

# The Case for Collaboration

## Integrating Information on English Learners and Special Education in Teacher Preparation Programs

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Although public school districts in Southern California are experiencing declining enrollment overall, accompanying this decline is a continuing increase in the percentage of students classified as English language learners (EL). Of the 1,515,074 public school students enrolled in K-12 schools in the state of California in 2008-2009, over 24% were identified as EL (California Department of Education). More than 50% of EL in California begin their school experience in Kindergarten (EdSource, 2008).

In one Southern California school district with an enrollment of approximately 5,500, EL represented almost 31% of students. This district employed one teacher on special assignment (TOSA) as the District English Language Development (ELD) Coach. As is common for ELD specialists, this person mentored teachers in utilizing instructional strategies for EL and provided professional development; however, an additional responsibility was added to the already full list: attending all Student Study Team (SST) meetings held for EL throughout the entire school district.

The impact this action had would prove dramatic. Calendars began to look more like completed crossword puzzles. The meetings were numerous and occurred at every school and every K-12 grade level plus preschool. Over the course of four years, the number of SST meetings for EL attended by the TOSA totaled more than one hundred and expanded to include students from pre-school to high school.

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Numerous experiences at SST meetings for EL led to a reexamination of the teacher's role in the pre-referral process until it became a central focus for professional development and new teacher training, especially for cases involving EL. The need for teachers to understand and be more prepared for their role in the pre-referral process became evident, especially for beginning teachers without the advantage of years of classroom experience.

This article is a brief compilation of some of the observations made during this time, including the proposition that a study of the classroom teacher's role in the pre-referral and referral process, especially in relation to EL, should be included in teacher preparation programs in collaboration with special education professionals. Finally, recommendations for further research in this area that arose will be discussed.

### Over-Representation of Language Minority Students in Special Education

The complex issue of overrepresentation of language minority students in special education settings is nothing new and remains an area of concern for both regular education and special education (Harry & Klingner, 2007). One of the main factors is that the characteristics of second language learning can easily be misinterpreted as signs of a learning disability. Other factors leading to overrepresentation include cultural and linguistic bias in testing and discriminatory practices in the assessment of bilingual children (Becker, 2001).

In fact, one recent study found that personnel responsible for assessing a student's eligibility for special education services, school psychologists, did *not* assess or investigate the possible confounding ef-

fects of bilingualism on tests, testing, and diagnoses (Figueroa & Newsome, 2006). Other factors plaguing the placement of minority children in special education involve the lack of adequate classroom instruction prior to the student's referral, the pressure of high-stakes testing, inconsistencies in policy implementation, and arbitrary referrals and assessment decisions.

Harry and Klingner (2006) found that each school creates a "culture of referral" that reflects the attitudes and beliefs of administrators and teachers regarding children's performance in the regular education setting and beliefs about special education. Their research indicated that these were "greater determinants of these patterns [of referral] than were the characteristics of the children themselves" (p. 95). The researchers recapitulate by stating that:

The real problem is the arbitrariness and stigmatizing effects of the entire process. Students shouldn't need a false disability label to receive appropriate support. They also shouldn't acquire that label because they had inappropriate or inadequate opportunities to learn. And they shouldn't end up in programs that don't offer the truly specialized instruction they need. (2007, p. 19)

Language minority students often experience learning difficulties related to learning in a second language. Each case requires a careful examination of many factors to create a holistic picture of the learner.

Although academic difficulties may become evident in students even in the early grades, some studies have found "significant over-representation" at the secondary level (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005). In addition, when the data regarding the EL

in the same study was disaggregated into subgroups based on various factors such as proficiency level in English and the student's primary language, it was found that the subgroup with limited proficiency in both the native language and English were more than four times as likely to be labeled learning disabled as their White counterparts, as well as being consistently over-represented in special programs in both elementary and secondary grades (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

As the curricular demands increase with each grade level, the discrepancy between academic content standards and the learner's performance becomes more clearly pronounced. The self-contained structure of the elementary classroom naturally lends itself to in-depth observation of students; however, at the secondary level, the context for referrals requires collaboration between counselors, content-area teachers from various departments, administrators, and other personnel, making it a more complex process.

