A Comprehensive Approach to Identifying and Addressing Issues of Disproportionate Representation

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ABSTRACT

Reasons for the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education are multifaceted and shaped by the cultural experiences of students and professionals. With this perspective in mind, this article presents a comprehensive approach to identifying and addressing issues of disproportionality. Specifically, a list of questions that can be used to examine the extent to which issues and factors of disproportionality exist in schools is presented as well as strategies to address the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Ours nation’s schools are serving a growing number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Obiakor & Utley, 1997). Data on the educational performance of these students have indicated that they are achieving below their potential (Cartledge, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1998) and that a disproportionate number of them are inappropriately referred to, and placed in, special education (Artiles, 1998; Yates, 1998).

Yates (1998) defined disproportionate representation as the presence of students from a specific group in an educational program being higher or lower than one would expect based on their representation in the general population of students. Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh (1999) defined disproportionate representation as “the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education disability category” (p. 198) and proposed that the degree to which it exists can be calculated as an odds ratio by using the following formula (see Oswald and Coutinho, 2001, for additional information regarding the odds ratio formula):

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\text{Odds Ratio} = \frac{\text{no. of students of X ethnicity in Y disability category or placement}}{\text{no. of students of X ethnicity in the student population}} \times \frac{\text{no. of students of all other ethnicities in Y disability category or placement}}{\text{no. of students of X ethnicity in the student population}}
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Artiles and Zamora-Duran (1997) also noted that disproportionality includes both the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in terms of educational classification and placement; access to programs, services, resources, curriculum, instruction; and classroom management techniques.

Data from the Office of Civil Rights have indicated that students from various racial and ethnic groups are differentially affected by issues of disproportionality (Yates, 1998). These data reveal that African American students, particularly males, are overrepresented in terms of their identification in three special education disability categories: learning disabilities, mental retardation, and serious emotional disturbance (Cartledge, 1999; Oswald et al., 1999). For Hispanic
students, the data show that they are underrepresented in the
categories of mental retardation and serious emotional distur-
ance and slightly overrepresented in the category of learning
disabilities. The data also indicate that Asian American and
European American students tend to be underrepresented in
terms of their identification in all three categories. Whereas
Hispanic, American Indian, and African American students
are underrepresented in terms of their placement in programs
for students who are identified as gifted and talented, Asian
American and European American students are overrepre-
sented in these programs (Ford, 1998; Patton, 1997). Although
issues of disproportionate representation have focused on the
placement and delivery of services to students with mild disabil-
dies, concerns about the overrepresentation of African
American and Hispanic students in the category of students
with moderate and severe disabilities also have been noted
(Harry, Grenot-Scheyer, et al., 1995).

Overrepresentation and underrepresentation can adversely
affect students and their school performance. The overrepre-
sentation of students from culturally and linguistically di-
verse backgrounds in special education has raised concerns
about these students’ being placed on a separate and unequal
track that denies them access to the general education cur-
riculum (Patton, 1998), a practice that frequently has a nega-
tive effect on their academic performance, self-esteem,
classroom behavior and interactions, educational and career
goals, and motivation (Nieto, 1996). Similarly, the underrep-
resentation of students can also have a negative impact on
students’ educational outcomes by denying them access to
services, programs, and resources designed to meet their
unique educational needs (Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000).

A variety of educational, sociocultural, socioeconomic,
and sociopolitical factors contribute to the disproportional
representation and treatment of students from culturally and
linguistically diverse backgrounds (Cartledge, 1999; Cou-
tinho & Oswald, 1998; Oswald et al., 1999; Patton & Town-
send, 1999). Although a high rate of poverty among these
students contributes to their disproportional placement in
educational programs, poverty alone does not account for this
(U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Yeargin-Allsopp, Drews,
Decoufle, & Murphy, 1995). For example, Oswald et al.
(1999) found that African American students who attended
schools in the wealthiest communities were more likely to be
identified as being emotionally disturbed than African Ameri-
can students residing in poor communities. Similarly, U.S.
Department of Education data have revealed that school dis-
tricts with similar rates of students living in poverty show a
significant variation in terms of their special education place-
ment rates, which appear to be related to race or ethnicity
(Hartocollis, 1998). In addition, Coutinho, Oswald, and Best
(2002) found that although poverty appears to increase the
likelihood that African American and Hispanic students will
be identified as having a learning disability, living in poverty
tends to decrease the learning disability classification rates
for White and American Indian students.

