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# Understanding a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Multi-Tiered System of Supports

# 1

## Practitioner's Perspective . . .

**What are the key features of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)? How does an MTSS framework best serve culturally and linguistically diverse learners? How is an IEP best delivered within an MTSS model for English language and other diverse learners?**

In order to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of English language and other diverse learners, educators must possess a working knowledge of culturally and linguistically responsive principles and practices. Specifically, abilities associated with culturally and linguistically responsive teaching are critical to informed IEPs for diverse students. This chapter provides an overview of the unique qualities and strengths that English language and other diverse learners bring to the teaching and learning environment. The following topics are addressed: (a) MTSS in today's schools, (b) MTSS and cultural and linguistic diversity, (c) key features of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and stages to becoming a culturally proficient educator, and (d) suggestions for applying MTSS knowledge and skills in the development of culturally and linguistically responsive IEPs for English language and other diverse learners with disabilities. We begin with an overview of an MTSS framework for meeting needs of struggling learners, including diverse students with disabilities.

## OVERVIEW OF MTSS

The eventual placement of a student into special education is framed within a multi-tiered model that includes documentation of lack of progress leading

to referral. Once placed, the development, delivery, and refinement of an Individualized Education Program for English language and other diverse learners occur within the school-wide instructional framework designed to educate all students. Over the past several decades, we have educated students with and without disabilities through a variety of structures that included self-contained, resource, mainstreaming, inclusion, full inclusion, response to treatment, response to instruction, and response to intervention models (Hoover, 2013). No matter how the instruction is framed in a school, it serves as a backdrop and perspective, requiring a working level of understanding to best inform effective instruction provided through delivery of an IEP.

The contemporary framework for educating all learners in today's schools is through delivery of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). What is an MTSS model and how does it differ from previous models? Though specific definitions vary in how an MTSS is characterized, a recent American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education report captures the key aspects typically found in most MTSS definitions:

*A comprehensive system of differentiated supports that includes evidence-based instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessments, research-based interventions matched to student needs, and educational decision making using student outcome data. (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian, 2011, p. 15)*

An MTSS model of instruction serves as the foundation of IEP development by incorporating key features associated with response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), thereby emphasizing the interrelated features of academic and affective learner development. Similar to IEPs, the structure of an MTSS model varies across schools and school districts; however, the Colorado state MTSS model contains several common components found in most models as illustrated in Table 1.1. The model components are first presented in the table as essential for addressing educational needs of all learners, which is followed by specific examples of how cultural and linguistic features should be incorporated to generate an MTSS model most relevant to English language and other diverse learners.

Specifics concerning the application and implementation of an MTSS framework vary based on school district size, population, geographic location, available resources, and other related factors. However, each of the six features listed in Table 1.1 is important to include in a school- or district-wide MTSS model. Our purpose for presenting the core features of an MTSS model is to remind practitioners of the most important aspects that frame effective instruction for all learners, especially English language and other diverse learners, instruction that eventually may be drawn upon for informed IEP development and implementation. For additional and more detailed information about different MTSS models, the reader is referred to Center on Response to Intervention (n.d.), Hoover (2013), Vanderwood and Nam (2007).

**Table 1.1** MTSS Framework for All Learners

<b>MTSS Feature</b>	<b>Implementation Description</b>
<b>Shared Leadership</b>	Shared input, supports, and decision making to include representatives from the district, home-community, school, and classroom settings.
<b>Data-Based Problem Solving and Decision Making</b>	Achievement and affective rate of progress, proficiency, and gap analysis data form the foundation for making instructional, eligibility, and placement decisions.
<b>Multi-Tiered Continuum of Supports</b>	Instruction layered along a dynamic continuum of supports often includes three tiers: Universal (Tier 1: All learners); Targeted (Tier 2: Learners struggling with Tier 1); and Intensive (Tier 3: Learners who struggle with Tiers 1 and 2). Level of support provided is based on learner progress in the tiers, with increased instructional intensity and duration at each higher layer of instruction.
<b>Evidence-Based Instruction, Intervention, Assessment</b>	An efficient MTSS model is grounded in evidence-based practice in which effectiveness of methods is demonstrated for an intended (a) purpose (e.g., reading fluency) and (b) learner (e.g., EL). Multi-level models require use of high-quality instruction and intervention procedures and methods, along with assessment devices and practices matched to the needs of students based on standards (e.g., culturally responsive).
<b>Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring</b>	General assessment of all students to screen for at-risk and struggling learners occurs 2–3 times per year in most districts (i.e., universal screening), and the monitoring of student growth and progress for learners who are struggling occurs more frequently (e.g., weekly, daily, every other week; i.e., progress monitoring).
<b>Family, School, Community Partnerships</b>	An effectively implemented MTSS values the learners' families, guardians, and community members who assume key roles in the overall process, including decision making, while tapping into funds of knowledge and interactive home-school supports.

