



# Facilitating Socially Just Evidence-based Practice

Created by:  
Amanda L. Sullivan & Thuy Nguyen

*Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center*

July 2024





# About the Centers

The Region III Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Great Lakes Equity Center, an educational research and service center located in Indiana University Indianapolis's School of Education. The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act to provide equity-focused technical assistance to states, districts, and public schools focused on systemic improvements to ensure educational access, participation and positive outcomes for students who have been historically marginalized based on race, sex, national origin, or religion, at the request of public schools, districts, state departments of education, and other responsible governmental agencies.



## Introduction



**[Image description: Group of people with various research-related graphs, charts, and icons floating above their heads.]**

Research is a valuable resource for improving instruction and educational supports and is increasingly referenced in policy as a necessary basis for practice. Consequently, implementation of practices, interventions, and policies derived from research, or evidence, in schools is increasingly common, albeit still limited (e.g., Flegge, 2022; Stahmer et al., 2018). Within this context, *evidence-based practice* (EBP) has multiple meanings, from referring to individual practices or programs for which there are one or more well-designed studies showing favorable results, to referring to an *inquiry process* for leveraging research to inform decision making (Thyer & Myers, 2011). The latter is our focus here.



## Introduction (cont.)

---

This *Equity Tool* is intended to facilitate use of the concepts and processes described in greater depth in the *Equity by Design* brief, [Promoting Socially Just Evidence-based Practice](#). We summarize the framework presented in this brief and offer guiding questions to support educators' preparation for and engagement in EBP elements and processes. Note, the answers to these questions will be different depending on the unmet need that is the impetus for problem solving in each context (e.g., a schoolwide need or initiative versus a classroom or individual one). As such, this tool can be an ongoing resource as socially just EBP is leveraged repeatedly and iteratively to address a range of issues or problems to which educators would like to bring to bear research to support practice or policy at the systems, classroom or group, and individual levels.

