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Academic Interventions for Struggling Learners: *Using Culturally Responsive Instructional Support Teams*

METROPOLITAN CENTER FOR URBAN EDUCATION

December 2008

In nearly every classroom, students come with a range of strengths and weakness, each of which provide unique challenges for even the most skilled teachers. Often times, the learning needs of struggling learners require additional academic support that is not offered to the average student through the general education curriculum. While they may be perceived as such, these struggling learners are not learning disabled, but rather, they require specialized interventions to help them to achieve at the same level and pace as their peers. The challenge thus lies in the ability of a teacher or team of educators to identify the best and most effective interventions to help those struggling learners prior to any referrals to special education.

The Purpose of the Instructional Support Teams and Early Interventions

Instructional Support Teams (IST) – sometimes referred to as pre-referral intervention teams (PIT), Teaching Assistance Teams (TAT), or Instructional Consultation Teams (ICT) – are problem-solving mechanisms to help teachers meet the educational needs of struggling learner within the classroom. Their purpose is to identify the instructional needs of teachers to help them create more effective learning environments and, if needed, identify additional supports necessary to address these needs. They utilize a multidisciplinary team of teachers to determine the research-based early interventions aligned with need and provide teachers additional support, resources, and guidance on teaching students with different learning needs and evaluating student growth. As such, instructional support teams provide teachers with valuable resources and support in their classrooms, helping to ensure that all students achieve success in the general education setting (Kovaleski, 1994).

The basic conceptual framework of these support systems has remained relatively stable since the 1980s and includes similar features (Buck, et al.,2003). These problem-solving mechanisms are meant to be:

- An intervention process centered in the general education setting and general education curriculum.

- A process that is preventive (interventions implemented before a formal, special education evaluation).
- A problem-solving approach that is team based (team reviews data on a student, hypothesizes causes to explain the student's difficulties, and develops strategies to address those difficulties).
- An approach that is action-research oriented (develop and implement interventions and evaluate their effectiveness).

The IST is enacted when a teacher notices a struggling learner in his or her classroom. The teacher and the IST then work collaboratively to collect and identify concerns in the classroom, develop and evaluate interventions, and monitor the progress of struggling students.

In general, the Instructional Support Team works with teachers to document the following:

- Document what students are struggling with or potentially struggle with based on universal screenings and formative assessments, and determine possible reasons for the academic and/or behavioral struggle.
- Provide and document classroom modifications and/or other strategies.
- Assess the fidelity and effectiveness of the interventions.

- Monitor the student's progress for a significant period of time.
- Identify students for whom the learning and/or behavioral difficulty persists in spite of suggested interventions (NABSE and ILIAD Project 2002).

It should be noted, however, that early interventions are not a substitution to good classroom practices, but rather, are meant to supplement already good teaching practices. To that end, instructional support teams should first focus on the teacher's general instructional practices before prescribing interventions that are more specific.

Instructional Supports, Early Interventions and Disproportionality

The emphasis on instructional support teams and the use of early interventions for struggling learners originated in response to students from culturally diverse backgrounds being over-represented in special education. In part because referrals are too easily led to special education evaluations and placements (Buck, G, Polloway, E, Smith-Thomas, A. Cook, K, 2003). While research on disproportionality points to a multitude of factors operating in causing over-representation, good instructional practices and effective early interventions can reduce the overrepresentation of minority student classified as disabled by improving the access of racial/ethnic minority students to culturally responsive instructions and interventions (Buck, G, Polloway, E, Smith-Thomas, A. Cook, K, 2003, Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). More specifically, attention to intervention, instructional fidelity, adequate and appropriate monitoring of academic progress and team approach to reviewing data has the potential of reducing discrepancy in equitable opportunities to learn for racial/ethnic minority and low-

income populations. In addition, a culturally responsive lens to early interventions also has the potential of disarming the theory of compromised human development, which some practitioners argue is the reason why so many racial/ethnic minority and low-income students are referred to special education (e.g., see National Research Council, 2002). The theory of compromised human development elucidates the notion that many are referred and classified with disabilities because low-income students are exposed to more risk factors which compromise their early development and minimize their learning and behavioral capacity necessary to be ready and successful in schools (O'Connor and Fernandez, 2006).

