

# Toward a Conceptual Integration of Cultural Responsiveness and Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support

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## Abstract

Within the context of widely documented racially disproportionate discipline outcomes, we describe schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS) as one approach that might provide a useful framework for culturally responsive behavior support delivery. We conceptualize cultural and linguistic diversity as the result of a divergence between individual students' and entire schools' cultural identities and identify culturally responsive educational practices that might facilitate greater continuity between students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and school environments. Based on practical recommendations derived from the literature, we propose an expansion of the key features of SWPBS implementation (practices, data, systems, and outcomes) to facilitate culturally responsive behavior support delivery. We propose (a) systemically promoting staff members' cultural knowledge and self-awareness, (b) commitment to culturally relevant and validating student support practices, and (c) culturally valid decision making to enhance culturally equitable student outcomes. We provide recommendations for future research and present the efforts of one school district to blend SWPBS implementation with training in cultural responsiveness.

## Keywords

positive behavior supports

Disproportionate discipline outcomes for students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, especially students from African American backgrounds, are a widely documented and well-known reality of the U.S. public school system. A multitude of studies have documented that compared to White students, African American students are disciplined at a disproportionate rate, repeatedly, and more severely (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Cartledge & Lo, 2006; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) and are suspended or expelled more often (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004) and for longer durations (Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Vincent & Tobin, 2010). African American students are also referred to special education services for behavioral disorders at a higher rate than their White peers (Planty et al., 2008).

Latino students tend to be underrepresented among students who are referred to the office in elementary schools (Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, in press) but are suspended at a disproportionately higher rate compared to White students in secondary school (Skiba et al., in press). Latino students have a higher incidence of depression and anxiety compared to students from other ethnicities (Varela,

Sanchez-Sosa, Biggs, & Luis, 2008; Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005) and a dropout rate that in 2008 exceeded that of all other ethnicities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

These findings suggest that many schools may find it challenging to meet the social and emotional support needs of students from different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the U.S. student population is rapidly diversifying. Non-White enrollment in public schools has increased from 32% in 1988 to 45% in 2008 (Aud et al., 2010). Given these changing student demographics, a focus on educational practices that allow all students to experience equitable outcomes appears warranted.

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Much attention has focused on how to reduce disproportionate academic outcomes (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2002). Given the linkage between academic and social success (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2009), recommended approaches to reducing disproportionate discipline outcomes appear equally important. These recommendations include (a) data-based decisions regarding student needs (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008), (b) culturally relevant social skills lessons (Cartledge & Johnson, 2004; Delpit, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Obiakor & Utley, 2003; Smith, Levine, Smith, Dumas, & Prinz, 2009), (c) using culturally relevant language (Cartledge & Johnson, 2004; Delpit, 1992; Monroe, 2005, 2009), (d) tailoring instruction to the culturally conditioned physical needs of students (e.g., allowing students to move around) (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009; Kaufman et al., 2010), (e) enhancing teachers' cultural awareness and knowledge (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008; Delpit, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), (f) frequent positive feedback (Cartledge, Sentelle, Loe, Lambert, & Reed, 2001; Klingner et al., 2005; Serpell, Haying, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009), and (g) increasing cultural competence of school leaders to support staff (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Cartledge & Johnson, 2004).

A number of these recommendations, including data-based decision making, frequent positive feedback, and support from school leaders, echo aspects of schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS, Sugai & Horner, 2002). The *Implementers' Blueprint and Self-Assessment* (Sugai et al., 2010) provides an overview of the four key features of effective SWPBS implementation: (a) data-driven decisions regarding student support needs, (b) evidence-based behavior support practices (e.g., frequent positive feedback) support student behavior, (c) schoolwide systems endorsed by school leaders support staff members in their delivery of evidence-based practices, and (d) social and academic outcomes valued by all school constituencies drive implementation efforts. High-fidelity implementation of these four key features has been repeatedly associated with overall reductions in office discipline referrals (ODRs) as well as improved academic outcomes (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2009; Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008; Ervin, Schaugency, Goodman, McGlinchey, & Matthews, 2006; Horner et al., 2009). However, much of this evidence rests on data averaged across entire student populations without sufficiently taking into account variability across students from different racial-ethnic backgrounds. Although case studies have associated successful SWPBS implementation with reductions in ODR for non-White students in a classroom (Cartledge et al., 2001) and a school (Jones, Caravaca, Cizek, Horner, & Vincent, 2006), there is emerging evidence that disproportionate discipline outcomes persist in schools implementing SWPBS (Bradshaw et al., 2010;

Kaufman et al., 2010; Skiba et al., in press; Vincent et al., in press; Vincent & Tobin, 2010).