The limited number of professionals from diverse back-
grounds and the different cultural and linguistic experiences
of professionals and students contribute to the disproportion-
ate representation of students from culturally and linguisti-
cally diverse backgrounds (Artiles, Trent, Hoffman-Kipp,
& Lopez-Torres, 2000; Voltz, 1998). Professionals’ lack of
training on relevant issues also leads to inappropriate place-
dment decisions and recommendations (Gallegos & McCarty,
2000).

Institutional racism is an often overlooked factor that
leads to the disproportionate representation of students of
color. Research indicates that norm-referenced standardized
tests are culturally and socially biased and do not give
accurate measures of some students’ abilities and potential,
contributing to a number of students from culturally and lin-
guistically diverse backgrounds being misclassified as having
some type of disability (Grossman, 1995; Rueda, 1997).
Vague definitions of socially constructed disability categories
often result in culturally and linguistically based behaviors
being misinterpreted by predominately White, middle class
professionals as signs of the existence of a disability (Salend,
2001). Inequitable funding of schools limits access to high
quality prereferral and ancillary services that have been suc-
cessful in reducing the extent to which students are referred
for special education services (Colon, 1998; Ochoa, Robles-
Pina, Garcia, & Breuning, 1999). In addition, because of
severe disparities in school funding, students from culturally
and linguistically diverse backgrounds are more likely than
their White counterparts to attend schools that do not have
the resources to provide them with access to fully licensed pro-
essionals; preschool, related, supportive, and transitional
services; extracurricular activities; appropriate class sizes;
testing accommodations; and state-of-the-art physical facili-
ties and instructional and assistive technology (Brown, 2000;
Kemp & Parette, 2000; Kozol, 1991; Lewin, 2000). Profes-
sional perspectives and practices that do not recognize the
importance of family involvement and the failure of school
districts to collect data to identify, track, and examine dispro-
portionality also increase the likelihood that the dispropor-
tionate representation of students of color will occur (Ford,
Obiakor, & Patton, 1995; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin 1995;
Townsend, 2000).

Many of these factors interact to produce policies, prac-
tices, attitudes, and behaviors that result in disparate treat-
ment for, and disparate impact on, students from culturally
and linguistically diverse backgrounds, which leads to the
disproportionate representation of students of color. Dispar-
ate treatment refers to treating students differently because
of their characteristics and membership in a certain popula-
tion such as racial and linguistic groups. Disparate impact
refers to similar treatment having different effects on students
from different groups (Smaile, 1998).

In light of the prevalence of disproportionate representa-
tion and its deleterious effects on students, this article pro-
vides educators with guidelines for examining and addressing
issues related to the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These guidelines can be used to develop, review, and revise policies and practices for referring, evaluating, identifying, placing, and serving students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and they can also be employed to examine and improve educational services for all students.

**Maintain a Database to Examine Issues Related to Disproportionate Representation**

As mandated in the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school districts can examine, track, and address the disproportional representation of specific groups of students by creating a database that allows them to determine if problems with overrepresentation and underrepresentation exist, as well as the nature of these problems. Such a database would also allow school districts and state education departments (SEDs) to analyze issues related to these problems and provide a basis for helping school districts and SEDs identify policies and practices that appear to be effective as well as those in need of revision (Salend, 2001). The database of students referred for special education services could provide the school district and SED with information related to the prereferral, referral, identification, placement, instructional, and service delivery processes by including the following:

1. a confidential code to identify the student referred;
2. demographic information relating to the student referred (e.g., date of birth, gender, race, ethnicity, language background, socioeconomic status, grade, school);
3. the title(s) of the individual(s) making the referral and the reason(s) for the referral;
4. the types, duration, and outcomes of the prereferral strategies and supportive services implemented as well as the titles of the individuals involved in the prereferral process;
5. the outcome of the referral, including the assessment instruments and procedures employed, classification and placement, the reasons for the placement, and the titles of the individuals involved in the placement;
6. the extent to which the student participates in the general education program and the reasons for limiting the student’s participation;
7. the testing modifications and related and transitional services the student receives;
8. the results of subsequent reevaluations, including changes in classification, placement, and services provided as well as the individuals involved in the process; and
9. the nature of students’ behaviors and the disciplinary actions taken by the school district (Lockwood, 1998; Townsend, 2000).

