

**Accommodation:
The Critical Element in Academic Success for Students
At-risk**

by
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**ACCOMMODATION:
THE CRITICAL ELEMENT IN ACADEMIC SUCCESS
FOR STUDENTS AT-RISK**

A Dissertation
Presented to the
Faculty of the
School of Education
Kennedy-Western University

In Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirement for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
Education

by
Geary J. Cantrell
Meeker, Colorado 1999

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Abstract of Dissertation

ACCOMMODATION:

THE CRITICAL ELEMENT IN ACADEMIC SUCCESS

FOR STUDENTS AT-RISK

by

Geary J. Cantrell

Kennedy-Western University

THE PROBLEM

The at-risk student population is growing larger in number with educators finding increased difficulty in meeting their diverse needs. Traditional teaching methods are not always working successfully. Accommodative services and alternative methods of education must be implemented in a fashion that will ignite students to success. Standard forms of statistical measurement (attendance, dropout, and graduation rates) have consistently shown negative ratings in schools across America. These measurements are indicators that students' educational needs are not being appropriately dealt with.

This study shows how increased accommodation has a major impact on the educational success rates of at-risk students. It also reveals the importance of going beyond societal expectations and limits to reach students educationally. Finally, this study proves at-risk students will take responsibility for their educational success without losing accountability or being enabled.

METHOD

A review of related literature indicates there is a great amount of exploration taking place with assistance teams and alternative educational programs. Research supports the idea of meeting students needs through increased accommodation.

This study utilizes a quasi-experimental approach to research. The design is a five-year accommodation project with a comparative analysis of intact groups against a control. Yearly attendance, dropout, and graduation rates emerge as dependent variables in the study.

FINDINGS

Increased accommodations do have a positive affect on the at-risk population. Through appropriate provisions, pupils with problematic educational needs can find success. They demonstrate responsible behaviors with a motivated attitude. With increased accommodation attendance rates increase, dropout rates decrease, and graduation rates rise.

Educators should move beyond restrictions and societal limitation to meet the needs of students. They should experiment and explore new and innovative ways to help all students achieve academic success.

Accommodation:

The Critical Element In Academic Success For Students

At-Risk

Chapter 1

Introduction/Importance of the Study

“Whatsoever things were written afore times were written for our learning”. These old words written by the apostle Paul in his book of Romans (15:4), indicate the importance of learning. This is an example of how important learning has always been. From the beginning of time people have been engaged in learning in one form or another. Learning is a natural part of development and a right that every human being has. The Federal Government has established a law guaranteeing every school aged child the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). It is important to note, just because students have the right to a free public education does not mean they are getting one. Many students are not fitting into traditional ways of learning. They are losing interest in school and are giving up on one of the greatest

guaranteed rights ever offered. This trend is indicated by poor attendance, high dropout rates, and low graduation numbers in schools all across America. "Due to many factors, classroom teachers in America seem to be dealing with more and more at-risk students. Some are chronically angry and hostile; others are apathetic and withdrawn. Some students are insecure and need continual reassurance; others seem to be perpetually disruptive. Unless their problems are addressed, these students leave the school system still hostile, still apathetic, still insecure, and often still disruptive - ill-prepared to function productively in society." (Garrison, Mickey, Marilyn Sprick and Randall. Interventions: Collaborative Planning for Students At-Risk. Sopris West, 1998. 1). Schools must find a way to address this situation and meet the differing educational needs of today's children.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines accommodations in the educational process and how they are used to meet the needs of students at-risk. Exploration of Student Assistance Teams and Alternative Education will be provided in an attempt to solve the multifaceted

needs of many students. A focus will be given to restructuring of traditional education for nontraditional students, seeking to offer them an optional learning path for success.

Overview of the Study

The number of students with special needs is a staggering number in today's school systems. These include students who are classified as gifted and talented, those who have identified disabilities, and boarder line disabled (not classified). Another group of special needs students are the at-risk individuals. These include: potential dropouts, minority cultures, low-income students, drug and alcohol abusers, pregnant females, students from single parent homes, and those considered socially maladjusted. "Adding these students together, plus those who obviously need assistance but do not fit into any distinct group, results in a total group that approximates half of all students in public schools" (Dowdy, Carol A., James R. Patton, Edward A. Polloway and Tom E. C. Smith. Teaching Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Settings, Second Edition. Allyn and Bacon,

1998. 4). With numbers of this magnitude, it is absolutely necessary that something be done about meeting these needs.