In this context, emphasis on "culturally responsive" SWPBS implementation has increased (Sugai et al., 2010, p. 18). The mechanisms and strategies necessary for culturally responsive implementation, however, remain unclear. To explore approaches to culturally responsive SWPBS implementation, our overall goal was to deconstruct the theoretical foundations of SWPBS as well as those of cultural responsiveness into their component parts to try to identify a common denominator. First, we provide a brief overview of the theoretical foundations of SWPBS and cultural responsiveness; second, we identify key recommendations of culturally responsive practices from the literature, and third, we propose one approach to blending the recommendations from the literature with the key features of SWPBS that might guide future research efforts. Finally, we present the efforts of one school district that took steps to move toward culturally responsive SWPBS implementation.

### Theoretical Foundations of SWPBS and Cultural Responsiveness

The theoretical foundations on which the four components of SWPBS implementation identified above (data, practices, systems, outcomes) rest include the following: (a) human behavior is lawful and affected by the environment (Sugai et al., 2010), (b) changing the environment changes student behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2002), and (c) a school culture where all students share a common language and common knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors creates a level playing field, where all students, regardless of their backgrounds, can be held to the same behavioral standards (Horner, Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2001). Within the context of education, the theoretical foundations of cultural responsiveness include the following: (a) the laws of human behavior are moderated by complex cultural contexts (Bandura, 2002), (b) multiple and often culturally divergent environments affect behavior (Delpit, 1992; Noguera, 2003), and (c) school cultures are intended to be environments where differences among students are a source of enrichment for all (Monroe, 2005, 2009). On their faces, SWPBS and cultural responsiveness appear to be derived from different theoretical orientations. While SWPBS emphasizes sameness, cultural responsiveness emphasizes difference. How then can these two perspectives be reconciled?

"Difference" emphasized by cultural responsiveness theory commonly refers to cultural and linguistic diversity. A close examination of the characteristics of culturally and linguistically diverse students might help us understand the dimensions of this difference. Once those dimensions are identified, we can explore how to adapt behavioral support delivery to accommodate them. Much research on CLD students' school performance focuses on examining how children

develop awareness of their own and others' racial-ethnic identities and how teachers' language and verbal behavior patterns affect students' behavior.

Children develop an awareness of their own and others' racial-ethnic identities during their elementary years, begin to identify with those ethnically similar, and—around third grade—prefer associating with members of their own racial-ethnic group (Smith et al., 2009). Ethnic self-identification and preference for members of their own race appear to happen earlier for White students than non-White students but gain in strength with increasing age across all children (Quintana & Vera, 1999; Smith et al., 2009). A strong sense of racial-ethnic identity was related to fewer behavioral problems and greater academic achievement (Smith et al., 2009). Heightened awareness of their own cultural background—together with the development of self-worth—was associated with low problem behavior in fourth-grade African American students (Thomas, Townsend, & Belgrave, 2003) and better academic and behavioral outcomes during middle school (Hughes et al., 2009). These findings indicate that racial-ethnic identity formation affects children's social and academic success in school.

Language is clearly a crucial component of an individual's ethnic identity as well as a medium that establishes group cohesion (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996). Discourse theory helps us understand how language can create social cohesion as well as social division. Discourse theory proposes that discourse (i.e., exchange of linguistic structures among speech partners) derives meaning from sociocultural subtexts shared by native speakers that signal speakers' perception of the social situation they are engaged in, their own status in relation to that of their speech partner, and the intended function of their speech act (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). These layers of meaning inscribed in discourse lend any utterance a depth that exceeds the surface meaning of words. If one applies this theory to a teacher direction, for example, "Please sit in your seat quietly while you complete your worksheet," the seemingly culturally neutral direction might reveal a sociocultural subtext that implies the intention of maintaining the school's institutionalized order, establishing the teacher's authority over her students, and precluding questions or discussion through its use of the imperative. This subtext establishes a cultural lens that values the teacher's authority and passive student compliance.

