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**A New Approach to Pre-Referral Intervention:
The PEP Model**

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INTRODUCTION

Prevention of educationally induced disabilities must become the focus of intervention efforts by all educators. Research has indicated that one of the primary reasons for referral of limited-English proficient (LEP) students to special education is poor academic achievement (Ortiz et al., 1985) which can often be resolved without resorting to identification and placement of students in special education programs. The recommendation for using multiple educational interventions for students experiencing academic difficulties and documenting the results prior to referral for special education assessment is not a new one (see for example Graden, Casey & Christenson, 1985; Maheady, Towne, Algozzine, Mercer & Ysseldyke, 1983). However, continuing patterns of over- and under-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Harry, 1994; Robertson, Kushner, Starks & Drescher, 1994) emphasize the need to implement prevention and enhancement programming (PEP) for prereferral intervention on a widespread basis to prevent the occurrence of educationally-produced disabilities, to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to special education, and to enhance the quality of instruction for all children (Baca & de Valenzuela, in press).

One of the reasons for inappropriate referrals of CLD students for special education evaluations is that teachers may be unable to distinguish differences from disabilities, particularly when they do not possess knowledge and skills in areas such as cultural influences on learning, second language acquisition, and English as a second language (ESL) and dual language instruction. This lack of knowledge also influences their ability to provide an appropriate learning environment. PEP focuses on enhancing achievement through building teachers' knowledge and skills in these areas, developing stronger parent/family-school partnerships, and focusing on effective program design.

This type of ecological approach examines the appropriateness of the learning environment, rather than trying to fit the student to the program, and seeks to improve the 'match' between learner needs/characteristics and instruction. Prevention efforts seek to systematically develop general education programs that will enhance the performance of CLD student populations; problem solving/prereferral efforts follow later in that some students may not succeed right away for a variety of reasons. Their success requires implementation of alternative teaching approaches, not special education. It should also be emphasized that PEP is necessary not only for students who are still in the process of acquiring English as a second language and classified as limited-English proficient (LEP), but also for students who have been designated fluent-English proficient (FEP) and those who speak a dialect other than Standard English as their first language, such as African-American English.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

On a practical level, a disability prevention, problem-solving approach (prereferral intervention) should have the following features:

1. a problem-solving focus (action research),
2. a collaborative environment,
3. implementation of identified successful teaching practices,
4. support for the classroom teacher and interventions in the general education classroom
5. general education ownership (Graden, 1989),
6. cyclical implementation,
7. emphasis on language development and literacy, preferably in both the student's first and second languages, and
8. support via ongoing staff development that has significant general educator ownership.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

This publication offers recommendations that will assist educators in complying with regulations regarding the education of CLD students. However, a higher standard of equity, not just minimal

compliance, is implicit in this document. The guidelines that follow in this section, at the levels of the classroom, the school, and the district, are designed to:

- 1) facilitate a shift from viewing academic problems as located within the student to consideration of external factors,
- 2) prevent pedagogically-induced academic problems,
- 3) encourage an accommodation of greater student diversity within the general education classroom,
- 4) serve as a normalizing environment,
- 5) assist the general educator to become more self-sufficient in accommodating student diversity,
- 6) encourage educational equity through quality services and academic excellence, and
- 7) encourage a student advocacy approach (Cummins, 1986).

CLASSROOM LEVEL

Goals for prevention of disabilities and policies for program implementation are important at all levels. Teachers must develop appropriate educational goals for all students, emphasizing high academic achievement, language and literacy development, and with recognition of the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Moll & Diaz, 1987) that all students bring to school. Teachers must also learn to articulate appropriate policy for CLD learners, with and without disabilities.

EFFECTIVE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

In order to prevent pedagogically-induced academic difficulties, all classrooms must strive to integrate best practices for CLD students into the curriculum. The effective general classroom:

- Incorporates a multicultural curriculum;
- Stimulates language development through functional language use and purposeful conversational interactions (Tharp, 1994, June);
- Provides possibilities for students experiencing academic difficulties to receive instruction in alternative ways;

- Is compatible with students' cultural patterns and contextualized at pedagogical, curricular, and policy levels (Tharp);
- Fosters the development and articulation of cultural identity;
- Provides all students with a gifted or enriched curriculum;
- Maintains high academic standards for all students;
- Is inclusive of a wide range of student diversity, including academic, experiential, cultural, linguistic, and ability; and
- Encourages active participation of CLD families and community members.

