

Addressing Special Education Inequity Through Systemic Change: Contributions of Ecologically Based Organizational Consultation

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Since the inception of special education, scholars and practitioners have been concerned about the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds among students identified with disabilities. Professional efforts to address this disproportionality have encompassed a range of targets, but scholars increasingly view disproportionality as a complex, multiply-determined problem that requires systemic change to ameliorate disparities. In this article, we describe a framework for systemic change to foster equity in special education identification and placement. We discuss the use of ecologically oriented organizational consultation as a means of facilitating systemic change, emphasizing the role of stakeholders, and the implications for school psychology practice and training.

Racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and gender disparities in the identification and treatment of diverse learners with special needs have long troubled education scholars, practitioners, and policy makers with many asking why these disparities exist and how to correct them (for a review, see Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). In his seminal commentary on this disproportionality, Dunn (1968) noted that many students from culturally diverse and low-SES backgrounds were inappropriately referred to special education in the wake of compulsory education laws that prevented public educators' continued exclusion of students perceived as difficult to teach or who were

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not welcome in certain classrooms or schools. Since then, others have echoed the concern that disproportionality reflects not the special needs of minority students identified as disabled, but the responses of systems to students who are different from the dominant cultural group (Losen & Welner, 2001; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). This dynamic signals a need for *systemic change* to foster special education equity via the cultivation of equitable educational systems that ensures all students are provided with quality opportunities to learn and appropriate academic supports.

In this article, we provide an interdisciplinary perspective on addressing minority disproportionality in special education through systemic change. Our focus is on how special education disparities may be ameliorated through attention to the systemic factors thought to produce the discriminatory and ineffective treatment of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who experience school difficulties. These factors include the school vision and mission, school culture, school–family–community relationships, policies and procedures, resource allocation, and collaboration among professionals. We address disproportionality generally, rather than specific special education disparities (e.g., under- and overidentification of Black males or English learners in certain disability categories) or narrowly targeted interventions for those disparities because of the common systemic issues driving the unequal treatment of students who are different (Artiles, 1998), and the multidimensional, interdependent nature of students' intersecting social statuses (e.g., ethnicity, language status, class, gender; Sullivan & King, 2010). This concept of intersectionality underscores the complexity and concurrence of individuals' social statuses and their resultant experiences, along with the necessity of understanding these experiences relative to the historical, structural, and social contexts in which they are educated (García Bedolla, 2007). Thus, the focus of systemic change is on understanding why and how the organizational and structural features of a school setting shape these disparities, not merely who is affected, so that those dimensions of educational systems can be improved to facilitate the development and success of diverse learners rather than perpetuate their marginalization through inappropriate special education and other constraints on students' access, participation, and opportunities to learn. Because disproportionality is one dimension of broader educational disparities resulting from systemic inequities, changing the system will foster equity, which in turn can improve special education disproportionality.

Professional Responses to Disproportionality in Special Education

Decades of disproportionality research indicate intractable disparities in the identification and placement of minority students in special education, along with dismal educational outcomes following placement (e.g., Losen & Orfield, 2002). The concern that these patterns are attributable to bias—i.e.,

identification of special needs when no disability exists—and the resultant placements expose certain groups to inappropriate special education services (Losen & Welner, 2001), and marginalization from the academic and social curricula of general education (Patton, 1998) spurred numerous studies of the relations of student, teacher, and community sociodemographics to special education identification patterns. Findings, however, have been inconclusive and often contradictory (for discussion, see Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). The research to date is primarily correlational and has not often examined the discriminatory practices or procedures often thought to cause disproportionality (e.g., racially biased referrals and eligibility decisions, discriminatory policies and procedures, inappropriate instructional practices). Scholars in education, psychology, and sociology who have studied the student, family, and school sociodemographic factors related to disparities suggest that identification of special education needs is socially and contextually based rather than driven solely by students' educational difficulties or characteristics (Eitle, 2002; Hibbel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010; Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Causal factors remain unknown, perhaps because the complexity of the problem precludes research that allows for causal inference, but persistent disparities and associated negative outcomes mean educators and students cannot wait for the researchers to catch up.

