

## Culturally Responsive Classroom Practices

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Historically, the disproportionate representation of children of color in special education has been well documented in the research (Dunn, 1968; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). This persistent issue was highlighted recently in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004. This legislation strengthened the mandatory reporting of disproportionate districts by states through Indicators 9 and 10 and stipulated the maximum use of federal funds for coordinated early intervening services (CEIS) in identified districts.

According to Gravois and Rosenfield (2006), disproportionality can be defined as “the representation of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population” (p.42). Disproportionality is deemed as harmful when special education placements result from a) inadequate general education programs, b) inappropriate assessment practices, or in c) ineffective special education programs (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). Harry and Klingner (2006) conducted extensive qualitative research surrounding the overrepresentation of minority students in special education and concluded that factors throughout the pre-referral, referral, and placement processes affected eligibility determination for students of color.

When examining risk factors, African American students are approximately 2.5 times more likely to be identified in the area of cognitive disabilities and 1.5 times more likely to be identified in the area of emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBD) than white students (Reschly, 2006; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999). In the area of learning disabilities (LD), American Indian students were 2.6 times and African American

students were 2.7 times more likely to be found eligible (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). According to Losen (2005), risk factor or the percentage of students of a given racial group that are identified as belonging in a particular category, is determined by dividing the number of a given racial group in a disability category by the number of students of a given racial group enrolled in the district. Wisconsin statistics for 2003-04 depicted significant risk factors for African American (7.1) and American Indian (8.2) students identified as LD as opposed to a risk factor of 5.6 for White students. Less dramatic, but still significant risk factors were revealed for African American (2.9) and American Indians (4.9) identified as EBD as opposed to a risk factor of 1.8 for White students. Equally troubling is the fact that each of these populations is significantly underrepresented in college preparatory courses and gifted and talented programs.

National trends indicate that well over 86% of the current teaching force is White, mono-lingual, and female (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002). “Educators today struggle in their efforts to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse ... learners, as evidenced by the gaps between children of color and white children in achievement, graduation, and other indicators of school success. (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Sobel & Taylor, 2006). “Indeed, preparing current and future teachers to teach students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse academic needs is one of the most compelling challenges facing teacher educators today” (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Sobel & Taylor, 2006). With that said, if teachers are either unaware of or misunderstand their students’ unique cultural learning styles, they may make the mistake of underestimating the “student’s cognitive abilities and unknowingly misplace or mistreat them (Bennett, 2002).

Considerable research has shown that the best way to combat this misplacement of students of color is to provide culturally responsive teaching. *Cultural Responsivity* refers to the ability to learn from and relate respectfully to people from your own and other cultures. Through the Culturally Responsive Education for All: Teaching and Enhancement (CREATE) initiative, culturally responsive classroom practices training has been offered to districts in the state of Wisconsin. The training is designed for school-based teams who are interested in changing classroom practices. Participants gain a better understanding of themselves and students in their classroom as cultural beings with diverse communication patterns, perceptions of time and space, learning styles, and interpretations of respect. Careful attention is paid to identity development, an examination of power and privilege in schools, cultural competency, and critical self-reflection.

Once this intersectionality is understood coaches and districts can work together to implement Culturally Responsive Teaching, which according to Geneva Gay, “can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them (Gay, 2000).”

In one of her more famous pieces Gloria Ladson Billings describes the true nature of culturally relevant instruction:

“Teachers who practice relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others. They see their teaching as an art rather than a technical skill. They believe that all of their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some. They see themselves as a part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community. They help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities. Such teachers can also be identified by the ways in which they structure their social interactions: Their relationships with students are fluid and equitable and extend beyond the classroom. They demonstrate a

connectedness with all of their students and encourage that same connectedness between students. They encourage a community of learners; they encourage their students to learn collaboratively. Finally, such teachers are identified by their notions of knowledge: They believe that knowledge is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike. They view the content of the curriculum critically and are passionate about it (Ladson Billings, 1994).”

As alluded to earlier, the sessions focus on understanding culture and diversity, recognizing the role of power and privilege in both individual and institutional interactions, and developing a philosophy of social justice and equity. The training also focuses on understanding culture and diversity, recognizing the role of power and privilege in both individual and institutional interactions, and developing a philosophy of social justice and equity. Activities include cross-cultural simulations, large and small group discussions on selected readings, classroom maps, videos, etc., all with the intent of increasing the group members’ cultural competency. During the 2010-11 school year, ten districts, some disproportionate and others not, are participating in the training. There are 138 total participants in three geographical cohorts: Madison, Milwaukee, and Green Bay.

The end product of effecting Culturally Responsive Teaching and these trainings is to provide a more nuanced and culturally sensitive curriculum for *all* students and from there to make more appropriate evaluations of students’ placement in either regular or special education settings. According to Rosenberg, Westling, and Mcleskey, “when students see their cultural background and culturally derived knowledge in the curriculum they are more likely to be engaged, see schooling as relevant, and achieve academically (Rosenberg, Westling, & McLeskey, 2008).”

It will be the responsibility of those who have participated in the training to help lead their schools and districts in facilitating more appropriate and meaningful conversations on issues of culture and race and their clear relationship with disproportionality into the future, if we are to address this problem. It is our hope that through training in Culturally Responsive Classroom Practices the facilitators can point out the forces at play and assist the districts with implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching which provides the most equitable, appropriate, and effective education for *all* students.

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