

**REMEDIAL INTERVENTIONS FOR ACADEMIC FAILURES AMONG STUDENTS****Nasir mohammad bhat**

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**Abstract**

*Prevention of academic failure is a serious challenge because children who fail academically experience significant social and economic challenges throughout their lives. Causes of academic failure include familial, socioeconomic, and cultural issues that lead to a lack of readiness for school, academic, instructional, and motivational problems as well as physiological, cognitive, and neurological barriers to learning. This article reviews the field of academic interventions. It describes types and targets of academic interventions; intervention delivery systems; guidelines relating to the selection, implementation, and evaluation of academic interventions; and selected evidence-based strategies.*

**Key Words:** *Preventions, Interventions, Academic Failures, Academic, Instructional, and Motivational Reasons*



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**INTRODUCTION:** A lot depends on children's success in school—their self-esteem, their sense of identity, their future employability. Preventing academic failure means that we, as a society, are much more likely to produce individuals who feel confident about their ability to contribute to the common good, whose literacy skills are competent, and who are able to hold jobs successfully. Thus, prevention of academic failure should be a primary concern for any society. But exactly what is meant by academic failure? What does the term connote? Generations of schoolchildren since the 1920s, when the system of grade progression began,

have equated academic failure with retention in grade. School failure meant literally failing to progress onto the next grade, with the assumption that the skills and knowledge taught in that grade had not been mastered. To have flunked multiple grades quickly led to quitting school altogether—the ultimate academic failure.

More recently, academic failure has come to mean a failure to acquire the basic skills of literacy. Students who were unable to read at a functional level, to communicate effectively through writing, and to complete basic math calculations were seen as representing a failure of the academic system even though they might hold high school diplomas. The practice of moving students on from one grade to the next even though they might not have mastered basic competencies associated with lower grade levels is often referred to as social promotion. This type of academic failure led to calls for an increased emphasis on basic skills, that is, the “three R’s”—reading, (w)riting, and (a)rithmetic—in public education. Partly in reaction to emphasis on basic skills, a third interpretation of academic failure has also emerged. In this view, academic failure occurs not only when students fail to master basic skills but also when they emerge from school without the ability to think critically, problem solve, learn independently, and work collaboratively with others—a skill set deemed necessary for success in a digital age. This underachievement symbolizes a significant loss of intellectual capital for a culture. Finally, statistics show that students who do not complete high school are much more likely to need welfare support, have difficulties with the law and police, and struggle economically and socially throughout their lives. Thus, academic failure ultimately means both the failure to acquire the skill sets expected to be learned and the failure to acquire official documentation of achievement by the school system.

**CAUSES OF ACADEMIC FAILURE:** Students struggle academically for many reasons, including familial, socioeconomic, and cultural issues that lead to a lack of readiness for school, academic, instructional, and motivational problems as well as physiological, cognitive, and neurological barriers to learning. Early school failure often occurs because children enter the structured school environment not ready to learn.

**School Readiness:** School readiness refers to the idea that children need a certain set of skills to learn and work successfully in school. Often this term refers to whether or not children have reached the necessary emotional, behavioral, and cognitive maturity to start school in addition to how well they would adapt to the classroom environment. To create some consensus about when

a child should begin school, states designate a specific cutoff date. If a child reaches a certain age by the cutoff (usually 5 years for kindergarten and 6 years for first grade), the child may begin school. However, cutoff dates are arbitrary and vary considerably across nations, and age is not the best determinant or most accurate measure of whether or not a child is ready to begin school. Research has suggested that we must look at all aspects of children's lives—their cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development—to get an accurate idea of their readiness to enter school. Most important, children's readiness for school is affected by their early home, parental, and preschool experiences. Stated in its simplest form, school readiness means that a child is ready to enter a social environment that is focused primarily on education. The following list of behaviors and characteristics are often associated with school readiness:

