



The Alliance Project

Headquarters

Peabody College, Box 160
Hill Student Center, Rm. 101
(615) 343-5610
1-800-831-6134
Fax (615) 343-5611
alliance@vanderbilt.edu

Washington, DC Metropolitan Office

10860 Hampton Road
Fairfax Station, VA 22039
(703) 239-1557
Fax (703) 503-8627
Email: judysd@gte.net

January 2003

Issues Arising From Insufficient Diversity Among Education Personnel: Fact Sheet

"WE ARE NOW ENGAGED IN A MULTICULTURAL EXPERIMENT unique in the history of the world: a democratic society attempting to forge peaceful and productive communities with shared interests, while at the same time honoring particular ethnic, racial, and cultural characteristics, traditions, histories, and languages" (Hill, Carjuzaa, Aramburo, & Baca, 1993, p. 260). The future could bring fragmentation to American society, or it could bring a tapestry of complementary yet unique ethnicities that enrich the whole. The next generation of American adults is now in school, and a great deal depends on the intercultural attitudes and capacity for linkages and community that they can internalize and collectively bring to society in the future. Therefore, the development of these attitudes and capacities should become a natural part of the learning experience.

It is an expressed goal of American education that all of its personnel should be competent for effective instruction of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic populations; at the same time, it is acknowledged that the accomplishment of this goal is not at hand (Office of Special Education Programs, 2000). Meanwhile, the proportion of general education teachers, special educators, related services personnel, school administrators, and diagnostic specialists from diverse racial/ethnic groups is relatively small and is declining in many locations, while diversity is increasing rapidly in the public school population (Annie B. Casey Foundation, 2002; Chinn, 2002; Olson, 2000; Olson & Jerald, 1998). This disparity creates a number of conditions that detract from excellence in education for all students, and from building a successful multicultural society. Some of the issues that should be considered are as follows.

Intercultural understanding. When white students are culturally isolated from teachers whose racial or cultural backgrounds are different from their own, they are deprived of wider perspectives and of the intercultural understanding and communication that are necessary to the society of the present and future (Michael-Bandele, 1993). These skills and understandings should become part of the learning experience of all children, so that they will foster tolerant and productive communities as adults.

Role models. When schools lack racial/ethnic and linguistic diversity among their personnel, students from diverse backgrounds lack important role models to emulate and through whom to recognize that their ethnic/racial differences are not perceived as liabilities (Michael-Bandele, 1993; Pavel, Curtin, Christenson, & Rudes, 1995; Riley, 1998). The presence of role models in the schools is particularly important in the lives of inner city children who may otherwise lack consistent contact with successful adults with their same racial identification (Cooper & Harper, 1990).

Parent participation. Among parents from diverse populations, fuller cooperation with schools in behalf of their children's education is often inhibited by feelings of inadequacy and intimidation, language barriers, and cultural differences (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Johnson & Schilder, 1994; Office of Special Education Programs, 1996). An urgent need, therefore, is to employ personnel who can relate meaningfully with families from diverse backgrounds so that they may participate more fully in educational planning for their children and in supporting that education at home and in the community. Where children with disabilities are concerned, an additional dimension concerns cultural variations in interpretation of, and response to, disability and developmental patterns among families from various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Harry, 1992) -- and the need for clear two-way communication about assessment results, instructional planning and placement, parental rights and responsibilities, and children's progress.

Reduction of bias. Biases and uninformed racial attitudes are prevalent among school-aged children, and can be modified by the presence and positive attention of adults from other cultures in the schools (Pang, 1988; Robinson, 1993). "Each multiethnic-multiracial society develops a social distance scale between and among the various ethnic and racial groups. Such a social distance scale is usually anchored in the mainstream society's cultural values and feelings about the minority group. Those groups against which majority members have strong sanctions are those that they perceive as being most unlike them, and, therefore, the group for which they feel the greatest amount of social distance" (Smith, 1991, p. 182). Obviously, children who have disabilities and who are also from diverse racial/ethnic groups can experience more than one sort of social distance, thus elevating the importance of cultural sensitivity and identification among their teachers.

Variations in learning styles. Clear differences in cognitive and behavioral style can be observed among children from various racial/ethnic groups (Au & Kawakami, 1991). For example, children from Tribal communities are responsive to cooperative learning methods (rather than to the competitive approaches typical of American public schools) (Rayhner, 1989); and affective-oriented teachers have been found to be more successful than are task-oriented teachers in improving the academic achievement of African American students (Franklin, 1992). "Teachers must recognize that students' learning styles, assumptions about formal education, comfort level in overt social relationships, and other culturally influenced factors impact how a student responds to a teacher's classroom style and behavioral expectations (Ishii-Jordan, 1997, p. 39).