## MTSS AND CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

A properly developed and implemented MTSS should by its very nature meet the diverse needs of all learners. However, as seen in many of our previous models of instruction (e.g., mainstreaming, response to intervention) without specific attention to cultural and linguistic diversity, the models may be appropriate in general for diverse learners yet lack specificity required to bring them to a more culturally responsive level (Ortiz et al., 2011). Therefore, attention to some of the key instructional qualities and strengths brought to the instructional environment by CLD learners is necessary. Each of the six MTSS features summarized above contains embedded opportunities for making certain that the model is appropriate for English language and other diverse learners, leading to informed IEPs.

**Shared Leadership.** Educators with expertise (i.e., training, experience) in the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners bring much needed knowledge, skills, and perspective to the MTSS leadership. Too often we operate from the perspective of a one size fits all model, which serves only to undermine the concept and practice of *diversity*. Educational leadership in the development and implementation of an MTSS model requires representation from experts in curriculum, content, and management as well as from those most knowledgeable about the influences of cultural and linguistic diversity on the implementation of that curriculum, content, and management. Effective leadership throughout instructional delivery within a school-wide MTSS framework is necessary to ensure proper development of an IEP for diverse learners with a disability.

*A key question to ponder:* Does the team leadership in your school or district include educators with expertise in the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners?

**Data-Based Problem Solving and Decision Making.** A cornerstone of MTSS is the gathering, charting, and analyzing of data reflecting learners' academic and affective growth, followed by decisions based on those data. Procedures in the data process need to be standardized, so comparisons across time may be made using tools or assessment measures designed to assess the specific area (e.g., self-management behaviors, reading fluency rate, mathematics reasoning). However, a critical area of caution when implementing this feature of an MTSS model is making certain that the data collection procedures are appropriate for English language and other diverse learners by taking into account cultural and linguistic qualities (Hoover & Klingner, 2011). Oftentimes, we use in good faith an instrument to gather data that has not been validated for use with English learners, or it fails to address in its development the various stages of second language acquisition. Of most significance in the implementation of this MTSS feature is the possibility that if decision making and problem solving for an English language or other diverse learner are based on data that are not culturally responsive, thereby inaccurately demonstrating a learner's actual progress, then subsequent instructional adjustments, multi-tiered placements, possible referral for special education, or the contents of an IEP may also be inaccurate.

*A key question to ponder:* To what extent is the data-based decision making for English language and other diverse learners in your MTSS based on data collected using culturally and linguistically responsive methods and devices?

**Multi-Tiered Continuum of Supports.** The concept of layered instruction, increasing in duration and intensity, provides the framework for delivering education in our schools. Though easy to comprehend in theory, actual practice of tiered instruction often represents unique challenges to educators of English language and other diverse learners (Hoover & Klingner, 2011). Of most concern is the delivery of tiered instruction in a way that meets the needs of all

learners in a classroom or grade, differentiated sufficiently to be culturally and linguistically responsive. Multi-tiered supports are only effective if they provide diverse learners sufficient opportunities to learn, particularly in Tiers 1 and 2. Though the MTSS structure in a school is the same for all learners, decision making concerning high-quality differentiated instruction for English language and other diverse learners requires emphasis on language skill development not typically necessary for non-English learners. Incorporating academic language development (see Chapter 3) in the education of English learners is fundamental to providing sufficient opportunities to learn (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014), and it is essential to consider when addressing IEP needs in MTSS models.