Although few of us are conscious of how the subtexts of our native language shape our own behavior, we intuitively tend to interpret the behavior of others within the parameters of the familiar subtext. For example, if the direction above produces "inappropriate" student behavior, such as overlapping speech, back-talk, or noncompliance, teachers might interpret the behavioral response as "disrespect" or "defiance." However, the alternative response could be triggered by an alternative subtext that requires compliant behavior only in response to more authoritatively delivered demands

(Delpit, 1992), or in which overlapping speech is not only socially appropriate but a sign of social engagement (Cartledge et al., 2008). In some cases, then, a behavioral "violation" could be seen as a violation of one specific linguistically conditioned sociocultural subtext rather than as a categorically inappropriate behavior.

The processes of racial-ethnic identity formation and linguistic conditioning start before students enter school, continue throughout their school years, and appear to be affected by what happens within the school as well as outside of it. Students whose behavioral repertoires shaped by their racial-ethnic identity development and linguistic conditioning are sufficiently different from what the school social culture promotes might be labeled CLD. Cultural and linguistic diversity, then, might not be an inherent characteristic of an individual student but rather the extent to which a student's cultural identity diverges from that of the school (Hitchcock et al., 2006; Quintana et al., 2006). The extent to which individual students' cultural identities differ from the school's cultural identity defines the magnitude of cultural and linguistic diversity. To facilitate all students' social success in school, then, behavior support delivery needs to bridge various degrees of divergence between students' cultural identities and the school environment.

Given that SWPBS is conceptually focused on changing the environment, its key features could provide the tools to build those bridges. The challenge is to use those tools to identify the common denominator shared by multiple student cultures and use it to develop a common school culture able to negotiate individual differences. The literature on culturally responsive educational practices provides guidance on what practices school staff could engage in to shape an environment where individual differences can serve to enrich the performance of all.

## **Culturally Responsive Educational Practices**

Although much of the literature focuses on culturally responsive academic instruction, the following guidelines emphasize what teachers can do to support student behavior in a culturally responsive manner.

### *Enhance Staff Members' Cultural Knowledge*

Although "culture" is a fairly comprehensive and often ill-defined term (MacPherson, 2010), school staff may benefit from developing greater knowledge of the various dimensions along which cultural differences and similarities can be defined. The general dimensions on which cultures tend to differ include collectivistic versus individualistic orientations, expressiveness, communication styles, interactions between generations, the role of status and authority, and

language. Knowledge of these cultural dimensions has been recommended as a key requisite for delivering culturally responsive behavior and academic support (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996; Gay, 2002; MacPherson, 2010; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Weinstein et al., 2004).

### *Enhance Staff Members' Cultural Self-Awareness*

Pollock, Deckman, Mira, and Shalaby (2010) emphasize that abstract knowledge of culture is insufficient to effect meaningful and consequential change in educators' behaviors. Awareness of the dimensions of one's own culture is a prerequisite to understanding the culture of others (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Becoming aware of one's own culture can increase one's understanding of the cultural relativity of the verbal and nonverbal behavior of others. Cultural self-awareness has been identified as a key element of culturally responsive classroom management as well as greater understanding of how greater cultural continuity between members from different cultures can be established (Blanco-Vega, Castro-Olivo, & Merrell, 2008; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Phinney, 1990; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

### *Validate Others' Culture*

To establish meaningful connections with students from different cultural backgrounds, research recommends acknowledging the cultural identity of students instead of being "colorblind" (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996; Delpit, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2004). Acknowledging differences between students' cultures and thereby making them visible might discourage members of traditionally privileged cultural backgrounds from insisting that their behavior is "culturally neutral" (MacPherson, 2010). The importance of making race and culture visible has been widely documented in the past decade (American Psychological Association, 1997; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Brown, 2000; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004).

### *Increase Cultural Relevance*

Cultural relevance does not only apply to academic content but also to social skills (Monroe, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Cartledge and Kleefeld (2010) provide an excellent example: Given the high incidence of disproportionate discipline outcomes, students from minority backgrounds may have a much higher need to question discipline practices they might perceive as unfair. Appropriately questioning the discipline practice thus constitutes a highly relevant and important social skill. Students from different cultural backgrounds clearly require different sets of social skills to function within a common school culture.

