

Copyright © 2012 by Dwayne D. Williams, MA., Ed.S.

www.tier1education.com

dwayne@tier1education.com

Case Studies Surrounding the Role Culture Plays in Engagement

Consider the following case studies. After reviewing the cases, consider the role culture might play in each scenario, by answering the questions that follow the case studies.

Case #1:



Markisha is a third grade African-American female student who is referred for a full case study because she is not responding to research-based interventions. Markisha barely made it through the second grade, although she would periodically pass math and spelling quizzes without any problem. Markisha is performing below her grade level peers but has the ability to do better. The beginning of the year DIBELS measure—a predictor of early reading skills—showed that she performed at the strategic

range (often color-coded yellow) in oral reading fluency, which indicated *some risk* at the time of the measure. Starting in October, Markisha's reading scores and grades began to drop. The middle of the year assessment showed that she dropped to the intensive range (often color-coded red), which indicated severe *deficits* in oral reading fluency. She was provided rounds and rounds of interventions to improve her reading fluency skills, but progress-monitoring data showed very little improvement. In fact, her scores decreased when research-based interventions were implemented.

Case #1: What are some possible reasons why Markisha started out at grade level but began to perform below grade level by midyear?

Case #2:

Oscar is a Hispanic male student in the second grade. Both English and Spanish are spoken in his home, and he is bilingual. The beginning of the year (BOY) DIBELS measure showed that he scored at the intensive range in oral reading fluency, which indicated that he was at-risk for having reading problems. Because of his BOY data, 30 minutes of intervention time was devoted to improving his reading skills. These 30 minutes were in addition to his core 90 minutes of reading instruction. After rounds of interventions and progress monitoring, Oscar still performed at the intensive range. Because his response to intervention was still low, 30 additional minutes of intensive interventions were provided and he was placed into a smaller group. Because Oscar's scores did not improve when provided additional time and rounds of intensive interventions, the team requested a full case study to determine if Oscar would benefit for specialized services.



Case #2: What are some possible reasons why Oscar is performing poorly?

Case #3:



Darnell is an African-American male student who was referred for a full case evaluation because, according to his teacher, “he is always bouncing off the wall!” Mrs. Doe explained, “Darnell has a difficult time remaining still in his seat, taps his pencil on his desk throughout the day, and talks to his neighbors when, after all, he should be completing his work.” An observation was conducted using the B.O.S.S.—a behavioral observation instrument—and it showed that Darnell was off-task motorically 48% of the time during the

observation (meaning that he moved around a lot during the observation) and off task verbally 30% of the time. This data showed that Darnell tapped his pencil, made beats on the desk, and either sang or rapped music to himself. At one point, Darnell got the entire class involved; they sang with him as he danced around the classroom. When interviewed, Mrs. Doe explained, “These are typical Darnell behaviors and I don’t know what to do with him!”

Case: #3: What are some possible reasons why Darnell is “bouncing off the wall”?

Common Responses from Teachers

When I presented these questions at an RTI in-service, educators provided the following responses.

- Markisha probably didn't have much academic help at home.
- Maybe Markisha began to experience problems of some sort at home or within her community and the experiences impacted her achievement.
- Maybe the interventionists did not implement the interventions with fidelity when working with Oscar.
- Maybe Oscar actually had a specific learning disability.
- It sounds like Darnell has ADHD.
- Maybe Darnell had a reading deficit and would become disruptive to get removed from class so he wouldn't have to read aloud in front of his peers.

Although these responses could have been the underlying factors, no one mentioned factors related to culture. According to research on the effect of culture on academic engagement, Markisha, Oscar, and Darnell could be suffering from the same condition, which is boredom in the classroom! It is possible that these students come from highly stimulated backgrounds, home environments that incorporate expressive movement and entertaining activities. These students could have come from home backgrounds that place emphasis on affection, bonding, and sharing. If this were true for these students, simply incorporating research-based interventions might not be enough to engage them academically; rather, these students may require not only research-based interventions, but also affection, bonding, entertainment, and sharing to stimulate them for learning.

Sociocultural Needs

Markisha

Based on the above data, Markisha has the ability to do well academically. For some reason, she began to fail, even with intensive support. The data showed that the team focused only on skill-focused interventions—interventions that focus primarily on increasing reading performance. An important question is, What process-focused interventions should have been used—interventions that focus on the manner in which interventions are delivered—in addition to skill-focused interventions such as building reading fluency? If Markisha comes from a communalistic home background, one of the greatest interventions may be bonding with her teacher and peers in the classroom; Markisha may benefit from a reduction in instructional activities that require her to compete against her peers in the classroom, and activities that require Markisha to work independently as opposed to interdependently. She may require an increase in activities that emphasize bonding and sharing, and activities that allow her to express positive emotions toward others and working with peers interdependently.

Oscar

Oscar, the student who did not progress with intensive support, may not be motivated by skill-focused interventions only. Oscar may require activities that highlight his strengths, interests, and values. Oscar may be more interested in books that emphasize activities that are related to his culture, books that emphasize activities and values that have been passed down to him from his parents and grandparents.

Darnell

Darnell, the student who demonstrated a high degree of movement in the classroom, may have come from a home environment that values dance, song, and expressing emotions. Darnell may be a kinesthetic and hands-on learner. He possesses social competence—as he was able to lead his peers socially (in singing and engaging them in entertaining activities in the classroom).

These scenarios show that, for some students of color, skill-focused interventions may not be enough to engage them cognitively, emotionally, and socially in the classroom. Process-focused interventions should be paired with skill-focused interventions.

References

Williams, D., D. (2012). *An rti guide to improving performance of African-American students: What every teacher should know about culture and academic engagement*. Aurora, IL: Tier I Educational Coaching and Consulting Firm