

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Addressing inequity in special education: An integrated framework for culturally responsive social emotional practice

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**Abstract**

Despite great strides toward equity and inclusion of all students, the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds has been an issue of concern within the field of special education for decades. Of particular concern is the disproportionate representation of students from CLD backgrounds among students served within the category of emotional disturbance and students faced with exclusionary disciplinary decisions. This paper presents an overview of literature related to school- and teacher-based factors that contribute to these issues of disproportionality. It concludes with the recommendation for an integrated framework of culturally responsive practice and social emotional learning as an approach to target these factors.

**KEYWORDS**

culturally responsive, equity, special education

The field of special education was born out of the plight of parents and professionals to address issues of inequity faced by students with disabilities in schools. Throughout the years, these issues have related to access to free and appropriate public education [FAPE], transportation, supports, and services; what constitutes “appropriate” in FAPE (*Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District*); and the disproportionate representation of students of color within special education (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014), among others. Disproportionate representation pertains to the phenomenon when a given population, defined by socioculturally, racially/ethnically, and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) background, is *over- or underidentified* within a specific population category when compared to their representation among the greater population. Recognizing concerns related to disproportionate representation in special education, legislation has been enacted requiring states to monitor disproportionality rates (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Amendments of 1997; IDEA, 2004). Yet, disproportionality is still evident among students (a) receiving special education services; (b) within specific eligibility categories (e.g., specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, autism); (c) served in more restrictive settings; and (d) faced with exclusionary school disciplinary decisions (Snyder deBrey & Dillow, 2016).

Data clearly highlight the persistently disproportionate representation of students from CLD backgrounds particularly among students who exhibit challenging social, emotional, and behavioral needs. To address these inequities, it

becomes necessary to first identify the factors that perpetuate the marginalization of students from CLD backgrounds particularly as they relate to challenging student behavior.

## 1 | CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Although a myriad of factors (e.g., community-, school-, teacher-, and student-based; public policy; funding) exist that exacerbate the disproportionate representation of students from CLD backgrounds in special education, a comprehensive discussion of all factors is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, this article focuses on school- and teacher-based factors that perpetuate the marginalization of students from CLD backgrounds.

### 1.1 | School-based factors

School-based factors have been shown to influence the rate of referrals for special education evaluation among students from CLD backgrounds (e.g., Garcia & Ortiz, 2004). School-based factors that disproportionately impact students from CLD backgrounds include, but are not limited to, climate, structure and expectations, referral and assessment practices, and resources or a lack thereof.

#### 1.1.1 | Climate and structure

School climate, or culture, has been defined as the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators that thereby create expectations of acceptable behavior and norms for a school (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997). School climate has been linked to students' academic achievement (Griffith, 1999) and adjustment difficulties (Kuperminc et al., 1997). Furthermore, research has found that perceptions of school climate can vary by individual, with students from CLD backgrounds reporting less favorable attitudes toward academics (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). This is disconcerting considering that a students' school experience can contribute to more high-risk behaviors more than their ethnicity (Marsh & Cornell, 2001).

#### 1.1.2 | Referral and assessment practices

Historically, the validity of referral process and assessment practices for eligibility determinations of students from CLD backgrounds have been rife with concern (Garcia & Ortiz, 2004). These processes are directly impacted by the method used for eligibility determinations (e.g., discrepancy model, response to intervention [RTI]), factors influencing teacher referrals, and limitations related to assessment. Furthermore, referral and evaluation practices for eligibility determinations often vary at the school, district, and state levels compounding the problem of variability in eligibility rates within and across categories (e.g., SLD, ED), CLD background, and gender.

#### 1.1.3 | The discrepancy model versus RTI

The IDEA (2004) clearly states that schools may no longer use the severe discrepancy model as a stand-alone eligibility practice, allowing for the use of student responsiveness to high-quality, research-based instruction and intervention (e.g., RTI) data. Although such frameworks hold promise for reducing disproportionate representation of students from CLD backgrounds in special education (Klingner & Edwards, 2006), problems persist with implementation (e.g., lack of uniform approach, a dearth of research on best practices for secondary school implementation). Furthermore, RTI is most frequently used as an approach to eligibility for specific learning disability but not as a means of qualifying students under other categories (e.g., ED). Research has documented increased outcomes for students from CLD backgrounds in special education when RTI is implemented as a service delivery model (e.g., VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). Yet, when implemented as a framework for eligibility determinations, the research is mixed. Researchers have found both a decrease in the number of students from CLD backgrounds receiving special education

services (Scott, Boynton Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014; VanDerHyden et al., 2007) and some states indicating no change in representation (Scott et al., 2014).

#### 1.1.4 | Referrals

Research suggests that referral rates increase if a teacher has a lower tolerance for students who preform below grade level or engage in challenging social and/or emotional behaviors (Gottlieb & Weinberg, 1999). Despite this, referral rates for students under the category of emotional disturbance suggest that this population may be underidentified (Landrum, 2001; Lane & Menzies, 2010). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of students can influence rates of referral (Chu, 2011). It is likely that disproportionate referrals of students from CLD backgrounds may stem, in part, from teachers mistaking diversity for disability (Gay, 2002).