Linguistic diversity. Limited English proficiency is an important barrier to learning, and linguistic diversity is becoming more and more heterogeneous as new immigrants arrive in the United States from many countries of origin and with many primary languages. The presence of personnel who speak the languages of limited-English-proficient students is an obvious necessity.

School improvement. Studies focusing on effective schooling have identified characteristics of successful bilingual schools, such as emphasizing processes over structure and attributes, denial of the cultural deprivation argument and the stereotypes that support it, hiring bilingual staff with cultural backgrounds that are similar to those of the students, and other factors (Baca, de Valenzuela, & Garcia, 1996; Franklin, 1992; Tharp, 1999; Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998). The cooperative leadership of school-based personnel from diverse races/ethnicities can contribute markedly to improved achievement by all students in restructured schools that exemplify best practices for students from all cultures (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; McLaughlin, Artiles, & Pullin, 2001).

Judging students' abilities. Among many white teachers, there is a likelihood of underestimating the abilities of students who are culturally/linguistically diverse (Clewell & Villegas, 1998; Michael-Bandele, 1993). Students can perceive that their competence is underestimated, and often interpret this underestimation as a reflection of racist ideas (Patthey-Chavez, 1993). Further, "one of the reasons for inappropriate referrals of culturally/linguistically diverse students for special education evaluation is that teachers may be unable to distinguish differences from disabilities" (Baca, de Valenzuela, & Garcia, 1996, p. 3).

Disproportionate placement of students of color in special education is a longstanding national issue that has been widely documented (e.g., Artiles, 1998; Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997; Blanes-Reyes & Rapport, 1996; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2001; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Serna, Forness, & Nielsen, 1998; Trent & Artiles, 2002). Many factors contribute to this problem, including the unintended consequences of State and local policies and practices; the dearth of effective early literacy interventions for students who have had limited opportunities for school readiness; and lack of social capital among culturally diverse individuals in school and community contexts. Equally important are (a) school and community environments that treat racially/ethnically diverse individuals differentially, and (b) insufficient cultural understandings, skills, and repertoires for instruction and intervention among teachers, administrators, diagnostic personnel, and others.

Teachers as cultural agents. Research suggests that education succeeds when teachers recognize the value of what students bring to school from their own cultures and communities, and can use students' cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences in the teaching-learning process (e.g., Au & Kawakami, 1991; Nieto, 1994; Rueda, 1997; Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998). "Teachers are cultural agents and, as such, bring to their interactions with students cultural perceptions and assumptions about students' cultures; . . . these assumptions and preconceptions are the starting points of consequences, rewards, punishments, opposition" (Spindler & Spindler, 1996). Educators who share cultural backgrounds and experiences with students are able to act as "cultural translators," helping children learn to function more successfully in the dominant

culture, and in an increasingly diverse society (Genzuk & Baca, 1998). Teachers of color who have learned to succeed in the dominant culture might be termed "bicultural" in this sense (Michael-Bandeled, 1993). Although "uniform education" (designed to accommodate a homogeneous student body) may be inevitable (Patthey-Chavez, 1993), this uniformity can be mediated, in terms of cultural characteristics and needs, by teachers who have direct knowledge of and experience with these characteristics and needs. Individualization has been a hallmark of special education, yet, in practice, special education has not yet fully responded to the individual strengths and needs of children with disabilities who are from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds (Chinn, 2000), and this failure stems largely from the lack of qualified personnel from these groups.

References

- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2002). *Kids count data book: State profiles of child well-being, 2002*. Baltimore: Author.
- Artiles, A. J. (1998). The dilemma of difference: Enriching the disproportionality discourse with theory and context. *The Journal of Special Education, 32*(1), 32-36.
- Artiles, A. J., & Zamora-Duran, G. (Eds) (1997). *Reducing disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special and gifted education*. Arlington, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children.
- Au, K. H., & Kawakami, A. J. (1991). Culture and ownership: Schooling of minority students. *Childhood Education, 67*(5), 280-284.
- Baca, L., de Valenzuela, J. S., & Garcia, Shernaz. (1996). *A new approach to pre-referral intervention: The PEP model*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University/Peabody College, The Alliance Project.
- Baca, R., & Genzuk, M. (1998). The paraeducator-to-teacher pipeline: A five-year retrospective on an innovative teacher preparation program for Latinas(os). *Education and Urban Society, 31*(1), 73-78.
- Bermudez, A. B., & Marquez, J. A. (1996, Summer). An examination of a four-way collaborative to increase parental involvement in the schools. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 16*, 1-16.
- Blanes-Reyes, M. E., & Rapport, M. J. K. (1996). Minority issues. In *Improving the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Making schools work for all of America's children* (pp. 535-554). Washington, DC: National Council on Disability.

