# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH MULTIPLE OR SEVERE PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Are there students with physical disabilities who are so severely impaired that their culture can not be taken into consideration? Growing numbers of preschool and school age children with such disabilities are from non-European countries including Africa, South America, East Asia, and the Caribbean Islands. In addition, children who are American Indian/Alaska Natives, African American, or Hispanic are also represented in special education programs. Psychologically, familiar food, music, and customs are important for these students as they may provide a comforting link between home and school. It is the cultural frame of reference that most often informs and shapes children. It is imperative that culturally responsive instructions be implemented for students with physical impairments that are multiple or severe. Such instruction involves teachers in cultural self awareness, establishes diversity as a foundation for the curriculum, and recognizes that language diversity impacts educational needs.*

The importance of recognizing and affirming the cultural frame of reference of children is an ongoing concern for many educators (Banks, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Sleeter, 2001). It is the cultural frame of reference that often most informs and shapes children, thereby influencing communication patterns,

music and food preferences, attitudes about identity groups and, very importantly, about the process of education. This paper explores this issue for students with physical impairments that are multiple or severe precisely because little attention is devoted to this matter. The purpose is to relate the experiences of immigrant and historically underrepresented groups as well as cultural pluralism to students with multiple or severe physical impairments. A consideration of cultural diversity within a rapidly changing globalized world is central to a pedagogy that values differences and the establishment of inclusive learning communities.

The importance of this examination is apparent when viewed within the context of the ethics, standards, and guidelines for special education developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (*What Every Special Educator Must Know,* 2003). The Standards include the importance of cultural consideration in assessment, collaboration, language, and individual learning differences in the development and characteristics of learners. Standard Five requires entry level special education teachers to be knowledgeable of ways to create learning environments that allow individuals to retain and appreciate their own and each others' language and cultural heritage, ways specific cultures are negatively stereotyped, and strategies used by diverse individuals to cope with a legacy of former and continuing racism.

## IMPACT OF PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENTS THAT ARE MULTIPLE OR SEVERE

Children with physical disabilities represent a most diverse group when the different types of physical disorders are taken into consideration. Children with physical disabilities that are severe or multiple generally lack the ability to "talk, walk, point, or make any purposeful movement" (Gargiulo, 2003, p. 537). IDEA defines multiple disabilities as "simultaneous impairments (such as mental retardation/blindness, mental retardation/orthopedic impairment, etc.) the combination of which causes such severe educational problems that the child cannot be accommodated in a special education program solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include children who are deaf-blind" (IDEA, 34 C.F.R., Part 300, Sec. 300.7).

Students with multiple or severe physical disabilities may require support for life activities such as mobility, communication, self-care, and learning for community living, employment, and self-sufficiency (TASH, n.d.). Possessing more than one major disability presents unique challenges to the individual and the family. According to Smith (2004), one major impact of physical impairments that are multiple or severe is the cluster of challenges

that the individual faces to gain independence and participation in the community. Intensive and pervasive support from a range of community members is usually required for the accomplishment of these goals.

The population of students with severe physical disabilities is often vulnerable because of a lack of ability to communicate effectively in traditional modes. Such students incur challenges in multiple developmental areas. Vaughn, Bos, and Shumm (2003) indicate that two of every five students with multiple and severe disability will also have a sensory impairment. This adds to the difficulty in determining, with any degree of certainty, the level of many of these students' cognitive functioning, or their independent responsiveness to their environment (Heward, 2006).

Equally important is the degree to which families of students with multiple or severe physical impairments are also affected. Not only are phenomenal expenses frequently associated with physical impairments that are multiple or severe, there is also the issue of the emotional impact of guiding the growth of children. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, and Soodak (2006) offer insights into the family dynamics, noting the interplay between spouse and spouse, spouse and children without disabilities, sibling to sibling, parent to the child with the disability, and siblings to children with disabilities. Families coping with children with any disabilities may experience stress, guilt, anger, resentment, and fatigue (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). The needs of children without disabilities are often viewed as less urgent than those of children with disabilities. These authors assert that there may be cultural differences in the expectations for siblings where age, birth order, and gender are additional important variables.

The National Health Interview Survey, Disability Survey (*Twenty-second Annual Report,* 2000) is a follow-up interview conducted with children and adults with disabilities. The assessment considered the extent of co-occurring disabilities or multiple disabilities among children. Results indicated an increased likelihood that children from historically underrepresented ethnic groups would have two or more co-occurring disabilities. The report also suggested that students who were of Hispanic ethnicity, those who lived in single parent homes, and those with less educated parents were of greater risks of having co-occurring disabilities.

