Race and Restrictiveness in Special Education: Addressing the Problem We Know Too Well

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In addressing the problem of disproportionate placement of minority students with special education in charter schools, Fierros describes the commentaries of this issue's contributing scholars. The contributions expose a variety of topics to address the needs of inequities experienced by students with special needs. These topics include: the development of appropriate and preventive intervention programs for students experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties; the creation of formative and summative assessment instruments and programs that consider students' racial and ethnic backgrounds; the improvement of teacher education programs to include culturally responsive training; and the development of collaborative approaches to addressing the needs of all students. The author identifies the themes of accountability, assessment, collaboration, and cultural responsive practice as necessary to change the longstanding inequity that has existed for minority students with special needs in public schools and that now exists in charter schools.

Introduction

Numerous problems exist in the way schools currently deliver education to students with special needs. Several challenges remain for public schools wishing to address the learning requirements of students with special needs. Among these challenges is the current model of general and special education which has hindered collaborative efforts between special and general educators (National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], 1995). Despite NASBE (1995) statements like "inclusion is not just a place or a method of delivering instruction, rather it is a philosophy of supporting children in their learning . . . part of the very culture of a school . . . defining how students, teachers, administrators, and others view the potential of children," (1) unequal educational opportunities continue to be the norm for minority students with special needs in public schools (Utley and Obiakor, 2001) and charter schools (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; McLaughlin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996).

Inclusion requires that public schools (charter schools included) must allow all children to learn in the least restrictive environment possible. Yet, charter schools do not admit as many students with special needs as public schools even though the characteristics of charter schools (i.e., more individualized instruction, smaller class size, specialized curricula) would seem to be more conducive than public schools to serving their needs (McLaughlin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996; Sacchetti, 2005). The restriction of students with special needs from charter schools is likely related to the

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need for charter schools to produce positive standardized test outcomes in order to remain open (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005). Thus, the success that charter schools claim can easily be explained by the smaller number of students with special needs they enroll in their classrooms, their smaller teacher to student ratio, and the relative bureaucratic freedoms they enjoy (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; McLaughlin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996).

Background

For more than two decades, the research literature has been filled with the problem of unequal placement of minority students with special needs in public schools (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, 2003; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Finn, 1982; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Oswald & Coutinho, 2001). The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) have conducted surveys of schools and districts across the U.S. to identify placement patterns of students with special needs and have documented the chronic unequal placement of this student population at the national, state, and local levels. For more than two decades, there has been a consistent pattern of disadvantageous placements for racial minority students with special needs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, 2003; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Harry, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Coutinho and Repp (1999) reported that for the 1992-1993 school year, nearly 60 percent of students with special needs (ages three to twenty-one) were taught outside the regular classroom— a large majority of these students were racial minorities. These disproportionate placements have meant that minority special education students' educational experiences are likely to be delivered in unequal and separate classroom environments (Crocket & Kauffman, 1999; Grossman, 1995; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Moreover, as Lipsky and Gartner (1996) point out "the negative consequences of the separate special education system are greater for students from racial minorities" (p. 33).

Examinations of restrictiveness[1] have focused on the general placement patterns in U.S. public schools. What has been largely absent from the research literature is how these patterns are manifested in the increasing number of U.S. charter schools (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; McLauglin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996). In this issue, Algozzine (2005) reports that the number of U.S. charter schools has been increasing steadily since 1991. That was the year when Minnesota passed the first charter school law with California following suit in 1992. With well over 3,000 charter schools in the U.S. and the large number of these schools in California (n > 500), there is increasing concern about how, and if, charter schools address the needs of students with special needs (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; McLaughlin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996; Sacchetti, 2005).

