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What is This?

Systemic Transformation from the Ground–Up: Using Learning Lab to Design Culturally Responsive Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports

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Abstract

The enduring existence of disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education programs and disciplinary practices creates a double bind for educators, educational leaders, and families. Disproportionality is an adaptive systemic issue that is not under any entity's control; thus, it demands collaboration and critical dialogue among local stakeholders. This article examined the implementation of Learning Lab, a new methodology of systemic transformation, for local stakeholders to collectively examine and address disproportionality in behavioral outcomes from the ground–up. Learning Lab aims to increase equity within the local implementations of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) by opening up decision-making and problem-solving processes with local stakeholders. Designed to increase authentic collaboration and dialogue among educators, families, and community-based organizations, Learning Lab offers the possibility of contextually fit, culturally responsive implementations of PBIS and building the capacity for forming adaptive and inclusive schools.

Keywords

positive behavioral interventions and supports, cultural responsiveness, Learning Lab, activity theory, formative intervention, expansive learning

In the United States, youth from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds face enormous disparities in educational outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2010). A major contributor to this problem is that these students are disproportionately placed in special education programs for emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Moreover, students from CLD communities receive exclusionary school discipline more frequently and are punished more severely for less serious incidents such as disrespect and dress code violations (Bal, Betters-Bubon, & Fish, 2013; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). For instance, African American students accounted for 39% of all expulsions, yet they made up only 18% of the students enrolled in schools. African American students with disabilities constituted 21% of the total number of students with disabilities but 44% of those who were subject to mechanical restraints (Office for Civil Rights, 2012).

This disproportionality in EBD identification and exclusionary school discipline reproduces the historical marginalization of youth from CLD backgrounds. Disproportionality re-emerged as a national crisis at the same time that some researchers were calling for more emphasis on early intervention and prevention. As a result, schoolwide multi-tiered prevention services (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS] and Response to Intervention [RTI]) surfaced as important redesign strategies.

PBIS is becoming a primary means of providing behavioral support in U.S. schools. It has been implemented in 20,011 schools in every state since 2000 (The Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2014). PBIS is the only approach specifically mentioned in the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004). The goal of PBIS is to more precisely classify needs and to deliver services for students with behavioral difficulties (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

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Multiple studies found that PBIS implementation was linked to a reduction in office discipline referrals (ODRs), a reduction in discipline recidivism, and increased perception of school safety (Bradshaw, Mitchel, & Leaf, 2010; Horner et al., 2013). Yet, CLD students remain overrepresented as recipients of ODRs in schools implementing PBIS (Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Current theoretical and methodological approaches that are assumed to be culture-free or culturally neutral need to be expanded to facilitate locally meaningful and sustainable implementations of PBIS in diverse school contexts and reverse the pernicious effects of disproportionality. Such a paradigmatic expansion demands the use of a systemic perspective and theoretically robust research and intervention methodologies to re-mediate cultural contexts of schools (Trainor & Bal, 2014).

The Learning Lab was designed to provide a systematic methodology to expand PBIS implementation and to form inclusive school cultures via ecologically valid and sustainable systemic transformations led and owned by local stakeholders (Bal, 2011). The aim of this article is threefold: (a) introducing Learning Lab methodology for culturally responsive PBIS (CRPBIS) with its theoretical roots and implications, (b) exploring the use of qualitative research to engage a schoolwide intervention, and (c) reporting on our initial findings using the Learning Lab in an elementary school in Wisconsin. To situate our theoretical framework and methodology, below we provide a brief review of the relevant literature on PBIS and disproportionality.

PBIS: Opportunities and Challenges

PBIS is one of the most important innovations in the field of special education and is increasingly being utilized in districts and schools nationally and internationally. PBIS takes into account the whole school context and strives to create a cohesive, supportive, and positive social climate for *all* children by unifying general and special education resources and providing early identification and intervention (Sugai et al., 2000). PBIS is often implemented in three tiers: universal (Tier 1), targeted group (Tier 2), and individual (Tier 3) support. This team-based implementation includes special and general education teachers, administrators, and guidance staff in decision-making and problem-solving processes. The PBIS team creates a behavioral support plan and meets regularly to review behavioral data. The team makes modifications in the plan and reports outcomes to staff (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). The PBIS scholars are working on addressing two implementation challenges: (a) facilitating family and community involvement and (b) sustainable implementation of PBIS in vastly diverse cultural contexts (Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011).

The first challenge is related to cohesion among educators, families, and community members that is assumed to produce and maintain safer, predictable school contexts (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Ideally, behavioral expectations, outcomes, and reinforcements should be generated by all stakeholders, thus motivating them toward the same goal. In reality, family and community members—most often those from CLD backgrounds—do not have opportunities to participate in PBIS implementation (Vincent et al., 2011). The second challenge is related to implementing PBIS in diverse cultural contexts. The original design of PBIS did not theorize culture as a key factor (Singer & Wang, 2009). The principles of PBIS are assumed culturally neutral and should be altered to achieve contextual fitness:

> PBIS emphasizes the importance of procedures that are socially and culturally appropriate. The contextual fit between intervention strategies and the values of families, teachers, schools, support personnel, and community agency personnel may affect the quality and durability of support efforts. (Sugai et al., 2000, p. 136)

The PBIS literature, however, lacks guidance for educators on how to systematically incorporate cultural and contextual considerations and facilitate meaningful participation of families and community members. Learning Lab provides a model for actively involving family and community members in problem-solving process to achieve contextual fitness of PBIS in specific schools.