Data from the Twenty-fifth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the IDEA (2003) suggest somewhat similar findings. In fact, 14% of students with disabilities ages 6 through 12 were found to have three or more disabilities. About 29% of students in this age group had two disabilities and about 57% had one disability. Of students ages 13 through 17, at least 37% had three or more disabilities, a little over 19% had two dis-

abilities, and 43% had only one disability. This report indicated that a larger percentage of American Indians/Alaska Natives and Black (non Hispanics) were among the population of students who were at risk for co-occurring disabilities.

Many children from historically underrepresented families are more often economically disadvantaged than children from European Americans families. Statistics from the Twenty-fifth Annual Report to Congress (2003) suggest that students with disabilities are more likely to be poor than students without disabilities. Perhaps, most challenging of all, the nation's poorest families are frequently headed by a single parent (Expert Report of Thomas J. Sugrue, 2005). Thinly stretched family resources, in combination with the birth of a child with physical impairments that are multiple or severe, may be devastating, especially for the working poor. Such parents or guardians may not have the flexibility of attending and participating in the meaningful collaborative processes that are essential to the success of children with disabilities. Taken collectively, poverty, cultural and linguistic diversity, and the presence of children with physical impairments that are multiple or severe, can be negatively influenced by an education process with questionable cultural responsiveness. It is not difficult, therefore, to comprehend how some families fail to fulfill the essential tasks of being effective advocates and highly participatory team members.

## CULTURAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

Culture, according to Nieto (2004), consists of "the values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity" (p. 146). Culture is a thread that winds through generations and binds them together. It is a significant influence in determining children's identity.

There are increasing numbers of children from culturally different groups in the United States' education system as this country continues to open its doors to new immigrants. Five categories are used by states to report ethnic data for children with disabilities. The categories are American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black (not Hispanic), Hispanic, and White without Hispanic ancestry (*Twenty-fifth Annual Report*, 2003). These ethnic descriptors, used by the government, are broad and vague. These terms, according to Gargiulo (2003) "camouflage immense cultural variability while obscuring the richness of individual cultures" (p. 82).

Findings from the Twenty-fifth Annual Report (2003) suggest that a significant population of children from ethnic populations is in special education programs. In fact the numbers for students with disabilities who are African American or Native Americans exceed their representation in the general student population (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Data from the Twenty-fifth Annual Report (2003) indicate that under Part B, children who are three through five years and who are American Indian/Alaska Natives or European Americans are 1.3 times more likely to receive special education and related services than all other groups combined. Of the 6 through 21 year old IDEA population, at least 39% represent four of the five ethnic categories (American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black [not Hispanic], and Hispanic) used by the government to classify groups of children. The fifth ethnic category consists of the 61% of students who are labeled White (not Hispanic).

Currently, 28.4 million immigrants live in the United States (Camaroti, 2001) and come primarily from Africa, Mexico, South America, the Caribbean Islands, and East Asia. Interestingly, teachers of all age groups are primarily female and of European American ancestry. The implication is that teachers have instructional responsibility for children whose ethnicity is very different from that of their teacher. Because the United States is such a diverse society, it is important for teachers to understand the impact of culture on children's prior experiences. Cultural knowledge is particularly critical for teachers of children with physical impairments that are multiple or severe.

Cultural frames of reference can influence perceptions of disabilities. Many families from specific ethnic groups view disabilities markedly different from the traditional western European cultural perspective that currently characterizes the United States (Lamorey, 2002). Seeking help or outside intervention may not be culturally appropriate for some families of children with physical impairments.

## CULTURALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES AND CHILDREN WITH PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENTS THAT ARE MULTIPLE OR SEVERE

Professionals working with diverse families may find themselves at cross-purposes because of differing cultural frames of reference (Nieto, 2004; Ogbu, n.d.). The challenge then is to find common ground to maximize the educational experience of students with physical impairments that are multiple or severe. Just as noteworthy, professionals must be aware of the fact that some culturally diverse families traditionally defer to educators (Park, Turnbull, &

Park, 2001) and allow them to make decisions that many believe should be made through a collaboration among all stakeholders.

Denney, Singer, Singer, Brenner, Okamoto, & Fredeen (2001) studied Mexican immigrant families' beliefs and goals about caregiving and development for their infants with prematurity and other special health needs. The six families in the study were of first generation Mexican descent and used Spanish as their primary language. The results, from all of the families in the study, indicated ongoing communication barriers while their children were in the neonatal intensive care unit. Families had questions about the medical needs of their children and answers were not readily available from health care professionals. In addition, all families had different cultural beliefs about the care of infants that sometimes were a contrast to the care as practiced in hospitals. The availability of trained translators was suggested as a means of responding to communication needs and explaining cultural differences. While the sample size in this study is small, the findings suggest a need for culturally sensitive intervention practices.