The database and Oswald et al.’s (1999) odds ratio formula can provide school districts with the information necessary to assess the extent to which variables such as race, gender, and linguistic background play a role in determining students’ eligibility for special education and their placement in the least restrictive environment. For example, current data on placements and ethnicity reveal that a differential diagnosis by race often results in a disproportionate number of African American students being placed in more restrictive environments and denied access to general education classrooms (Oswald et al., 1999; Singh, Ellis, Oswald, Wechsler, & Curtis, 1997). In addition to addressing various dimensions of overrepresentation, such a database could be used to identify and examine patterns of underrepresentation (Gersten & Woodward, 1994).

**Offer Equal Access to Quality Prereferral and Ancillary Services**

Because prereferral systems allow schools to intervene prior to the placement of students in special education (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999), providing equal access to high quality prereferral and ancillary services can decrease the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Colon, 1998; Ochoa, Robles-Pina, Garcia, & Breuning, 1999). Prereferral services help teachers gather information about students and devise and implement interventions to address students’ needs prior to referral for special education services. Prereferral interventions are individually determined based on students’ strengths and needs; students’ educational, social, and medical histories; students’ experiential, cultural, and language backgrounds; families’ and teachers’ perspectives and concerns; and learning environments’ unique dimensions and cultural contexts (Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Perez-Selles, 2000). Effective prereferral interventions with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds include embedding their culture and language into the curriculum, establishing collaborative school and community relationships, employing effective and culturally relevant instructional and classroom management practices, and involving families in school and classroom activities (Baca & De Valenzuela, 1998; McCarty, 1998). The effectiveness of these interventions are then assessed prior to formally evaluating students’ for placement in special education.
REMEDIATE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Educators can revise their assessment practices to prevent students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from being overrepresented in special education (Ochoa, Rivera, & Powell, 1997; Voltz, 1998). Revisions to assessment practices include (a) using alternatives to standardized testing; (b) distinguishing cultural, linguistic, dialectical, and experiential factors from learning and behavioral difficulties; and (c) diversifying the composition of the multidisciplinary planning team and offering training to team members.

Use Alternatives to Traditional Assessment Practices

Rather than relying solely on potentially biased standardized tests, evaluation teams can employ a variety of student-centered, alternative assessment procedures to assess the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds more accurately (Rueda, 1997). Such assessment alternatives include performance-based and portfolio assessment, curriculum-based measurement, rubrics, dynamic assessment, student journals and learning logs, and self-evaluation techniques (Salend, 2001). These assessment alternatives can provide evaluation teams with more complete profiles of students, including their strengths, weaknesses, characteristics, behaviors, learning styles, and the impact of the school environment on their learning. They also can be coupled with the use of multiple identification criteria to address the underrepresentation of African American, American Indian, and Hispanic students in programs for gifted and talented students (Ford, 1998).

Distinguish Cultural, Linguistic, and Experiential Factors From Learning and Behavioral Difficulties

Distinguishing cultural characteristics and the characteristics associated with learning a second language from the existence of some type of learning and behavioral difficulty can limit the extent to which disproportionate representation occurs (Ochoa et al., 1999; Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000). Educators have proposed that assessment procedures for second-language learners include strategies for measuring first- and second-language proficiency, examining achievement and intelligence testing in the students’ primary language, considering the impact of the second-language acquisition process on all areas of development, documenting students’ language use in natural environments, comparing students’ performance to others within their cultural and linguistic groups, obtaining information from families, and linking assessment with effective instruction (Garcia & Malkin, 1993).

