Comprehensive Special Education Evaluations: Addressing Bias in the Evaluation Process

Racial Disproportionality Institute
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Learning Objectives

1. Participants will learn the practical application of DPI's Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation Framework to address racialized patterns of disproportionate identifications.

2. Participants will identify vulnerable decision points to address potential bias in the special education evaluation process.

Formula for ACCURATE Identification

Observable, measurable characteristics of disability category
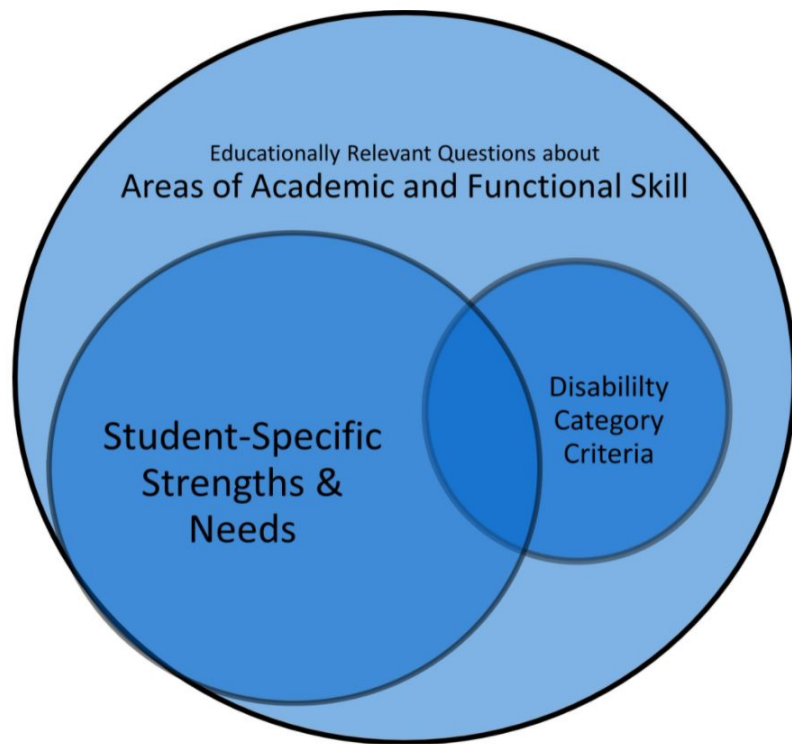
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Objective assessments and data requirements

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Evaluations that ensure strategies and systems are in place to address the impact of implicit or explicit bias, and establish consistent and accurate identification of disability criteria

CSEE Framework Overview

A Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation (CSEE) is driven by [educationally relevant questions](#) grounded in [assessment areas (domains)](#) rather than disability category criteria.

- o Need vs. label focused
- o Consideration of disability category criteria is only one part of a comprehensive evaluation

Foundational Concept:
State Criteria are Necessary but Not Sufficient

Educationally Relevant Questions about
Areas of Academic and Functional Skill

Student-Specific Strengths & Needs

Disabililty Category Criteria

"the evaluation is **sufficiently comprehensive** to **identify** all of the child's special education and related service **needs**, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child has been classified." 34 CFR 300.304 (c)(6)

Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill

1. **Academics**

2. **Cognitive Learning**

3. **Communication**

4. **Independence and Self-Determination**

5. **Physical and Health**

6. **Social and Emotional Learning**

KEY POINT: The six areas of academic and functional skill represent interrelated knowledge, skills, and habits. Any one skill, such as self-regulation, will often interact with and affect skills within one or more of the other six areas.

Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation: Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill | Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

So When Do We Look at Criteria?

