

Promoting Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Students With Significant Disabilities

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Providing comprehensive services to students with significant support needs is a complex and challenging endeavor because of the uniqueness of a wide range of conditions and variables that impact one or more of the functioning capacities of these students. Along with this complexity, it is necessary to fully integrate culturally responsive ideology and pedagogy within the framework of determined effective strategies and supports. This article provides a context for the application of the essential elements of cultural responsiveness and the critical skills for teachers to use in teaching diverse populations of students with significant support needs. Recommendations are made for the inclusion of these elements in teaching practices in terms of the development of a more foundational knowledge base and the implementation of culturally responsive practices within the field of special education. Implications for further research are identified to support the implementation of quality services for students with significant support needs through culturally responsive practices.

DESCRIPTORS: culturally responsive teaching, severe disabilities and inclusion

The educational system has continued to perpetuate a focus on student differences and further continue to define these differences from a deficit model of thinking. Block, Balcazar, and Keys (2001) describe the historical evolution of the theoretical constructs of eugenics and biological “deficiencies” to cultural pathologies as the pathways that inform our views regarding differences and diversity. Connor and Ferri (2005) present a timeline beginning with the medical interpretation of disabilities to a “societal model” focusing on the structural elements in society that potentially present barriers to living life to the fullest extent possible. “People with disabilities constitute a marginalized minority group socially, economically, occupationally, and educationally” (Lipson & Rogers, 2000, p. 14). These discourses, relative to diversity and disability, converge and intersect

through an underlying framework that constitutes a deficit model of thinking (Banks & Banks, 2007; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Harry, 2002, 2008; Lipson & Rogers, 2000; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Valencia, 1997).

Legislative definitions regarding the term *disability* continue to perpetuate the construct of deficiency. The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 defines disability as a “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (§ 12102, Section 3). The 1994 reauthorization of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (Pub. L. No. 103-230) incorporates the language “substantial functional limitations” in the definition of developmental disability. The U.S. federal government definition of multiple disabilities includes those who have more than one impairment, “the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments” (Code of Federal Regulations, 1999). The use of this deficit-based language perpetuates the idea that to have a disability is to be an incomplete or a broken human being. People with disabilities powerfully resist this representation as they share their desire to be seen as representatives of the diversity of the human race and not broken or impaired human beings (Kunc, 1992).

The ongoing goal of creating inclusive school and classroom environments for culturally and linguistically diverse students and students with significant support needs attempts to break down the structural, systemic barriers as well as the attitudinal and behavioral dispositions that inform a belief in separate and not equal. It is necessary to fully integrate culturally responsive practices for students with significant support needs to bridge the gap that exists between segregated and inclusive educational practices. This article identifies four frameworks from which culturally responsive practices can be applied to ensure increased educational support and inclusivity for culturally and linguistically diverse students with significant support needs. These are classroom environment, family engagement, access to academics and general education curriculum, and successful pedagogy. These four frameworks have been identified to be areas of significance because they emphasize the student first, their family and cultural background, and the intersection of these primary components with best practices in serving the educational

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needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students with significant support needs.

The significant cornerstones of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) attempt to reverse deficit model thinking and replace it with mandates toward equity and inclusive practices regardless of race, ethnicity, or disability. Yet, despite these attempts, structural and procedural variables that separate general and special education practices continue to support the Anglo European culture and its values (Patton, 1998). On a micro level, in the classroom, teachers across the country are supporting the needs of students with disabilities from a variety of cultural backgrounds. These teachers need support in providing integrative strategies and practices that enhance cultural responsiveness relative to the classroom environment, student and family engagement, access to academics and general education curriculum, and successful pedagogy. The construction of the supports identified in these areas is built from a strengths-based rather than a deficit model of thinking regarding the social constructs of race, ethnicity, and disability.

