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Conceptual Framework for Addressing the Disproportionate Representation of
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Special Education

Janette K. Klingner

University of Colorado at Boulder

Alfredo J. Artiles

Vanderbilt University

Elizabeth Kozleski

University of Colorado at Denver

Cheryl Utley

Juniper Gardens Project, University of Kansas

Shelley Zion

University of Colorado at Denver

William Tate

Washington University

Beth Harry

University of Miami

Grace Zamora Durán

U.S. Department of Education

David Riley

Education Development Center

Contact:

Janette K. Klingner
University of Colorado at Boulder
School of Education
249 UCB
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
303-492-0773
janette.klingner@colorado.edu

Draft

Abstract

In this article we present a conceptual framework for addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. The cornerstone of our approach to addressing disproportionate representation is through the creation of culturally responsive educational systems. Our goal is to assist practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in coalescing around culturally responsive, evidence-based interventions and strategic improvements in practice and policy to reduce inappropriate referrals to and placement in special education and to help close the achievement gap between culturally and linguistically diverse students and their peers. We envision our work as cutting across three interrelated domains: policies, practices, and people. Policies include those guidelines enacted at federal, state, district, and school levels that influence funding, resource allocation, accountability, and other key aspects of schooling. We use the notion of practice in two ways, in the instrumental sense of daily practices that all cultural beings engage in to navigate and survive their worlds, and also in a technical sense to describe the procedures and strategies devised for the purpose of maximizing students' learning outcomes. People include all those in the broad educational system: administrators, teacher educators, teachers, community members, families, and the children whose opportunities we wish to improve.

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) provides technical assistance to State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies to reduce the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education resulting from inappropriate or ineffective educational practices. NCCRESt's work takes place in several key activity arenas that cut across different domains. The purpose of this article is to outline the theoretical assumptions and guiding principles that inform NCCRESt's efforts. First, we describe our explicit theoretical understandings about the complex nature of disproportionate representation. Then we discuss our vision for addressing disproportionality and improving outcomes for all students through the creation of culturally responsive educational systems. Finally, we explain the domains of our work: policies, practices, and people.

NCCRESt builds on the findings and recommendations of the latest National Research Council's report (Donovan & Cross, 2002), the work of the Harvard Civil Rights Project (Losen & Orfield, 2002), and other key syntheses of the literature. Our approach to reducing disproportionality and improving educational outcomes for students focuses on how the different dimensions of disproportionality (i.e., child and structural factors) come together in practice. Though a few researchers (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Ortiz & Yates, 2001; Serna, Forness, & Nielsen, 1998) have urged the implementation of prereferral interventions as a way to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education, we hold that in general the field of special education has not adequately considered prevention and intervention strategies at the general education level as a viable means of addressing disproportionate representation. Moreover, in general, many compensatory education programs that serve linguistic and culturally diverse students are academically problematic. Many linguistic and culturally diverse students are isolated in schools that provide a compensatory education that is merely the regular curriculum "repeated, broken into meaningless segments, or 'dumbed down' Because compensatory education programs are located

in low-socioeconomic schools and are aimed at low-track students, the problems of a narrow, fragmented, measurement driven curriculum that plague these schools also threaten the pedagogical utility of compensatory education” (Strickland & Ascher, 1996, p. 618).

Our goal is to assist practitioners, educational leaders, researchers, and policy makers to coalesce around culturally responsive, evidence-based interventions and strategic improvements in practice and policy to help close the achievement gap between culturally and linguistically diverse students and their peers. Our work is based on logic derived from existing literature (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Kilpatrick, Swafford, & Findell, 2001; Ortiz & Yates, 2001; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003): if we can improve the instruction provided in general education classrooms and through general education support systems we will reduce the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students referred to and placed in special education programs.

Persistence of Disproportionate Representation as a Problem

The disproportionate representation of ethnically and linguistically diverse students in high incidence special education programs (mild mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disorders) has been a concern for over three decades (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). The importance of this issue is evident in the fact that it has twice been studied by the National Academy of Sciences (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). The recent NRC report concluded, “[t]wenty years later, disproportion in special education persists” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 1). [Two NRC reports, resolutions, statements, and actions from major professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (CEC, 1997, 2002), litigation (e.g., court cases such as *Larry P. vs. Riles* and *Diana vs. the California State Board of Education*), policy and advocacy efforts (e.g., new IDEA amendments, CEC Institutes on Disproportionality), pressure from parent groups, and efforts from a relatively small group of researchers have not been sufficient to

significantly reduce this problem. Although disproportionate representation is most apparent among African American and American Indian students when aggregated data are the focus, there are notable instances of overrepresentation among other ethnic groups, such as Asian Americans and Hispanics, when data are disaggregated and population subgroups are examined. The phenomenon of disproportionate representation becomes particularly problematic when one considers that our nation's school-aged population is becoming culturally and linguistically diverse at an unprecedented rate (Smith, 2003; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000).

Assumptions about the Nature of Disproportionate Representation

Disproportionate representation is a complex phenomenon, not explained simply nor understood easily. In summarizing the extant literature on disproportionate representation, we draw several conclusions (see Artiles, 2003; Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002 for syntheses and emergent research on this topic). The following synopsis is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather represents what we consider to be the most salient issues to consider across a wide spectrum.

Intrinsic deficits? The bulk of the literature emphasizes child factors to explain and address the problem. We know, for example, that reading difficulties and behavior problems are the main reasons for special education referrals (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Child poverty and associated risk factors, such as low birth weight, exposure to alcohol during pregnancy, tobacco and drug use, malnourishment, and exposure to lead, are often described as a causal factor in the production of language or cognitive deficits or maladaptive behaviors (Donovan & Cross). When framed in this way, the problem is reduced to a discussion of technical issues related to presumed intrinsic child deficits, with little attention to contextual, historical, or institutional issues (Artiles, 2003; Artiles, Osher, & Ortiz, 2003; Daniels, 1998; Patton, 1998). One consequence of this perspective is a growing literature base that overemphasizes student placement patterns in which deliberations

about technical matters dominate (e.g., definitions of overrepresentation, accuracy of indicators to monitor the problem); preventive or intervention models to tackle this problem have been largely ignored. Also, it is important to note that poverty itself does not automatically result in low learning potential, as witnessed by a significant proportion of children and schools who “beat the odds” (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000).

Contextual issues. Emergent research evidence suggests that contextual factors play an important role in contributing to disproportionality (Artiles et al., 2004; Harry & Klingner, in press; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Some of the specific factors that shape disproportionality include: (a) decision-making processes by which eligibility for special education is determined; (b) placement in special education programs with uneven levels of restrictiveness; (c) administrative decisions related to hiring practices and resource allocation that result in disparities; (d) interactions among school location, disability, ethnicity, poverty, and density of culturally and linguistically diverse populations; (e) the lack of availability of alternative programs (e.g., early intervention, bilingual education, Title I); (f) the presence of subtle forms of bias at various stages of the referral process; (g) the uneven quality of instruction and management in general education classrooms; and (h) the effects of various discipline policies (e.g., suspensions).

