Practitioners: Culturally and linguistically diverse students are coming and they may need special education services:

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Abstract

The following is a best practice approach when working with families that are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and their children who may need services in special education. A review of issues concerning changes in demographic diversity, the relationship between culturally and linguistically diverse children and special education are presented as well as. Culturally sensitive suggestions are offered as means of providing appropriate services for working with this specific population. These suggestions are intended for use by teachers, school counselors, educational diagnosticians and school psychologists and are by no mean exhaustive, but do provide useful approaches in order for effective provision of services for this multicultural/multifaceted population and their families.

Author Note: The term practitioner in this article is used to denote teachers (regular and special education), school psychologists, educational diagnosticians, and school counselors.

Introduction

The world of special education can be an intimidating place for new and novice practitioners who often have had little practical training in working with children who have special needs. Even special educators trained in teacher education programs often find themselves at a lost when having to work with diverse learners many of which may be second language learners. The field of special education itself is plagued by criticisms pertaining to the over reliance on the deficit model, the inappropriateness of separate programs, lack of focus on the outcomes, and the over representation of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLD) who continue to dominate classrooms throughout these United States (Trent, Artiles, Fitchett-Bazemore, McDaniel, & Coleman-Sorrell, 2002). Furthermore, plenty of evidence attests that colleges of education within institutions of higher education have not been successful in producing practitioners with the skills in working with culturally and linguistic diverse children with or without special needs (Miller, Strosnider, & Dooley, 2002; Winzer & Mazeurek, 1998)

This paper is written in the spirit of a best practices approach for practitioners who will work with families that are CLD and have children needing special education services along the U.S. - Mexico borderlands. Practitioners such as teachers (regular and special education), school counselors, educational diagnosticians and school psychologists have
a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that all children regardless of cultural group or language differences have an equitable opportunity in achieving their full potential to the maximum extent possible. Furthermore, the responsibilities for assuring that equitable standards be met can no longer fall upon a few, but must be shared among all parties who will work these families and their children.

**Population Changes**

The United States is a nation of great cultural pluralism unlike that of many other nations. By the year 2020, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children will comprise most of the public school students in the United States thus making them the majority of the K-12 school aged population (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). Many school districts and state departments of education throughout the U.S. have neglected to address the issues associated with the growing representation of CLD students in their schools. The debate over the manner in which these students should be educated has been discussed and debated and will continue to dominate much of the public education agenda for years to come. As this nation’s demographics change it becomes essential that as service practitioners within the public schools along the U.S. Mexico border that we continue to make modifications in service provision in order to ensure equal educational opportunities for all our students. More importantly, those opportunities must be cultivated within appropriate educational programs that meet each unique student’s educational needs.

Public education is the host of demographic diversity in the United States (Dieker, Voltz, & Epanchin, 2002) as this country has historically opened its arms to diverse groups for a variety of purposes ranging from economic reasons to a socio-political strife. As it is, refugees from other countries have found solace here almost 3 million people between the years of 1991 to 1996; the largest numbers came from Vietnam, Cuba, Ukraine, Russia, Yugoslavia, Uzbekistan, Belarus, and Iraq. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that 5 million undocumented immigrants reside in the U.S. The recent flows of immigrants coming to the U.S. are from Mexico and other countries in the Western Hemisphere. At one point, the assumption made was that these families would continue to reside along the U.S. Mexico border which has historically been true, but this no longer holds relevance in that many of these families and their children are now located throughout the U.S. including large metropolitan areas, as well as, rural America (Gollnick & Chinn, 2004).

California alone has the distinction of housing more undocumented immigrants than any other state with 40% of its population being from another country. As a matter of fact, most undocumented and legal immigrants tend to settle in the same states namely; Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, Arizona, and California (Gollnick & Chinn, 2004). Settlement in these areas is often dependent on economic availability and alleged quality of life. Some immigrant groups are sponsored by church and local community groups such as the Hmong population (Schnalberg, 1996). All immigrant children undocumented or not are entitled by Plyer v. Doe (1982) to seek public education in these United States without having to reveal their immigrant status to any public education service practitioner.