According to the 28th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act of the Office of Special Education Programs (2006), the information (as shown in Table 1) represents the data on the diversity of public school students in traditional categories, which are typically included under the rubric of severe disabilities (i.e., mental retardation, multiple disabilities, autism).

The figures in the table reflect the percentage of representation of each of the groups within their own group. Overall, in the category of “all disabilities,” minority students with disabilities are represented at a rate of 62.36%, and White students are represented at a rate of 15.25%. In the category of “mental retardation,” minority students are represented at a rate of 4.56%, and White students are represented at a rate of 0.88%. In the category of “multiple disabilities,” minority students are represented at a rate of 1.08%, and White students are represented at a rate

of 0.28%. In the category of “autism,” minority students are represented at a rate of 1.76%, and White students are represented at a rate of 0.51%. In each disability category that represents the categorization specific to severe disabilities, the cumulative effect of minority representation far exceeds the categorical representation of “White, not Hispanic.” Through the process of data-driven decision making, these data clearly indicate the need for the application of culturally responsive teaching strategies for students with significant support needs.

Creating culturally responsive, inclusive classroom environments by focusing on the strengths and abilities of each student (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2006) diminishes adherence to “deficit model” thinking and attitudes. For this to occur, it is critical that teachers examine their deeply conditioned beliefs regarding diversity, needs, and expectations. Studies conducted by Anyon (1997) and Gay (2001) have identified strong correlations between the quality of services provided to students of diverse backgrounds and the teacher’s attitude and expectations for these students. Engaging students with significant disabilities with their strengths, interests, and needs by making optimal use of the academic learning time has been shown to increase a student’s ability (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005).

Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states the importance of access to academics for all students with disabilities, students with significant disabilities are routinely denied access to the general education curriculum (Kasa-Hendrickson & Kluth, 2005). A focus on culturally relevant teaching practices provides a unique opportunity to implement active strategies that reflect the cultural experiences and histories of all students, including those with significant disabilities (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009). As students with disabilities are denied a quality education, including such basics as comprehensive literacy instruction, students and teachers miss out on the participation of an entire group of students with important contributions to make, thus limiting the entire school population’s ability to examine their own cultural competence.

Table 1
IDEA: Part B (Fall 2004)

Category	All disabilities	Mental retardation	Multiple disabilities	Autism
Ages 3–5 years				
American Indian/Alaska Native	8.56	0.13	0.07	0.12
Asian Pacific Islander	3.81	0.13	0.07	0.38
Black (not Hispanic)	5.91	0.22	0.07	0.19
Hispanic	4.36	0.17	0.05	0.17
White (not Hispanic)	6.49	0.19	0.08	0.23
Ages 6–21 years				
American Indian/Alaska Native	14.09	1.04	0.28	0.18
Asian Pacific Islander	34.64	0.41	0.12	0.31
Black (not Hispanic)	12.61	1.87	0.28	0.26
Hispanic	8.38	0.59	0.14	0.15
White (not Hispanic)	8.76	0.69	0.20	0.28

The importance of culturally responsive practices for students with significant support needs within the classroom environment, family engagement, access to academics and general education curriculum, and successful pedagogy is presented and discussed later in greater depth, with a discussion of implications for practice and research.

Classroom Environment

Creating culturally responsive classrooms and environments to support the culturally diverse needs of students with significant support needs involves applying attention to five variables that impact these conditions: self-awareness, creation of caring classrooms, physical environment considerations, implementation of learning communities, and understanding of learning style preferences among groups that are culturally diverse.

Numerous authors have noted the significance of a teacher's ability to become socioculturally conscious of their individual place in the social order and how this place affects their attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about specific ethnic groups (LeRoux, 2001; Sileo & Prater, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Montgomery (2001) developed five guidelines for the preparation of a culturally responsive classroom. The first guideline is to conduct a self-assessment of the level of one's knowledge base regarding cultural variations that differ from the ethnocentric values of the societal majority.

