

Strategies that are Respectful of Gender, Cultural, and Linguistic Differences

Module 13

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Mrs. Newsome has a problem. In the span of a week, her class added three new students. One was a boy of Native American origin with a reading disability. Another was a quiet African-American girl with an internalized emotional disorder and a significant social skills deficiency. The third was a first-generation Puerto Rican boy recently identified as OHI. Although Mrs. Newsome had very little opportunity to prepare for their arrival, thanks to the help of her colleagues and recent continuing-education courses in gender and multicultural concerns, she was well prepared to accommodate instruction and materials to meet the needs of her new students.

Description of the Procedure

Many teachers feel unprepared to teach culturally and ethnically diverse students and, as a result, many of these students are over represented in special education. Some educators believe the needs of these students would be better served in a special education environment. To avoid this trap, it is necessary for teachers to base instruction upon a multicultural perspective. Learning environments developed to facilitate and encourage the diverse backgrounds of students will inevitably lead to improved academic performance, a decrease in inappropriate behavioral responses, and fewer referrals.

To establish a culturally aware learning environment, teachers can begin the school year with a lesson plan on childhood that the students can share with each other. Ask the students to share information on personal characteristics including learning, physical, and emotional challenges they may have experienced. Inquire about home backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, and other aspects that may be unique to that student and his or her family. Make lessons accessible and meaningful to all students by making connections to their cultural commonalities and uniqueness. Applying learned knowledge and concepts to their personal lives encourages students to participate in classroom activities, discussions, and homework assignments. Ultimately, the emphasis on cultural universals—such as food, shelter, clothing, transportation, communication, family, religion, work, recreation, and money—creates a heterogeneous classroom supportive to natural acculturation and cultural acceptance (Alleman, Knighton, & Brophy, 2007).

Cultural background and ethnicity can also be an obstacle for students trying to abide by the rules and expectations of the “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968). This hidden curriculum contains the unspoken rules, norms, attitudes, and social values that influence behaviors differently dependent upon the situational context with the classroom and throughout the school. The differences in the cultural values, behaviors, traditions, and religious beliefs of culturally and linguistically diverse students can interfere significantly with integration at school. Teachers

need to be aware that cultural diversity is a comprehensive web that connects people and society. Nuances and idioms of language can also be obstructive. Students who speak a primary language other than English may have trouble due to difficulties translating slang and metaphorical concepts in casual conversation, leading to misunderstandings and alienation. Teachers need to be aware of how linguistic diversity obstructs access to the hidden curriculum and how to develop methods to teach aspects of the hidden curriculum to culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students who are experiencing difficulties with social integration (Lee, 2010).

Effective instruction of English language learners with special needs can pose a significant challenge for educators. The behaviors of these students are influenced by different cultural and sociolinguistic backgrounds, adjustment to new and often unfamiliar cultural norms, the presence of a disability, or any combination of these factors. To meet the needs of English language learners with disabilities, differentiation and adaptation of lessons and materials, along with modifications to instruction, are required on a regular basis in a variety of environmental settings. Before any changes can be made, teachers need to be aware of the family structure and other cultural or familial variables, such as interpersonal relationships, gender responsibilities, family values, disciplinary procedures, traditions, significant historical events, attitudes toward punctuality, obligations to work and school, personal space, religion, and health-related concerns. Teachers should adapt instruction and materials to include: (1) content related to student's cultural background and experiences, (2) the continual reinforcement of content knowledge across subject areas, (3) integrating cognitive and academic goals, (4) maintaining high-expectations while valuing cultural diversity, (5) providing active learning and inquiry-based tasks. When adapting lessons and materials, teachers need to be mindful of the function of language, acculturation, conceptual knowledge, thinking abilities, cultural values and norms, and teaching styles (Hoover & Patton, 2005).

To check for cultural appropriateness, teachers need to ask themselves the following questions:

1. Are the lessons and materials culturally appropriate?
 - Are the skills necessary for success directly related to the objectives?
 - Based on the student's cultural information, is any of the content misleading or unfamiliar?
 - Are the student's culture and heritage represented in the lessons and materials?
2. Is the language used in lessons and materials appropriate?
 - Is any language used unfamiliar to the learner?
 - Do the lessons and materials rely too heavily upon receptive and/or expressive English language ability?
3. Is the content appropriate?
 - Does the student possess the prerequisite skills?
 - Does the student possess the appropriate reading level to understand questions or direction?
 - Can the student work at a rapid pace?
 - Does the student understand the required concepts and tasks?
 - Does the student possess the prerequisite life experiences?
 - Does the student possess the prerequisite language skills? (Hoover & Patton, 2005).