- Autism
- Blind and Visually Impaired
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Deafblind
- Emotional Behavioral Disability
- Intellectual Disability
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Significant Developmental Delay
- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Speech and Language
- Traumatic Brain Injury

- •Academic Achievement
- •Cognitive
- •Communication
- •Independence/Self-determination
- •Physical/Health
- •Social and Emotional

- Autism
- Emotional Behavioral Disability
- Intellectual Disability
- Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Speech and Language

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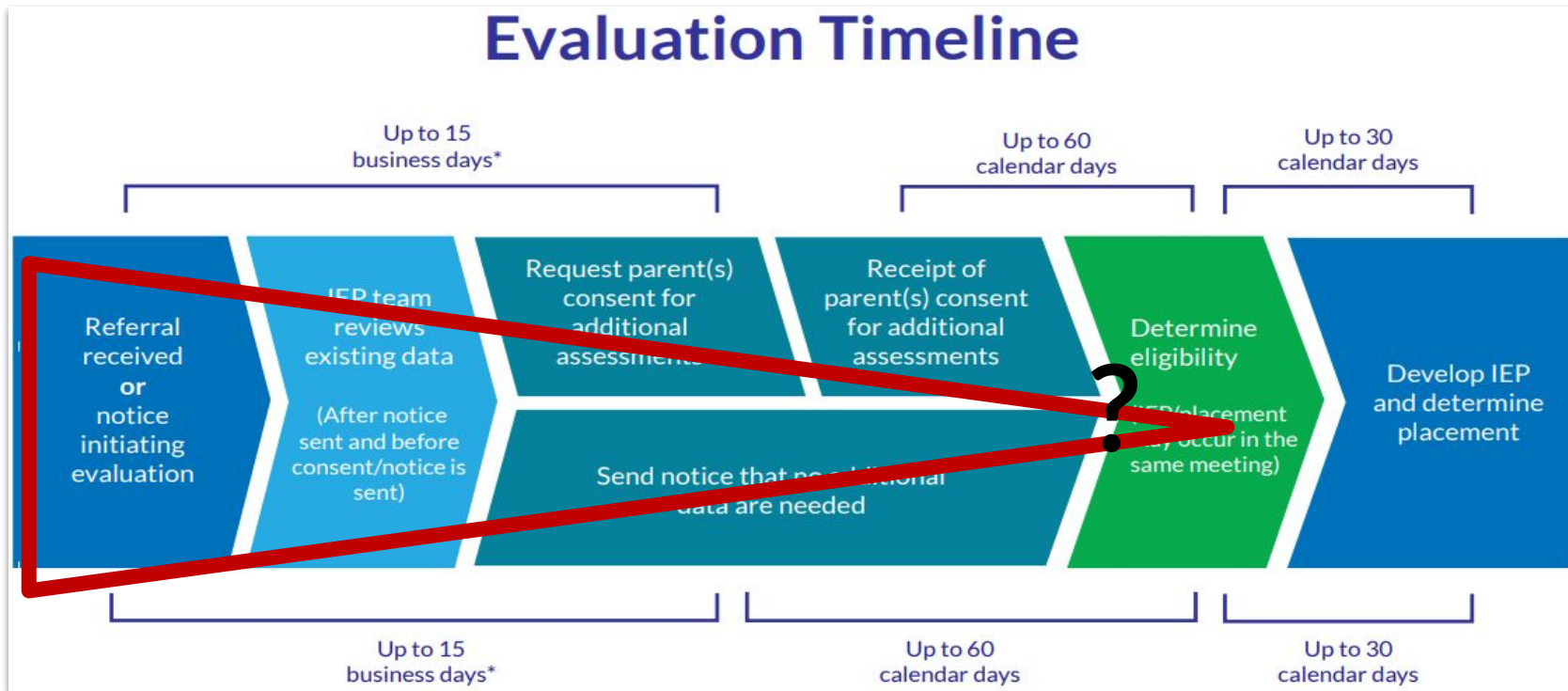
DPI Evaluation Timeline Visual
DPI Evaluation Timeline Text

Planning and Conducting Comprehensive Special Education Evaluations

Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation Process Chart

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF Public Instruction

Planning and Conducting Comprehensive Special Education Evaluations: Process Chart

IEP teams follow these steps when conducting comprehensive special education evaluations. The Evaluation Process Chart outlines required IDEA timeline procedures and describes recommended actions for each step. Links to related forms and other resources are included.

- Start the Evaluation
- Plan the Evaluation
- Implement the Evaluation Plan
- Complete the Evaluation

Also see Information Update Bulletin 21.01- Special Education Evaluation for answers to specific questions about special education evaluation timeline procedures, and other requirements and processes.