Using a population of 10 Korean American parents of children with disabilities, Park, Turnbull, & Park (2001) found similar results. Eight of these parents responded that limited English proficiency was the biggest barrier that they faced in forming partnerships with professionals. Language differences prevented parents, in the study, from advocating for their children, accessing information, and participating actively in school activities. Families wanted professionals to understand traditional Korean values and practices. Cultural understanding, these parents felt, could be used by professionals in developing intervention strategies for use with Korean children. The study concluded that parents wanted a partnership relationship where genuine caring was evident, characterized by both respect, trustworthiness, and a recognition of linguistic and cultural differences.

Liam and Fontanez-Phelan (2001) designed a study to identify perceptions of 158 Latino parents regarding cultural and linguistic issues and advocacy for children with disabilities. The children had a range of disabilities including some with physical impairments that are multiple or severe. Responding to survey questionnaires, all of the parents indicated concerns about their children attending schools in this country. They believed that culture should be incorporated into the curriculum to which their children were exposed in order to facilitate academic success. Further, the parents felt that educators should increase their understanding of Latino culture, family traditions, and expectations. This is important for anyone with responsibility for teaching children from specific ethnic groups. Following these sugges-

tions would more closely align instructional practices to cultural expectations.

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

Increasingly, schools of today are serving parents and children who differ from the traditional European American perspective. Solomon (2003) describes the challenges that many suburban schools face in reaching out to families who are poor or immigrant. This author emphasizes the struggle that students encounter concerning language, culture, and personal feelings about their school experience. The situation can create a barrier that leads to a disconnect from schooling for both families and students. This is a reinforcement of Nieto (2004) and her assertion that cultural discontinuities create academic concerns for students.

Bowman (1994) believes that an appropriate model of development not only recognizes that human characteristics are influenced by genes and also by culture. These two components are inextricably interwoven. Bowman suggests a social interaction theory of development. She describes how the infant/caregiver relationship reflects the earliest form of social contact to include the influence of culture. While cultures may change somewhat over time, according to Bowman, there is stability in the interpretation that group members apply to experiences and represents an unconscious definition of appropriate behavior. This author encourages the recognition that "environmental effects are buffered by social support systems, personal resiliency and vulnerability, and the meaning that people attribute to the care and education they provide for children"(p. 3).

When children reach school age, most of them have acquired what Bowman (1994) describes as developmental competence and maturity. This means that they have "achieved the normative learning benchmarks of their community" (p. 3). If these community-acquired competences match those of schools, children should come to school ready to learn. When this does not occur, or the new setting demands differ from that of communities, the problem of social mismatch or cultural dissonance (Lim & Renshaw, 2001) occurs.

The presence in the classroom of students with diverse heritages is a positive circumstance that should evoke a curriculum that is responsive to that diversity. The presence of ethnic and other diversity enhances teachers' understanding of behaviors and explains actions that can stem from different beliefs and values. Therefore, it is essential to consider culture when meeting children's needs, working with their parents or caregivers, and developing

individualized educational plans. It is vital for teachers to address diversity issues for children with multiple or severe physical disabilities who may be limited in their ability to communicate or express their cultural heritage.

Park and Lian (2001) point out "the education of students with severe disabilities draws upon, reflects and echoes the same concerns as in multicultural education" (p. 135). Unfortunately, according to these researchers, there have not been concerted efforts to infuse culture into the education of students with physical impairments that are multiple or severe.

One aspect of culturally responsive teaching for students with multiple or severe physical impairments involves a serious consideration of children's linguistic backgrounds. Professionals should ensure that they communicate effectively with children and their families in the primary language used in the home. To do otherwise seriously curtails potential learning for children and impedes building reliable alliances between families and professionals (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Cummins (1989) found that a major predictor of academic success for linguistically different students is the extent to which their primary language and culture is incorporated into school programs. Cummins states that even when programs of bilingual education are not offered, school personnel can encourage and promote children's skill and pride in their first language. This is important when working with children who have multiple or severe physical disabilities.

Teachers and other school personnel who are members of children's linguistic communities are key elements of schools where linguistic diversity is represented. The presence of such individuals means that students who are linguistically different have access to language mentors. Their parents have access to community-friendly mediators in the attempt to collaborate with schools. According to Igoa (1995), to lessen the impact of culture shock, immigrant students need a transitional place in which they can incubate, growing emotionally as well as intellectually. Without caring teachers and other forms of positive intervention, patterns of loneliness, anxiety, and helplessness persist.

