Practitioner Brief Series

Preventing Disproportionate Representation: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Prereferral Interventions



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NATIONAL CENTER FOR
Culturally Responsive
Educational Systems

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Disproportionate representation of students from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds in special education has been a persistent concern in the field for more than 30 years. To date, in spite of continued efforts by educators and researchers to identify contributing factors and develop solutions, student enrollments in special education range from over- to under-representation, depending on the disability category and the specific racial/ethnic group, social class, culture, and language of the students (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Although examining rates of representation can alert educators to the existence of a problem, ultimately a key question in dealing with disproportionality in special education is, "Are we identifying and serving the 'right' students?"

Prereferral intervention emerged during the 1970s in response to the concern about inappropriate identification and labeling of children for special education and has evolved over time into a variety of models. The primary concern of all models has generally been to differentiate students with disabilities from those whose academic or behavioral difficulties reflect other factors, including inappropriate or inadequate instruction. In all these models, students who are persistently non-responsive to more intensive and alternative instructional or behavioral interventions over time are viewed as the most likely candidates for special education (Fletcher, Barnes, & Francis, 2002; Ortiz, 2002).

Current discussions about response-to-intervention (RTI) models for the identification of learning disabilities (LDs) reflect these concerns as well (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). When RTI is implemented with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, it is critical that the prereferral intervention process is culturally and linguistically responsive; that is, educators must ensure that students' socio-cultural, linguistic, racial/ethnic, and other relevant background characteristics are addressed at all stages, including reviewing student performance, considering reasons for student difficulty or failure, designing alternative interventions, and interpreting assessment results (Ortiz, 2002). Without such examination, even prereferral intervention practices may not result in improved student outcomes and may continue to result in disproportionate representation in special education.

In this brief, we highlight four key elements of culturally- and linguistically-responsive prereferral intervention for culturally and linguistically diverse students. These elements are (1) Preventing School Underachievement and Failure, (2) Early Intervention for Struggling Learners, (3) Diagnostic/Prescriptive Teaching, and (4) Availability of General Education Problem-Solving Support Systems.

Key Element 1:
Preventing School Underachievement and Failure Among culturally and linguistically diverse Learners

When educators understand that culture provides a context for the teaching and learning of all students, they recognize that differences between home and school cultures can pose challenges for both teachers and students (García & Guerra, 2004) and that school improvement efforts must be focused on preventing these types of academic and behavioral difficulties. When considering the creation of student-centered learning communities, there are many definitions for culture that can be used (Erickson, 2001). In this brief, we will highlight the fact that all students have cultures composed of social, familial, linguistic, and ethnically-related practices that shape the ways in which they see the world and interact with it. In most cases, schools are places where dominant cultural practices form the basis of social, academic, and linguistic practices and act as the driving force for the varied experiences students have in schools. In cases where dominant cultural practices shape school culture, many culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families find it challenging to function and participate in school.

Four elements of school culture are particularly important: (a) shared responsibility among educators for educating all students, (b) availability of a range of general education services and programs, (c) collaborative relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and (d) ongoing professional development focused on effective practices for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In turn, these elements influence the classroom learning environment as they influence teachers' efforts to design and implement culturally- and linguistically-responsive curricula and instruction for their students.

1.1 What can teachers do to create a positive school environment for culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Share responsibility for educating all students, including culturally responsive curricula and instruction. A positive school climate is one in which educators (teachers, administrators, and related services personnel) share the philosophy that all students can learn and that they, as educators, are responsible for creating learning environments in which their culturally and linguistically diverse students can be successful (Ortiz, 2002). Ensuring student success, however, requires that educators have high expectations for all students regardless of their cultural, linguistic, economic, and other characteristics. This understanding leads to an additive view of culture and language (Cummins, 1986), and there is a focus on designing accessible, inclusive, and equitable learning environments that develop bicultural/bilingual competence among all students. Moreover, students' success and failure are considered to be the results of a match (or mismatch) between the learning environment and their learning needs and characteristics (García, Wilkinson, & Ortiz, 1995). Finally, shared responsibility for all students also means that teachers have systematic opportunities to plan and coordinate services when students are taught by more than one teacher (e.g., middle and high school students) or are served by more than one program (e.g., students receiving pull-out English as a second language [ESL] services, instruction from reading specialists, or special education). Failure to share responsibility can create a disconnect between instruction across teachers and programs and contribute to students' learning difficulties or slow down their progress.

Supporting all students also includes culturally responsive curricula and instruction. Culturally responsive curricula and instruction go beyond an additive approach to pedagogy, where diversity is represented superficially (e.g., food festivals or culture "days"). These practices add representations of diversity, yet contribute to "othering" or exoticizing culturally and linguistically diverse students and their communities (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). culturally and linguistically diverse learners are better served

by curricula and instruction that build on their prior socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge and experiences (i.e., their strengths and available resources). Students are actively engaged in the instructional process through meaningful dialogue between students and teachers, and among students in written and oral domains (Leinhardt, 1992). Classroom instruction is comprehensible at two levels: (a) it is embedded in contexts that are familiar to the students (i.e., socio-cultural relevance) and (b) the language(s) of instruction as well as the content are within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This is accomplished through thematic instruction, guided participation (Rogoff, 1990), and instructional mediation using a variety of scaffolding techniques (Santamaría, Fletcher, & Bos, 2002).