Fierros and Blomberg (2005) describe the "growing concerns over the way special education is implemented in charter schools and the access they grant and provide students with special needs" (p. 1). They show that disproportionate placement and restrictiveness of minority students exists in California's charter schools at rates that are similar to public school patterns. They also show that minorities with special

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1. Restrictiveness describes the degree to which students with disabilities are educated outside of regular classrooms and isolated from their non-disabled peers (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

needs are not as likely to enroll in California's charter schools as their white counterparts. Minority students with special needs are effectively left with little choice but to attend public schools where they are more likely to receive poor educational opportunities. Although Fierros & Blomberg (2005) identify the problems that minority students with special needs face in public and charter schools, they do provide limited solutions for reducing or eliminating the improper placement of these students (Algozzine, 2005; Cartledge, 2005; Grant, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

In this issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal,* several prominent scholars in the field of special education present engaging perspectives on the role of restrictiveness in special education in general, and for minority students with special needs in particular (Algozzine, 2005; Cartledge, 2005; Davis, 2005; Grant, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Obiakor, Beachum, & Harris, 2005; Parette, 2005; Taylor, 2005). Their suggestions for ways to address the improper placement of racial minorities with special needs in schools include developing appropriate and preventive intervention programs for students experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties; creating formative and summative assessment instruments and programs that consider students' racial and ethnic backgrounds; improving teacher education programs to include culturally responsive training; and developing collaborative approaches to address the needs of students with special needs. The purpose of this manuscript is to explore, discuss, and reflect on this issue's contributors' main points and to identify possible solutions for students with special needs wishing to attend charter schools.

Commentary Main Points—What the Commentaries Have Contributed

In his commentary on the issue of segregation of students with disabilities across cultural groups in U.S. charter schools, Parette (2005) provides in-depth descriptions of acculturation, cultural dissonance, and the four-step process for achieving cultural reciprocity (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Warger, 2001) and how these terms have been defined and operationalized by various researchers. *Acculturation,* or the adoption of the behavior patterns of the surrounding culture, leads to the process of assimilating new ideas into existing ways of thinking (Parette, Huer, & Scherer, 2004). *Cultural Dissonance* may result when individuals from different backgrounds have different views about people with disabilities, the goals of education; difficulties the child is presenting, the "stigma" associated with a disability, or how parents should treat children with disabilities. *Cultural Reciprocity* is the two-way process of information sharing and understanding that helps students with special needs and their service providers to develop acceptance of each others' goals.

Parette (2005) examines the assumption that all family members exercise choice and are proactive in educational decision-making about their children. He concludes that "many families may be reluctant to exercise such choice and initiative given strongly held cultural values that education professionals should make decisions for them and their children since educators are deemed to be experts" (p. 18). He notes that cultural reciprocity cannot "flourish in environments where shared values result in homogeneous groups of students and results in reticence on the part of families to participate in the charter school environment" (p. 20).

To remedy the restriction of students with special needs from charter schools and general education classrooms, Cartledge (2005) outlines possible actions, including

effective administrative and classroom procedures, programs of prevention, effective assessments, and culturally competent personnel. She explains that students once placed in special education settings are typically not returned to general or regular education environments. She calls this the *failure to return* phenomenon and points out that, like other researchers, Fierros and Blomberg (2005) have failed to address this reality. She maintains that students with special needs will benefit greatly from placement in the regular classroom (Cartledge, 2005). Yet, she argues that improving the likelihood that students with special needs return to the regular classroom requires systemic intervention and prevention.

Programs of prevention (i.e., early intervention programs) have been shown to have significant positive impact on the lives of the individuals that receive these services. Cartledge (2005) points out that "interventions in the form of special education typically come after an extended period of failure" (p.29), which is often too late for most students. She emphasizes the need for effective assessment of racial minorities' cognitive and behavioral areas suggesting that current assessment practices do not address the needs of all students. She further argues that the teachers' role in the restrictive setting placements exacerbates the situation for minority students with special needs. For example, she writes that "teachers are more likely to refer minority students than white students and that white children are more likely to be referred by their parents" (p. 30).