Most practical efforts to reduce disproportionality have targeted attitudes and practices presumed susceptible to bias or ineffective practice. These activities ranged from resolutions and professional development by major professional organizations denouncing discriminatory practices (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 1997; National Association of School Psychologists, 2007); recommendations for reforming teacher practices, pre-referral intervention procedures, and psychoeducational evaluation (Klingner & Harry, 2006); program evaluation to identify disparities (Skiba et al., 2008); and federal policy requiring state monitoring of districts' disproportionality and improvement activities. More broadly oriented recommendations included the promotion of multitiered systems of support to increase students' access to instruction and intervention (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Osher et al., 2004). Most of these efforts focused on individual attitudes and behavior or discrete practices (e.g., universal screening, pre-referral intervention, evaluation protocols), but such strategies do not appear to affect disproportionality (e.g., Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middelberg, 2012; VanderHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2011). These efforts may have been misconceived in foci that were too molecular to affect the other interconnected and distal forces that drive disproportionality.

Shifting Focus from the Individual to the Institutional

The problem of special education disproportionality is believed to extend beyond and start before intervention, identification, and placement processes.

The consensus of scholars in special education, educational psychology, and law is that disproportionality is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by multiple levels of the societal ecology with roots in systemic factors (Artiles, Sullivan, Waitoller, & Neal, 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Osher et al., 2004; Skiba et al., 2008). Artiles (1998) argued that disproportionality must be understood within the broader social context in which minority groups are positioned as different, and thus lesser and problematic relative to their mainstream peers, and that this deficit thinking mediates educational policies and practices in ways that may advantage some groups while disadvantaging others. As such, to be effective, interventions would need to address these larger issues, not just individuals' attitudes or specific practices.

Some scholars have posited the mechanisms through which these systemic forces shape daily practices. For instance, Weinstein, Gregory, and Stambler (2004) suggested these disparities operate via negative self-fulfilling prophecies and educators' inaccurate expectations that contribute to differential learning opportunities that must be understood in their ecological context within and across systems and time. These may be enacted in a variety of ways such as inaccurate negative perceptions of students' behavior that may contribute to inappropriate disciplinary policies and practices, lowered expectations for students' learning and achievement that result in watered-down curriculum and instructional practices, or negative perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse families that lead to unwelcoming policies and school-family interactions, and exclusion of families from the problem-solving and decision-making processes. These interdependent expectations and practices are far reaching, as Weinstein and colleagues (2004) emphasized:

The institutionalization of expectancy processes in school culture rests on its multilayered, interactive, and temporal qualities. Such processes exist not only in teacher-student interactions but also involve intrapersonal, organizational, institutional, and societal pathways all at once. They are fueled by the allocation of differential learning opportunities [...] with interwoven and cumulative consequences across the educational trajectory. (p. 515)

Inappropriate special education may be one of those consequences, and in this vein, disproportionality in special education can be regarded as one element of the constellation of disparities (e.g., achievement, engagement, discipline, high school completion) that result from differential access, opportunity, and participation in education.

Disproportionality interventions that focus on narrowly defined problems or practices may be necessary but insufficient to ameliorate disparities because they do not change the educational infrastructure (e.g., inequities in education funding, personnel quality, enrichment programs) that hinders many minority communities' educational opportunity and mediates dispro-

portionality (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Attention to these broader educational issues is critical if we accept the premise that remediating disproportionality necessitates changing the ways educators conceptualize and respond to difference, and modifying the institutionalized factors that maintain disparities in order to support the development of all students (Weinstein et al., 2004). Most interventions for disproportionality target interactions and social pathways but leave the organizational, institutional, and societal pathways unchanged. Although individual educators or leadership teams cannot change societal forces (e.g., culturally based conceptualization of race and ability, race-relations), they can ensure that detrimental organizational and institutional dynamics are not perpetuated within schools by altering the system to promote socially just policies and practice for fair resource allocation and educational decisions.

Systemic Change as an Alternative Intervention for Disproportionality

In keeping with this theoretical perspective, scholars and school leaders emphasize the need for systemic change to remedy the widespread, persistent disparities in the educational treatment of diverse children and youth with learning difficulties (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). *Systemic change* is framework for holistic paradigm shift in or comprehensive vertical reform of educational perspectives, policies, and practices in an educational system. Thompson (1994) noted:

[S]ystemic reform is not so much a detailed prescription for improving education as a philosophy advocating reflecting, rethinking, and restructuring. Unlike reform efforts that are more limited in scope, systemic reform pervades almost every aspect of schooling. It calls for education to be reconceptualized from the ground up, beginning with the nature of teaching and learning, educational relationships, and school–community relationships. (p. 2)

Quite simple, systemic change involves attention to every aspect of the system because of their inherent interdependence (Holzman, 1993). This framework for reform can be utilized as an intervention for disproportionality via the construction of effective, socially just schools where all students are provided quality instruction, curriculum, and educational and social supports to foster their academic, behavioral, and social–emotional wellbeing.