1.2 What is my school's responsibility to support culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families?

Make available a range of general and special education services. When schools offer an array of programs and services that accommodate the unique learning characteristics of specific groups of students, special education is less likely to be viewed as the logical alternative for students who are not successful in general education classrooms (Rueda, Artiles, Salazar, & Higareda, 2002). Examples of such alternatives include early childhood education, Title I services, bilingual education/ESL, gifted/talented education, and services for immigrant students. In addition, community-based programs and support services can offer teachers, students, and families access to resources that support learning. When coordinated effectively, these efforts can be successful in developing resilience and increasing educational performance (Wang & Kovak, 1995). These programs are academically rich (i.e., focus on higher-order thinking and problem solving in addition to basic skills) and provide high-quality instruction designed to meet high expectations (García et al., 1995). Of course, high quality instruction presumes the availability of highly qualified teachers who have expertise related to culturally and linguistically diverse students. These two factors are particularly relevant because a large percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse students is being educated in low-income and urban schools staffed with teachers who are relatively inexperienced with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, teaching out-of-field, and/or on emergency certification plans (Barron & Menken, 2002). This once again raises questions about the contribution of inadequate instruction to students' difficulties.

1.3 It's difficult to get my students' families involved. What can I do?

Create collaborative relationships with students and their families. To increase the likelihood of student success, parents/family members must be seen as valuable resources in school improvement efforts and as partners in promoting academic progress (García et al., 1995). In a positive school environment educators reject interpretations of student failure that place the responsibility and blame on families and adopt an additive framework that appreciates the funds of knowledge among all families, including those with limited resources (Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992). Given the focus on shared responsibility and equity, teachers work closely with parents and other family members from a posture of cultural reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). These efforts communicate to families that their language and culture are valued, their educational goals for their child are important, and educators are committed to working within the family's cultural comfort zone (García, 2002). Ultimately these messages can serve to develop an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, in which culturally and linguistically diverse families are more likely to actively participate in a variety of roles, including school governance and decision-making.

1.4 What can schools do to enhance teacher development for culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Focus professional development on effective practices for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Given the limited availability of teachers with adequate preparation in effective practices for culturally and linguistically diverse learners, it is essential that educators engage in professional development that will lead to culturally competent practice. Effective staff development on this topic requires attention to participants' cultural self-awareness, attitudes/expectations, beliefs, knowledge, and skills (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). This should lead to an increased understanding of socio-cultural influences on teaching and learning, as well as the socio-political contexts of education in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Given the emphasis on shared responsibility for all students, school-wide professional development also provides a foundation of shared knowledge from which educators can work together. The following general topics are important to include:

(a) Cultural influences on children's socialization at home and at school

(b) First and second language acquisition and dialectal differences

(c) Instructional strategies that promote proficiency in first and second languages/dialects

(d) Characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy

(e) Culturally responsive curricula for literacy development, academic content, and social skills

(f) Culturally-responsive classroom and behavior management strategies

g) Informal assessment strategies to monitor student progress

(h) Building positive relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities

In summary, professional development related to diversity must go beyond cultural sensitivity and appreciation to equip educators with explicit, research-based pedagogical knowledge and skills that they can use in the classroom (García & Guerra, 2004).

Key Element 2: Early Intervention for Struggling Learners

Even when school-wide practices are focused on prevention, it is likely that some students will experience academic or behavioral difficulties. In such instances, early intervention strategies must be implemented *as soon as these learning problems are noted*. In this discussion, the term "early intervention" is purposefully substituted for "prereferral intervention." All too often, prereferral activities are viewed as a hurdle before students can be tested for special education. Moreover, the prereferral process is often activated too late to be successful. Thus, general education's failure to intervene in a timely fashion, not the presence of a disability, may be the real source of students' difficulties. Research shows that if students are more than a year below grade level, even the best remedial or special education programs are unlikely to be successful (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Timely general education support systems for struggling learners are important components of early intervention aimed at improving academic performance and reducing inappropriate special education referrals.

As with prevention efforts, early intervention has classroom- and school-level components. At the classroom level, teachers use diagnostic/prescriptive teaching approaches to validate the source(s) of the difficulty. When such efforts are not adequate, they have access to school-wide support systems, such as peer and expert consultation, general education problem-solving teams, and alternative programs such as those that offer tutorial or remedial instruction in the context of general education (Ortiz, 2002).

Key Element 3: Diagnostic/Prescriptive Teaching

Clinical teaching involves instruction that is carefully sequenced. Teachers (a) teach skills, subjects, or concepts; (b) reteach using significantly different strategies or approaches for the benefit of students who fail to meet expected performance levels after initial instruction, and (c) use informal assessment strategies to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and the possible causes of academic and/or behavioral difficulties (Ortiz, 2002). Teachers conduct curriculum-based assessments (e.g., using observations, inventories, and analyses of student work/behavior) to monitor student progress and use these evaluation data to plan and/or modify instruction (King-Sears, Burgess, & Lawson, 1999). In the case of English language learners (ELLs), for example, results of assessments of conversational and academic language proficiency are critical in selecting the language(s) of instruction and in determining learning goals and objectives for native language and English instruction (Ortiz & García, 1990). Assessment data, along with documentation of efforts to improve student performance and the results of these efforts, are invaluable if students are later referred to remedial or special education programs (Ortiz, 2002).