- Chinn, P. C. (2000). *Cultural pluralism and exceptionality*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, The Alliance Project.
- Chinn, P. C. (2002). Changing demographics: Module 1 of *Facts, Statistics, and Theories on Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, The Alliance Project.
- Clewell, B. C., & Villegas, A. M. (1998). Introduction to the special issue. *Education and Urban Society*, 32(1), 3-17.
- Cooper, C. C., & Harper, E. J. (1990). A model collaboration for increasing the number of black teachers in U.S. classrooms: A public policy issue. *Journal of Education Policy*, 5(3), 223-229.
- Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (Eds.). (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted education*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Franklin, M. E. (1992). Culturally sensitive instructional practices for African American learners with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 59(2), 115-122.
- Harry, B. (1992). Making sense of disability: Low-income Puerto Rican parents' theories of the problem. *Exceptional Children*, 59(1), 27-40.
- Harvard Civil Rights Project. (2001). *Minority issues in special education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Heller, K. A., & Holtzman, W. H., & Messick, S. (Eds.). (1982). *Placing children in special education: A strategy for equity*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Hill, R., Carjuzaa, J., Aramburo, D., & Baca, L. (1993, Summer). Culturally and linguistically diverse teachers in special education: Repairing or redesigning the leaky pipeline. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 16(3), 258-269.
- Ishii-Jordan, S. R. (1997). When behavior differences are not disorders. In A. J. Artiles & G. Zamora-Duran (Eds.). *Reducing disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special and gifted education* (pp. 27-46). Arlington, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children.
- Johnson, E. L., & Schilder, D. (1994, December). *Early childhood programs; Parent education and income best predict participation*. Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office.
- Lucas, R., Henze, R., & Donato, R. (1990, August). Promoting the success of Latino language-minority students: An exploratory study of six high schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60(3), 315-340.
- McLaughlin, M. J., Artiles, A. J., & Pullin, D. (2001). Challenges for the transformation of special education in the 21st century: Rethinking culture in school reform. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 14: 51-62.

- Michael-Bandele, M. (1993). *Who's missing from the classroom? The need for minority teachers*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education.
- Nieto, S. (1994, Winter). Lessons from students on creating a chance to dream. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(4), 392-425.
- Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). (1996). Meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the inner cities. *Eighteenth annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (pp. 81-104). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). (2000). *The importance of minority institutions of higher education in the preparation of special education personnel*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Special Education.
- Patthey-Chavez, G. G. (1993). High school as an arena for cultural conflict and acculturation for Latino Angelinos. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 24(1), 33-60.
- Pang, V. O. (1988, August). Ethnic prejudice: Still alive and hurtful. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 375-379.
- Pavel, D. M., Curtin, T. R., Christenson, B., & Rudes, B. A. (1995). *Characteristics of American Indian and Alaska Native education: Results from the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Rayhner, J. (1989). *Changes in American Indian education: A historical retrospective for educators in the United States*. Charleston, WVA: Appalachia Educational Laboratory, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.
- Riley, R. (1998). Our teachers should be excellent, and they should look like America. *Education and Urban Society*, 31(1), 18-29.
- Robinson, T. (1993, January). The intersections of gender, class, race, and culture: On seeing clients whole. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 21, 59-58.
- Rueda, R. (1997). Changing the context of assessment: The move to portfolios and authentic assessment. In A. J. Artiles & G. Zamora-Duran (Eds.). *Reducing disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special and gifted education* (pp. 7-25). Arlington, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children.
- Serna, L. A., Forness, S. R., & Nielsen, M. E. (1998). Intervention versus affirmation: Proposed solutions to the problem of disproportionate minority representation in special education. *Journal of Special Education*, 31(1): 48-51.
- Smith, E. (1991, September/October). Ethnic identity development: Toward the development of a theory within the context of majority/minority status. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70, 181-188.

- Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (1996). *Pathways to cultural awareness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press (cited in J. M. Patton. (1997). Disproportionate representation in gifted programs: Best practices for meeting this challenge. In A. J. Artiles & G. Zamora-Duran (Eds.). *Reducing disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in special and gifted education* (pp. 59-85). Arlington, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children.
- Tharp, R. G. (1999). *Standards for effective pedagogy and learning*. Santa Cruz, CA: University of California-Santa Cruz, Center for Research in Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE).
- Trent, S. C., & Artiles, A. J. (Eds.). (2002). Minority issues in special education. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 4(1): 3-25
- Trent, S. C., Artiles, A. J., & Englert, C. S. (1998). From deficit thinking to social constructivism: A review of theory, research, and practice in special education. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 277-307.