

Teaching Strategies for Maltreated Students With Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Children coming from homes where they experience abuse and neglect are frequently unprepared to take their place in the classroom alongside children who have been prepared for academic learning environments. These children frequently face multiple setbacks in learning situations where more traditional teaching methods are employed, and yet teachers are expected to ensure that these students keep pace with their peers. This paper highlights the challenges many educators face when trying to teach children who have grown up in abusive relationships or with environmental neglect. The author offers information to help teachers recognize signs of child maltreatment in the classroom, and concrete suggestions as to how they may advocate for students needing protection. She also spells out alternate teaching strategies that can be effective with children whose early caregiving environment did not foster the kind of academic background that is expected in traditional learning situations. She places special emphasis on strategies that involve social influences on academic progress, such as cooperative and peer learning, as well as strategies that help educators tailor their instruction and the school environment to the individual child's learning style.

Introduction

Maltreatment is a term which includes both abuse and neglect (Hunt & Marshall, 2005). Unfortunately, the rate of child maltreatment in the United States is increasing (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 1998). Risk factors such as poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, and adolescent parenthood of the caretakers can be some of the causes for this rate. In 1998, 44 out of every 1000 children younger than 18 years of age were maltreated (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 1998). Because of this prevalence, teachers are likely to have students in their classrooms who have been reported as maltreated, and also those who are maltreated but have not yet been reported to child protection agencies.

There is considerable evidence that child maltreatment produces adverse effects on development and generates or exacerbates learning disabilities in

children (Bos & Vaughn, 1998; Lowenthal, 2001). The documented negative effects of child maltreatment on academic competence include: cognitive delays, difficulties in language acquisition, impulsivity, inattention, disorganization, problems in memory, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation (Barnett, 1997; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Teachers can play a life-saving role for maltreated children, as a teacher may be the first grown-up to respond to a child's distress with compassion, accuracy, and skilled care rather than censure. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that teachers can save children's lives when they can identify child maltreatment, report it to protective services for evaluation, and then respond accurately to the child's needs in the classroom (Crosson-Tower, 2002; Weinreb, 1997). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to provide assistance to teachers in 1) identifying children who are maltreated, 2) advocating for the protection of the children, and 3) responding to the children's needs in the classroom.

Identifying Children who are Maltreated

To consider how teachers can help maltreated children in the classroom, one needs to begin with the identification of a child who has been maltreated. It is not always easy for teachers to identify maltreated children among their students. While some children may come to the teacher's attention because their behavior is markedly agitated, angry, or extremely withdrawn, teachers with many students can have difficulty identifying whether such children are victims of maltreatment (Appelstein, 1998; Barnett, 1997; Thuppall & Sobsey, 2004). Although some children may refer themselves or their friends for help for parental maltreatment, often maltreated children want to protect their families and may feel too ashamed or frightened to describe the maltreatment to a teacher (Crosson-Tower, 2002, Hunt & Marshall, 2005). Moreover, it is difficult to identify child maltreatment based on behavior alone, because other causes aside from child abuse or neglect can cause children to be agitated, angry, withdrawn, or inattentive, including the divorce or serious illness of a parent, or the loss

of a grandparent. Information from a caseworker or foster parent is probably the most reliable, yet while a child's caseworker or foster or adoptive parents may confer with the teacher about the child's history of maltreatment, it is also unfortunately common that teachers are not notified that a child in their classroom has been maltreated.

Accordingly, following are some guidelines teachers can use to identify children who may have been maltreated. There are four types of child maltreatment: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, and neglect (Sattler, 1998). Physical abuse is a nonaccidental physical injury to a child that happens as the result of the behavior of a caretaker (Costner & Cicchetti, 1993). Sexual abuse involves both contact and noncontact maltreatment. Contact abuse is sexual contact with a youngster, while noncontact abuse includes coercing the child to watch pornography and to observe and participate in sexual activities (Lowenthal, 2001). Emotional or psychological abuse is the attempt of the caretaker to control the child through the use of humiliation, fear, continuous criticism, and shame. Neglect is the failure of the caretaker to provide the youngster with necessary food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, adequate supervision and nurturance (Lowenthal, 1998).

Some indicators or signs for teachers to be aware of in physical abuse are (Thuppal & Sobsey, 2004):

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, welts, bite marks, burns, or fractures on the child's body.
- Extreme fear shown by the child, especially in interactions with adults.
- The explanation of the injury is inconsistent with the nature of it.
- Aggressive behavior of the child including the bullying of other children.