For many schools, this requires a thorough interrogation and revision of policies and practices to rectify deeply entrenched inequities in educational opportunity and participation, the preservation of which may undermine more targeted strategies. Beyond resultant changes in specific policies and practices, common features of effective change efforts often include development of a shared vision for equity and learning and the articulation of an

egalitarian purpose; involvement of stakeholder evaluation, planning, and implementation; cultivation of collegiality; teacher, administrator, and service provider skill development; and a theoretically coherent focus integrated into all elements of practice (Fullan, 1995; Horn & Carr, 2000).

An important moderator of the impact of systemic change is school culture. Scholars regard changing school culture—as opposed to assimilating school-wide interventions into existing culture—as essential to successful systems reform, but rare in practice, which is thought to undermine the impact and sustainability of piecemeal changes (Horn & Carr, 2000). As Schlechty (1990) observed, “to change an organization’s structure . . . one must attend not only to rules, roles, and relationships, but to systems of belief, values, and knowledge as well. Structural change requires cultural change” (p. xvi). Thus, approaching change holistically, as opposed to compartmentally, with attention to the implications for the general school culture supports the uptake and maintenance of reform.

Elements of Systemic Change

Systemic change requires attention to multiple dimensions of the educational environment. The elements of systemic change may include a school or district’s inquiry about equity (e.g., What disparities exist? What school factors contribute to these disparities? What would equity look like?); vision and philosophy of education (e.g., What is learning? What is the purpose of schooling? What are the responsibilities and roles of educators?); stakeholder involvement (e.g., families, related service providers, community agencies, community leaders); collaboration between professionals (e.g., general education with special education and related service providers) and with families; leadership and administration (e.g., governance); policies; resource allocation (human and material resource allocation, scheduling, state and use of the physical environment); and curriculum, instruction, assessment, and other supports for learning (e.g., quality of, use of research-based practices, attention to culture, availability of prevention services; Anderson, 1993; Kozleski & Smith, 2009).

Each element may be targeted in the systemic change process in a variety of ways. The manner in which systemic change efforts play out in any given school setting is unique because it is determined by the distinct contextual and historical features of that setting; hence the lack of prescription in this approach. The specific foci of systemic change—how, for instance, equity is defined, the vision for equity is articulated, collaboration is envisioned, and resources are allocated—and the ways each may be addressed in any given setting is contextually dependent and determined by the setting’s history, current policies and practice, available resources and collaborators, and receptivity to change. For example, a school undertaking systemic change may discover that their philosophy and policies are consistent with an eq-

uitable vision, but that the school culture, teacher–family relationships, and the enactment of policies in practice are not, making those the focal point of change. This contextual specificity means that when multiple schools may undertake systemic change to address disproportionality, they may identify different elements of the system that may be changed to foster equity or may address these targets in very different ways despite sharing a common objective (for case studies describing how this framework has been applied in school systems addressing disproportionality and other special education disparities, see Kozleski & Smith (2009), and Sullivan, Abplanalp, & Jorgensen (2014).

The Process of Systemic Change

A school's readiness for systemic change exists on a continuum: commitment to the current/old infrastructure, awareness of the need for change, exploration of potential changes, transition toward a vision for change, implementation of changes, and maintenance of the new infrastructure (Anderson, 1993). The actual process of systemic change occurs in the latter four stages of this continuum. Systemic change should be conceptualized as an ongoing, incremental process undergirded by inquiry and reflection. Indeed, such reform may require up to 5 years of sustained implementation for change to be fully actualized (Horn & Carr, 2000). Accordingly, systemic change is driven by a recursive problem-solving process focused on analysis of ecological factors influencing students' experiences and the systemic factors contributing to discriminatory decisions and practices.

