

**Lesson 2: Identification and Assessment of Students with Special Needs**

*Learning Objectives*

At the end of the lesson you will be able to:

* Discuss the reasons for the need to identify disabilities
* Describe the identification and assessment process
* Detail both informal assessments and formal assessment
* Explain the role of a school based team
* Describe the purpose of an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
* Describe components of an IEP

*Introduction*

The following statement explains why so many countries are now working toward including all students in a regular classroom.

“Although the prevalence rate of learning disabilities in Africa is not known, quite a significant number of school children experience learning problems and thus progress slowly through their education. Not surprisingly, some countries report below-average academic performance on national standardized exams.” (Chitiyo, 2013, p. 17)

The number of students with special needs, in any country, tends to be a general percentage rather than an exact number. This is because many students are not identified by teachers. Also the identification process is often so complex and time consuming only a few of the students can readily access this educational service compared to the large number of students identified by teachers. This means that large numbers of students who have learning problems not only do not get help but are often unidentified. If a teacher has an idea of what is interfering with the student’s ability to learn then in most instances strategies can be used to help the student overcome this obstacle.

This lesson will introduce you to the process of identification by classroom teachers and the process of detailed identification, plus finding strategies to help the student. You will find some terminology introduced which is specific to the field of special education. In addition, you are going to learn about an **ideal process** that in a large number of places cannot exist due to lack of finances or expertise in an area of special education. In these instances we will discuss how teachers work without these support and identification systems.

Again, we will learn about the overall process of identification. Then we will look at how you, as a Teacher, can adapt the process to your own needs. This will form the basis for our look at specific categories of disabilities and challenges

*Identification*

Typically, it is the classroom teacher who identifies the majority of students needing specialized services. Teachers notice students who are having difficulties in areas that other students seem to be able to handle. When difficulties arise students who struggle start to fall behind in their lessons. Over a period of time that struggle in learning becomes more obvious, with the end result being failure. Unfortunately, if the student has no visible handicaps teachers will think it is a lack of trying or that the student does not have the intellectual ability to do the work. Usually neither of these things is true. Students in general want to learn and don’t like to fail. With our knowledge of special education we can now try to find out what is hindering a student’s ability to learn.

Once a teacher has noticed learning difficulties in a student he or she makes observations and gathers samples of work that show the students weaknesses and strengths. The teacher then notifies the School-based Team (SBT). This team is composed of a group of teachers within a school that meets on a regular basis to assist classroom teachers with the Identification and Assessment process. They are also the group who organizes appropriate testing for the student and help plan appropriate goals and objective for a student as well as possible teaching strategies for the teacher. This is when the specific testing is done to help identify exactly the difficulty the student is having. For example, the student may be seeing letters backwards rather than how we see letters. For example a “b” is seen as a “d”. This makes reading very difficult to impossible. (You will get more details on this in a later lesson) While the ideal time for identification and help for a student is when they are in elementary school many student manage to make it into secondary school where their learning struggles become even more apparent.

If necessary an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is written for the student by the School Based Team, in conjunction with the classroom teacher. Plus, if necessary other specialized individuals may be involved, such as: a special education teacher, a medical specialist, ex. physiotherapist, reading or writing specialist or anyone else who may help with the educational planning for the student.

*Activity*

In a Group of 4:

1. Why is it important to identify students who are struggling to learn?
2. In an ideal situation: Who is going to help the teacher work with a struggling student?

*For a GROUP activity only ONE set of answers needs to be submitted. Make sure everyone’s name and student number is on that submission.*

If the SBT needs specialized testing they can submit the student’s name to a specialist. In Canada, when educators suspect that a student is encountering academic challenge the student can be tested by an educational psychologist. Testing may include both aptitude and achievement tests and are designed to identify a student’s cognitive strengths and weaknesses. The report that is then written is called a Psychoeducational report (you do NOT need to remember this term). It is this report which provides information to fill in parts of the IEP.

*Planning for teaching in a regular classroom*

Once the SBT decides to write an IEP this becomes the document the classroom teacher works from to help the student.

