



## Reform and Restructuring in Special Education Teacher Preparation: Multicultural Considerations and Pedagogical Strategies

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## **Reform and Restructuring in Special Education Teacher Preparation: Multicultural Considerations and Pedagogical Strategies**

Diversity characterizes all aspects of our lives, especially educational systems. A report from the U. S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census (1999), which considers population changes between 1990 and 1998, indicated that 9.3 percent of the population is foreign-born ("Ethnic diversity," 1999; "One American," 1999). The African American population increased almost percent; African Americans are the largest under-represented group and comprise 34.4 million people or 12.7 percent of the nation's 270 million people. About seven million foreign-born black people emigrated to the U. S. thereby contributing to the increase in the African American population. The largest foreign-born groups entering the U. S. are Hispanics and Asian Pacific Islanders. Hispanics increased more than 35 percent and make up 30.3 million people or 11 percent of the population; about 10.7 million Hispanics are foreign-born. Asians and Pacific Islanders evidenced the most growth and increased more than 40 percent; they comprise 10.5 million people or 4 percent of the population. An estimated 6.4 million Asian Pacific Islanders are recent immigrants; 4.1 million Asian Pacific Islanders are native-born.

Diversity among school-aged students also includes an increasing number of youth from mixed racial backgrounds as well as members of indigenous groups such as Alaska Natives, Eskimos, Hawaiians, and Native Americans. Many of these youngsters typically live in less affluent neighborhoods; their backgrounds may include factors such as low socioeconomic levels and poverty, single parent families, low parent education levels, and limited English proficiency all of which are associated with high risk for poor student outcomes (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998).

The majority of public school teachers are from middle class socioeconomic levels and live in the suburbs. They are often removed from the cultures of school communities and may have few shared experiences with and lack understandings about the children and parents with whom they interact (Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1996). They may be unable to provide equal access to meaningful educational opportunities for students whose culture differs from their cultural background and values (Bradfield-Krieder, 1999; Wald, 1996).

Sociocultural diversity is greater within the general population than among teachers. About 32 percent of public school students represent diverse groups, whereas only 14% of their teachers are from similar heritage (Choy, Henke, Alt, Medrich & Bobbitt, 1993; Henke, Choy, Gies, & Broughman, 1996). A similar situation is found in special education where the student population is increasing in diversity while the teaching force remains predominantly white, middle class, and female (Cook & Boe, 1995). Differences between the teaching force and students may create a lack of cultural compatibility (Shimabukuro, 1998; Wald, 1996).

Teachers' attitudes and reactions to diverse youth influence classroom climate, students' achievement and behavioral expectations, self concept, and sense of belonging. Their beliefs determine if they assume responsibility to address students' learning needs in a culturally responsive manner (Talbert-Johnson & Cochran, 1999). Accommodations must be made to ensure all students receive a responsive education that enables them to experience academic success and ensures equal access to educational opportunities.

### **Teacher Supply and Demand**

The United States experiences a severe teacher shortage; an estimated two million new teachers are needed by 2006 (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). Projected retirements within the next decade portend teacher shortages for disadvantaged urban and rural schools and the fields of special education, bilingual and multicultural education, mathematics, and science (Henke et al., 1996). In addition, an estimated 22 percent of new teachers leave the field within their first three years of employment; attrition among teachers from under-represented populations is much higher than among their white colleagues (Henke et al., 1996; Wald, 1996). Reasons attributed to high attrition include teachers' perceived lack of support for and investment in their personal and professional well-being as well as changing roles and responsibilities in which they are required to develop and implement an ever expanding curriculum (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1997). Factors that contribute to high attrition among special education teachers concern conditions of employment which include limited supplies, ill-equipped classrooms, an overwhelming amount of paperwork, and students who have widely differing abilities. Special educators also may teach in isolation from peers, under the direction of multiple supervisors, and as consultants and advocates in a system that experiences a constant state of flux and opposition from employers and peers (Sileo & Edelen-Smith, 1993; Wald, 1997, 1998).