Donovan and Cross (2002) discuss the significance of classroom context in terms of teacher effectiveness, “[T]he same child can perform very differently depending on the level of teacher support, and aggressive behavior can be reversed or exacerbated by effective or ineffective classroom management. In practice, it can be quite difficult to distinguish internal child traits that require the ongoing support of special education from inadequate opportunity or contextual support for learning and behavior” (p. 3). A national dilemma is that teachers’ degrees, qualifications, and licensing or certification status in affluent communities are impressive and increasingly improving, while teachers in high-poverty schools are under-prepared and know too

little about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). While cultural diversity in the student population is increasing, the composition of the teaching or professional force is becoming less diverse (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1994; Snyder, 2002). During the 1980s, commissioned reports (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*, National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983) and research findings (e.g., Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*) focused the nation's attention on the failure of U.S. schools to improve the status of education for culturally and linguistically diverse children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. More recently, in their investigation of the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education in one of the nation's largest school districts, Harry and Klingner (in press) noted that teachers in inner city schools with predominantly Black populations had fewer qualifications and advanced degrees and were more likely to exhibit ineffective instructional and classroom management skills than teachers in other schools.

Power and hegemony in the education of culturally diverse students. A key premise of our conceptual framework is that power and hegemony play a significant role in the educational experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students in U.S. schools. McLaren (1989) defines hegemony as the “maintenance of the domination not by sheer exercise of force *but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family* (p. 173, emphasis in original). We draw from various theoretical frameworks (critical race theory, Latino/a critical theory, e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) to understand the central role of power in human affairs and examine how presumed race-neutral structures in education actually reinforce racial borders and hierarchies (Marvin & Adams, 2002). As such, it is important to examine the impact of oppression and hegemony in culturally

diverse students' opportunities to learn in general education (Tate, 1995) as well as in the special education referral and placement process.

In this vein, Patton (1998) asserted that basic assumptions about race, worldviews, beliefs, and epistemologies serve to perpetuate disproportionate representation. Mainstream educators generally read culturally diverse students' performance through white middle class normative parameters of competence. Because culturally diverse students' performance does not always align with such parameters, it is often regarded as deficient. These hegemonic processes are further complicated by the fact that current educational reforms accept substantial inequality in practice as a baseline that actually serves to perpetuate the status quo (Gutierrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2002). Thus, many practitioners and researchers do not regard the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education as a problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

It is a challenging endeavor to trace how hegemony works, particularly because it is generally invisible to members of cultural communities. An insidious feature of hegemony is that it requires that the "oppressed unknowingly participat[e] in their own oppression" (McLaren, 1989, p. 173). This consensual dimension of hegemony is an understudied notion in the special education field. There is an urgent need for research on this aspect of hegemony as it affects the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. At the same time, however, we must be reminded that we cannot assume an overly deterministic perspective when understanding the roles of power. Indeed, people resist the weight of hegemonic codes and terms of reference. Thus, future special education scholarship should also be concerned with documenting how culturally and linguistically diverse students and families resist and overcome hegemonic systems of oppression.

It is not enough to merely acknowledge that power and hegemony play a role in the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse students. *The role of NCCRESt is to make transparent the ideological barriers to optimal conditions of learning and to offer real solutions vis-à-vis technical support and advanced tool development with the goal of student advancement in mind.* How this plays out is complex. At times the social practices of individuals in authority are built on deficit model assumptions, thus the vision of what might be technically possible in terms of improving opportunity to learn structures are not discussed or considered. Or those in power view educational opportunity as a zero-sum game where investments in some groups are deemed essential and investments in other groups are thought to be superfluous. The point is that technical support and invention typically have not been forthcoming to students and communities viewed as outside the power structure. NCCRESt aims to change that.

Assumptions about intelligence. Categorical views of intelligence as a measurable construct affect the way teachers and schools think about students. Deeply held assumptions about inferior intelligence among students of color represent one of the most enduring legacies of Western racism. Despite exposure of their fallacious nature by Gould (1981) and numerous other scholars, these beliefs have been institutionalized in the policies and practices of our public schools (Steele, Perry, & Hilliard, 2004). The fact that the construct of eligibility for high incidence disabilities is tied to IQ measurement means that cultural and linguistic minorities continue to be more likely to be found deficient, since there is little doubt that these measures reflect the cultural, social, and linguistic knowledge of the society's mainstream. Further, the decontextualized IQ testing for the identification of high incidence disabilities that typifies assessment for special education is based on a narrow view of intelligence that fails to take into account the social and cultural nature of learning (e.g., Hilliard, 1994; Rogoff, 2003; Rowe, 1991, Samuda, 1998). Thus, as Hilliard (1995) has argued, what is needed is "either a paradigm shift or

no mental measurement” (p. 6). The National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002), in concluding its consideration of assessment issues, called for a focus on children’s intervention needs rather than a search for intrinsic disability, and for an end to the requirement for IQ tests as a “primary criterion” for eligibility (p. 313). We agree with these recommendations.

Wait to fail model. The educational system works on the assumption that failure must be documented first to secure assistance for struggling learners (President’s Commission on Special Education, 2002). Most students who show signs in kindergarten or first grade of falling behind are not provided with the early intervention in reading or behavior that might enable them to “catch up” with their peers. Also, currently no mechanisms are in place to guarantee that students will receive adequate opportunities to learn through exposure to state of the art reading instruction or classroom management before they are identified as having a “within-child” problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Research to practice gap. The availability of research-based intervention approaches in general and special education does not guarantee their adoption in professional practice. Indeed, a major challenge in addressing disproportionate representation is the widespread gap between what we know from research about “what works” and what actually gets implemented by teachers in practice (Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997; Malouf & Schiller, 1995). The NRC report recognizes that “between the articulation of what we know from research and best practice and a change in everyday practice lies a wide chasm” (p.382). In part we believe this gap exists because research has not sufficiently addressed issues of language and culture and the varying contexts within which practice takes place. We address these issues in more detail later in this paper.

To conclude, the genesis of disproportionate representation is located beyond the borders of special education and requires a solid understanding of the intersection of culture, learning, disability, and the socio-historical constitution of educational processes and outcomes. Two issues

are associated with the persistence of culturally and linguistically diverse overrepresentation in special education, namely (a) issues related to *UNDERSTANDING* the complexity of this problem and (b) difficulties associated with the *USE* of research knowledge to address it. Ultimately, what is needed is the transformation and improvement of educational systems in culturally responsive ways.

