# Embedding Culturally Responsive Practices in Tier I

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## Introduction and Purpose

*The PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches* was first published in 2016 to support teams with integrating cultural practices of their students and communities into the existing PBIS framework with the goal of increasing equity in school discipline. The RDQ session at the 2019 National PBIS Forum tied the historical context of segregation in U.S. schools for students of color and students with disabilities with the need to: (1) Examine our policies and practices for systemic patterns of inequity, and (2) Recognize that we must have an honest discussion of the ways in which our schools have contributed to student disengagement by devaluing their culture. The purpose of this document is to review the strategies essential to begin removing barriers and providing access to education for all. The approaches noted represent ideas that some locations have taken.

## Operational Definition and Rationale

Addressing cultural responsiveness in PBIS Tier 1 should not be considered as an add-on nor a special variety of PBIS. Cultural responsiveness is one of the six defining features of PBIS (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015). Therefore, if we are not attending to cultural responsiveness in universal PBIS we are not implementing PBIS with fidelity. As mentioned in the *PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches* (Leverson, Smith, McIntosh, Rose, & Pinkleman, 2019), cultural responsiveness should be a core feature of all PBIS implementation. However, we recognize that not all implementers are aware of this concept. Others may be familiar with the term cultural responsiveness but are uncertain of how to recognize when teams are effectively addressing it. Cultural responsiveness refers to the process of developing awareness of the significance of our students' backgrounds (including historical context), then intentionally integrating their customs and values into our curriculum, instruction, and school environment. The goal of cultural responsiveness within the educational setting is to increase our ability to meet student needs in order to foster positive student-teacher relationships that maximize academic engagement. As we
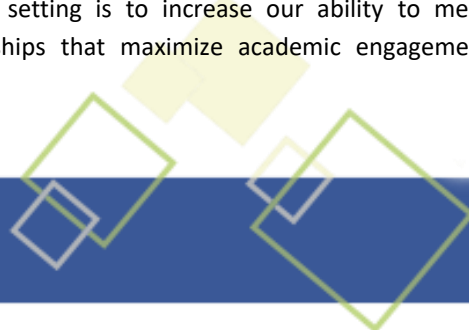
define it, cultural responsiveness consists of five components: Identity, Voice, Supportive Environment,Situational Appropriateness, and Data for Equity (Leverson et al., 2019). So, cultural responsiveness will look different depending upon variations in any of the five elements, even if schools are within the same district.

## Identity

Each person has multiple identities based upon gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education, occupational etc. The concept of intersectionality can be helpful in thinking about identity. Intersectionality is defined as the multiple identities that each person has that overlap and contribute to scenarios where aspects of one's identity can either result in access to certain resources, or provides privilege. In other settings, certain aspects of one's identity can lead to discrimination. For example, a woman may possess a post-graduate degree that grants her access to certain fields of employment. Yet, she may also face pay discrimination due to her female gender status. Educators, students, and their families all possess multiple identities that are associated with societal norms and rooted in historical context. For example, African American male students tend to be viewed as more aggressive based upon the male gender status and the historical influence of stereotypes relative to Black males. As educators, it is important to develop self-awareness of how aspects of your identity influence your practice and expectations for students' academic performance and behavior.

## Voice

 "Authentic family or community engagement includes providing family, students, and community members with meaningful opportunities to be heard, and voice their opinions, and exercise leadership within the school system" (Leverson et al., 2019). A common occurrence, however, is that schools attempt to structure and define parent participation (Lawson, 2003). For example, schools may limit parent participation to fundraising and encourage more affluent parents to lead the fundraising committee, excluding the voices of under-resourced parents. Instead, we should strive for intentional collaboration, especially with families who are not typically asked to have a seat at the table. Prior to engaging in conversations with these families, educators should consider the value of building trust, especially with families that have been historically marginalized in schools, by being humble, being transparent, actively listening, being collaborative, and following through with your commitments (McIntosh, Bastable, Sandomierski, & Hall, 2019).

## Supportive Environment

Within a supportive school environment three conditions are present. First, staff hold themselves accountable for implementing school-wide systemic approaches to developing positive school climates. Systemic approaches for addressing behavior is viewed as an opportunity to develop a positive, safe school climate versus a means to punish students. Second, staff understand and view building quality student-teacher relationships and providing behavioral instruction as integral to their role as educators. Third, they build systems and practices to reach a goal of all students in the building feeling cared for and valued.

