



# Culturally Competent Assessment and Consultation

Because the outcome of a consultation or an assessment can have significant implications for students, principals should ensure that those services are culturally competent.

By Mary Beth Klotz and Andrea Canter

The greatest distance between people is not space. The greatest distance between people is culture.

—*Jamake Highwater*

Given the increasing diversity of U.S. schools, using culturally competent practices when assessing students and providing consultation for placement and services is absolutely essential to improving outcomes for all students and, in particular, to reducing achievement gaps and the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education. Principals play a key role in establishing the core values and schoolwide goals necessary to ensure that all professionals in the school are culturally competent in their interaction with students and that the school environment reflects the diversity of the student population.

Culturally competent practice requires integrating culturally sensitive

attitudes, knowledge, and skills into the problem-solving framework of consultation, assessment, and intervention by which schools meet the educational needs of individual students. Appropriately trained school-based consultants—such as psychologists, counselors, reading or ESL specialists—can help guide the process and support the efforts of teachers and other staff members as well as improve collaboration with families.

## General Issues

Providing culturally competent services requires that schools and school personnel take some basic steps.

### Define Your Community's Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Although a national perspective is helpful, it is more important to understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of your community. School personnel

should first identify what cultural groups are represented in the school by obtaining state and community demographic data. Information about available programs, types of services, program criteria, service providers, and community leaders among the various cultural and linguistic groups should also be gathered. Such information is available from professionals who are employed by the government (including the state department of education), social service agencies, universities, school districts, local libraries, and online resources.

### Designate Your School-Based Consultants

It is important to designate appropriate personnel to serve as consultants when addressing concerns about the behavior and academic achievement of students from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. These may be the same professionals who provide general consultation services and may include school psychologists, social workers, counselors, reading specialists, ESL teachers, or other staff members who participate in the problem-solving process. Consultants and assessment

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personnel must understand their own culture and how it affects others, respect and value other cultures, learn how to design and implement culturally appropriate assessments and interventions, and develop an understanding of how to build bridges across cultural differences while recognizing that there are individual differences within cultural groups (Ingraham, 2000).

### **Establish a Pool of Community Consultants and Assistants**

Most schools will find it necessary to augment school-based consultants with people from the community. Specific steps and considerations include:

**Proactive efforts.** After school personnel identify the possible cultural groups and languages represented at their school site, a pool of people from the relevant cultural and linguistic groups should be identified to serve as assistants. These individuals can be found in the sources already noted and in students' families. In addition, many translation and interpreter services provided by individuals and agencies can be contacted over the Internet.

**Types of consultants and assistants.** Potential consultants or evaluation assistants include cultural brokers (individuals who can provide you with insight into the specific cultural or linguistic group or who can provide a target student or family with information regarding the mainstream culture and language of your community), interpreters (individuals who possess nativelike proficiency in the target language and English), and translators (individuals who possess native written language proficiency in the target language and English and can provide word-for-word or word approximation translations).

**Selecting consultants and assistants.** Identifying appropriate consultants and evaluation assistants, as well as interpreters, requires careful screening of candidates and training of selected individuals. Important information that can be obtained from an interview includes the candidate's personal history

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as it relates to the target language or culture; qualifications in oral and written language proficiency (in English and the target languages); and willingness to receive any necessary training in school laws, ethical standards, and assessment procedures (including standardization issues).

**Using interpreters.** Interpreters are essential to conducting fair and accurate evaluations of English language learners (ELLs) and in working collaboratively with parents who lack proficiency in English. Not just anyone should serve as an interpreter, however. Most experts agree that children should not be used as interpreters because of the sensitive nature of the information interpreted. However, experts don't agree on who should serve as an adult interpreter. For example, there is concern regarding asking family members or family friends to serve as interpreters because of sensitivity issues, as well as possible violations of confidentiality. Although interpreters may be needed in all the stages of the consultation and evaluation process involving the student and family, the issues to consider are who is the most appropriate interpreter, when to use an interpreter, and how to use the information conveyed by an interpreter.