### *Establish Cultural Validity*

Decisions regarding student behavioral support needs are commonly based on ODR. To date, little is known about the cultural validity of instruments used to collect ODR (Quintana et al., 2006). For example, the Schoolwide Information System (SWIS; May et al., 2005; www.swis.org), a web-based ODR data collection system that many SWPBS implementers use, emphasizes operational definitions of inappropriate behaviors to minimize teacher judgment (Todd, Horner, & Tobin, 2010). However, the cultural validity of those definitions remains to be examined. Analyses of ODR data in some cases show African American students referred disproportionately for greater subjective interpretation of behaviors, such as "disrespect" or "defiance" (Skiba et al., in press), but these findings are not necessarily supported by other studies (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010). This suggests that collecting information about how behavioral measures function for students from different cultural backgrounds or in schools with different demographics appears important to establish the extent to which our data—and therefore our data-based decisions—are culturally valid.

### *Emphasize Cultural Equity*

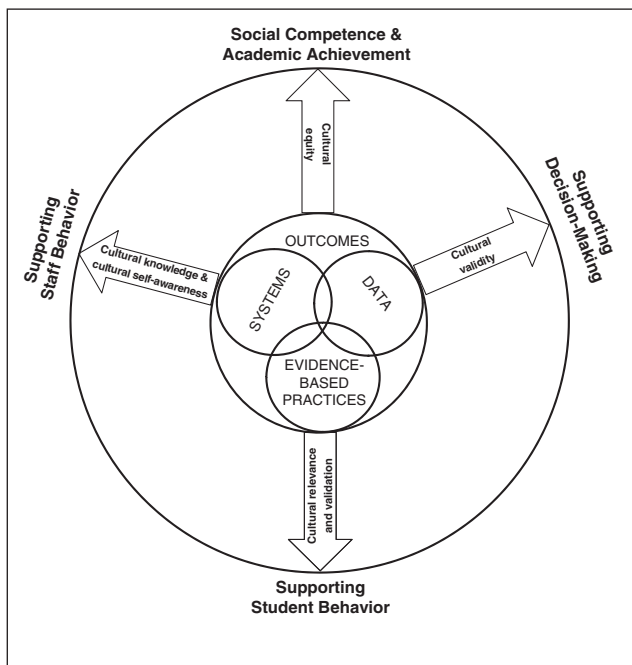
Although documentation of the achievement gap led to strong commitments to achieving greater equity in academic outcomes (Haycock, 2001), documentation of the discipline gap is just beginning to generate institutional commitment to achieving greater disciplinary equity (Monroe, 2009). Schools' commitments to equitable discipline outcomes should be accompanied by an awareness that equality is not identical to equity. Although student outcomes valued by all school constituencies emphasize sameness across all students, commitment to cultural equity emphasizes schools' ability to respond effectively to the differing needs of students from different backgrounds. To strengthen commitment to culturally equitable discipline outcomes, acknowledgment of differences and clear strategies for accommodating those differences within a common school culture might be necessary.

Recommendations for culturally responsive educational practices abound. The key features of SWPBS implementation appear to provide an infrastructure that could encourage use of these practices.

### **Integrating Culturally Responsive Practices With the Key Features of SWPBS**

Although the key features of SWPBS are currently represented as culturally neutral (Sugai et al., 2010), SWPBS implementation clearly never happens in a cultural vacuum.





**Figure 1.** Integrating Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support and culturally responsive practices

Note. Expansion of figure illustrating SWPBS implementation components from Sugai et al., 2010, p. 27, available at [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).

To acknowledge the always-present cultural context within which SWPBS implementation occurs, we propose to conceptualize the culturally responsive practices recommended by the literature as mediating the relationships between the key features of SWPBS (practices, data, systems, outcomes) identified by Sugai et al. (2010) and their intended goals. Figure 1 provides an overview of our proposed expansion of the conceptual framework of SWPBS to include culturally responsive practices as mediators: Culturally responsive practices affect the manner and extent to which implementation of the key features of SWPBS achieves the intended goals of supporting staff, students, decision making, and students' social and academic success.

### Culturally Responsive Practices Supporting Student Behavior

SWPBS relies on evidence-based practices to support student behavior, the most important of which may be proactive teaching and rewarding of appropriate behaviors (Horner et al., 2001). If teaching and rewarding appropriate behaviors equally validated students' varying cultural identities, the common school social culture built on these practices could have equal relevance for all students.

