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Issues Arising from Insufficient Diversity Among Education Personnel: A Monarch Brief

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"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 E. 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 cultural/linguistic 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 cultural identification (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; 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 their 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; Ishii-Jordan, 1997). 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; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003); and affective-oriented teachers have been found to be more successful in improving the academic achievement of African American students (Franklin, 1992; Ferguson, 2002). "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. 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); Thomas & Collier, 2002.

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-Bandeale, 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 evaluations is that teachers may be unable to distinguish differences from disabilities" (Baca, de Valenzuela, & Garcia, 1996, p. 3).

Disproportionate Placement of Students of Color

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-Bandeale, 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.

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