### **Expand Knowledge of English and Second Language Acquisition**

For consultants and assessment personnel to provide culturally competent services to ELLs, they need to obtain or expand their knowledge of the acquisition of English as a first versus a second or additional language; other world languages; and how language proficiency, dominance, and preference affect school performance. School personnel who can assist in this process include teachers of

ELLs (e.g., ESL, ESOL, or bilingual education teachers), speech/language pathologists, reading specialists, reading teachers, and dual language or bilingual assessment specialists. If your school district does not have some of these specialists, consider contacting adjoining districts, universities, or your state's department of education for a referral and training opportunities.

### **Problem-Solving Stages**

The problem-solving process is the essence of assessment and consultation and typically follows several specific stages. In this model, principals or their designees work collaboratively with teachers and parents who are seeking assistance in working effectively with students from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Cultural issues may emerge during any of the problem solving stages. The following points are adapted from Sheridan (2000) unless otherwise noted.

#### **Establish a cooperative partnership**

- A key factor in creating a strong partnership is developing mutual trust and respect, which require valuing cultural differences and viewpoints.
- Take into consideration how parents from diverse cultures view collaboration in schools. Parents may define collaboration differently, ranging from cooperating with those they regard as "experts" to becoming full decision-making partners in the process (Lopez & Truesdell, in press).
- The interpreter, the cultural broker, or another assistant or consultant should be regarded as an essential partner in service delivery.

#### **Problem definition and analysis**

- Cultural differences should not be viewed as a problem, but as key

ingredients to interpreting issues in student performance and developing effective and appropriate services.

- Consider the learners' cultural and linguistic background as well as their educational background. For example, look at the delivery of instruction within a multicultural context and determine whether the learner has the background knowledge (including linguistic proficiency) required to complete the task (Lopez & Truesdell, in press).
- Recognize that the behavioral scrutiny often required in data collection may be viewed as an invasion of privacy by people in some cultures. Adjust the data collection process to align with a particular family's view when possible with advice from a cultural broker or consultant.
- Assessment of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds involves specific challenges and requires the use of alternative and flexible procedures.

#### **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 are consistent with their preferred goals.
- Recognize that intervention, like assessment, must be linked to the cultural realities of the home and school to ensure effectiveness. Such considerations as time and material resources must be taken into account during intervention development for the intervention to be successful.

#### **Intervention implementation**

- Intervention will be more effective if the goals and plans are developed in a culturally sensitive and cooperative manner. A strategy that is effective for students from the mainstream culture may be inappropriate, unproven, or ineffective for students from other backgrounds.
- Problems with implementation may be linked to unidentified variables. Even careful, culturally competent consultants will sometimes overlook an

## **Collaborative Problem Solving: Can It Work in Your School?**

The school psychologist received a request for a psychoeducational assessment of Juan, a 12-year-old boy who moved from the Dominican Republic last year. Although Juan is currently placed in the sixth grade because of his age and receives daily ESL services, he has yet to master his basic academic skills, including understanding vocabulary from a variety of instructionally appropriate literary and informational texts. In addition, Juan's school records note that he had poor literacy skills in Spanish, his first language, although he performed slightly better in math.

The referral for a bilingual psychoeducational assessment was being considered to determine whether Juan meets the criteria of being a student with a learning disability who is in need of special education services. However, when Juan's IEP team meets to discuss the referral, the ESL teacher and the general education teacher report that many of their English language learner (ELL) sixth-grade students are struggling with discussing words and word meanings that they are encountering in text, instruction, and conversation.

After consulting with the principal, who sees the benefit of a group problem-solving approach, the team decides to implement a coordinated intervention in the area of vocabulary development that will include all of the sixth-grade ELL students who are having difficulty. Each week, the teacher assesses the students on their vocabulary development. On the basis of these assessments, the teacher, the school psychologist, and the ESL teacher meet to coordinate lesson plans and develop interventions for the week. Interventions include using flash cards to practice vocabulary words in a ratio of 70% known to 30% unknown items. Using this drill technique, the students receive distributed, repeated practice throughout the school day.

Each week, the students are assessed and their progress is charted so their teachers can base their instruction on what the students know and adjust their instructional interventions as needed. By the end of the year, the assessments show that the targeted students have mastered their grade-appropriate vocabulary skills in instructional contexts. Juan's referral for a special education evaluation is dropped, and he continues to make adequate progress in the general education program.

*—Provided by Arlene Silva, NASP graduate assistant*

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implementation barrier that is linked to a cultural or linguistic difference. When interventions do not meet goals as expected, further consultation and assessment may be needed.

