



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Culturally Competent Consultation in Schools: Information for School Psychologists and School Personnel

“The greatest distance between people is not space. The greatest distance between people is culture.” Jamake Highwater (Native American choreographer, author and lecturer, 1932-2001)

As America’s schools become increasingly diverse, school psychologists and educational personnel face the challenge of providing services that enhance the mental health and educational competence of all children. In order to succeed with this challenge, school psychologists and the teams they work with must understand the ways in which cultural and linguistic differences influence how a child views and interacts with his or her environment, including how children learn and behave in school.

Over the course of any given school year, a school psychologist may be asked to consult with school personnel and/or parents of culturally or linguistically diverse students on issues such as the lack of academic progress of a limited-English proficient student, or the behavioral difficulties of a student who recently immigrated to this country. Given the growing diversity in the U.S. student population, and the fact that the majority of school psychologists are not culturally or linguistically diverse, it is imperative that school psychologists utilize culturally competent practices when providing school-based consultation services.

School psychologists benefit from understanding how communication breakdowns may interfere with developing and maintaining a positive rapport with others from diverse backgrounds. It is imperative that school psychologists recognize when cultural clashes are responsible for the break down in communication and actively work to resolve these issues. **Several studies suggest the attentiveness and responsiveness of the consultant to racial issues, and not the consultant’s race, determine ratings of consultant effectiveness and multicultural sensitivity (Ingraham, 2000).** This means that all school psychologists and school personnel, regardless of cultural differences, can increase their effectiveness as consultants through learning and integrating culturally competent principles into their practice.

The following information will help school psychologists and the teams they work with to provide effective and culturally sensitive consultation.

Definitions

- *Culture*: “An organized set of thoughts, beliefs, and norms for interaction and communication, all of which may influence cognitions, behaviors, and perceptions” (Ingraham, 2000, p. 325). Variables that influence an individual’s culture include race, ethnicity, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, educational attainment and level of acculturation.

- *Consultation*: “A method of providing preventively oriented psychological and educational services in which consultants and consultees form cooperative partnerships and engage in a reciprocal, systematic problem-solving process...to enhance and empower consultees, thereby promoting students’ well-being and performance” (Zins & Erchul, 2002, p. 625).
- *Consultant*: Refers to a school psychologist or other related service provider.
- *Consultee*: In schools, the *consultee* is most often a teacher or other school professional (e.g., reading specialist) seeking help regarding a specific student or classroom-based problem, though sometimes a family member may be the consultee, or even the school district or school as a whole when systemic consultation is the focus.
- *Multicultural Consultation*: “A culturally sensitive, indirect service in which the consultant adjusts the consultation services to address the needs and cultural values of the consultee, the client, or both” (Tarver Behring & Ingraham, 1998, p. 58).
- *Cross-Cultural Consultation*: A subset of multicultural consultation where at least one consulting triad member (consultant, consultee, client) differs culturally from the other(s) (Ingraham, 2000).

Section I: Learning and Skill Development

“There are two ways of exerting one’s strength: one is pushing down, the other is pulling up.”
Booker T. Washington (Post-Civil War author, educator, and leader, 1856-1915)

Consultants

In order to practice in a culturally competent manner, consulting school psychologists must understand their own culture and how it impacts others, must respect and value other cultures, and must learn how to design and implement culturally appropriate interventions. School psychologists must also develop an understanding of how to build bridges across cultural differences while recognizing that there are individual differences within cultural groups (Ingraham, 2000). Learning to frame the problem and the consultation process in a way that values multiple perspectives and creates emotional safety and motivational support is also a key.

Consulting school psychologists must understand the culture of the school and the school as a system. This involves developing an awareness of the school in terms of attitudes and beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse children (Lopez & Truesdell, in press). Consultants must also understand that policies and norms within the system may have a direct influence on the quality and types of services provided to students. Culturally and linguistically diverse students are often provided multiple services that are delivered across programs and staff in schools (e.g., English language learners may receive English as a second language, bilingual education, and bilingual special education services). In order to effectively coordinate service delivery, an understanding of how those services are delivered must be developed so that consistent interventions and supports can be implemented across programs.

Consultees

School psychologists must not only strive to increase their own knowledge, skills, and objectivity as they relate to working with culturally diverse populations, they must also encourage and inspire individuals and the teams they work with to do the same. The specific goals for consultee learning and development may vary depending on whether the consultee is a teacher, family member or administrator.

