Chapter 6
Enhancing Social Justice via Equity–Based Multi–Tiered Systems of Support

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of a framework for equity-based multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), practical strategies for its implementation, and resources to be used by stakeholders when implementing these supports. Special education referral and placement have historically been contingent upon subjective decisions fraught with discriminatory practices that affect racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RELD) students. Through a social justice and culturally responsive lens, this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of existing MTSS systems and ways that inequities in schools can be mediated. Equitable practices are then described across academic and socioemotional supports. The chapter includes: (1) focus on an equity-based MTSS framework for RELD students; (2) implementation of equity-based approaches across three tiers; (3) equity-based assessment and progress monitoring; (4) recommendations for implementation; and (5) future research directions to ensure equity-based supports for RELD learners with or at risk for disability.

INTRODUCTION

The United States (US) educational system has a long and deep-rooted history of inequitable policies and procedures fueled by racialized oppression and discrimination affecting racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RELD) students (Artiles et al., 2013; Avant, 2016). RELD learners consistently realize the gravest academic, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes (Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). Moreover, RELD youth from low-income families often face the poorest outcomes in school that have long-lasting effects, including higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and school dropout; higher incarceration rates; and lower rates of employment (Anyon et al., 2014; Avant, 2016; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016).

Educators must promote safe and affirming spaces where students are provided the necessary support to successfully navigate life's challenges, including the systemic injustices that have plagued public education. Data-driven and evidence-based practices (EBPs) created to negate levels of subjectivity, such as the response to intervention/multi-tiered systems of support (RTI/MTSS) framework, emerged with promise (Avant 2016; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016). The US Department of Education (DOE)'s Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) established the What Works Clearinghouse in 2002 to review research and determine what practices show evidence of effectiveness as recommended interventions. However, these frameworks and interventions have failed to promote cultural responsivity and equitable approaches necessary to support RELD students (Bal & Trainor, 2016), calling into question the scientific processes used in education to determine "what works" and for whom.

Standardized models and curricula intended to be a panacea for disparities have instead served to shift away from the flexibility encompassed in culturally responsive practices (Cramer et al., 2018). A recent consensus report of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2022) calls for the advancement of "equity-oriented science" in education research. The recommendations of the report suggest that IES must reframe research and funding models to better account for educational complexities associated with equity in education. Further, focus and funds must be shifted toward underserviced communities.

Thus, equity-based approaches are needed to support students beyond current practices that have not adequately served them. This chapter provides a framework for equity-based MTSS, practical strategies for its implementation, and resources to be used by stakeholders when implementing these supports. Our examination of the intersectionality of race, disability, inequities, bias, and failed attempts of inclusivity in education is grounded in a Dis/ability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) framework (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit highlights the social construction of disability and helps unpack systems of oppression and the mechanisms by which they operate (Annamma et al., 2013). Its seven tenets can be applied to guide ethical solutions central to equity-focused MTSS (Annamma et al., 2013; Rausch et al., 2019). Without such consideration, RELD students with disabilities continue to be perceived as problematic (Eilers, 2021), rather than acknowledging systemic issues that have perpetuated widening gaps in education, as well as the stakeholders contributing to such inequities (i.e., teachers, administrators, researchers, politicians, and others influencing education policy and practice).

Through this social justice lens, the chapter provides an in-depth analysis of existing MTSS that have left RELD students behind and examines ways that pervasive inequities in schools can be mediated via an equity-based MTSS framework. It begins with an overview of the background of systemic inequities in the US educational system that have led to disparate results for RELD learners. The chapter continues with a critical examination of existing MTSS systems' role in instruction within a socio-historical context

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