Evaluation teams also need to consider the impact of regional or dialectal differences on student learning and behavior. Although all English-speaking students speak with regional or dialectal differences, sociocultural factors make it particularly important for evaluation teams to assess the extent to which these regional or dialectal differences affect the language development of African American students and the extent to which these differences contribute to their being perceived as having language problems and learning difficulties (Sleeter & Grant, 1998). For example, although African American English (also referred to as Black English or ebonics) is like any other dialect of English that contains its own legitimate system of communication (Salend, 2001), teacher bias against it is common among majority group educators and some African American educators as well (Gollnick & Chinn, 1997). As a result, educators often underestimate its important cultural connection for students who use it and mistake it as an indicator of a language problem rather than a cultural and language difference.

Furthermore, when African American children enter school speaking a dialect of English, many educators, in their attempt to teach language competence, unwittingly hinder their language development and silence them by correcting all nonstandard speech. Rather than contributing to the learning of standard English, such correcting behaviors result in students’ refusing to participate in classroom discussions or orally respond during language-learning activities for fear of being humiliated by the teacher’s persistent corrections (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997). Although their silence is often interpreted as a lack of language competence, in most cases it is a matter of discontinuity between the home language and the school-defined standards of language competence (Gunning, 2000). Educators’ rejection and misinterpretation of students’ home languages also sends a message to many African American children that the dialect of their parents, grandparents, and significant others in their lives is unacceptable. When students are unsure whether they should use their dialect (the language in which they are fluent) to express their points of view or their understanding of new words and concepts, they speak less and struggle to find the appropriate words to use in their efforts to communicate with their teachers, behaviors that can result in their being referred for placement in special education (Sleeter & Grant, 1998).

To comply with the mandates of IDEA, students cannot be identified as having a disability if the determining factor for eligibility is lack of instruction in reading or mathematics or limited English proficiency. Therefore, the assessment process for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds should also be revised to include an examination of the extent to which students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds explain the difficulties they may be experiencing in schools and how the instructional program and the curriculum may be contributing to these problems (Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000). Damico (1991) developed several questions that evaluation teams can use as a framework for assessing students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These questions address the following issues:
1. the factors and conditions that may explain students’ learning and/or language difficulties (e.g., stressful life events, lack of opportunity to learn, racism, acculturation, experiential and language backgrounds, regional and dialectal differences, cultural differences);

2. the extent to which students demonstrate the same learning and/or language difficulties in their community settings and with their primary language as they do in school;

3. the extent to which students’ learning and/or language difficulties are due to normal second-language acquisition, dialectical factors, cross-cultural interference, or cultural factors;

4. the occurrence of bias effects prior to, during, and after assessments, such as those affecting the reliability, validity, and standardization of the test; and

5. the extent to which students’ cultural, linguistic, dialectic, and experiential backgrounds are considered when collecting and analyzing assessment data (e.g., selection, administration, and interpretation of test results; interpretation of prereferral strategies, learning styles, and family involvement).

The responses to these questions should be included in assessment reports and considered by placement teams. If the responses indicate that the difficulties students are experiencing in schools may be related to cultural, linguistic, or dialectic factors, these students should not be placed in special education but should receive other supportive services to address their learning needs.

**Diversify the Composition of the Multidisciplinary Planning Team and Offer Training**

Another factor that reduces the disproportional identification of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is the composition and training of the multidisciplinary planning team members making the placement decision (Ford, 1998; Ochoa et al., 1999). The lack of inclusion of family members and culturally sensitive individuals who have the necessary training and experience can affect student performance and the planning team’s interpretation of the assessment results. Therefore, individuals performing the assessment and making the placement decisions need to be aware of, and knowledgeable about, the student’s cultural, linguistic, and dialectical background and have an understanding of the impact of socio-cultural perspectives, experiential backgrounds, and socio-linguistic variables on behavior and school performance (New York State Department of Education, 1997). In addition, it is important that placement team members

1. have a knowledge of instruction, behavior management, and mental health interventions appropriate for the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;

2. understand the problems associated with the assessment of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and

3. possess expertise in selecting and adapting assessment instruments for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Salend, Dorney, & Mazo, 1997).