SCHOOL LEVEL

At the level of the school, philosophical goals and specific policies need to be developed and articulated. At this level, there needs to be consideration of how district-wide policies and resources within individual classrooms will effect the implementation of goals and procedures at the building level. The coordination of services between programs, the ability of staff members to collaborate with each other, family and community members, and the consistency of services provided to students from year to year need to be addressed, both in terms of goals and policies. Below are suggestions of areas that should be included in the discussion and development of goals and policies that effect CLD students:

GOALS

- A. The development of a culture in the school of a "learning community";
- B. The incorporation of current best practices as described in the effective schools and inclusion literature, with specific attention to the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic characteristics and relative instructional needs of the students;
- C. Support for and emphasis on the prevention of serious learning problems and disabilities via curricular adaptation, improved classroom management, and the use of alternative assessment procedures; and
- D. Shared responsibility for all students.

POLICIES

- A. The continuity of services from grade to grade;
- B. The articulation of curriculum between disarticulated programs, such as Title 1, ESL, bilingual education, general education, and special education (Skrtic, 1988);
- C. The development of a collaborative culture and a team work ethic among school personnel by emphasizing joint responsibility for all students, providing for joint planning time, and recruiting active administrator support;
- D. The use of teams (such as Teacher Assistance Teams, Student Assistance Teams, Child Study Teams, etc.) as a problem-solving general educator support mechanism (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; García & Ortiz, 1988; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991); and
- E. The inclusion of families and community members as equal partners in planning, instruction, and evaluation.

DISTRICT LEVEL

School districts need to provide a climate of support and optimal allocation of resources for teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively accommodate increasing student diversity via campus-level problem-solving procedures (García, 1992). According to García, “such efforts are not only effective as prereferral intervention mechanisms but also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and skills among teachers across program boundaries” (p. 1).

GOALS

It is also important to articulate goals at the district level for enhancement of student achievement and prevention of disabilities. These goals will help determine district-wide policies on curricular modification and the use of teams as problem-solving support mechanisms, rather than as decoupled referral and assessment procedures. The goals should promote a philosophy of acceptance and accommodation for increased levels of student diversity within the general education setting. The community wide strategic planning process is highly recommended.

POLICIES

District level policies need to address the following areas, at a minimum:

- A. The provision of resources, which should include: 1) the careful and informed use of interpreters/translators, 2) comprehensive and ongoing teacher-owned staff development, and 3) the involvement of additional specialists, such as community liaisons or counselors;
- B. The development of guidelines for appropriate instructional and assessment practices;
- C. The dissemination information pertinent to the education of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, with and without disabilities; and
- D. Active recruitment, development, and retention of trained bilingual/bicultural professions who can effectively serve CLD students in general and special education.

MODEL PROGRAMS

There are four model programs that contribute to our understanding of prevention of educationally-induced disabilities and enhancement of CLD student achievement. These programs are: AIM for the BESt, OLE, EXITO, and IST. Although each of these models differ in terms of program structures, approaches, and processes, they all share several important features, including:

- collaboration,
- an emphasis on contextualized, holistic instruction,
- a focus on the general education classroom, and
- the goal of reducing the number of inappropriate referrals to and placements in special education.

AIM for the BESt and the OLE project, can serve as models for the development of specific goals and program policies at the level of the general education classroom. The *AIM for the BESt* (Assessment and Intervention Model for the Bilingual Exceptional Student) innovative educational program emphasizes effective instructional strategies for CLD learners, such as reciprocal interaction teaching approaches that foster higher-order thinking skills and are characterized by genuine student-teacher dialogue (Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991; Wilkinson, 1989). This is a comprehensive model for bilingual

special education that begins with educational enhancement and problem solving and moves through assessment to special education programs and interventions.