Conversely, teachers need to recognize and understand the importance of the cultural values of diverse populations (Gay, 2002a, 2002b; LeRoux, 2001). Hickson, Land, and Aikman (1994) and Park (1997) conducted two different studies regarding the determination of learning style differences of various ethnic groups. Park studied the learning style preferences of Mexican American, Korean, Armenian American, and Anglo students. All of these ethnic groups indicated a significant preference for the kinesthetic style of learning. Understanding the preferred learning style of diverse students with significant support needs is an important component of any applied service delivery model.

Hickson et al. (1994) analyzed 12 different variables regarding learning style preferences for Hispanic, White, African American, and Korean middle school students. In this study, several conclusions are drawn: Hispanic student preferences included studying in the late morning in a noisy and formal setting with snacks, a kinesthetic and auditory style of learning, and the close proximity of an authority figure in the classroom with motivation by parental contact and interactions. African American student preferences included studying in the evening and having a snack and high noise level while studying, close proximity of an authority figure in the classroom, and an auditory learning style. African American students did not prefer a kinesthetic learning style and were not motivated by parental contact or involvement. White student's

preferences included an informal setting in the evening for studying with a quiet noise level and minimal snacks during studying. They took an individual approach to learning and therefore did not necessarily need the close proximity of an authority figure in the classroom nor are they motivated by parental contact and involvement. White students preferred the visual learning style the least. Asian student preferences included studying in the late morning in a quiet environment with minimal snacks during studying. They were motivated by parental contact and involvement yet did not require the close proximity of an authority figure in the classroom environment. Asian students preferred the visual learning style and the auditory learning style the least. Understanding the underlying cultural values of students with significant support needs will assist teachers in providing more individualized levels of instruction for the diverse needs of these students.

Culturally responsive classrooms should project a sense of genuine caring and safety in which diversity is respected and valued (LeRoux, 2001; Sileo & Prater, 1998; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Caring classrooms support positive interrelationships between students and other students and the teacher and also create an atmosphere where students feel connected to each other. According to Gay (2002a, 2002b), the classroom should be emotionally safe, children should know they are valued, teachers should be diligent and creative, and the expectations should be demanding and challenging.

Some indicators of cultural responsive classroom environments, as noted by Gay (2002a, 2002b), include arranging the furniture in the room for group learning, displaying student work, and having posters that reflect diverse cultural and ethnic groups and books that represent multiple viewpoints on multiple topics. Cooperative learning and peer tutoring have been identified as effective strategies for students with disabilities (Goor & Schwenn, 1993; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 1994) and for students from cultures that represent interdependent and cooperative familial value systems (Harry, 1992). Gay recommended surrounding students with images of individuals who are ethnically diverse and who symbolize positive leadership characteristics representing a wide range of accomplishments.

According to Brown (2007), culturally responsive practices include the building of a learning community within the classroom in which the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual. These learning communities are created within an environment of interdependence, and learning is not complete until all students have achieved to the best of their ability (Gay, 2002a, 2002b). Sileo and Prater (1998) note the favorability of group participation for students from cultures that value cooperation. Learning communities establish an understanding of each other's cultural context and identifying similarities and differences that exist between each other (Gay, 2002a, 2002b). In inclusive classrooms, students

with and without significant disabilities will have the opportunity to engage in a process for continuous understanding of the intersection of their sociocultural backgrounds and their disabilities.

Research continues to support the application of creating classroom environments that engage the diverse learning styles of students in terms of the development of positive interrelationships and cooperative learning groups as well as providing opportunities for students to engage in educational activities that support their preferred learning style.

Family Engagement

Cultural responsive practices that create connections and understandings of the diverse sociocultural, familial, and linguistic mores of students with significant support needs require that teachers engage in reflective analysis of their assumptions, beliefs, and values. After engaging in this reflective analysis, it is critical for teachers to determine if their beliefs intersect or disconnect with the cultural beliefs and values of the families they serve. From a societal perspective, Harry (2002) presents a framework of assumptions that have hindered the recognition of cultural, linguistic, or other identity variables regarding students with disabilities. Harry noted that ethnocentrism has defined the norms of familial practices and patterns, and the status of having a disability became a primary identity, diffusing cultural, linguistic, and diverse identity recognition.