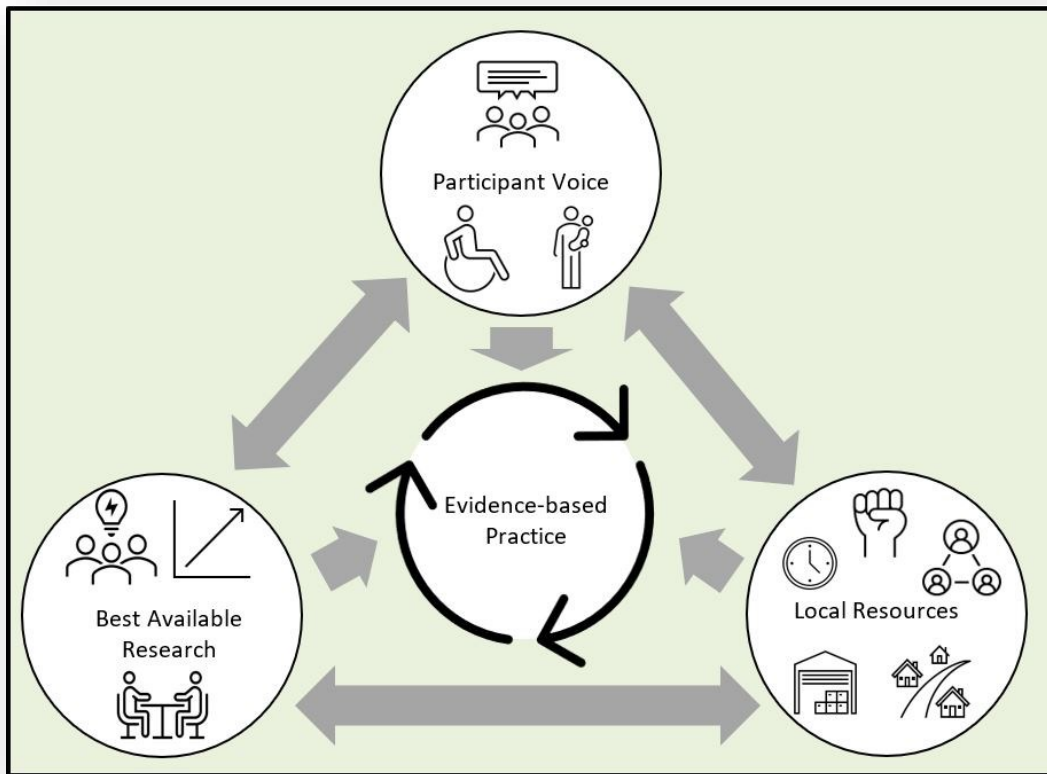


## Why Engage in Socially Just Evidence-based Practice?

---

Common conceptualizations of the inquiry process of EBP feature integration of (1) the best available research evidence with (2) provider expertise and resources and (3) client characteristics, culture, identity, and preferences (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2008; Spring & Hitchcock, 2009). *Socially just* EBP is distinct in its centering of participant voice, critical consideration of local context, and research in a dynamic, collaborative problem-solving process in partnership with students, families, and community members (Sullivan et al., 2022). In this way, socially just EBP overcomes common criticisms of traditional EBP, including concerns for narrow conceptualizations of what constitutes evidence, inappropriate application of research with samples unrepresentative of minoritized populations, overemphasis on research standards and expertise over participant voice, and lack of critical consideration of the sociocultural contexts of implementation, which, taken together, can result in lack of contextual and cultural appropriateness and ineffective practice (e.g., Berg, 2019; Berliner, 2002; Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2022). Use of a framework for socially just EBP can better align educators' research use with equity-centered initiatives and commitments. It may also help prevent misattribution of poor response-to-intervention to participants, where it may instead be attributable to the inappropriate application of research evidence by giving careful consideration to participant partnerships and features of the local context. This in turn can position research use as a key element of critical collaborative practice to advance equitable, effective prevention, instruction, and intervention in schools.

## Why Engage in Socially Just Evidence-based Practice? (cont.)



*[Image description: EPB Components. This figure depicts the elements of EBP and their relations. There are three circles for participant voice, best available research, and local resources organized in a triangle with bidirectional arrows between them to show they inform each other. At the center there is a circle labeled evidence-based practice with arrows showing it is influenced by each element.]*

## The Importance of Elevating Participant Voice

Equity-oriented, socially just EBP involves prioritizing participant voice so that the individuals involved in the practices or services identified through the EBP process, including those intended to benefit from them, are partners in the problem-solving process. This includes staff, students, families, and other community members. Student voice in particular is an important aspect of culturally responsive practice (REL Pacific/Institute of Education Sciences, n.d., p.1) and research (Berliner, 2002) to support positive outcomes. Notably, voice is about so much more than merely gathering data on student characteristics and performance; it involves *active partnership* with the individuals or groups who will be the intended recipients of services or practices. Partnership involves co-construction, shared leadership, ongoing bidirectional communication, and collaboration throughout the problem-solving process (Garcia et al., 2016; Sheridan & Garbacz, 2021).





## The Importance of Elevating Participant Voice (cont.)

Doing so requires developing awareness about how individuals' relations to structural and interpersonal power shape opportunity and engagement (O'Neill, 2015), as well as how educators and others experience and understand practices and context. This awareness should be leveraged within the EBP process to minimize barriers to engagement and develop nuanced understanding of the educational needs to be addressed. It is especially important that those with the greatest social and role privilege (e.g., administrators and other staff) check their assumptions and behaviors throughout the process to ensure they are not impeding others' voice or agency.

### *Cultivating Participant Voice*

As educators and leadership teams prepare to engage in EBP, they can consider the following guiding questions to promote ongoing engagement of partners and development of effective partnerships. Responses can then be used to structure opportunity and teaming processes to ensure equitable, active participation of all relevant partners. Because consideration of context, resources, and evidence will depend on the insights from partners, it is important to carefully cultivate participant voice to support the other elements of socially just EBP.

- Who are all the relevant participants from our school community?
  - ◊ Who are the participants currently involved in the current processes and initiatives? Are these individuals representative of our school community? Depending on need to be addressed in the EBP problem-solving process, potential participants might include a single student, their caretakers, and service providers, as in an individual need, or an entire classroom, grade level, or school community for more expansive needs.
- How are representatives of participant groups solicited so that they can make a truly informed choice about participating?
  - ◊ What aspects of common procedures or communications may impede access or participation in leadership and problem-solving? Who is commonly nonresponsive, silent, or overlooked? Note, it is important not to assume



*[Image description: Raised hands with smiley faces drawn on them of people with diverse skin tones, with chat bubbles above the hands.]*



## The Importance of Elevating Participant Voice (cont.)

---

families' disinterest in participation, but to instead consider how different individuals and groups may not feel fully welcome or supported in schooling spaces. Then, communication and participation structures can be leveraged to provide a more welcoming, engaging process.