Regular education and traditional teaching alone cannot possibly meet the special needs of students. Educational leaders must seek out new and more effective ways to accomplish learning for all students. The only chance schools have to meet the many-sided demands of students is to bring in accommodations to the regular program. Some students will require adaptations to their learning environment while others will need substantial modifications to the adopted curriculum. The task of bringing in multiple alternatives for student learning success is a great one. It will take a team effort on the part of school districts and communities to make it happen. Society as a whole must buy the idea that students have different learning needs and cannot all be taught the same way.

For school districts to begin efforts of accommodating student needs appropriately, they should implement "Building Assistance Teams". These teams are composed of dedicated individuals who truly care about assisting young people and are

willing to spend the extra time helping pupils find the support needed for educational success. These groups should be able to work together for the good of kids on a regular basis, weekly if possible. A quality Building Assistance Team will perform child studies, researching all avenues to bring about appropriate learning for specific students. They will make recommendations to the classroom teachers that will accommodate students with diverse educational needs. These teams must develop trust and respect from the other faculty members for the process to work appropriately. Good assistance programs will greatly enhance student success rates, providing opportunities for at-risk students to find their niche in schools.

Alternative schools provide another very important form of education for students at-risk. These schools are designed to reach out to students who have become misfits in the regular education process. Socially or behaviorally alternative school students are unable to function in the daily routines of the normal school setting. They need a different environment that has been adapted to meet their learning styles. Alternative schools are

quite different from the traditional school environment. These classrooms may be fitted with living room furniture instead of desks to create an atmosphere of comfort and belonging.

Alternative school students usually have problems fitting into an acceptable group. These schools are designed to create a family atmosphere of belonging and appropriate social interaction.

Needs are accommodated through individualized learning with the teacher being a facilitator of instruction. Students are allowed to build nontraditional classroom schedules to accommodate employment, teen pregnancies, family situations, and other unique predicaments. Alternative schools are designed in various ways to meet the specific school and community needs. Some of these schools are structured as stand alone schools, operating on their own and separate from the regular education schools.

Others are developed as a "school within a school", sharing administrations, faculty, and funding from an already established institution. Some states have already begun the process of mandating that alternative schools be established within school districts.

Special Education is a federally established program that modifies, accommodates, and adapts curriculums to fit students learning needs. Pupils must qualify through established formulas that identify specific disabilities. All students should be eligible for classroom accommodations, but "students with special education and students eligible under section 504 have a legal right to the accommodations listed in their instructional/ accommodation plans". (Ryley, Helen. Accommodations to Improve Learning and Performance. Colorado Department of Education, 1998. 18)

Students with disabilities identified by their Individual Education Plans are often categorized into the at-risk group. Many times they develop problematic behaviors caused by their disabilities, creating an impact on their education. Special Education students are a group that ranks high in the dropout ratings. Disabled kids have a greater chance of succeeding if they can be identified early in their educational careers and have well-established interventions developed into their learning plans. Public Law 94-142 grants disabled students the right to an equal education. "The basic intent of PL 94-142 was to provide equal educational

opportunity for students with disabilities. The legislation required schools to seek out and implement appropriate educational services for all students with disabilities, regardless of the severity” (Dowdy, Carol A., James R. Patton, Edward A. Polloway and Tom E. C. Smith. *Teaching Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Settings, Second Edition*. Allyn and Bacon, 1998. 12). Special Education Students were originally isolated from the regular population. As civil rights laws were passed, disabled students began to gain their rights to an equal education. Educational services moved from isolated self-containment to an inclusive model. Disabled students now have the right to be taught in the main stream of education with accommodation being made in the regular education classroom.

All students have a right to a free public education. Schools must continue to seek out new and better ways to meet the constantly changing, diverse needs of students. Restructuring schools to move away from traditional methods, appears to be making an impact on the special needs population. New and better ways of educating young people must be explored if our

youth are going to have a chance at succeeding in the twenty-first century.

Problem Statement

A problem emerges as the at-risk student population increases. Focusing on the educational needs of these young people, it becomes clear that traditional methods are failing. Attendance, dropout, and graduation rates from at-risk students have created great concerns for educators all across America, as they discover educational needs not being met. This study will produce answers to the following questions:

- * Is increased educational accommodations the answer to the increasing diverse needs of students?
- * How much accommodation is appropriate?
- * Will too much accommodation relieve students from accepting their own educational responsibility?