Some indicators of sexual abuse are:

- Age inappropriate knowledge of sex.
- Sexual acting out behavior in children under the age of 12 years.
- Frequent preoccupation with sexual images in play, drawings, stories, and choices of toys.
- Injuries to the genital area.

Some indicators of emotional abuse are:

- Behavior extremes: overly aggressive or overly compliant.
- Low self esteem.
- Depression.
- Attempts to self mutilate.
- Suicide attempts

Some indicators of neglect are:

- Malnourishment.

- Hunger – attempts to get, borrow, or steal food.
- Extreme fatigue – often falls asleep at school.
- Lack of hygiene.
- Lack of medical care.
- Lack of appropriate caretaker supervision.
- Lack of interest of the caretaker in the child's education.
- Repeated non completion of homework assignments (Berger, 2000).

Advocating for Protecting Maltreated Children

If a teacher suspects that a child is being maltreated, the teacher's first obligation is to report this concern to the children's protective services agency. All fifty states have laws that require that individuals who work with children (such as social workers, teachers, child care workers, medical personnel, counselors, etc.) report child maltreatment when there is a reasonable suspicion of it (Houry, Sachs, Feldhaus, & Linden, 2002). These people are referred to as mandated reporters. Teachers and other mandated reporters do not have to prove the maltreatment. This is the responsibility of the child protection and law enforcement agencies to whom the reports are made (Sattler, 1998). In general, state laws require the reporting of child maltreatment within 24 hours (Repucci, Britner, & Woolard, 1997).

The primary reasons for reporting are: to stop the maltreatment, to provide safety for the child, and to refer the troubled caretakers for needed services (Sattler, 1998). Teachers should be informed of their own state's definitions of child maltreatment and regulations for reporting. The National Child Abuse Hotline can be contacted to report maltreatment by calling their toll-free number which is (800) 422-4453. Many school districts have set up their own policies which support their state's regulations. All educators should be aware of their school policies (Repucci, Britner, & Woolard, 1997).

Sometimes, teachers and other mandated reporters have complained that the child protection agencies have not adequately responded to their reports, and the children are still being maltreated (Crosson-Tower, 2002). It is important to realize that the agencies are operating under time limits and under state regulations. These regulations often require that child welfare personnel obtain additional information to justify that abuse or neglect is occurring. If this information is lacking, the agencies cannot act any further. Teachers, who are in daily contact with their students, may be able to supply the additional documentation

needed by the child protection agencies to investigate further. If teachers have more proof of child maltreatment, they can file additional reports or encourage fellow educators who share the same suspicions to also report it. The extra reports may provide the necessary documentation for further investigations. The teachers also can help the maltreated children in their classroom to feel more successful, valued, and respected. In the next section, some teaching strategies are suggested which may assist these students.

Helping the Child in the Classroom

To be effective, teaching strategies for maltreated children should meet their specific educational needs. Some studies (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993; Regome, 1993) indicate that maltreated children between the ages of 6 to 12 years have demonstrated more cognitive delays, learning disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, lower self esteem, less motivation to learn, and more school failure than their peers who were not maltreated. Although there has been no specific research on effective teaching methods for this population, the following strategies are suggested which can help to meet the needs stated above: cooperative learning, peer tutoring, techniques targeted to improve organization, attention, and memory, as well as modifications of the curriculum and the school environment. In addition, specialized instructional techniques derived from the theories of Multiple Intelligence (Gardner, 1993) and the Social Influence of Learning (Vygotsky, 1978) may be helpful and will be summarized below.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning methods have been explained by Slavin (1991) as "instructional techniques in which students work in heterogeneous learning teams to help one another to learn academic subjects" (p.177). This teaching method has the following characteristics that make it beneficial for many maltreated children. First, it emphasizes positive interdependence of students instead of negative interdependence. In negative interdependence, which is based on competitive tasks, the students who attain success do so at the expense of their peers. In positive interdependence, which is based on cooperative tasks, the pupils work together to ensure that each one is successful. Thus, academic success comes from the cooperation of each learner in the group and there are no losers, creating an emotionally safe climate for these children, who have already experienced more

than their share of traumatic losses (Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Lowenthal, 2001).

Second, cooperative learning ensures the accountability of each team member, who has the responsibility to help complete the assignment and show progress. Methods of accountability include self-evaluation, teacher evaluations, and team assessment.

Third, cooperative learning encourages face-to-face interactions of students with their peers as a team. Teammates share experiences and recognize each other's accomplishments. These intense interactions foster social skills for work and play, such as effective communication, problem solving, conflict management, recognition of others' ideas, and the ability to compromise. These skills need to be taught by the teacher, modeled and practiced by the children, and constantly monitored for effective use.