Implementation of PBIS is not straightforward and complete but ambiguous, eclectic, and incomplete. Once PBIS is introduced into the life of a school, the prescribed course of action in PBIS implementation is heuristically and innovatively appropriated by practitioners in response to local cultural-historical contexts. In the "messy" real school contexts, practitioners find themselves caught between the demands of multiple educational programs, curricula, and initiatives that they are required to strictly follow and the pressing academic, behavioral, financial, and political issues in their school. PBIS scholars' common response to localization dilemmas has been to increase implementation fidelity and limit practitioners' interpretations and innovations (Bal, 2011). Learning Lab aims to expand local stakeholders' diverse interpretations and innovations, not ignore or undermine them.

Researchers from organizational psychology and information sciences showed that multiple interpretations, as well as resistance and subversion, are essential elements of the localization of any social intervention and should be taken into consideration in any sustainable organizational reforms (Bowker & Star, 2000; Engeström, 2008). While those are natural consequences in localizations of a mass product (educational programs or curricula), not all-local adaptation results in positive transformations. When practitioners adapt a new initiative, they may further marginalize

CLD students and families rather than impact the very processes that reproduce outcome disparities such as disproportionality (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

The Thorny Problem of Disproportionality

Disproportionality is defined as "the extent to which membership in a given [. . .] group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category" (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999, p. 198). It is, however, not a matter of statistical probability but a symptom of larger issues of equity in a society stratified along the intermingled lines of race and ability (Artiles, 2011b; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Disproportionality is a "runaway object" that is partially shared and determined by multiple interacting social systems: schools, families, districts, and the state educational agencies (Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014). The disproportionality literature demonstrates the need to develop contextually situated analyses of how local configurations of multiple determinants interact to create patterns and predictors of disproportionality (Artiles, 2011b). As a runaway object, disproportionality requires continuous collaboration and dialogue among participants of those activity systems to examine and develop solutions for it (Bal, 2011).

Theoretical Framework: A Praxis-Based Model of Systemic Intervention

The first author developed the Learning Lab methodology for school staff and education leaders to build the capacity in schools to develop locally meaningful and adaptive solutions for highly complex, adaptive systemic problems (Bal, 2011). The Learning Lab design is informed by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Activity Theory) and employs *expansive learning laboratory methodology* and *formative intervention* to facilitate praxis, a continuous cycle of collective critical reflection and action among local stakeholders (Freire, 2000). To our knowledge, this is the first study that employed expansive learning laboratory methodology in the field of special education.

Activity Theory is the third-generation theory of cultural psychology and increasingly used in education research to study how individuals learn and develop as active social agents in local sociocultural and historical contexts. Built on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of mediated learning and experimental work on human–context interaction, Activity Theory takes activity systems as the unit of analysis to capture complexities of individual and organizational learning and change (Engeström, 2008). Activity Theory provides a new approach to educational experiments: *formative intervention* that aims to re-mediate institutional contexts to re-constitute practices and design robust learning contexts.

Formative interventions are epistemologically different than traditional experimental design in educational research. Formative interventions have four epistemic threads: (a) activity system as the unit of analysis, (b) systemic contradictions as a source of change, (c) increased collective agency as a layer of causality, and (d) re-mediation of practice as a form of transformation (Engeström, 2008).

As the driving forces of change, contradictions within an activity system lead to a *double bind* that is "a societally essential dilemma which cannot be resolved through separate individual actions alone—but in which joint co-operative actions can push a historically new form of activity into emergence" (Engeström, 1987, p. 165). In U.S. schools, disproportionality creates a double bind for educators and educational leaders: Practitioners find themselves in a double bind between addressing the immediate issues in their local contexts related to school discipline, students with behavioral problems, and disproportionality and the demands regarding the implementation of PBIS and other competing initiatives. To handle this double bind, local educational agencies and schools often rely on outside experts and/or technical assistance centers for helping them with PBIS implementation, cultural responsiveness, and disproportionality. However, the external experts usually have limited or no experiential knowledge about the local school contexts and rarely provide an operational definition of what cultural responsiveness is and how it can systematically transform local schools. Relying on technical assistance centers and external experts does not usually translate into continuous systemic improvement and capacity building to understand and address fluid educational problems (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Donovan (2013) stated,

> There will be no "silver bullets" that will transform education systems from the outside . . . if we create the organizational capacity for researchers and design experts to work with practitioners inside the system, we could potentially change the outcome. (p. 319)

We closely worked with local educational leaders and educators to implement the Learning Lab for building capacity in schools facing a runaway object and experiencing the double bind.

The Learning Lab targeted opening up problem-solving process to families, especially CLD families, community members, and school staff that have been historically excluded. The central focus of the Learning Lab was increasing meaningful collaboration and dialogue among its participants to re-mediate their school cultures by expanding disproportionality analysis. Local objectives within the Learning Lab were not established by researchers beforehand but were collectively determined by the participants and researchers (see the "Method" section for more information).

More specifically, we addressed the following research questions in this article:

Research Question 1: In what ways do local stakeholders engage in problem solving within Learning Lab?
Research Question 2: What are the challenges and possibilities regarding engaging multiple stakeholders to facilitate a critical examination and dialogue regarding disproportionality and PBIS implementation?