“It is important to take into account the fact that different cultures interpret disability differently” (Rogers-Adkinson, Ochoa, & Delgado, 2003, p. 4). Yet, it is critical to refrain from aligning the cultural construction of disabilities with cultural stereotyping (Harry, 2002). Cultural identity is fluid and not defined by stereotyped boundaries (Banks & Banks, 2007). Although this section presents research that identifies different cultural constructions of disabilities, each student’s identity remains unique, constituting a continued need for individualized support.

All groups recognize that severe disabilities do exist, yet the degree of importance regarding the extent of the stigma or the impact of having a child with significant support needs will vary according to the values of the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of these students. Rogers-Adkinson et al. (2003) cite the example of the Navaho tribe in which a person with a disability is considered to have a special gift to offer and does not require specialized services.

Ethnic minorities have a broader view of normalcy and a greater resiliency regarding coping with life’s challenges (Beth, 2008; Boyd & Correa, 2005; Garcia, Perez, & Ortiz, 2000; Harry, 2008). In Mexican American families, a child is seen to be “normal” unless an external incident causes a change in their child’s status (language or hearing impairment) such as ear infections and childhood illness. For

European American families, the onset of a diagnosis of a disability is typically considered an intrinsic condition, a somewhat preexisting condition (Langdon, 2009).

Family engagement primarily relies on open and respectful communication with teachers and school personnel. It is important to recognize that parents may not fully understand or embrace the educational tasks that they are requested to do at home with their children because these tasks may not be in alignment with their family patterns and styles of interaction. An additional factor in attempting to bridge the gap between the school and home is that the parents may not question or disagree with the professionals at the school because they consider school personnel to be the experts and hold them in high regard (Garcia et al., 2000). Ethnic minorities such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Pacific Islanders generally value interdependence within their family and religious support systems and exhibit direct communication styles with their children (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Vigil & Hwa-Froelich, 2004).

Child rearing and communication patterns between Mexican American and European American families are dissimilar. European American children are taught to be self-directing individuals who achieve success through individual efforts. In contrast, Mexican American children are taught to value conformity and place a high priority on cooperation with other family members (Langdon, 2009).

The different beliefs and cultural norms of minority populations often do not represent the ethnocentric values of the educational system yet these norms can be embraced and used from a strengths-based perspective in providing a comprehensive, individualized plan of services for students with significant support needs.

Access to Academics and the General Education Curriculum

Research in the field of special education has consistently shown the benefit of educating students with and without disabilities together (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1994; Fisher, Pumpian, & Sax, 1998; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). When students with significant disabilities receive special education services in the general education classroom, achievement of IEP goals and mastery of general education curriculum are both achieved at a greater rate than when educated in a segregated classroom (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). In addition, students with significant disabilities are supported to access and participate in the general education curriculum, and achievement often surpasses previous expectations held by the IEP team.

Historically, students with significant support needs have not been supported to access the academic curriculum. It is essential that teachers understand provisions of IDEA that requires students with disabilities to have access to and to participate in the general education

curriculum (IDEA, 2004). Students with significant disabilities have the right under IDEA not only to be exposed to the general education curriculum at their grade level but also to participate in that curriculum. When students with significant support needs are included in the general education curriculum, using best practice strategies (see Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008; Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, & Agran, 2004), teachers are in the position to examine the curriculum they are implementing to ensure that it is culturally relevant in content to their students.

Central tenets to culturally relevant teaching are the development of high expectations while working to shed prejudice and stereotypes that may impede the teacher from seeing the student as a competent learner capable of achieving academically (Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This is not only a powerful shift in thinking for teachers to make about students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but this is also an essential shift in thinking necessary for educating students with significant support needs. The idea of presuming competence (or holding high expectations) in relation to students with significant support needs forces the teacher to examine preconceptions on the basis of a student's label and/or how they walk, talk, and/or move.