Addressing Disproportionate Representation through the Creation of Culturally Responsive Educational Systems

The cornerstone of NCCRESt is the assumption that disproportionate representation should be addressed through the creation of culturally responsive educational systems. Instead of determining how to “fix” culturally and linguistically diverse students’ “deficits,” professionals’ biases, or society as a whole, NCCRESt aims to promote the creation of conditions, produce resources and tools, and support multiple stakeholders in the creation of educational systems that are responsive to cultural diversity. The work of NCCRESt draws from scholarship on culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gallego, Cole, & the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 2001; Gay, 2000; Hilliard, 1997a; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Nieto, 1999, 2002/2003; Villegas, 1991). Through our theoretical assumptions and actions, we seek to advance the core values of care, respect, and responsibility across all levels of educational systems.

Culturally Responsive Educational Systems

Culturally responsive educational systems are grounded in the beliefs that all culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors when their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development, *and* they are provided access to high quality teachers, programs, and resources. As Sonia Nieto (1999, 2002/2003) notes, it is not enough to help students celebrate their own and others’ cultural

traditions. We must ask tough questions about who is being taught by the best teachers. Who is taking advanced placement courses? Where and for what purposes are resources allocated?

Culturally responsive educational systems instill ethics of care, respect, and responsibility in the professionals who serve culturally and linguistically diverse students. These systems have a transformative goal in all their activities and nurture the creation of school cultures that are concerned with deliberative and participatory discourse practices (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive educational systems create spaces for teacher reflection, inquiry, and mutual support around issues of cultural differences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1991). Key questions that are consistently researched and debated include (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1991): (a) What are the explanations for the differential achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students?, (b) What are the conceptions of “self” and “others” that inform pedagogical practices?, (c) How are social relations structured in the cultures of schools and classrooms?, (d) What are the conceptions of knowledge that inform pedagogical, curricular, and assessment practices?, (e) What are the consequences of the aforementioned assumptions for academic and social outcomes?

Culturally responsive educational systems benefit *all* children. When educators strive to develop the individual self-worth of each child, everyone gains. Also, exposure to a variety of experiences enriches lives by broadening perspectives and validating each person’s uniqueness and sense of belonging to a larger whole (Nichols, Rupley, Webb-Johnson, & Tlusty, 2000).

Systemic Change: Building the Context for Culturally Responsive Practice

Even if teachers themselves are able to explore their own cultural boundaries and learn to reach out to their students and connect and engage them in learning, they often do so in spite of the systems that surround them (Townsend & Patton, 2000). Individual excellence in culturally responsive teaching can only become collective tradition when the contexts in which teachers practice and learn are able to support, sustain and expect culturally responsive practice. While

school leaders often seek teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, they do so without a deep understanding of what culturally responsive practices and systems could be and accomplish. To engage in substantive transformation of our current educational systems requires changes in fundamental assumptions, practices and relationships, both within school systems and between school systems and the outside world (Conley, 1997; Elmore, 2000). The real challenge of school renewal is changing old assumptions and practices to reinvent schools rather than simply making additions or corrections to existing practice (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedsicleaux, 1999). One path to creating culturally responsive *systems* is by working at systemic reform (Townsend, 2002; Utley & Obiakor, 2000).

System characteristics are often so familiar to the people involved in them that they seem invisible. Systems have a life and dynamic of their own that resists change (Bateson, 1972). To think about culturally responsive educational systems requires looking at the processes, decision and communication paths that are used to make and sustain changed practice (Beyer, 1996). It should be no surprise to observe that the hierarchical systems that have been created in most public school districts and schools mirror our military and traditional business organizations. Policy decisions are made by a few individuals at the top of a pyramid of workers and are conveyed to the workers or practitioners who, in turn, convey them to families and students. Even in enlightened and reformed educational systems, where site-based decision-making prevails, the kinds of participatory communication and decision making that mark some cultures are rarely present (Bondy, Ross, Sindelar & Griffin, 1995). Thus, teachers who may engage in culturally responsive teaching practices receive rather than construct policy and practice around teacher development, assessment and evaluation. This mismatch between expected practice in the classroom and systems of administration and leadership in the school can create tension and signal the system's preference for conformity over diversity. This helps explain why classroom and

school practices may be so intractable. Educational systems try to maintain equilibrium in order to sustain familiar, and therefore predictable, routines and practices.

Conversely, practitioners thrive and are better able to innovate, support student effort, and generate improved outcomes when their organizations support and encourage their cultural responsiveness through systems of leadership that also meet standards of culturally responsive practice. Organizational support for culturally responsive practice must, in turn, be supported by initial educator preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities that enable educators to acquire and build this capacity. Teachers and other school personnel are able to engage in sustained, thoughtful, continually improving and reflective practice if the school organization is able to provide a milieu or environment that supports professional practice (Beyer, 1996). Schools that organize themselves to create time for these rich conversations are able to sustain this kind of dialog over time (Ferguson, Kozleski & Smith, 2003). Further, their approaches to professional development create the contexts for continued growth and awareness of culturally responsive teaching.

The key to systemic reform is the coherence and alignment of activities. Because we are focused on systemic change, our work must cut across different interrelated domains to be successful. These we describe next.

Interrelated Domains in Addressing Disproportionality

NCCRESt's work cuts across three interrelated domains: policies, practices, and people (see Figure 1). "Policies" include those guidelines enacted at federal, state, district, and school levels that influence funding, resource allocation, accountability, and other key aspects of schooling. We distinguish between intended and enacted policies. We also contend it is imperative to understand "the histories embodied in the policies that permeate people's labor..." (Cole, 1996). We use the notion of "practice" in two ways. First, we use it in the instrumental sense of daily

practices that all cultural beings engage in to navigate and survive their worlds. Second, we use “practice” in a technical sense to describe the procedures, models, or strategies devised by educators and researchers for the purpose of maximizing learning outcomes. However, our framework also suggests people use practices in complex institutional contexts in which policies play a crucial mediating role. “People” include all those in the broad educational system, administrators, teacher educators, teachers, community members, families, and the children whose opportunities we wish to improve.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Culturally Responsive Policies

Federal and State Level Policies

Policy at the federal level is the most likely to be disconnected from the work of practitioners simply because it is the result of multiple experiences and multiple viewpoints sifted and distilled over time to meet competing political, social, and professional agendas. Further, federal policy makers in Washington, D.C. and practitioners in classrooms across the country operate in very different worlds. While the intent of law and regulation may be to level the playing field for specific groups or increase the access to goods and services for traditionally marginalized populations, the interpretation of law through regulation and action at the federal, state and local level may obfuscate or neutralize those goals. Hence, practitioners who carry out policy act on information that has been distilled through many layers of bureaucracy. What is intended, interpreted, required, and finally, enacted, is the product of reinvention (Ferguson, Kozleski & Smith, 2002).