Clearly, teachers at all grade levels are responsible for recognizing and documenting learning difficulties, implementing best practices for all students, and collaborating with colleagues to prevent inappropriate referrals. Whereas each local education agency develops its own particulars of the pre-referral and referral process, there are some general components of the process that can be incorporated into teacher preparation programs to promote a healthy culture of referral by providing the knowledge base and strategies necessary for addressing learning difficulties of EL and others in the classroom.

When learning difficulties first arise, a teacher may be tempted to suggest prematurely that an English learner be tested for eligibility for special education services in an attempt to meet a student's needs. At first, the small group and/or individual attention that special education students often receive seems appealing and just what an English learner may need to be more successful. The perceived first step is for the classroom teacher to fill out the necessary paperwork and request a SST or Child Study Team meeting. However, the purpose of the SST process is for a team of professionals to explore options and resources to assist students that are struggling, whether it be academically, in the social/emotional arena, or behaviorally; it is not a func-

tion of special education, but of the regular education program.

Guidelines established by the California Department of Education state that:

All instructional personnel are responsible for referring an EL student through the locally adopted referral process if a disability is suspected...IEP teams must determine whether an EL student meets the eligibility criteria for special education and requires special education and related services in order to benefit from this educational program. A determination that the learning difficulty is not the result of cultural or linguistic diversity is also made. Students should not be referred for special education solely on the basis that they do not understand or are limited in their ability to understand English. To do so would violate both state and federal laws which protect the educational rights of these children. (2006, p. 13)

It is easy for educators, especially those new to the profession or with limited exposure to special education practices, to arrive at the conclusion early on that they suspect a disability when a student has continued learning difficulties. Historically, a deficit model has been employed instead of examining external factors such as educational history, cultural and linguistic factors, significant life events, and opportunity to learn. Harry and Klingner (2007) write

The deficit model is based on the normative development of students whose homes and communities have prepared them for schooling long before they enter school. Children who come to school without that preparation, and without the continuing home support of family members who can reinforce the goals of schooling, face expectations that they have not had the opportunity to fulfill. All too quickly the students become candidates for suspected "disability." (p. 20)

A determination must be made about whether the difficulty is related to environmental or other factors rather than attributing it to internal sources. Before a student's difficulties are reviewed by an IEP team and the student is tested, the local pre-referral process should be fully utilized to promote accurate determination of whether or not the difficulty can be attributed to cultural or linguistic diversity or other factors. The SST or Child Student Team is the vehicle through which this action takes place. Almost all referrals to the SST in the district described above were initiated by a classroom teacher. This makes the teacher the first stop

at determining if there is sufficient concern to pursue further measures; therefore, it is imperative that teachers possess a base of knowledge regarding the purposes and processes of the SST in order to make appropriate referrals and collect relevant information and data to present to the team.

The team's ability to systemically address and rule out environmental factors is an integral part of the pre-referral process. The discussion of intervention design and delivery, best practices, and RTI for struggling students necessitates collaboration between general educators and special education specialists. This convergence of the issues for EL and the area of special education merits considerable thought in teacher preparation programs.

The Standards for Teacher Preparation Programs developed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) include a standard devoted to each of these two areas. Standard 12 delineates teacher candidates' preparation to teach EL. It states that:

Candidates are provided with multiple, systematic opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and application of pedagogical theories, principles, and practices for English Language Development and academic language, comprehension and knowledge in the subjects of the curriculum. (2009, p. 28)

The subsequent standard, Standard 13, Preparation to Teach Special Populations (Students with Special Needs) in the General Education Classroom, declares that the teacher preparation program ensures the following:

Candidates demonstrate a basic level of knowledge and skills in assessing the learning and language abilities of students in order to identify those needing referral for assessment, identification of disabilities, and eligibility for special education... Candidates learn about the role of the general education teacher in identifying and teaching students with special needs ... and the general education teacher's role and responsibilities in developing and implementing tiered interventions. (2009, pp. 29-30)

Elements of Standard 12 and 13 are now embedded throughout the candidate's program, whereas in the past they existed as separate courses. In addition to these Standards, the Teaching Performance Expectations (TPE), also developed by CCTC (2008), reiterate the

same language in the required elements for teaching EL (TPE 7). Although the TPEs do not list a specific standard devoted solely to preparation for meeting the needs of special education students, language regarding meeting various types of needs that students may have is embedded throughout the TPEs. For example, TPE 8, Learning About Students, describes teacher candidates' actions related to teaching students with disabilities:

