

Addressing Disproportionality Through the Creation of Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving Teams

New York University
Technical Assistance Center on
Disproportionality

**METROPOLITAN CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON EQUITY
AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLS**

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The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (Metro Center) Culturally Responsive Education training requires that practitioners develop nuanced understandings about race, culture, and privilege and their effects on school outcomes before endeavoring to clarify structural policy and practice changes. Questions about structures that support equitable outcomes for students are answered differently from district to district given the specific local context. One consistent theme, however, in our work with districts related to our technical assistance is the effort to identify methods for schools to support and develop culturally responsive problem-solving teams.

In our work, we spend a great deal of time and effort to unpack the root causes contributing to the disproportionate placement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children into special education and disciplinary practices. After identifying and understanding root causes, a service plan is developed to address these core issues at a district and/or building-wide. Although it is uniquely nuanced from district to district, our work has led to the identification of a set of general common causes of disproportionality.¹ One of the most consistently surfacing root causes is the failure of schools to investigate the wellness of the classrooms from which both disciplinary referrals and referrals to special education are being made. Schools that have developed well-considered structural supports for high-frequency referrers that include coaching and other targeted professional development measures have been found to improve academic and/or behavioral outcomes (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). These strategies for supporting teachers are most effective when they are thoughtfully incorporated into building- and district-wide problem-solving structures. Successful problem-solving teams may employ a range of strategies and interventions, but it is generally true that significantly positive effects in improving regular education instruction result when practices intentionally examine the quality of instruction delivery from a critical, rather than evaluative perspective prior to making a decision to evaluate a student for special services (Klingner et al., 2005).

The concept of professional teams is neither new nor radical. Conscientious school leaders know and understand that not all staff demonstrate the same capacity for implementing practices that are aligned with the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Given this awareness, it is crucial that school administrators support systems that continuously cultivate the development of instructional practices among educators in order to improve or maintain high student achievement outcomes. It has been our experience that most schools have already established teams of professionals (whether called

¹ <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/>

professional learning communities [PLCs], instructional support teams [ISTs], or response-to-intervention teams [RTIs]) who have the inherent charge and potential for providing supports to staff that directly address student issues; these teams, however, often struggle to do so appropriately or efficiently for reasons such as time constraints, lack of understanding around what tiered interventions should look like, limited resources, and unawareness of the idea that cultural dissonance can often serve as a primary factor impacting student performance.

Based on our direct work with various school districts, we propose that in order for teams like this to function as capacity builders, they must first view themselves as problem solvers that are willing and able to consider the implications of race, class, and culture constructs that are functioning as risk factors for vulnerable populations. Second, they must commit to adopting a strength-based problem-solving perspective and abandon deficit models that emphasize students and/or families as the sole, inherent source of low student achievement outcomes. Third, once the group's identity as a problem-solving team has been established, leaders must determine how they will build capacity for implementing a culturally responsive problem-solving process that focuses on identifying the root causes of school challenges while carefully consulting with (and making efforts to build) cultural competence that may in turn inform the problem-solving process of ways in which culture plays a key role in issues that arise at the classroom level. Essentially, what makes a team culturally responsive is the awareness that school sanctions and cultural differences may be contributing to student outcomes.

Here we summarize the technical assistance steps we provided in reforming the ISTs throughout one of our school district partners (District B) so that they met the criteria for supporting struggling teachers and, more importantly, so that they would be able to employ a lens informed by cultural awareness to focus on developing teacher capacity in order to increase student achievement (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). Although these steps were designed to address the specific improvements in the practices of ISTs throughout the district, we present them here as representative of the generalized steps that may be considered as a framework for supporting cultural responsiveness in problem-solving teams. (Note: These steps are not intended to be sequential.)

