

PBIS Indiana: Applying Culturally Responsive Practice to Positive Behavior Supports

The overrepresentation of culturally diverse students in suspensions and expulsions, office discipline referrals (ODRs), and corporal punishment has been well-documented (Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003). Research suggests that differential expectations between the home and school lives of culturally-diverse students may contribute to disciplinary disproportionality (Cartledge, Tillman, & Talbert-Johnson, 2001; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002; Townsend, 2000, 2002). Classrooms are not culturally-neutral terrains, but rather are constructed around sets of norms, values, and expected behaviors that are culturally-bound. Likewise, students bring into the classroom a host of culturally-bound expectations about learning and behavior. Classroom norms and expectations often align with White middle-class values and orientations, such as: individual praise (Lerman, 2000), competition (Boykin, Tyler & Miller, 2005; Gay, 2000), individualism (Boykin, Tyler & Miller), and linear thinking and communication patterns (Hale-Benson, 1986; Swartz, 2004). Culturally-responsive practice involves utilizing the cultural knowledge, life experiences, and learning styles of culturally diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them. Building upon the knowledge and strengths students bring with them from their homes and communities, it validates who they are and sets high expectations for behavior and learning. It comprehensively creates an environment where diversity is affirmed and establishes a cultural lens for determining normative behavior and learning expectations (Gay, 2000; King, 2004; Nieto, 2004).

PBIS Indiana is a federal and state grant-funded project to create a statewide network of culturally-responsive positive behavior interventions and supports (CR-PBIS). CR-PBIS integrates culturally responsive practice into SWPBS. By embedding CR practice within the four elements of SW-PBS--data, systems, practices, and outcomes--the goal of PBIS Indiana is to create a more equitable system of discipline, reduce disproportionality in discipline, and continually ask the question: "*Are all groups of students benefitting equally?*" Below is an explanation of how culturally-responsive practices are embedded into the six components of SWPBS implementation: Establishing Commitment, Establishing and Maintaining a Team, Collecting and Analyzing Data, Developing the Universal Level/School-wide Plan, Establishing Information Systems, and Building Capacity for Function-Based Support.

Establish Commitment

Gaining support and commitment from district- and school-level administrators is critical to the successful implementation of SWPBS. This commitment includes providing stable funding sources for training and implementation, accepting that this change process takes 3-5 years, and aligning district- and school-wide initiatives to SWPBS. At the school level, ensuring at least 80% of the staff are in support of implementing SWPBS is crucial for the success of the school-wide plan. Incorporating culturally responsive practice into the SWPBS framework means that both district and school level administrators are actively committed to addressing racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and ability status disparities in office discipline referral and suspension/expulsion rates. This active commitment means allowing sufficient time and planning for professional development to enhance staff members' self- and cultural-awareness to increase the use of culturally responsive practices. Further, the district and school must make an open commitment to ensure all families feel welcome and included in the development of the framework and implementation process.

Establish and Maintain Team

Traditionally, an established SWPBS leadership team includes stakeholders from administration, general and special education, mental health, higher education, professional development, and evaluation and accountability. To ensure that the SWPBS Leadership Team is culturally responsive we emphasize the need for family and student membership that represents the demographics of the school community. We also encourage membership of stakeholders who either sit on Diversity/Equity Committees or who have extensive experience in the cultures of the school community. For a SWPBS Team to most effectively represent the school population there needs to be adequate membership of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual orientation diversity.

Collecting and Analyzing Data

Collecting and analyzing data is a key element of SWPBS. Reviewing data by the “Big 5:” (a) number of office discipline referrals per day per month, (b) time of day, (c) type of problem behavior, (d) school location, and (e) student is standard in order to identify areas of need for directing efforts to teach expected behaviors and implement targeted and intensive interventions. CR-PBIS, with the goal of equitably serving all groups of students, requires the collection and analysis of data that is disaggregated by all relevant student groups. This includes: race/ethnicity, disability status, free/reduced lunch status, and/or gender, as relevant by the school. Disaggregating data by relevant student groups allows schools to examine if CR-PBIS is serving all student groups equally well or if modifications need to be made to the development and implementation of intervention efforts. At least monthly, school teams should review graphs of Big 5 discipline data and discipline data disaggregated by relevant student groups. An effective information system (described below) will support teams in using minimal amount of time and resources to collect, enter, retrieve, summarize, and report the data. This will also help ensure that this process is consistently utilized to guide decision-making.