- ◇ What steps need to be taken to ensure all relevant participants' equal access to information and opportunity to engage?
- Once team members are identified, what structures (e.g., modes and formats for participation) and processes need to be in place to ensure every participant has an opportunity to engage in the EBP process?
- How will the EBP process be structured to ensure that knowledge, lived experiences, and other contributions of students, families, and other community members, particularly those from minoritized groups, are honored?
  - ◇ How will we invite input and knowledge from participants beyond representatives in the problem-solving or leadership team(s)? How can we use multiple methods to gather input from diverse constituents throughout the problem solving process?
  - ◇ How will we reconcile disparate perspectives without invalidating or ignoring those who lack traditional professional authority, particularly students and family members from minoritized groups?
- How will we collect and share data on the process and outcomes to determine the effectiveness of the process, decisions, and eventual outcomes of implementation?
- How will we ensure broad participation in data use to determine effectiveness and any needed modifications?

### Notes

---



## Leveraging Local Resources & Context

---

Local resources encompass the knowledge, social, material, financial, and personnel resources within the school community that can be leveraged to support practice and improvement efforts. Solidarity with those from marginalized groups is especially crucial—that is, listening to communities and using privilege to advance their needs and rights—as a resource for socially just EBP as lack of solidarity reduces the social justice potential of collaboration, partnership, and initiatives.

### *Critical Considerations of Resource and Context*

Once processes for equitably engaging participants are in place, the next set of considerations focuses on developing a holistic understanding of the local context of the need to be addressed and in which research will be used and applied. In considering the relevant resources and other contextual factors, consider the following guiding questions:

- What does solidarity look like in this context?
- What are the related practices and initiatives?
  - ◇ How do different members of the school community experience them?
  - ◇ What implications might this have for the ways we understand and respond to the identified need?
  - ◇ Is the identified need related to existing initiatives that may be ineffective or even harmful for some and that need to be adapted or de-implemented? (Shaw, 2021)
- What are the potential structural, material, and social barriers to addressing this issue?
  - ◇ What mechanisms are in place, or can be put in place, to support understanding of structural or institutional inequities? (Dodman et al., 2019)
  - ◇ What resources can be leveraged to overcome barriers?
- What is the broader context related to unmet need? This may include policy, schoolwide or community/local factors, or other influences beyond the immediate context that was the impetus for engaging EBP.
  - ◇ How do different members of the community experience this context?
  - ◇ How do marginalized members of the community experience it?



## Leveraging Local Resources & Context (cont.)

---

Once potential research-based practices, interventions, programs, or policies are identified through the problem-solving process, consider the following:

- What resources are available to support implementation?
- How do the potential practices identified relate to existing resource use?
- What preparation and materials will be required to allow for appropriate implementation?
  - ◊ How do the interventionists in the research compare to ours in time, preparation/training, and other resources?
  - ◊ What time and materials are needed for appropriate implementation?
- Do one or more aspects of the practice, intervention, program or policy need to be adapted to the culture of recipients in order to be appropriate for use?

Answers to these questions will help determine the most efficient deployment of local resources and enhance the feasibility and social validity of the selected course of action. Full understanding of each of the queries above will necessitate engagement of all partners, especially those who will be participating in the services or practices both as intervention agents and recipients.

### Notes

---





## Determining the Best Available Evidence

---

Accessing, evaluating, and applying new knowledge from research is a core aspect of all EBP. What constitutes relevant, applicable research will vary from one student, school, district, or community to the next because of the role of context in shaping the research process and how the resulting knowledge should be used (American Psychological Association, 2021). What constitutes the *best available* evidence is not based on the design or methods in a given study but rather *fit* with needs and context. Consequently, determining fit should include consideration of the values, assumptions, methods, and processes of the research in order to determine what works, for whom, and under what circumstances relative to the needs that were the impetus for engaging the EBP process. Generality or applicability of research to your context should not be assumed. The following questions can be helpful in guiding critical appraisal of potentially relevant research:

- What dimensions of difference (e.g., ethnicity, culture, language, dis/ability, LGBTQ+ identity) and relations to systems of oppression (e.g., exposure to racism, classism, sexism, ableism, etc.) are relevant in this process or are most salient in the context in which the research will be applied and should be accounted for in selecting and appraising available research?
- What contextual features of the classrooms, school, and/or other individuals and settings involved are relevant in this process and should be accounted for in selecting and appraising available research?
- How will school leaders ensure the research knowledge to be evaluated is accessible to all members of the problem-solving or leadership team(s)?
- What constitutes a *credible* source and why? For example, beyond common academic sources just as peer-reviewed journals or books, teams might consider other print or web-based materials. Yet not all sources are credible or useful, particularly in light of the proliferation of misinformation (Kendeou et al., 2019; Lester et al., 2020; Pappas, 2022). Given the need to be addressed, the context, and the participants, a variety of different sources might be applicable, so it will be important to consider whether a given source is credible. Particularly where scholarship and resources related to supports for minoritized populations are concerned, credible sources may include those without typical academic credentials. Further, academic credentials alone does not mean an article or book is the most relevant or credible for a specific context given the implications of researcher positionality (Arora et al., 2023), methods, and findings (Boyle & Kelly, 2017). Many libraries offer resources to help with evaluating sources (e.g., [University of Washington: University Library Research Guides](#)).



## Determining the Best Available Evidence (cont.)

---

- How does the research considered address the roles of those dimensions of difference in the study design, implementation, and interpretation?
  - ◇ How does the context (participants, setting, community, broader environment) align with or differ from ours?
  - ◇ How do the perspectives, needs, worldviews, and approaches of the researchers and participants align with or differ from ours?
  - ◇ Is the practice/intervention/program/policy universal or culturally-specific? What support do we have for use with participants different from those who participated in the research?

As suggested, relevant considerations include both the demographic and cultural contexts of the research considered relative to those of the setting in which the research will be used, as well as considerations related to social status, aims, values, and assumptions of the researchers (Arora et al., 2023).

- Where the research does not align well with our context, how can the practice/intervention/program/policy be adapted to our context and culture? How much adaptation is too much? (see Ingraham & Oka, 2007 for in depth discussion)
  - ◇ Where can we get information and support for needed adaptations? Student, family, and community partners will provide valuable insight into the relevant and applicability of potential research to be applied. These insights can, in turn, inform consideration of potential adaptations (e.g., modification of materials for cultural relevance or linguistic accessibility).
  - ◇ How will we know if the modifications were appropriate and successful? There are a variety of resources available to guide adaptation and evaluation thereof (e.g., Booth & Lazear, 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022; Wadud & Berkowitz, n.d.).

# Notes

---



# Implementing the Problem-Solving Process

With the three broad elements above (voice, resources/context, and best available evidence), EBP is generally implemented through a 5-step problem-solving process. In addition to the general guiding questions above, teams can consider the following reflection questions within each stage of the inquiry process.

Steps in the EBP Inquiry Process	Goal	Additional Reflection Prompts
<b>1. Ask a question about an unmet need.</b>	Arrive at a shared understanding of the unmet need to be addressed. The question will need to be explicitly operationalized to inform the remaining steps in the process. This process should clearly identify the need in collaboration with the individual(s), group(s), or community/ies affected; context for addressing it; and targeted outcome(s).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do diverse constituents understand the need and associated factors (e.g., curriculum, instruction, programming, policy, practices, relationships, other resources)?</li><li>• How are we prioritizing the perspectives and needs of those most affected by the unmet need?</li><li>• How can the question and need be framed to support equity and social justice for affected parties?</li><li>• To what extent are disparities in resources, relationships, or opportunity contributing to the need?</li><li>• How might disparities and structural inequities affect addressing the need?</li></ul>
<b>2. Acquire the evidence.</b>	Identify scholarship that may inform practice, intervention, programming, or policy to address the need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How are we finding the evidence?</li><li>• What are the different sources we can leverage to find evidence?</li><li>• Whose knowledge is the most valuable and why? Whose knowledge is marginalized?</li></ul>