Based on assessment data, classroom observation, reflection and consultation, they identify students needing specialized instruction, including students whose physical disabilities, learning disabilities, or health status require instructional adaptations, and students who are gifted. (CCTC, 2008, p. A-14)

Although there appears to be a significant amount of material covered under these requirements, research by Smith, Herner, McCambridge, and Sieger (2004) suggests that teachers may need more extensive preparation for instructing these populations, especially when the teacher candidates begin to work directly with students. In a longitudinal study of teacher candidates in California, they found that

Teacher candidates perceive the least sufficient knowledge for instructing students with special needs in all phases of their preparation program. Once teacher candidates engage in practice, they continue to perceive that their knowledge is sufficient in instructing typically performing students; however, they feel much less sufficient in instructing English Learners and students with special needs. (p. 10)

The case can be made for more extensive collaboration between English learner specialists and educators in special education. Since teachers working with each of these populations require a significant knowledge base and special skills, the information gleaned from the experiences of practitioners in both realms may indeed prove to be helpful to better prepare teacher candidates for the challenges that they will face when students fall into both categories. In any case, the pre-referral process serves a central function in providing for the needs of EL in the regular education classroom. The following details some practical information that is suggested for inclusion in a comprehensive teacher preparation program to address the in-

tersection of EL in the regular classroom and special education.

### **Vital information to Share with Pre-Service Teachers**

#### ***The Pre-Referral Process***

The pre-referral process using Student Study Team meetings is not a gateway to special education, but a function of the regular education program. The team should consist minimally of the classroom teacher and an administrator. At the secondary level, all concerned teachers and a counselor discuss difficulties seen across the curriculum and in different settings.

When the student is an English learner, the team must include at least one educator with expertise in second language acquisition and experience working with EL. The role of this specialist is not to make final decisions about whether a child should be referred for special education testing, but to serve as a consultant to the team and as a contributing team member. He or she provides information and presents guiding questions that facilitate the ability of the team to determine whether or not the learning difficulty is related to linguistic or cultural diversity.

The purpose of the first SST meeting is fact-finding. It consists of reviewing all available information and data, identifying specific areas of academic and/or social difficulties, and developing an intervention plan to address the concerns. It can almost be said that it is inappropriate to require a special education teacher to be present at the very first meeting. At times, it may be appropriate to have a parent present, but it is not usually necessary unless the teacher has been unable to gather information from the parent or the concerns involve issues at home.

The classroom teacher should gather as much information as possible before attending the meeting. The information should reveal the external or environmental factors affecting the learner and describe how they have been addressed. Data may include student work samples, test results, anecdotal records, grades, a list of strategies employed by the teacher, and other accommodations made to appropriately provide access to the curriculum at the English proficiency level of the student. This data needs to outline strengths the student presents, such as academic aptitudes, social/emotional characteristics, and cultural and linguistic resources available to the student.

Other responsibilities of the teacher initiating the meeting include reviewing the cumulative file to search for any past record of difficulties, interventions, skipped grades, retentions attendance patterns, or previous evaluation for eligibility for special education services. Some of the most valuable information is shared when parents are consulted as resources and funds of information. Parents can contribute information regarding how language is used in the home (primary language and English), the child's educational and health history, sleeping and eating habits, and other characteristics or details that may be relevant to the difficulties being examined by the SST.

As the team reviews the data presented, it must be synthesized to create a holistic picture of the student. Rather than focus only on what the student can't do, a balanced approach inclusive of positive factors offers hope for building future success as well as ideas for how to guide the student in drawing on his or her own strengths. This approach can contribute to the school's culture of referral by emphasizing a shared responsibility for student success and a process for decision-making that is informed by data from multiple sources.

#### ***Modified Response To Intervention (RTI) as a Useful Tool in Serving ELLs***

Early intervention and use of SST or Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT) allows learning difficulties to be addressed in the regular classroom before inappropriate referrals to special education are made (Ortiz, 2001). As the team develops a plan to address the concerns for the ELL, elements of the three-tiered Response to Intervention model (RTI) can be applied to enhance the effectiveness of the plan, providing they are applied in a culturally responsive manner.