The process is guided by a leadership team that engages stakeholders to evaluate the system, determine needed changes, and then design, implement, and evaluate efforts. These stakeholders—administrators, general and special education teachers, related service providers, families, and community partners—help to identify the goals of reform and organizational targets for change. Philosophical changes begin during the evaluation of the system and planning, while changes in policy, practice, and procedures are enacted during implementation. Formative evaluation is embedded in the design of reform so that ongoing assessment of impacts can inform iterative changes. In this regard, systemic change is dynamic, not static, and requires responsiveness to the resultant data to facilitate progress.

Once targets are identified and reform design begins, integrating systemic reform efforts with other concurrent educational interventions is essential to promoting efficiency and sustainability (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). Systemic reform to reduce disproportionality through equitable policies, practices, and procedures is unlikely to succeed if stakeholders perceive it as exclusively addressing a special education problem or being separate from other initiatives (e.g., accountability, response to intervention, professional learning). In that regard, special education disparities can be framed as

one facet of broader educational problems—as a symptom of institutional disparities. Thus, the task is not “fixing” special education, but creating more effective schooling, which, arguably, is the goal that propels most building- and district-level initiatives. This overarching mission can provide a basis for integrating multiple initiatives.

Facilitating Systemic Change through Organizational Consultation

Ecologically based organizational consultation is theoretically and operationally consistent with the systemic change framework, making it a powerful tool to facilitate stakeholders’ (i.e., the consultees) engagement in the self-analytic problem-solving process to improve system (i.e., the client) functioning. In efforts to foster educational equity, organizational consultation provides a structure for guiding the process of systemic change, and ecological theories provide the schema for understanding relationships between the foci of systemic change.

Nastasi (2005) described several roles for school psychologists in facilitating educational equity: identifying relevant stakeholders, ensuring stakeholder engagement and participation, facilitating collaboration, structuring problem analysis and program evaluation, assisting with data analysis and interpretation, promoting shared problem-solving, providing professional development, and designing interventions. The consultant can help a leadership team move from awareness of disparity and the need for change to exploration of systemic change. The systemic change process begins with inquiry and confronting the “individual, relational, organizational, community, and societal factors [that] operate individually or synergistically as facilitators or inhibitors to achieving and sustaining equity” (Nastasi, 2005, p. 122). Because this necessitates difficult conversations about complex social phenomena—conversation uncommon in most educational settings—the consultant can play an invaluable role in structuring interactions to move the dialogue forward. The consultant can also assist stakeholders in analyzing the functioning of the system, including the formal and informal structures, policies, norms, operations, and practices to identify malleable targets for intervention (Harris, 2007).

Applying Ecological Theory in Systemic Change

Given the nature of systemic change for special education equity and the necessity to examine the systems shaping disparities, the ecological orientation helps to engender consideration of the multiple interdependent systems shaping students’ experiences and identified disparities (Nastasi, 2005; the theoretical foundations of have been described in detail in Bronfenbrenner,

1986; Meyers, Meyers, Graybill, Proctor, & Huddleston, 2012). This orientation, particularly in attending to and understanding the influence of the distal systems, is central to the inquiry that underpins systemic change. In particular, ecologically based organizational consultation emphasizes consideration of contextual influences on educators' practices and students' experiences and encourages recognition of the role of structural factors throughout the problem-solving process. At the same time, an ecological perspective promotes appreciation of the characteristics (e.g., teacher qualifications, student demographics, community characteristics), values (e.g., orientations to diversity, learning, disability), and practices (literacy instruction, behavior management, pre-referral intervention, universal screening) of the individuals who comprise the systems recognizing the synergistic relations of the institution and actors within it (Meyers et al., 2012). Neither can be fully understood in isolation from the other.

Accordingly, ecologically based organizational consultation integrates analysis of systems and individuals to facilitate intervention to promote organizational functioning. An ecologically based model promotes consideration of the ways in which exo-systemic and macro-systemic factors, and resulting structures, procedures, and practices within school buildings and districts, shape the educational experiences of students in desired and undesired ways (e.g., inappropriate referrals for special education, overidentification of certain minority groups in special education programs). Given the deficit thinking that underlies traditional conceptualization of disability and the overrepresentation of minority children in special education, an ecological perspective is necessary to foster careful consideration of the distal factors influencing student outcomes.

