

Using Learning Labs for Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Aydin Bal¹, Elizabeth M. Schrader², Kemal Afacan¹, and Dian Mawene¹

Abstract

Culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports (CRPBIS) is a statewide research project designed to renovate behavioral support systems to become more inclusive, adaptive, and supportive for all. The CRPBIS methodology, called *learning lab*, provides a research-based process to bring together local stakeholders and facilitates their authentic participation in problem solving. Learning lab addresses the outcome disparities for youth from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds and strategically includes CLD families and students and representatives from community-based organizations. Learning labs were found to successfully create and sustain productive partnerships among local stakeholders that renovated their school discipline systems. The purpose of this article is to provide specific guidelines and key considerations for practitioners on how to implement learning labs to facilitate authentic and productive family–school–community collaboration and systemic transformation in schools.

Keywords

CRPBIS, learning lab, disproportionality, school discipline, capacity building, family–school–community collaboration, systemic transformation

Today, teachers and education leaders in the United States are faced with the crucial task of addressing persistent and complex inequities that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and families experience in schools. Particularly troubling is the overrepresentation of CLD students in exclusionary discipline practices (detention, suspension, and expulsion; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Many educators see these disparities and ask such questions as

1. Why are many African American students receiving more discipline referrals than other students in my school?
2. How can our school discipline be culturally responsive?
3. How can we make meaningful connections with diverse families to support the success of all students?

To address these questions, schools often rely on outside expertise. External experts usually have limited knowledge about local school contexts and rarely provide an actionable process that is locally meaningful (Frattura & Capper, 2007). External resources, such as professional development workshops provided by consultants or technical assistance centers, rarely translate into capacity

building in schools for systemic improvement. In addition, disproportionality in behavioral outcomes may perpetuate distrust between educators and CLD students, families, and communities. Educators' attempts to bring families and community members, particularly those from CLD backgrounds, into school activities are not usually sustained, nor do they result in authentic family–school–community collaboration (Harry & Klingner, 2014). This article presents a specific methodology for facilitating an inclusive problem-solving process whereby practitioners can effectively initiate authentic and productive collaboration with students, families, and community members—specifically, those from historically marginalized backgrounds—and design culturally responsive discipline systems.

¹University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA

²The Tomorrow River School District, WI, USA

Corresponding Author:

Aydin Bal, PhD, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education, 1000 Bascom Mall, Room 403, Madison, WI 53706, USA.
Email: abal@wisc.edu

Addressing Behavioral Outcome Disparities

In a given school year, over 3 million students across the United States lost instructional time due to exclusionary discipline practices, which is “about the number of children it would take to fill every seat in every major league baseball park and every NFL stadium in America, combined” (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 6). While widely used, exclusionary discipline does not effectively change negative behaviors in students nor does it increase academic performance and safety in schools. Rather, it is associated with higher dropout rates and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011).

Historically, CLD students disproportionately received exclusionary discipline more frequently and were punished more severely for less serious and more subjective incidents, such as disrespect, insubordination, and excessive noise (Skiba et al., 2011). In the past three decades, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) emerged as a systemic approach to design a well-defined system of schoolwide behavioral support and prevention. Many schools implementing PBIS have successfully reduced office discipline referrals (ODR); however, PBIS has not impacted racial disproportionality (Vincent & Tobin, 2011). In response, special education scholars suggested PBIS implementations should be culturally responsive to local contextual factors (Sugai, O’Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012).

There is a limited but emerging literature around culturally responsive implementations of PBIS. There are ongoing efforts in the field under the names of *culturally relevant PBIS*, *culturally sensitive PBIS*, or *culturally responsive PBIS*. These efforts mainly include the following actions: (a) increasing educators’ self-awareness about their implicit racial biases through professional development and disaggregated data and (b) aligning behavioral expectations with CLD families’ beliefs, norms, and values (Jones, Caravaca, Cizek, Horner, & Vincent, 2006; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011).