RTI can be used to address both academic and social learning issues. The first tier involves quality instruction and ongoing monitoring within the general education classroom. In the second tier, schools provide intensive intervention support for students who have not met expected benchmarks. In the third tier, students who do not respond to previous interventions may be evaluated for possible placement in special education.

Benchmark or classroom level modifications and accommodations must be documented and proved insufficient in

the regular classroom. Subsequently, the SST can use this information to design strategic and/or intensive interventions geared toward the English learner's specific difficulties. For example, at one initial SST meeting for a Vietnamese-speaking first grader at the early intermediate level of English proficiency, the classroom teacher requested a full evaluation for speech and language from the speech and language pathologist because the child was difficult to understand in oral communication.

The teacher reported that she did not have time to teach him English pronunciation. Knowing that the sound inventory and phonological rules of Vietnamese differ greatly from those of English, the ELD TOSA offered the team a strategic RTI-type of alternative: an intensive, short-term intervention with a trained speech and language pathologist to target the sounds that the student was not producing and report back in a few weeks.

The team agreed and the student was assigned to one of the speech and language assistants. She identified 12 sounds that the student found difficult and worked two or three times a week with him, individually or in a small group to target the missing sounds. After only a few weeks, the assistant reported back that the student had mastered all 12 targeted sounds. The classroom teacher also noted improvement in comprehensibility and withdrew her request for a speech and language evaluation. The prescribed intervention plan was designed to directly address a very specific skill and proved to be successful in allowing the student to focus on pronouncing the target sounds.

Ideally, this type of intervention can be implemented in Tier 1 of RTI and delivered by the classroom teacher; however, in this instance, the teacher was not able to address this particular need without the assistance of a specialist, illuminating the need for more comprehensive teacher preparation and additional professional development in collaboration with specialists in order to address specific learning needs of EL.

Once the team has identified the specific difficulties to be addressed by the plan, available interventions should be evaluated for quality and appropriateness to the child's need. A decision based on data from inappropriately placed students can result in misdiagnosis and/or

further misplacement. In order for an activity to be considered a valid intervention, it must directly address the child's area of need and provide high quality opportunities to learn.

Validity must take precedence over availability. For example, at one SST meeting, the English learner's area of difficulty described by the teacher was related to phonemic awareness. The teacher reported that the student had been attending an after-school reading intervention program with no real improvement. In the ensuing discussion, it was discovered that the program the student was attending focused on reading comprehension, not phonemic awareness; however, the student attended because it was the only reading intervention available at the school at the time. The pretest and post-test data showed little to no improvement.

The ELD TOSA recommended to the team that the English learner be removed from this program immediately and then collaborated with the team to design an individual intervention program to target specific skills. In another instance, a secondary teacher reported at an SST meeting that the failing English learner had been assigned to an after school homework help class for weeks with little to no improvement. When questioned by SST members, the student indicated that she visited the ice cream truck after school on most days and by the time she arrived back on campus for homework intervention class, she was not allowed into the class because there were only a few minutes remaining in the session. The classroom teacher was not aware of this, but made the assumption that the student had been attending diligently. This intervention was deemed invalid due to the student's lack of participation.

In a similar meeting for another English learner who was failing more than one class, but attending the homework intervention sessions, the student revealed that the structure of the intervention was not helpful; the intervention consisted of a large group of students who were receiving low grades in various classes. They were working independently after school while the teacher graded papers. The students did not receive help from the teacher unless they raised their hands and asked. The student reported that usually the teacher was busy helping others and did not have time to help him, so he eventually stopped raising his hand for help. Again, the validity of this intervention must be evaluated for its ef-

fectiveness in addressing the learning difficulties presented by the students in the program.

Once an appropriate, effective intervention plan has been established, the plan should begin as soon as possible. A follow-up meeting should be scheduled for no later than six to eight weeks after the interventions begin. This is usually a sufficient amount of time for improvement to begin to manifest. At the follow-up meeting, the team reviews the progress made by the student and makes any adjustments or modifications to the intervention plan and implements any changes for the next few weeks. At a subsequent meeting, the student's progress is again reviewed.

If the student shows little or no progress after intense, sufficient, appropriate interventions have been faithfully implemented and monitored over time, then the student may indeed be considered for further investigation which may include an evaluation for eligibility to special education services (Ortiz, 2001). In cases where an English learner has been evaluated for special education services and found to be eligible due to a learning disability, an Individual Educational Plan or IEP is developed by special education teachers and specialists to address the learning difficulties faced by the student. The most appropriate instructional setting for the student is determined through the IEP process.