There is great wisdom in carefully considering the role of the federal government in determining education policy. We suggest that federal and state policies and practices should be

reexamined and revised to promote culturally responsive educational systems. Though there are several policies worthy of scrutiny, here we discuss just a few.

First, we support current efforts to amend legal requirements at federal and state levels concerning the determination of eligibility for special education. Though there are those who would prefer to retain intelligence quotients and discrepancy formulae for identification purposes, many others question the validity and utility of such approaches. As IDEA is reauthorized, it is likely that identification criteria will be changed substantially to a focus on how students respond to research-based interventions as part of a multi-tiered model (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). While we see the wisdom in such a transformation, we urge caution and careful consideration of issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity when making eligibility determinations as part of a response-to-treatment model. We discuss these issues further in a later section of this paper.

Second, we urge careful scrutiny of governmental policies and mandates related to school financing and the allocation of resources. Currently, educational resources are not equitably distributed across schools and districts (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Parrish, Hikido, & Fowler, 1998). Culturally and linguistically diverse children living in high poverty areas are more likely to attend schools that are inadequately funded and staffed. Yet more money allows districts to hire better-prepared teachers who use more effective instructional strategies, offer more college preparatory classes, and provide teachers and students with more resources. All of these serve to increase students' opportunities to learn (Elliott, 1998).

Third, we suggest reexamining accountability measures, including how high stakes testing results are used to evaluate schools. Like others, we are concerned that high stakes testing is impacting culturally and linguistically diverse schools in disproportionately negative ways (Hilliard, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Smith & Fey, 2000; Townsend, 2002; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). As an alternative, we support standards-based reforms that are culturally responsive and not

premised on high-stakes (Townsend, 2002). We agree with Hilliard (2000), who suggests placing greater focus on teachers who excel, in spite of barriers, and providing additional support for teachers and schools in need of assistance (Hilliard, 2000).

Finally, we suggest that all states should review their teacher certification/licensure requirements to make sure they include standards specific to teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students, and that they require evidence from teacher preparation programs indicating they are addressing diversity in significant ways. Miller, Strosnider, and Dooley (2000) investigated the state teacher licensure requirements regarding diversity among the 50 states and District of Columbia. They found that 67 percent of respondents required some level of diversity preparation, though specific requirements varied substantially from state to state. We would like to see this percentage closer to 100%.

District Level Policies

School systems in which all students are successful create policies that are based on a thorough and timely analysis of data related to (a) student learning, (b) teacher quality, (c) the school contexts in which students are expected to learn and teachers teach, and (d) changing community demographics. Effective systems are built on (a) partnerships with local community resources including museums, business, non-governmental non-profits, mental health, police and social services, (b) alliances with families, (c) productive working relationships with teachers' unions, (d) collaboration with faith-based organizations, and (e) commitments to inform and involve the community through local media as well as the internet (Shanklin, Kozleski, et al., 2003). Having information and making informed choices is critical to school system success. Capital investment, technical assistance, transportation, professional development, the size and quality of the teaching force, salary compensation, maintenance, and infrastructure capacity can be allocated more effectively and reinvested more readily in a system that collects, manages and uses

information streams well. How data that drive policy, regulation and practice are assessed and acted upon signals the values of the organization. In culturally responsive organizations, questions about who benefits from current policy and practice and who is being marginalized or disadvantaged are essential to any discussion of resource allocation (Townsend & Patton, 2000). By asking such questions, resources can be reallocated based on need and equity.

Inequities in the quality of leadership and instruction in inner-city schools exacerbate efforts to reduce the disproportionate placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students into special education. Many schools that serve students from racially, ethnically, economically and linguistically diverse neighborhoods have the least qualified teachers, inadequate physical resources, and are buffeted by violence in their communities (Ansell & McCabe, 2003; Darling Hammond, 1995; Klingner, Harry, & Felton, 2003; Krei, 1998; Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rogers, 2002; Schneider, 1985). Problems related to the recruitment and retention of highly qualified principals and teachers in inner-city schools must be addressed if disproportionality is to be addressed effectively (Harry & Klingner, in press). Districts that examine these issues can reorganize their resources to ensure that the most skilled teachers and administrators are reassigned to these buildings. In addition, examining which students are being identified for specialized services such as gifted and talented programs, special education, and Title 1 can help systems assess the degree to which the general education system is well prepared and skilled to build upon the assets that children bring to school.

District level special education administrators who wish to decrease disproportionality should form collaborative relationships with general education administrators so that they can play a role in developing effective intervention models designed to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education (Klingner, Harry, & Felton, 2003). Recent recommendations at the federal level include the permissive use of a portion of IDEA funds to support early interventions (i.e., pre-

referral) within general education. By leveraging these resources, special education administrators can assure that they are part of the conversation and can play a role in developing effective intervention models designed to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education.

Community organizations have the potential to provide additional resources to improve educational outcomes for all students. School systems can create expectations and on-going processes that enlist and sustain productive working relationships with local community leaders. Creating a policy environment that invites and enlists this kind of community ownership for the outcomes of public education can create the milieu in which community members and organizations from multiple perspectives and experiences can come together to educate each other as well as work on improving schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Keith, 1999).

Finally, many school systems are fortunate to have local universities and teacher preparation institutions in their communities (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Levine, 2002). Strong partnerships for teacher preparation, professional development, research and inquiry and exemplary practice can be established (Murrell, 2000). These partner schools have the potential to ground the next generations of practitioners in culturally responsive teaching and learning and, in doing so, transform a one size fits all approach to teaching and learning to a diverse and personalized program of learning for each child. However, for these partnerships to be successful, higher education must itself become more culturally responsive and implement powerful teacher education programs that promote models of culturally responsive practice that are strongly committed to goals of social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

School Level Policies

All of our collective hopes and dreams about a quality education for every child come to fruition or wither over time in the corridors and classrooms of our nation's schools. While federal, state, and district policies and regulations greatly influence what happens in schools, it is also

evident that in the same community, only neighborhoods apart, one school can take a group of children and help them excel while another fails year after year to accomplish this goal. The most important aspect of renewing our nation's schools is extending our understanding of schools that "beat the odds." Beacons of excellence in inner cities exist throughout the country. In fact, in most of the 100 largest systems in this country, researchers have found schools that work well for disenfranchised students living in poverty, many of whom speak languages other than English (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999; Jerald, 2001).

