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Asking the Right Questions

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During this entire RTI or RTII process, it is extremely important that specific cultural and linguistic issues be addressed as well as the specific learning and behavior that are part of the teacher's concern. Before school personnel can move to formally evaluate and consider placement in special education services, they must document that the presenting problems are not principally because of language and culture issues. They must document that the primary cause of the presenting problem is not because of the student's English proficiency or level of culture shock.

Language and culture issues will always be part of serving an ELL/CLD student, but under the reauthorized IDEA of 2004, the team must document the extent to which these are part of the presenting problem and that they are not the most significant determining factor. Specific language and culture questions that must be addressed during the problem-solving process include the following.

Asking the Right Questions

These issues frequently appear in school settings as questions asked by concerned school personnel:

- "He has been here over two years, so isn't his lack of academic achievement a sign of a possible disability?"
- "Is this communication problem a language difference or is it a language disability?"

- "She was born here, so can't we rule out culture shock and language development issues?"

Although illustrative of the good intentions and heartfelt concern about these students by education professionals, it is more productive to ask what information do we need and how will we use it.

What information do we need?

The information to be gathered answers specific questions critical to separating difference from disability (SDD) considerations:

- a) Education: Has the student been in school before? Are there gaps in the student's education experiences? Sufficient intensity of instruction?
- b) Home language: Are languages other than English spoken in the student's home? What languages other than English does the student speak? Is the student maintaining an ability to communicate with his/her family members?
- c) Language proficiency: What is the student's language proficiency and literacy? Is the student developing the home language at a normal rate?
- d) English: Does the student need assistance with learning English? Is the student acquiring English at a normal rate?
- e) Achievement: What is the student's level and rate of academic achievement? Is this normal for the general student population in your district/school? Specific population of the student?
- f) Behavior: Is the student's emotional stability developmentally and culturally appropriate? Are there individual or family circumstances that may explain the observed behavior?
- g) Adaptation: What is the student's level of acculturation? Is the student at risk for culture shock? Is the student adapting to our school at a normal rate?

How should we use the information?

Information about students is not valuable if it is not instructionally meaningful and does not lead to a course of action for the student's benefit.

Education

Prior experience in school, whether in the US or other country, facilitates transitional instructional models. Thus knowing that the student has received schooling elsewhere tells school personnel they can focus on transition from one academic language foundation to English academic language (Collier & Thomas, 2007). If the student has never had a formal education experience, school personnel must start by building an understanding of school culture, rules, expectations, and basic school interaction language in the student's most proficient language before transitioning into English.

SDD (separating difference from disability) concern: if the student shows little progress with adapting to school expectations and continues to struggle with acquiring school interaction language in their home language, they may have an undiagnosed disability and a full evaluation may be needed.

Home language

Students, who are raised in homes where English is infrequently or only one of other languages used, come to us with unique strengths that can become the foundation of instruction. Research shows that they have cognitive and linguistic capacities that can facilitate learning (Baca & Cervantes, 2003). Additionally, psychological wellbeing is built upon quality family communication and interactions. (Padilla et al, 1980).

SDD concern: If the student has not acquired a developmentally appropriate proficiency in a language other than English, it may be due to family circumstances or the presence of an undiagnosed disability. In either case this can delay their English acquisition. A structured intensive intervention in the primary home language would show whether the student has the ability to develop language and communication. If the student's communication does not improve under intervention then a referral for a full evaluation might be warranted.

Language & literacy

The student's proficiency and background in a language other than English assists in deciding the most effective instructional communicative models. It is critical to assess to the extent possible the student's proficiency in their home language/communication mode. As there are not standardized tests available for every language or communication mode, alternative measures are frequently needed (Baca & Cervantes, 2003). These can be structured sampling and observation, interview, interactive inventories, and other analytic tools (Hoover, Baca, & Klingner 2007).

SDD concern: a student may score low on a standardized test in their home language because they have never received instruction in the language and have only an oral proficiency. Thus low primary language and low English may look like there is some language disability. A structured intensive intervention in the primary language, including basic literacy readiness would serve two purposes, profile the student's proficiency and establish whether the low score is learning based rather than something else. If the student makes little or no progress in the RTI or RTII, a referral for a full evaluation may become necessary.