- Ability to follow structured daily routines
- Ability to dress independently
- Ability to work independently with supervision
- Ability to listen and pay attention to what someone else is saying
- Ability to get along with and cooperate with other children
- Ability to play with other children
- Ability to follow simple rules
- Ability to work with puzzles, scissors, coloring, paints, and the like
- Ability to write own name or to acquire the skill with instruction
- Ability to count or acquire skills with instruction
- Ability to recite the alphabet
- Ability to identify both shapes and colors
- Ability to identify sound units in words and to recognize rhyme

Family environment is very important in shaping children's early development. Some family factors that can influence school readiness include low family economic risk (poor readiness for school is associated with poverty), stable family structure (children from stable two-parent homes tend to have stronger school readiness than do children from one-parent homes and from homes where caregivers change frequently), and enriched home environment (children from homes where parents talk with their children, engage them in conversation, read to them, and engage in forms of discipline such as "time-out" that encourage self-discipline have stronger readiness skills).

Children's readiness to read, in particular, has gained greater attention from educators recently as the developmental precursors to reading have become more evident. During the preschool years, children develop emerging literacy skills—preacademic skills that allow children to develop a disposition to read, write, and compute. Children are ready to read when they have developed an ear for the way in which words sound and can identify rhyme and alliteration, blend sounds, recognize onset rime (initial sounds), and identify sound units in words. Together, these skills are called phonological awareness and usually emerge in children between 2 and 6 years of age. Children with good phonological awareness skills usually learn to read quickly. Children who are poor readers have weak phonological skills, and children who do not learn to read fail in school. Another important readiness skill that helps children to learn to read is called print awareness. Print awareness means that children are capable of the following:

- Knowing the difference between pictures and print
- Recognizing environmental print (e.g., stop signs, McDonald's, Kmart)
- Understanding that print can appear alone or with pictures
- Recognizing that print occurs in different media (e.g., pencil, crayon, ink)
- Recognizing that print occurs on different surfaces (e.g., paper, computer screen, billboard)
- Understanding that words are read right to left \_ Understanding that the lines of text are read from top to bottom
- Understanding the function of white space between words
- Understanding that the print corresponds to speech word for word
- Knowing the difference between letters and words

**Academic, Instructional, and Motivational Reasons:** Children who do not master basic reading skills, specifically the ability to automatically decode new words and build a sight word vocabulary that leads to fluency, experience academic failure. By third grade, learning to read has become reading to learn. In other words, in third grade the curriculum becomes focused much less on teaching students to acquire the basic tools of literacy (reading, writing, and computing) and much more on

using those tools to learn content, express ideas, and solve problems. At this point, students are likely to be given content textbooks in science and social studies and

to read nonfiction for the purpose of gaining new information. Thus, the inability to read effectively and to learn to study independently often leads to failure at the elementary and middle school levels and also creates profound motivation problems at the high school level that contribute to the ultimate school failure—dropping out. The inability to master key concepts in pivotal classes such as algebra, now typically taken at the middle or junior high school level, often limits students' ability to proceed in coursework. Students may fail to understand algebraic concepts due to their developmental level.

(Many students are stilling thinking in concrete terms in middle school and have not yet moved into a stage of cognitive thinking allowing them to understand formal logic and manipulate symbols—a developmental source of failure.)

In addition, some students might not have automatized basic arithmetic skills, particularly computing with fractions—an academic or instructional failure. Some students may have become turned off to math and accepted self-images that permit poor math skills—a motivational failure. Finally, many students will fail algebra for all of these reasons, and the impact will often be that they will finish school in a nonacademic or basic track or might even drop out. Thus, academic and instructional reasons for school failure include the effectiveness of the instruction a student has received and the quality of remediation strategies or programs available. The following is a typical example that illustrates academic and instructional reasons for school failure. A teacher reports that a student is having difficulty in getting beyond the primer level in reading and is being considered for retention. The child was assessed as having average intelligence. No behavioral or attention problems were noted. Closer inspections of the student's reading skills indicated that she had poor phonological skills and was not profiting from the type of classroom reading instruction she was receiving that depended heavily on auditory phonics instruction stressing "sounding out words" and matching sound-symbol connections. Appropriate interventions included using techniques to build up a sight word vocabulary through repetition and distributed learning and introducing the student to a visual decoding system to provide her with a method for reading unknown words by analyzing the words and breaking them down into more familiar visual units.