Numerous key policies are established at the school level. Other policies are officially set at the district level, yet vary substantially in how they are implemented in schools (Harry & Klingner, in press). As the leader at the school-site, principals exert tremendous influence over hiring practices, the assignment of teachers to classes, whether students are grouped by ability level or heterogeneously across classrooms, discipline policies, student retention policies, class size and scheduling decisions, whether paraprofessionals are hired and how they are utilized, visitor policies, the extent to which interruptions to instructional time are allowed, whether students are permitted to take school books and other materials home, how resources are allocated, and curricular decisions. In their ethnographic investigation of 12 schools in one district, Harry and Klingner (in press) noted a great deal of variability across sites in each of these policies. For example, in one inner city school 102 students out of a total school population of 603 were given out of school suspensions in one year, whereas in a school with similar demographics 20 students out of 780 were suspended in the same time period.

Culturally responsive school-level policies take into account how decisions affect all students, even those who are typically marginalized. Effective school leadership teams are able to see the "big picture" and make sure the conglomeration of different programs and policies they enact make sense when implemented simultaneously. They give a high priority to quality

instructional time in class without interruptions. Teachers are assigned to classrooms in equitable ways that assure that all students have access to the most effective teachers. Teachers are provided with the support they need to succeed. Culturally responsive leaders consider alternatives to suspension and put into practice discipline policies that are proactive, such as in-house counseling support for anger management and other emotional/behavioral needs, positive reinforcement systems and behavioral supports (discussed in depth later), and increased relationship building with students and their families (Townsend, 2000). They implement alternative programs (other than special education) that provide students with more intensive, early assistance within general education, such as by using Title I funds.

Culturally Responsive Practices

Teacher Education: Rethinking the Context

Teacher development is a process of growth over time. Sanders and Rivers (1996) assert that teachers' ability to impact student achievement occurs over years of practice and that their influence on student learning begins a strong growth trajectory in about the fifth year of their teaching career and continues to improve until about the 12th year of teaching. This construct of continuing teacher growth over an extended career timeline suggests that the initiation of teachers into the practice community through preparation, induction, and ongoing mentoring and coaching requires significant investment of resources by both universities and school systems. Supporting teacher learning over time is further complicated by the need to engage teachers in a critical dialogue about conscious attention to culturally responsive dispositions and practices (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Zeichner & Miller, 1997).

School systems and university preparation programs are becoming more adept at creating practice arenas for teacher candidates and teachers through teaching schools or professional development schools (Kozleski, Sobel & Taylor, in press). The Holmes Group and the National

Network of Educational Renewal have been instrumental in developing this approach to teacher preparation and renewal (Wise & Leibbrand, 2000). The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education has published a set of monographs highlighting the strengths of these newer conceptions of teacher learning (Kozleski, Pugach, Bellamy, & Yinger, 2002). Emerging data suggest that teachers who are prepared in urban schools are more likely to develop culturally responsive practices and continue to work in schools and classrooms with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Ladson Billings, 2001). Similarly, Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) use the construct of activity theory to focus on the contexts and settings in which teachers learn their craft and sustain their own growth over an extended career. Where teacher candidates, teachers and university faculty practice together, they develop a set of tools for informing their discourse, their actions, and their reflections that help nourish improvement over time (Chandler, Kozleski, et al., in press). The preparation and development of culturally responsive teachers requires attention to the context in which this preparation occurs, the nature of the skills and dispositions that characterize culturally responsive teachers, and the elements of multicultural education (Ford, 1992; Kea & Utley, 1998; Obiakor, 2001). It also requires that teachers develop knowledge of specific instructional practices and how to implement these practices in culturally responsive ways that enhance students' opportunities to learn.

Another issue to consider in the context of teacher education is the recruitment and selection of prospective teachers. Haberman (1995; Haberman & Post, 1998) noted that there are certain attributes that predispose individuals to be more likely to be effective in high poverty, culturally and linguistically diverse schools, and more like to stay on the job. Older, non-traditional students with more life experiences tend to be better suited for such settings than younger, less-experienced candidates.

Professional Development: Translating Research Knowledge into Practice

The ultimate test of good intervention research is its application in the contexts where practitioners and students work and learn. We advocate for on-going professional development that provides teachers with the support they need to implement new practices (Hilliard, 1997b; Quartz, 2003). Once practitioners begin to adopt novel approaches, the challenge becomes how to institutionalize and ensure the sustainability of such changes.

The work of NCCRESt relies on the growing literature on school change (Borko & Putnam, 2000). Practitioners work in complex social milieus and thus, the application of research knowledge requires that they change what they think and do and transform the contexts in which they work. Beliefs, feelings of self-efficacy, attitudes, and perceptions all affect the extent to which teachers try new strategies and persist in using them even when confronted with challenges (Artiles, 1996; Sparks, 1988). Change can be difficult even in the best of circumstances, and for teachers implementing new instructional practices, it can be daunting. Often teachers are faced with the need to reconcile differences between long-term goals and short-term needs and to balance their experiential knowledge with new research knowledge (Artiles, Barreto, Peña, & McClafferty, 1998; Lieberman, 2000). A supportive community of teachers and researchers can provide needed assistance while teachers make the shift towards improved practice (Klingner, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001; Pressley & El Dinary, 1997).

Professional development programs are most successful when: (a) researchers work closely with school districts so that everyone is on the same page, and the practices that researchers are espousing align with the district's curriculum and standards; (b) researchers provide student outcome data showing the practices are effective; (c) administrators clearly are supportive and facilitate implementation; (d) teachers receive long-term support (including demonstrations and coaching); (e) teachers take ownership of the practices, adapting them to fit their students' needs and the local context; and (f) teachers take responsibility for mentoring their peers as part of a

community of practice (Klingner, 2004). Teachers need to see concrete examples of how a new theory relates to their students and their circumstances. If teachers do not see the relevance of the new approach to their situation, little change is likely to occur (Englert & Tarrant, 1995). We recognize that our professional development efforts must acknowledge the history and unique characteristics of the communities in which research knowledge is being utilized, including the contexts of general education.

Induction programs offer a promising approach for mentoring beginning teachers in culturally and linguistically diverse settings (Haberman & Post, 1998; Murrell, 2000; Quartz, 2003). Such programs not only lead to enhanced effectiveness, but also have the potential to improve teacher retention (Quartz, 2003). A key component of successful induction programs is the partnering of novices with true master teachers (Hilliard, 1997b).

Culturally Responsive Evidence-Based Instructional Practices

We agree with those who emphasize that instructional practices should be based on scientific evidence about “what works.” However, we would add that is essential to find out specifically “what works” with whom, in what contexts, and under what circumstances. We value findings from carefully designed experimental, quasi-experimental, mixed methods, and single subject research studies, but also emphasize that much can and should be learned through qualitative means. Qualitative approaches are ideally suited to answering questions about “how” and helping us to understand essential contextual variables that impact the effectiveness of an approach. A well-known example of this is the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii (Au, 1980; Au & Mason, 1981). KEEP was a research-and-development program that spanned more than a decade. Lessons were observed over several years while school personnel implemented different reading programs that had been found to be effective in other settings. It was not until the discourse of reading lessons was allowed to become more like the

style of day-to-day Hawaiian conversation (in other words, more culturally responsive) that reading achievement improved dramatically.