Cartledge (2005) details how racial minority students are more likely than their white peers to be taught by inexperienced or unskilled teachers. Yet, it is these unseasoned teachers that will likely refer minority children for special education services. So to ameliorate the teachers' lack of training and inappropriate placement practices, Cartledge (2005) promotes the idea that teachers who have limited experience with racial minorities should undergo "cross-cultural" training.

Taylor (2005) describes ways to ensure that the "right" students are being identified and served by appropriate training and professional development. She says that general and special education teachers must participate in professional development that addresses the needs of learners in general and students from diverse ethnic/racial, socio-cultural, and linguistic backgrounds in particular, and maintains that the professional development of school staff (i.e., administrators, teachers, and counselors) must focus on conducting nondiscriminatory and unbiased assessments and referrals, and on avoiding potential sources of bias in the testing and referral process.

Taylor (2005) suggests that, in order for practitioners (i.e., general and special education teachers) to develop culturally and linguistically responsive pre-referrals they will have to understand culture in the broad sense and rethink their responsibilities. She suggests that practitioners must provide timely support to students with academic or behavioral difficulties at the individual, classroom, and school levels. Taylor (2005) also discusses how culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) can meet the needs of students with special needs. Moreover, she argues that culturally responsive practices should be considered in all aspects of school.

In addition to her focus on teacher competence and cultural responsiveness, Taylor (2005) introduces the issue of teacher race. The author points out that more than "40,000 California teachers are working without full preparation or credentialing, almost exclusively in high-minority and low-income schools" (p.35). There is

also, she maintains, a great probability that teachers will continue to be white while the number of African-American teachers shrinks. For example, during the 1999-2000 school year, about 84% of U.S. public school teachers were white and the percentage is growing while the number of minority teachers has gotten smaller (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1994; Topper, 2003).

Jenkins (2005) introduces the Content Mastery Center (CMC) and argues for dually trained teachers (i.e., teachers trained in both general and special education content). The CMC model supports the "majority of students who struggle to achieve in the general classroom" (p.47). It differs from the traditional resource room model in that students receive all their instruction from the general education teacher thus removing the negative stigma associated with traditional special education pullout programs. Students (with and without special needs) only go to the CMC classroom when additional support is needed as decided by the regular education teacher and the student. The success of the model depends on collaboration between CMC staff and classroom teachers. Jenkins (2005) also suggests that dually trained teachers would be more effective than regular teachers at meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. For example, she suggests that dually trained teachers would be less likely than regular teachers to make erroneous student referrals.

Obiakor, Beachum, and Harris (2005) note that charter schools are not immune from segregationist practices existent in public schools. The authors encourage researchers to continually analyze the effectiveness of educational reform efforts like the charter school movement as it may be subject to the "bandwagon effect," in which schools begin systemic change without regard for unintended negative consequences. They note that general and special educators should avoid "reinventing the same broken wheel" and both "must help all learners to optimize their capabilities" (p. 54). They argue that laws which are intended to protect students with special needs have not been effective in curtailing the stratification of public and charter schools along racial and socio-economic lines.

As a way to show the potential that parents and children see in charter schools, Davis (2005) looked at several charter schools' mission statements. Despite the attractive nature of charter schools she suggests that charter schools' *recruitment practices* and *knowledge of special education* need to be closely scrutinized during the charter application process so that only schools that are prepared to meet the needs of students with special needs will be granted charters and be allowed to open. She argues that in order to obtain the school charter, the prospective school's administrators and instructors need to demonstrate how they will accommodate students with special needs when their school's doors open.

If the prospective charter school staff cannot accommodate those students with special needs by themselves, then Davis (2005) suggests a system of collaborative partnerships between existing charter schools and researchers and details practices that charter school administrators can follow to reduce disproportionality in schools. These practices would require charter schools to 1) have access to a special education infrastructure, 2) build a community of practice to share effective research-based strategies, problem-solving solutions for common challenges, and access qualified special needs teachers, 3) develop collaborative relationships with

families, 4) provide professional development concerning disproportionality, 5) adopt a culturally responsive (i.e., Gay, 2002) pre-referral intervention, and 6) continue monitoring the enrollment and placement patterns of students with disabilities in charter schools.