### **Physiological, Neurological, and Cognitive Reasons**

Imagine a child spending most of the year in kindergarten with an undetected hearing loss that has made it very difficult for her to benefit from instruction. Imagine another child in first grade

struggling to learn because her vision impairment has not been caught or corrected. Similarly, students suffering from a variety of conditions and illnesses, such as childhood diabetes, asthma and allergy-related problems, and sickle cell anemia, may have difficulty in maintaining energy and attention in school due to chronic fatigue and the impact of medications. Children may also suffer from orthopedic or motor impairments that make it difficult for them to explore their environment, interact with others, and/or master tasks that demand motor skills. Students who suffer from various kinds of neurological disorders or learning disabilities may also have cognitive learning problems that make it difficult for their brains to process information, interpret sounds and symbols efficiently in reading, calculate and understand number concepts, and/or write effectively.

Other children may have cognitive deficits, such as mental retardation, that limit their ability to absorb and apply regular classroom instruction. Children with attention deficit disorders have difficulty in directing and maintaining their attention, may exhibit impulsive behavior, and have trouble in interacting independently in typical classroom environments without support. Specialized and/or special education interventions are designed to provide individualized strategies and approaches for students who have physiological-based learning problems interfering with their ability to learn.

**INTERVENTION DELIVERY SYSTEMS:** Academic interventions can be implemented through a variety of delivery systems, including (a) case-centered teacher consultation, (b) small-group or classroom centered teacher consultation, (c) staff development programs, and (d) intervention assistance programs (IAPs). For academic interventions with a home component, intervention services can be delivered through case-centered parent consultation, parent training programs, or parent participation in IAPs.

**Intervention Assistance Programs:** IAPs are based on a consultation model of service delivery and are designed to increase the success of difficult to teach students in the regular classroom by providing consultative assistance to teachers. Since the 1990s, IAPs have become widespread, with the majority of states now requiring or recommending interventions prior to special education referral. Several IAP approaches based on collaborative consultative models of service delivery have been developed to meet the needs of difficult to teach students in the regular classroom. These models fall into two general categories depending on whether special education personnel are involved. Key factors in successful implementation and maintenance of

IAPs include administrative support, provision of high-quality interventions, and support of teachers during the intervention process. Although an increasing body of evidence supports the efficacy of IAPs in reducing referrals to special education and improving teachers' attitudes toward diverse learners, relatively few studies have documented that IAPs produce measurable gains in student

performance, and many of the studies reporting academic improvement suffer from methodological problems.

**GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING, IMPLEMENTING, AND EVALUATING ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS:** In designing interventions for students with academic problems, intervention effectiveness can be enhanced by following guidelines and serve as the foundation for the discussion that follows. The guidelines reflect the importance of balancing treatment efficacy with usability considerations to accommodate the realities of today's classrooms.

**Selecting Academic Interventions:** Despite the growing database of evidence-based interventions, studies indicate that teachers and IAPs continue to rely on interventions characterized by familiarity or ease of implementation rather than on those with documented effectiveness. The importance of considering efficacy in intervention selection has been underscored by the Task Force on Evidence-Based Interventions in School Psychology, jointly sponsored by the Division of School Psychology of the American Psychological Association and the Society for the Study of School Psychology and endorsed by the National Association of School Psychologists. Founded in 1998 as an effort to bridge the often-cited gap between research and practice, the Task Force has developed a framework with specific efficacy criteria for evaluating empirically supported intervention and prevention programs described in the literature. Consultants should also give priority to proactive interventions that help teachers to create learning environments that prevent academic problems from occurring by promoting on-task behavior and productivity rather than using reactive strategies that are applied after problems have already developed. Academic achievement is significantly related to the amount of time allotted for instruction and to academic engagement rates, that is, the proportion of instructional time in which students are actively engaged in learning as demonstrated by behaviors such as paying attention, working on assignments, and participating in class discussions. Although all students profit from proactive strategies that increase instructional time and academic engagement, such interventions are especially important for diverse learners, who

