School Psychologist And Disproportionality

As Bottiani, Bradshaw, Rosenberg, Hershfeldt, Pell and Debnam (2012) state, “Despite decades of national concern, the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education and disciplinary actions continues to plague the U.S. educational system (Dunn, 1968; Gilbertson, Fox & Provasnik, 2007; Kewal Ramani, Waitoller, Artiles & Cheney, 2010)” (p. 93). National Association of School Psychologists’ (NASP) “Position Statement on Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality in Education” finds that “Black/African American students, are disproportionately represented in special education programs (Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Klinger, 2006; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009) and are subjected to higher rates of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion (Children’s Defense Fund, 2004; Losen & Skiba, 2010)” (2013, p. 1). Disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation of a certain racial, cultural or ethnic group that is larger than its overall representation within the population in general. (Fiedler, Chiang, Van Haren, Jorgensen, Halberg & Boreson, 2008) In order to effectively address and potentially solve this problem, school psychologists must enlist the support of multiple stakeholders and, within a problem-solving framework, build a plan of action to implement systems-wide change. Through the domains of consultation and collaboration and the knowledge of diversity in development and learning, school psychologists are in a unique position to lead teams into more effective practice for all students.

Included within the domain of consultation and collaboration are the practices of problem solving, evaluating instructional and mental and behavioral health services, facilitating communication and advocating for needed change. (Skalski, Minke, Rossen, Cowan, Kelly, Armistead, & Smith, 2015). Through problem identification, problem analysis, plan development and plan evaluation, the school site team will attempt system reform within an elementary school setting.

A school psychologist’s skills in consultation and collaboration in addition to her understanding of diversity in development and learning will support the school-site team to understand the needs of culturally diverse students in selecting interventions. The domain of diversity in development and learning asserts that school psychologists have knowledge of diverse student characteristics, research related to their diversity factors including those related to culture and evidence-based practices (Skalski et al., 2015). Further, their knowledge of school-wide systems supports such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), social emotional learning (SEL), school-wide positive interventions and supports (SWPBIS) and culturally responsive practices (CRP) can be instrumental in assisting schools to end disproportionality (NASP, 2013).

Before addressing a systemic problem as large in scope as disproportionality, a team of site representatives committed to change should be built with the understanding that reform of this magnitude will require a multi-year commitment. In the elementary setting, a team of multiple stakeholders will be formed with one volunteer from each of the following groups: Administrator, school psychologist, counselor, education specialist, guardian of a primary student and one of an upper grade student and classified personnel. The group will meet once a month to analyze data, hear staff feedback and determine next steps via an action plan. The action plan will

outline specific roles and responsibilities for each team member and goals to accomplish before the next meeting. This paper will specifically outline the methods for addressing disproportionality and the school psychologist's role in supporting reform.

Blitz, Yull, and Clauhs (2016) assert that classroom functioning does not take place in isolation but rather within the context of society at large and structurally imbedded within society are frameworks of oppression and privilege. Consequently, those frameworks effect how schools and classrooms function. Losen and Orfield (2002) as cited in Fiedler et al. (2008) found race-linked factors such as unconscious racial bias contributed to overrepresentation of culturally diverse learners in special education.

The site team's first responsibility is to identify the problem of disproportionality. In order to do so accurately, the school psychologist can amass site discipline data and yearly referrals for special education to facilitate the site leadership team's understanding and planning. Currently, research demonstrates that students of color receive higher rates of discipline referrals, suspensions and expulsions (Blitz, Anderson, & Saastamoinen, 2016) when compared with their white peers. Studies have also shown that teacher referral for special education is related to student disruption in the classroom. Students with more disruptive behaviors are more likely to be referred for special education (Raines et al., 2012). Aggregation of that data will provide the objective basis for problem evaluation.

During problem evaluation, the site leadership team will analyze the data, identify patterns and share the results with the site staff in order to get feedback and subsequently build a plan for effective interventions. As cited in Raines, Dever, Kamphaus and Roach (2012), Pas (2010) found that students who were placed in classrooms with teachers who had historically high rates of special education referrals, were much more likely to be referred to special education. While consulting with staff, it is the role of school psychologists to acknowledge that consistent exclusion of historically marginalized groups is not acceptable and must be questioned (NASP, 2013). They are tasked with interrupting the cycle of inappropriate special education referrals and exclusionary discipline practices.

In the next stage of the problem solving, plan development occurs. Within the consultation and collaboration process, "school psychologists can attempt to be leaders in developing, implementing and evaluating culturally responsive supports that address disproportionality" (NASP, 2013 p. 5). In order to ensure efficacy of evidence based practices (EBPs) in dismantling disproportionality, research suggests that teams must consider socio-cultural, contextual and linguistic factors at every stage of decision-making and implementation (Bottiani et al., 2012). Without utilization of culturally responsive practices (CRPs) within evidence-based interventions, school teams risk exacerbating the problem of disproportionality in special education referrals as implementation of generic EBPs may not meet the needs of a culturally diverse learner (Bottiani et al., 2012).

Teacher self-assessment, surveys and student-centered universal screeners (Raines et al., 2012) will identify the needs of the staff and the students respectively. For staff, those measures intend to foster self-reflection and identification of biases to drive professional learning and potential system change. The school psychologist could gather research-based self-reflection tools that would be administered anonymously, aggregated for the whole group in order to target areas of challenge for entire school staff. The site leadership team would work together to build a method for sharing all of the data and utilize it as a springboard to gauge areas of deficit

and plan a series of trainings. For students, universal screeners would identify their specific needs. The leadership team, with the support of the school psychologist will match those specific areas of need to culturally responsive evidence based interventions. The eighth domain of professional practice for school psychologists, calls for advancing professional services that promote effective functioning for individuals, families and schools with diverse cultures (Skalski et al., 2015). There is a growing body of research supporting the implementation of culturally responsive trauma-informed care as one such service. Blitz, Yull and Clauhs, (2016) found that teachers initially associated problematic classroom behaviors with ethnicity or race, many times linking race, poverty and difficult home lives, but that educating a teacher how trauma affects the brain could provide them with the knowledge they needed to adjust their teaching and interactions with students. Blitz et al., (2016) cited two studies which asserted that culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma-informed pedagogy implemented together could teach students to first, to interpret and ultimately challenge an oppressive social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and second, learn self-determination and resilience (O'Conner, Mueller, &Neal, 2004).

The final step in the problem solving process is to evaluate the plan. In each monthly meeting, the leadership team will review discipline data, the intervention data as outlined in the action plan and determine if the chosen interventions are yielding positive effects. The school psychologist's expertise in collecting and evaluating data as outlined in the second domain of professional practice (Skalski et al. 2015) will be a valuable support to those who may have less experience. The results of the data will guide decisions addressing potential changes needed and interventions the team might build upon.

Through collaboration and consultation with the school psychologist in keeping with the understanding of diversity in development and learning, school site teams can use a problem-solving framework to meet the needs of culturally diverse student populations. Informing evidence-based practices with cultural responsiveness is one step on the pathway to abolishing the overrepresentation of students of color in exclusionary discipline practices and placement in special education known as disproportionality.