Beyond these discrete suggestions, the literature has not offered any operational definitions of cultural responsiveness in the context of PBIS with specific guidelines indicating how cultural responsiveness plays out in daily life of schools (Sugai et al., 2012). For example, it is suggested that practitioners should infuse cultural responsiveness in each stage of PBIS. Yet, the operational definitions of culture and cultural responsiveness have not been provided. Moreover, existing efforts on cultural responsiveness in PBIS suggested practitioners work with CLD families; yet, no comprehensive framework or specific research-based guidelines have been developed to achieve family–school collaboration in a meaningful and productive way.

As a response to these gaps in the knowledge base, a statewide research project, Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS), was implemented. The CRPBIS framework is the first framework

to operationalize cultural responsiveness within the context of PBIS (Bal, 2011). The CRPBIS framework positioned CLD students, families, and communities as active and responsible agents of change (Freire, 1970/1993). CRPBIS conceptualized cultural, linguistic, ability, and economic differences in a school community as assets, not obstacles to overcome, and utilized the diverse experiences, perspectives, goals, and skills stakeholders bring to school (Bal, 2011).

Culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports uses a methodology called *learning lab*. The learning lab methodology is the operational definition of cultural responsiveness in PBIS as a problem-solving process in which multiple stakeholders examine and renovate their behavioral support systems (Bal, 2011). The learning lab methodology provides guidelines to develop authentic family–school–community partnerships and design a new system that is culturally responsive to diverse strengths, needs, practices, and goals of all stakeholders within a school community (Bal, 2011).

What Does a Learning Lab Do?

Disproportionality is a systemic problem that extends beyond individual students and teachers. Thus, what is needed is a systemic solution (Artiles, 2011). Klingner and Edwards (2006) concluded the most effective interventions for CLD students would arise from uniting diverse perspectives to critically examine school practices and cultures.

The CRPBIS learning lab aims to build organizational capacity in schools for inclusive problem solving and decision making. The learning lab methodology was adapted from *activity theory*. This theory, grounded in Vygotskian cultural psychology, has been used in various fields, including health care, finance, telecommunication, and education, for organizational renewal to address systemic issues, such as academic success and postsecondary transition of migrant students (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014).

In the CRPBIS study, learning labs were formed in three urban public K–12 schools in a midwestern state with two goals: (a) to unite local stakeholders through an inclusive problem-solving process and (b) to renovate school discipline systems to be culturally responsive. The learning lab members engaged in root cause analysis and examined their school’s behavioral data (e.g., ODR), institutional culture, and exclusionary and punitive discipline practices. They then redesigned their discipline systems over the course of seven to 10 meetings (Bal et al., 2015). The learning labs included educators; paraprofessionals (e.g., playground attendants); students and families considered as CLD (e.g., refugees); White families, some of whom were experiencing poverty or homelessness; and representatives from community organizations (e.g., the Boys and Girls Club and Urban League). The learning lab members at two schools created culturally responsive discipline systems during the 2013–2014 school year (Bal et al.,

2015). Informed by the successful learning labs, this article presents steps and key considerations for practitioners to form and lead a learning lab.

Forming a Learning Lab at Your School

Step 1: Gain Support From Your Administration

A learning lab is a working group that must have power to reform the system; thus, it requires commitment and active involvement from leadership (Frattura & Capper, 2007). As an educator initiating a learning lab, you should establish a network of school and district leadership support.

Step 2: Form the Group

The next step, after gaining administrative support, is to compile a list of potential members who represent the school's diverse population and may be interested in joining the learning lab. The composition of the learning lab looks different at each school, depending on school demographics. The CRPBIS study found the following model effective: 10 to 12 participants with equal numbers of staff, family members, community representatives, and students when possible (Bal, Kozleski, Schrader, Rodriguez, & Pelton, 2014). For example, a 10-person learning lab may comprise five school staff and five family and community members. Cultural, linguistic, ability, and economic diversity within your school should be represented in the learning lab. Preference should be given to the stakeholders who are historically underrepresented in school activities, such as immigrant parents, low-income families, or parents of students receiving ODRs frequently. Learning lab can also include individuals working outside of the school (e.g., after-school program coordinators) and district representatives (e.g., external PBIS coaches). When possible, it is beneficial to reach out to education departments at local universities, such as faculty, graduate students, or teaching interns who can work with you toward your goal.