Cartledge and Kleeefeld (2010) emphasize that social skills instruction needs to reflect students' experiences, model appropriate behaviors with individuals sharing the students'

cultural background, be delivered in the language specific to the students' cultural backgrounds, and encourage students' parents to reinforce the desired behaviors in the students' everyday environment. Within the context of SWPBS's emphasis on teaching behavioral expectations through precise demonstrations of what these behaviors look like in specific school settings, these recommendations might mean that teaching behavioral expectations in a school with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population may need to involve adults from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, it may be necessary to provide multiple examples demonstrating the relevance of the behavior for students who are likely to have different experiences in school (e.g., ability to question perceived unfairness in a respectful manner). Figure 1 shows cultural relevance and validation as mediating the relationship between evidence-based practices and supporting student behavior.

### Data Supporting Culturally Valid Decision Making

Within the existing SWPBS framework, data are used to make decisions regarding students' behavioral status, support needs, and the effectiveness of SWPBS practices (Sugai et al., 2010). To arrive at defensible decisions, SWPBS emphasizes operational definitions of observable behaviors to minimize teacher judgment (Horner et al., 2001). However, given the complex interactions of multiple sociocultural subtexts resulting in individuals' interpretation of language, it appears that "culturally neutral" operational definitions are difficult to conceptualize. Instead, it might be necessary to (a) test data collection instruments for their validity with culturally diverse student populations and (b) routinely examine discipline data disaggregated by student race and ethnicity to see if data collection biases are evident (Serpell et al., 2009).

Many SWPBS implementers rely on SWIS to collect behavioral data for decision making. Operational definitions of behavioral violations recorded in SWIS have been carefully developed. For example, "disrespect" is operationally defined as "student engages in refusal to follow directions, talks back and/or delivers socially rude interactions" (Todd et al., 2010). Given that language reflects specific sociocultural subtexts, this operational definition could contain cultural bias. "Refusal to follow directions" might be due to culturally conditioned perceptions of what constitutes and does not constitute a command (Delpit, 1992); "talking back" might simply be an expression of a culturally specific communication style (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996); and what is "socially rude" varies from culture to culture. Involving stakeholders from different backgrounds in operationally defining inappropriate behaviors could minimize cultural bias.

Disaggregation of behavioral data by student race and ethnicity seems a necessary step to assess the presence and

amount of potential bias in discipline decisions. Although SWIS users have access to an “ethnicity report” that provides detailed information about discipline patterns by student race, only about 14% of all SWIS users regularly access the report (Vincent, 2008). To draw attention to the importance of basing behavior support decisions on culturally valid data, Figure 1 shows “cultural validity” as mediating the relationship between data and support for decision making. Establishing cultural validity of data collection instruments and procedures seems a crucial step in culturally responsive decision making (Quintana et al., 2006).

### **Systems Supporting Culturally Responsive Staff Behavior**

Within the existing SWPBS framework, schoolwide systems are intended to promote staff members’ high fidelity and sustainable use of evidence-based practices and data for decision making (Sugai et al., 2010). To support staff members’ use of culturally relevant and validating behavior support practices and culturally valid decision making, schoolwide systems may need to proactively encourage staff members’ cultural knowledge and cultural self-awareness (Blanco-Vega et al., 2008; Cartledge & Johnson, 2004). This could occur by adding modules on cultural knowledge and self-awareness to SWPBS team training materials. Implementers could also be held accountable for providing staff access to cultural knowledge and self-awareness training by including items on fidelity measures that explicitly assess the extent to which cultural knowledge and self-awareness training is provided and included in action planning. To encourage investment in cultural knowledge and self-awareness acquisition as an important aspect of systemic staff support, Figure 1 shows these concepts as mediating the relationship between systems and supporting staff behavior.

### **Culturally Equitable Student Outcomes**

Within the current SWPBS conceptual framework, student outcomes, defined as social and academic competencies endorsed by all school stakeholders (teachers, parents, students), drive implementation of practices, systems, and data use (Sugai et al., 2010). To underscore and rationalize the importance of culturally relevant practices, culturally valid decision making, and training in cultural knowledge and self-awareness, strong commitment to culturally equitable student outcomes may have to be generated. In the abstract, it is hard to argue against culturally equitable student outcomes. However, in the absence of discipline data disaggregated

by race—as seems to be quite common (Vincent, 2008)—the severity of disproportionate discipline outcomes might be easy to ignore. Greater attention to student discipline outcomes disaggregated by race may be necessary to generate momentum toward engaging in practices that might alleviate disciplinary disproportionality. Figure 1 shows cultural equity as mediating the relationship between desired student outcomes and students’ actual social competence and academic achievement.