*A key question to ponder:* What features within your school's MTSS provide evidence that the model reflects cultural and linguistic diversity in the education of all learners to ensure accurate special education referral, placement, and subsequent IEP development?

**Evidence-Based Instruction, Intervention, Assessment.** A most critical aspect in the education of diverse learners pertains to the extent that education incorporates methods, materials, classroom management, cooperative groupings, curriculum-based measurement, or access to content reflective of cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students. Most curricula, assessment devices, and expectations for achieving benchmarks are almost always reflective of a mainstream, Anglo, middle-class perspective—a perspective that may vary significantly from values, teachings and expectations of many English language and other diverse learners educated in today's schools and classrooms (Hoover, 2013; Orosco, de Schonewise, de Onis, Klingner, & Hoover, 2016). Similar to use of data discussed above, we often in good faith implement instruction and interventions including methods, materials, or management that were not designed or are inappropriate for use with English learners, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, or those with limited experiences due to lack of appropriate learning opportunities. Yet as we assess progress to determine growth, we fail to recognize that delivery of instruction, interventions, or assessments that are not culturally and linguistically responsive has little chance of facilitating growth expectations for diverse students as compared to non-English learners and other mainstream students. The influence and direction of *shared leadership* is critical when implementing this evidence-based feature within an MTSS model to make certain that instruction, intervention, and assessment are culturally and linguistically responsive. Development of proper IEPs can be achieved only if this MTSS feature is properly delivered to all learners prior to and subsequent to special education referral and placement, especially English language and other diverse learners.

*A key question to ponder:* What evidence exists to confirm that the instruction provided in Tier 1, intervention in Tier 2, and associated assessments used are culturally and linguistically responsive to properly educate English language and other diverse learners prior to referral?

**Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring.** The practice of screening learners for evidence of struggle two to three times per school year is standard in today's districts. Similarly, more frequent monitoring to maintain current data on a struggling student's progress is also standard practice. In regard to English language and other diverse learners, the practice of universal screening or progress monitoring represents a challenge to educators due to lack of valid and reliable devices (Basterra, Trumbull, & Solano-Flores, 2011; Hoover & Klingner, 2011). Though most nationally developed, normed, and standardized screening and monitoring devices are appropriate for non-English learners and mainstream students, when used with diverse students, they often yield invalid or inaccurate results, due to English language proficiency levels or cultural expectations that some English language or other diverse learners do not possess (Hoover, Baca, & Klingner, 2016). This, in turn, leads to instructional, referral, and/or placement decisions that may also be inaccurate. The significance of using curriculum-based measurement (CBM) to screen and monitor English language and other diverse learners' progress via many of the current devices becomes highly important, since educators are able to develop or modify CBMs that meet cultural and linguistic needs that many existing devices lack (see Chapter 8 for discussion about CBMs). Therefore, universal screening and progress monitoring when used with diverse students require educators to view existing practices through a cultural and linguistic lens, making proper adjustments as necessary particularly when incorporating findings into IEP development.

*A key question to ponder:* What evidence exists to support use of the universal screening and progress-monitoring devices and practices in your school, demonstrating that each is culturally and linguistically responsive for diverse learners?

**Family, School, Community Partnerships.** An MTSS model is most effective when grounded in a well-established partnership that values collaboration among home, community, and school (Hoover, Barletta, & Klingner, 2016). Valuing contributions of family and community as partners in the education of students serves the best interests of all involved with education. Depending on cultural expectations, parents/guardians and community members may vary in their expectations for collaboration, which educators should respect by accommodating differences to best support learners' education. Additionally, the importance of community and family support in the education of English language and other diverse learners cannot be overstated. As partnerships are strengthened through collaboration, educators become more informed of student strengths, qualities, learning preferences, and needs. Comprehensive education provided through an MTSS framework requires involvement and commitment from a variety of people in students' lives given the diversity seen in today's classrooms. Additionally, parental or guardian involvement is required in IEP development, further highlighting the importance of collaboration and effective communication.