There are 3 key components of an IEP:

1. **Present level of educational performance**

* + - Provides summary of assessment data on student’s current functioning

2. **Measurable annual goals**

* + - Measurable (provide basis for evaluation)
    - Positive (provide appropriate direction for instruction)
    - Student oriented and relevant (address individual’s strengths and areas of needs)

3. **Short-term objectives** or benchmarks

* + - Given in a logical and sequential series to provide a general plan for instruction
    - Progress monitoring is a key component of the IEP

All of this information is found in an IEP. Plus, there should be suggestions for the teacher on various strategies to help the student.

*Activity*

In a group of 4:

3. A large amount of information has been given about the process of identification and setting out a plan for a student with a special need.

* What specific parts of this process would you find useful as a teacher working with a struggling student?
* List any other information from the information above that you would find useful.

*For a GROUP activity only ONE set of answers needs to be submitted. Make sure everyone’s name and student number is on that submission.*

*Building our own system*

The reality of working in schools is that in many instances the community does not have the resources to provide all of the supports that have just been mentioned. Even here in my own school district they are struggling with the cost of providing support for these students. However, the rationale behind these supports can provide ideas for teachers to generate their own system to work with struggling students. With this in mind let us produce a system that will work in your school and classroom.

*Activity*

In a group of 4:

4. List the responsibilities of the classroom teacher in Identification. Remember that classroom work consists of both informal (ex. homework, in-class work) and formal work (ex. tests). Students can be compared to each other:

**Criterion-referenced tests:**

* + - Tests that compare a child to a particular mastery level rather than to a normative group(or comparing one students work against another student)
    - e.g., math test shows a student can add and subtract decimals and fractions (has reached 90% mastery), but still needs to learn how to multiply and divide them (has reached 30% mastery)

Or against a curriculum:

**Curriculum-based assessment:**

* A form of criterion-referenced assessment that uses the actual curriculum as the standard for comparison.

5. Explain how you are going to investigate how well a student is functioning in classrooms with different teachers, covering different subjects, etc. Ex. Write down what kinds of questions will you ask those teachers? Don’t forget to find out what the student does well.

6. You should now be able to develop some kind of chart which can be filled in to summarize strengths and weaknesses. This is only an example, you do not have to make you chart or headings like this – it should be your chart.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Subject | Weaknesses | Strengths | Ideas |
| Reading | Can’t figure out unfamiliar words  Stumbles over reading  Doesn’t remember what was read |  | My class - ??? |
| Math  Colleague 1 | Has problems with word questions | Very good math student as long as it isn’t a word question | Tries to eliminate as many words as possible or reads the question to student |
| Geography  Colleague 2 | Poor student  Difficulty reading materials | Excellent artist  Draws great maps | Has another student read the material to him |

As you can see once the chart starts to be filled in you get a better picture of the difficulty the student is having – beyond what happens in your class.

Make a chart which you can use in your classroom or school. Since it will be hard to submit this chart please explain what you would include on your chart. Submit one explanation of your chart for the group. You can add anything to your chart which you think might provide more insight and information concerning the struggles the student is facing.

*For a GROUP activity only ONE set of answers needs to be submitted. Make sure everyone’s name and student number is on that submission.*

Once you have developed a summary in this fashion you can then use that information to find suggested strategies on the internet. When we start going over specific disabilities this will become much easier to understand. In the meantime we are just trying to gather specific information on this student.

*Activity*

The next step is to develop some kind of IEP that will work for you in your classroom.

7. Look back to the key components of an IEP. List the information you need to have for your own IEP. Add anything else that you feel you would like to know specific to your class. You should find that the information you gathered from other teachers will be helpful.

*For a GROUP activity only ONE set of answers needs to be submitted. Make sure everyone’s name and student number is on that submission.*

This IEP is the basis for teaching a particular student. Again, in the next sections we will be looking at strategies for you to use. Right now we are just trying to list characteristics to help us identify (as best we can) the reasons for the student’s learning difficulties.

***Important***

One important thing to know about finding strategies for teaching students who struggle to learn:

The strategies you use in your class for that struggling student usually work well for ALL of your students. Often these strategies make it easier for EVERYONE to learn. Teachers often use strategies on a regular basis which at one time were only used for students with special needs.