Developing a Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving Team

- 1. Conduct critical observations of your building's currently existing team.** Since most schools already have some form of a preexisting professional learning team, it makes sense to examine this group before making a decision to keep or disband it. Conducting

observations is a simple way of collecting baseline data to determine the team's level of functioning in terms of their capacity to problem solve and to do so from a culturally responsive perspective. Most popular problem-solving models, such as the one used in response to intervention, essentially encourage team members to: (1) identify the problem, (2) devise an action plan, and (3) monitor implementation and student progress. What is often left out of these models is the recognition of how culture impacts student learning (NCCRESt, 2005). When observing a problem-solving team in action, observers should pay attention to how team members are engaging, if at all, in the problem-solving steps and the degree to which they consider cultural differences as having any impact on student outcomes. For example, during an IST observation we conducted, the team was discussing an early elementary-grade student they believed to have speech issues. At one point, the student's teacher stated the child's family had a history of more than one child requiring speech services. In addition, one or more of the team members added that they believed the family was of Jamaican descent and that perhaps the dialect had something to do with the speech problems. In a case like this, the Jamaican language, patois, should be treated as a separate language; however, it was not. At no time were the unclearly defined speech patterns of the student considered to potentially be the result of the child speaking a different dialect of English or acquiring a second language in school (American English). Also, at no time did a team member question why so many children from the same family were being classified as speech and language impaired. Unfortunately, the unawareness team members had around differences in language acquisition and dialectic patterns caused them to perceive this child as potentially being speech and language disabled.

- 2. Define (or redefine) the purpose of the team.** Teams, of course, work best when they work around a central purpose. Rosenfield and Gravois (1996) found that the most effective instructional support teams recognize their purpose as supporters of the instructional development of teachers rather than as a group that attempts to "fix" students. In addition to this, we suggest culturally responsive problem-solving teams include in their purpose and self-definition language that stresses all staff's role as guardians of equity in their building and district. This sends the message to other staff that the team is not only an instructional resource but also a group committed to analyzing data trends, identifying which students are performing poorly, and investigating how their behavior or academic performance might be read or misread based on their cultural and/or linguistic differences. In this way, all strategies and intervention efforts are more likely to coalesce around a common vision for student success.

- 3. Establish private, safe spaces where conversations can continue.** Our team in District B consisted of IST chairs from buildings throughout the district. The central district office leader made it her primary concern to establish regular meeting days and provide a central location for people to get together and brainstorm new ideas and practices. In addition to creating a physical space, the development of an online communication/resource workspace turned out to be extremely useful in encouraging continued development and sharing of best practices among team members. An online web resource, such as Google Sites, is both relatively easy and inexpensive for districts to use. Our district team found this to be a useful tool in encouraging professional learning beyond the limited number of times the team members could physically meet to share and discuss field-related ideas and/or problems. We found this to be effective in sustaining the momentum of staff as they built their capacity for refining practices that operationalized their roles as guardians of equity. Team members were able to use the shared web space to post drafts of documents created through the reform process and receive feedback, ask each other questions, raise process-related observations, and share online and other personal tools and resources. As technical assistance providers, we also found the online communication/resource workspace to be a great instrument for tracking the district's systemic progress in reforming its problem-solving processes.
- 4. Identify the cultural considerations that need to be addressed within the problem-solving process.** There are several cultural elements that must be investigated when determining the root cause(s) of poor student performance in school. First, culturally responsive problem-solving teams recognize that *all* students come to school with prior knowledge and valuable experiences that can contribute to learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). These teams must guide individual teachers to develop interpersonal skills and practices that validate—rather than negate—the values, beliefs, and identities that students bring into the classroom, even when these ways of being may be in conflict with the cultural norms most familiar to the teachers (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). Second, culturally responsive problem-solving teams avoid efforts to have students and parents shed their cultural reference points in order to conform or assimilate to school norms. Instead, team members model and direct struggling teachers to embrace the cultural norms students bring with them before attempting to teach a new language or set of cultural references with which they are not familiar. Third, when developing intervention plans, culturally responsive problem-solving teams know to include specific adult practices that need to be modified in order to change student outcomes. Fourth, culturally responsive problem-solving teams recognize that

parent engagement takes many forms and that the most critical forms of parental support occur in the home (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). This requires something of a paradigm shift for many educators who think that parental support is primarily demonstrated by attending school-based events. Culturally responsive problem-solving teams seek traditional *and* more creative strategies to include parents as educational partners; in turn, parents' voices are incorporated in the school's decision-making process. Fifth, culturally responsive problem-solving teams acknowledge that the rate of progress differs from student to student and may be impacted by many variables, including culture. For instance, a student who has grown up in a home where problem solving is a shared, interactive process among all family members may need assistance developing independent problem-solving skills, but at the same time may excel when provided opportunities to participate in cooperative learning activities. Culturally responsive problem-solving teams promote the understanding that differences in learning and the rate at which learning occurs should *not* be equated with disability.