## Situational Appropriateness

Situational appropriateness refers to behaviors that may be expected and acceptable in one setting (e.g., yelling and cheering for your team at a game), but can be unsuitable within a different context, or environment (e.g., a student who is yelling and cheering during academic group work in a classroom). We encourage schools to involve parents, and students (especially children who are in junior high/middle school and high school) in the process of developing student handbooks and discipline codes. When parents and students have a role in shaping discipline policies, there is an opportunity to create dialogue about what behaviors contribute to a safe, healthy, learning environment while valuing the norms of the students' homes and communities. When there is a difference between behaviors that are acceptable in the community and students' homes versus behaviors expected within the school environment, the rationale for having different expectations is respectful of the families' norms and values. The discussion highlights the benefits of adjusting behaviors in the school setting to facilitate the learning process, and staff explicitly teach when and how students should adjust their behavior (e.g., 'code switching'). Additional examples of situational appropriateness are found on pages 9-11 of the *PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches* (Leverson et al., 2019).

## Data for Equity

Systemizing data collection and review is critical to using data to address equity. Districts/schools that are committed to delivery of equitable education for all kids are intentional about the ongoing collection and use of data for decision-making. There is a required procedure for school teams to regularly review disaggregated data for trends signifying the presence of disproportionality. Meeting norms are developed and reviewed during meetings to keep the focus on using data to address equity. Teams have open discussions around data and avoid the use of coded language (e.g., kids from "urban" families get more referrals).

Effective school environments help the vast majority of students to be successful. Establishing a positive school culture includes setting up the school's social environment (either intentionally or unintentionally) to reflect a shared vision of common values, beliefs, and behavior expectations. However, for students who are not from the dominant culture, the school environment can expose them to unintentional slights, which devalue their backgrounds and diminish school connectedness. Thus, this environment can either engage students through validation and affirmation of their identity (including their cultures and individual learning histories) or disengage them through these unintentional slights. For example, in an example of a Wisconsin school that serves Menomonee (First Nation or American Indian) students, cultural symbols familiar to students and the community are incorporated into visual displays of school-wide expectations. In recognition of the sacred role of tobacco in the Menomonee community, signs posted in the school remind students not to

"abuse the gift" rather than saying that smoking is bad. Another example shows school expectations written in the Menomonee language and incorporated into one of the clan symbols. Building responsive environments requires an understanding of how our school systems have been established, how well they support students from varying cultures, and how they can be changed to ensure the support and validation of each student. (Leverson et al., 2019)

Given that educational environments are rooted in the U.S. historical context of racial segregation and exclusion of students with disabilities in schools, universal PBIS systems must be examined for systemic patterns of inequity. Embedding culturally responsive practices across the school system means (a) holding high expectations for all students, (b) using students' cultures and experiences to enhance their learning, and (c) providing all students with access to effective instruction and adequate resources for learning (Klingner et al., 2005). Disproportionality in educational outcomes occurs when schools and districts engage in "business as usual" without attending to the unintended consequences of current practices. Intentional integration of cultural responsiveness in PBIS is not only imperative for implementation fidelity, cultural responsiveness encourages school staff to have the difficult conversations about who has access to education and why.

# Questions

This section addresses the questions raised during this RDQ session and provides some practical, field-based examples for review.

## How do we use data to support and implement CR in PBIS?

Data should be used to help schools hone in on patterns of inequitable outcomes (e.g., discipline disproportionality). Teams should regularly disaggregate their data to identify where outcomes do not align with goals, identify where practitioner identity and related biases may disengage students and families, or identifying where policy may create institutional barriers to equitable outcomes.

An example of this approach is from the Eau Claire Area School District in Wisconsin. District PBIS and English Learner Coordinators worked with their assessment and technology department to create data dashboards for each school showing current disaggregated data that was refreshed on a frequent basis. Over a two-year period, the District PBIS Coordinator (who is now the District Mental Health Coordinator), English Learner Coordinator and district administration developed a process to allow easy access to building-level disaggregated data and related professional development modules. These modules provided culturally responsive professional development resources for building teams to utilize. The district took this approach with an emphasis on improving outcomes for all students, but to address a noted increasing disciplinary trend for Black students in their district.