Start the Evaluation

Procedures (and related Sample IEP forms)	Actions
Referral or request for reevaluation (Sample form R-1, or RE-1)	• Initial Evaluation: A special education referral starts the initial special education evaluation process. The referral describes why the person making the referral believes the student is a "child with a disability" who needs special education. • Reevaluation: A reevaluation is started when the LEA decides a student's disability-related needs, including improved academic achievement and functional performance, warrant a reevaluation; or if the student's parent or teacher requests a reevaluation. A reevaluation occurs at least once every 3 years unless the parent and LEA agree it is unnecessary.
Notice of start of evaluation or reevaluation and appointment of IEP team (Sample forms IE-1, RE-1, RE-2)	• Select IEP team participants with collective expertise about areas of student strength and need, age and grade level standards and expectations, disability category criteria, and state and federal evaluation process requirements. • Identify if any specialists (from LEA or outside LEA) may be needed on the team to provide expertise about concerns representing particular areas of need such as specific medical or health concerns or a low incidence condition requiring specific expertise such as blind and visually impaired, deafblind, and deaf and hard of hearing. • Ensure someone on the team has expertise in coordination and facilitation.

Addressing Bias in a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation

Disability identification, IEP development and provision of special education services is a problem when either or both of the following conditions are met:

Special education services are not what the student needs:

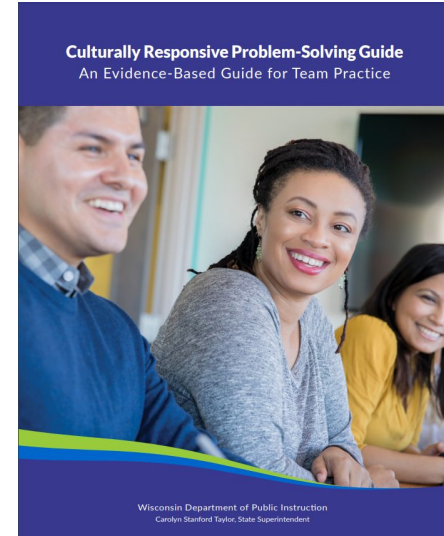Incorrect identification→inappropriate/unnecessary SE services→unmet needs→poorer performance + disengagement from school

Special education services are ineffective:

Services that do not work = prolonged difficulties for students and further limit their access, engagement, and progress toward meeting age and grade level expectations

Addressing Bias in a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation

Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving

- The [Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving Guide](#) helps educators honor cultural backgrounds and remain committed to supporting students through anti-bias frameworks.

- It provides strategies that support more culturally relevant decision-making processes in order to help close the gap between students of color and their peers.

Culturally Responsive Problem-Solving Guide
An Evidence-Based Guide for Team Practice

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Carolyn Stanford Taylor, State Superintendent

Vulnerable Decision Points

- Vulnerable decision points are contextual events or elements that increase the likelihood of implicit bias affecting decision-making in schools.

- There are certain contexts (e.g., classrooms with less engaging instruction), factors (e.g., student behavior that is judged subjectively, such as disrespect), and internal states of educators (e.g., hunger, fatigue) that increase the likelihood of educators making decisions based on implicit bias rather than objective information.

Culturally Responsive Problem Solving Guide

Vulnerable Decision Point (VDP) 1

[Forming IEP Team Communication Norms](#)

When an IEP team participant makes statements that reflect stereotypes, prejudices, or assumptions without evidence, then bias can influence the communication as well as the decision-making process.

- **Strategies to Address Bias:**
  - Engage in critical self-reflection
  - Establish shared agreements for communication
  - Engage parent, family, and student voice

VDP 1: Communication Norms

Strategies to Address Bias:

- **Engage in Critical Self-Reflection**
  - [NASP Self-Assessment Checklist](#)
  - [Cultural Genogram](#)
  - [Implicit Association Test](#)
- **Establish Shared Agreements for Communication**
  - Tim or Mr. Peerenboom?
  - Introductions include pronouns?
- **Engage Parent, Family, and Student Voice**
  - Parent preferred communication method between meetings?
  - Remember Trauma Sensitive School principles: choice, collaboration, empowerment

VDP 1: Communication Norms (continued)

Additional Strategies to Address Bias:

- **Include an LEA staff member on the IEP team who has a positive relationship with the student**
  - Required for evaluations when emotional behavioral disability criteria considered. Good practice for all comprehensive evaluations
  - Trauma sensitive practice
  - Can serve in role as monitor to ensure communication norms are adhered to throughout the evaluation process (VDPs 2-4)

(VDP 1) Establishing Communication Norms: What would you do?