Ethnic diversity prompts language diversity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) they cite the following information concerning language usage: 47.0 million people
reported that they spoke a language other than English at home. These figures were up from 14% (31.8 million) in 1990 and 11% (23.1 million) in 1980. After English and Spanish, Chinese was the most common language spoken at home (2.0 million speakers), followed by French (1.6 million speakers), and German (1.4 million speakers). Spanish speakers grew by about 60% and Spanish continues to be non-English language most frequently spoken at home in the U.S.

Baca (1999) asserts that out of every classroom of 30 children, ten children will be ethnic or racial minority and six of them will be from homes from where English is a second language. And of those six language minority children, two to four of them will be English language learners and two will be from immigrant families. Of those six language minority children mentioned four to five of them will be Spanish speakers, one will speak an Asian language (Vietnamese) and the last student would speak one or more than 100 other languages.

This diverse picture should serve as a signal to practitioners of the pre-requisite for the development of a knowledge base that includes competency in working with diverse families and their children, the quest to examine their own perspectives, and ultimately to seek training in order to accommodate demographic changes with the populations they will serve. All CLD groups will require sensitive on behalf of the practitioners who will be working with them. Some CLD groups will be more easily served in their native language and within their cultural context due to larger representation of these groups within a particular community. Others may require something quite different in regards to how their individual needs will be met especially in regards to educational programs such as special education.

**Relationships: CLD students and Special Education**

As ethnic diversity increases in America’s K-12 school population so will the referrals to special education programs. While some referrals may indeed reflect true exceptionalities and warrant special education services, others unfortunately reflect the lack of competency on behalf of practitioners assigned to work with CLD children who are often limited English proficient (LEP) learners as well (Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). Inaccurate perceptions; stereotypes and lack of familiarity with ethnic minority groups, their culture, history, and acculturation experiences are major causes for low expectations, and unsolicited generalizations concerning the educational outcomes of diverse children. This regrettably often leads to referrals to special education ensuing in inappropriate labeling and the over representation of CLD groups such as Hispanic and African American children in special education classes (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 1995; Irvine, 1990; McSwain, 2002; Ortiz & Yates, 1989; Patton, 1998).

Special education has not been a welcoming place for children who are CLD. As a matter of fact Winzer and Mazurek (1998) contend, “special education was not designed with the needs of culturally diverse students in mind and has not been noted for its responsiveness to cultural differences” (p. 86). Baca and Cervantes (1989) estimate that in the United States approximately 1 million children who are limited English proficiency (LEP) learners have qualified for some type of special education services. Furthermore,
the Presidents Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) writes that of those CLD children who are receiving services for a specific learning disability have been placed in special education not because of a true disability, but because they haven’t been taught to read. The over representation of CLD children should be of concern to us all in that once children are diagnosed and placed in special education they generally remain there throughout their K-12 schooling experience (Meyer & Patton, 2004).

García and Yates (1986) reported that in some instances, “eighty percent of Hispanic children are placed in learning disabled (LD) or communication disorders (CD) programs, with three times as many children in LD as might be expected from their representation in the general school population”(p. 126). The U.S. Department of Education 24th (2002) in their Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA indicated that during the 2000-2001 school year the number of Hispanic children receiving services for specific learning disabilities was higher than that for all students with disabilities at 60.3%. Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh (1999) reported that African American males were more likely to be placed in programs for the mild mentally disabled at twice the rate as their Anglos counterparts. Furthermore, a study by Zhang & Katsiyannis, (2002) and the 24th Annual Report to Congress for the year of 2002 have pointed out similar findings with very little deviation.