### Intervention evaluation

- All intervention strategies should be monitored and evaluated to determine success, and modifications should be made as needed. At the conclusion of the consultation, work to establish systems of support that will help sustain effective intervention outcomes over time. The support systems must address the role of families.

### Culturally Competent Assessment

There are a number of possible action steps that principals can share with school personnel to ensure that individual assessments are conducted in a cul-

turally sensitive and nondiscriminatory manner. Although much of the focus in culturally competent assessment is on students who are ELLs, the basic elements of alternative and flexible procedures should be present whenever a student from a nonmainstream background is evaluated.

All actions taken by a teacher or an evaluation specialist—including consultations and interventions before, during, and after a referral—are collectively defined as the evaluation process. In addition, it is assumed that the teacher or evaluation specialist is part of a team of professionals who will participate in selecting assessment strategies, collecting and analyzing information, interpreting assessment results, making relevant determinations of service needs, and generating intervention strategies. Many of these strategies also apply to the large-scale

assessments required under the No Child Left Behind Act.

### Expanding the Evaluation Process

**Allow more time.** The evaluation strategy should be expanded by factoring in the need for more time than would be spent on the typical evaluation.

**Recognize the limits of translations and use nonverbal and alternative assessment strategies.** On-the-spot translations of standardized tests are considered inappropriate by many experts. When assessing students from culturally or linguistically different backgrounds, the use of standardized nonverbal cognitive and translated tests (when available in the target language) is recommended. Such assessment strategies as curriculum-based assessments, test-teach-test, and performance monitoring over time should also be conducted.

**Gather extensive background information.** Conduct a review of all historical data available about the student, using interpreters as needed. Seeking background information will facilitate the interpretation of results from interventions and assessments. A chronological

## Resources

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

**Culturally Competent Practice**  
[www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence](http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence)

**National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)**  
[www.nabe.org](http://www.nabe.org)

**Online Directory of ESL Resources**  
[www.cal.org/resources/ncbe/esldirectory](http://www.cal.org/resources/ncbe/esldirectory)

**Portraits of the Children: Culturally Competent Assessment** (CD-ROM and video). National Association of School Psychologists. 2003. Bethesda, MD: Author.

**U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition**  
[www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html)

history from birth to present—including school attendance, family structure, household changes and moves, and medical and developmental histories—provides a critical context for the rest of the evaluation.

**Address the role of language.** An important part of the evaluation process is determining whether there is a need for a language assessment and what languages need to be assessed. Language evaluations should include assessments of speaking, reading, and writing abilities. Areas that need to be addressed include the student's language history (ages and stages of all languages that the student speaks and hears), dominance (the language for which the student has the most proficiency), and preference (the language the student prefers to speak).

**Conduct debriefing sessions.** Such sessions should be conducted after assessment sessions and should include interpreters and evaluation assistants, who can offer important insights regarding the student's understanding of the procedures, motivation, and cultural factors that might interfere with obtaining reliable and valid results.

**Recognize limitations in all reports.** The assessment team should note in its report what information was gathered using interpreters, cultural brokers, or other assistants; what modifications in testing procedures were used and why; and the cautions and limitations of these data.

**Include additional interpretation questions.** In general, teams must consider what role language, culture, and social history factors play in the results and observations of the student from a cultural or linguistic minority

background. It should be the goal of the evaluation team to conclude that any disabilities identified are not solely attributable to language acquisition or cultural issues.

### Summary

Given the growing diversity of the U.S. population, it is imperative that education professionals engage in culturally competent practices. This is particularly true during the provision of consultative services and assessment procedures because the outcomes of a specific consultation or assessment can have significant implications for a student's placement; the services he or she receives; and ultimately, his or her success in school. All educational stakeholders—including principals, school personnel, parents, and community members working in the schools—have a responsibility to examine and increase their cultural competence so their efforts meet the needs of all students. **PL**

### References

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

## Advertisement

This article is the second in a three-part Student Counseling series that addresses culturally competent schools. It is adapted from "Culturally Competent Assessment of English Language Learners: Strategies For School Personnel" by Doris Páez, PhD, NCSP, and "Culturally Competent Consultation in Schools: Information for School Psychologists and School Personnel" by Karen Nuijens, MA, and Mary Beth Klotz, PhD, NCSP, in *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators* (NASP, 2004).