Method

The present study is part of the CRPBIS project, an ongoing statewide research project examining the implementation of Learning Lab in Wisconsin schools. To conduct a culturally responsive research study (Trainor & Bal, 2014), we designed and conducted this study with close collaborations with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and two school districts. We also partnered with the state's education centers and initiatives such as the PBIS Network and the RTI Center. Participating schools were invited to participate in the CRPBIS project based on the following criteria: (a) implementing PBIS, (b) experiencing disproportionality in behavioral outcomes, and (c) increasing sociodemographic diversity. Principals, PBIS coaches, and a research team collectively determined whether the project might be feasible, beneficial, and sustainable for their schools.

In this article, we focus on the Learning Lab implementation at Cole Elementary School in the Lillehammer School District (LSD) during the 2012–2013 school year. Lillehammer has a population of just over 29,000: 85% of the population identified as White, 6% identified as African American, 4% identified as Latino, about 3% identified as Asian, and approximately 2% identified as two or more races. Minority residents, specifically those of African American heritage, doubled in the last decade from 3% to 6%. The change was felt most strongly at Cole Elementary. Recently, LSD restructured school boundaries, which resulted in a sudden increase in diversity. The African American student population grew from 7% to 26%, the Latino population from 5% to 17%, and the Asian population from 1% to 6%. The percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged has increased 20% in the last 6 years to 55%.

This relatively rapid change made Cole Elementary the most diverse school in LSD. Meanwhile, demographic composition of the educational staff has been stable, majority White, middle class. During the 2012–2013 school year, there was only one full-time faculty of color out of 85 educators. There were four part-time educational support staff from CLD backgrounds. Disproportionality has been a lasting problem. The school was implementing PBIS, yet without effectively addressing disproportionality. In 2010–2011, the school served 395 students. White students consisted of

51% of the total population; 0.9% of them were suspended. African Americans comprised 26% of the school population, and 2.7% of those students were suspended.

Prior to the first Learning Lab meeting, the research team met with the principal, David Weber, twice to learn about the school's organizational structure, PBIS implementation, and other programs and initiatives such as cultural responsiveness and community outreach. To tailor the Learning Lab design, discussions centered on immediate systemic challenges and how the Lab might be helpful in his vision of school's future. The research team and internal PBIS coach reviewed schools' behavioral outcome data.

Participants

There were 36 participants including a principal (*n* = 1), school staff (*n* = 16), family members (hereafter parents, *n* = 13), a local YMCA representative (*n* = 1), and a five-person research team. Six participants (the principal, one school staff, three parents, the YMCA representative) were male. Based on the needs and preferences of the school leadership, the Learning Lab included school staff, family members, and a community representative. Maria Breton, the student services coordinator and the PBIS internal coach, was selected as the CRPBIS liaison by the principal. David and Maria cooperatively identified other potential members and chose the Building Leadership Committee as a starting group. The Building Leadership Committee had been formed as an umbrella committee overseeing schools' PBIS and RTI initiatives. All committee members were invited to participate in the Lab. The first meeting was composed of 17 school staff. Of those, 16 staff participants were White, and one was African American.

As for the research team members, the team consisted of the lead researcher, a professor of special education at a local university, and four graduate research assistants—two PhD students and two master's students in educational sciences. The lead researcher and a graduate research assistant were people of color. All research team members have experiential knowledge about Wisconsin schools and worked as practitioners (special education teachers and counselors) and researchers in the state. Three researchers were teaching in Wisconsin schools during the study. Two professors of education (White, female) who had worked with the state as consultants for culturally responsive education observed two Lab meetings. They made recommendations for the Lab activities through peer debriefing meetings with the research team.

In the first three Learning Lab meetings, the Lab members engaged in the first stage of the Cycle of Systemic Change (Engeström, 2008), the questioning stage, to identify the focus of the systemic transformation (see Figure 1) and select parent participants. Parents were included in the
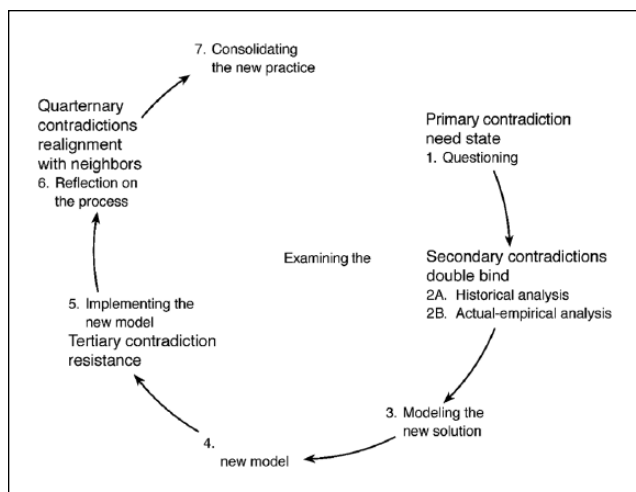
Figure 1. Cycle of Systemic Change (Reprinted from Engeström, 2008).

fourth meeting. In identifying the parents, a *participatory social justice* perspective was used (Bal, 2012): First, the research team worked with David and Maria to identify parents from nondominant backgrounds and historically underrepresented in school activities. Three groups of parents were identified as historically excluded from the school activities: African American and Latino parents, immigrant/refugee families (Hmong and African), and low-income and homeless families. Then, the Learning Lab participants engaged in a strategic decision-making process: The researchers asked the Lab members to invite parents from the targeted nondominant groups who would also work with them during this study and afterward because the Learning Lab is not a focus group or a professional development course, but a school-based committee in which families and community members participate as equal partners.