A final element of cooperative learning that helps maltreated children is when students and teacher evaluate whether cooperative learning is helpful. Feedback from all participants is essential to the program's effectiveness (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, and Gibson, 1998; Abruscato, 1994). For these children, whose opinions about the care they receive have generally been ignored or even traumatically overridden, experiencing that their views can be respected and their evaluations of the learning process recognized is a new, healing opportunity.

Peer Tutoring

Cooperative learning is sometimes combined with another instructional technique known as peer tutoring. In peer tutoring, two students work together on a learning assignment. One child takes the role of the tutor, while the other one is the tutee (Lerner, 2003). This instructional technique has several advantages for at-risk students. It provides more time to practice and review difficult school assignments; tutees can get immediate feedback from the tutors about the accuracy of their responses; and social skills are enhanced through modeling and peer interactions (Greenwood, 1996). Tutors also improve their own learning because often the best way to really understand a subject is to teach it to someone else. Peer tutoring is usually done by partners of the same age. However, this instructional technique can be used with children of different developmental levels and ages, in which case it is referred to as cross age tutoring.

In both types of tutoring, a multiple-step training process helps students to achieve success. During training teachers demonstrate the tutoring process. Tutors model and repeat the demonstration with

teacher guidance. Other children play the role of the tutee while the tutor practices. With teacher assistance and reinforcement the peer tutor has an actual rehearsal with the tutee; and lastly, additional tutoring sessions are scheduled with several teacher observations and evaluations until learning goals are achieved (Snell & Brown, 2000).

Research on peer tutoring programs indicates that they are successful (Greenwood & Terry, 1997; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Fisher, Schumakher, & Deshler, 1995). One such program is Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (Greenwood, 1996), in which the tutor-tutee partners work together in teams. Partners alternate roles of tutor and tutee to lessen any tendency toward possible feelings of superiority or power imbalances between students. More positive social relationships can be facilitated by the role exchanges. The instructor's role in Reciprocal Peer Tutoring is to prepare materials and introduce the lesson; to assign the tutors and tutees to teams; to determine when roles must be exchanged, and to award the teams points contingent upon each team's success (Utley, Mortsweet, & Greenwood, 1997).

Research on peer tutoring programs reports multiple advantages. Children appear to like these programs. They are not difficult to initiate and implement, and students maintain improvements in both academic abilities and social skills (Harper, Mallette, & Moore, 1991; Lowenthal, 2001; Utley, Mortsweet, & Greenwood, 1997). For at-risk students, an important benefit is that peer tutoring programs accommodate their individualized strengths and concerns (Franca, Kerr, Reitz, & Lambert, 1990; Garcia, 1992; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000).

Teaching Strategies Derived from the Theory of Multiple Intelligences

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) hypothesizes that intelligence is not a unidimensional construct, but rather is multidimensional, and derives from many aspects of human experience (Gardner, 1993). The theory presents multiple and varied understandings of intelligence, which include:

- Verbal-linguistic in which verbal skills such as oral and written language are stressed;
- Logical-mathematical, which stresses problem solving, mathematical reasoning, and logic;
- Visual-spatial, which focuses on directional, spatial, artistic, and architectural abilities;
- Musical-rhythmic, in which musical talents are emphasized such as in composing, singing, appreciating, and performing in music;

- Bodily-kinesthetic, which stresses movement such as in dance or sports. Children learn by movement of their bodies;
- Naturalistic, which focuses on an appreciation of nature's ability to grow plants and flowers, and animal husbandry;
- Interpersonal, which emphasizes talents in social skills, team building, and leadership;
- Intrapersonal, which stresses accurate knowledge of one's self, self-direction, and control processes.

Because of the often negative effects of maltreatment on at-risk students' development of verbal-linguistic and mathematical-logical skills, many child victims have difficulty succeeding on tests designed to measure these cognitive aspects of intelligence highly valued in most schools. However, if given opportunities, these children often demonstrate greater abilities in other domains of intelligence. At this time, however, we lack specific research as to whether the strengthening of their other abilities will have a positive impact on the cognitive intelligences valued in many schools (Venn, 2004). Chen and Gardner (1997) stress that an appropriate assessment of the effects of multiple intelligences will likely require new, alternative methods of testing that can tap the behaviors associated with each type of intelligence.