It is important to design accommodations and modifications that are supportive to the individual student. Careful design and implementation of accommodations and modifications is key to successful engagement in the curriculum. Further, the use of accommodations and modifications and supplementary aids and services is required by law to ensure successful inclusion of the student with a significant disability into the general education classroom. Examples of these services and strategies include: preferential seating, large print materials, peer tutors, graphic organizers, use of computers, taped lectures, reduced seat time, assistance of a teacher with special education training, training for the general education teacher, use of computer-assisted devices, a note taker, communication device, or changes to materials. All of these services and strategies can be used to modify or to adapt the general education curriculum or instruction and may also be helpful to some students when working to ensure their participation in the classroom.

In an effort to practice culturally relevant teaching while working to include students with significant disabilities with their general education peers, it is essential to use student's strengths, interests, talents (see www.paulakluth.com/articles/strengthstrateg.html). When using students' strengths, interest, and talents, teachers are able to build students confidence within the culture of the classroom as well as teaching their peers that the student with a significant support need has unique ideas and values as well. This helps the students without disabilities to unlearn prejudicial practices and attitudes regarding people with disabilities and to see people as individuals with individual differences and commonalities.

To be culturally relevant, the curriculum must represent the students in the classroom both in the content and in the unique learning styles and histories that all students bring (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Historically, disability has not been represented in American classroom in anything other than a token look at Helen Keller. Certainly, these curricular references are beginning to expand, but there is much more inclusion necessary.

Successful Pedagogy for Students With Significant Support Needs

Teaching practices using principles of universal design and differentiated instruction have been brought to the forefront of discussions on teaching on the basis of the inclusion of students with disabilities and the need for culturally responsive teaching practices. As the field of teacher education responds to the needs of the diverse student population, successful teaching practices are being developed. The need to teach all students has put the fields of both general and special education into action so that the development of new and innovative teaching methods is responding to and benefiting the needs of all learners.

When teachers work to blend instructional methods needed for successful inclusive education such as differentiated instruction and the tenets of culturally responsive teaching, they are blending two very compatible philosophical and strategic sets of knowledge that work to value and support the individual student rather than to marginalize (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2004). When teachers practice culturally responsive teaching, their methods work to show a genuine desire to learn from and about the student's individual heritage and culture in a way to connect them to the curriculum (Gay, 2002a, 2002b). When teachers work to differentiate instruction, they are considering the student's personal learning styles and multiple methods of presentation and engagement. Working from this position of inquiry allows teachers to design instruction so that the student can connect with the curriculum successfully (Tomlinson, 2004) and the student's voice can be present in the classroom conversation.

For students with significant support needs, having a voice and being heard can be a challenge. In order for reciprocal communication to occur, teachers need to learn about and work to carefully include communication techniques and strategies for students with significant disabilities into the daily routine of the classroom.

It is important for all students, including students with disabilities, to have their voices, ideas, and opinions present throughout the classroom day. Teachers of students with significant support needs will have to purposefully work to ensure that the student with a different mode of communication has the opportunity and support to be heard. This practice provides an invaluable model for peers to learn how to engage in and support communication.

Isolation within the school and classroom does not foster an environment where students are able to share their personal histories and unique abilities. In order for students with significant disabilities to make connections with peers, teachers must model and teach using strategies that will bring students together. In order for exchanges to continue outside of the classroom, teachers may have to work to purposefully plan and design strategies to get students involved in playground games and lunch conversations. Teachers can work to match students carefully with peers of common interests and begin to foster relationships. It will also be important for paraprofessional support to fade during social and cooperative learning times so that students can interact with each other without adult supervision. Careful design of peer interaction can support students to learn from each other's personal experiences and lives in a way that promotes powerful engagement within the curriculum.