Rationale of the Study/Developing an Hypothesis

Students' educational success is of the utmost importance. If pupils are going to be successful in the future, they must gain a quality education. The hypothesis for the problem becomes

clear. This study should prove that increased accommodation will have a major impact on the success rates of students at-risk. It will further show that when it comes to pupils academic success, there is no limit as to how far educators should go to meet the needs of students. Young people are America's most prized possessions. School districts, families, communities, government officials, and society as a whole must do what it takes to accomplish the task of appropriately educating young people. The final portion of the hypothesis centers around student responsibility. If pupils are highly accommodated, will they live up to their own responsibility to achieve academic success or will they fall into an attitude of expectancy, waiting for the gift of an effort free education? This study will prove that accommodation can be implemented with student accountability built in, accomplishing appropriate academic work ethics.

Scope of the Study

An experimental study was conducted on a small high school in northwest Colorado with efforts to meet the diverse educational needs of the at-risk student population.

Administrative and teacher concerns for school dropouts, poor attendance, low achievement and graduation rates were the driving force behind the study. Through the services of a student assistance team and implementation of an alternative school, this study attempts to prove that increased accommodation can meet the needs of students at-risk. A five-year comparative analysis will show how the diverse needs of high school pupils can be met through dedicated efforts of a student assistance team, and by incorporating an alternative program for at-risk youths within the same institution. The Alternative High School will be instituted as a school within a school, for experimentation with achievement, graduation rates, dropout rates, and attendance rates. The student assistance team will be referred to as a "Building Assistance Team" (B.A.T.). This group of dedicated educators will design multiple accommodative services, including the incorporation of the Alternative School.

Limitations

Limitations to the experiment did exist from the beginning. The already functioning Building Assistance Team had been operating in the high school for many years prior to this project. This variable makes it hard to know how much accommodation was already impacting the school in a positive or negative way. At one point, the Building Assistance Team had to be restructured by the high school principal due to internal problems. This created an intervening variable that may have had some kind of unknown effect on the ultimate reliability of the experiment. The personal bias against at-risk students was always present throughout the five-year study. This became another intervening variable as various members of the community and school faculty maintained very strong and personal opinions about students enrolled in the Alternative High School. These opinions were degrading and labeling. Negative innuendos were apparent through the media, street conversations, and various school functions. This variable must have made some impact on student progress in some unknown way.

Other limiting factors to the study existed such as the use of intact groups, gender differences, diversity, teaching/learning styles, small facility usage and closed enrollment. These limitations will be described and analyzed in great detail within chapter four.

Even though some variables may have had an impact, it is evident that increased accommodation through this experiment made a positive impact on the small Colorado high school. The traditional methods of teaching were challenged. These new ways of reaching young people forced the community to look at education differently.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used throughout the study.

1. Accommodation: "Provisions made in how a student accesses and demonstrates learning. These do not substantially change the instructional level, content nor the performance criteria. The changes are made in order to provide a student equal access to learning and equal opportunity to demonstrate

what is known.” (Opportunities for Success. Colorado Department of Education, 1996.)

2. Adaptation: “Changes made to the environment, curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment practices in order for a student to be a successful learner. Adaptations include accommodations, and modifications.” (Opportunities for Success. Colorado Department of Education, 1996.)

3. Alternative School: “School designed to provide learning opportunities that accommodate the needs of students not optimally served by the regular program.” (Katsiyannis, Antonis and Brenda Williams. A National Survey of State Initiatives on Alternative Education. Volume 19. Remedial and Special Education, September 1998. 1)

4. At-Risk Students: “Pupils who develop learning or behavioral problems due to environmental influences.” (Dowdy, Carol A., James R. Patton, Edward A. Polloway and Tom E. C. Smith. Teaching Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Settings. Second Edition. Allyn and Bacon, 1998. 485)

5. Building Assistance Team: A local group of educators that are building level specific who meet on a regular basis to study students needs and make recommendations for accommodations and interventions. (See Intervention Assistance Team definition. The Building Assistance Team phrase was specifically created for the school district in this study.)

6. Disability: "A condition that effects an individuals physical or mental ability." (Dowdy, Carol A., James R. Patton, Edward A. Polloway and Tom E. C. Smith. Teaching Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Settings. Second Edition. Allyn and Bacon, 1998. 488)

7. Dropouts: "Students who attend at least one day out of the school year and discontinues for any reason other than death." (Braziel, Patricia M. and Larry J. Kortering. School Dropouts from the Perspective of former Students: Implications for secondary special programs. Volume 20. Remedial and Special Education, 1999. 3)