English Language Learners and Disproportionate Representation in Special Education

Citation: Preventing Disproportionate Representation: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Prereferral Interventions – questions were generated in response to reading Key Element 1 introduction located on page 5.

Preventing School Underachievement and Failure Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

When educators understand that culture provides a context for the teaching and learning of all students, they recognize that differences between home and school cultures can pose challenges for both teachers and students (García & Guerra, 2004) and that school improvement efforts must be focused on preventing these types of academic and behavioral difficulties. When considering the creation of student-centered learning communities, there are many definitions for culture that can be used (Erickson, 2001). In this brief, we will highlight the fact that all students have cultures composed of social, familial, linguistic, and ethnically-related practices that shape the ways in which they see the world and interact with it. In most cases, schools are places where dominant cultural practices form the basis of social, academic, and linguistic practices and act as the driving force for the varied experiences students have in schools. In cases where dominant cultural practices shape school culture, many culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families find it challenging to function and participate in school.

Four elements of school culture are particularly important: (a) shared responsibility among educators for educating all students, (b) availability of a range of general education services and programs, (c) collaborative relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and (d) ongoing professional development focused on effective practices for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In turn, these elements influence the classroom learning environment as they influence teachers’ efforts to design and implement culturally- and linguistically-responsive curricula and instruction for their students.

Reaction Questions:

1. Disproportionate representation may refer to over-identification, or under-identification, of students from culturally and linguistically diverse populations who are served through special education. In your experience, recall situations where this has existed.
2. In what ways is the issue of disproportionate placement of students in special education important to you and your stakeholder group?

3. From your perspective, in what ways can disproportionality impact student achievement? Please give some examples.

4. Why do you think that culturally and linguistically diverse students may find it challenging to function and participate in school? How could their learning/achievement/educational opportunities be impacted?

5. What are the potential benefits to you in your role of increasing awareness of disproportionality? Benefits to other stakeholder groups?

Application Questions:

1. How might you address issues of disproportionality in your specific role?

2. How can you determine the level of awareness regarding disproportionality in your school, district and state?

3. What new knowledge, skills and attitudes will be required to design accessible, inclusive and equitable learning environments that provide culturally- and linguistically-responsive curricula and instruction for all students? Who will design and provide the appropriate training?

4. What are the implications for staffing and time patterns that would facilitate a shared responsibility for all students? What can we implement short-term and long-term to facilitate staffing and scheduling?

5. How do you ensure that everyone is knowledgeable and well trained in the areas of cultural and linguistic diversity? What can we do to begin the process?

6. What provisions may be put in place to provide appropriate supports for culturally and linguistically diverse students?

7. How are community-based programs and support services integrated by the school/district as resources to support culturally- and linguistically-diverse students and their families?

8. What role does the state education agency have in working with community-based organizations to ensure such programs are providing appropriate research-based programs?
These questions were developed by the following stakeholders working together within the IDEA Partnership:

Role: Special Education Administrator  
Location: Kentucky

Role: Regional Comprehensive Center Staff  
Location: New Hampshire

Role: Regional Comprehensive Content Center Staff  
Location: New Hampshire

Role: State Technical Assistance Provider  
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