Teachers: It is vitally important that teachers and other school personnel begin to recognize and decrease the tendency to filter perceptions through stereotypes, overemphasize culture, or take a color-blind approach (Ingraham, 2000). One way consulting school psychologists can help school personnel grow in this area is to point out inaccurate perceptions that are held about the child or family. For instance, a teacher may comment that a student with limited English proficiency is not making sufficient reading progress because nobody at home is reading to the student. Comments such as these imply that the family does not want to help the child, when in fact it may be that parents feel uncomfortable reading to the child due to linguistic differences or do not understand the teacher's expectations for working with the child at home. In cases such as these, school psychologists and teachers can work together to find creative ways that family members can become more involved in the child's educational efforts.

Families: Consultants should help families gain the knowledge and skills they need to be a proactive force in the educational success of their children. Often families want to do more to help their child succeed in school but lack specific knowledge regarding how to help or have had negative experiences with schooling here or in their home culture that make them more likely to avoid home-school collaboration. In addition, families often need information to help bridge the gap between home and school in terms of academic expectations, homework, and philosophies about school-home interaction. Families who have newly immigrated to the U.S. also may need specific information about the educational system and the district's standards before fully understanding how to work with the school to best help their child.

Administrators: Consultants periodically consult with administrators on systemic issues related to cultural diversity. Traditionally, school success has been defined in terms of a White, middle class norm and students whose realities differ from this norm are generally required to make adjustments to achieve educational success (Lee, 2001). When culturally diverse students are not meeting school norms on a regular basis, consultants should help administrators look for systemic barriers such as policies, norms, and communication patterns that may be interfering with a high quality education for all children. One way to overcome these barriers is to implement professional development experiences for teachers and other school personnel on culturally competent practices. Another potential intervention is to collaborate with administrators and community stakeholders on joint initiatives. For instance, culturally diverse individuals from the community could come into the school as tutors, classroom presenters, assembly speakers, or experts for professional development workshops.

Section II: Culturally Competent Consultation Across Problem-Solving Stages

The problem-solving process is the essence of consultation and typically follows five stages (Zins & Erchul, 2000). First, a strong collaborative relationship is established. Second, the problem is defined in clear, concise, and measurable terms. Third, goals for intervention are established and the intervention is designed. Fourth, the intervention is implemented. Fifth, the effectiveness of the intervention is monitored and altered as necessary. Cultural issues may emerge during any of these stages. The following points were adapted from Sheridan (2000) unless otherwise noted.

Establish a Cooperative Partnership

- A key aspect for creating a strong partnership is developing a mutual sense of trust and respect, which requires valuing cultural differences and viewpoints.
- It is important to develop a sense of shared ownership. This may be difficult for individuals whose cultural background has taught them to defer to authority. For instance, Hispanic

parents, due to their respect for authority, often have difficulty collaboratively participating in the educational decision making process and sometimes go along with suggestions they do not agree with or do not fully understand (Correa & Tulbert, 1993).

- When collaborating, take into consideration how parents from diverse cultures view collaboration in schools. Parents may define collaboration differently ranging from cooperating to becoming full decision-making partners in the process (Lopez & Truesdell, in press).

Problem Definition & Analysis

- It is vitally important to not allow cultural differences to be construed as the problem. However, cultural differences must be recognized and acknowledged during the problem definition stage so that appropriate interventions can be developed.
- Recognize that differences in values may influence the perception of the problem behavior and that a traditional viewpoint that the problem rests within the child may cause discomfort. Avoid labeling or categorizing deficiencies. Instead, focus on specific behaviors and reframe the problem as a “mismatch” between the child, home and school.
- The consultant and consultee must look at the learner’s cultural and linguistic background as well as their educational background. For example, within an instructional context, the consultant and consultee should look at the delivery of instruction within a multicultural context and examine whether the learner has the background knowledge required to complete the task (Lopez & Truesdell, in press).
- When working with families who are not proficient in English, allow additional time to communicate through interpreters to determine families’ concerns, priorities and resources (Lopez, 2000).
- It is important to recognize that the behavioral scrutiny often required in data collection may be viewed as an invasion of privacy in some cultures. Consultants should openly discuss the contribution data make toward identifying the problem in concise and measurable terms and adjust the data collection process to align with a particular family’s view when possible.
- Finally, recognize that a consulting school psychologist’s attempts to self-monitor their actions may be seen as inappropriate. While a consulting school psychologist may wish to acknowledge a lack of cultural knowledge or potential bias related to the case, this information may not be well received by those who frown on sharing perceived weaknesses outside of one’s family.