The members generated a list of potential participants. A total of 13 parents gave their consents. There were 2 recent-immigrant parents from Africa. Both had BS degrees, one of whom was working toward his PhD in a distance education program. There were 4 African American parents with a high school diploma or general education diploma (GED). One African American parent was experiencing homelessness. Two parents were the second-generation refugees of Hmong heritage. Of 3 Latino parents, 2 were recent immigrants from South America and 1 was a Chicana. There were 2 White parents; 1 was a grandfather and the caregiver of a student, while the second White parent, a mother serving as the head of the school's parent organization, had a BS degree. Later, this parent became a playground instructional assistant responsible for ODRs.

Learning Lab Implementation

Between June 2012 and June 2013, the Learning Lab participants met monthly for 2-hr meetings. The lead researcher

and Maria, the internal PBIS coach and CRPBIS liaison, co-facilitated the meetings.

Implementation of the Lab followed the Cycle of Systemic Change (Engeström, 2008, see Figure 1). The participants were first asked to identify daily pressing incidents of problems about disciplinary practices. Those incidents were used as the starting point. Freire (2000) suggested that a transformation for stakeholders should start

> in the "*here and now*," which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation—which determines their perception of it—can they begin to move. (p. 171)

The Learning Lab members identified two interconnected foci of the Learning Lab: *disproportionality* and *family–school collaboration*. Next, the facilitators introduced mediating artifacts, such as the Cycle of Systemic Change diagram, ODRs, and interactive data maps (designed to represent results of the statistical analyses of disproportionality within the district and state using Geographic Information System [GIS] technology; see CRPBIS, 2014 for the data maps).

Data Generation

Qualitative data were generated from ethnographic and discursive analysis of the Learning Lab meetings, individual and group interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, including the school's behavioral support plan. During the Learning Labs, a graduate research assistant took ethnographic notes, and the other two worked as visual ethnographers responsible for video and audio recordings. More than 40 hr of data were collected including 10 meetings, two pre-Lab meetings with David and Maria, seven individual interviews, four agenda meetings with David and Maria, one meeting for reviewing the school's behavioral data, and another meeting for mapping out the school's past and ongoing initiatives for community and family outreach. We reviewed artifacts such as instructional materials and guidelines.

The following mediating artifacts were introduced by the research team: the Cycle of Systemic Change (Engeström, 2008); the three planes of culture diagram showing interacting institutional, individual, and interactional cultural contexts (Artiles, 2011a); and the Courageous Conversations Compass (Singleton & Linton, 2005). We also created artifacts based on data collection activities in and out of the Lab meetings. For example, in the February meeting when the Lab discussed the institutional culture (e.g., social climate, roles, rules), the facilitators grouped one parent with one staff and asked each staff–parent dyad to take a tour of the school and to complete the CRPBIS Equity Walkthrough form developed based on a module for inclusive education

(Equity Alliance at ASU, 2009). The form includes questions related to school–family partnerships, resources, dialogue, physical space, and representation (e.g., How do adults and students communicate in the school? and Do all students have access to the same materials and supplies?). Each dyad presented their data. This allowed each member to have an opportunity to share views that might not be possible with a large group discussion format.

Quantitative data presented at the Learning Lab were drawn from two main sources: (a) school-level behavioral data (e.g., ODRs and EBD identification) and (b) district-level data about disability, demographic, and academic information and teacher characteristics for all districts in the state of Wisconsin. Five types of school-level discipline referral data (BIG 5) were reviewed through the School Wide Information System: Average ODRs per month, ODRs by problem behavior, ODRs by location, ODRs by student, and ODRs by time.

As part of the larger CRPBIS project, the research team examined the extent to which disproportionality in EBD identification and in exclusionary school discipline is predicted by student- and school-level factors. For those analyses, the CRPBIS research team built and tested statistical models for multi-level logistic regression. At the state level, we found that African American students and Native American students were two and three times more likely to be labeled with EBD than White students, whereas Latino students and English-Language Learners (ELLs) were underrepresented in EBD category compared with their White counterparts (odds ratios = 0.78 and 0.22, respectively). As for the school disciplinary actions, African American (odds ratio = 4.05), Hispanic (odds ratio = 1.40), and Native American (odds ratio = 2.48) youth were more likely than their White counterparts to be removed from school (see Bal et al., 2013 for full results of the disproportionality analysis). Results of the quantitative analyses were presented to the Lab participants through the interactive GIS data maps and pie charts presenting micro- (Cole Elementary), meso- (LSD), and macro- (Wisconsin) level findings. The visual/spatial representation of disproportionality was used as a method of qualitizing the quantitative data and served as a stimulus to facilitate a situated understanding of disproportionality within the Lab.

Analysis of local disproportionality often provokes discussion of race and racism, and educators find it hard to examine those issues openly (Skiba et al., 2008). We were mindful that individuals from CLD backgrounds might experience stress and further marginalization at structured "safe" race dialogues (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). To facilitate this discussion, we used the Courageous Conversations Compass and asked participants to reflect on disproportionality in small groups through the compass (Singleton & Linton, 2005). A participant trained in the Courageous Conversations helped the Lab members to use the compass.