We are concerned that some reforms are touted as “research-based” but may be inappropriate in particular school contexts. For example, Klingner, Cramer, and Harry (in review) noted that various challenges affected the fidelity with which Success for All (SFA) was implemented across the four schools in their study. This issue of fidelity has been at the center of debates about SFA and other school-wide instructional models. One of the greatest challenges seemed to be students’ stagnating and not passing to higher levels of the program, thus recycling through material they had already covered. Klingner and colleagues also found grouping and scheduling difficulties, and students of different reading levels and widely varying grade levels placed in the same class. Further complicating implementation was the view of some strong teachers that programs such as SFA essentially de-skill and de-professionalize teachers.

We are cautious in interpreting research findings when applied to culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly when diverse students have not been included in participant samples, or demographic and other relevant information has been under-reported (Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gersten et al., 2001). We support research that examines experiential variables (e.g., economic, specific family background, community environment and history) of students of color and students from other diverse perspectives and how those variables help explain educational outcomes. We emphasize the importance of research reports/articles including sufficient information about the language proficiency, ethnicity, and other characteristics of participants (Bos & Fletcher, 1997; Keogh, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1997). Also, we recommend that when culturally and linguistically diverse students are included in the samples of intervention studies, data should be disaggregated to show how treatment(s) may have differentially affected students from diverse backgrounds.

We believe researchers and educators must continue to ask tough questions about whether we are doing all we can to improve outcomes for culturally and diverse students who seem to be “left behind.” If Treatment A is found to be better than Treatment B (or nothing), we must not assume that Treatment A is the best we can do. What if we were to adapt Treatment A to be culturally responsive to a particular group of students and then compare Culturally Responsive Treatment A with Traditional Treatment A? How do we know when increased outcomes with a given intervention are “good enough”? We must continue to ask whether or not we are truly providing an optimal learning environment for all students. If we believe that African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students really cannot achieve as well as their White mainstream peers, we will settle for less than satisfactory performance. If we believe that culturally and linguistically diverse students truly can achieve at least well as their White counterparts, we will not give up until we have facilitated this level of learning. Only by so doing can we close the achievement gap.

Culturally responsive positive behavior supports. Positive behavior supports (PBS) has a rich, empirically derived data base, steeped in applied behavior analysis and more recently in the application of functional behavior analysis to solve school-related behavioral issues (Utley, Kozleski, Smith & Draper, 2002). Sugai and colleagues (2000) define PBS as “a general term that refers to the application of positive behavioral interventions and systems to achieve socially important behavior change” (p. 133). All PBS models are based on three fundamental principles: (a) behavior is affected by internal and external factors; (b) behavior is constantly shaped by unintended and intended responses in context; and (c) all behavior is learned and therefore, can be changed (Sugai et al., 2000). By examining behavior in context, it is possible to plan intentionally to encourage certain kinds of behaviors and to create disincentives for other, less desirable kinds of behaviors. According to Sugai et al. (2000), PBS takes the principles of applied behavior

analysis and set them within an arena that considers practicality, social values, and the interaction of variables within systems. In a school context, this means understanding the nature of student behavior, individually and in groups, the social contexts in which behaviors occur, and practical responses to shaping desirable behaviors. By studying the behavior of students across many schools, researchers have found that 80 to 90% of students in schools fall into a typical range of social behaviors (Sugai et al., 2000). Another 5 to 15% of students have more serious behavioral issues that can be successfully addressed in specific, group interventions. And a much smaller group of students (from 1 to 7%) of a school's population require ongoing, individualized support and intervention to improve their behavior.

It is in the latter situation that various communities criticize behavioral approaches, in spite of protestations by PBS researchers that their methodology incorporates considerations of social contexts and cultural expectations. At the heart of concerns is who makes decisions about what is appropriate and inappropriate. In schools, where the vast majority of teachers are white (92%) and female (87%) (Snyder, 2002), and the students who are most likely to be sent to the office, suspended and expelled, are boys of African-American descent, this criticism takes on heightened import (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2000). Sheldon and Epstein (2002) examined school officials' efforts to implement family and community involvement activities to reduce the number of disciplinary actions and ensure school climates focused on learning. They found that the more family and community involvement activities were implemented, the fewer students were disciplined.

Decisions to refer students for disciplinary reasons rely on the observations of teachers who themselves may not have the social and cultural contexts to translate and respond to student behavior in their classrooms. However, there is great hope in the approach of the proponents of PBS. First, they acknowledge the importance of context. Second, they acknowledge the different

levels of systematic intervention required to support and develop pro-social behaviors. Third, they have strong and effective strategies for behavior change. To learn from critics of PBS, it might be instructive to think about the constructs inherent in multicultural communities.

From a multicultural perspective, the process of identifying students to target for intervention itself is problematic because identification of problematic behavior focuses on descriptions of difference. Appropriately, multicultural proponents ask the question, “Different from what?” Difference can hardly be conceptualized in the contemporary world as existing on a unitary dimension of normalcy and deviancy since that bimodal perspective assumes homogeneity and monolithic cultural norms rather than heterogeneous and indigenous norms. By naming and focusing on what is different, the process runs the risk of marginalizing some individuals. The rub of “otherness” gives rise to other, sociological, or anthropological phenomena: resistance, abandonment, and exclusion. These phenomena play out in the high numbers of students of African-American and Hispanic descent who dropout of school. Therefore, identifying problems cannot be a unitary act by teachers or groups of professionals. Problem identification must be led not only by a multi-disciplinary *professional* team but by a multidisciplinary *professional and community* team.

To improve school success for every student, issues that are not typically considered as part of behavioral education must be addressed by general and special educators. Researchers and practitioners must work with families to examine issues related to classroom discipline, cultural diversity, and culturally responsive teaching to develop successful approaches for teaching pro-social skills and reducing antisocial behavior (Townsend, 1994). Sugai and colleagues (2000) note that:

The use of culturally appropriate interventions also is emphasized in the PBS approach.

Culturally appropriate describes interventions that consider the unique and individualized

learning histories (social, community, historical, familial, racial, gender, etc.) of all individuals (children with problem behaviors, families, teachers, community agents, etc.) who participate in the PBS process and approach. Data-based problem solving and individualized planning processes can help to establish culturally appropriate interventions. (p. 134)

For these reasons, NCCRESt takes the stance that school-wide PBS interventions should be proactive and promote a positive, culturally responsive climate that is conducive to learning by all.