**USE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULA AND INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND MATERIALS**

Schools need culturally responsive instructional curricula and instructional strategies and materials to support the learning of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and to decrease the likelihood that these students will be referred for special education services. Despite this, learning and behavior still largely continue to be taught within the dominant social contexts and with insufficient regard to students’ cultural orientations. Educators who are seeking to implement instructional strategies to address the behavioral norms of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds must understand culture as an important educational tool for facilitating students’ academic achievements (Garrick Duhaney, 2000).

Culturally responsive instructional programs specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the classroom and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves, the subject matter, and the tasks they are asked to perform (Bynoe, 1998; Montgomery, 2001). In such programs, educators employ a multicultural curriculum and instructional strategies and materials that recognize and address the different cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds and learning styles of their students (Voltz, 1998). Toward these ends, educators use a range of methods tailored to their students’ individualized needs and cultural and language backgrounds, their classrooms, and their curricula (Montgomery, 2001). For example, Franklin (1992) identified several culturally responsive instructional strategies for use with African American students, including (a) emphasizing verbal interactions, (b) teaching students to engage in self-talk, (c) facilitating divergent thinking, (d) using small-group instruction and cooperative learning, (e) employing verve in the class-
room, (f) focusing on real-world tasks, and (g) promoting teacher–student interactions. Culturally responsive instruction also includes the use of reciprocal teaching approaches and peer-mediated interventions that foster empowerment, reflection, analysis, and learning through verbal and written dialogues between students and teachers and among students (Echevarria & McDonough, 1995; Maheady, Harper, & Mellette, 2001; Utey, Mortwee, & Greenwood, 1997).

Another important aspect of culturally relevant instruction is the use of instructional materials that reflect a diverse range of experiences and aspirations. Therefore, materials such as textbooks, children’s literature, media, poetry, toys, puppets, manipulatives, and art supplies that reflect cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and gender diversity are used frequently and are fully integrated into the curriculum (Salend, 2001). Teachers use interdisciplinary units that include and connect content area learning with multicultural resources (e.g., literature, television, videos, community resources, personal interviews) and provide students with opportunities to share written and oral reports pertaining to their heritage as well as others’ cultural traditions.

**USE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Although students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are disciplined more often and more severely than White students for comparable inappropriate behaviors, data from the Office of Civil Rights have shown that African American students, particularly males, are disciplined by suspension, expulsion, and corporal punishment at significantly higher rates than their percentage in the general school population, and than other ethnic groups (Townsend, 2000). The differential treatment of African American students and other students of color in terms of disciplinary actions appears to be related to race more than socioeconomic status or student behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 2000) and serves to hinder their learning by limiting their access to instructional and social activities, causing them to be tracked in lower ability groups, lowering their self-esteem, and alienating them from school (Townsend, 2000).

Several factors contribute to students of color being disproportionately subjected to more severe disciplinary actions (Garrick Duhaney, 2000; Townsend, 2000). Teachers and students often come from different cultural backgrounds, which results in different learning styles and divergent views about appropriate classroom behavior (Kea, 1998). For instance, although schools have meticulously designed behavioral norms that require conformity, passivity, quietness, and individualized competitive participation during teacher-focused instructional activities, some African American students are accustomed to performing multiple tasks simultaneously and may therefore prefer to work with others during instructional tasks (Townsend, 2000). Hence, this conflict in orientation may result in teachers’ perceiving students as being insubordinate, disrespectful, or inappropriate and in need of disciplinary actions (Ishi-Jordan, 1997).

Cultural variations in verbal and nonverbal communication also affect behavioral norms and expectations in the classroom and the disproportional use of disciplinary actions with students of color (Garrick Duhaney, 2000; Kea, 1998; Neal, Davis McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2001). For example, because some African American speakers may be more active and animated than their teachers, teachers may misinterpret this communication process as confrontational and requiring disciplinary action (Patton & Townsend, 1999).