During the period that these efforts were in place, a variety of student outcomes were noted to have improved for Black students. Among the improved outcomes noted during this time frame was reduction in the dropout rate of Black students between 2015 and 2018 from 3.5% to 1.9%. There was also noted, during this time period, a decrease in out of school suspension rates across all grades in the district for Black students of 1.2%, and a 3.6% decrease in disciplinary contact at the elementary level for Black students. At the high school level, disciplinary contact for Black students decreased 13% in that same time period. While these results were noted, it is not possible, nor advisable, to attribute the changes solely to the use of disaggregated data and brief professional development modules, rather this is being offered as an example of a step that can be taken to start changing systems.

The use of this system was implemented at the District level for use in buildings to move past cursory examination of data. Dr. Kaying Xiong, District Student Services Director, noted the importance of this practice by stating: "As a school district, we use these to allow staff to have tools that will allow them to understand and react to their data, to do something about it rather than storing it on the back shelf." In terms of practice impact, Jodi Hubbard, the district mental health coordinator, shared her thoughts by stating, "the use of risk ratio (and related professional development) allows us to start to focus on changing our systems; the materials we select to use in our schools, how to change the classroom environment so students can see themselves, identifying needed changes in how we teach, how we interact with students, etc… This shifts us from blaming the students for the outcomes we get to looking at the systems. Looking at our practices and working for equitable outcomes is our moral responsibility; no one can make us do this."

## How do we systematize practices that outlast changes in personnel in schools or districts?

Understand that equity work and system change is never done; allow for ongoing training, feedback, and support as part of on-boarding new staff and professional learning. Consider partnerships with colleges and universities who prepare student teachers and practicum students with foundational knowledge about cultural responsiveness. Engage Boards of Education in setting priorities in this work to help manage competing initiatives that interfere with equity work.

## How do we get staff on board with Culturally Responsive Practices (CRP)?

We have found that successful strategies to engage staff are individualized and are unique to each site. Effective CRP implementation, however, typically begins with staff taking a personal journey in understanding how their own culture shapes their beliefs about instruction and student interactions. Then, learning how to manage the

dynamics of difference, or diverse cultures and norms in the classroom, or school. For some staff, frequent sharing of outcome data can help them understand the necessity to improve practices. Other staff may be motivated by a variety of professional development opportunities (for example, the Seven Experiences Model developed by Ms. Andreal Davis, found at https://www.wisconsinrticenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Seven-Experiences.pdf). Others may gain useful experience and strategies through work with families or diversifying their sources of feedback and input. Others may engage readily and wish to grow in this area as part of their licensing/renewal/continual education process.

Another example from practice comes from Harrison Elementary School in Janesville, Wisconsin. After examining the school's outcome data, they recognized they were underserving specific groups of students. The building administrator and leadership team decided to prioritize building family connections as a first step in getting staff on board with Culturally Responsive Practices. They began to dialogue with staff about changing mindsets about how they define family engagement or family participation, and how to begin getting to know students and families in more authentic ways. The administrator and team engaged in training staff on how to communicate with students effectively, how to do home visits, understanding personal bias and other related issues. After making necessary policy adjustments, the school instituted home visits at the start of every year for goal setting and relationship building. This was a marked departure from expecting families to come into schools and participate in traditional "signing day" activities. Shifting from the practice of having families come to the school to having staff visit families in their homes has translated into increased family participation in school leadership activities. It should be noted that this school and district have been working to address equity in their educational systems and this is one example of the approaches they have taken.

## How do we engage resistant staff members?

Resistance comes for a variety of reasons. For some staff it is a lack of awareness about current conditions; others may have their own personal biases or a general cynicism that things can't improve. Attending to issues of commitment early and often has the most potential for overcoming resistance. In other cases, engaging in this work may need to become a non-negotiable and come under the purview of administration. Frank and candid conversations regarding ethical and moral obligations to directly address equity in schools can be critical, as can a discussion regarding who has the right to be in school, and how do we best go about the business of education. Because so much of this resides at a personal/practitioner level, there is no one perfect or best way to engage; teams and coaches should consider a range of options, but also understand that this takes time and that consistent and persistent effort is required.

## What is your advice for schools and districts that are just beginning this work?

There is no one right way to begin a deliberate focus on equity. The first step, even a small step, leads to another and another. Additionally, expect to be uncomfortable and to say and do things that result in people getting upset. System change is not easy and addressing unequal outcomes adds a layer of discomfort based on generations of taboo, where we have been encouraged to not talk about differences let alone the issues of unequal outcome based in those differences. This journey is never done; it is a dynamic process that requires constant reflection of current practices against desired outcome. The systems we inherit and operate in will not change without effort and discomfort, and understanding that stepping into this necessitates that discomfort in order for change to occur.

## References

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