Scenario 1	Scenario 2
"I was on the IEP team for the student's sibling last year, and I know that family has problems; this one is probably the same."	During a meeting, school personnel address teachers as Mr. and Ms. but address the parents as "Mom" and "Dad".

Discussion Prompts

- How would you engage in critical self-reflection?

- What would you do to establish shared agreements for communication?

- How would you engage parent, family, and student voice?

Vulnerable Decision Point (VDP) 2

Identifying Potential Areas of Need During Referral and Review of Existing Data

During this step, bias can first manifest when IEP team participants overly-rely on the referral by only seeking out data based on the information presented in the referral.

- **Strategies to Address Bias:**

    - Reframe the purpose of evaluation

    - Obtain multiple perspectives on educational experience (not just on concerns described in the referral)

VDP 2: Referral and Review of Existing Data

Strategies to Address Bias:

- **Reframe the purpose of evaluation**
  - What is the "problem" we are trying to solve with this evaluation?
    - Need vs. Label focus
    - Deficit vs. Strengths
  - Developmentally and educationally relevant questions
- **Obtain multiple perspectives on educational experience (not just on concerns described in the referral)**
  - [Ask parents and student the right questions](#)
  - Obtain input from all IEP team members during review of existing data using open ended questions.

(VDP 2) Identify Potential Areas of Need: What would you do?

Scenario 1
A team member says they printed the "disability category criteria checklist" to review with the IEP team in order to plan assessments and obtain evaluation consent.

Scenario 2
The case manager contacts the parent and asks "do you have any concerns?" The parents says "no".
The case manager enters "no concerns from parent" into the review of existing data form.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you reframe the purpose of the evaluation?

- How do you obtain multiple perspectives on educational experiences (not just on concerns described in the referral)?

Vulnerable Decision Point (VDP) 3

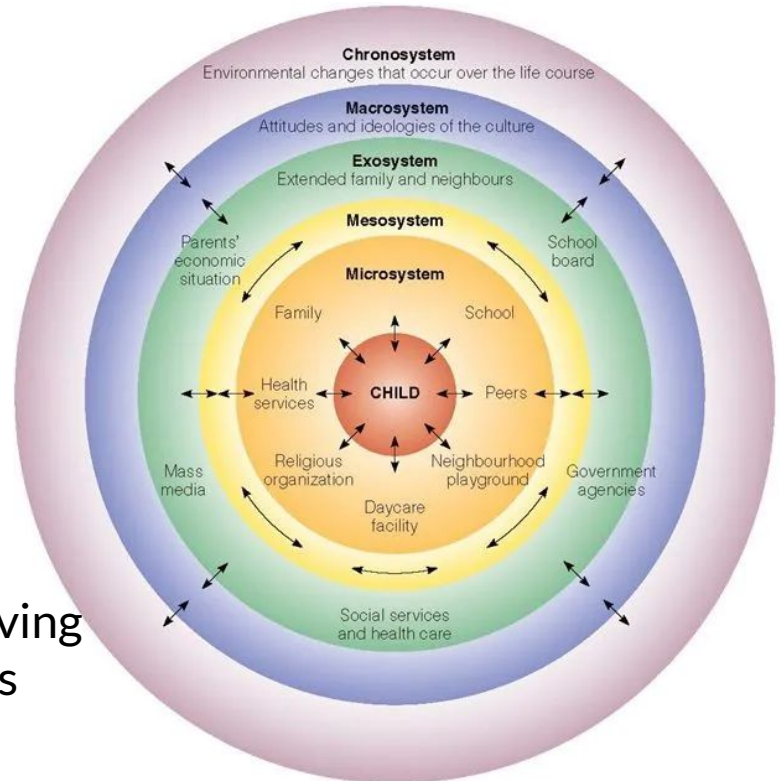## Collecting Additional Information

- **Confirmation bias**

- **Attribution bias:**
  - Unfounded
  - Untrue
  - Unalterable

- **Strategy to address bias:**
  - **Use ICEL Framework to collect multidimensional data**

Ecological Factors

	Review	Interview	Observe	Test
Instruction				
Curriculum				
Environment				
Learner				

Ecological: of or relating to the environments of living things or to the relationships between living things and their environments.