Steps in the EBP Inquiry Process	Goal	Additional Reflection Prompts
<p><b>3. Appraise the evidence.</b></p>	<p>Evaluate the evidence for relevance to the need and context in order to identify which research-based practices/interventions/ programs/policy will be most acceptable and feasible within our context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the context of the research reflect <i>our</i> context?</li> <li>• Given the studies' conceptualizations, methods, contexts, and interpretations, which elements are best aligned with our needs and context?</li> <li>• How do various partners within the process regard the different sources of evidence that might be applicable? What are the relative strengths and weaknesses given different identity and cultural characteristics?</li> <li>• Who would be the most impacted (e.g., time required by implementers, training required, etc.) by the implementation of these practices?</li> <li>• What are the potential outcomes associated with each option?</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Apply the evidence.</b></p>	<p>Apply the best available evidence identified to address the need.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are all relevant participants involved in the decision on which practices are applied?</li> <li>• How will we ensure resources are appropriately deployed to promote proper implementation?</li> <li>• How will we collect data on the implementation process and outcomes to know if it is working and what adjustments may be needed?</li> <li>• How will we determine the decision rules regarding effectiveness?</li> </ul>





## Implementing the Problem-Solving Process (cont.)

Steps in the EBP Inquiry Process	Goal	Additional Reflection Prompts
<p><b>5. Analyze and adjust if needed.</b></p>	<p>Evaluate fidelity of implementation and outcomes of the practice/intervention/program/policy and make adjustments as needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the practice/intervention/program/policy being implemented as intended? If not, what adjustments are needed?</li> <li>• Is the practice/intervention/policy having the intended effects? If not, what adjustments are needed?</li> <li>• If implemented for multiple recipients, is the practice/intervention/policy having the intended effects for all or are there differences in outcomes?</li> </ul>

Even when the process is applied well, the selected practice/intervention/program/policy is that *most likely*--but not guaranteed--to be effective in addressing the identified need. The problem-solving process is intended to be iterative, so depending on what happens in the final stages, it might be necessary to return to earlier steps to recalibrate in order to promote positive outcomes. This is not a failure of the process but simply a feature of research use, data-based decision making, and engaging within dynamic social environments like schools.

# Notes

---



# References

---

- American Psychological Association. (2008). *Disseminating evidence-based practice for children & adolescents: A systems approach to enhancing care*. <https://www.apa.org/practice/resources/evidence/children-report.pdf>
- American Psychological Association. (2021). *APA guidelines on evidence-based psychological practice in health care* [Data set]. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e503832021-001>
- Arora, P., Sullivan, A. L., & Song, S. (2023). On the imperative for reflexivity in school psychology scholarship. *School Psychology Review*, 52(5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2022.2105050>
- Berg, H. (2019). Evidence-based practice in psychology fails to be tripartite: A conceptual critique of the scientocentrism in evidence-based practice in psychology. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02253>
- Berliner, D. C. (2002). Educational research: The hardest science of all. *Educational Researcher*, 31(8), 18-20. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X031008018>
- Booth, C., & Lazear, K. (2015). Cultural adaptation. *The Cultural & Linguistic Competence (CLC) Hub of the Technical Assistance Network for Children's Behavioral Health*. [http://cfs.cbcs.usf.edu/projects-research/\\_docs/CLC\\_ResearchBrief1.pdf](http://cfs.cbcs.usf.edu/projects-research/_docs/CLC_ResearchBrief1.pdf)
- Boyle, J., & Kelly, B. (2017). The role of evidence in educational psychology. In B. Kelly, L. Woolfson, & J. Boyle (Eds.), *Frameworks for practice in educational psychology: A textbook for trainees and practitioners* (2nd ed.) (pp. 29-42). Jessica Kingsley.
- Dodman, S. L., DeMulder, E. K., View, J. L., Swalwell, K., Stribling, S., Ra, S., & Dallman, L. (2019). Equity audits as a tool of critical data-driven decision making: Preparing teachers to see beyond achievement gaps and bubbles. *Action in Teacher Education*, 41(1), 4-22.
- Erickson, F., & Gutierrez, K. (2002). Culture, rigor, and science in educational research. *Educational Researcher*, 31(8), 21-24. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X031008021>
- Flegge, L. G. (2022). The evidence-based practice (EBP) instrument (school version): Development and initial psychometrics of a new interdisciplinary scale. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 27, 581-592.
- Garcia, M. E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C. B., Flores, N., & Miller, K. B. (2016). *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 1: Building an understanding of family and community engagement (REL 2016-148)*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific.
- Ingraham, C. L., & Oka, E. R. (2014). Multicultural issues in evidence-based interventions. In B. K. Nastasi (Ed.), *Multicultural issues in school psychology* (pp. 127-149). Routledge.
- Kendeou, P., Robinson, D. H., & McCrudden, M. T. (Eds.). (2019). *Misinformation and fake news in education*. IAP.