*A key question to ponder: How are family and community involved in the education of English language and other diverse learners at your school?*

## **CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING QUALITIES**

The education of students in today's classrooms requires teachers to have a working knowledge and understanding of key features that define diversity in schools. Culturally and linguistically diverse learners have a significant stake in the success of multi-tiered support systems (Hoover & Klingner, 2011; Vanderwood & Nam, 2007). Knowledge of CLD instructional qualities leading to culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) teaching is essential to providing high-quality instruction, while also avoiding erroneously thinking that a learning disability exists when in fact the student is exhibiting differences in learning preferences (Hoover, Baca, & Klingner, 2016). Adhering to the following, derived from material found in Hoover (2011), assists educators to apply CLR teaching principles in the development and delivery of an IEP for English language and other diverse learners:

- Incorporating culturally and linguistically diverse values and practices is required to provide diverse students sufficient opportunities to learn.
- Interventions need to be validated with English learners and other diverse populations to achieve satisfactory IEP progress.
- IEPs need to reflect English language proficiency levels in instruction and assessment.
- Students' English language proficiency and cultural values/norms inform necessary accommodations to best meet IEP goals.
- Culturally responsive educators (see Table 1.2) need to be involved in the development and implementation of IEPs for diverse learners.

Consideration of these items facilitates the successful development and implementation of the IEP within an MTSS framework, while reducing the tendency to perceive lack of opportunity as lack of progress. "Teachers who utilize CRT [culturally responsive teaching] practices value students' cultural and linguistic resources and view this knowledge as capital to build upon rather than as a barrier to learning" (Aceves & Orosco, 2014, p. 7).

In addition, cultural proficiency is achieved through a long-term process as educators integrate experience with and knowledge about different cultures (Gay, 2000; Mason, 1993). This experience and knowledge, in turn, informs the development of responsive IEPs for diverse learners. Literature searches yield a variety of definitions describing culturally responsive teaching and instruction (Gay, 2002; Hoover, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2007; Wlodkowski & Ginsburg, 1995). One definition frequently cited and applied was put forth by a leading researcher in the field

**Table 1.2** Stages of Cultural Proficiency

<b>Development Stage</b>	<b>Relevance to IEP Development and Implementation</b>
<b>1. Cultural Destructiveness</b>	Cultural diversity is viewed as a highly negative aspect and is excluded totally from MTSS and IEPs.
<b>2. Cultural Incapacity</b>	Cultural diversity is viewed indifferently, ignored, and given little if any credibility in the implementation of MTSS and IEPs.
<b>3. Cultural Blindness</b>	Existence of cultural diversity is acknowledged yet is viewed as having little significance in the implementation of MTSS or IEP development and implementation.
<b>4. Cultural Precompetence</b>	Cultural diversity is valued as evidenced through greater personal awareness and sensitivity with some, although limited, applications within MTSS and IEP development and implementation.
<b>5. Cultural Competence</b>	Perceptions about cultural diversity move from awareness and sensitivity to application and incorporation within MTSS and IEP development and implementation.
<b>6. Cultural Proficiency</b>	Cultural diversity is significantly embedded into MTSS and IEP development and implementation including both general and special education at the school/district levels.

who defined culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). In regard to cultural proficiency in teaching, Table 1.2 summarizes stages associated with educator development (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Gay, 2000; Hoover, Klingner, Baca, & Patton, 2008; Mason, 1993) as applied to MTSS and IEP implementation.

The initial stages (i.e., Stages 1–3) are very incompatible with culturally responsive teaching, while Stages 4–6 reflect preferred and necessary MTSS practices, attitudes, and values along with appropriate IEPs for English language and other diverse learners.

## WHAT MAKES AN IEP CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE?

Though it is essential to *exclude* culture and language as primary causes leading to a struggling learner’s lack of academic or affective progress, diverse learners who are appropriately placed into special education continue to bring

Cultural and linguistic diversity does not cease to be integral to diverse students’ teaching and learning once they are placed in special education.

their cultural and linguistic diversity to the teaching and learning environment. That is, cultural and linguistic qualities that diverse students bring to the special education environment continue to be relevant and, therefore, require continued incorporation into instruction similar to the teaching provided in the general classroom prior and subsequent to referral and placement.