Overall, early interventions and a formal process of implementing them - i.e., instructional support teams – have the potential to identify and address systemic problems that hinder student success – e.g., inadequate instruction, irrelevant curriculum, lack of resources – (NABSE and ILIAD Project, 2002; Garcia and Ortiz 2004). This, in turn, greatly reduces the probability that the student will be referred to special education (Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006). In order to achieve such outcomes a culturally responsive framework must exist.

Culturally Responsive Instruction and Early Interventions

To ensure that teachers create the most effective learning environment, instructional support teams should also examine the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. Culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes and uses the students' culture and language in instruction and respects the students' personal and community identities (Richards, Brown, Forde, 2004). In addition, culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges school practices and policies as culturally-bound and a culturally

responsive environment maintains a perspective of race/ethnicity, low-income and gender identification as active social constructs that are fluid and vary across individuals. The adults in such an environment operate with the presumption that one cultural group does not represent the normative group. While it may appear novel, culturally responsive pedagogy embodies the elements of what have proven to be good teaching practices (Ladson-Billings,1995).

Elements of a Culturally Responsive Instructional Interventions

When examining teacher practices, instructional support teams may consider a wide range of interventions to help teachers support the learning needs of struggling students. Seen through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy, these instructional supports would reflect some of the following attributes (Richards, H; Brown, A; Forde, 2004; Banks and Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999):

1) ***Acknowledge students' differences as well as their commonalities.*** Teachers need to note the shared values and practices of students, but also recognize the individual differences they bring, as well. It's important not to ascribe particular characteristics to a student because of his or her ethnic group. In order for teachers to be able to embrace diversity, they need to self-reflect on their personal assumptions about the ways in which students and families interact, communicate, and learn as well as understand how these beliefs impact student outcomes.

2) ***Validate students' cultural identities in instructional materials and activities.*** Teachers may, to the extent possible:

- Use textbooks, design bulletin boards, and implement classroom activities culturally supportive of their students.
- Supplement instruction with resources rich in diversity and sensitive in portrayal of individuals from different backgrounds when the school-assigned books and other instructional materials perpetuate stereotypes.
- Attend to the discourse portrayal in texts, e.g., most language arts curriculum for grade 6-12 use a range of diverse texts but many maintain racial/ethnic minority groups as the antagonist and Whites as the protagonist.
- Make time for students to share their own perspectives and experiences in class discussions, validating their personal knowledge and incorporating it in the lesson.

3) ***Educate students about the diversity of the world around them.*** Students need the skills to interact positively with people from various backgrounds. To promote these skills, teachers might have students interview individuals from other cultural groups, or link students to email pals from other communities and cultures. Teachers also should look for opportunities that allow students to learn the contributions of different peoples to the advancement of the human race.

4) ***Promote equity and mutual respect among students.*** It is imperative that all students feel fairly treated and respected. To make this happen, it's important that teachers:
- Establish and maintain standards of behavior that require respectful treatment of all in the classroom.
- Be role models by demonstrating fairness in interactions and expectations.

- Monitor what types of behaviors and communication styles are rewarded and praised and which are penalized, keeping in mind that behaviors and communication styles are often aligned with cultural practices of the students.

5) ***Foster a positive interrelationship among students, their families, the community and school.*** Students' performance will likely be affected by the ability of the teacher to negotiate the home-school relationship effectively. Teachers should tap into the resources of the community by inviting parents and other community members into the classroom as respected partners, and participate in community events when possible.

6) ***Motivate students to become active participants in their learning***. Students who reflect upon and evaluate their own learning become more engaged learners. Teachers may consider structuring a classroom environment conducive to inquiry-based learning that allows students to pose questions to themselves, to each other and to the teacher.