Analysis

We employed a *Qualitative-Dominant Monotype Mixed Analysis* design in which qualitative and quantitative data sources are concurrently analyzed to inform each other: QUAL + (Quan → QUAL; Onwuegbuzie, Slate, Leech, & Collins, 2007). Quantitative data of disproportionality were qualitized by a "narrative profile formation, wherein narrative descriptions are constructed from statistical data" (p. 9). For analyzing qualitative data in identifying and documenting heuristic process of the Lab, we used an *interpretative research* approach (Erickson, 1986, 2006). The purpose of our analysis was to (a) generate preliminary assertions regarding systemic contradictions, exclusionary processes, and systemic transformation processes; and (b) establish the evidentiary warrant for the assertions via rigorously and continuously testing them against the whole data corpus.

The research team developed a set of preliminary hypotheses that transpired from the data. We then returned to the data searching for both confirming and disconfirming evidence to ensure that our hypotheses were emerging from the data. We checked our hypotheses with the participants as a way of members checking. We focused on unifying features such as re-occurring patterns that led to key linkages, which were tested across multiple data sources. To conduct a *trustworthy* qualitative analysis, we followed five criteria: (a) cohesion; (b) evidentiary adequacy and immersion, spending adequate time in research sites to develop trust and comprehensive understandings of the complexities of participants and their contexts; (c) data triangulation; (d) member checking; and (e) peer debriefing (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Stake, 2005). It was this iterative process between doing and understanding what was occurring that allowed the Learning Lab to move forward.

Results

Our analysis revealed two interrelated themes explaining the challenges and possibilities regarding the Learning Lab implementation at an elementary school: (a) building inclusivity within a bureaucratic institution and (b) shifting from deficit to expansive discourse. The themes mapped out a relational model that demonstrates the complexity of working with the participants who have connected with one another in specific roles and power relationships with the goal of engaging in shared discovery and action.

The themes are of particular importance because they help bring systemic tensions to the surface, facilitating praxis. One of our struggles with the data was that, in some cases, the quotes described points of view that were very different from our own views. Yet, in telling the story of how difficult conversations were structured, supported, and permitted to occur, it was important to be open about what we heard. It is in an expansive dialogue that the Lab comes

face to face with the diversity of experiential knowledge within the group and finds ways to move forward.

Building a Sustained Inclusive Working Community Within a School Bureaucracy

The work at Cole Elementary School was intentionally designed to not only bring together a diversified collective problem-solving team within the school but also to sustain the Learning Lab as part of the institutional infrastructure and organizational memory of the school even after the researchers left. The collective process encouraged a new concept of family–school collaboration relative to disproportionality, emphasizing participation frameworks to re-center perspectives that were marginalized in the school community. The roles and identities the members had assumed within their everyday lives at school complicated the new relationships that the Lab invited. For instance, some teachers and parents often settle into expert–novice relationships that the Learning Lab seeks to undo. Mary, a Latino parent, talked about the different kinds of relationship that she developed with a teacher as a work partner:

> I really like being partnered up with a teacher and having like homework to do with them because then it gives us a chance to talk to them not just in a school setting, but be able to talk to each other as people and not just as like a parent and a teacher conversation.

Histories and institutional cultures (e.g., roles, rules, and division of labor) shape individuals' participation in school activities, and other interacting activity systems (e.g., family and neighborhood) in which they engage in their daily lives. The Lab process encouraged social agency among the stakeholders who inhabited multiple activity systems. This was highlighted by the Lab participants who also volunteered or worked as para-educators at the school. Although they supported and followed the lead of teachers, they also formed alliances with students to help them navigate school. The teachers and administrators knew about these relationships but considered them secondary to the authority of their roles as holders of the curriculum and managers of the policies that regulated school activities. These relationships were rarely made transparent. The Learning Lab gave the para-educators a source of information that created new conversations and ways of relating to one another as equals.

Sustaining new modes of partnership in group requires a *knotworking*: "the emerging mode of collaboration in work settings that move toward co-configuration, a form of production aimed at the creation of customer-intelligent products or services which adapt to the changing needs" (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 13). Parents noticed how this knotworking was being formed:

> Well, I like in the beginning where we set those ground rules. You know, what happens in here stays in here. And we're not gonna talk about it at school-the crucial conversations that no one's going to hold it against you. So, that was really good, because I think that put us all at the same level, whether we're parent, teacher, whatever. (Sandy)

Families from nondominant groups often are marginalized within traditional school settings because the approaches to soliciting feedback from families reflect the dominant culture (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). A parent and playground instructional assistant, Sarah, understood the opportunities that parent–staff participation offered:

> Besides, we haven't got their perspective because we don't have the same, you know, perspective. We see the kids in another way, and so, sometimes it's interesting and surprising what their perspective is.