Teachers must be able to apply cultural, ethnic, gender, and diverse language factors to helping students access a fair and appropriate education. This includes identifying the problem, defining the cultural or gender-related influences, consulting others knowledgeable with the culture or gender issues, creating a plan to teach hidden curriculum aspects, providing time for the student to practice acquired skills and strategies, generalizing these strategies in various settings, then monitoring and evaluating the student's progress. Students with social skills deficits may have difficulty distinguishing between different contexts so teachers may use video modeling to teach socially appropriate behaviors, or scripting to understand the cause-and-effect relationship to behavioral responses across differing contexts. In order to act appropriately in specific contexts, students need to acquire the ability to determine what the teacher desires and expects, who are the friendly and reliable students, how to attract and maintain the attention of teachers and peers, and what behaviors to avoid getting into trouble with teachers or rejected by peers (Lee, 2010).

To teach diverse students with disabilities to access the hidden curriculum, teachers can use the Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies, Simulation (SOCCSS) strategy by following this six step process:

1. Situation: The teacher identifies the situation in which the problem occurs by asking the student who, what, when, where, and why questions.
2. Options: The teacher and student discuss alternative behavioral responses to the problem situation.
3. Consequences: The teacher and student discuss the positive and negative consequences for each option.
4. Choices: The student selects the best option depending upon the situation and necessity.
5. Strategies: The teacher and student devise a plan for implementing the option that is most comfortable to the student.
6. Simulation: Under the teacher's supervision, the student practices the plan until the student is able to solve his or her social problems in a more acceptable manner (Lee, 2010).

Discussion of Supporting Principle, Available Research, or Theory that Explains why the Procedure Works

Students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are on the rise by an overall increase of 22% since 1972. Most of this increase comes from children with a Hispanic background (from 6% of students in 1972 to 20%) but students in African-American families and of mixed ethnic origin have made significant increases as well. School-aged children who speak a different language at home have also increased from 3.8 million in 1979 to 10.6 million in 2005 (an increase from 9% of students to 20%). This increase comes mostly from Spanish-speaking households but other languages (such as French, German, Portuguese, and Asian/Pacific-Islander) have increased as well. Confounding the problem includes diversity within ethnic groups, such as "Hispanic" students of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American, or South American origin; all of which are considered culturally distinct. The same can be said for Asian-American students (Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, etc.) and Native-Americans who represent over 500 distinct cultures (Miller, 2009).

In light of these statistics, it is especially important for instructors of diverse students with disabilities to be versed in the multicultural education practices necessary to best serve these special students. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education specifically states that teachers should be prepared to meet the needs of a “diverse community of students . . . who are at different developmental stages, have different learning styles, and come from diverse backgrounds” (NCATE, 2002, p. 4). The National Association for the Education of Young Children affirm their commitment to cultural diversity by stating “all children means all: children with developmental delays or disabilities, children whose families are culturally and linguistically diverse” (NAEYC, 2001, p. 12). To teach these students not only requires an understanding of the differences and similarities between these distinct cultures and languages, but teachers must also exhibit cultural sensitivity toward these diverse students. This involves not only teachers learning about these cultures and languages but also familiarizing themselves with their students and families in order to build stronger relationships, improve understanding, and eliminate stereotyping (Miller, 2009).

The extent of gender-based discrepancy in special education is also a significant concern, ranging from 1.5:1 boys to girls to 3.5:1 boys to girls. This discrepancy results in the concern that some female students are being denied special education services due to gender bias. Despite the female students’ physical maturity occurring earlier than males, females are typically not referred for services until they are older than boys at the time of identification. When they do receive services, they are more likely to be placed in more restrictive environments. The special education “gender gap” is most evident in the national gender discrepancy rates for services, ranging from a 1.33:1 overrepresentation of males with an intellectual disability to 3.43:1 overrepresentation of males with an emotional disability. Since the typical female student’s strengths and resources are more prevalent than her male counterparts at the same age, in order for the female student to be identified she must demonstrate symptoms of a disability to a greater degree than her male peers. This may be due in part to a prevailing reluctance to identify girls until their strengths and resources are notably impaired (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005).

There also is the prevailing practice among some teachers to treat male students differently than female students, although these differences may not be based solely upon gender, nor will differing treatment result in either gender receiving the bulk of teacher attention. Male students disproportionately attend and interact more often with male teachers than their female peers. However, findings show there is considerable disparity in attention and participation between the two genders within female-taught classes; however, female teachers frequently reprimand their male students more often than their female students. Male teachers, on the other hand, reprimand students of both genders equally. These reprimands also tend to have a gender bias: males are more likely to be reprimanded for behavioral misconduct and rules infractions while female students are more often cited for their poor academic and intellectual performances. Since rule-breaking and misbehavior are perceived by teachers as the more troublesome concerns, male students are viewed less favorably than their female peers. In light of this perception, teachers may pay greater attention to their male students, more as a disciplinary precaution than an instructional practice, resulting in more frequent interaction, praise, and reprimands from teachers (Jones & Dindia, 2004).

