**Culturally Adapted Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Support for Black Male Students**

Portfolio II Depth of Knowledge Essay

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Culturally adapted social, emotional, and behavioral supports (CASE/B) for Black/African American (Black) male learners serve as disruptors to disproportionate placement of Black students at risk of behavior-based disability classifications in special education. A growing number of practitioners and researchers agree that evidence-based social, emotional, and behavioral (SE/B) interventions should be culturally appropriate to meet the needs of diverse learners (Fallon et al., 2015). The the unique characteristics, variables, and learning histories of students and educators determine cultural and contextual relevance (Fallon et al., 2015). Considering that classrooms are not culturally neutral spaces, it is critical to implement culturally and socially appropriate interventions (Obiakor, 2012; Sugai et al., 2012).

Particular concern exists regarding developing effective social, emotional, and behavioral intervention approaches for Black male students, because this student population continues to have disproportionate representation in emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Graves et al., 2017). Black students made up 13.79% of the total school-aged population (5–21 years old) in the 2019–2020 school year, but represented 17.66% of all students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and 22.98% of the emotional disturbance category (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2021). With a risk ratio of 1.8, Black students aged 5 to 21 were more likely to be identified with EBD than students in any other racial or ethnic groups (OSEP, 2021). Students with EBD experience higher rates of exclusionary discipline practices and receive special education services in more restrictive placements than any other disability group (Novak et al., 2020). Data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study revealed students with EBD and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as more likely to experience suspension or expulsion than students with learning disabilities alone (Achilles et al., 2007). More recent data have supported this conclusion by showing more than double the out-of-school suspensions for students with EBD compared to the next closest disability category (e.g., other health impairment, including ADHD) and four and a half times more suspensions than any other disability category (OSEP, 2022). Similar patterns exist on in-school suspensions.

**Ethical and Methodological Considerations**

Black students experience exclusionary discipline procedures, excessive disciplinary actions, and special education referrals including restrictive placements (Betters-Bubon et al., 2016). The approach to discipline and support in schools, particularly for students of color, impact the amount of time these students spend in the classroom (McCarter, 2017). When practices exclude students from learning environments, the effects are poor postschool outcomes (Rocque, 2010). These negative outcomes have been a persistent concern for the past four decades (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014).

Multitiered systems of support (Leverson et al., 2021) have the capacity to lessen the disproportionality and exclusionary discipline practices associated with the school-to-prison pipeline. Two converging movements focus on supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs, and a comprehensive tiered model of prevention and supports. The first is a focus on social and emotional learning (SEL), and the second is a commitment to interventions grounded in prevention of behaviors. CASE/B supports are integral disruptors to disproportionate placement of Black males in special education. In particular, the noteworthy impact that SEL and prevention have in identification of behavior-based disabilities.

**Culturally Response to Intervention (CRtI)**

RtI is considered a promising preventative approach for reducing minority disproportionate representation. Since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), RtI models are being implemented to promote equity, by ensuring that all students receive intensive, systematic, and evidence-based interventions before the need for special education services is considered (Cummings et al., 2008).

Although a framework for the implementation of RtI exists, the success of RtI in reducing disproportionality of CLD students in special education is not guaranteed. First, many researchers are suggesting that in order for RtI to be successful for CLD students, the process must be culturally responsive (e.g., Harris-Murri et al., 2006). In the only empirical study of culturally responsive RtI, Marston et al. (2003) designed a four-step problem-solving model specifically designed to address the issue of disproportionate placement of African-American and Native American students in special education. The four-step problem solving process was repeated at each intervention stage. Dray, Cole, & White (2009) proposed a five-step process for implementing culturally responsive RtI, that includes: (1)analyzing disaggregated data in the areas of achievement scores, dropout rates, discipline referrals, SPED placement, attendance, and transience, (2) examine patterns within subsets (race/ethnicity, LEP, etc.), (3) use tools to reflect on the level of implementation of culturally RtI practices such as Culturally Responsive Practices in Schools: The Checklist to Address Disproportionality (CADSE), which addresses the team’s beliefs and practices, and (4) reflecting on findings that may need to be improved in step three, and (5) re-cycle through the process to analyze the effects of the plan to improve implementation.

**SEL**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CA-SEL) defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and skills to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CA-SEL, 2022)” The organization’s SEL framework identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsive decision-making. Strong Start, (Carrizales-Engelmann et al., 2016; Merrell et al., 2008) is a collection of grade-banded SEL curricula with lessons designed to improve student behavioral outcomes by increasing their social and emotional competencies (Graves et al., 2017; Whitcomb & Parisi Damico, 2016). The curricula are not culturally responsive as written, and initial studies did not include cultural adaptations (Whitcomb & Parisi Damico, 2016). However, recommendations are provided for cultural adaptation (e.g., modifying lessons to reflect the interests, abilities, and culture of the participants while leaving the critical components in place). Suggestions include procedural, content and program delivery adaptations.

**Gaps in the Research**

Despite the disproportionate identification of Black males with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs), few studies have focused on culturally responsive social, emotional, and behavioral curricula or interventions that are designed to benefit this population of students. There have been a limited number of studies that have investigated the effectiveness of Strong Start, a culturally adapted intervention. Castro-Olivo (2014) evaluated the effectiveness of a culturally adapted version of the curriculum for middle school and high school Latinx English-language learners. Researchers adapted peripheral activities and literature and embedded cultural sensitivity into the teacher training. Findings showed students in the intervention group to report significantly higher levels of SEL knowledge and resilience This intervention has an option of cultural adaptation to increase SEL competencies. Graves et al. (2017) found that adapted versions of Strong Start did not improve teacher-rated externalizing behavior scores (BASC-2) for elementary Black male students.

Results from the few studies implementing culturally adapted versions of the Strong Start program have shown promise for increasing social and emotional competencies. However, there is little known about the impact of culturally adapted versions of Strong Start on externalizing problem behavior. Castro-Olivo (2014) cited the lack of an externalizing problem behavior measure as a limitation of their study. Graves et al. (2017) reported the Strong Start curriculum as having no significant effect on teacher-rated externalizing behaviors for students at risk, which is consistent with prior studies (e.g., Caldarella et al., 2009; Merrell et al., 2008). Students with more intensive needs might need a more intensive intervention and more sensitive measures like direct observation. In theory, an ideal intervention starts with explicitly teaching and practicing replacement behaviors, followed by individualized feedback and differential reinforcement. Because the SEL curriculum explicitly taught and practiced skills, it might not have led to distal effects on externalizing behavior, since it lacked a formalized approach to individual feedback and differential reinforcement of behaviors aligned with the SEL competencies. Through individualized feedback from school personnel and reinforcement of specific skills, CICO has been shown to be effective in decreasing externalizing behavior. It may be necessary, especially for students with and at risk for EBD, to add interventions such as CICO and self-monitoring to SEL curricula to see improvements in SEL competency and externalizing behavior outcomes.

**Impact on My Future Research**

The lack of culturally responsive SE/B curricula or interventions designed to meet the needs of disproportionately identified Black male learners has influenced me to want to conduct a single subject/single case research study for my dissertation study. The lack of culturally adapted SEL curriculum to monitor and replace externalizing behaviors of school-aged Black students at risk of an EBD diagnosis is troubling and only further contributes to the disproportionality in special education.

[Word count: 1430]

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