Value must be placed on children's primary language and heritage so the opportunity for self-expression and the feeling of belonging are encouraged (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). Nieto (2004) describes how students from homes where the primary language is not English enter schools and attempt to interact within a curriculum that is based upon the English language. Nieto asserts that if schools are seriously taking into consideration children's prior knowledge, schools should consider linguistic diversity as instructions are planned.

Schools assume a position of importance in helping children transfer to the new setting what they already know as they enter school. Unfortunately,

many children with multiple or severe physical disabilities, and with communication deficits, may not be able to effectively convey their prior cultural experiences and knowledge. These children are dependent upon teachers and their families to be cultural mediators. Bowman (1994) suggests that important effort must be directed toward preparing teachers to educate a greater diversity of children.

## PREPARING TEACHERS FOR DIVERSITY

Lim (2001) describes the process of becoming culturally inclusive within the context of personnel preparation in severe disabilities. First, individuals must understand the values and beliefs behind acculturated practice and research. In essence, this involves developing an understanding of self as it relates to the process of socialization. The engagement of the cultural self in learning represents the second step. Third, alignment of instruction with relevant experiences allows individuals to interact with children from different family traditions. Finally, developing knowledge of self allows teachers to see how self affects interpersonal interactions. Throughout the process, as Lim describes, the importance of understanding the personal impact of cultural on the self is crucial to understanding how culture impacts students with physical impairments that are multiple or severe.

Jacobson (2000) encourages teachers to redefine their role within their classrooms and use interactions that empower rather than disable students. Failure to recognize elements of culture, race, and educational experience that make some students more vulnerable in schools than others causes many teachers to be complicit in the devaluing of children. By this Jacobson means that teachers should have what Nieto (2004) calls high expectations for students. Jacobson sees this actualized in an attitude of value toward students and a desire to work to ensure that they acquire the skills needed for independence. Jacobson defines insensitivity as teaching practices that undermine motivation, devalue, and unnerve already academically bruised students. This idea corresponds to Nieto's (2004) description of low expectations for children. Nieto reminds readers that such low expectations mirror the expectations of these children that are possessed by many in our society. Teachers who value students provide productive and positive academic experiences within a context of high expectations.

Bowman (1994) describes the connection of cultural and linguistic diversity to the lack of academic success. The incongruity that occurs when children and teachers' behaviors are not mutually intelligible interrupts children's ability to optimally achieve in school. Teachers, according to Bowman,

use their personal construction of reality to make meaning of children's behaviors. She feels, as Nieto (2004), that misunderstandings occur when teachers and children do not share common cultural experiences or hold common beliefs about the meaning of those experiences.

Anton-Oldenburg (2000) explores the issue of creating a caring classroom that honors students' cultural background. The increasing diversity that now characterizes this country presents challenges to teachers who must juggle the expectations and experiences of a widely diverse student population. This author reinforces the belief that children's culture impacts their learning and suggests a need to move toward more culturally responsive teaching or to the establishment of caring classrooms that are inclusive of all children.

Anton-Oldenburg offers several suggestions for celebrating students' diversity. The first suggestion is to learn about the backgrounds of students to reduce cultural conflicts that lead to school failure and that negatively shape the direction of the curriculum. Second, the author encourages the teaching of multiple perspectives. Third, the author promotes the celebration of all kinds of life stories and experiences.

## CONCLUSION

If all teachers are to face issues of cultural diversity effectively, there are several needed skills. The first is cultural self-awareness. Teachers must know and understand how culture impacts their own lives before they can become responsive to children and families from diverse backgrounds. Second, teachers must include skill diversity as a fundamental form of diversity in the classroom. The acquisition of skill diversity facilitates the recognition of multiple ways of thinking and doing. Teachers begin to match children's learning style with teaching style. Third, teachers recognize that language plays a major role in the instructional process. Teachers are sensitive to the effect of language differences on children's responsiveness to teaching and learning. In summary, the issue requires teachers to adopt a flexible teaching style, establish a positive climate for learning, use a variety of approaches to meet students' needs, and have high expectations for students' success.

Meyer (2001) asks if it is possible for someone to have such a severe disability that cultural identity is irrelevant to planning for present and future IEPs as well as for the design of support by and for family and friends. The research on multicultural education provides a foundation for what can be done in providing a culturally relevant education for students with physical disabilities that are severe or multiple. The literature suggests that all stu-

dents are entitled to be taught in recognition of their cultural heritage. All students, regardless of the severity or multiplicity of their disabilities, should be taught within the context of their own cultural heritage, and their families should be welcomed as an integral part of a team that is at once collaborative and caring.

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