- 5. Pair teachers with instructional coaches and include building administrators as key team members.** In our observations of multiple building-level ISTs in District B, groups that had the most impact on changing teacher practices in order to improve student outcomes were those that had instructional leaders, such as literacy or math coaches, working directly with the teacher in the classroom. These coaches not only modeled best practices and gave relevant feedback to instructors, they also conducted observations that provided pertinent data necessary to identify instructional goals and planning strategies for the teacher. Pairing teachers with well-trained instructional coaches helps to improve the quality of teaching and mitigates the effects that limited resources (e.g., students with limited access to quality pre-K instruction, before- and after-school enrichment programs, and highly qualified teachers, etc.) have on student achievement outcomes (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). In addition, teams that had building principals present for all or most instructional planning meetings were found to be the most productive in executing plans and establishing an equity-focused culture.
- 6. Use case studies to develop richer understandings of student experiences.** Experiential activities are a critical learning component for promoting change in teacher practices. Once problem-solving team members have established a set of problem-solving steps that consider culture, they are ready to practice the implementation of these procedures. Student case studies are effective in giving the team the opportunity to both reflect on the specific circumstances of students' school experiences and also

carefully consider the advised steps—and more importantly, the cultural awareness that underscores those steps. The most nuanced understanding of culture is based on the consideration of specific spatial and contextual norms. Problem-solving teams should not think of culture as being universal but rather should seek to recognize the distinctive aspects of the sociocultural elements within the student's unique experience. Having teams use fictional or their own student case studies to analyze and practice action based on their analysis is helpful in getting them to both develop an equity lens that considers access opportunities and to adopt appropriate language to communicate this to staff and parents.

- 7. Develop action plans that articulate a clear course of action and assign ownership within the group for oversight and implementation of objectives.** After a full year of going through steps 1 through 6, District B ended the year by drafting an action plan that was used to guide their efforts to reform problem-solving teams in the subsequent year. This consisted of writing additional objectives that clearly delineated specific tasks, identifying staff or work groups to be aligned with certain tasks, and creating a timeline to project the start and end of those specific tasks. Finally, the plan identified deliverables that would support the intended outcomes, which typically revolved around improving the academic and/or behavioral achievement of racial and ethnic minority students in order to impact disproportionate student outcomes. The success of the culturally responsive problem-solving teams is much more likely to be a function of the quality of implementation than of the nature of the specific intervention itself.
- 8. Problem-solving teams should routinely engage in reflection and reconsideration.** Although reflection is a process that is informally integrated throughout all these steps, it is important to formalize it by creating a very purposeful time and space for it to occur. Team members must be able to formally come together to purposefully reflect on changes made and make any necessary decisions required at various stages in the problem-solving process. Transformation is best measured through deliberate reflection over time. Reflection and reconsideration underscore the actual implementation of the action plan and must be purposefully scheduled at different points throughout the process in order to hold stakeholders accountable for attending to the outcomes of CLD and other marginalized students. For instance, District B made several critical choices while engaging in the problem-solving process, including requiring literacy and math coaches to serve on teams as instructional mentors for teachers in the classroom; developing a problem-solving handbook; mandating classroom observations as a first step in collecting baseline data on what is occurring in the classroom before scheduling

a problem-solving meeting; creating large posters to be posted in all problem-solving meeting rooms that highlight key cultural considerations; requesting building administrative representation and support; and sharing policy and practice changes made with all staff districtwide. Finally, the reflection and reconsideration process should seek to capture evidence of validation from multiple cultural perspectives.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive problem-solving teams are not the sole answer to ending disproportionate racial outcomes for students; however, given that they often function as an entryway to special education, their problem-solving structures have the potential of becoming critical gatekeepers if they can effectively build their capacity to function from a critical, socioconscious, multiperspective lens. It is only through this type of a deliberately thoughtful problem-solving process that practitioners will be able to systematically transform how students' differences are perceived and addressed.

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