As this work moved from building relationships to working the knots, tensions began to arise. The work of deepening the discourse and understanding each other's perspectives rubbed against the everyday practices of the participants within the school bureaucracy (the institutional culture). For instance, the teachers felt frustrated as if they were "spinning their wheels" in the first three meetings as disproportionality was introduced, data presented, and then, possible causes explored through their monthly data review meetings and professional development activities regarding cultural responsiveness. The need to start something, to move from collective historical and empirical analysis to action instead of "just talking about it" began to surface. Exploring and identifying disproportionality and family–school collaboration felt as if it was rehashing old conversations even though these conversations were new for many nonteacher participants. Maria, the PBIS internal coach, voiced this concern at an interview:

> I think so far what we've been doing is talking about where we are at a school- as a school, what we've tried in the past, what we see as issues, and everyone's voice is equally heard which is fine. But as a school, they've done that before and so they're feeling a little_the people that I've spoken with are feeling like we need to make some traction. It [cultural responsiveness] is an issue . . . we've really already done a lot of things to get us to the point of actualization of that being an issue and not just behavioral but student achievement wise. And so I think this— the team is really ready to like push us to that next level like what else do we need to do.

As we interpreted these comments, we wondered what the role of power/privilege was within the Learning Lab, given the roles, positions, and histories that administrative staff, parents, teachers, and researchers assumed. The school's "cultural responsiveness" work that had been done

already by the educators without the parents had led to the commitment to a Learning Lab. Until the Learning Lab, parents had been excluded from examining disproportionality and some of the deeper issues that might have contributed to disproportionality at Cole Elementary.

Some parents felt reluctant to share because they felt that their perspectives were not as important as the teachers, researchers, or administration. Other parents felt that while they learned a lot from the Learning Lab experience, they did not feel as if they could contribute to discussion. As these different perspectives surfaced, both parents and educators deepened their appreciation of each other's learning, and gradually, trust began to develop. As the Learning Lab community bond grew stronger, parents felt safer in sharing their experiences. Norms set by the Lab members to support the notion of balance in terms of who was speaking in the group reinforced the notion that the participants were equals in the process. Samara, a teacher noted,

> I was a little uncomfortable with the terms that we had been using . . . were saying "professional educators" and "parents" and "professional teachers" or something like that. Most of us who are professional educators are also parents. And our parents are professional parents as well. And again, there's I guess not only a balance in the voices, but a balance in [the decision making].

Educators and families alike began to realize how important it was to re-negotiate their relationships. Beyond having inclusive spaces to represent themselves and reexamine each other's positionality, authentic collaboration required that the Lab members actively participate in problem-solving and decision-making processes toward shared goals (Friend & Cook, 2007). However within the context of school–family partnerships, CLD families and school personnel usually do not work as equal partners: The terms and function of such relationships and the rights and responsibilities of CLD families are often determined by school personnel (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Because the U.S. educational system is generally characterized by values and beliefs reflecting the dominant society (Kozleski et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995), perceptions that certain families lack resources and capacities because of cultural, economic, and linguistic differences significantly limit the quality and focus of partnerships (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

CLD families have not been viewed as worthy or capable of the critical and serious work of reforming educational systems and practices (Fine, 1993). Yet, it is precisely this work within family–school partnerships that must be engaged to re-mediate histories of marginalization and oppression CLD students and families have long experienced within education system. As we discovered through the Learning Lab, doing this work is difficult because the players have so much at stake. Time to learn and develop trust and then a mutually respectful and meaningful dialogue among families and educators rubs against the institutionalized need and pressure to perform and demonstrate improvement in outcomes.

From a Deficit Perspective to an Expansive Discourse and Understanding

Participatory social justice honors the complexity and diversity in the lives of nondominant communities and explores the institutional processes that reproduce socially unjust spaces where CLD youth and families from nondominant racial, economic, linguistics, and ability groups are excluded and negatively positioned through deficit-oriented views (Bal, 2012). By using the participatory social justice approach (Bal, 2012), the Learning Lab facilitated a collective critical dialogue and movement to an expansive discourse and understanding.

In the initial Lab meetings with the educators, a metaphor, "empty backpack," that was introduced by Samara, the teacher who earlier criticized the labels ("parents" vs. "professional educators") used to describe families who later joined the Learning Lab. The empty backpack metaphor, instantly accepted by other educators, mediated the first stage of the Lab process, examining the extent, meaning, and root cause of disproportionality.

> I guess a bigger picture one for me that I can't nail down as ethnicity or poverty is how to get the students who come to us with less in their backpack or different things in their backpack to progress at the level of academic achievement that's expected. (Maddy)

The empty backpack metaphor suggested that certain students' backpacks are "empty" when they get to school, while others come with a full backpack. Sometimes missing qualities were specifically attributed to race or ethnicity of the students; other times, it was less direct, highlighting the deficits themselves. In these next quotes, members of the Learning Lab use the "empty backpack" metaphor to describe academic deficits existing prior to a child's first year in school. Later on, they effortlessly transitioned in and out of conversations regarding African American students and empty backpacks that some students bring to school, suggesting that the empty backpacks are found primarily with African American students.

While one tact might be to explore the assumptions that undergird Maddy's point of view, here we offer her quote as an example of the kind of discourse that needed to be surfaced and mediated during the Learning Lab in order for the Learning Lab as a whole to reposition their understanding and therefore, their conceptualization of and resultant actions toward disproportionality. The re-mediating came

through the discourse and the use of artifacts designed to help participants question their own thinking and actions that are not static and cohesive but dynamic and even contradictive. Morgan extended Maddy's premise:

> Just sort of expanding rather than thinking about how little they have in their backpack. Thinking about what different things they have that they're bringing to the table that can support their learning.