are more likely to need additional practice on academic tasks to keep up with their grade peers. Academic interventions should be minimally intrusive so that they can be implemented in regular classroom settings without unduly disrupting instructional and management routines. Interventions with low ecological validity (i.e., strategies that require major alterations in classroom procedures or cumbersome reinforcement delivery systems) are unlikely to become integrated into regular education routines. Priority should also be given to strategies that benefit more than one student.

**Implementing Academic Interventions:** Regardless of the quality of the intervention design and the documented efficacy of the intervention components, no strategy will be effective in improving student achievement unless the teacher implements it accurately and consistently, that is, with treatment integrity. In the absence of treatment integrity measures, there is no way to determine whether changes in academic performance are due to the effects of the intervention or to factors that are unrelated to intervention components. Among the factors influencing treatment integrity are (a) intervention complexity, (b) time and material resources required for implementation, (c) the number of intervention agents, (d) efficacy (actual and as perceived by the intervention agents and stakeholders), and (e) the motivation of the intervention agents and stakeholders. Strategies for enhancing treatment integrity include (a) delivering interventions by means of a videotape or an audiotape, (b) documenting consultation contacts, (c) using an intervention manual or script, (d) having a written intervention plan, and (e) providing direct feedback to intervention agents during implementation.

**Evaluating Academic Interventions:** Systematically evaluating performance change not only provides information that is useful in monitoring and increasing intervention effectiveness but also contributes to teachers' maintenance of interventions by demonstrating that positive change is occurring. Although researchers have developed several measures for assessing teachers' perceptions of changes in students' academic performance, it is important to assess actual student outcomes and not merely teachers' or parents' perceptions of improvement. Similarly, researchers have often evaluated the effects of academic interventions in terms of task completion rates without regard for accuracy or the absolute level of achievement. Ultimately, the effectiveness of academic interventions should be evaluated in terms of meaningful changes in students' academic achievement relative to grade-level expectations.



**Curriculum-Based Assessment:** In recent years, intervention-oriented researchers have developed alternative assessment methodologies to traditional norm-referenced tests with the goal of identifying students in need of supplementary academic services and documenting the effectiveness of schoolbased interventions. One of these methods, curriculum based assessment (CBA), refers to a set of procedures that link assessment directly to instruction and evaluate progress using measures taken from the students' own curricula. Among the many different CBA models, the most fully developed is curriculum-based measurement (CBM), which has become the standard for assessing changes in student performance subsequent to interventions, especially in reading. Developed by Deno, Mirkin, and colleagues at the University of Minnesota Institute for Learning Disabilities, CBM is a generic measurement system that uses brief, fluency-based measures of basic skills in reading, mathematics, spelling, and written expression. CBM is ideally suited to monitoring the progress of students receiving academic interventions because measures are brief (1–3 min), can be administered frequently, and are based on students' own instructional materials. Procedures for conducting CBMs in reading, mathematics, spelling, and written expression can be found in Rathvon's 1999 book.

**ACADEMIC INTERVENTION TARGETS:** Academic interventions can be categorized according to targets as follows: (a) interventions designed to enhance academic productivity, including classwork, independent seatwork, and homework; (b) interventions targeting achievement in specific academic subjects; and (c) interventions targeting what DiPerna and Elliott termed academic enablers, that is, nonacademic skills, behaviors, and attitudes that contribute to academic competence. Table I describes empirically validated academic interventions from each of the three categories. The categorization is necessarily somewhat arbitrary because all of the interventions include procedures that facilitate productivity and academic enabling behaviors; however, the interventions in the academic enablers category include the largest number of behavioral and attitudinal components.