School districts can engage in a variety of actions to address the disproportional use of exclusionary disciplinary practices with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Townsend, 2000). School districts and educators need to examine their behavioral expectations in terms of cultural biases and their usefulness in contributing to a safe, positive, and supportive learning environment that respects and affirms student diversity. In addition, educators need to explore the extent to which student behavior is related to differences between students and teachers in terms of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Because many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may have different cultural perspectives from their teachers, common communication misunderstandings between students and teachers are often interpreted by educators as behavioral problems. Therefore, educators need to examine their culturally based viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors and recognize how their cultural beliefs may conflict with the cultural beliefs of their students (Obiakor, 1999; Thorp, 1997).

In light of the significant impact of cultural perspectives on behavior, educators need to conduct culturally sensitive behavioral assessments to determine why students engage in specific behaviors and what social, cultural, linguistic, affective, environmental, and contextual variables appear to predict and maintain the behaviors (Larson & Maag, 1998). A culturally sensitive functional behavioral assessment could include assessing the extent to which the targeted behavior is related to the student’s cultural and linguistic background, employing culturally appropriate interviews and surveys to obtain information about the student and the behavior, analyzing the data and developing hypotheses in culturally sensitive ways, and examining behavior and communication within a social/cultural context (Salend, 2001). Based on the information obtained, a culturally responsive behavioral intervention plan can be developed that includes the use of peer-mediated and self-management interventions and social skills programs (Daniels, 1998). Although a variety of social skills curricula are available (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998), educators need to carefully evaluate them to make sure they are appropriate for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996). In addition, when teaching behavioral and social skills to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, edu-
cators need to acknowledge and be sensitive to students’ cultural perspectives, and understand that it may take some time for students to develop bicultural social competence (Salend, 2001).

**Promote Family Involvement and Empowerment**

An important factor in students’ success in school is the involvement of families in a wide range of school activities (Voltz, 1998). Family members can be valuable resources in helping educators understand students’ strengths; needs; and cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds and in helping develop and implement meaningful and effective educational programs.

Although families of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are interested in their children’s education, divergent cultural perspectives between teachers and their students’ families can hinder the establishment of traditional school–family interactions (Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999; Sileo & Prater, 1998). Therefore, educators need to interact with families in culturally sensitive ways and adjust their services to the family’s level of acculturation, beliefs about schooling, prior experience with discrimination, concepts of the family, childrearing practices, developmental expectations, beliefs about disability, emotional responses, and communication patterns (Dennis & Giangreco, 1996; Harry, Grenot-Scheyer, et al., 1995). In addition, educators need to address linguistic and socioeconomic barriers to communication between schools and families (Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996).

An important factor affecting family involvement and empowerment is the trust established between families and educators (Davern, 1999). Educators can foster family involvement and empowerment by establishing with families interactions and communications that are based on collaboration, mutual trust, and respect and that recognize the individual strengths and cultural perspectives of families (Harry, Grenot-Scheyer, et al., 1995). Trust also can be established by schools’ collaborating with families to offer and coordinate a broad spectrum of flexible, usable, comprehensive, and culturally sensitive services that address the diverse and changing needs of families (Hanson & Carta, 1996).

Incorporating the experiences, cultural perspectives, and expertise of family and community members into schools can promote mutual respect and trust between schools, families, and the community (Townsend, 2000). Educators can also gain the trust of families by learning about the experiential and cultural backgrounds and perspectives of families and students and then interacting with families and students in ways that are congruent with their cultural values (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999). There are a variety of activities available that educators can engage in to increase their awareness and understanding of the cultural backgrounds and perspectives of students and their families (Garcia & Malkin, 1993; Hyun & Fowler, 1995).

Supporting family advocacy can also counter disproportionality and establish trust with families (Harry, Grenot-Scheyer, et al., 1995). However, because of a myriad of factors, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are less likely to have access to advocacy groups and information about their legal rights. Therefore, educators need to work with families, community members and groups, and state agencies to ensure that all families have access to information about their rights and advocacy groups available to assist them. Because families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are concerned about disproportionate representation, they can receive training related to these issues, including the district’s grievance procedures for addressing complaints about disproportionate representation (Voltz, 1998).

**Recruit and Retain a Diverse Staff**

Data suggest that culturally and linguistically diverse students are more likely to be educated in special education classes when they attend schools at which the administrators and faculty are predominately White (Grossman, 1995; New York Times, 1997; Presswood, 1998). Therefore, a critical variable in addressing issues of disproportionality is the need for school districts to recruit and retain a diverse staff.