Chronosystem
Environmental changes that occur over the life course

Macrosystem
Attitudes and ideologies of the culture

Exosystem
Extended family and neighbours

Mesosystem

Microsystem

Parents' economic situation

School board

Family

School

Health services

CHILD

Peers

Mass media

Religious organization

Neighbourhood playground

Government agencies

Daycare facility

Social services and health care

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

VDP 3: The "O" in RIOT

Strategy to Address Bias: Ask educationally relevant questions using ICEL

	Observe
Instruction	Academic, Behavioral, and SEL Instruction, expectations, antecedents, consequences
Curriculum	Behavioral Curriculum: reinforcement of expected behaviors, behavioral expectations clearly displayed, routines taught
Environment	Classroom, transitions, hallway, lunch room, playground, bus
Learner	Frequency, Intensity, Duration, Latency of Behaviors

VDP 3: The "I" in RIOT

- **Do your interviews address Instruction, Curriculum, Environment?**

- **Learn about the family and student's experiences and perspective through:**

  - [**RESPECTFUL model**](#)

  - [**ADDRESSING Framework**](#)

  - [**DSM 5 Cultural Formulation Interviews**](#)

(VDP 3) Collecting Additional Data: What would you do?

Scenario 1
A team members is planning systematic observations, another team member states, "you just need to come observe during science, you'll definitely see the student acting out."

Scenario 2
During the 60 day evaluation timeline, a team members ask why we are bothering to administer a standardized achievement test because the student shouldn't be expected to meet age or grade level standards.

Discussion Prompts

- How can the team ensure it collects multidimensional data that includes data about the Instruction, Curriculum, Environments and Learner (ICEL Framework)?

Vulnerable Decision Point (VDP) 4

Interpreting Data and Information

Manifestations of bias that can occur when interpreting data:

1. relying on stereotypes and prejudice and ignoring data,

2. weighting data from school-based professionals more than parents or guardians and students,

3. taking a deficit-based view of the data, and

4. not seeking convergence across multiple sources of data.

Strategy to Address Bias:

- Ask questions when interpreting data

VDP 4: Ask Questions When Interpreting Data

Strategy to Address Bias: Ask Questions when Interpreting Data

- Did we equally consider all the data? If not, what data did we not fully consider and why?

- Did the data tell us what the student can do as well as student strengths? If not, go back and review the data or gather additional data.

- Did the data converge to confirm the problem?

- Did the data converge to confirm why the problem is occurring?

- Did the data tell us what the student's disability-related needs are so that we can develop IEP goals and align college and career ready IEP services?

(VDP 4) Ask Questions When Interpreting Data: What would you do?

Scenario 1	**Scenario 2**
A team member says "I don't understand how the rating scale says the student isn't aggressive, I had their sibling a couple of years ago and this one is just the same."	All the educators in the IEP team meeting report about negative interactions with the student.

Discussion Prompts:
- What questions about the evaluation data should be asked and discussed before the team makes its decision?
- What are the unintended consequences of staff having different values or interpretations about functional or behavioral information when making decisions about special education eligibility and services?

Summary of Strategies to Address Bias

VDP 1: Establishing Communication Norms ● Engage in Critical Self-Reflection ● Establish Shared Agreements for Communication ● Engage Parent, Family, and Student	**VDP 2: Areas of Need During Review of Existing Data** ● Reframe the purpose of evaluation ● Obtain Multiple Perspectives on Educational Experience (Not Just on Concerns Described in the Referral)
VDP 3: Collecting Additional Data ● Use ICEL Framework to collect multidimensional data	**VDP 4: Interpreting Data and Information** ● Ask Questions when Interpreting Data

Addressing Bias in Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation

Final Thoughts and Questions

Resources - Mental Health

I want to know more about mental health and special education evaluations:

- Wisconsin DPI [Comprehensive School Mental Health Framework](#)

