated that the skills, attitudes, and behaviors contributing to academic success in the classroom fall into one of two domains: *academic skills* or *academic enablers*. Academic skills are the basic and complex cognitive skills (e.g., mathematics, reading, critical thinking) that are the primary educational outcome (and focus of instruction) of elementary and secondary schooling.

Academic enablers (e.g., social skills, study skills, motivation, and engagement) are student attitudes and behaviors that facilitate a student's participation in, and benefit from, academic instruction in the classroom.

Assessment Considerations

Researchers (e.g., DiPerna, Volpe, & Elliott, 2002; Reynolds, & Walberg, 1991) have demonstrated that prior academic skills are the largest single predictor of current achievement, regardless of other student, classroom, or home environment variables. As such, the first step in developing an intervention for a student experiencing academic difficulty must be to assess the student's current proficiency in core academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics). After determining the student's level of proficiency relative to the academic skill expectations in the classroom, academic enablers should be assessed to determine if they are contributing to the current problem. Motivation appears to be the first academic enabler that should be assessed given the strength of its relationship with current achievement.

For children in the primary grades, engagement in classroom instruction appears to be a good predictor of early academic skill development. Conversely, study skills appear to assume a greater role (e.g., DiPerna et al. 2002) as students advance through the intermediate grades and continue into their middle and secondary years.

After motivation, the next skill domain for consideration appears to vary depending on the grade of the student experiencing difficulty. For children in the primary grades, engagement in classroom instruction appears to be a good predictor of early academic skill development. Conversely, study skills appear to assume a greater role (e.g., DiPerna et al. 2002) as students advance through the intermediate grades and continue into their middle and secondary years. The final enabler for consideration is social skills. Based on the research of DiPerna et al. (2002), the contributions of social skills to academic outcomes primarily are indirect and assume slightly lower priority when developing interventions for students experiencing academic difficulty.

Intervention Strategies

If a student's academic enablers are in need of intervention, there are multiple strategies that can be implemented. Four such strategies include *modeling, coaching, behavioral rehearsal, and reinforcement*. Two of these strategies (modeling and coaching) are appropriate for a student who has not demonstrated the target enabler and does not understand the steps involved to demonstrate the enabler. The remaining two strategies (behavioral rehearsal and reinforcement)

are appropriate for a student who has demonstrated the target enabler but has not done so with necessary frequency or proficiency. Thus, after identifying a target enabler for intervention, the next step in developing a specific intervention plan is to determine if the child has (a) failed to demonstrate the target skill and needs to learn the actual skill, or (b) demonstrated the target skill but needs to increase/improve its use. For a detailed discussion of these four broad intervention strategies, practitioners are encouraged to refer to Elliott and DiPerna (2001) for additional information.

Academic skills certainly should remain the primary focus of instruction in schools; however, if academic enablers promote academic achievement, then there are additional skills and attitudes that should be taught explicitly to increase the likelihood that all students will learn to the best of their abilities.

In concluding this brief article on academic enablers, it is important to note the potential of academic enablers for prevention services in schools. Researchers have documented that academic enablers rarely are taught explicitly in the classroom (e.g., Zimmerman, 1998) and that students who are academically at-risk demonstrate lower enablers than students with average or above average achievement (Elliott, DiPerna, Mroch, & Lang, 2004). Academic skills certainly should remain the primary focus of instruction in schools; however, if academic enablers promote academic achievement, then there are additional skills and attitudes that should be taught explicitly to increase the likelihood that all students will learn to the best of their abilities. Facilitating the introduction of explicit instruction of academic enablers represents an excellent opportunity for educational support personnel (e.g., psychologists, special educators, resource teachers) to expand the impact of their professional practices.

Note: Practitioners interested in further reading about academic enablers are encouraged to see the forthcoming article *Academic Enablers and Student Achievement: Implications for Assessment and Intervention Services in the Schools* that will appear in *Psychology in the Schools* in January, 2006.

For more information on Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES), [click here](#).

References

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