Key Element 4: Availability of General Education Problem-Solving Support Systems

When clinical teaching is unsuccessful, teachers should have immediate access to general education support systems for further problem solving (Ortiz, 2002).

4.1 Peer or expert consultation

Peers or experts can work collaboratively with general education teachers to develop strategies to address students' learning problems and to guide them as they implement recommendations. For example, teachers can share instructional resources; they can observe each other's classrooms and offer suggestions for improving instruction or managing behavior; ESL teachers can help general education peers by demonstrating strategies for successfully integrating ELLs into their classes; teachers can meet to coordinate ESL and content instruction; and so forth (Ortiz, 2002).

4.2 Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT)

Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT) (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979) can help teachers resolve problems they routinely encounter in their classrooms. These teams, comprised of four to six general education teachers and the teacher who requests assistance, design interventions to help struggling learners. At the TAT meeting, team members (a) reach consensus as to the nature of the problem; (b) determine priorities for intervention; (c) help the teacher select the methods, strategies, or approaches to be used in solving the problem; (d) assign responsibility for carrying out the recommendations; and (e) establish a follow-up plan to monitor progress (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979). The teacher then implements the plan, with the assistance of team members or other colleagues, if needed. Follow-up meetings are held to review progress toward problem resolution. If the problem is resolved, the case is closed; if not, the team repeats the problem-solving process.

When teachers contact the team, their focus is on *requesting assistance from the TAT for themselves*; they are not *referring students to the team*. In other words, they continue to "own" the problem but seek to resolve the situation with the assistance of peers, creating shared responsibility. This distinguishes the TAT process from prereferral interventions that are initiated because the teacher views the student's difficulties as the responsibility of others, such as remedial or special education teachers.

Across the various types of support systems available at the school level, it is important to systematically monitor and document student progress as well as the fidelity of implementation of the recommended interventions. While TATs have been reportedly successful, there is scant discussion, if any, in these

reports regarding the cultural and/or linguistic appropriateness of interventions. For this reason, when students do not appear to respond to more intensive or alternate interventions, schools need to consider whether or not the intervention responds to the cultural and/or linguistic needs of the students. Additionally, schools need to assess factors related to the cultural context of classrooms, such as appropriateness of the curriculum and/or instruction.

In addition to individual teachers receiving support for problem-solving, school-wide support systems are beneficial to the entire school in a variety of ways. Serving on the TAT is an excellent professional development activity for team members and especially for teachers who request assistance from the team (Ortiz, 2002). The next time they encounter a student with a problem similar to one that the team helped them resolve, they know what to do. An additional benefit is that the TAT coordinator can analyze the types of problems for which teachers requested assistance and share this information with the principal (without identifying the teachers who requested assistance). The principal can thus identify issues that need to be addressed on a broader scale (e.g., the need to revise the school's discipline plan or to implement a tutoring program) or professional development topics that might be beneficial to the entire faculty (e.g., how to determine when students are truly proficient in English or when to transition students from reading in their native language to reading in English). As a result, the problem-solving process can generate data to refine or modify other components of the educational system in ways that are tailored to the unique characteristics of the school.

4.3 Alternative Programs and Services

When teachers request assistance from school-wide, problem-solving teams, it is important that they have access to a range of alternative services to support their efforts. General education alternatives for struggling learners may include one-on-one tutoring, family and student support groups, family counseling, services supported by federal Title I funds, and so forth. The support provided to students through these programs is supplemental to, not a replacement for, general education instruction (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Moreover, services should be intensive and temporary; students who have had to be removed from their regular classrooms for supplemental instruction should be returned to those classrooms as quickly as possible (Anderson & Pellicer, 1998). Finally, as with all other components of the model, it is critical that such alternatives are based on what is known to be effective for culturally and linguistically diverse students, and that they reflect the same philosophy as the rest of the school (i.e., high expectations, equity practices, additive orientation, and resilience-focused).

Next Steps: What happens after prereferral?

Prevention and early intervention are not intended to discourage special education referrals. Rather, they are fundamental to preventing referral of students whose problems result from factors other than the presence of a disability. When these approaches fail to resolve learning difficulties, then referral to special education is warranted (provided that implementation was appropriate). Decisions of the referral committee are informed by data gathered through the prevention, early intervention, and referral processes (Ortiz, 1997).

Prevention and early intervention efforts can significantly improve the academic achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In turn, this will reduce the number of students (a) perceived to be at risk of failing, (b) inappropriately referred to remedial or special education programs, and/or (c) inaccurately identified as having a disability. These outcomes are critical given the concern that as the linguistic and cultural diversity of students increases, the special education system may be at risk of being overwhelmed by referrals of culturally and linguistically diverse students because the general education system has failed to accommodate their needs.

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