Cultural Identity and Special Education Teachers

Have We Slept Away Our Ethical Responsibilities?

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Abstract

All teachers play a pivotal role, if not the most important role, in the success or failure of culturally and linguistically diverse children, but most importantly in the field of special education as overrepresentation of these children continues to grow. We believe that those teachers who are aware of their own ethnic identity are better prepared to work with children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Consequently, it is our contention that the knowing of one's ethnic identity is an ethical issue for special education teachers as they attempt to understand the lives of those children who differ from themselves. This paper explores the notion of cultural and ethnic identity and its relationship to the special education teacher.

The United States is experiencing demographic shifts in epic proportions as increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students are entering the public schools at rapid rates. This richness in America's K-12 public schools is readily seen in its student population, but it is not visible in the teaching force which continues to be 90.7 percent European American (Branch, 2001). This disparity among teachers and students poses ethical and moral dilemmas in that for many culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students their whole K-12 schooling can be experienced without ever being taught by an ethnic minority teacher (Duarete, 2000).

As it is, differences between the diversity of teachers and students are unlikely to be mitigated without intervention at the federal, state, or local level. As a matter of fact, the problem is only expected to get worse due the national shortages of teachers, especially in the area of special education. Of concern to us is whether or not America's teaching force will be culturally competent to handle the diversity to be found in the K-12 student population (Tyler and Smith, 2000), particularly those students in need of special education services.

We believe that the need for culturally competent special education teachers is second to none as more and more culturally and linguistically diverse students are being inappropriately placed in special education. Furthermore, it is our contention that as the need for culturally competent special education teachers increases it becomes paramount that universities/colleges prepare teachers in understanding their own cultural contexts as part of their teaching persona. In other words, we believe that culturally competent special education teachers are those teachers who know and understand how their own cultural identity has influenced their lives.

What is Culture?

Culture can be said to be an elusive concept (Nieto, 2004; Gollnick & Chinn, 2004; Winzer & Mazurek, 1999). The term itself denotes the shared implicit and explicit rules and traditions that express the beliefs, values, and goals of a group of people (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Culture is passed on to individuals through socialization, which is the general process by which attitudes, skills, and behavioral patterns are acquired. The act of cultural therefore, is a learned experience as people interact with individuals on a daily basis.

Culture, according to Sonia Nieto (2004), can best be understood "as the ever changing values, traditions, and social and political relationships, and worldview created and shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion, or other shared identity" (p. 146). Different cultural groups have different rules or expectations that guide behavior. All students and teachers enter the public schools with a knowledge base which is supported by the cultural codes in which they are born. For many CLD students, their cultural codes are at times neither supported nor validated among teachers often resulting in what Nieto describes as cultural discontinuity.

A cultural discontinuity refers to the "lack of fit" between the home and school culture and as such may cause problems for some students from CLD backgrounds. The notion of cultural discontinuities experiences have been identified and documented throughout the research community. Classical examples stem from the works of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) in exploring the tension between African American students and their mostly Anglo teachers and in Guadalupe Valdés (1996) study which documents the plight of Mexican migrant families and their disconnection with the public schools. We also find validation in the recent works by Lisa Delpit (1995) in her seminal work, "Other people's children: Culture conflict in the classroom which illustrates varies examples of cultural conflict between culturally and linguistically diverse children and their teachers.

Our belief is that the failure of many CLD students in schools is not solely dependent on the cultural discontinuities between teacher and student, but rather a product of other factors such as the social political contexts of education and what it means to be schooled in the United States. In addition, the hidden curriculum which continues to support the status quo at the expense of a culturally responsive pedagogy has a huge impact on students and their learning (Darder, 1991; Nieto, 2004). Add to this context the culturally and linguistically diverse student who is now functioning in what Harry (1992) describes as the culture of Special Education.

Discourse and Special Education

Western thoughts about special education are deeply rooted within the functionalist paradigm which espouses the need to view reality as something objective and independent of the human perspective (Skrtic, 1991). Within this paradigm, is the belief that something is wrong with the student which requires "fixing." In other words, the concept of disability within this paradigm becomes reified – or made into a thing that the student has therefore requiring remediation by teachers or other experts (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

Presented in quantifiable or medical terms, the use of special education language espouses that information be delivered, sustained as objective, technical, and factual, (i.e, evidence must be shown and presented in order for truth to be legitimized). The responsibilities of the experts, such as teachers, school psychologists, for example, are to identify, recommend, diagnosis and provide treatment. Objectivity therefore, within special education paradigm implies that "fixing" is more efficient when experts remain distant or aloof from the individual requiring the fixing.

We acknowledge that although some objectivity is needed in all professions. However, our argument and that of others (Bogdan & Knoll, 1988; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Mehan, Hartwick, Meihls, 1986) asks how can the notion of objectivity in special education be justified when teaching and being taught are human experiences that are embedded on those subjective experiences that are culturally coded within our identity as cultural beings? Furthermore, to assume that a special education teacher's expectations are not influenced by their own ethnicity, class or linguistic backgrounds or that of their students is to postulate that they are removed from their own cultural bias for which we find no support (Dilworth, 1998; Nieto, 2002; Rist, 2000; Rios, 1996).