The AIM for the BESt process utilizes ongoing instructional assessment and curricular modification, which are implemented to resolve difficulties prior to any referral for outside assistance. If difficulties persist after modification of instructional strategies and curricular materials, support for the teacher is provided via a team approach, such as a Child Study Team, a Teacher Assistance Team, or a Student Assistance Team. A critical facet of this model is that these teams function in a problem-solving fashion - referral to a team is not tantamount to a referral for a special education assessment.

The *Optimal Learning Environment* (OLE) Project in California has demonstrated that by implementing instructional strategies that emphasize literacy metaskills within a holistic-constructivist paradigm, CLD students identified as learning disabled can achieve significant academic gains (Ruiz, 1989, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Ruiz & Figueroa, 1995). Therefore, the instructional principles developed through this research effort have significant implications for the prevention of disabilities within the general education classroom. Ruiz and Figueroa provide the following 12 principles that they find are crucial for success of this program (pp. 466-467):

1. "Offer students choice in their writing, reading, and learning.
2. Activate and use students' interests and background knowledge.
3. Center learning around whole texts or projects.
4. Provide for active participation and peer interaction.
5. Recognize that literacy is first, a meaning-driven process within which issues of form (e.g., phonics, spelling) can be addressed.
6. Provide opportunities for classroom work to have an authentic, real-life purpose (write a book, or a real letter).
7. Accept and acknowledge students' developmental approximations toward learning.
8. Immerse students in a language- and print-rich environment.
9. Give demonstrations (not just directions) of the literacy and learning that needs to be done.

10. Respond immediately and in a personalized manner to pupil work products or journal entries (rather than give a letter grade in the future).
11. Create a sense that the classroom is a community of learners, readers, writers, and speakers.
12. Raise your expectations of what the students can do and help them raise their own expectations of what they can do.”

Based on the success of this program with CLD students identified learning or language disabled, it is recommended that these instructional strategies also be considered for use in the general education classroom with CLD students who are not receiving special education assistance.

The *EXITO* (“success” and “a way out”) model of staff development provides information useful for school districts that wish to develop a comprehensive continuing education program for teachers and staff. This program emphasizes staff growth and development in the following eight areas for all members of school-based prereferral and assessment teams:

1. cultural issues that impact teacher perceptions;
2. the effects of first and second language acquisition on student achievement;
3. optimal referral and teaming procedures;
4. assessment and enhancement of an inclusive educational environment, emphasizing effective instructional practices, learning style differences, and accountability for student outcomes through alternative assessment procedures, including observation and interview;
5. careful selection and administration of assessment instruments and procedures,
6. the development of informal assessment measures;
7. the training and use of interpreter/translators; and
8. the development of valid and reliable professional judgment (Clark, 1994).

The *IST* (Instructional Support Teacher/Team) Model from Pennsylvania is an excellent example of how a comprehensive prereferral intervention program can be implemented on a state-wide level. This model is an example of how institutional commitment and support can facilitate wide-spread implementation of best practices. The *IST* model is a general education owned and funded program that has resulted in a 40% reduction in special education placements (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1993). This

model emphasizes curricular adaptation, collaboration, joint planning and staff development at a local level. A teacher on special assignment, who has received special training in curricular adaptation, consults with other general educators regarding modification of teaching strategies prior to referral of students for special education assessment. Administrator support is assured by inclusion of the building principal in collaborative decision making. The stated goal of Pennsylvania's program is to facilitate greater academic success for students within the general education environment by modification of teaching strategies. This is consistent with the recommended focus on prevention of educationally-induced disabilities.

SUMMARY

Clearly articulated and consistent goals and outcome standards at all levels will facilitate the shift in perspective of the CLD student from a learner at-risk to an individual that brings a multitude of rich resources to the school environment. Whether or not teachers, schools, and districts are willing to critically examine their instructional practices and engage in organizational and professional development prior to consideration of a within-child disability will determine whether students will thrive in the school context. These guidelines for development and implementation of a disability prevention and academic enhancement program (PEP) should be seen as not only a means of ensuring minimum compliance with federal legislation, but also as a way of addressing a higher standard of equity for CLD students. Educational equity can be achieved by a consistent focus on providing a quality education and emphasizing academic excellence for *all* students.

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