An educator (e.g., internal PBIS coach and dean of students) may serve as a facilitator. Alternatively, an educator–parent or an educator–student dyad can facilitate the meetings. The facilitators should ask questions to accurately assess and meet the needs of each group member for attending the meetings, such as meeting times, childcare, food, interpreters, and transportation. Online scheduling tools, such as Doodle, can assist in scheduling meeting times; however, it is best not to assume uniform methods of communication will be effective for all participants. Scheduling via phone call and text message might be convenient for participants who do not have regular Internet access. Collaborating with local community organizations (e.g., YMCA) can provide resources (e.g., meeting space, childcare, or translators; Bal et al., 2014).

Step 3: Establish a Culture of Inclusion in the Learning Lab

Special education research shows effective interventions for CLD students come from inclusive and critical examination of school practices, cultures, and data (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). To form a truly inclusive team, simply bringing together individuals from underrepresented communities in the same room is not enough. Safe spaces for a critical dialogue need to be created so that all members are empowered to contribute as they identify and work toward a common goal. It is important to establish a democratic culture within the group. Group norms or working agreements can be derived from existing protocols (e.g., the courageous conversations; Singleton & Linton, 2005). These norms, such as “what is shared in the learning lab is confidential and respected,” will guide the group through difficult discussions about race and the racialization of behavioral problems.

At the beginning of each meeting, the members should spend time participating in team-building activities. The CRPBIS study found beginning the meetings with icebreakers or team-building activities to be an effective way to unify the members and ease into more difficult conversations (Bal et al., 2015). Internet searches for icebreakers and team-building activities can be a useful tool to generate ideas. “Additionally, grouping members into dyads or triads consisting of one staff member and one nonstaff member. The dyads communicate with each other in between meetings to build close relationships. Facilitators should reduce the use of jargon and, most importantly, provide all members adequate time to develop trust and comfort.

Running a Learning Lab: Cycle of Change

Part 1: Here and Now

The learning lab members initially focus on the immediate, concrete situation (i.e., here and now) by empirically and historically examining the extent of disproportionality. To do this, the members are encouraged at the first meeting to openly share their experiences at the school or in the community related to school discipline and disproportionality. At the second meeting, members examine the school-, district-, and state-level behavior data. Schools often use web-based data management systems (e.g., the SWIS Suite and Infinite Campus) that allow users to disaggregate their data by race, language status, and income level and to provide actionable data. For example, in the CRPBIS study, the school staff at one school shared a concern that the majority of behavioral problems occurred on the playground. At the second meeting, the PBIS data team brought graphs presenting the school-level ODR data by month, by behavior type, by location, by student, and by time (Bal et al., 2014).

The learning lab members in the CRPBIS study also utilized interactive data maps developed by the CRPBIS research team in order to examine disproportionality within their district and across the state. Visual examination of multiple data sources helped the members to develop a more comprehensive understanding of behavioral outcome disparities (Bal et al., 2015). There are interactive data maps available online (e.g., crpbis.org, pbis.org, and equityallianceatasu.org). When sharing data, practitioners should use clear graphs or charts that are easy to understand. They should explain acronyms and never share confidential data.

Part 2: Analysis

After determining the status of disparities at their school, the learning lab members begin to examine their discipline process. To do this, they create a map of the discipline system in place asking the following questions:

1. How are the problem behaviors (major and minor) defined?
2. What happens when a student is being disruptive in a classroom?
3. What are the roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers, behavioral support staff, or security?
4. What is the purpose of the system (punishment, reintegration, or teaching positive behaviors)?
5. Who is the system designed for (only for students with problem behaviors, all students, or teachers who need support with classroom management or extra resources)?
6. How are families involved?

Facilitators use these questions to guide members as they draw a system map that tracks the responses to behavioral incidents and the roles, rules, and division of labor in the discipline process from a behavioral incident (e.g., insubordination) to suspension and expulsion. The goal is to develop a map representing what actually happens. It is during this mapping process that members become aware of potential breakdowns and workarounds as well as strengths of their system (e.g., effective practices and available resources).