Monique, a teacher, joined the discussion and offered the following observation:

> I brought this particular story up once already, but it just kind of made things clear to me that this is gonna be what's happening from when we started. So about the ODRs on the playground. I had a particular instant when an African American boy was causing a lot of trouble on the playground. I talked with his teacher. She told me that when he's in the classroom, she called him a schoolboy. He's like a schoolboy. He wants to learn. She doesn't see any of these behaviors in the school. The minute he got out on the playground, it was like he was a tough kid and he wasn't gonna let an adult go into that world.

This extract illustrates collective re-construction or expansion of the object, an African American student with behavioral issues, specifically after the inclusion of the parents in the Lab. However, ensuing discussion suggested that both school professionals and family members had internalized notions of inadequacy and deficit-oriented explanations. They used these internalized notions to interpret why that student acted differently on the playground and in the classroom. In this movement of object expansion, having parents from nondominant racial and linguistic backgrounds served an important role in expanding how the educators interpreted the situation. At this point, the problem (i.e., the deficits students bring to school) was placed within the African American culture. An African American parent, Destiny, stated the following:

> I think a lot of it with our culture, Black culture to be honest, it comes out of our house because a lot of times our children come and they ask for help and a lot of us because we haven't been to school we don't know this.

Destiny's comments were not challenged but supported by other African American participants. As seen, Destiny explained the problem with African American families' lack of knowledge about schooling. In a system built on the deficit-view, placing educational problems within CLD students and families has naturalized and become a common sense (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). From a critical theoretical stance, African American participants' reactions toward disproportionality—identifying African American families as the source of the problem—can be interpreted as hegemonic—"elements of unconsciousness,

common sense, and consciousness that are compatible with ideologies and social practices that perpetuate existing practices of domination and oppression" (Giroux, 1983, p. 265).

Both school professionals and parents were attempting to reconstruct the object of the disproportionality analysis as African American students with behavioral issues. As expected, in the beginning, they did not question the material underpinnings (the institutional practices and institutional culture of the school). As these issues surfaced, understanding how to mediate these notions authentically without imposing view of the researchers became critical.

The expansive learning experience at the Cole Elementary School depended heavily on the collective and critical expansion of how the members understood disproportionality via existing and new tools. As a way of accelerating the discourse, we presented the school's behavioral data (BIG 5) in a subsequent meeting as a way of facilitating empirical and historical analyses of disproportionality. The PBIS team had shared the data with the school staff at monthly meetings, but they had not presented the data to families and community representatives. Reviewing the multi-level disproportionality data facilitated a collective examination of the extent of disproportionality and its root causes. The Learning Lab learned that African American students were significantly overrepresented in the school, the district, and the state (Bal et al., 2013). The Learning Lab group reflected on the data using a heuristic that asked participants to connect their responses to four arenas: believing, thinking, feeling, and acting (Singleton & Linton, 2005). Here, Brett, an African American parent reflects on how the disproportionality data made him feel about deficit thinking in multiple settings.

> I feel like hurt . . . I don't even feel that, not even just for my children . . . I mean I don't want to be looked at as different and when I say looked at mean for all young Black kids or minorities or just kids in general I don't feel like, I feel like when you look at that graph right there it kind of separates us from everybody else and that's one of the biggest problems that we've been having in America period is all the separation. We gotta find out a way to come together and I feel like that's what we doing here, by everybody being here, but it does really hurt to see those numbers looking like that. Only 20% of the whole schools is Black and what did they say? 45% or something office referrals comes from us and that's not, that's unacceptable. We just can't do that.

Brett positioned his feelings within a social justice frame and demanded corrective action. He expanded the responsibility for disproportionality from African American families and the culture that African American students bring to the school (e.g., "empty backpack"). Brett contextualized disproportionality as an outcome of collective actions within historical issues of race relationships in the United States. This was an illustration of expanding collective construction

of disproportionality. The Lab was able to continue to expand their thinking from this point. Denise, the only African American teacher of the school who was also responsible for culturally responsive education initiative in LSD, noted the following:

> We have gotten as far as we think we are in that just because there are Black and Whites or people of all different colors at a table, and I think, I feel like that's what the civil rights movement did. It just said integrate, and we just integrated. We never dealt with the issues around integration. We just had to do it. It was kind of just like an arranged marriage. You don't know a person and all of a sudden you just get married. And, you have to deal with oh this is that person's culture, this is how that person . . . As opposed to taking time to get to know, dating, like if there was dating before marriage, then you know what person's quirks are and you can enter in with a different perspective. I just feel like because there was so much segregation and there were so many mindsets that were keeping at least African Americans inferior to Whites, I don't know that those issues were resolved once integration has happened. And, so here we are about 50 years later and yes there have plenty gained, but I just feel like the issue is way bigger than this conversation—bigger than Cole. I believe it is very societal, a society issue.

Denise's comment includes explicit and implicit references to the cultural history of the nation: slavery, segregation, and integration ("an arranged marriage"). Denise also firmly re-stated Brett's call for a corrective action in society as the solution to disproportionality. Through the interactions in empirical-historical analyses of local disproportionality within the Lab, the African American and African immigrant participants moved the conversation from individual students and a cultural group to the larger cultural-historical context and brought societal and institutional contexts by providing examples outside of Cole Elementary School.