#### 1.1.5 | Assessment

Best practice dictates that examiners (i.e., those persons responsible for conducting educational and psychoeducational evaluations) should use measures that are nonbiased and nondiscriminatory (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1991). It is important to note that when interpreting results of standardized, normative assessments as an indicator of relative standing for students from CLD backgrounds, the assumption is made that the examinee is similar to those on whom the test was standardized (Flanagan & Ortiz, 2001; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1991). Inherent in this assumption is the idea that the examinee's acculturation is similar to that of the normative sample. When differences exist between an examinee's general background experiences and those of the normative sample, issues related to the validity of the results may be called into question (Flanagan & Ortiz, 2001). Additional concerns with the assessment of students from CLD backgrounds include item response formats, language differences, and examiner factors (e.g., cultural differences between the examiner and examinee; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1991; Skiba et al., 2008).

#### 1.1.6 | Resources

Resources (e.g., fiscal, personnel, curriculum), or a lack thereof, can have an impact on student referral and eligibility for special education services. With funding for low-income schools steadily declining over the years, the disparities in resources between high-income and low-income schools across the country only widens. Unfortunately, teachers have reported considering special education as an avenue for accessing additional resources for students who are struggling (Skiba et al., 2008). This is particularly disconcerting when one considers the stigma and implications of labeling students, particularly if a student is misidentified, or is receiving special education services but does not have a disability that would make him/her eligible for services.

### 1.2 | Teacher-based factors

#### 1.2.1 | Lack of diversity in the teaching force

Most classroom teachers come from far less diverse backgrounds (e.g., White, middle class, female) than the students they serve (Snyder et al., 2016). Teachers who lack shared backgrounds, culture, and/or experiences with their students run the risk of misinterpreting culturally informed student behaviors as challenging social and/or emotional behaviors indicative of a disability thus warranting evaluation, particularly when those culturally appropriate behaviors violate classroom and/or school expectations (Gay, 2002).

#### 1.2.2 | Self-efficacy, deficit thinking, and bias

There has been extensive research to support the idea that self-efficacy, an individual's perceived ability to implement the behavior necessary to yield a specific outcome (Bandura, 1997), influences teachers' decision making and performance (e.g., Hudson-Baker, 2005) thereby impacting student motivation and performance (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). It has been suggested that teachers' referral decisions for students from CLD backgrounds may be influenced by their perceived efficacy and deficit-based thinking and views (Chu, 2011). This often

occurs in the form of lower expectations for students from backgrounds that do not fit traditional school contexts (Artiles, Harry, Reschley, & Chinn, 2002). It stands to reason, then, that students from CLD backgrounds and students with disabilities are most frequently impacted by deficit thinking.

### 1.2.3 | Teacher preparation and training

There are a number of factors related to the training and preparation of general and special education teachers that contribute to the marginalization of students from CLD backgrounds namely minimal coursework related to diversity, disability, and behavior and the intersectionality of the three; a lack of instruction and practice with implementing evidence-based practices for students from CLD backgrounds; and, preservice field-based opportunities to observe and engage with students from CLD backgrounds. All too often teacher preparation programs incorporate stand-alone courses focused on diversity or multicultural education as part of preservice teacher preparation. Although it can be argued that preservice teachers are being exposed to this critical content, teaching in isolation only serves to further marginalize students from CLD backgrounds when the intersectionality of diversity and disability are not addressed (Artiles, Bal, & King Thorius, 2010). Preservice teachers continue to report feeling underprepared to manage challenging behavior, particularly among students from CLD backgrounds (Siwatu & Starker, 2010). This may be due, in part, to limited opportunities for field-based experiences during teacher preparation programs, particularly experiences that deliberately and strategically combine coursework with field experiences to immerse pre-service teachers in diverse classrooms both early on and throughout their preparation programs. Field-based experiences serve as in-context learning opportunities wherein students can apply what they are learning in the classroom (Zeichner, 2010). When working with students from CLD backgrounds, preservice teachers need a variety of opportunities (e.g., simulation, observation, practicum) beginning early on and occurring throughout their training programs to expose them to and immerse them in classrooms with students from diverse backgrounds (Miller & Mikulec, 2014). Furthermore, teacher preparation programs that strategically combine coursework with field-based opportunities designed to target pre-service teachers' understanding of the intersectionality of disability and diversity hold promise and have been linked a growing awareness of the intersectionality between disability and diversity (Robertson, McFarland, Sciuchetti, & Garcia, 2017).

## 2 | MOVING FORWARD TO ADDRESS DISPROPORTIONALITY

Evidence clearly indicates that school- and teacher-based factors perpetuate persistently disproportionate representation of students from CLD backgrounds, particularly among students who exhibit challenging social and/or emotional behaviors. Therefore, it is critical that school-based stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators) both increase their awareness of and actively work to address these factors. To this end, identifying practices that combat school-based factors that impact the disproportionate referrals for special education among students from CLD backgrounds who exhibit challenging social and/or emotional behaviors becomes paramount. Two such research-based approaches are culturally responsive practice (CRP) and social emotional learning (SEL). The remainder of this article focuses on CRP, SEL, and the recommendation of an integrated framework for the delivery of both.