Teachers, administrators, and support staff should:

- Understand that perceptions of behavioral appropriateness are influenced by cultural expectations and that (a) what is perceived as inappropriate varies across cultures, and (b) behaviors occur within larger socio-cultural contexts;
- Connect with their students in ways that convey respect and caring;
- Explicitly teach rules and expected behaviors within a culture of care;
- Provide a continuum of support; and
- Involve families and the community in positive, mutually supportive ways.

Culturally responsive literacy instruction. All children should receive culturally responsive literacy instruction that builds on their prior knowledge, interests, motivation, and home language, and emphasizes cultural relevance (August & Hakuta, 1998; Au, 2000). This instruction should be multifaceted, with frequent opportunities to practice reading with a variety of rich materials in meaningful contexts (Pressley, 2001). It should also include language activities, explicit instruction in phonological awareness, the alphabetic code, and vocabulary development (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), as well as comprehension strategies (Snow, 2002). We support a balanced approach to literacy instruction that promotes authentic literacy experiences in a supportive learning environment while providing the high level of explicit

instruction needed for students to gain important skills and strategies. We believe that a focus on the complete literacy event does not mean that traditional skills are unimportant. "Rather these skills are situated within a holistic context that is intimately linked with goals and conditions of reading" (Roller, 1996, p. 34).

Furthermore, literacy instruction should take into account the sociocultural contexts within which students learn (Artiles, 2002; Ruiz, 1998). A fundamental assumption of NCCRESt's work is that culture matters—we believe that disproportionate representation is due in part to the inadequate attention to culture by researchers and practitioners. Culture is not a unitary construct, but rather is complex and dynamic. In any given classroom, there are multiple cultures "as embodied in the cultural toolkit that each person brings to school and the cultures that are created as students, teachers, and school staff interact over time" (Artiles, 2002, p. 696).

But what does it mean to account for culture when teaching children to read? First, it means taking a broad view of what counts as literate in a multiethnic, diverse society. It means understanding the complex sociocultural, institutional, and political contexts that influence students' acquisition of literate behaviors (Artiles, 2003). It means recognizing that when children begin school, they may not have experienced all the same interactions with print as their mainstream peers, but they still have had valuable experiences that teachers can and should build upon. It means explicitly connecting home, community, and school literacy practices. It means recognizing that students' discourse and behavioral styles may not match school-expected ways, but are still to be validated (Brice Heath, 1983; Cazden, 1988). It means recognizing that bilingualism is an asset and that learning English should be an additive rather than a subtractive process (August & Hakuta, 1997). Although teachers need not be "insiders" in a particular culture to offer culturally responsive instruction, they should make an effort to learn about the cultures

represented in their classrooms, respect students' values, and view differences in students' literacies as strengths, not deficits (Alverman, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally responsive literacy instruction requires choosing relevant multicultural literature and other reading materials (Bieger, 1995/1996; Godina & McCoy, 2000). Multicultural literature should be used in transformative ways that reconstruct the curriculum so that students are able to view concerns, themes, problems, and concepts from the perspectives of diverse groups (Banks & Banks, 1997). Literature should also be selected that allows students to identify social problems and to read about how the main character takes action to solve these problems. This approach helps students realize that all ethnic groups have roots in the past and a strong heritage (Bieger, 1995/1996).

Culturally responsive literacy programs tap into community resources that promote children's literacy. One way to do this is by enlisting volunteers to serve as reading tutors (Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2001; Invernizzi, Juel, & Rosemary, 1997; Wasik, 1998; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Another is to invite parents and others in the neighborhood to share their expertise or "funds of knowledge" on a multitude of topics (Moll & González, 1994). For example, an effective model includes local elders in the schooling of American Indian youth (Aguilera, 2003). Programs that focus on developing partnerships with parents and other caregivers to enhance home literacy experiences also are beneficial. Parents can learn to interact with their children in ways that promote literacy achievement (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

Much can be learned from schools and classrooms where culturally and linguistically diverse students excel as readers. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) investigated 14 schools across the U.S. that each had a high proportion of students living in poverty. In

comparison with less effective schools, the most effective schools they identified included: (a) more small group instruction, more coaching (i.e., scaffolding) by teachers, (b) more teaching of phonics with an emphasis on application during real reading, (c) more higher-order questioning (i.e., questions requiring inferences and integration), (d) greater parental involvement, (e) and more independent reading. There was a balance between skills and holistic instruction (e.g., reading complete texts, composition writing) and greater student engagement (i.e., students spent more time productively reading and writing). In their observational studies of effective programs, Pressley and colleagues (Pressley, Allington, et al., 2001; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald et al., 2001) noted: (a) excellent classroom management; (b) a positive, cooperative classroom environment, with much reinforcement of students; (c) explicit instruction in word-level, comprehension, and writing skills; (d) frequent experiences with high-quality literature and students engaged in a great deal of actual reading; (e) teachers making sure students are involved in tasks matched to their competency level, with demands on students accelerating as their competencies improve, (f) teachers carefully monitoring students and providing scaffolded support; (g) teachers encouraging students to self-regulate; and (h) strong connections across the curriculum (e.g., through thematic units).

Culturally Responsive Early Intervention

Students who show early signs of struggling should receive supplemental, intensive instruction that is culturally and developmentally appropriate. We advocate for universal screening models that identify those students who may benefit from such support as soon as they first enter school, as well as progress monitoring that identifies students who do not advance at expected rates. Early intervention should be provided before students have had a chance to fail, as part of a general education support system. Ideally this instruction should take place in small groups, such as one-to-three, or one-to-four (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000).

As IDEA is reauthorized and disabilities are reconceptualized and redefined, eligibility and identification criteria are changing as well. States have the option to use other methods of identifying students as having learning disabilities rather than IQ scores and discrepancy formulae. Many states are moving towards a “Response to Treatment” or “Response to Intervention” model. Yet what should the treatment in a “Response to Treatment” model look like? A popular current model has three “tiers”: the first tier consists of quality instruction in a general education classroom based on evidence-based practices. The second tier is only for those students who do not reach expected benchmarks using an assessment instrument such as the DIBELS— Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (now also available in Spanish). These students are then provided with intensive assistance, either as part of a tutoring model or in small groups, still as part of a general education support system. Students who make adequate progress in this second tier are then returned to the first tier where they continue to receive general instruction. Students who continue to struggle are then provided with a third tier level of assistance. It is this third tier many would consider to be special education.

Yet, like previous eligibility criteria, this model presumes that if a child does not make adequate progress, he or she must have an internal deficit of some kind. Our position is that we must assure that the child has in fact received culturally responsive, appropriate, quality instruction. As with earlier identification criteria, this model *must* be based on students having received an adequate “opportunity to learn.” What should the first tier look like for English language learners? What should the first tier look like for African American students, particularly those living in high poverty areas? How should the second tier look? Should it be the same for all? If not, how should it vary, and how should this be determined? These are important questions to consider as we move forward with response to treatment models.