Educators may be able to help these children through MI-compatible instruction (Kagan, 1998; Lerner, Lowenthal, & Egan, 2003). MI-compatible instruction matches teaching strategies with each child's strength, and is, therefore, uniquely responsive to the individual child's learning style. For example, if given an event in social studies to remember, a child who is talented musically could compose a song about it, a budding artist could remember the event by drawing a picture of it, and a child who has good social skills could report on the meaning of the social interactions which occurred during the event to refresh her memory of it. Thus, MI-compatible instruction can foster the academic success of at-risk maltreated children because it teaches to their strengths.

According to Gardner (1993), teachers can maximize each child's potential by adjusting the curriculum to include each one of the intelligences. At-risk students who may have different learning styles can be respected and valued for their contributions (Kagan, 1998). This favorable recognition of the child's contributions is of great importance in building the child's self-esteem and self-respect. In addition, by accessing the strengths of the students,

they can be assisted to overcome their weaknesses. By allowing them to choose how they can master academic work, they gain a sense of control in the school environment, which may be lacking in their chaotic homes.

Teaching Strategies Derived from the Theory of Social Influences on Learning

A second major theory, Vygotsky's cognitive theory about social influences on learning, emphasizes the social nature of intellectual development and the important role of social relationships in learning. Lev Vygotsky (1962) hypothesized that teachers and caregivers use language and social interactions to guide a child's thought process and cognition. Vygotsky referred to this guidance as "scaffolding". When children can do a task independently, the teachers do not interfere. However, when the task is challenging, educators ask questions or give prompts to help children devise ways to master the assignment and achieve success. Through this verbal mediation, students are encouraged to demonstrate more of their real potential. Vygotsky (1978) called this process "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD). In applying this theory to at-risk students, they may be able with teacher mediation to successfully master academic work originally thought to be too difficult for them (Trawick-Smith, 2000). This can improve both their learning and their self-confidence, and peers recognize and compliment them on their achievements, so their self-esteem in social relationships is enhanced as well.

In addition to the strategy of scaffolding, another teaching method has been developed from Vygotsky's Theory of Social Influences on Learning, that of reciprocal teaching (Palinesar & Klenk, 1992). The premise of reciprocal teaching is that children often learn best through a social dialogue with their teachers. In this dialogue, teachers and students take turns in leading discussions about shared texts and academic materials (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). Active learning and comprehension are emphasized in this approach (Bos & Vaughn, 1998). Reciprocal teaching consists of four activities (Lerner, 2003):

1. The text is read silently by the students and the teacher.
2. The educator explains and models the techniques of questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting, all of which increase comprehension of the text.
3. Students are chosen to read another section of the text and model the teacher's techniques to other classmates. The teacher's role is to

guide and help the students if they have difficulties, as would be done in the "scaffolding" process discussed above.

4. The final activity is for the students to practice and master these techniques, which assist their comprehension of the subject matter.

Reciprocal teaching is a strategy that can be valuable for at-risk students because of its "fail-safe" nature. Errors are not criticized, and children are guided to understand text that originally would be too difficult for them. In addition, they are actively involved in their learning and have opportunities to show their abilities and receive recognition through praise from peers and teachers. These positive reinforcements can increase their self-esteem and confidence in mastering academic work.

Other Instructional Techniques for Improving Organization, Attention, and Memory

Maltreated youngsters may need assistance developing other cognitive skills necessary for school and other daily living activities, such as organization, attention to task, and memory. Lerner, Lowenthal, and Lerner (1995) offer suggestions to help students improve their organizational skills. In summary, they recommend that teachers:

- Designate a specific place for the students to keep their materials.
- Help children to plan ahead by scheduling special blocks of time to finish their assignments. Give each child a copy of the schedule.
- Provide children with different colored note books for each assignment to help recognize the ones needed for the task.
- Give the students a list of materials needed for each assignment.
- Tape record information about deadlines so students can review them if necessary.
- Avoid too many assignments at one time.

Since maltreated students have often come from homes that are frighteningly disorganized or excessively rigid, when a teacher can offer gentle organizational assistance, it helps the student both to acquire skills s/he does not have, and also offers the student a new, caring relationship experience with which to identify.

At-risk youngsters may pay attention initially to an academic task but can become easily distracted within a short time. Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal

(1999) suggest techniques to lengthen attention span:

- Increase the novelty of the task so that the children become more interested in doing it.
- Shorten the assignment; as for example, decrease the number of arithmetic problems assigned.
- Follow less interesting assignments with more interesting ones.
- When repetition is necessary, alternate rote practice with relevant, interesting games that rehearse the material.
- Alternate written and oral instructions.
- Underline important information with colored markers so children attend to it.
- Allow extra time to complete work.
- Provide peer assistance for note taking when necessary.