  - [Stigma Reduction Toolkit](#)

- Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity: A Supplement to Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General

  - [Chapter 2 Culture Counts: The Influence of Culture and Society on Mental Health](#)

Resources - Trauma Sensitive Schools

I want to know more about Trauma Sensitive Schools:

- [DPI's Mental Health - Trauma Sensitive Schools web page](#)

- [Guidelines for Adopting a Multitiered Approach to Addressing Trauma](#)

- [Trauma-Sensitive Assessment and Planning](#)

- [The Heart of Learning and Teaching:](#)

[Compassion, Resilience and Academic Success](#)
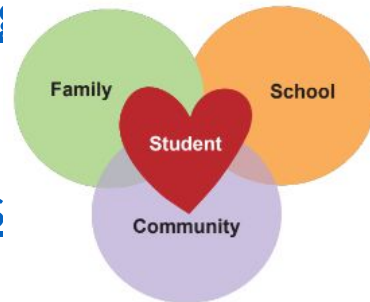
Resources - Difference vs Disability

I want to know more about cultural differences versus disability:

- [Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context](#)

- [Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less Innocent Than Whites, Research Finds](#)

- [Prospective teachers misperceive Black children as angry](#)

- [Promoting Excellence for All Ecourse](#)

- Culturally Responsive Problem Solving [Guide](#) & [Recorded Webinars](#)

- [Addressing Bias in Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation](#)

- [WI DPI American Indian Studies Program](#)

- [Disproportionality Technical Assistance Network](#)

Resources - Multilingual Learners

I want to know more about assessment of bilingual and multilingual learners:

- [Assessing English Learners When Conducting Comprehensive Special Education Evaluations](#)

- [Best Practices When Assessing English Learners](#)

- [Best Practices When Assessing English Learners](#) (slide hand-out)

- [Best Practices When Assessing English Learners II](#) (slide hand-out)

- [Guidance When Conducting Comprehensive Assessments for Speech-Language Impairments](#) (YouTube video list)

- [Considerations for Students who Speak Nonmainstream Dialects of American English](#)

- [Speech and Language Assessment - Linguistically Culturally Diverse: Spanish Speaking](#)

Resources - Limitations of Norm-Referenced Assessments

- [Limitations of Norm-Referenced Tests](#) (YouTube Playlist)

- [Limitations of Norm-Referenced Tests (PowerPoint](#))

- [Limitations of Norm-Referenced Tests](#) (Document)

- [Significant Discrepancy and Consideration of Speech or Language Impairment](#)

- [OSEP Fast Facts: Children Identified with Intellectual Disability](#)

- [Understanding Assessment: Applying Dynamic Assessment | LEADERSproject](#)

- [Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy: A Resource and Planning Guide](#)

Resources - Conducting Interviews

1. Cultural Self-Awareness
   a. NASP Self-Assessment Checklist
   b. Cultural Genogram
   c. Implicit Association Test
   d. Read, learn, discuss, reflect...repeat
2. Cultural Literacy (see following slides)
3. Multicultural Intentionality (see following slides)

Resources - Conducting Interviews

- Cultural and Community Genograms

- RESPECTFUL model

- ADDRESSING Framework

- DSM 5 Cultural Formulation Interviews

Resources - Conducting Interviews

Foundational Resources:

- [Addressing Bias in a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation](#)
  - [Vulnerable Decision Point 3: Collecting Additional Information](#)
- [Promoting Excellence for All eCourse](#)
- Many, many books

Resources - Conducting Interviews

- [Culturally Responsive Interviewing: Proactive Strategies for BIPOC Students](#) (blog)

- [Culturally Responsive Interviewing: Proactive Strategies for BIPOC Students](#) (NASP on-demand webinar)

- [Sample questions from Jones Intentional Multicultural Interview Schedule.](#)

- Jones, Janine. "[Best Practices in Multicultural Counseling.](#)" In Best Practices in School Psychology V, edited by Alex Thomas and Jeff Grimes, Ch. 111. Bethesda, MD : National Association of School Psychologists, 2008.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain

- **Surface Culture**

- **Shallow Culture**

- **Deep Culture**

Hammond, Zaretta L. 2015. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.