While Bronfenbrenner's theory of the social ecology is invaluable to understanding the interdependent systems shaping individuals' experiences and development, other theories of the social ecology can be integrated to explicate the characteristics and functioning of the distal systems Bronfenbrenner delineated and to clarify how these systems shape the behavior and experiences of students and educators, and, in turn, contribute to educational inequities, including disproportionality. Consideration of all of the systems, from the micro-system to the chrono-system as opposed to a focus on only the student, family, and school, for instance, is needed to facilitate systemic change. Specifically, the consultant can provide additional clarity to this inquiry by drawing on a sociological perspective of human ecology to understand how exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems—which generally receive little attention in the educational and psychological literature— influence educational policy and practice. This theory helps articulate the interrelatedness of systems (e.g., school, local economics, local and federal politics, immigration) and system components (e.g., finance, governance, instruction), group dynamics within systems (e.g., how administrators and service providers interface), and how and why specific systems come to

advantage some while disadvantaging others (Helves-Hayes, 1987). This specificity is not provided in developmental theories of human ecology where the central focus is on the student as the center of the ecosystem, but it will likely be valuable in facilitating inquiry about how these distal systems operate and relate to each other. This can be especially valuable in considering, for instance, why special education or other school programs or policies operate in unintended ways to be a disservice to certain groups, how systemic policies may contribute to students' difficulties, and local resources that can be leveraged to support change efforts. We propose integrating frameworks from both developmental ecologists and social ecologists to draw on psychological and sociological principles relevant to understanding how educational systems operate. This interdisciplinary approach to understanding these structural dynamics and other contextual influences on students' experiences facilitates the critical praxis underpinning efforts to create equitable learning environments.

Fostering Systemic Change through Ecologically Oriented Systems Consultation

In addition to being theoretically coherent with the systemic change process, ecologically based organizational consultation aligns well procedurally. During the entry stage, the consultant should collaborate with administrators to convene a leadership team. In working to foster systemic change, the organizational consultant works with this team to (a) understand the social, cultural, and political forces in the system—that is, the school's ecology, and (b) agree on the services provided. The leadership team will shepherd the systemic change process and should be comprised of representatives of the various stakeholder groups. System change relies on locally driven, holistic change guided by stakeholders through ongoing collaboration and joint ownership of the reform process. The input from various stakeholder groups is valuable to the process of integrating services within schools and across community resources. During this stage, the consultant also seeks to gain initial understanding of the ecological dimensions of the system. This understanding will expand throughout the process as the team works through the inquiry necessary to identify how systemic factors contribute to special education disproportionality and other disparities.

Roles of stakeholders. As suggested above, full stakeholder involvement in systemic change efforts is critical to fostering educational equity (Nastasi, 2005). This is because of the importance of stakeholders to understanding the system, designing changes, and enacting and maintaining resultant changes. Each group will have a unique perspective on a given topic (e.g., pre-referral interventions, discipline policy, reading curriculum) and in integrating these viewpoints, the consultant and team will come to a more comprehensive

understanding of the nature of the issue and how to move forward in ways that are responsive to the needs of students and the various groups.

All stakeholder groups should be involved in constructing a vision for change so that the school or district can develop a framework to unify activities across programs and groups. Administrators play an important role in demonstrating support for needed changes, modeling willingness to take risks, and soliciting community support, all of which foster the buy-in needed to facilitate both initial and ongoing change (Thompson, 1994). In addition, administrators' knowledge of human, financial, and materials resources; educational policy, competing and concurrent initiatives; and stakeholder interests and responsibilities can be critical to the planning process. This perspective on various system elements is often unavailable to other stakeholders because they are not privy to such information. Together with teachers and service providers, administrators can also provide insight into the social networks operating within the school to shape relations between stakeholder groups, support or inhibit of innovations, enact policy, and influence student learning and behavior. Thus, the administrator's role is not one of unilateral decision making, but rather facilitating the process through shared leadership and collaborative problem solving to reduce disproportionality (Thompson, 1994). In some sites, an important outcome of the consultation process may be facilitating shifts in administrators' understanding of leadership, policy enactment, and problem solving, and the influence on each on inequity (e.g., biased disciplinary outcomes, inadequate instruction, discriminatory referral practices, exclusionary procedures toward families).

Teachers and service providers bring to the process their expertise in various aspects of learning and instruction, as well as their perspectives on classroom management, student behavior, educational policies and initiatives, student and family engagement, and attitudes toward best practice, and the intersections with targeted disparities. Again, each party likely holds a unique perspective that can enrich understanding of any given issue under consideration. During the intervention phase, teachers often engage in professional development to build cultural knowledge, and skills in intervention, collaboration, and classroom intervention (Horn & Carr, 2000). Identified interventions may also emphasize collaboration between general and special education teachers to provide instruction (e.g., team teaching) and intervention to meet the diverse learning needs of students, rather than focusing on labeling and compartmentalized services (Harry & Klingner, 2007). This may entail intensive professional development to bolster cultural competence, nondiscriminatory practices, and collaborative skills.