Part 3: Culturally Responsive Model

Once the group finishes mapping out the existing discipline system, the learning lab begins to generate solutions to transform the system, taking into consideration the critical reflections from members based on the earlier empirical and historical analysis and concerns. The team works together to design a new, culturally responsive system in a way that is relevant for all stakeholders and prepares for implementation of the new system. To ensure equal and active participation, facilitators break members into smaller

groups. Within small groups, the members are encouraged to be innovative and share ideas that may not seem immediately feasible.

An example of such thinking was discovered by members of one learning lab who decided to replace the punitive disciplinary actions with restorative justice-oriented practices (Bal et al., 2015). The district was promoting the restorative justice approach as a districtwide initiative. This approach included victim-offender conferences to provide an opportunity for the students and adults to accept responsibility and repair the harm (see Singleton & Linton, 2005). This learning lab identified a grant available in the district that would allow them to hire a staff member to lead the restorative justice component of the new system.

Part 4: Data Collection and Reflection

As the renovated discipline system is designed, the learning lab members examine the new system and collect data on feasibility. Based on the examination, the members determine roles, rules, and division of labor and identify potential breakdowns. The data review can include but is not limited to (a) focus group interviews with teachers and students, (b) referral data, and (c) school climate surveys. Data collection processes should reflect the principles of the new system and engage discussion with the school community as a whole. Facilitators should solicit input from the administration about events occurring at year-end and plan meetings to complete the learning lab. It is vital to give the members a sense of accomplishment and create an institutional memory of effective family-school-community collaboration with a concrete, practical product.

Part 5: Implementation Preparation

At the end of the year, the learning lab should work to solidify the final version of the culturally responsive system that can be implemented in the next school year. It is crucial that the facilitators coordinate closely with school administrators throughout the process to engage them in implementing the new model and assessing its effectiveness over the coming school year. This often involves utilizing the qualitative and quantitative data from the school that are being collected and analyzed as a part of the process as well as coordinating joint sessions with school's PBIS team and school and district leaders during the summer.

According to Gutiérrez and Penuel (2014), "local actors' productive adaptation of interventions or use of theories from research and the documentation of the work they must do to sustain change are important sources of evidence for generalizability" (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014, p. 21). The new system should not be expected to be perfect and static, but adaptable to the changing needs of the whole school community. The implementation of a learning lab at a high school follows as an illustrative case.

Case Study: Martin Luther King High School

MLK High School is an urban public school in a midwestern U.S. state (see Note 1). The city and the state have some of the widest racial achievement gaps and disproportionality rates in the nation (Bal et al., 2015). The school is known for its success in college placements, as its graduates are regularly admitted to top universities. However, not all students experience such success. Disproportionality in behavioral outcomes has significantly impacted the achievement of the CLD students. These numbers and corresponding day-to-day experiences troubled the MLK staff. The dean of students, serving as the internal PBIS coach, and the assistant principal decided to take action and began forming a learning lab in collaboration with the CRPBIS research team.

In 2013–2014 academic year, there were 2,072 students enrolled at MLK High School. The composition of the student body was 55% White, 14% African American, 14% Latino, 10% Asian, 6% two or more races, and 1% Native American. Potential members representing the increasing diversity in the school were solicited. The initial group consisted of 11 people: (a) five White (i.e., one administrator; three educators, including one special education and two general education teachers; and one paraprofessional), (b) two African American (i.e., one teacher and one community representative), (c) two Hmong (i.e., one teacher and one parent), and (d) two Latino (i.e., one parent and one community representative). In contrast, the school's existing PBIS team had 15 members, all of them White school staff (Bal et al., 2015).

The first three meetings were held outside of the school, in a public library and a community center. In the initial meetings, the members reviewed discipline data disaggregated by (a) race, (b) English language learner (ELL) status, and (c) free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility. They found that African American students were the most negatively affected group at the school. While African American students represented 14% of the school population, they received 60% of all documented behavior incidents and nearly 80% of detention room visits that resulted in missing instructional time (Bal et al., 2015). The members shared their thoughts and frustrations about ineffectiveness of disciplinary actions and the root causes of racial disparities. The members agreed upon their first step toward action: The learning lab needed a stronger representation of students and African American parents. They recruited an African American parent and a Latino student.