Migrant or immigrant children are often referred to special education faster than other children even before they have had an opportunity to acculturate or become accustomed to school or what it means to be schooled in the United States (Sugai, 1988). Many of these children have experiences in which they flee their country of origin due to economic hardship, political uprising or war often entering the U.S. with characteristics labeled as “lack of initiative” resulting in practitioners not recognizing the cultural stress these children may be experiencing prompting them (practitioners) in encouraging and recommending placement in special education (Crawford, 2004; Igoa, 1995).

Language issues pose unique problems in that most practitioners trained have little or no knowledge concerning second language acquisition and bilingual programs. Of concern is that many children of CLD backgrounds may not fit exactly into any of the recognized categories of exceptionality and conventional definitions of exceptionalities do not always apply to these children, particularly those for whom English is not there first language (Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002).

Baca (1990) asserts that a child who is bilingual in need of special education services is not a handicapped child because he or she lacks fluency in the English language. As a matter of fact, the attribute of being bilingual should be seen as an asset and something that practitioners can embrace and build on (Hale, 2001; Nieto, 2002). Based on personal experiences and what other researchers have conferred special consideration must be taken into account when working with a CLD children before placement in special education even commences however, these are rarely taken into account by service practitioners (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Baca, 1990; Meyer & Patton, 2004; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).
What should we know

In order for practitioners to work effectively with CLD families and their children entails that practitioner’s work with them out of respect and not tolerance. It is important to note that tolerance and respect is not the same thing – tolerance assumes that what may be tolerated today may not be tolerated tomorrow (Nieto, 2004). In order for practitioners to work effectively with CLD children/families, practitioners must come to know how their cultural contexts differs from that of the children and families they will be working with and as such the following recommendations are proposed as a means of assisting the practitioner in working with this growing population.

First and foremost, do not assume or stereotype anything concerning these children and their families as they often differ in regards to linguistic competence, acculturation levels, socioeconomic status, education levels, experiences, etc. Practitioners should never take for granted and assume that CLD parents know what U.S., participation in schools entails and what they are expected to do any thing. Often these assumptions lead to ideologies and stereotypes about cultural groups that are not grounded in real truths (Quiroz, Greenfield & Alchech, 1999).

Trustworthiness is a key factor that needs to be developed when working with families. As mentioned by Sue & Sue (1999) the development of trustworthiness has been found to educe a bonding experience in which those involved work toward a common goal. For many culturally and linguistically diverse families this bonding experience often needs to be in place before they are willing to feel safe enough to participate in the educational process. Trustworthiness is not a given, but something that needs to be developed and nurtured. The importance of trustworthiness cannot be overstated.

Practitioners need to educate themselves about diversity and know as much as they can about the population they will be working with regardless of cultural group (Lynch and Hanson, 2004; Nieto, 2004). It is essential that all cultural groups (including male/ female and Anglo practitioners) explore their own biases and how power relations have affected their lives, which can be a scary place. Some practitioners may operate under a “color blind” stance that assumes race does not matter or that they have not been affected by it (Nieto, 1999). Race and race relations have affected each person as all societies have been influenced by cultural traits that are constantly being mediated by one group over another.

Practitioners need to come know the literacy proficiency of the families they will be interacting with as some families may be highly fluent in the language of the schools including special education jargon while others may have limited or no fluency in this area. Other families may not have had the opportunity to acquire a high degree of literacy in their language, but do have a language and language skills (Bermudez, & Marquez, 1996; Violand-Sanchez, Sutton, & Ware, 1991). For many CLD families attending special education meetings can be an incredibly intimidating experience as they may not understand what is being said to them or being asked of them. Often times, these experiences leave such horrific lasting impressions that for many families what ever partnership that could exist is eradicated resulting in the silencing and non- participation of these parents (Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Salas, 2004).
Investigate families’ comfort levels especially in regards to language usage as many CLD families and their children often have a preference for which language they want to communicate in. Some may have some oral English language skills, but they may comprehend and feel more comfortable in their native language. For many CLD individuals society has made them feel that their language is subordinate to English. Therefore, they feel undervalued by school practitioners who often make no attempts at asking what language preference they prefer (Nieto, 2002). Many times notes sent home by teachers with no translation, leading to little or no response on behalf of those parents for whom English is not their primary language (Peña, 1999; Valdés, 1996). This premise is dangerous as it often perpetuates false assumptions by practitioners that CLD families do not care about the welfare of their children.