Due to difficulties attending to task, maltreated children sometimes struggle to memorize information necessary for tests and assignments. Bos & Vaughn (1998) offer instructional strategies to aid memory:

- Stress the new concepts to be learned at the beginning of the lesson.
- Help students connect new information with any previous knowledge of the subject.
- Use visual aids such as charts, graphs, pictures, and overheads to make information easier to remember.
- Help students learn mnemonic strategies which simplify the information to be recalled. Mnemonic strategies stress the process of association, categorization, visualization, and verbal repetition. Examples of these strategies are the use of acronyms, and choosing categories such as people or animals making information easier to remember. The process of visualization requires seeing in the mind's eye a picture of what needs to be recalled. Verbal repetition enhances memory through oral rehearsal of the information (Hughes, 1996; Lerner, 2003).

At-risk students may need special modifications and/or adaptations to assist their academic learning, such as adapting the environment and modifying the objectives of the curriculum, the responses required, the presentation, the workload, and the materials.

Adapting the School Environment

Although the school setting is different than the curriculum, it has an influence on the learning and teaching processes. The following adaptations can help make the school environment more positive for at-risk students and help them succeed (Yehle &

Wambold, 1998; Nevin, 1998):

- Reduce unnecessary clutter to make the classroom more attractive.
- Seat the at-risk student in close proximity to the teacher. The proximity often has the effect of increasing the child's attention span.
- Make sure the student's seat is not near high traffic areas, which can be distracting.
- Needed equipment and materials should be prepared ahead to reduce distractibility due to waiting time.
- The schedule should be planned to reduce waiting times.
- Divide children into small groups while teaching lessons. Aides and volunteers can help reduce the ratio of children to adults.
- Delimit the child's space during large group floor activities by providing each child with a carpet square to sit on.
- Allow hyperactive students to stand, especially towards the end of the task.
- Give students permission to alternate between two seats to lessen hyperactivity.
- Cover students' desks with colored contact paper and use colored markers to circle difficult numbers and words. These techniques can attract their attention to their school assignments.

Modifying the Objective, Response, Workload, and Materials

To meet the needs of at-risk students, modifications may be necessary in the objectives of the lesson, presentation of it, response, workload, and material. The following modifications are summarized from the recommendations of Snell and Janney (2000), Lerner (2003), and Yehle and Wambold (1998):

- Maintain the objective while allowing an alternate response. For example, the students work on the same goal, but instead of writing the answers down, they are allowed to give them orally.
- Maintain the objective but use an alternate presentation. For example, when students have difficulty reading, allow others to read assigned chapters to them. Tape recorders can also be useful for this purpose.
- Maintain the objective but reduce the workload. Instead of assigning 12 math problems, assign six.
- Maintain the objective but modify materials and expectations. The objective is similar but fulfilled at a lower developmental level. For

example, instead of learning sixth grade spelling words, the student learns second grade level words.

- Create an individualized objective that relates to life skills. For example, instead of giving story problems in mathematics, have the students work on recognizing money and counting change.

When planning modifications, teachers need to keep in mind the important components of the curriculum so they will be included in the changes. Modifications should be useful and meet the individual needs of maltreated children so that they are actively involved, enjoy working with their peers, participate fully in class activities, and achieve success in their schoolwork. It is also important to be culturally sensitive so that classroom expectations do not conflict with students' cultural backgrounds. One example would be to refrain from demanding eye contact from youngsters answering questions if this would be considered a sign of disrespect to adults in their culture. Respect for cultural diversity within the classroom requires an ongoing commitment to learning about the different cultural worlds students inhabit and the core values embodied within each culture.

Conclusion

For children who experience parental maltreatment, the school may be the only environment that can recognize their maltreatment, advocate to protect them, and remediate some of the social and cognitive impairments that can be consequences of unrecognized and untreated traumatic stress reactions. To help teachers plan care for maltreated children in their classrooms, this article has reviewed and summarized a number of teaching strategies and instructional techniques that can help maltreated children with learning disabilities to experience greater academic success. As can be seen, the role of the teacher who provides appropriate instruction and support is an important ingredient of school success for at-risk, maltreated children. For children demoralized and overwhelmed by maltreatment, a relationship with a caring teacher who creates an understanding and effective classroom environment can offer the child her/his first caring relationships, and an experience of her/his own mind that can change the child's present and set her/him on course for a greatly improved future.

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