Thus, an IEP for a culturally and linguistically diverse learner must incorporate cultural and linguistic features into its development and implementation to be responsive to the learner’s needs. Stated differently, if a CLD learner’s



IEP addresses only factors typically addressed for non-CLD students with little or no attention to culture and language, then it lacks the cultural and linguistic responsiveness needed to properly provide a diverse learner special education. As will be discussed and illustrated throughout this book, in order for an IEP to be responsive, it must include documented practical considerations and instructional suggestions for meeting diverse culture and language needs within several IEP component areas:

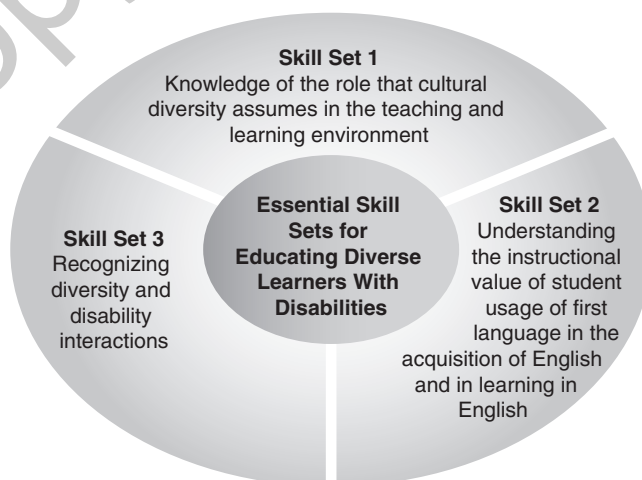
- (a) present level of performance statement(s)
- (b) measurable annual goals and short-term objectives
- (c) instructional and assessment accommodations
- (d) progress monitoring devices and procedures
- (e) special considerations, related services, and supplemental aids

The significance of incorporating cultural and linguistic content and considerations in these, and the other mandated IEP components, is a central focus of the material in this book, providing practitioners contemporary perspectives about diversity and disability education embedded into IEP development and implementation.

## EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIVERSE LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

Successful education of English language and other diverse learners who have a disability requires educators to become knowledgeable about the content and skills described above. However, when diverse learners possess a disability, another dimension in teaching and learning emerges requiring consideration of the interaction between diversity and disability. Figure 1.1 illustrates one way of thinking about or conceptualizing skill sets required to provide sufficient

**Figure 1.1** Conceptualizing the Education of Diverse Learners With Disabilities



opportunities to learn for diverse learners with disabilities. The figure, developed from material found in numerous sources (e.g., Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Gay, 2002; Hoover, Baca, & Klingner, 2016; Hoover & Klingner, 2011; IRIS Center, 2015; Ortiz et al., 2011), illustrates three skill sets that shape effective instruction for English language and other diverse learners with disabilities.

***Skill Set 1: Role of cultural diversity.*** As illustrated in Table 1.2, cultural competence and proficiency become evident when diverse cultural values, teachings, and heritages are integral to the curriculum being used in overall teaching and learning. That is, in order for educators to become culturally proficient (i.e., Stage 6), the ways of learning must reflect best practices that demonstrate educator understanding of the role that culture assumes in teaching and learning, such as diverse (a) ways of thinking about history, (b) views about the same set of events shaping society, (c) home and community teachings in the curricula, or (d) perceptions about a disability in society, to name a few. Therefore, this first key skill set necessary to develop and implement a culturally and linguistically responsive IEP is for all educators to understand the significant role and positive contributions that cultural diversity assumes in the classroom.

***Skill Set 2: Significance of native language use.*** It is well documented that English learners' success with English development and with learning in English is strengthened by strategic use of native, or first, language in the instruction, especially when more complex issues, vocabulary, concepts, and comprehension are involved (August, Shanahan, & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008; Hoover, Baca, & Klingner, 2016). Successful education of English language and other diverse learners requires opportunities in the teaching and learning environment for students to use their first language skills, even if the classroom teacher is not proficient in that language. Therefore, this second skill set emphasizes the importance of educators knowing the value of first language usage by second language learners, which should be evident in various aspects within the IEP.