Communication

The student's language proficiency in English is directly related to eligibility and entry level for English as a second language instruction. There are many tools available for determining whether a student needs assistance with learning English. (Baca & Cervantes, 2003). For initial services in English Language Learning for limited English proficient speakers (ELL/LEP), school personnel should select instruments that are quick, non-biased, and focus

on speaking and listening skills. Including literacy screening would be instructionally meaningful only for students who have received prior instruction in English.

SDD concern: Some students speak enough English to not qualify for ELL/LEP services but have such a limited classroom language foundation that they look like students with learning disabilities. Thus English screening for ELL/LEP services must include screening for cognitive academic language proficiency and not just social language. A structured intensive intervention in English, including basic phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and other reading/writing readiness would serve two purposes, profile the ELL/LEP student's proficiency and establish whether the low score is learning based rather than something else. If the student makes little or no progress in the RTI or RTII, a referral for a full evaluation is necessary.

Additionally, if the child has a disability and is receiving special education services, and is an ELL/LEP student, the IEP should list the ELL/LEP accommodations as part of related services. This could be bilingual assistance or specially designed assistance in English (Freeman and Freeman, 2007) within the special education setting or some other appropriate monitored intervention with specific objectives related to acquiring English.

In many cases, the disabling condition is such that it seriously impacts the acquisition of English and thus special education personnel and ELL/LEP personnel must work together on realistic outcomes. These modified language outcomes need to be included in the IEP.

Cognition

All children can learn but they learn at different rates and in different manners. All children can learn but they enter and exit at different points. A challenge of today's standards based education models is that students that do not fit the scope and sequence of a particular school system are frequently placed in alternative instructional settings that may or may not be appropriate to their needs (Baca and Cervantes, 2003).

SDD concern: if a student is not meeting the benchmarks established by a school system even when given learning support, they may be referred to special education as having a learning disability of some sort. Sometimes special education is the only instructional alternative available in the building. It is not appropriate to place students who do not have a disability in special education even when it is the best alternative instructional setting available. Restructuring all programs to include differentiated instructional environments where any student can enter a lesson at his/her entry point and learn to the maximum of his/her abilities. A structured intensive intervention in fundamental learning strategies would establish whether the low score is learning based rather than something else. If the student makes little or no progress in the RTI or RTII, a referral for a full evaluation may be necessary.

Behavior

Family and community events can be a contributing factor and it is critical to effective instruction to explore both school and non-school environments and their relationship to the

student's presenting problem. Whether the behavior problem is due to an innate disorder, biochemical dysfunction, or a temporary response to trauma or disruption in the student's home or school environment, the student needs effective and immediate intervention and assistance.

SDD concern: although the student needs assistance with managing or controlling his or her behavior, special education is not the appropriate placement if the etiology of the problem is culture shock, an event or chronic stressors in the student's home or school environment (Collier, Brice and Oades-Sese, 2007). An intensive instructional intervention which facilitates self-monitoring and control within a supportive and safe environment should be always be implemented first. If the problem does not appear to decrease in frequency or intensity, or if the student makes little or no progress, a referral for a full evaluation might become necessary.

Adaptation

The level and rate of acculturation, and accompanying degree of culture shock, must be addressed within the instructional environment. All students must adapt to the school environment whether they speak English or not; students who come into your school from homes or communities very different from the school will experience greater degree of culture shock (Collier, Brice and Oades-Sese, 2007).

SDD concern: the manifestations of culture shock look a lot like learning and behavior disabilities and unaddressed acculturation and adaptation needs can concatenate into serious learning and behavior problems later in the education experience. An intensive instructional intervention which mitigates culture shock and facilitates adaptation and language transition should be always be implemented, particularly for newcomers. Most students will respond within weeks to this intervention. This positive response does not mean that culture shock may not reappear as culture shock is cyclical and a normal part of our adaptation to anything strange to us.

However, a positive response to acculturative assistance lets school personnel know that the presenting problems are due to a normal adaptive process, acculturation, which responds over time to instructional intervention. Students should have their level of acculturation measured at entry into your school system and their rate of acculturation monitored annually to assure the student is making normal progress in your school. If the student's rate of acculturation is not within normal range, it is an indication either that the program is not adequately addressing his transition needs, or that there may be an undiagnosed disability of some sort that is depressing the rate of acculturation.

Citations

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