### **Interventions Targeting Academic Productivity**

**Self-Management:** Self-management techniques involve teaching students to engage in some form of behavior, such as self observation or self-recording, in an effort to alter a target behavior. Self-management interventions fall into one of two categories: (a) contingency-based strategies with self-reinforcement for the performance of specified tasks or (b) cognitively based strategies that use self-instruction to address academic deficits. Self management interventions are

especially appropriate for targeting academic problems because they not only enhance students' sense of responsibility for their own behavior but also increase the likelihood that students will be able to generalize their new competencies to other situations

**Class wide Peer Tutoring:** Increased academic responding is associated with higher levels of on-task behavior and achievement. In class wide peer tutoring, peers supervise academic responding so that every student can engage in direct skill practice during instructional periods, leaving teachers free to supervise the tutoring process. Moreover, because peer tutors are provided with the correct answers for tutoring tasks, the strategy permits immediate error correction. Of the several variations of this strategy, the best known is the Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) program developed by Greenwood and colleagues at the University of Kansas to improve the achievement of entire classrooms of low-socioeconomic status urban students. CWPT has been successful in improving academic skills and productivity in a variety of domains, including oral reading, spelling, and mathematics computation, and with both regular education and special needs students.

**Interventions Targeting Academic Achievement:** This section discusses some of the best-known and most widely validated interventions in three academic areas: reading, mathematics, and written language.

**. Interventions to Improve Reading Performance:** Reading problems are the most frequent cause of referrals to school psychologists and IAPs. Three sets of skills are required for proficient reading: (a) decoding (i.e., the process leading to word recognition), (b) comprehension (i.e., the ability to derive meaning from text), and (c) fluency (i.e., the ability to read quickly and accurately). Although reading interventions can be categorized according to their primary subskill target, interventions focusing on one subskill have the potential to improve other competencies due to the interrelated nature of the reading process. The two interventions described in this section primarily target fluency and comprehension.

**Interventions to Improve Mathematics Performance:** The 2003 NAEP report on mathematics revealed serious deficiencies in math achievement in the general student population. Although the percentage of fourth graders performing at or above the proficient level (29%) was higher in 2003 than in all previous assessment years since 1990, sizable numbers of students failed to reach even the basic level of proficiency (23%). The situation was even more dismal for eighth graders, with only 23% performing well enough to be classified as proficient. Although students

with difficulties in learning mathematics constitute a very heterogeneous group, they generally exhibit deficits in one or more of three areas: (a) computational skills, including the basic operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division; (b) computational fluency, that is, speed and automaticity with math facts; and (c) mathematics applications, including areas such as money, measurement, time, and word problems. Targets of mathematics interventions can be characterized as (a) foundational arithmetic skills (e.g., number knowledge, basic understanding of mathematical operations), (b) acquisition and automatization of basic computational skills, and (c) problem solving skills. Intervention components include frequent feedback to teachers and parents regarding student performance, explicit instruction in math concepts and procedures, and peer-assisted learning. The two interventions described in this section use highly structured, multicomponent approaches to enhance basic skills acquisition and fluency.

**Cover–Copy–Compare:** The cover–copy–compare (CCC) strategy, originally developed by Skinner and colleagues at Mississippi State University, is a self-management intervention that can be used to enhance accuracy and fluency in a variety of academic subjects. Students look at an academic stimulus (e.g., a multiplication problem for CCC mathematics), cover it, copy it, and evaluate their response by comparing it to the original stimulus. CCC combines several empirically based intervention components, including self-instruction, increased opportunities to respond to academic material, and immediate corrective feedback.