The current pool of college students may not fill the demand for teachers; the number of teachers from under-represented populations continues to decline despite their increase in teacher education programs (Wald, 1996). Many individuals with high qualifications, especially women and members of under-represented groups, are drawn to more lucrative and prestigious professions. Circumstances that contribute to choosing other careers include financial aid packages that offset college tuition and living costs, equal employment opportunities and affirmative action standards, a perceived lack of societal respect accorded teachers, and low salary levels (Sileo & Edelen-Smith, 1993). Stringent program entry and exit requirements, which require passing national or state examinations in basic skills, content areas, and pedagogy, as well as program length are other reasons for not enrolling in teacher preparation programs (Wald).

Teacher shortages in special education, coupled with increasing numbers of students with disabilities, have resulted in a critical need for qualified special education teachers. An estimated 10 percent to 30 percent of special education teachers do not possess suitable credentials (Cook & Boe, 1995; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). The shortage of qualified special education teachers necessitates that school districts and universities focus on programs that promote professional success and satisfaction in the early years of teaching, thereby increasing the likelihood of retaining qualified teachers in the profession (Cheney, Krajewski, & Combs, 1992).

### **Recruitment and Retention**

High-poverty communities with large numbers of students from diverse heritage face the greatest challenge in recruiting, supporting, and retaining new teachers. School districts may address the situation by offering (a) increased salaries, cash bonuses, and reimbursed education costs; (b) incentive funding programs, such as tuition waivers, for public institutions to recruit students in high demand areas; (c) alternative routes to special education teacher credentials; and, (d) teacher induction programs (Rodriguez, 1998).

Disproportionate ratios among students and special education teachers from similar backgrounds necessitate that colleges and universities recruit and retain individuals from like populations to the teaching profession. Cultural representation among the teaching force affords students diverse educational experiences, ensures equality of opportunity, and provides role models for all students (Craft, 1996). Teachers from under-represented populations often engage in culturally responsive instruction; they use communication styles similar to students' home and community settings (Au & Mason, 1981; Foster, 1994). Teachers who share students' cultural backgrounds may be effective in maintaining classroom discipline, establishing ongoing communication with family members, and reducing the numbers of students referred for special education services (Ewing, 1995; Garcia & Malkin, 1993; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989).

The recruitment of university students from among under-represented groups cannot be separated from retention efforts. Guiding principles that may enhance recruitment and retention endeavors in special education teacher preparation, include acknowledgment of diversity within and among under-represented student populations, students' need for support and assistance in goal setting and attainment, and campus climate and classroom environment as important variables to students' subject matter mastery

Commitment to under-represented students must be highly visible and evidenced by the (a) active recruitment of faculty members with diverse heritage and others who have experiences with racial, ethnic, and cultural groups; (b) formation of partnerships with school districts with large under-represented student populations; and (c) professional development for teacher education faculty regarding the various aspects of teacher preparation for diversity (Zeichner, 1996). Faculty development programs may address the topics: (a) infusing multicultural content throughout the teacher education curriculum, (b) classroom dynamics and creating enabling learning environments, (c) language-related issues in teacher preparation, (d) culturally sensitive instructional strategies and assessment of student learning, and (e) representation of diverse populations in teacher preparation textbooks and instructional materials.

The recruitment and retention of preservice teachers from diverse populations is an important function of special education teacher preparation. The efforts of colleges and universities to encourage diversity help to identify culturally responsive assessment and instructional practices and inform teacher preparation programs of needed changes. Ongoing systematic data collection, analysis, and synthesis are the bases for the modifications.

### **Higher Education Pedagogical Considerations**

Multicultural course transformations necessitate that teacher educators design and deliver programs that model inclusivity and use culturally sensitive curricular, instructional, and assessment materials and strategies appropriate to diverse university students' learning needs. The application of culturally sensitive and responsive instruction illustrates effective pedagogical approaches and teacher educators sensitivity to students.

#### **Curricular Materials**

Textbooks and instructional materials should represent a wide range of diversity, particularly the students in the university classes in which they are used and the cultural groups with whom they will interact as future teachers (Prater, Sileo, & Sileo, 1997). They should also use politically correct language, portray positive images of diverse cultural groups, and acknowledge their contributions to society. Finally, the textbooks and instructional materials must be free of biases that may include (a) invisibility of specific neglected or under-represented populations, (b) stereotyping in which traditional roles are

ascribed to certain groups, (c) selectivity and imbalance where authors omit the roles of various groups; and, (d) linguistic bias where authors rely on masculine pronouns or Anglo names (Hunt & Marshall, 1994).