Algozzine (2005) describes the development of charter schools in the U.S. and explains the likely reasons for their increasing numbers (i.e., to realize an educational vision, to gain autonomy, and to serve a special population). He notes that parents (of students with and without special needs) and teachers choose charter schools for their small school size and relative safety.

He reminds us that the overrepresentation of minorities with special needs has existed in the United States for more than twenty years (Artiles, 2003; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2004). He shares the principles from a 1982 National Research Council (NRC) report on overrepresentation of minorities with special needs and notes that "these important responsibilities, directions, and expected actions have been largely ignored" (p.68). Finally he argues that researchers must not only point out the problem of disproportionate placement but also ask the question, "What are the consequences of placements in special education?"

COMMON THEMES

Utley and Obiakor (2001) make the case that "equal educational opportunities for students of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds seem to be deferred dreams" (p. 3). In order to realize these deferred dreams and meet the needs of students experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties, Jenkins and Sileo (1994) argue that students' context must be at the forefront of any school-reform effort. They state that; "We must strive for curricular relevance and individualized instruction for students with disabilities and those who are at risk for school failure due to the related effects of environmental variables" (Jenkins & Sileo, 1994, p. 84). Moreover, we must continue to focus on charter schools effective denial of access to students with special needs and their limited enrollment of students of color (Grant, 2005).

In reflecting upon the contributors' main points, we discovered common themes across this issue's articles that might lead us to curricular relevance and individualized instruction for minority students with special needs in public charter schools. The themes, presented alphabetically, are accountability, assessment, collaboration, and culturally responsive practice.

Accountability

When we think about accountability, it is almost impossible to think of anything other than standardized tests given the assessment environment that exists in our schools today (Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, & Karvonen, 2003). However, the accountability that these commentaries bring to light is not limited to that suggested by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's annual yearly progress (AYP) or standardized test results. Rather this accountability deals with the intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in that it is a systemic accountability. As McLaughlin, Henderson, and Ullah (1996) note, "Diversity in the provision of special education across schools, misunderstandings about special education funding policies and practices, and difficulties with students with behavior disorders are all

evident in today's schools" (p. 10). For years, teachers, schools, and school districts have been shortchanging minority students with special needs (Utley & Obiakor, 2001). Now that these problems (i.e., disproportionality and restrictiveness) are manifesting themselves in charter schools as well, it is imperative that charter school administrators and teachers be accountable to all students with special needs who wish to attend charter schools.

There are numerous ideas about what can be done to reduce disproportionate restrictiveness for racial minorities in charter schools. On the one hand, Cartledge (2005) suggests that one blanket system for all students reduces disproportionate restrictiveness for racial minorities by mandating that the initial placement for all students should be in the least restrictive placement possible (p. 28). On the other hand, Parette's (2005) notion on cultural reciprocity requires a more precise distribution of services to meet the specific needs of students with special needs and their differing ethnic and cultural needs. However, if either of these approaches is going to work, there will have to be effective application of special education laws (Obiakor, Beachum, & Harris, 2005) already in existence. In short, the educational system needs more "teeth" (Obiakor, Beachum, & Harris, 2005) in the enforcement of its existing laws with consequences for administrators, teachers, and educators who do not follow those laws. Moreover, Davis's (2005) plan to only grant charters to schools that are prepared to meet the needs of students with special needs would be a great improvement to current practice.