With the new composition, the learning lab began mapping out the discipline system in place. Throughout the system mapping, the members identified areas that required further exploration and improvement. They noted three major needs for improvement: (a) gaps in behavioral data collection, in particular, the detention room visits were not being recorded, (b) missed opportunities to restore broken

relationships between teachers and students after an ODR was initiated; and (c) lack of parental involvement in the discipline process (Bal et al., 2015).

The map of the existing discipline system was first drawn by the internal PBIS coach. This map represented the ideal system of how the discipline process should work. All of the members viewed the map and revised it according to how the system actually worked, along with breakdowns, workarounds, and missing elements. Figure 1 shows a simplified version of the new discipline system. The new model addresses each of the areas of concern by increasing data collection, building opportunities for teachers and students to resolve issues, and involving families throughout the process. One of the significant changes was to institutionalize the restorative justice approach and reconstitute the detention room as restorative justice room. The members operationalized the actions for the restorative justice room, such as informing legal guardians and having time built in for teachers and students to follow up and restore relationships after behavioral incidents. In addition, they identified four pillars to keep the new system reflexive and supportive for all adults and students. For example, one of the pillars, called continuous data collection, included actions such as developing student data snapshots that would be available for all teachers as well as families.

Even before the MLK learning lab was completed, the PBIS committee recognized its success in regard to both inclusive problem solving and family–school–community partnership. The PBIS committee decided to embrace practices of the learning lab and invited parents and students to join the PBIS committee (Bal et al., 2015). The learning lab members unanimously agreed the process was successful in its efforts to include multiple perspectives and experiences; to create a useful, concrete product; and to have a replicable process for future use.

At the last meeting the Hmong parent testified to the importance of the learning lab in the history of the school and pointed out the possibilities of reciprocal partnership:

I graduated from [MLK], my kids graduated from there, and I think this is the first time I heard about having a group with teachers, parents, and administrators get together to talk about what we should do to improve or keep the kids in school.

The Latino student member reflected on the outcome, acknowledging the sense of productivity and success:

We did something you know. It's that sense of accomplishment . . . We brought all sorts of parties to the table—the admins, the parents, the students, they all have different views and problems they see and how they should be fixed. Even though it might not be the real solution or the real problem, they bring just that one piece of information that can be crucial to what we're trying to accomplish. (Bal et al., 2015)