### **Recommendations and Future Directions**

Given the ample evidence that SWPBS implementation can improve the behavioral success when measured for an entire school’s student population (Bradshaw, Koth, et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2008; Bradshaw, et al., 2009), accompanied by growing evidence that SWPBS implementation might not sufficiently decrease *disproportionate* discipline outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Kaufman et al., 2010; Vincent & Tobin, 2010), a focus on exploring how the key features of SWPBS might be used to encourage culturally responsive behavior support delivery appears to be a logical next step. Our review of the literature on culturally responsive educational practices indicates that the key features of SWPBS (practices, data, systems, outcomes) provide an infrastructure that may facilitate integration of culturally responsive educational practices into effective delivery of behavior support. For example, existing schoolwide organizational structures (e.g., teams and committees) could provide staff access to trainings in cultural knowledge and self-awareness; evidence-based practices (e.g., teaching and acknowledging appropriate behaviors) could be used to validate all students’ cultural backgrounds; disaggregation of discipline data by student race and review of operational definitions to minimize potential racial bias could be strongly encouraged as a prerequisite of high-fidelity implementation; and strong commitment to racially equitable outcomes could encourage continuous accountability for culturally equitable student social success.

To move the SWPBS research agenda toward exploring these potential approaches to culturally responsive implementation, strong commitments to the following appear to be necessary: (a) examining disciplinary disproportionality in relation to SWPBS implementation, (b) critically examining the extent to which existing training materials and evaluation tools address cultural responsiveness, and (c) making the voices of culturally and linguistically diverse students, parents, and school staff heard.

Commitment to examining the extent to which SWPBS implementation is effective for students from varying cultural backgrounds is emerging (Bradshaw et al., 2010;

Kaufman et al., 2010; Vincent et al., in press), but more evidence may be needed. Identifying the problem, however, is not enough. Emphasis needs to be placed on developing SWPBS implementation approaches that result in culturally equitable student social competence. Modifications to SWPBS training resources and manuals (see <http://pbis.org/training/default.aspx>) may be necessary. Novice as well as experienced implementers could benefit from training materials that explicitly emphasize the need to generate staff buy-in to culturally equitable student outcomes, provide a model for ongoing review of discipline data disaggregated by student race, and offer practical steps to be taken if discipline data indicate racially disproportionate patterns. These practical steps could include staff training in cultural self-awareness, review of operational definitions of inappropriate behaviors, and teaching and rewarding appropriate behaviors in a manner that validates all student cultures.

Modifications to SWPBS training materials could be coordinated with modification of SWPBS evaluation tools. Current research efforts to identify specific SWPBS practices that may be effective in reducing disproportionate discipline outcomes are often hampered by a lack of relevant data. For example, current SWPBS evaluation tools contain few items assessing the extent to which schools engage in efforts to provide culturally responsive behavior support or culturally valid decision making. Without data on these critical variables, it is difficult to link potentially culturally responsive practices with outcomes and build evidence for strategies to enhance cultural responsiveness of SWPBS implementation.

Finally, research efforts to identify SWPBS strategies to enhance culturally responsive behavior support practices may benefit from routine involvement of students, parents, and school staff from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This involvement could be in the form of surveys or focus group meetings to gather data on how to improve culturally responsive support practices or documented representation of minority populations on school or district implementation teams. Although current trainings encourage implementers to establish teams that are representative of all school constituencies, the extent to which team members represent cultural and linguistic diversity, and the extent to which culturally and linguistically diverse team members equitably participate in discussion and decision making is not completely known. Given the current “cultural neutrality” of many SWPBS training and evaluation materials, implementers might be inclined to look beyond SWPBS for trainings that might provide the needed capacity to increase the cultural responsiveness of their behavior support efforts. The following case example illustrates how one school district with a commitment to SWPBS implementation and an awareness of racially disproportionate

student outcomes worked toward increasing equity in student outcomes.

### **One School District’s Approach to Blending SWPBS With Culturally Responsive Practices**

When a midsized suburban school district (10 elementary, 3 middle, 2 high schools) with a large Latino enrollment and a long history of SWPBS implementation reviewed its discipline and academic data disaggregated by student ethnicity, it became apparent that Latino students were disproportionately overrepresented in office referrals, suspension, and expulsions, and disproportionately underrepresented among students meeting the state reading standards. Unsure about how to address this problem through SWPBS alone, the district turned to an alternative diversity training curriculum titled “Courageous Conversations About Race” (Singleton & Linton, 2006). This training provided district and school leadership teams with the knowledge and awareness necessary to engage in activities that could enhance the cultural responsiveness of ongoing SWPBS implementation efforts. Table 1 provides an overview of the district’s activities across multiple years.