Goal and Intervention Development

- Cultural differences may lead to mismatched goals and expectations. Offer school personnel and parents opportunities to develop goals that compliment one another, yet at the same time are consistent with their preferred goals.
- Explore the possibility of a mismatch between common behavioral interventions and the consultee’s acceptance of those procedures. For example, a teacher and school psychologist may wish to implement a behavioral plan in the home and school that includes reinforcers for appropriate behavior, but the parents, due to cultural differences, disagree with the use of reinforcers. This intervention will not be successful unless all parties reach a compromise regarding the use of reinforcers.
- Recognize that successful implementation of an intervention is linked to the match between the design of the intervention and the cultural realities of the home and/or school. Considerations such as time and material resources must be taken into account during intervention development in order for the intervention to be successful.

Intervention Implementation

- Treatment integrity will be maximized if the intervention's goals and plan are developed in a culturally sensitive and cooperative manner.
- Problems with implementation may be linked to unidentified variables. Even careful, culturally competent consultants will sometimes overlook an implementation barrier that is linked to a cultural or linguistic difference. When interventions are not being implemented according to plan, potential barriers should be openly explored.

Intervention Evaluation

- It is vitally important to ensure consultees do not feel judged negatively if goals are not met. Instead, acknowledge that the goals have not yet been met and collectively consider barriers to treatment success, and whether strategies should be modified or if new interventions should be designed and attempted.
- At the conclusion of the consultation, work to establish systems of support that will help sustain intervention success over time. This is particularly important when working with families. Families should be left with the sense that they are a collaborative partner with the school in the education of their child and that their input will be valued in the future.

Summary

Given the growing diversity of the U.S. population, it is imperative that school psychologists and other educational professionals engage in culturally competent practices. This is particularly true during the provision of consultative services because the outcome of a specific consultation and the strength of the relationships established can have profound implications for a child's present and future success in school. All educational stakeholders, including school personnel, parents and community members working in the schools, have a responsibility to examine and increase their cultural competence so that our efforts meet the needs of all of our children.

References

Correa, V. I., & Tulbert, B. (1993). Collaboration between school personnel in special education and Hispanic families. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 4*, 253–265.

Ingraham, C. L. (2000). Consultation through a multicultural lens: Multicultural and cross-cultural consultation in schools. *School Psychology Review, 29*, 320–343.

Lee, C. C. (2001). Culturally responsive school counselors and programs: Addressing the needs of all students. *Professional School Counseling, 4*, 257–261.

Lopez, E. (2000). Conducting instructional consultation through interpreters. *School Psychology Review, 29*, 378–388.

Lopez, E. C., & Truesdell, L. (In press). Multicultural issues in instructional consultation for English language learners. In G. Esquivel, E. C. Lopez & S. Nahari (Eds.), *Handbook on multicultural school psychology*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Sheridan, S. M. (2000). Considerations of multiculturalism and diversity in behavioral consultation with parents and teachers. *School Psychology Review, 29*, 389–400.

Tarver Behring, S., & Ingraham, C. L. (1998). Culture as a central component to consultation: A call to the field. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 9, 57–72.

Zins, J. E., & Erchul, W. P. (2002). Best practices in school consultation. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology* (4th ed., pp. 625–643). Bethesda, MD. National Association of School Psychologists.

Web Resources

NASP Culturally Competent Practice:

<http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/index.html>

Practicing the Three C's: Cross Cultural Competence in School Psychological Services:

<http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/threeCs.ppt>

Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children and Their Families

<http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/checklist.html>

Authors:

Karen L. Nuijens, MA is a doctoral student in the school psychology program at the University of Maryland and a 2004–2005 intern at NASP Headquarters. Mary Beth Klotz, PhD, NCSP is NASP Director of IDEA Projects and Technical Assistance.

Reviewer:

Emilia C. Lopez, PhD, NCSP is an Associate Professor of School Psychology, and Co-Director of the Bilingual Psychological and Educational Support Center, Queens College, CUNY.

©2004, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Hwy. #402; Bethesda, MD 20814, www.nasponline.org, phone (301) 657-0270, fax (301) 657-0275, TTY (301) 657-4155