Defining Student Problems: The First Step in Effective Intervention Planning

Students who struggle with academic deficits or behavioral problems do not do so in isolation. Their difficulties are played out in the larger context of the school environment and curriculum—and often represent a 'mismatch' between the characteristics of the student and the instructional or behavioral demands of the classroom (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). It may surprise educators to learn that the problem-identification step is the most critical for matching the student to an effective intervention (Bergan, 1995). Problem identification statements should be defined in clear and specific terms sufficient to pass 'the stranger test' (Howell, Hosp, & Kurns, 2008). That is, the student problem can be judged as adequately defined if a person with no background knowledge of the case and equipped only with the problem-identification statement can observe the student in the academic setting and know with confidence when the problem behavior is displayed and when it is not.

Here is a 3-step process for describing student problems clearly, understanding their likely causes, and matching those problems to appropriate interventions.

1. Describe the problem in specific terms (Batsche et al., 2008; Upah, 2008). Write a clear, brief description of the academic skill or performance deficit or behavioral problem. This section provides guidance in how to construct strong statements identifying student concerns in both academic and behavioral areas.

   Academic Problem Identification. An academic problem ID statement focuses on a specific skill or performance area and includes information about the conditions under which the academic problem is observed and typical or expected level of performance. It contains these 3 elements:

   - *Conditions*. Describe the environmental conditions or task demands in place when the academic problem is observed.
   - *Problem Description*. Describe the actual observable academic behavior in which the student is engaged. Include rate, accuracy, or other quantitative information of student performance.
   - *Typical or Expected Level of Performance*. Provide a typical or expected performance criterion for this skill or behavior. Typical or expected academic performance can be calculated using a variety of sources.

Academic Problems: Sample Definitions		
Environmental Conditions or Task Demands. *'What is the student supposed to do?'*	Problem Description. *'What does the student actually do?'*	Typical or Expected Level of Performance. *'What is the performance that you expect from this student?'*
When completing a beginning-level algebra word problem…	…Ann is unable to translate that word problem into an equation with variables…	…while most peers in her class have mastered this skill.
During social studies large-group	…Franklin attends to instruction an average of 45% of the time…	… while peers in the same room attend to instruction an

instruction…		average of 85% of the time.
For science - homework…	… Tye turns in assignments an average of 50% of the time…	… while the classroom median rate of homework turned in is 90%.
On weekly 30-minute in-class writing assignments…	… Angela produces compositions that average 145 words…	…while a sampling of peer compositions shows that the typical student writes an average of 254 words.

Behavior Problem Identification. A behavioral problem ID statement defines the problem behavior in clear, observable, measurable terms (Batsche et al., 2008; Upah, 2008) and avoids vague problem identification statements such as "The student is disruptive." A useful self-prompt to come up with a more detailed description of the problem is to ask, "What does <problem behavior> look like in the classroom?" A behavior problem ID statement contains these three elements:

A well-written behavioral problem definition should include three parts:

- *Conditions.* The condition(s) under which the problem is likely to occur
- *Problem Description.* A specific description of the problem behavior
- *Contextual Information.* Information about the frequency, intensity, duration, or other dimension(s) of the behavior that provide a context for estimating the degree to which the behavior presents a problem in the setting(s) in which it occurs.

Behavior Problems: Sample Definitions		
Conditions. *'Where or when does the problem behavior occur and what is going on at the time?'*	Problem Description. *'What does the behavior look like in the classroom?'*	Contextual Information About Frequency, Intensity, Duration, or Other Dimension(s) of the Behavior. *'What indicates that this behavior is challenging?'*
During 20-minute independent seatwork literacy tasks,…	…John talks with peers about non-instructional topics…	…and must be redirected by the teacher an average of 3 times per session.
In school settings such as the playground or gymnasium, when unsupervised by adults,…	…Andrea is reported by peers to use physically threatening language…	…at least once per week.
When given a verbal teacher request…	…Jay fails to comply with that request within 3 minutes…	… an average of 50% of the time.

2. Select a hypothesis to explain the academic or behavioral problem. The hypothesis states the assumed reason(s) or cause(s) for the student's academic or behavioral problem(s). Once it has been developed, the hypothesis statement acts like a compass needle, pointing toward interventions that most logically address the student concerns. The checklist below includes common reasons for academic and behavioral concerns. Note that more than one hypothesis may apply to the same student (e.g., a student may have both a skill deficit and a motivation deficit).

Likely Reason(s) for Student Academic and Behavioral Concerns	
Behavioral	Academic
❑ Lacks necessary behavioral skills ❑ Has the necessary behavioral skills but is not motivated by the instructional task/setting to comply/behave appropriately ❑ Seeks att'n from adults ❑ Seeks att'n from peers ❑ Reacts to teasing/bullying ❑ Tries to escape from instructional demands or setting ❑ Attempts to hide academic deficits through noncompliance or other misbehavior	❑ Is placed in work that is too difficult ❑ Lacks one or more crucial basic skills in the problem subject area(s) ❑ Needs drill & practice to strengthen and become more fluent in basic academic skills ❑ Has the necessary academic skills, fails to use them in the appropriate settings/situations ❑ Needs explicit guidance to connect current skills to new instructional demands ❑ Has the necessary academic skills but is not motivated by the instructional task/setting to actually do the work

3. Select interventions to match the selected hypothesis. After a 'best guess', or hypothesis, has been selected to explain the probable cause of the student's academic or behavioral concern, the teacher will then choose intervention ideas that logically address the root cause of the problem.

References

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