Universal Level/School-wide Plan

The purpose of the universal plan is to: (1) clearly define school-wide behavioral expectations, (2) have a structured plan for the teaching and reinforcing of those expectations, (3) have well-defined and consistent adult responsibilities and expectations, (4) establish a clear system for behavioral infractions and consequences, and (5) have a system for monitoring implementation and outcome data. In essence, this universal plan creates the social culture of the school. Acknowledging that gaps between school and home behavior expectations for students may exist, a culturally responsive universal plan must consider both students’ home culture and the culture of the school. Recognizing that behavioral norms are location specific, the development and teaching of behavioral expectations should clearly delineate and teach expectations for school behaviors while also validating the cultural expectations and ways of being that students bring with them from their homes and communities. This involves incorporating cultural knowledge from students and their families in the development of the universal plan and, at times, adjusting school expectations to more closely reflect the values and ways of being present within the school community. Further, teams need to support staff in reflecting upon the ways in which their cultural perspectives affect classroom instruction, and classroom and school-wide behavioral management. Culturally-bound expectations in the classroom and school need to be recognized and acknowledged so that practices can be modified to be culturally responsive and ensure all students are benefitting equally from the school and classroom environments regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or disability status. Finally, behavioral interventions must be considered through a culturally responsive lens to ensure student needs are being addressed and met in a culturally competent manner.

Establish Information Systems

In order to collect and utilize data to make decisions, an information system that can be effectively used must be established. An effective information system is one that allows individuals to collect, enter, retrieve, summarize, and report data in an efficient and consistent way. First of all, a comprehensive set of behaviors of concern should be defined. Definitions of each behavior should be written in terms that are measurable, observable, and distinctive. Knowledge of the local community and student and family cultures should be used in the development of this set of behaviors of concern. This can be done by soliciting student, family, and community perspectives in this process. There are various ways to accomplish this, including the use of surveys, focus groups, committees, as well as incorporating students and family members on school teams. An effective information system will summarize data visually by generating bar graphs and tables that school teams can easily interpret and use to guide decision making. The School-Wide Information System (SWIS) is an example of an information system that is effectively used with SWPBS.

Build Capacity for Function-based Support

Traditionally, in order to build capacity for function-based support it is recommended that personnel with behavioral expertise be involved in decision-making at all three levels. There must be systems built that provide time and procedures for identification, assessment and implementation. To build this capacity for function-based support in a more culturally responsive manner, systems must be in place at both the district and local levels that will support the time and institutional procedures necessary for ensuring ongoing dialogue around issues of race and culture. We recommend that some type of professional learning communities (i.e., Professional Learning Communities, Critical Friends Groups, Focus/Study Groups) be established and maintained to provide the safe environment for building trust, and time for text-based discussions and difficult conversations that will enhance awareness and knowledge of culture.

Closing Thoughts

Culturally responsive PBIS does not involve augmenting SWPBS with culturally responsive practices in an additive manner. Rather, CR-PBIS involves the infusion of culturally responsive practices throughout the implementation of SWPBS. SWPBS enhances the behavioral practices within a school environment by minimizing cultural mismatches in behavioral expectations, creating a cultural lens for viewing behavioral norms, and affirming the diversity found within the school environment. District- and school-level administrators must make the commitment to address issues of equity in order for CR-PBIS implementation to be successful. Culturally responsive practices are infused throughout each of the components of SW-PBS implementation by ensuring families' and students' cultural practices are represented and incorporated when developing school-wide norms, lessons, and reinforcement systems. Further, culturally responsive PBIS schools examine and disaggregate disciplinary data by subgroup (i.e., ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability status, etc.) to examine potential disproportionality in office discipline referrals and modify practices, as needed, with the goal of benefitting all student groups equally. Armed with this knowledge, readers are encouraged to examine their current school practices to determine if these practices are accurately reflecting the needs of their culturally diverse students and families.

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