



# CRPBIS

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral  
Interventions and Supports

## **Equity by Design:**

**Re-mediating the Role of School-Family  
Partnerships in Systemic Change  
within Culturally Responsive Positive  
Behavior Interventions & Supports**

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# Re-mediating the Role of School-Family Partnerships in Systemic Change within CRPBIS

School communities engage Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) “to address enduring educational equity issues, such as the racialization of discipline and outcome disparities, and to build safe, inclusive, and supportive school climates” (Bal, Thorius, & Kozleski, 2012, p. 4). School-family partnerships within CRPBIS function toward creating school cultures that: (a) *from the start*, position families as equal partners with school practitioners in determining the goals, activities, and desired outcomes for local CRPBIS implementation; (b) center student and family analysis of crucial avenues for building safe and inclusive schools; and (c) attend

explicitly to institutional structures that have hindered such partnerships in the past and seek to remediate them through collaborative inquiry. This brief details the features of such a partnership as developed under the auspices of the CRPBIS project, funded by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and carried out by the CRPBIS research team at University of Wisconsin-Madison in collaboration with researchers from the Equity Alliance and the Great Lakes Equity Center, schools, and families within two Wisconsin districts.

Authentic collaboration requires that all stakeholders participate in decision-making processes toward shared goals (Friend & Cook, 2007). However, within the context of school-family partnerships, the terms and function of such relationships, as well as the rights and responsibilities of culturally and linguistically diverse families within them, often have been determined by school personnel (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Because U.S. educational systems are generally characterized by values and beliefs that reflect the dominant society (Kozleski et al., 2008; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2008; Stambach & Bal, 2010), perceptions that certain families lack resources and capacities because of cultural, economic, and linguistic differences (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) significantly limit the quality and focus of school-family relationships; culturally and linguistically diverse families have been historically neglected as worthy or capable of the “critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices,” (Fine, 1993, p. 83). Yet it is precisely this work within family-school partnerships that must be engaged by culturally responsive educators committed to remediating histories of marginalization and oppression culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families have long experienced within the U.S. educational system (Kozleski et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

## Key Terms

**Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS)** - Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) framework aims at remediating school cultures that reproduce behavioral outcome disparities and marginalization of nondominant students and families (Bal, 2011).

**Learning Lab (LL)** - The concept of a Learning Lab was developed by Aydin Bal (2011) as a new method of school-based decision-making and problem-solving process. Adopted from the change laboratory methodology and grounded in activity theory (Engeström, 1987), LL brings together educators, historically marginalized families, and community members to facilitate culturally responsive, sustainable educational solutions and systemic transformations from the ground up.

**Critical Reflection** – To engage in critical reflection is to question the logic and/or assumptions underlying particular ideas, arguments, or social constructions. In the context of schools, this type of reflection often leads individuals to question and act on policies that create or maintain unequal power relations among specific groups (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Freire, 1998).

**Participant Frameworks** – Within classrooms, teachers set up structures for students to participate in learning and interactions (i.e., participant structures- e.g., whole group, pairs) and within and because of those structures, students are assigned certain roles, rights, and responsibilities, called participant frameworks.

## Introduction to the CRPBIS Project


As we have elaborated upon elsewhere (Bal, 2011; Bal et al., 2012; Bal et al., 2013), CRPBIS builds upon a multi-tiered behavioral support and early intervening model known as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Schools enact PBIS to facilitate a “predictable and supportive school-wide social and academic environment,” (Bal et al., 2012, p. 5). PBIS emphasizes monitoring of student progress on an ongoing basis, making decisions about the supports students need based on behavioral data, and using evidence-based practices (Sugai & Horner, 2006). PBIS also stresses direct teaching and practice of expected behavior and social skills, and the reinforcement of student compliance with expectations (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Within the existing PBIS literature, the importance of engaging culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families as partners in their children’s schooling has been emphasized as activities related to (a) expanding the predominantly White middle class teacher population’s definitions of family engagement; (b) promoting educators’ understanding that families

may experience obstacles in engaging effectively and work with families to alleviate such obstacles; (c) teaching families to replicate PBIS tenets within the home to enhance parenting skills and create positive home environments; and (d) engaging family members in training to serve as liaisons between schools and families to increase understanding of PBIS goals and tenets (Bal, 2011; King, Harris-Murri, & Artiles, 2006; Muscott et al., 2008).