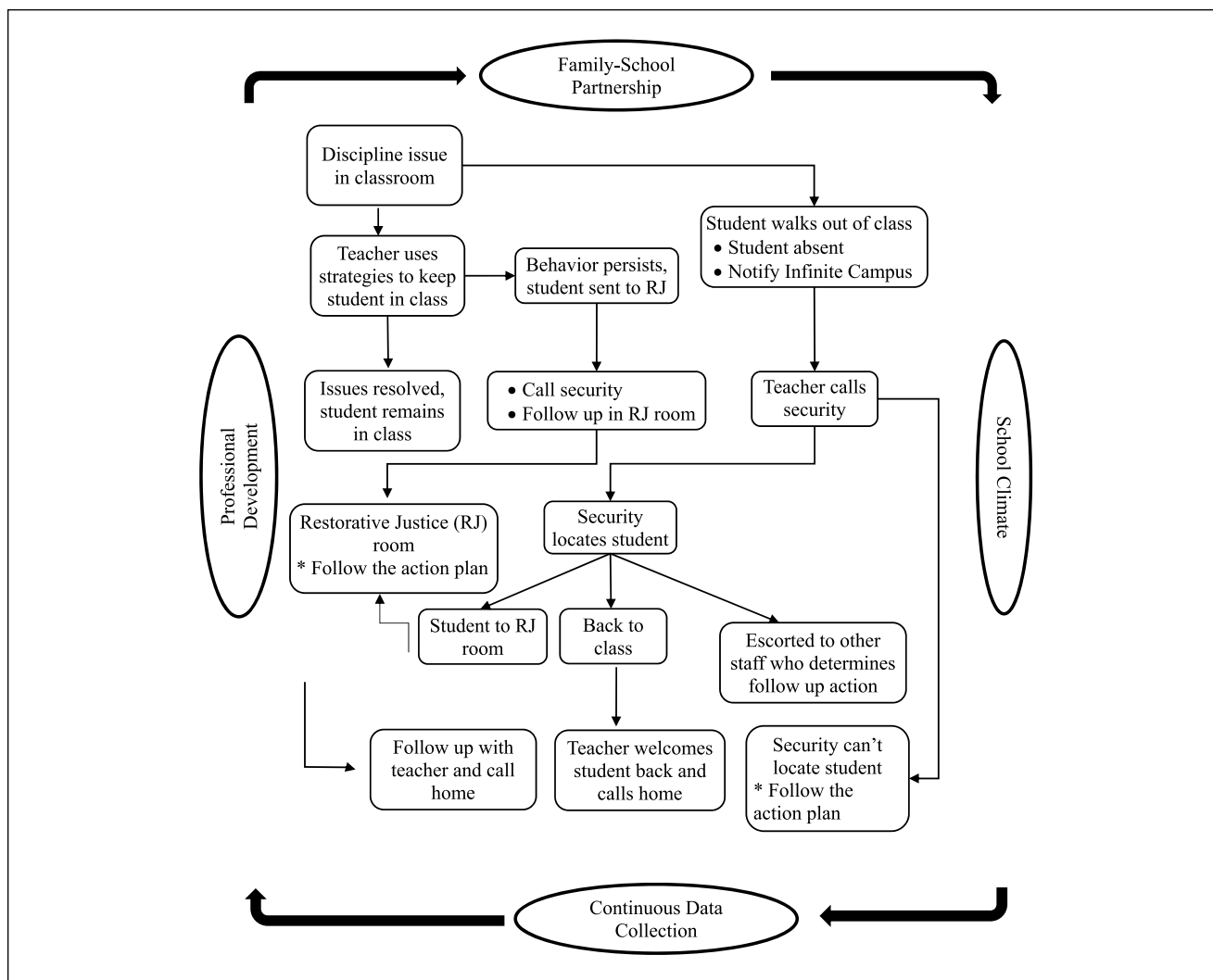


Figure 1. The renovated discipline system at MLK High School.

Note: The map of the MLK High School culturally responsive behavioral system was simplified for the purpose of this publication.

Consequently, the influences of the learning lab research have extended beyond the CRPBIS schools to the district. The learning lab members took a part in districtwide professional development and planning workshops and shared the processes and tools developed with other local educators. The district is now working with the CRPBIS research team and the learning lab members to scale up the project to the whole district as a methodology to build capacity for continuous systemic improvement.

Conclusion

There is no silver bullet solution that will transform schools to impact disparities in educational outcomes and opportunities. Educators are often charged with implementing top-to-bottom initiatives and prescriptive technical solutions to address

complex systemic problems, such as racial disproportionality. However, disproportionality is a persistent and adaptive systemic issue that requires persistent and adaptive systemic solutions developed by local stakeholders.

Organizational change is complex, incomplete, and often messy. It takes time for a transformation to result in sustained changes in school cultures and outcomes. Even if all goes well (e.g., sustained leadership and vision), it may take years to effectively transform schools (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Fullan, 2003). The CRPBIS project did not assume the new discipline systems would affect outcomes immediately after their implementation. The goal was to include stakeholders as equal partners in problem-solving activities and build the institutional capacity in schools for continuous reflection and action and the data-based renewal of school systems from the ground up.

Across the nation, educators find themselves juggling multiple tasks and demands while facing lessening resources and fewer opportunities to (a) reflect on their practice, (b) experiment, and (c) collaborate with other educators, students, and families. The learning lab approach provides a problem-solving and decision-making structure for designing new discipline systems that are culturally responsive to diverse experiences and goals of all stakeholders (Bal et al., 2014). The learning labs are research and innovation sites for schools and school districts to transform their systems to be effective, efficient, and fair. Such school systems may serve as expansive learning and development contexts for all adults and students and impact the behavioral and academic outcome disparities.

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Note

1. The vignette depicts authentic situations. Names are changed to pseudonyms.

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