Overall, the Learning Lab process was not linear but sporadic, as the participants suggested solutions or new models of actions during the initial questioning phase, while in the Cycle of Systemic Change, stages are represented sequential from the questioning to consolidating new practice (see Figure 1). We completed the stages of questioning and historical and empirical analyses and started to develop new models of solutions. At the last meeting, the parent participants stated that the Learning Lab process was productive and helpful and provided examples how the process re-mediated their interactions with educators at Cole Elementary School and other schools in LSD. They stated their willingness to continue participating in the Lab and working with the teachers and administrators.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the implementation of the Learning Lab with its possibilities and challenges at an elementary school. The Learning Lab model conceptualizes disproportionality as a systemic disruption that provides a critical opportunity for educators to reexamine and re-mediate school cultures. Diverse perspectives, experiences, and practices that students, families, and educators bring to schools can serve as resources for educational leaders to build inclusive and adaptive schools. Bringing together four communities of practice—educators, families, community members, and researchers—that have different and often conflicting perceptions, experiences, priorities, and timelines in a Learning Lab have been a substantial challenge because, historically, these communities have been isolated from one another in the U.S. education system. Their interactions have been characterized by hierarchical relationship patterns. During the Learning Lab, we have experienced the possibilities and constraints of expansive learning to achieve meaningful and sustainable collaboration or knotworking. This work has a promise for increasing the impact of PBIS model in diverse and dynamic contexts of local schools and developing capacity for democratic school cultures in which diversity is nurtured and treated as strength rather than an obstacle to overcome.

The goal of the Learning Lab is to facilitate meaningful and sustained participation of family members from historically marginalized communities in problem-solving processes regarding PBIS implementation (Bal, 2011). Through the use of the Learning Lab, the present study focused on facilitating a space where the continuous reflection of disproportionality and educational practices could guide the initiatives of a school environment. More specifically, the Learning Lab focused on providing more opportunities for nondominant parents to take part in crucial problem-solving processes, as they are often left out of these processes. Not only does the need for more robust and inclusive environments for nondominant communities exist, but this study has highlighted the need for deep learning and transformation, where joint-cooperative actions may provide contextually fit solutions.

The Learning Lab offered a systematic opportunity to understand the school culture and practices that give rise to disproportionality through exploring qualitative data holistically and heuristically, while engaging in a situated research. In addition to facilitating active involvement of multiple stakeholders within an educational institution, the Lab model suggests an innovative use data. The Lab members generated and used data (e.g., the walkthrough, historical analysis, and BIG 5) to examine school culture and outcomes. The Lab expanded the conceptualization of data (what counts as evidence) as a way to evaluate the potential changes they made.

Limitations

A limitation of this study includes the limited number of labs that formed the basis of this analysis. Moreover,

generalization of this formative intervention needs to be investigated. Generalizability of the findings and actions within this Lab depends on "local actors' productive adaptation of interventions or use of theories from research and the documentation of the work they must do sustain change are important sources of evidence for generalizability" (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014, p. 21). While we were able to describe the implementation process along with the nature of the discourse in Lab, its impact on everyday practice is not available at this time. We intend to extend our design to include deeper conversations with the participants for our ongoing cross-case analysis including data from the other sites. We will continue to partner the state's educational agency and districts to disseminate the findings and to implement the Learning Lab designs developed by local educators, families, and researchers in Wisconsin for Wisconsin schools.

Implications

We suggest that practitioners implement the Learning Labs to form as research and innovation sites in their schools and districts for facilitating a homegrown, equity-oriented systemic transformation in order to examine and address local patterns and predictors of disproportionality and the implementation challenges regarding their behavioral support systems. Educational researchers can examine how the Learning Lab can serve as a zone of proximal development (ZOPED) for school communities (Vygotsky, 1978). It is important for the future of this project and other similar projects to continually reflect on what information is presented within the Lab; how families' cultural practices, histories, and goals are included; and ultimately how such a knotworking builds the institutional capacity for sustained coalitions among schools, families, community-based organizations, and local educational agencies.

Federal and local educational agencies allocate a substantial amount of financial resources and time for technical assistance centers and professional development workshops in order to assist local educators to solve highly complex educational equity problems. We recognize the task of sustained school reform is not as the product of disjointed, top-to-bottom activities such as professional development workshops and trainings provided by technical assistance centers or independent consultants. It can be achieved by building an intelligent infrastructure from the ground–up and creatively using existing resources in schools and local educational agencies. Such an infrastructure can maintain agility and cultural responsiveness of schools without relying on external sources or individual agendas and actions of educational leaders or researchers.

Social justice is not an abstract notion or something "handed down" but a continuous collective struggle of people in the unjust systems that they inhabit and reproduce knowingly or unknowingly (Soja, 2010; Young,

1990). Because exclusionary practices have been institutionalized and become taken-for-granted in U.S. schools, inclusive, transformative re-medial spaces and practices should be also institutionalized to nurture democratic school cultures. Democratic schools can promote social justice depending on the degree to which stakeholders have the opportunity to represent themselves and influence the key processes. As Varenne and McDermott (1998) aptly put, it is one kind of problem to have a behavioral range different from expectations in schools; it is another kind of problem to be in a school culture in which others use that difference for degradation and the exclusion. The latter problem is worse, specifically when a group is historically denied influence in the decision-making and problem-solving activities in schools.

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