Responding to Diversity

As children grow they become aware of their uniqueness. By appealing to “cultural universals” teachers can transform classrooms with diverse learners into holistic learning communities. As children understand commonalities among the cultural backgrounds of their peers, they also discover the needs, behaviors, and motives that were once mysterious to them are very much like their own. Students from diverse backgrounds begin to make connections that promote unity and cooperation. Through modeling and the explanation of key attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, the teacher provides lesson content that is both meaningful and relevant. Classroom discussions, instructional activities, and follow-up assignments are authentic and applicable to their personal growth. Students build networks of connected information that help them formulate big ideas. Focusing on big ideas provides struggling learners and students with disabilities easier access to lesson content they can then apply to their lives outside of school. Making cross-cultural connections within lesson content and beyond the classroom promote cultural tolerance and empathy about diversity which, in turn, counteracts the predilection of the young mind toward exceptionalism and chauvinistic tendencies (Alleman, 2007).

It’s the teacher’s obligation to provide a supportive environment for both diverse students with disabilities as well as their families. As a result of over-representation in special education, minority adolescents with disabilities often experience more difficult transitions to middle and high school than their non-minority peers. Transition practices are, for the most part, oriented toward the values of “typical” mainstream students. Families of minority students with a disability may experience unnecessary barriers to adequate services due in part to deliberate or unintentional discrimination, prejudices, stereotyping, and insensitivity of individuals involved in the process. Enduring such obstacles to needed services can damage the integrity of the collaborative relationship between parents and educational professionals; damage that cultivates a sense of helplessness and hopelessness which can hinder the self-determination of these vulnerable students. Despite this potential setback, minority families have strong connections to extended family and their community. These familial resources can provide an invaluable foundation for the support and success of minority students in need. (Geenen, Powers, Vasquez, & Bersani, 2003).

Special education for culturally diverse students with disabilities is considered appropriate and effective when:

- placement is in the least restrictive environment,
- services are based on instruction and instruction is closely connected to the legal mandates for free and appropriate education,
- culturally diverse students are not misidentified,
- culturally diverse students are not assessed discriminately,
- the due process rights of culturally diverse students and their parents are protected,
- culturally diverse students and their parents are treated as equals,
- confidentiality is maintained,
- services are based on the needs of the student, collaboration of team members, and culturally responsive strategies,
- accountability does not discriminate against culturally diverse students, and

- methods and practices are not influenced by prejudice, misconceptions, or indifference to the student's cultural background and heritage (Obiakor, 2007).

Cultural competence allows teachers to explore and define relationships with parents of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Once this understanding is achieved, teachers can accept differing perceptions and boundaries without the desire to mainstream the parents. Reciprocity builds upon respect by recognizing that the interaction of every individual is equally powerful. Reciprocity acknowledges an equal exchange of information toward achieving a common goal: namely, the academic success of the student. This relationship as equals provides the context for responsiveness by overcoming cultural differences to discuss problems and devise solutions. Responsiveness requires the trust and openness that only respect and reciprocity can provide; it is neither rushed nor taken for granted (Barrera & Corso, 2002).

There are special considerations for collaborating with families of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Parents may have varying views on disabilities and special education. They may also react to their child's condition in differing ways. On the other hand, teachers and other educational professionals may discount or ignore the cultural implications and impact of the disability upon the family, which could contribute to dissonance between family values and the educational system (Harry, 2002). To avoid misunderstandings and frustrations, teachers must consider:

1. accepting that the family desires the academic improvement of their child as much as the educator,
2. providing a variety of materials (written, oral, visual) for easy learning and access to the curriculum,
3. allowing the parents to learn the skills and activities their child is learning,
4. offering the means and opportunities for family members to become involved in instruction,
5. sponsoring workshops that include role-playing and rehearsing scenarios that emphasize collaboration between the parents and school personnel,
6. involving members from the community who also speak the same language or are of the same cultural origin to participate in school-related activities,
7. providing informal meetings to exchange experiences and advice, and
8. inviting family members to share their backgrounds and experiences with other students and families (Vaughn & Bos, 2009).

Culture is a pervasive and dynamic influence upon perceptions of and interactions with others based upon the traditions, beliefs, behaviors, and language unique to specific cultures. Knowing how to respond and interact within the context of a specific cultural framework requires knowledge of specific cultural core values. An understanding and respect for the intricacies and importance of these core values as expressions of self and community will provide the foundation for strong and lasting connections. This cultural competence provides teachers with the ability to utilize connections within specific cultural frameworks to facilitate communication and skill acquisition across cultures. Building and maintaining respectful, reciprocal, and responsive relationships is the true measure for achieving a culturally and linguistically receptive educational environment. It is this mutual acceptance of cultural differences and a shared desire to build connections and explore solutions based upon balanced

interaction, cultural commonalities, and the integration of diverse perspectives that will render lasting results (Barrera & Corso, 2002).