As illustrated in Table 1, the district’s efforts were initiated and remain driven by a review of academic and behavioral outcomes disaggregated by student race. Once disproportionate outcome data were identified in Year 1, activities in Years 2 and 3 utilized existing district and schoolwide systems (e.g., teams) to build administrative support and staff buy-in to training in racial identity awareness. District and school leaders’ engagement with the diversity training curriculum was accompanied by adoption of SWIS and regular access of the SWIS ethnicity report to monitor racial disproportionality in discipline outcomes. In Year 4, trained school team members were training and coaching classroom teachers in culturally responsive practices (e.g., heightened sensitivity to individual students’ classroom experiences or inviting student feedback on preferred items or activities). Increased parent and student involvement in culturally responsive support is currently in the planning stage.

The district built on existing teams at the district and school level to (a) expand the knowledge base and cultural self-awareness of its staff and secure commitment to equitable outcomes, (b) formulate a transformational action plan, and (c) build capacity to train and coach individual teachers in culturally responsive practices. This emphasis on building systemic support for culturally responsive practices is likely to sustain the district’s commitment to reducing racially disproportionate student outcomes. The investment in building systemic support, however, also means that changes in

**Table 1.** Overview of One School District's Activities to Blend SWPBS Implementation With Culturally Responsive Practices

Enriched SWPBS component	Year 1 (2006–2007)	Year 2 (2007–2008)	Year 3 (2008–2009)	Year 4 (2009–2010)	Future plans
Outcomes (culturally equitable social and academic competencies)	Self-assessment of extent to which outcomes are equitable across student ethnicities	Review of academic and discipline data disaggregated by race	Review of academic and discipline data disaggregated by race	Review of academic and discipline data disaggregated by race	Review of academic and discipline data disaggregated by race
Systems (promote cultural knowledge and self-awareness of adults)		District E-team* is trained in racial identity awareness District equity transformational plan is formulated	School E-teams are trained in racial identity awareness	E-teams review instructional and behavioral support training materials for presence of cultural responsiveness	Active engagement of parents of minority students in support planning
Data (culturally valid data-based decisions)		Some schools adopt SWIS No school accesses SWIS ethnicity report	All schools use SWIS and regularly access SWIS ethnicity report	All schools use SWIS and regularly access SWIS ethnicity report	Schools regularly access SWIS ethnicity report
Practices (culturally validating and culturally relevant behavior support)				Classroom teachers are trained and coached in culturally responsive practices by school E-team members	Student leadership development

Note. E-team = equity leadership team; SWPBS = Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support; SWIS = Schoolwide Information System.

student outcomes will not be immediately noticeable. Ongoing review of data disaggregated by race indicated that in the 2008–2009 academic year, the district documented a modest decrease of 5 percentage points in Latino students' disproportionate overrepresentation in expulsions as well as an increase of 6 percentage points in Latino students meeting state reading standards. These outcomes are encouraging and are likely to sustain the momentum of the district's commitment to culturally equitable student outcomes.

## Conclusion

Existing studies leave little doubt that culturally responsive behavior support is a necessity. SWPBS provides a framework that lends itself to integrating recommendations for culturally responsive educational practices with key components of schoolwide behavior support delivery. School systems that actively focus on staff members' development of cultural awareness and self-knowledge are likely to support staff in their implementation of culturally responsive evidence-based behavior support practices. Evidence-based behavior support practices that are relevant to and validate students' cultural backgrounds are likely to support all students equitably. The extent to which support practices equitably support all students needs to be guided by decisions based on data collected with instruments that have documented cultural validity. Use of culturally validated data to guide culturally relevant and validating support practices

by culturally knowledgeable and aware staff is more likely to occur if a schoolwide commitment to culturally equitable social and academic student outcomes exists.

How culturally responsive schoolwide behavior support delivery can occur was demonstrated by the case example. If SWPBS were to explicitly integrate culturally responsive practices into its conceptual model of behavior support delivery, districts and schools might more readily acknowledge the need to consider cultural differences in their implementation efforts. Schools and districts might be encouraged to focus on developing support structures that are built around equitable student outcomes and continuously emphasize strategies to create learning environments where all students, regardless of their cultural background, can succeed.

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