**The central role of families in CRPBIS.** While we agree with the potential of the approaches listed above, we also suggest that a central function of families’ roles within CRPBIS, as informed by Fine’s (1993) critique of traditional roles in schools, is in their “critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices,” (p. 83) including elements of school culture and educator practice that impede the creation of safe and inclusive schools. Specifically, family members should work alongside educators to uncover and examine the ways in which the cultural assumptions present in the U.S. educational system that hinder positive







interaction and school climate are reproduced in school cultures in relation to “climate, rituals, and routines.” Such a joint endeavor will also support deliberation about the types of data necessary to drive problem-solving and decision-making in the local setting (Bal, 2011). Therefore, while creating behaviorally positive and academically rich educational environments remains a central aim of CRPBIS, this is achieved through the creation of local contexts that are socially just, such that:

CRPBIS emphasizes desired outcomes of student and family power to...(determine) what types of social interaction are desired in education settings. This represents a shift away from the assumption that the behaviors educators desire students to demonstrate are relevant, or even in the best interest of student learning and interaction. This shift also acknowledges that emphasis on how educators desire students to interact is heavily shaped by educators’ cultural beliefs, values, and practices as well as the status quo for what is expected in schools, and does not account for students’ and practitioners’ agency in determining what they believe is important in their interactions with others...CRPBIS actively involve(s) students, families, and community members in identifying interaction patterns... necessary for student engagement and learning, which patterns are problematic, and ways that not only educators, but students and families can participate in teaching and modeling desired behaviors through a variety of indirect and direct instructional methodologies (Bal et al., 2012, p. 7).

Generally, CRPBIS’s emphasis on creating socially just school contexts through school-family partnerships is shaped by a number of theoretical premises; namely, it is informed by activity theory (Engeström, 1987), which relates to how systems develop, learn, and change (i.e., reform), and local-to-global justice perspectives, which incorporate elements of local (i.e., grassroots) coalition building that over time gains traction and informs larger social movements (Bal, 2012).

More specifically, the CRBPIS Project uses a structure called Learning Labs (LLs) as the primary strategy to achieve the types of school-family partnerships described above (Bal, 2012). The project includes a series of seven to ten LL meetings in an academic year, which provide a routine place, time, and set of norms for interaction. The LL activities engage educator/family teams and help collectively examine the pressing issues within each specific school context, and ultimately provide for achieving the goals of addressing racialized behavioral outcome disparities (e.g., overrepresentation of minority students in office discipline referrals or in expulsion) and facilitating meaningful school-family partnerships in the context of PBIS implementation (Bal et al., 2012). For more details about the CRPBIS study, please see Bal et al. (2012) or contact the CRPBIS team (crpbis.org).

Within each of the two schools, in two Wisconsin school districts, the LL started with members’ identification of critical incidents or problems faced in their day-to-day experiences as family members or educators. These problems served as springboards for LL members’ determination of priorities for the group, and facilitated the building of environments that bolster positive relationships and cultures for learning (Bal, 2011; Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010).

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# Essential Features of School-Family Partnerships within CRPBIS

Three key domains within the formation, cultivation, and sustenance of school-family participation within CRPBIS guide our practice: (a) Recruitment; (b) Goal Setting; and (c) Participation Frameworks. Permeating these three domains is explicit attention to members' power, privilege, and status as experienced historically in relation to individual and cultural group histories, and in the here-and-now (e.g., in that particular school, in specific LLs, during and between LL activities). Within our descriptions of the Recruitment, Participation Frameworks, and Goal Setting domains, we discuss considerations related to how power, privilege, and status within family-school partnerships surfaced within each meeting.

## Recruitment


The research team initiated several practices in order to support the inclusion of LL members who represented - demographically and experientially - those multiple perspectives necessary to critique the ways in which school culture can facilitate positive behavioral and learning interactions. School-specific goals related to behavior, academics, and family-school partnerships influenced the inclusion of particular individuals, staff and parents alike, into the LL setting.

Following initial discussions, the schools' administrative teams supported two different approaches to the recruitment of LL members. Despite the two different recruitment approaches, the early discussions between the research team and school sites centered on the importance of family members' participation including opportunities for sharing their personal expertise with challenges faced by and with the school and possible initiatives to help address these challenges.