Universal design is the practice of designing instruction on the basis of the backgrounds, strengths, and needs of the learners in the teacher's class. In this way, universal design is culturally relevant. When a teacher uses universal design, he or she makes thoughtful decisions about how curriculum will be presented, how students will engage with the curriculum, and how they will show what they learned.

Historically, the field of special education has focused on deficits and weaknesses of students with disabilities. Influenced by the disability rights movement and people with disabilities, the field is beginning to shift away from a deficit focus and toward a strength-based model.

Implications for Practice

Through the application of culturally responsive practices in supporting students with significant support needs, the barriers to believing in and developing practices from a deficit model are minimized and hopefully altered for students within the educational system. The practical application of the research regarding culturally responsive classrooms supports the practices of learning communities that create positive relationships among students, thus encouraging appreciation of each other's unique histories and perspectives. Further, the use of teaching practices designed to acknowledge student's lives and experiences is necessary to develop student's cultural competence. Teacher preparation and professional development programs for current teachers must begin to assist teacher educators to identify socially conditioned beliefs and attitudes that may perpetuate a deficit model of thinking and behaving. Teacher preparation and professional development should also provide the most current, evidenced-based research regarding cultural differences in the learning styles of the children they will be serving. To assist with bridging the gaps of understanding and practices regarding cultural responsiveness, teacher preparation and professional development programs should incorporate skill development training in the area of in-

terpersonal relationship development and conflict resolution strategies that support the strengths-based perspective of their students.

The willingness of teachers to understand and apply culturally responsive practices that break down the cultural barriers of mistrust and misunderstanding that exist between groups and the educational system is supported by the current research. Parents and families need to be given choices regarding their preferred mode of communication and their participation in their child's educational experiences in the school environment and in the home. Teacher preparation and professional development programs must provide current and relevant culturally responsive research practices that explore the cultural differences that exist regarding "normalcy" and the cultural lenses from which the educational system is viewed. With this understanding, teachers can begin to eliminate assumptions that parents or families "do not care" and concentrate on creating situations that insure trust and understanding between the teachers, the school and the students, and the families they serve.

Implications for Research

Research regarding culturally responsive teaching practices specifically targeted toward students with significant needs is limited and requires further exploration. Although race and ethnicity may take a "backseat" when considering a student with significant support needs, further research in this area would enhance the quality of services provided to these students through consideration of the student's cultural and linguistic background and its importance and relevance to their ability to learn and to create meaning within their environment. From a sociocultural perspective, students with significant support needs are often severely marginalized because of the socially constructed deficit model of thinking. Further research regarding the significance of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other societal labels of differentiation would provide a greater understanding of the strengths and abilities of students with significant support needs and perhaps reduce the dimensions of these margins of difference.

Conclusions

Students with significant disabilities who come from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds present positive contributions toward the identification of a teacher's ability to meet their unique needs in the classroom. The very first place to begin is to view all students from a strengths-based perspective rather than the one based in deficit-model thinking. The ability to create caring classrooms, support student, and family engagement, to create individualized curricular modules, and to provide individualized and cooperative instruction must originate from a belief that what we share in common is our differences and that these differences are appreciated, respected, and valued.

The inclusion of students with significant disabilities into the general education classroom strengthens the classroom as a whole. When including students with significant disabilities, the classroom teacher examines how instructions are delivered, how cultural communication styles are integrated between families and school personnel, how student strengths are used in the classroom, and how the cultural backgrounds and needs of students are identified and valued to create belonging and academic achievement.

Current research has shown that when students with disabilities are included, teachers work to create strength-based classrooms, focus on infusing discussion of civil rights into the whole class, increase students access to resources and technology, implement principles of universal design and differentiation, and teach skills of collaboration and interdependence (Kasa-Hendrickson & Ashby, 2009). When students with disabilities are included, not only does achievement rise, but learning opportunities are strengthened for all (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, in press).

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