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is crucial in becoming a culturally competent special education teacher (Banks, 1997; Nieto, 2004; Vázquez, 1997). An awareness of the self allows for an understanding of situations, interactions, and relationships. Banks argues that teachers must have "a clear understanding of their own cultural identity and its influence on their attitudes toward and relationships with culturally different people" (p. 85). According to Giroux (1994) the exploration of the self leads to teachers to become "responsible for their practices, particularly as these serve to either undermine or expand the possibility of a democratic public life" (p. 339).

We believe that special education teachers must come to know themselves not only from a traditional sense of belonging to an ethnic group, but from various other perspectives which includes race, language, economic, familial, spiritual, and gender. In addition, special education teachers must also come to understand how the nature and attachment to these perspectives has shaped their personal/familial histories, as well as their teaching pedagogy (Ndura & Lafer, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

As indicated by Sue & Sue (1990;1999) and Ponterotto & Pedersen (1993) cultural identity are the ideas and ways of thinking about you, your group and other cultural groups. Knowledge of cultural identity models such as the White Racial Identity Model (Helms, 1995) and the Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (Sue & Sue; Ponterotto & Pedersen; Ponterrotto, Gretchen & Chauhan,

2001) are processes in which special education teachers can come to understand their cultural developmental stage and that of their students.

The White Racial Identity Model (Helms, 1995) for example can be representative of a special education teacher's position in a dominant "cultural" role (i.e., López, 2003) and how their stage of identity development impacts not only their perceptions of themselves, but also perceptions and interactions with other teachers and the students/families they serve. In understanding the Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (Sue & Sue, 1990; 1999) special education teachers can understand where their process of developing culturally impacts their students, but also helps in understanding where their students are functioning within their own cultural identity.

The Ethical Dilemma

Understanding the construct of identity is the basis for acquiring cultural competency (Vázquez, 1997). As service providers, are we not ethically responsible for operationalizing this construct not only from a cultural and racial perspective, but from the culture of special education? As indicated by Kalyanpur & Harry, (1998), special education should be viewed as a cultural and as such has its own ethos from which it values and legitimates itself.

Special education has its own means of communication to which only those who are privy ascribe. In addition, the profession itself has certain acquired behaviors on behalf of the teachers, whether reinforced unconsciously or consciously, which portrays them as objective and experts of knowledge, which others do not have (Harry, 1992). There are also beliefs and values associated with being a teacher who works with students with disabilities that is mediated within the contexts of each individual school culture.

Yet, how often are the cultural identities of teachers considered when negotiating the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting or during the application of IEP goals and objectives by teachers? Nonetheless, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 1993), American Psychological Association (APA; 2002), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2002), state that culture should always be considered not only during the special education process, but in the assessment/ intervention portion and in planning and developing the IEP with students and their families.

Having been involved in all aspects of IEP meetings, specifically in the development of goals and objectives and in the implementation of these goals/objectives, we have rarely been involved in a discussion as to how perceptions and values of the special education teacher impact the specific teaching modalities, interventions and interactions. We assert that if the cultural identity on behalf of teachers is not questioned or addressed, the probability for the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students will continue to manifest itself in the public schools. In essence, we believe this moves this agenda from an ethical issue to a legal question in that those special education teachers may not truly be meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students within a special education environment.

Resolving the Ethical Dilemma

In working with students who have disabilities impacting academic success, there must be an understanding that CLD students are functioning within multiple cultures and may have varying expectations and stressors associated within this context (López, Salas, & Menchaca-Lopez, 2004). Along with functioning within a multi-contextual forum, CLD students may also have attitudes and beliefs associated with each role they have in specific environments and situations (López, 2003: Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1990). As special educators and ancillary service providers, we must first come to understand and be aware of this phenomenon. Second, teacher education programs in special education must implement the use cultural identity models that have been developed in order for pre-service teachers to understand the cultural developmental stages at which they are operating. We believe that special education teachers play a pivotal role in understanding this dilemma and as such can make huge differences in the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse children by not only advocating on behalf of them, but by making appropriate decisions regarding instruction and special education placement.

Conclusion

The special education teaching profession must come to recognize that teachers are living in what Renato Rosaldo (1989) call the "cultural borderlands." Within this milieu, individuals (including teachers) are constantly intersecting with the lives of people from various racial, ages, ethnic, social class, and gender backgrounds. Schools and classrooms embody the borderlands as students and teachers backgrounds come together and influence each other in this setting on a daily basis. Special education teachers need to explore how their own cultural codes which are defined by their ethnic identity have impacted their teaching pedagogy and their beliefs regarding culturally and linguistically diverse students. We believe that the call for the exploration of how culture identity influences the practice of teaching within the special education profession has slept long enough and that an awakening is indeed warranted.

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