Acculturation levels need to be taken in account when working with CLD families and their children. The length of time a family has been in this country often dictates how and if these families participate in schooling activities and what their role should be. Some cultural groups may view the school partnership as something that they informally support at home as they trust that professionals will do what is best for their children. From their worldview, the academic and cognitive development of their children may be the function of school practitioners and not something that they should interfere with (Peña, 1999; Violand-Sanchez, Sutton, & Ware, 1991).

Practitioners must understand that for many CLD parents they often may lack confidence in trying to understand how schools in the U.S. work. For many recent immigrants for whom English is not their first language, schools can be a daunting place. Many CLD parents have had personal experiences with public education systems in which they have not been respected nor deemed worthy and as such remove themselves from the process of special education or schooling in general (Lian, Fontanez-Pheland, 2001; Salas, 2004). For many cultural groups with traditional values, teachers are often held in such high esteem that parents often blame themselves for the failure of their children without even considering that the problem could be the teacher or the educational program.

Learn to be critical of assessment and curriculum practices as each carries racists and discrimination ideologies. All parties must come to question the ethics and truthfulness of the methods commonly used for collection, analysis, and interpretation of numerical data which continues to be the primary method used for placement in special education. In spite of better attempts in the training of practitioners in multicultural assessment the interpretation of numerical data is often confounded by the author or agency reporting the data (Meyer & Patton, 2004). Furthermore, concerns in curriculum practices stemming from both the tangible (books, curriculum guides, etc.) and the not so tangible as in (teacher perceptions/attitudes, etc.) to CLD students about they’re worth, aptitude and capability. As it is the curriculum as depicted among many school districts across the U.S. tends to be standardized, rote learning, and places emphasis on the European experience which negates the experiences of CLD families and their children (Nieto, 2002).

Become an advocate for CLD families and their children in the schools. Practitioners should find ways to promote diversity among follow staff members as well as among the student population. Encourage and create multiple ways of seeing and doing
things among all who work with families and children in special education. See that the curriculum reflects the population it serves. Be a role model by surrounding yourself not only with diverse individuals, but advocate for the need for more practitioners that are culturally and linguistically diverse. Finally be prepared to confront discrimination of all kinds whether that by in the playground, cafeteria, or staff rooms (Nieto, 2004).

**Closing thoughts**

Diversity is here to stay and all predictions indicate that this is the future of the United States. Public schools will be at the forefront of demographic changes and as such will be held responsible for the education of all children regardless of whether exceptionalities exist or not. Even more paramount will be those CLD families who have children needing special education services who are often dependent on the public education system for the academic welfare of their children. Public education for many of CLD families has become a refuge of sorts in that they often view schooling for their children as the necessary element in the quest for the American dream.

Children of all colors regardless of culture group are entitled to be treated equally and equitably. Practitioners who work in the public schools should be held accountable in guaranteeing that all children reach their full educational potential, especially CLD children who often receive remedial and inappropriate services in special education (Harvard University Civil Rights Project Conference, 2000). This conscientiousness can no longer be subsumed by a few, but must be embraced by all who work with this diverse population.

Schools should be safe places where nurturing and achievement are carried out to the maximum extent possible. Attitudes and messages by practitioners often set the stage for how CLD families and their children are embraced within the schooling community. These messages and attitudes whether covert or overt often determine the academic success and achievement of CLD children and as such may determine the future outcome for U.S. society in general. Nieto (1999) and Cummings (1996) note that while learning new approaches and techniques may be helpful, teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children successfully means above all else a change in one’s attitudes toward children, languages, cultures, and the communities.
Reference