#### ***English Language Development for ELLs with an IEP***

With the current emphasis on inclusionary practices for special education students, more regular education teachers are finding students with a variety of special needs in their classes. It is imperative, then, that teacher candidates begin developing a knowledge base of information and skills to help them address these needs. Classroom teachers should be aware of EL in the class that have special needs, including being familiar with any modifications and/or accommodations that need to be made to instruction and assessment for the student.

In California, the IEP team is responsible for including English language development (ELD) goals as part of the IEP. All EL, including those with identified special needs, must receive daily instruction in ELD at their current level of proficiency, which is assessed using

the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).

Since the IEP takes precedence in the areas of placement and educational goal setting, the determination for the setting in which the ELL will receive daily ELD instruction should be made by the IEP team, including at least one member with expertise in second language acquisition. In some cases, the ELL's disability may impact the development of the student's first language, second language, or both. The team must also consider which of the four domains, if any, of language development (listening, speaking, reading, writing) are affected by the student's diagnosed disability.

For example, the development of listening and speaking skills in EL can be affected by auditory processing disorders, just as visual processing disorders can affect literacy development. In the course of providing professional development

to special education teachers in the area of integrating ELD goals into IEPs in the aforementioned district, the ELD TOSA developed the following flow chart to help IEP teams outline the impact of learning disabilities on EL's language acquisition and determine the most effective setting for delivery of daily ELD instruction (See Figure 1). EL receiving daily ELD instruction in the special education setting must still receive instruction appropriate for their English proficiency level and other needs while in the regular education classroom.

### Directions for Further Research

It is interesting to note in TPE 3 (CCTC, 2008) that teacher candidates are to be able to explain a student's academic and behavioral strengths as well as areas of need. This is a topic worthy of further study. Student strengths are internal factors that can be leveraged and developed

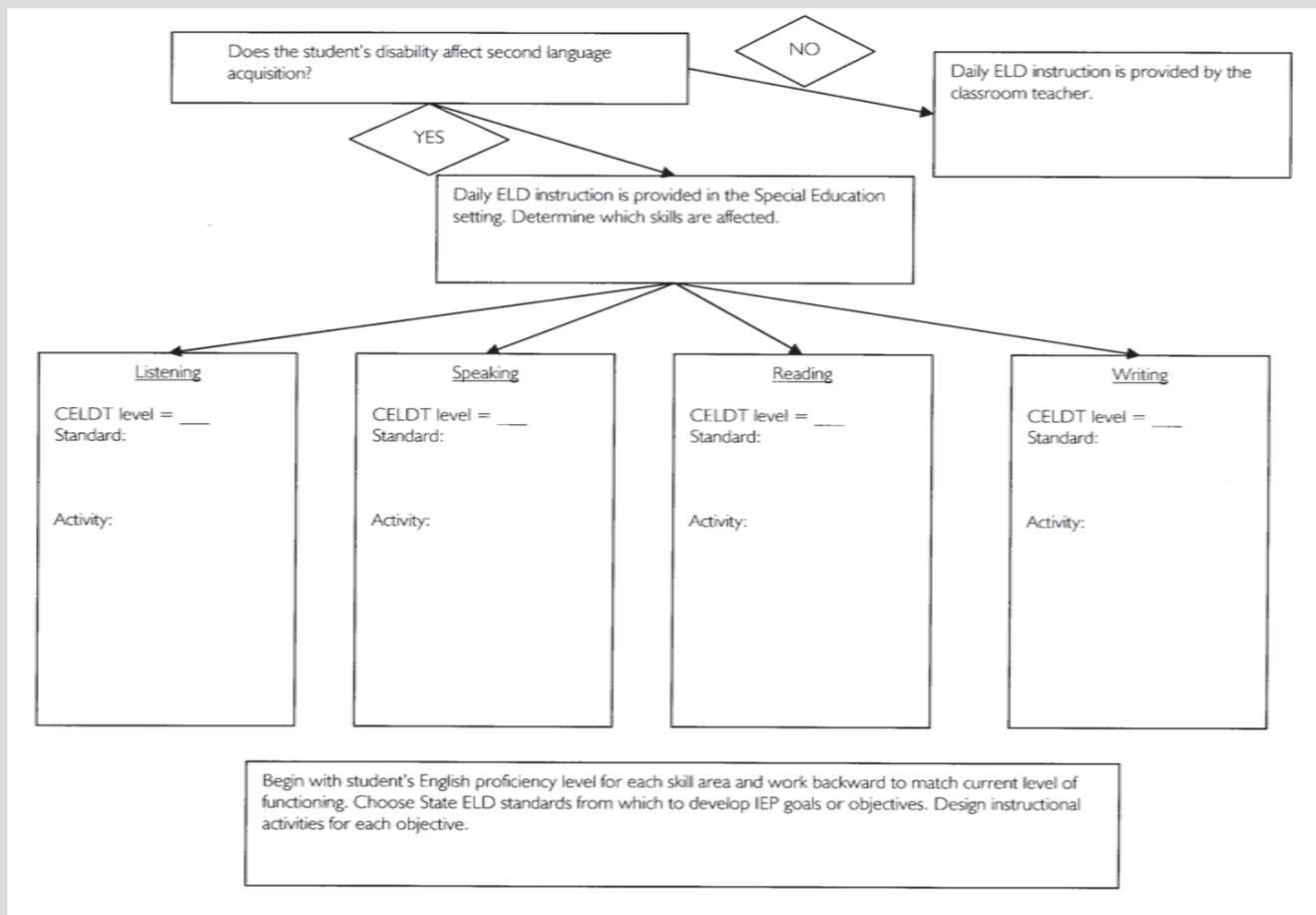
to facilitate student achievement and allow teachers differentiate instruction and assessment more effectively.

