Working with Diverse Students with Special Needs in Border and Rural Areas

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Abstract
In working in border and rural areas it is crucial that we understand the issues and constructs that culturally and linguistically diverse students with special needs face. It is in acknowledging these constructs that we can assist school personnel in increasing academic achievement and close the achievement gap. The following is a discussion on the issues to consider in working with this promising population.

The implementation of No Child Left Behind legislation (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002) and the concept of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) has proven difficult for two populations found in border and rural areas: English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education. Too often, students fall into both categories of ELL and students receiving special education services and are often looked upon by school districts as not making AYP (Johnson & Strange, 2005). Thus, the question may lead school personnel to ask, where do we begin to address these particular school populations.

The literature has documented that culture does impact assessment, intervention, instruction, and parent participation within the school setting (Hammam, 2004; López, 2003; Suzuki, Meller & Ponterotto, 1996; Suzuki, Ponterotto & Meller, 2001). Yet a phenomena that is not novel and/or unique for children who are culturally diverse, is functioning and living within three or more cultures or languages (i.e., López, Salas, & Menchaca-López, 2004). However, when the child who comes from a border and/or rural community enters a school setting, not only is there an added way of life calculated into the formula, as mentioned above, the chances are greater that the student will not make AYP (Johnson & Strange, 2005), perhaps due to limited experiences in our public school culture. The following discusses important issues that school personnel must consider, recognize and address for students to succeed under the current federal mandates.

The Issues
Once the culturally and linguistically diverse child has been appropriately identified within the border and/or rural school setting as a student being an ELL and/or a having a disability requiring special education (i.e., Padilla, 2001), these particular students are now functioning within two additional distinct cultures; the school culture and the culture of special education (López & Menchaca-López, 2004). This is beyond the traditional two dimensional conceptualization regarding acculturation, dominant/new culture and the native culture (i.e., Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995; López, et al., 2004; Matthiason, 1968). Furthermore, there is a paradigm shift that exists from the conventional perspective of culture, which strictly focuses on the visible aspect of ethnicity and/or race (López & Menchaca-López; Menchaca-López & López, 2007). Thus, the process of acculturation becomes complicated as not only are students needing to acculturate to the dominant culture (at both the individual, societal/community and school levels), possibly enculturating to the
native ethnic culture, students are now also acculturating to the special education culture depending upon the extent through which they are receiving services. The range of special education services can vary depending on the student meeting the criteria to qualify for a disability and the services that are determined by certified bilingual personnel and the Individual Education Plan (IEP) Committee which resulted from evaluation recommendations (i.e., Salvia, Ysseldyke & Bolt, 2007). Services fall under a continuum that meet the Individual’s with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) principle of a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (i.e., López & Menchaca-López; Turnbull, Turnbull & Wehmeyer, 2007).

This acculturative process experienced by students with special needs living in border and rural areas could be accompanied by the phenomena known as conflict, more commonly identified as acculturative stress (López, 2003; Padilla, 1986). The student may be struggling with which ethnic/cultural traits to maintain, which ethnic and “cultural” traits to adopt and which to reject. This may be compounded with pressures from home and school as to which traditions, values, beliefs and even language to utilize (Salas, López & Menchaca-López, 2005). Some common affective responses to the “conflict” include: anger, depression, bullying, anxiety and withdrawal (López, 2003; Menchaca-López & López, 2007). These responses could impede the academic success of these students and could mimic emotional disturbance and possible misdiagnosis of the true needs of the student leading to possible dropping out or skipping school (López, Salas, Arroyos-Jurado, & Chinn, 2004; Menchaca-López & López; Padilla, 2001; Salas, et.al.).

Addressing the Issues

This stress must be considered not only during the nondiscriminatory assessment (López, Flores, Manson-Montoya, Martinez, Meraz, & Romero, 2001) in the school setting, but also throughout the curriculum and the intervention process, such that the student’s feelings and thoughts are validated and appropriate steps are taken to provide support for the student and their families. Interventions, parental involvement and professional development for school personnel for these cultural issues that are possibly impacting students and families are essential (American Psychological Association, 2002; López, 2004a). The interventions and professional development need to include and are not limited to the development of support groups for students and parents as well as individual and group counseling in more severe instances. As discussed by López (2003), normalizing the acculturation process for the student and the family can assist in understanding what is happening psychologically as well as in the interpersonal relationships, impacted by expectations from the various environments and associates (parents, teachers, etc.). Support groups can serve as “safe” forums through which students/parents learn about the construct of acculturation, the phases and models associated with acculturation, as well as behaviors and feelings associated with acculturative stress. Students and parents can dialogue an possibly identify the acculturation level and type that they are currently functioning within to help them understand why they may feel, behave and believe in a certain manner, which may be different from their peers, siblings and family members. Another positive outlet that has been suggested to assist with the acculturative process is participation in native musical or artistic groups (i.e., López, 2004b). This is important for students with disabilities and their families, as they are truly functioning within multi-cultural, multi-social and multi-lingual settings.

In addition to the cultural and communication issues arising, the student’s learning style (Ormrod, 2004) will need to be identified and utilized to enhance potential and to see what other modes of learning could be developed to teach students “how” to learn academically in the school
culture (i.e., Chinn, Eleweke, & López, 2007). This is essential in that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students may learn differently than mainstreamed students. Further, it is essential to process how the cultural and linguistic information will serve to be implemented in the intervention so as to not only validate the various cultural traits and values but also to build on the strengths that are possessed in each culture which will assist in the student becoming successful.

Conclusions

Living in border and rural areas allows for great opportunities in working with students with special needs and their families that may be functioning within multiple cultural realms. It is in recognizing and working within these cultural arenas that students must function within, that allows for appropriate understanding not only of assessment information (Padilla, 2001), but ultimately success in the classroom. Border and rural districts should consider these constructs and issues to assist in academic achievement.
References