Assessment

As the articles in this issue point out, the disproportionate restrictiveness of minority students with special needs in regular public schools and charter schools often begins with the formal assessments that are used in the placement of students. Cartledge (2005) supports preventative programs with appropriate assessments, and Taylor (2005) argues for "correctly assessing" students for placement in special education. These formal assessments are determined by some combination of federal law (i.e., IDEA), state requirements, and district- and school-level practice. Yet, seldom do existing formal assessments address the cultural diversity in today's schools (Artiles, 2003; Delpit, 1994; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Utley & Obiakor, 2001). For example, Thurlow, Nelson, Teelucksingh, and Draper (2001) point out that "there continues to be an ongoing concern among educators about finding an appropriate and unbiased measure to administer to individuals from varying backgrounds" (p. 155). However, Davis's (2005) holistic assessment approach that incorporates research-based strategies and culturally responsive pre-referral interventions may be effective in changing current assessment practices.

Collaboration

Collaboration between students with special needs, parents, special and general education teachers, administrators, and researchers is essential if any broad-based change will come to students with special needs in charter schools. Based on the community of practice model (Lave & Wenger, 1991), several contributors (e.g., Davis, Jenkins, Taylor, this issue) each argue for collaborative partnerships that ensure that a range of expertise and strengths will be available to improve the placements of students with special needs. Such collaborations, in turn, help to engage diverse students'

strengths and improve their opportunities to learn (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Kornhaber, Fierros, & Veenema, 2004; Fierros, 2004). These collaborations also make it possible for all parties to develop professionalism through open and informed discussions (Parette, 2005). In order to best determine the most appropriate placement for students in charter schools, it is important to examine the problem of improper placement of students with special needs from the perspective of students and parents, teachers, administrators, and researchers (Davis, 2005). By bringing the different perspectives together, it is more likely that a collaborative solution (Davis, 2005; Fierros & Foley, in press; Giangrego, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Nevin, Harris, & Correa, 2001) can be developed to serve the needs of students with special needs in charter schools. Moreover, participants must focus on helping all learners to optimize their capabilities (Obiakor, Beachum, & Harris , 2005).

Culturally Responsive Practice

The final theme identified in the commentaries was culturally responsive practice.[2] Obiakor & Utley (2001) argue, "Factors such as urban education, poverty, race, or membership in a particular culture demand new forms of teacher preparation" (p. 193). However, changing teacher preparation programs alone is not enough to address the challenges that minority students with special needs face. Several contributors (e.g., Davis, Parette, Taylor, this issue) suggest that these factors also demand changes in the education system as a whole.

We recommend that parents, special and general education teachers, administrators, and researchers must identity the values and beliefs that underlie priorities, goals, and visions for the child. Implementing cultural reciprocity (Parette, 2005) is one example of a culturally responsive practice that requires service providers to identify their own interpretation of a student's difficulties and the student's context in the recommendation of service (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Warger, 2001). "General and special educators must interrogate myths, assumptions, and stereotypes. They must assume responsibility for students' school success . . . the cultural deprivation hypothesis must finally be laid to rest" (Brantlinger, & Roy-Cambell, 2001, p.42). Awareness of one's own cultural beliefs is an essential first step in addressing the needs of students with special needs in charter schools. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)'s Common Core of Knowledge and Skills in Multicultural Education and Special Education" (Obiakor & Utley, 2001, pp. 198–199) could be used as an effective second step into ways of achieving cultural responsiveness.

SUMMARY

Accountability, assessment, collaboration, and culturally responsive practice are not the only ingredients for helping to increase the educational choices for minority students with special needs who wish to attend charter schools. What needs to be added to the mixture is a change in the mindsets of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers (i.e., those involved in the process of placing individuals in schools) so that all educators "teach natural groups of neighbors and peers relentlessly in normal environments guided by beliefs *and actions* illustrating that all children [regardless of race and status] can learn" (Algozzine, 2005, p. 68). As Grant (2005) succinctly states, "It is now clear that we must educate **all** learners" (p. 8).

2. See Gay 2002, Obiakor& Utley, 2001; and Villegas & Lucas, 2002 for a more extensive examination of cultural responsiveness practice.

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