***Skill Set 3: Diversity and disability intersection.*** One of the more frequently discussed topics in the teaching of diverse learners is educators' abilities to distinguish second language acquisition and learning differences from a language or learning disability. Critical to the successful development and implementation of an IEP is the understanding that culturally and linguistically diverse learner qualities and strengths are not indicators of a disability. This third essential skill set requires educators to become proficient in recognizing similarities and differences between expected second language acquisition behaviors, culturally taught behaviors, and disability characteristics—sufficient to a level where acquisition behaviors and cultural teachings are not misinterpreted as disability characteristics.

Overall, the conceptual framework for educating English language and other diverse learners must be shaped by educators' (a) positive perceptions about the role of diverse cultures in teaching and learning; (b) recognition and application of first language use in acquiring English and in learning and comprehending skills, concepts, and academic vocabulary in English; and (c) abilities to distinguish second language acquisition and culturally diverse values

from language or learning disabilities. These core essential skill sets are examined further in various chapters of this book. For more in-depth consideration of this conceptual framework and its three features, the reader is referred to the sources cited above and those found in the previous two sections. In summary, knowledge of the role of cultural diversity, native language usage, and interaction between diversity and disability is foundational to the development and implementation of an IEP for diverse learners, especially those in the process of acquiring English as a second language.

## **IEP DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND OTHER DIVERSE LEARNERS**

*English language proficiency* is used relative to an individual whose challenges in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may deny them the ability to meet expected proficiency levels of achievement. Students acquiring English as a second language progress through several stages, each of which reflects specific behaviors; these stages are necessary for educators to understand to best provide sufficient opportunities for diverse learners (see Chapter 4 for additional discussion). Overall, the composition of culturally responsive teaching includes adhering to several core principles reflecting important classroom structures, supports, and practices. Below are nine principles to guide IEP development and delivery to meet diverse student needs based on material found in several sources (see Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Grossman, 1995; Hoover, 2009; Hoover, Baca, & Klingner, 2016; Orosco & Klingner, 2010):

*Principle 1*—Language development, content knowledge, and academic vocabulary should be reinforced across different subjects to properly contextualize the IEP goals and objectives.

*Principle 2*—IEPs should contain both English language development and content goals to be culturally responsive for diverse learners.

*Principle 3*—IEPs for English language and other diverse learners should document challenging goals and objectives, rather than low-level outcomes, to ensure sufficient opportunities to learn.

*Principle 4*—IEPs' present level of performance statement(s) should include reference to instructional types found to be successful with the learner, such as cooperative, active, or inquiry-based learning tasks.

*Principle 5*—IEP content and suggested accommodations should reflect students' cultural, linguistic, experiential, and family backgrounds.

*Principle 6*—Opportunities should be provided to allow learners to utilize their cultural and linguistic experiences, languages, and strengths in their learning.

*Principle 7*—IEPs should document needed supports for using various learning strategies consistent with language proficiency and cultural and family teachings.

*Principle 8*—IEP objectives should incorporate co-teaching within collaboratively structured learning environments to make certain culturally and linguistically diverse methods and assessments are employed.

*Principle 9*—Diverse learners should be provided ongoing reciprocal dialogue in their instruction to be successful in meeting IEP goals and objectives through English language development.

## CONCLUSION

The education of English language and other diverse learners requires educators to possess training and experience working within culturally diverse environments to best provide sufficient opportunities. Understanding the MTSS model of education contributes to informed IEP development, especially since one mandated IEP element requires documentation of the extent to which student will participate in and access general education along with nondisabled peers. Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices facilitate needed language and cultural supports to assist with academic learning and English language development of diverse learners who have a disability. Developing and maintaining knowledge and expertise in cultural and linguistic responsiveness that shape the conceptual framework for educating diverse learners with disabilities provide a solid foundation from which culturally and linguistically responsive IEPs are best developed.

The contents of this chapter only introduce the reader to the complex task of educating English language and other diverse learners with IEPs. Additional study and experience are required to become fully proficient in the special education referral, assessment, and instruction of diverse learners, and readers are referred to the various sources cited in this chapter and throughout the remainder of this book for additional study in these areas. Best practices specific to the development and implementation of IEPs for diverse students in today's schools and classrooms introduced in this chapter are discussed in subsequent chapters of this book.