### 2.1 | Culturally responsive practice

Generally speaking, CRP occurs when teachers become responsive to the cultural representation within a classroom. According to Gay (2002), CRP requires teachers to use "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles" of CLD students to make learning relevant and effective (p. 29). To this end, CRP involves establishing trust between the teacher and students; using of appropriate diagnostic and assessment approaches and tools; analyzing instructional content; incorporating appropriate questioning and feedback techniques; and establishing positive relationships between and among school, home, and the wider community (Gay, 2002; Utley, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). Culturally responsive teachers, those who move beyond knowing of their students to developing a

knowledge base of their students' cultural background and home life, integrate students' unique cultural practices, norms, and preferences with evidence-based instructional strategies (Aceves & Orosco, 2014). This is to say that culturally responsive teachers teach *for* diversity instead of teaching *about* diversity that requires the move from multi-cultural awareness, respect, and recognition (Gay, 2002) to building relationships with students and their families that result in a rich understanding of lived experiences and backgrounds.

Within the context of student behavior, CRP requires that educators (a) develop an understanding of the differences between culturally based behaviors and those that are a manifestation of a disability and (b) use this information to make informed instructional and assessment decisions. Often students from CLD backgrounds engage in behaviors that are culturally appropriate (e.g., sharing resources and materials), yet conflict with school-based expectations (e.g., "Ask for permission before taking another students things"). As such, teachers must be aware of both the nuances of culturally based behaviors and potential competing school- and/or classroom-based expectations and adjust expectations accordingly. This is not meant to negate the importance of safety—*all* students should feel safe in schools. Rather, the argument is for teachers to be aware of their own behaviors, including the root of those (e.g., bias), and expectations while avoiding the discouragement of culturally based student behaviors that are not inherently meant to be disruptive, defiant, or dangerous.

## 2.2 | Social emotional learning

Researchers have defined SEL as a process or approach designed to assist individuals with developing competencies that facilitate the accomplishment of essential life skills, such as emotional and behavioral regulation and management; developing and demonstrating care and empathy; establishing and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships; practicing responsible decision making; and appropriately and effectively responding to challenging situations (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2012). According to the CASEL (2012), five core competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) form the basis for SEL. Instruction rooted in SEL is typically designed to (a) promote resiliency, (b) teach specific skills designed to improve coping skills, (c) provide supports to students navigating challenging experiences (e.g., trauma, abuse), (d) develop healthy perceptions of self and builds self-esteem, and (e) include character education.

Within the context CRP, there are several SEL considerations pertaining to student behavior worth noting. Effectively delivering SEL instruction to students from CLD backgrounds requires teachers to adhere to critical features of culturally responsive social skills instruction including: teaching skills that are relevant and of interest to the student; using culturally relevant materials; providing culturally competent peer models; integrating students' experience into instruction; and providing authentic opportunities to roleplay and applying learned skills (Robinson-Ervin, Cartledge, & Keyes, 2011). For example, some teachers might interpret student eye contact as an observable behavior indicative of student attention. However, in some cultures avoiding eye contact is a way to demonstrate respect. Using knowledge of students' culture, teachers can enhance the core competencies of SEL. This includes incorporating social skills instruction that is mindful of cultural difference and implementing rules and expectations that are sensitive to potential competing culturally appropriate behaviors.

## 3 | INTEGRATING APPROACHES THROUGH A FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY

Some researchers assert that culturally responsive tiered models of instruction and support are essential for appropriate eligibility determinations of ED for students from CLD backgrounds (see Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). I further contend that CRP and SEL should be integrated and systematically applied through multitiered systems of academic and behavioral support (MTSS) at both the school-wide and classroom levels as an approach to intervention and a model for eligibility determinations for ED. Two established MTSS include RTI, an academic framework, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), a behavioral framework. Culturally responsive PBIS models with a focus on the culturally responsive and research-based invention, capacity building, intensive and specialized

instruction, and teacher and student supports are emerging (Bal, Thorius, & Kozleski, 2012). Yet, given the paucity of research, examining the efficacy of PBIS as a method for eligibility determinations for students who exhibit challenging behaviors warrants further investigation.

## 4 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although it is evident that significant strides have been made in the pursuit of access and equity for students with disabilities, the field of special education still has considerable ground to cover to ensure that *all* students are recognized for the richness and diversity of strengths they bring to their classroom and school communities. The need to address pervasive issues related to school- and teacher-based factors impacting students from CLD backgrounds, particularly students who exhibit perceived challenging social/emotional behaviors and those with disabilities, remains paramount. To this end, educators must begin to examine the cultural context of student behavior to best interpret its functionality, thereby making it easier to recognize legitimate challenging social and/or emotional behaviors warranting evaluation and support. The success of any practice, framework, or system relies heavily on appropriate personnel preparation prior to and throughout implementation. If we are to continue in the pursuit of equity for *all* students, then the integration of CRP and SEL within a MTSS may be one way to keep us moving in the that direction.

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