#### Field-Centered Teacher Preparation

Field-based special education teacher preparation programs should afford future teachers opportunities to experience culturally responsive interactions with students, parents, and other family members in contrast to just studying about diversity (Morris, Taylor, Knight, & Wasson, 1997; Zeichner & Hoefft, 1996). Preservice teachers complete field-based activities and student teaching experiences in settings that embody the basic tenets of multicultural education. They engage in activities such as designing and implementing a culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional activities, and interviewing parents and other family members from diverse backgrounds.

#### Instructional Strategies

Pedagogical strategies should model cultural inclusivity and provide contextualized settings as means of facilitating the successful learning of diverse student populations in higher education settings. Examples of these strategies include the following.

Learning journals heighten preservice teachers' awareness of diversity issues, enhance understanding of events in their lives, describe personal and professional growth and problem solving processes, function as a means to explore solutions to life's problems, and enable writers to examine and clarify their knowledge and values as the foundation for decision making (Black, Sileo, & Prater, in press; Cooper and Heck, 1995). Students' journal entries and dialogue with the instructor provide a means for personalizing instruction and getting to know students in ways that are seldom possible in class (Lynch, 1997). They also allow students the privacy to examine difficult issues and the permission to share their thoughts in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere.

Journals may also allow students to focus on ethnic self-awareness in which to address their ancestors' origins, family backgrounds, cultural characteristics and values, and current levels regarding ethnic identity. Journaling enables preservice special education teachers to grow in reflective teaching practices and their interactions with students from diverse heritage and their parents (Pultorak, 1993, 1996).

Videotapes with peer-assisted reflection facilitate students' awareness and understanding of their educational experiences with linguistically and culturally diverse children and youth or their parents. Videotapes provide preservice special educators with opportunities to think about teaching practices and interactions, alter their behaviors, and, become thoughtful practitioners. Peer-assisted reflection of videotapes provides a nonthreatening environment that encourages constructive discussion and review of others' teaching behaviors. University students' ability to reflect about content, process, and the premises upon which their instructional decisions are based is central to their future successes with students and parents of diverse heritage.

Service learning activities extend experiential learning opportunities that are designed to develop preservice special education teachers' professional skills. They provide university students with enriched contextualized learning experiences to analyze issues of social concern as a basis for stepping outside their current understandings to finding solutions to problems that may conflict with their own predisposition and self-interests; students move their newly acquired learning to higher levels of understanding. Service learning activities connect practice with theory; they afford university students with know-how information that is acquired through active involvement in learning in contrast to know-about

information which may be acquired in a classroom setting (Checkoway, 1996). Service learning activities enable university students to give something back to schools or communities and to walk in another's shoes as a foundation for developing caring relationships and responsiveness to others' needs.

Role play provides realistic and effective contextualized learning experiences that enable university students to enact the everyday roles, responsibilities, and challenging situations that confront teachers (Espiner, Hartnett & Lyons, 1991; Hartnett, O'Brien & Espiner, 1992; Murray & Steadman, 1992). It allows flexibility and imagination in identifying and conceptualizing a role; students define the cultural and linguistic characteristics and values that guide their behaviors. Role play may be used to involve preservice special educators actively in the teaching-learning process, explore reactions or responses to various situations, and practice newly acquired knowledge and skills. An example of a role play situation that is applicable to preservice special educators may include collaborative team processes among professionals, students, and parents from diverse backgrounds regarding the student's individualized education program.

Action methods involve university students in structured learning experiences as the foundation for clarifying concepts, gaining new information, and acquiring perceptions. Selected action methods appropriate in university classes with students from diverse backgrounds include icebreaker and continuum activities, opinion maps, story boarding, concept mapping, and cooperative learning groups.

*Icebreaker activities* allow students to become better acquainted and to engage in meaningful learning activities that facilitate spontaneity in their class interactions. For example, an icebreaker activity may request students to locate someone in the class who has similar racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics as a basis for identifying what they like best (and least) about their heritage.