Families and community members are also important contributors to the systemic change process. They can provide their distinct perspectives on students' experiences, backgrounds, and learning needs, as well as the local context (e.g., represented cultural groups, community needs and dynamics,

perceptions of school quality and leadership, understanding of the targeted disparities, experiences of marginalization, impact of disparities on students) that enhances consideration of systemic factors during the change process. School leaders and consultants should promote families' empowerment to contribute to systemic change and advocate for the educational and social needs of their students (Nastasi, 2005). A central task for the organizational consultant is facilitating this collaboration and empowering parents and community members to be active participants by ensuring that parents are fully invited into and engaged in the decision-making process and that they understand their rights and mechanisms for exercising those rights. This facilitation is especially important in settings where families have not historically been invited into the problem-solving process or governance, or where family-school engagement is limited.

Problem definition: Identifying disparities and articulating a vision for improvement. Problem definition will consist of gathering and analyzing data to clarify the nature of the disparities targeted and clarify goals for systemic change. The consultant gathers data to operationalize goals (e.g., ensuring students' opportunity to learn and properly identifying their learning needs), then conducts needs assessment to understand fully the nature of disproportionality in special education. This may entail not only considering data on special education identification and placement, but also data on school-wide achievement, discipline, academic and social supports, staff training, and family-school collaboration and other data gathered via surveys and focus groups with staff, families, and community members. In the case of systemic change, a variety of data sources may be utilized, including records and student data, policy documents, classroom observations, surveys, focus groups, and procedures.

Needs assessment: Facilitating critical inquiry on inequity. The needs assessment stage will also include inquiry about equity. A variety of data sources may be used, including records and student data, policy documents, observations (e.g., in classrooms, other school settings, meetings), surveys, focus groups, and analyses of procedures. The stakeholders can provide distinct perspectives on the shared and unique contexts in which these services are provided. Every day, members of the school community—including educators, special educators, students, specialists, and families—interact within educational contexts embedded in larger and historical local, district, state, and federal activity systems (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). These activity systems are comprised of ideational and material tools and practices that can support inclusive aims or perpetuate historical patterns of marginalization.

Systemic change should combat institutionalized deficit thinking about historically marginalized youth by fostering collaborative consideration of how policies, practices, and procedures are structured to create or restrict educational opportunity and how these forces can be restructured to promote development and well-being for all students. In some settings, it may be

especially important to consider how specific structures within the school contribute to biased educational decisions in resource allocation, discipline, instruction, intervention, and special education. This involves critically questioning how aspects of the status quo may advantage specific groups while disadvantaging others, carefully examining the costs of such dynamics (e.g., achievement outcomes, student–teacher relationships, family–school engagement, discipline), and envisioning a more equitable system where all students are adequately supported through the redistribution of privilege with the goal of equalizing opportunities to learn and other supports for healthy academic, social, emotional, and behavioral development. This cannot be done effectively without engaging the various members of the school community to discuss how various circumstances affect the behavior of faculty, staff, students, administrators, and families and are reflected in educational outcomes.

Allman (2007) advocated for shifting the focus of educators' practices from technical skills—a common focus of many interventions and reforms—to critical revolutionary praxis that couples equity-minded theory and practice foregrounding social justice in teaching and learning. This shift is essential to changing school culture, and in turn, to the success of systemic change. In this process, stakeholders should help each other challenge commonly held assumptions about culture, ability, and access within educational systems and broader societal structures, by considering the ways culture, power, and history mediate students' educational experiences and outcomes (Klingner et al., 2005). Through this process, stakeholders reconceptualize policies and practices to account for the sociocultural nature of teaching and learning, reflect high expectations for all, and actively engage all students in meaningful curriculum and quality, dynamic instruction (Kozleski, 2011).