Moving from a deficit model to a strengths-based approach makes sense in light of the recent emphasis on differentiated instruction and attention to individual differences. Exploring this component as it relates to intervention plans for EL adds a new dimension to planning for the student's success, both academically and socially. For example, first language resources are counted as assets to be built upon, contributing to the supply of academic strengths EL possess.

The need for further research regarding the intersection of EL and special education is extensive. The following questions represent only some of the areas that warrant study:

1. What are the main risk factors to investigate regarding EL that are not

**Figure 1**  
Determining Instructional Settings for Delivering ELD Instruction to ELLs with Special Needs



making appropriate progress in English language acquisition, academics, or both?

2. How should data be disaggregated to account for the distinguishing characteristics of EL subgroups related to student achievement?

3. What is the relationship between time in program, instructional setting, opportunity to learn and placement in Special Education for long-term EL? How is it related to the overrepresentation of EL in special education at the secondary level?

4. In what ways will more collaboration among English learner specialists, special education educators, and classroom teachers benefit students?

5. How does a strengths-based approach affect student achievement through the design and delivery of instruction, assessment, and interventions for students?

6. What is the best way or place to integrate information on the pre-referral process into teacher preparation programs?

7. How can the effectiveness of the embedded program for EL and special education be measured in terms of adequately preparing teacher candidates in both of these areas?

8. How can educators better distinguish between the academic difficulties due to learning disabilities and similar characteristics of second language learning?

9. What personnel and resources in English and students' primary language are needed in order to adequately assess EL for eligibility for special education services?

10. What resources or assessments are needed to help determine whether there are indicators in the child's primary language that a disability may exist?

11. Can guidelines be developed to direct educators regarding whether bilingual students should be tested for eligibility for special education in their primary language, in English, or both?

12. Is there a need for a tool to be developed for classroom teachers to use that

outlines information vital to a comprehensive picture of the student involved in the pre-referral process, i.e. contributing environmental factors?

13. How can teacher preparation and on-going professional development for classroom teachers, special education teachers, administrators, counselors, speech and language pathologists, and others be improved in relation to the local culture of referral?

With the large numbers of EL in U.S. schools, the importance of the pre-referral process and its purposes and procedures will remain a critical topic for study. It will require collaboration and communication on the part of regular education and special education teachers, specialists, teacher educators, and researchers to develop methods and strategies for addressing the needs of diverse students.

Classroom teachers form the front line in identifying students with learning difficulties that need to be addressed through intervention. More information can be incorporated into the teacher preparation program to provide a foundation for in-service teachers to understand the pre-referral process, gather relevant data, make accurate referrals to the SST, and craft intervention strategies and plans to successfully address students' needs.

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