*Continuum activities* place preservice special educators on an imaginary line in relation to a position on a particular issue (Espiner et al., 1991; Hartnett et al., 1992; Murray & Steadman, 1992). They require students to indicate their stance on relatively black and white issues and progress along a continuum to more complex gray area issues that require situational responses. An example of an issue used in this activity asks students to place themselves along the continuum regarding interracial marriage in contrast to perceptions of their parents location on the same issue. Subsequent discussion often highlights inter-generational differences in people's viewpoints.

*Opinion maps* are similar to continuum activities (Espiner et al., 1991; Hartnett et al., 1992; Murray & Steadman, 1992). A group member makes a statement about an issue and places herself on a position in the room. Other students place themselves in far or near proximity to the person according to the stated opinion. Opinion maps encourage preservice teachers to take a stand and to clarify their position on a controversial issue such as the viability of bilingual education and the role of public schools in advocating cultural assimilation or cultural pluralism.

*Story boarding* is a brainstorming strategy that engages a group of students in team learning about a particular subject; it helps to maximize students' input and to tell a powerful and compelling story with multiple dimensions. Participants generate and write ideas on Post-it notes of various colors and sizes; they reflect upon the ideas and arrange them into a sequence that links various themes under consideration. The final aspect of story boarding involves a group summary and dialogue which concerns how the ideas address the themes. An example of story boarding considers the impact of homelessness on the lives of school-age children, youth, and their family members from diverse cultural heritage. The story

boarding activity serves as a springboard for generating strategies for working with children and their families in educational settings.

*Concept mapping* techniques are visual representations and expressions of preservice teachers' understanding about a topic. They help university students to link new knowledge to previously acquired concepts. Concept mapping encourages the construction of holistic patterns in which the relationships of concepts are determined by the user as a basis for understanding a topic. Concept mapping may be used to initiate class discussion about the heterogeneity of diverse populations such as Hispanics who are commonly aggregated as a single ethnic group.

*Cooperative learning activities* consist of structured, systematic instructional strategies where small heterogeneous groups of preservice special education teachers work together to attain a shared learning outcome. They afford opportunities for students to develop broader understandings than when a single individual explores a topic individually. Cooperative learning activities are powerful teaching strategies that promote students' acquisition of knowledge and develop valuable life skills such as critical thinking, effective communication, and respect for others' diverse academic abilities, disabilities, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.

Cooperative learning strategies require university students to process course content actively, reflect upon the content, and communicate their thoughts and discoveries to others. They seem to be particularly appropriate in higher education settings with students from under-represented populations who may need a supportive classroom environment that enhances their learning and success. Cooperative learning activities also create an atmosphere that reduces competition among students and, therefore, may be suitable for students who prefer a group orientation and an atmosphere of sharing as the basis for goal attainment. An example of a cooperative learning activity in preservice special education teacher preparation programs include (a) developing school-based action plans that facilitate the involvement of parents from diverse cultural backgrounds in their children's education (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine, & Rude, 1998).

### Assessment Strategies

Assessment strategies that model cultural inclusivity concern how students demonstrate mastery of course content and pedagogical competency. Lewis (1997) suggests that students be provided with alternative response modes such as reading logs, abstracts annotated with their personal reactions, concept mapping exercises, and (d) performance-based assessment as means of demonstrating content mastery and competency.

Portfolio assessment is an appropriate vehicle for students from under-represented groups to demonstrate their knowledge and pedagogical competence and interpersonal skills. It incorporates a wide range of response modes and provides evidence that demonstrates the unfolding of teaching and learning over time. Portfolio assessment allows students the chance to affirm their cultural heritage and to promote the tenets of multicultural education.

### Summary

The focus of this presentation was on the need to prepare special educators with competencies in multicultural education that enable them to work more effectively with children and youth from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Discussion considered changing demographics in public school settings as well as the misrepresentation of children and youth from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in special

education settings. Other considerations included teacher supply and demand and the concomitant need to recruit and retain college and university students with diverse backgrounds into special education teacher preparation programs. Finally, discussion addressed curricular and pedagogical changes that must occur in teacher preparation programs to ensure that future special education teachers are prepared adequately for a changing school population.

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