People as Change Agents

Culturally Responsive School Leaders

Effective school research 20 years ago found that the principal was the key to creating schools of opportunity and possibility (Edmonds & Frederickson, 1978; Jackson, Logsdon, & Taylor, 1983; Weber, 1971). The principals' beliefs, values, educational philosophies, and interpersonal as well as management skills have a great influence on the climate and culture of a school. Haberman and Dill (1999) noted that principals of successful urban schools have certain attributes that heighten their effectiveness. These principals see teacher motivation and nurturing as a top priority. They model positive interactions and communications with parents as well as ways to help teachers meet the needs of all of their students. Overall, effective school leaders empower teachers and students to succeed in school regardless of constraints—they exemplify a “*si se puede*” (it can be done) attitude. Even the principal, however, operates within a larger culture, that of the school district, which, in turn, responds to state and federal mandates and policies (Bridgeland & Duane, 1987).

Simultaneously, a group of researchers has been studying the implementation of a model of leadership called “distributed leadership.” In this approach to work in schools and other learning organizations, the capacity of the organization to reform, renew, and improve is thought to lie in its ability to distribute the responsibility for leadership throughout the community. In these school communities, learning and improving becomes the central galvanizing theme for the group. As a result, formal leaders such as principals can come and go and the work of the community remains strong and responsive to the changing needs of the families and children who attend that school (Elmore, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Culturally Responsive Teachers

A variety of researchers and scholars have described the kinds of dispositions and practices that culturally responsive teachers tap as they support their students' learning. Culturally

responsive teachers specifically acknowledge the need for students to find relevant connections among themselves, the subject matter, and the tasks they are asked to perform (Montgomery, 2001; Salend, Garrick Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). Gay (2000) describes such teachers as cultural organizers, mediators and orchestrators of social contexts. To act in such a manner requires conscious attention to the ways in which students interact among themselves as well as with teachers. These teachers help their students bridge borders between their home and school cultures, recognize and understand differences in the social milieu, and build on the knowledge and skills that their students bring with them to school learning. In doing so, these teachers demonstrate their care, respect and commitment to each student's learning abilities, desires, and potentialities (Gay, 2000). Teachers who act on a set of beliefs that are grounded in teachers' responsibilities to liberate and empower students help to validate and affirm the individual worth of each student (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings goes on to assert that students learn when their experiences and interests serve as the basis for curriculum connections, making learning relevant to their lives. Delpit (1995) helps to expand these concepts by asserting that culturally responsive teachers must explicitly teach skills and cultural capital, or, in other words, the knowledge and behaviors valued as being of high status by the dominant culture. Nieto (1999) describes the expertise of culturally responsive teachers in instruction and management and their ability to challenge and simultaneously support their students. Finally, culturally responsive teachers feel a strong sense of responsibility for all students, including students referred for or already placed in special education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Families & Communities

We begin with the premise that often the difficulties faced by culturally and linguistically diverse students in schools are neither intrinsic deficits of the student nor failures of families. As is visually represented in our conceptual framework, we see families and communities as encircling

students inside the layers of school-related personnel. Families and communities possess resources and abilities, or rich “funds of knowledge,” that can promote student learning and enrich the context of the school and classroom (Moll, 1992; Nieto, 1999).

Historically, deficit views of culturally and linguistically diverse families and of children's learning difficulties have combined to discourage participation (Harry, 1992). When families are not valued partners in the school setting, students may feel forced to choose loyalty to family over school success (Delpit, 2002). Delpit (1995) suggests that the answers to the issues faced by culturally and linguistically diverse students and families “lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs, but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another (xv).” We recommend professional development for teachers and administrators to change a pervasive negative attitude towards culturally and linguistically diverse children and families living in poverty that focuses on “deficits” in students and families that need to be “fixed” (Harry & Klingner, in press). We see great potential in proactive collaborative models that focus on strengths and finding common ground upon which to build, and include parents in assessment, placement, and policy-making decisions, thereby restoring the balance of power in parent-professional discourse.

Schools that successfully make a positive difference in the lives and learning of culturally and linguistically students work closely with families and communities as valued, respected partners (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Giles, 1998; Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Sands, Kozleski, and French (2000) suggest that schools are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of parental involvement, and are actively working to develop a process for establishing collaborative, reciprocal relationships. Davis and colleagues (2002) found many strategies being used to increase parental participation, including improving interactions between teachers and parents, making home visits, bringing in extended family, and involving parents in school cultural

activities and in planning parent training programs. They suggest involving parents in new roles as assessors, policymakers, and advocates. This level of reform requires a framework of systemic change that is inclusive of all participants, and impacts change across all parts of the system.

Students

Our focus is on children's potential and promise, not risk factors, emphasizing students' strengths and amazing abilities to be resilient and to overcome adversity (Spencer, et al., 2001). Culturally and linguistically diverse children living in poverty come to school with a variety of background experiences and from complex circumstances. Students' backgrounds are assets that students can and should use in the service of their learning.

Too often, students feel that they must choose to be academically successful at the cost of their cultural identity (Gay, 2000). Yet academic success and cultural identity can and must be simultaneously achieved, not presented as dichotomous choices. O'Connor's (1997, 1999) studies of high achieving African American students illustrate valuable strategies for maintaining identity. She examined how African American high school students living in low-income neighborhoods situated race, class, and gender while struggling to attain status. She found that the students emphasized the importance of hard work, individual effort, and education. However, students' overall views were complicated by their interpretations of how race, class, and gender affect life chances.

How can we bring teachers to the recognition that strong cultural identity supports, rather than detracts from, academic success? We must do a better job of helping teachers come to this understanding in our pre-service and in-service teacher education programs by emphasizing the importance of connecting with students' identities across the curriculum and of developing strong reciprocal relationships. Eleuterio (1997), in language arts, and Hoelscher (1999), in social studies, observed that classrooms filled with teachers and students who openly shared their lives, cultural

identities, and life experiences built trust and fostered stronger relationships. This climate led to student engagement and excitement about learning together. Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasized the worth in acknowledging and valuing the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students and the development of relationships based on care, respect, and responsibility.

Conclusion

Clearly, our task is not easy. Yet through networking with others involved in similar work, raising awareness and discussing tough questions about who benefits from current practice, and instituting interventions designed to bring about real change, we are optimistic that we can make a difference in the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities. NCCRESt is working with state departments of education and school districts across the nation, and collaborating closely with other centers, projects, and institutions of higher education to assure that culturally responsive evidence-based early intervention, reading, and behavioral practices are included in teacher preparation and professional development programs. Together, we *can* change the world (Oakes & Lipton, 2002).

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Figure 1

Domains of Culturally Responsive Educational Systems: Core Values of Care, Respect, and Responsibility