Intervention and evaluation. In the intervention phase, the consultant and stakeholders use data gathered throughout the process to identify targets for change and develop specific interventions (e.g., new programming, professional learning communities, policy change, revised instructional planning, and modified infrastructure) to support these goals. During the evaluation phase, the consultant gauges the efficacy and social validity of the implemented interventions, gathering quantitative and qualitative data again from school-wide information systems and various stakeholders, to inform further modifications as needed. Because systemic change is generally a multiyear process of progressive change, the consultant may need to be engaged with the stakeholders until maintenance is reached.

Implications for School Psychology Practice and Training

Organizational consultation is a valuable approach for school psychologists interested in contributing to systems-level change. When the school

psychologist assumes the consultant role, her role shifts from a focus on direct services and individual behavior to one that accounts for the full ecological system including the more distal forces affecting students' learning (e.g., policies, programming). At the same time, the school psychologist may consider the ways traditional assessment paradigms may contribute to special education disparities and, may, as a result, help to identify development of socially just assessment models (Newell & Coffee, 2012) as one needed change in systemic reform.

Effectively engaging in organization consultation requires knowledge of organizational and systems theories and interpersonal communication skills necessary to foster collaboration and critical praxis. School psychologists must not only understand various dimensions of cultural difference (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, language, religion, sexuality) that influence learning and behavior of students, but also how values, beliefs, and attitudes related to these cultural dimensions influence social interactions and perceptions, and how to design students' services and educational environments to be welcoming and supportive to all students regardless of these differences. A key activity of school psychologists may be using psychological principles to challenge the assumptions that underpin marginalization and disparate treatment (Weinstein et al., 2004). School psychologists must be able to help school leaders, faculty, and staff identify the ways in which ecological and systemic factors operate to advantage or disadvantage certain children and youth by leading to differential application of school policies and procedures and disparate treatment. Understanding the intra- and interpersonal dynamics operating throughout the collaborative problem-solving process is important to facilitating the complicated and complex discussions required in the process.

Further, because the emphasis of systemic change is on altering the school system, school psychologists must be knowledgeable not only of behavior change, but of how to affect and evaluate substantive changes in policies and procedures. Contributing to such changes rests on one's cognizance in principles of learning, instruction, curriculum, and policy development. As such, training programs should prepare practitioners to consult not only on the individual needs of learners but on a programmatic level. The school psychologist should be prepared to apply a problem-solving framework to systemic issues, not just individual ones, through analysis of the school's ecology, culture, and politics with administrators, teachers, and service providers.

Meyers and colleagues (2012) noted the importance of consultants' awareness of the characteristics, needs, and perspectives of the individuals comprising the system, as effective systems must be designed to meet the needs of the various constituents of the organization. This necessitates a shift in the consultants' focus on students to the adults who serve them. This means school psychologists will benefit from knowledge and skills related

to adult learning and scaffolding of attitude and behavior change. Likewise, because the systems consultant engages with a potentially large group of consultees simultaneously, knowledge of organizational development strategies—structural analysis, coaching, process observation, team building exercises, participatory action research—is valuable. In contributing to skill development, professional and organizational development should be consistent with the theoretical bases of the systemic change so that it can be integrated fully into operations and day-to-day practices because this integration bolsters substantive, sustained change (Fullan, 1995). This knowledge base enables the organizational consultants to empower stakeholders to effect organizational reform as change agents.

CONCLUSIONS

Systemic change for special education equity is fundamentally about educational equity. As recognized by some of the earliest disproportionality scholars, the disparate treatment of culturally and socioeconomically diverse students in special education is symptomatic of larger issues in the way schools treat difference and disability. As such, preventing continued special education inequities necessitates fostering educational equity system wide, not just in the process of disability identification and treatment. This entails restructuring schools to support the development of all learners so that special education does not become a means of *de facto* segregation or a dumping ground for students perceived as difficult to teach. To that end, systemic change for special education equity is about constructing schools that are effective for all students. As Adelman and Taylor (2006) noted:

Good schools are ones where the staff works cohesively not only to teach effectively, but also to address barriers to student learning. They are designed to prevent learning, behavior, and emotional problems and to address problems quickly and effectively when they do arise. They do all this in ways that promote positive socio-emotional development and create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community. [. . .] Such schools must rethink school improvement policies and practices. The focus on improving instruction must be accompanied by a fundamental reorganization of every school's approach to enabling student learning. (p. 681)

This is the overarching goal of systemic change for special education equity. Organizational consultants can contribute to this process by assisting stakeholders in devising and implementing comprehensive, coherent systemic change.

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