

## WHAT'S CULTURE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

### CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICES

#### CULTURE DEFINED

##### What is culture?

Culture refers to shared perceptions and behaviors among a group of individuals. Members of a cultural group share exposure to particular traditions, customs, practices, and beliefs in the same physical or social environment. Individuals within a cultural group may also share cultural repertoires (i.e., habits, styles, and skills) and the micro-level processes of meaning making and decision-making. Culture is a dynamic process rather than a fixed index or variable.

#### MENTAL HEALTH: CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

##### What is mental health?

Mental health is typically defined as the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity. However, definitions of mental health themselves are rooted in value judgments that may vary across individuals and cultures. School mental health professionals should consider students', families', and other stakeholders' perceptions of mental health during service provision.

#### Culture and School Mental Health Interventions

American schools are becoming increasingly culturally diverse more quickly than predicted. Racial and ethnic minorities make up more than half of all children born in the United States<sup>1</sup>. This rapid shift necessitates that school mental health professionals recognize cultural diversity and respond to multicultural students' diverse mental health needs and strengths in school settings with preventive interventions that target a range of cultural factors. Cultural factors include but are not limited to the influences of society, social justice, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.

#### How can school mental health professionals be more culturally responsive during service provision?

School mental health professionals may become overwhelmed when faced with culturally responsive service delivery. Below are some strategies used by culturally responsive school mental health practitioners.

- ✚ *Consider cultural diversity during the implementation of evidence-based school mental health interventions.* Practitioners may find it necessary to adapt evidence-based school mental health interventions to account for student and caregiver perspectives, values, needs, and choices. Culturally responsive practitioners should understand key principles of cultural adaptation.

## Three Common Elements of Cultural Adaptation<sup>2</sup>

Involving the community	Researching the target group to identify the areas to address in the culturally adapted intervention	Consulting with experts in either cultural adaptation and/or experts on the target group
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- ✚ *Engage in self-evaluation to build cultural self-awareness.* Culturally responsive practitioners continually examine their own views, identities, and biases, and explore how these cultural factors may affect school mental health practice.
- ✚ *Improve cultural literacy.* Practitioners who are sensitive to cultural diversity seek current knowledge of other cultures but are careful to avoid stereotyping. These practitioners consult with other professionals about multicultural issues.
- ✚ *Apply culturally responsive micro-skills.* Culturally sensitive school mental health professionals adjust basic counseling skills to take the cultural norms of the student and family into account. For example, nonverbal attending norms (e.g., eye contact, body language, and physical space during conversation) may vary across cultures.
- ✚ *Conduct multicultural interviews when gathering background information about the student and family.* To meet the diverse needs of students and families, practitioners should conduct interviews that intentionally gather information about student and family cultural factors. The Jones Intentional Multicultural Interview Schedule<sup>3</sup> is an example of an intentional multicultural interview.

## REFERENCES

1. U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *Most children younger than age 1 are minorities, Census Bureau reports.* Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-90.html>.
2. Burlew, A. K., & Mosley-Howard, G. S. (2015). Culturally sensitive mental health services. In Witte, R. H. & Mosley-Howard, G. S. (Eds.). *Mental health practice in today's schools: Issues and interventions.* Springer Publishing Company.
3. Jones, J.M. (2009). Counseling with multicultural intentionality: The process of counseling and integrating client cultural variables. In J.M. Jones (Ed.), *The psychology of multiculturalism in the schools: A primer for practice, training, and research* (pp. 191-213). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

## LEARN MORE

<https://captus.samhsa.gov/prevention-practice/strategic-prevention-framework/cultural-competence> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website that includes resources, videos, and practical suggestions on understanding cultural competence and infusing it into practice.

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/culturalcompetence/> National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) website that includes links to articles and resources on cultural competence, including information on many useful diversity-related websites.

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