In recognition of the value of and need for educators from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, school districts can engage in several activities to recruit a diverse teaching and administrative staff (Franklin & James, 1990). These activities can include the following:

1. conducting job fairs for prospective educators from diverse backgrounds;
2. establishing partnerships with schools of education and communications with college career placement centers;
3. providing field and student teaching placements for students from diverse backgrounds;
4. working with community and professional groups that are respected by community members from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds to increase the diversity of the school staff;
5. diversifying the committees that recruit and hire staff;
6. offering incentives and assistance such as moving expenses, summer employment, and tuition reimbursement;
7. advertising job openings with colleges and universities and in media outlets that serve
significant numbers of individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;

8. posting job openings and information about the school district on the Internet;

9. establishing cooperatives with other school districts; and

10. developing recruitment materials that are directed at the needs of a diverse teaching staff.

School districts also can make meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students an integral part of the hiring process. Toward this end, job descriptions and advertisements can include statements establishing that experiences with, and training related to, meeting the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are qualifications for being hired. In addition, interview questions can address the multicultural competence of prospective teachers as well as their understanding of, and their skills in, addressing the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

When educators from diverse backgrounds enter the teaching profession, they often encounter barriers to remaining in the profession. One of these barriers is the differential treatment they receive from other professionals, students, and family members, which can cause feelings of isolation and frustration (Foster, 1993). Similarly, these educators report feeling as if they are under surveillance from other teachers and having to deal with implications that they received their positions based on their ethnic backgrounds, which causes many of them to leave the profession after only 5 years of service (Stallworth, 1994). Therefore, school districts that are successful in hiring educators from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds need to engage in activities to retain them. Such activities can include forming a network of teachers from diverse backgrounds that meets regularly to share their experiences among themselves and with others; establishing mentoring programs for all new teachers; and conducting workshops for professionals, students, and community members on addressing awareness of, and sensitivity to, multicultural issues, including overt and subtle forms of racism and discrimination.

**Prepare Educators to Work with Diverse Learners**

In addition to hiring a diverse staff, school districts need to train all staff members regarding effective practices for meeting the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their families (Artiles et al., 2000; Kea & Utle, 1998). Therefore, school districts should offer staff development activities related to topics such as employing alternative student-centered assessment strategies; understanding the educational needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students; designing culturally sensitive programs that promote family involvement and empowerment; and employing culturally relevant instructional strategies and materials, curriculum modifications, and classroom management techniques. Schools could also develop training activities that embed issues related to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds into all sessions. For example, a workshop on students with attention-deficit disorders could include cultural issues affecting the diagnosis and treatment of this condition.

Training should also be directed at providing educators with opportunities to examine and reflect on their own cultural perspectives as well as those of others (Cartledge, Kea, & Ida, 2000; Trent & Artiles, 1998). These training opportunities can aid educators in understanding how their cultural assumptions and values affect their expectations, beliefs, and behaviors as well as those of their students, other professionals, families, and community members, and can help them develop their cross-cultural competence and intercultural communication skills (Craig et al., 2000; Garcia & Malkin, 1993). For example, educators can periodically engage in a self-assessment that will provide them with the opportunity to thoughtfully consider their definition and views of diversity; their perceptions of their students and how these perceptions affect their responses to, and relationships with, their students; and the impact of their current practices and educational decisions (Montgomery, 2001). Taking the time to carefully reflect on their responses (what they have learned about themselves that may help or hinder culturally responsive decision making) can assist educators in undertaking the difficult task of assessing and teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

**Summary**

A major and persistent challenge facing the field of special education is addressing the issue of disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Patton, 1998). This article presented a comprehensive approach to identifying the policies, practices, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to the disproportionate representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For the sake of these students, we must address issues related to disproportionate representation by modifying assessment procedures, school curricula, pedagogical practices, teacher attitudes, classroom management strategies, staffing patterns, family involvement procedures, and the availability of services to support students in general education.

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Received January 2001
Revision received July 2001
Initial acceptance November 2001
Final acceptance January 2002

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