To provide appropriate education for all students—regardless of cultural background, ethnicity, or gender—educators need to:

- Know each student,
- When in doubt, learn the facts about each student,
- Challenge the thinking of each student,
- Use staff and resources to provide assistance to each student,
- Develop the self-concept of each student,
- Utilize differing instructional techniques, as appropriate,
- Base the most appropriate choices upon new knowledge for each student, and
- Continue to learn how to help each student to progress and succeed (Obiakor, 2007).

Guidelines for Implementation

Important placement considerations for general and special educators include:

- Race and cultural background matter as part of the placement process.
- Disability determination must be based solely on a student's need, not race and culture.
- Never misconstrue a language difference as a lack of intelligence.
- Cultural understanding and acceptance is an important component of the placement process.
- The least restrictive environment is most often the best environment.
- Differences are not deficits.
- Respect the student's and family's due-process rights at all times.
- Appropriate inclusion diminishes biased exclusion of students in classroom activities.
- The values of all students—regardless of cultural background, ethnicity, or gender—must be respected (Obiakor, 2007).

General suggestions for educators to provide appropriate services for students with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds include:

- be as knowledgeable as possible about the student's cultural background and heritage,
- avoid generalizations of the student's cultural background and heritage,
- maintain and incorporate the student's cultural perspective in instruction and implementation of services as much as possible, and
- when a communication/language barrier is too great for the educator to provide effective instruction, employ the services of a trained interpreter/translator (Langdon, 2009).

Recommendations for instructing diverse students from specific cultural backgrounds:

African-American:

- Use cooperative learning strategies
- Use mnemonic devices
- Use interactive activities

- Use learning activities that combine movement, song, and music (Miller, 2009)

Asian-Pacific:

- Establish positive relationships with parents
- Provide bilingual educational activities
- Establish a culturally friendly learning environment
- Provide means to reduce anxiety as a result of high-achievement and expectations
- Provide positive cross-cultural examples and role models
- Use literature depicting a positive Asian perspective
- Offer opportunities for student interaction and collaborative learning (Pang, 1995)

Hispanic:

- Emphasize functional communication
- Implement small-group activities organized around student collaboration within “learning centers”
- Limit the use of worksheets
- Use thematic units and lessons based on skill and content instruction
- Provide for frequent student interaction and cooperative learning
- Use primarily English in upper grades and either English or Spanish in lower grades
- Conduct frequent comprehension checks (Garcia, 1995)

American-Indian:

- Integrate Native American culture and heritage into the curriculum
- Avoid marginalizing or disparaging Native Americans in American history instruction
- Deemphasize competition
- Deemphasize lecturing
- Use sensory stimulating or centric games and activities
- Utilize peer learning activities
- Recognize the diversity of Native American culture and experiences (Miller, 2009)

Puerto Rican:

- Make connections to the community
- Encourage strong parental involvement with the school
- Maintain high expectations
- Provide positive Latino examples and role models
- Offer bilingual and bicultural programs
- Recognize Latino diversity and values
- Organize the curriculum around a student-experience approach
- Promote the student’s native and second language with equal emphasis (Nieto, 1995)

Cautions Regarding Diversity

Misrepresentation, over-representation, and under-representation of gender, linguistic, and culturally diverse students in special education is a sensitive and oftentimes controversial topic. In spite of research to the contrary, there is some resistance in the field of special education to

break from a deficit-normative approach to evaluation and determination of services based upon inferences about the desirability and undesirability of biological, anatomical, intellectual, physiological, psychological, and sociological traits of diverse students with disabilities. The use of deficit-based and categorical portrayals of disability with little or no regard for the implications to the students acknowledges this resistance. Furthermore, the practice of cultural assimilation toward diverse students with disabilities enforces normative or “typical” approaches upon students whose cultural and ethnic differences may conflict with the implementation of interventions or services (Johnson & McIntosh, 2008).

Many teachers are ill-prepared to teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Compounding the problem is that 86% of special educators are Caucasian ; whereas, 32% of students receiving special education services are culturally and linguistically diverse (Correa, Hudson, & Hayes, 2004). However, preparing these teachers for students with gender, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity is only part of the solution. Incorporating the cultural perspectives and understandings of the disability toward defining and treating the disability is just as critical. Until “normal” or “typical” behavior is replaced by a more multicultural metric for measuring progress, many diverse students with disabilities will likely be misrepresented and inadequately served in special education (Johnson & McIntosh, 2008).

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