With regard to the recruitment of family member participants, one school's leadership suggested pulling together the school staff LL members prior to inviting family participation, and in the other case, school leadership opted for inviting all members simultaneously. In the first school, the initial school staff LL members nominated family members who represented the diverse racial and socioeconomic demographics of the school. Additionally, strategic school goals related to strengthening family-school relationship with minority populations and families whose participation has historically been limited shaped the nomination family members. Administrators contacted and invited select family members who matched the above criteria to join (Bal et al., 2013).

The second school's approach, which reflected the strategic goals of the leadership team, included the simultaneous recruitment of school staff, community staff, and parent participants. Administrators used school-wide goals regarding behavior and discipline data to inform their nominations of family members. In this case, the specific focus was also on strengthening school-family partnerships with African-American families and the parents of students over-represented in school discipline data (Bal et al., 2013).

**Considerations for improvement.** Although both schools utilized their strategic school goals to inform their recruitment, criteria for family member inclusion into the LL setting was defined differently by each. As such, LLs provided the opportunity for each school to define meaningful participation and partnership in their own school-community context. Furthermore, conversations around historical and present challenges and strengths also allowed for a rethinking of



purposeful inclusion of LL members (Bal et al., 2013). Now that we are about halfway through the project, we see a need to explore further in future iterations two areas prior to and during initial LL meetings to create a space where family members feel empowered to critique and suggest improvements to the schools' embedded cultural practices: a) historical analysis of family participation, and b) local definition and analysis of the nature of school-family partnerships. Any group interested in challenging current participation practices must foster a collective and critical awareness of historical and current practices that marginalize specific groups within a school community. Further, time spent in a LL, examining how markers such as race, class, and economic status shape how school representatives define productive family participation is important in facilitating spaces where heterogeneous groups can help redefine what meaningful participation and collective problem-solving look like. In this way, we can ensure more equitable, critical, and productive spaces of collective and meaningful decision-making (Bal, 2011).

### **Goal Setting**

Central to the engagement of families within CRPBIS is that family members contribute to decisions that set the course for the work of the LL groups in changing school practices, policy, and, ultimately culture of the school or the institutional culture. We emphasized this by asking families about their hopes for the project in multiple ways, at multiple times over the first two to three LLs. There were a number of different priorities, yet members were able to come to consensus in defining the top two in each site. To do so, the research team spent considerable time during initial LL meetings reframing concerns raised by families as individual challenges in their interactions with schools, by making connections to how these challenges revealed larger patterns of interactions between schools and home. For example, as one parent

raised issues with the new ways math was being taught and the struggle he had doing math homework with his children for this reason, another parent joined in to share she was experiencing the same. After discussion, school LL members acknowledged that this was more than a technical problem (i.e., something that could be quickly fixed by providing information to families about the new ways math was being taught). Rather, the new math curriculum positioned even young children as more knowledgeable than their parents during homework time, which left parents feeling disempowered and somewhat reluctant to contact the school staff due to embarrassment about not being able to support their children in the ways they wished to support them. This discussion led to a goal of strengthening family-school partnerships through examination of school practices that constrained the support family members were able to give their children (Bal et al., 2013).

### **Participation Frameworks**

Participant structures, as defined by Erickson and Schultz (1977), are "constituted by what people are doing and where and when they are doing it" (p. 6). They are set up by someone; they do not naturally occur, and in schools, educators most often determine the participant structures for students in classrooms (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996), as well as the structures for family participation. Relatedly, participant structures are subsumed within participant frameworks, which define participants' roles, rights, and responsibilities within participant structures (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996). Participant structures become cultural norms within various school activities, as they generate typical interactional patterns and highlight the identities created and represented by these interactions (King, 2009). Participant structures also serve as meditational tools for participants' development within the LLs and within the family-school partnerships more broadly.

The research team facilitated LL activities (i.e., participant structures) to meet the collective goals of the group. As the theoretical perspectives informing our project assert, each member's participation is shaped by her/his history in the school, as well as multiple other activity systems they have engaged in in their daily lives. Recognizing the potential of every LL member to shape social, behavioral, and educational goals and practices, we worked to develop participation frameworks that allowed for exploration of concerns and areas of focus across three spheres of culture; namely, (a) the cultural experiences and practices that educators, students, and family members bring with them from their own lived experiences, b) school-specific cultural practices shaped and determined by the school's dominant (i.e., majority) culture, including embedded ideas about the ways teachers, students, and families are supposed to behave and interact, and lastly c) the culture and practices that educators, administrators, parents, and students develop together (Artiles, 2011).