**Reciprocal Peer Tutoring:** Reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT) in mathematics, developed by Fantuzzo and associates at the University of Pennsylvania, combines self-management techniques and group contingencies within a peer tutoring format. Although both CWPT and RPT involve peer-mediated instruction, RPT includes self-management and subgroup contingencies, with teams of students selecting and working to obtain their own rewards. RPT has been demonstrated to enhance not only math performance but also students' perceptions of their own scholastic competence. Including a home-based reinforcement component enhances positive outcomes.

**Interventions to Improve Written Language Performance:** Writing is a crucial skill for school success because it is a fundamental way in which to communicate ideas and demonstrate knowledge in the content areas. Unfortunately, writing problems not only are characteristic of most students with learning disabilities but also are prevalent in the general student population.

According to the 2002 NAEP report on writing, only 26% of 4th graders scored at the proficient level, with the percentage dropping to 22% for 12th graders. The pervasiveness of writing problems suggests that poor writing achievement is related less to internal student disabilities than to inadequate writing instruction. During the past decade or so, research on the cognitive processes underlying writing has led to a shift in writing instruction from an emphasis on product (e.g., grammar, mechanics, content) to an emphasis on the processes used to generate written productions (e.g., brainstorming, writing multiple drafts, developing a sense of audience, incorporating feedback from others). As a result, writing interventions increasingly focus on student performance of various aspects of the writing process, including planning, sentence generation, and revising. The interventions in this section target several writing process components, including fluency and compositional elements such as planning and editing.

**Interventions to Enhance Academic Enablers:** According to DiPerna and Elliott, academic success requires more than skill in performing assigned tasks. That is, although classroom instruction focuses on the acquisition of concepts, knowledge, and skills in academic subjects, students must become active participants in their educational experiences to benefit from that instruction. The two interventions in this category have been widely used as stand-alone strategies or in combination with other intervention components to facilitate achievement and productivity across a range of academic skill domains.

**Public Posting:** Public posting involves displaying some kind of classroom record (e.g., a chart) that documents student achievement or productivity. Whereas traditional public posting strategies often record incidents of negative behavior (e.g., the names of disruptive or unproductive students), public posting as an academic intervention is a positive strategy that displays student progress in achieving specified academic goals. Originally designed to encourage improvement in individual student performance, small-group and class wide versions that target group achievement and capitalize on positive peer influence have also been developed. Adding individual or group contingencies can enhance outcomes but does not appear to be critical to intervention effectiveness.

**School–Home Notes:** School–home notes encourage parental involvement in children’s classroom performance, permit a broader range of reinforces than are generally available to teachers, and have demonstrated efficacy for both academic problems and behavior problems. School–home communications can be arrayed along a continuum of parental involvement,

ranging from notes that merely provide information to notes that ask parents to deliver predetermined consequences contingent on the reported student performance. Although strategies that include home consequences can have powerful effects on student performance, establishing and maintaining an effective school–home communication system can be difficult for even a single student, much less for groups

or entire classrooms of unproductive students. Not surprisingly, the majority of published school–home note interventions have targeted individual students or small groups of students, usually in special education settings.

**CONCLUSION:** Attempts to help students who are experiencing academic failure fall into three categories: prevention, intervention, and remediation. Preventive approaches aim to stop academic failure before it occurs. Early intervention programs from birth to 5 years of age, for example, aim to catch children during key developmental periods and facilitate development and readiness skills. Intervention programs, such as Robert Slavin’s Success for All program, aim to intervene as soon as students begin to show signs of slipping behind their peers. Intervention plans may also be designed under Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which mandates accommodations in the instructional environment for students who have physical or neurological problems that may interfere with their ability to learn or succeed in a typical classroom. Remediation programs are usually applied when students have demonstrated significant skill deficits and are experiencing significant academic failure. Special education programs often take this form, as do other kinds of academic accommodations for students identified with special needs. Of course, early identification and prevention of academic problems is always preferable to later intervention and remediation. Thus, systemic solutions that target early reading deficits, independent learning skills, and motivational problems from a developmental

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