7) ***Encourage students to think critically***. A major goal of teaching is to help students become independent thinkers who will make responsible decisions. Critical thinking requires students to analyze and synthesize information and develop multiple perspectives. To foster these skills, teachers might devise "what if" scenarios, requiring students to think about specific situations from different viewpoints. The intent of such scenarios is to encourage students' academic learning behavior via techniques of questioning (Bloom, 1956).

8) ***Challenge students to strive for excellence as defined by their potential.*** Teachers have a responsibility to motivate all students by reminding them that they are capable and by providing them with a challenging and meaningful curriculum. Moreover, teachers should set and maintain high expectations for all students. As their students progress, teachers need to continually "raise the bar" to take student one step higher, providing them with the right amount of assistance.

9) ***Assist students in becoming socially and politically conscious.*** Teachers need to prepare students to participate meaningfully and responsibly in the classroom and in society and impress upon them that if the world is to be a better place they have to work to make it so. To foster this consciousness, teachers might have students write group or individual letters to politicians and newspapers voicing their concerns about specific issues; or encourage them to participate in food or clothing drives to help people with fewer resources.

Instructional Support Teams (IST) and Response To Intervention (RTI)

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a process of systematically applied interventions with a child in general education, measuring the impact of the intervention and using that data to change the intensity or type of further intervention. There is no universal RTI model, but it generally includes multiple tiers beginning with the general education classroom and a sequence of programs and services – each increasing intensity and specificity – for students showing academic difficulties. In addition, RTI models contain screening and progress monitoring to assess student progress at each tier, allowing RTI practitioners the chance to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and determine if the student requires additional support or if instructional supports can be decreased.

RTI emerged from concerns about the inadequacies of the ability – achievement discrepancy criterion for identifying learning disabilities (LD) and the need to reduce referrals to special education by using well-designed instruction and intensified interventions in general education. It has taken on a more specific connotation because of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 language that allows local education agencies (LEAs) to "use a process that determines if a child responds to scientific, research-based intervention" as part of evaluation procedures to see if a child has a specific learning disability (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

Instructional support teams can work in conjunction with RTI by providing a rigorous process though which teacher practices are analyzed and interventions are recommended. Beginning with supporting the general education classroom teaches – i.e., helping them become more effective in their instructional practices – and continuing through the providing input of effective instructional supports, instructional support team can prove to be an effective mechanism through which to implement RTI.

Concerns About the Cultural Responsiveness of RTI

The use of RTI to determine eligibility for special education and related services has raised some concerns (Garcia and Ortiz 2004; NJCLD 2005; NCCRESt 2005). Garcia and Ortiz (2004) voice the same concerns they have with other intervention approaches: the interventions used must be culturally and linguistically responsive if they are going to work. While RTI models may prove effective in reducing disproportionality there are some concerns that RTI models "will simply be like old wine in a new bottle…another deficit-based approach to sorting children, particularly children from marginalized communities"

who will be unfairly labeled LD when the real problem is that schools have denied them a sufficient opportunity to learn (NCCRESt, 2005). At the heart of these apprehensions is the prevalent use of deficit thinking by practitioners when attempting to analyze the needs of learners. In order to be successful in reducing special education disproportionality, RTI must allow for critical examinations of school and classroom context. Without this perspective, there is a serious concern that RTI will become a quasi-evidence-based tracking system for racial/ethnic and linguistically minority groups.

Resources

Aladjem, P. 2000. *A Suggested Guide to the Special Education, Pre-referral Process for Bilingual Learners* includes check off list of pre-referral considerations for the assessment of potential and misdiagnosed disabilities in culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Intervention Central – A website that provides free tools and resources to help school staff and parents promote positive behavior and foster effective learning for all children and youth. Intervention Central. Retrieved October 3, 2008. www.interventioncentral.com.

Regional Resource and Federal Center Network – Provides links to research centers, publications, presentations, and experts in the field of RTI.
Regional Resource Center Program. Received December 1, 2008.
http://www.rrfcnetwork.org/component/option,com_bookmarks/Itemid,28/mode,0/catid,85/navstart,0/search,*/

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