As the research team planned the LL activities with members of the leadership team from each school, we emphasized the need for the participation frameworks to actively re-center marginalized perspectives. In part, this could be accomplished through a focus on shared power and status in making decisions about the goals, activities, and outcomes for the LL group. To illustrate, when discussing the institutional culture in relation to racialized behavioral outcome disparities, the CRPBIS research team grouped one parent with one staff and asked each staff-parent dyad to take a tour of the school and to complete the CRPBIS Equity Walkthrough form developed based on the Equity Alliance Inclusive Education for Equity Module (Equity Alliance at ASU, 2009). The form had questions related to school-family partnerships, resources, dialogue, physical space, and representation (e.g., How do adults and students

communicate in the school? and Do all students have access to the same materials and supplies?). Then, each dyad presented their data to the whole group. Unlike some practices of walk-throughs where the focus of the observation and analysis is the teacher in a classroom setting, these school-wide equity walk-throughs within CRPBIS LLs highlighted the multiple spheres of culture described previously (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009). Specifically, the focus of equity walk-throughs by one school's LL was to make the often-invisible culture of the people's rights and responsibilities for interaction visible. This includes the very right to be included in the school community, behavior expectations and representation of the school's multiple demographic populations such as African American, immigrant or Muslim in visual, textual, and spatial displays. Dyads reflected not only on who was and was not represented in school spaces, but also how school-wide practices either reinforced or challenged dominant group expectations and thus, influenced the experience of marginalized groups. Dyads utilized cameras and note taking in order to document their observations of the school and brought these observations back to the LL, where the research team facilitated the sharing of these experiences, paying close attention to family members' having equal time and status to discuss what they noticed. This activity provided an opportunity to make observations regarding practices and challenges in a way that highlighted not only the perspective of multiple groups (e.g., teachers, staff, and parents), but also highlighted the importance of reflection and discussion among these multiple groups.

# Critical Reflections for Future Iterations

Continuous improvement efforts require ongoing reflection, and in this particular project we focused our reflections on how power and the school cultures shaped the engagement and participation of all parents. In doing so, we re-mediated family participation in this school reform effort and continue to inform future iterations of this project. While to a significant degree thus far, the participant structures during LL meetings have contributed to a productive space where all participants have engaged in a critical analysis of institutional practices and have developed ideas about how to shift toward locally-defined and meaningful cultural practices, deeper analysis of how families' participation in such settings is afforded and constrained is an important area for further exploration. Yet, we do not assume that tensions and imbalances do not continue to exist, particularly given that:

Regardless of what types of participant structures are planned for events, when individuals come together in an institutional setting, everyone brings her or his own history of participation and status in educational (and other relevant institutional) settings into a power structure that is present before the first word is even uttered; certain individuals will have privileged status in institutional settings (King, 2009, p. 53).

Even though the LL setting aided in exploring these educational institutions' cultures and those cultures' relationships to the goals of CRPBIS, as we analyzed meeting discourse, at times we have noted that we had to revise our methodology for successfully engaging in a deep exploration of the concerns of the family LL members. That is, how and what knowledge was presented, the formal and informal methods of presenting knowledge, and the relevance that knowledge had to the cultural experiences of the multiple individuals were still negated by those with more status (e.g., researchers, school staff) during

some meetings. In future iterations, we will give consideration to specific activities that examine and acknowledge families' social and labor histories as well as their family and community activities, values, and knowledge so that ultimately, we can further validate family knowledge as worthy of contributing to school reform efforts such as CRPBIS. It is imperative that families, and particularly those who have been historically underserved, have a privileged place at the table in discussions and structural-political decisions affecting students in public education. When creating a collaborative problem-solving space where multiple voices are involved, CRPBIS demonstrates the need for an environment that is conscious of the interactions and implications of social factors at play (Bal et al., 2013). Efforts must be sustained and supported not only by the individuals involved, but also by the culture of the institution. In this way, the CRPBIS project has highlighted the importance of purposeful and relevant inclusion of families from nondominant, historically marginalized backgrounds into decision-making and problem-solving processes at the individual and institutional level.



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# About The CRPBIS Project

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# CRPBIS

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## About the CRPBIS Project

Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) is an educational initiative grounded in local to global justice theory with the ultimate goal of educational systems change. Using activity theory and various types of data collection, local schools are working with members of their communities to identify systemic tensions within the schools, pose new solutions, and test their effectiveness.



## About the Great Lakes Equity Center

The mission of the Great Lakes Equity Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequitycenter.org>.