# References (cont.)

---

- Lester, W. S., Strunk, K. K., & Hoover, P. D. (2020). Persistent myths about the psychology of education: Implications for social justice and equity. In L. Parson & C. C. Ozaki (Eds.), *Teaching and learning for social justice and equity in higher education* (pp. 53-71). Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Neill, M. (2015). Applying critical consciousness and evidence-based practice decision-making: A framework for clinical social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Education, 51* (4), 624-637.
- Pappas, S. (2022, January 1). Fighting fake news in the classroom. *Monitor on Psychology, 53* (1), 87. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/career-fake-news>
- Parra-Cardona, R. (2018). How to make effective cultural adaptations to evidence-based interventions. <https://txicfw.socialwork.utexas.edu/effective-cultural-adaptations-to-ebps/>
- REL Pacific/Institute of Education Sciences. (n.d.). *Including voice in education addressing equity through student and family voice in classroom learning*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/pacific/Resource/70111>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2022). *Adapting evidence-based practices for under-resourced populations*. [https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA\\_Digital\\_Download/PEP22-06-02-004.pdf](https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/SAMHSA_Digital_Download/PEP22-06-02-004.pdf)
- Shaw, S. R. (2021). Implementing evidence-based practices in school psychology: Excavation by de-implementing the disproved. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 36*(2), 91-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735211000513>
- Sheridan, S. M., & Garbacz, S. A. (2021). Centering families: Advancing a new vision for school psychology. *School Psychology Review, 51*(6), 727-741. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1954860>
- Spring, B., & Hitchcock, K. (2010). Evidence-based practice. In I. B. Weiner & W. E. Craighead (Eds.), *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology* (pp. 1-4). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0330>
- Stahmer, A. C., Suhrheinrich, J., Schetter, P. L., & McGee Hassrick, E. (2018). Exploring multi-level system factors facilitating educator training and implementation of evidence-based practices (EBP): A study protocol. *Implementation Science, 13*(1), 1-11.
- Sullivan, A. L., Li, A., Nguyen, T., & Bose, M. (2022). Promoting socially just evidence-based practice. *Equity by Design* [Brief]. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center. <https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/promoting-socially-just-evidence-based-practice>
- Thyer, B. A., & Myers, L. L. (2011). The quest for evidence-based practice: A view from the United States. *Journal of Social Work, 11*(1), 8-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017310381812>
- Wadud, E., & Berkowitz, B. (n.d.). *Section 4. Adapting community interventions for different cultures and communities*. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/analyze/choose-and-adapt-community-interventions/cultural-adaptation/main>



# About the Authors

---



**Dr. Amanda L. Sullivan** is a Professor of School Psychology and Birkmaier Educational Leadership Professor at the University of Minnesota, and an Equity Fellow with the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. Her research focuses on the educational needs, including disability, of students from racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized backgrounds and issues of equity and justice in the educational and health services they participate in.



**Thuy Nguyen** is a doctoral student in School Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Her research focuses on equitable education for traditionally marginalized populations.



# IMPACT:

*Equitable, Responsive Education for All*



**Great Lakes Equity Center**  
902 West New York St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317-278-3493 - [glec@iupui.edu](mailto:glec@iupui.edu)  
<https://greatlakeequity.org>



**IUI School of Education**  
902 West New York St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317-274-6801 - [soemail@iupui.edu](mailto:soemail@iupui.edu)  
<https://education.indianapolis.iu.edu/>

---

**Recommended citation:** Sullivan, A. L., & Nguyen, T. (2024). Facilitating socially just evidence-based practice. *Equity Tool* [Tool]. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center.

## **Copyright © 2024 by Great Lakes Equity Center**

The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (S004D220003). However, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal Government should not be assumed.

Additionally, this document and its contents are provided to public school personnel, students enrolled in public schools, parents of those students, community organizations and other community members. We ask that this resource is cited if research, ideas, or information from this document are used in any produced works.

No part of this document may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means for commerce media or commercial purposes without permission in writing from the Great Lakes Equity Center.

