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# Building Successful Multicultural Special Education Programs Through Innovative Leadership

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Across America's schools, administrators are faced with various educational challenges. On a daily basis, administrators are accountable for overseeing their educational program and ensuring a quality education for all students. However, in more recent years, there has been increased debate about the level of educational service received by multicultural students with special needs (Obiakor & Utley, 2004). In many large urban school districts, multicultural students, particularly African Americans, constitute the majority of students served in special education programs (e.g., programs for students with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and attention deficit disorder). While multicultural students are overrepresented in these programs, they are underrepresented in programs which may lead to future opportunities (i.e., gifted and talented). This overrepresentation contributes to the deferred dreams of many multicultural students, as they are denied the opportunity to maximize their potential in school and ultimately in life (Ford & Harris, 1994; Harris & Ford, 1999). Despite concerns over the disproportionality issue, the number of multicultural students placed in special education programs has continued to increase. Ideally, when multicultural students and white students enter school, their academic skills are quite similar. However, by fourth grade, there is a gap between the academic skills of multicultural students, particularly African American students and their white counterparts (Kunjufu, 2001). Not only is there an increase in the achievement gap, a substantial number of these students are placed in lower track special education programs while an increased number of whites are placed in higher track educational programs.

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These issues call for culturally responsive leadership in today's general and special education programs.

It has become increasingly evident that multicultural students are misidentified, misassessed, miscategorized, misplaced, and misinstructed (Obiakor, 2001a). The hope for these students appears to be almost futile. In many instances, those placed in special education are viewed as helpless, hopeless, and future noncontributors to the society. Once multicultural students are placed in special education programs, teacher expectations of them are lowered. Teachers tend to use more aggressive discipline with these students, especially African American males. In addition, in some instances they begin to feel sorry for them instead of helping them develop the necessary skills to succeed in school and in life (Williams, Stanley, & Fair, 2002). Thus, these students rarely receive a quality life-enhancing education in those special education programs in which they are often inappropriately placed (Patton, 1998). Despite educational reforms that have attempted to address these issues, inequities in education for diverse students with special needs continue to dominate (Daniels, 1998). To address this issue, school administrators must ensure teachers are prepared with an understanding of the benefits of multiculturalism and a realization of how ignoring students' culture could contribute to their placement in special education programs (McCray, Alston, & Beachum, 2006; Williams, Beachum, Obiakor, & McCray, in press). Hence, school administrators must understand their roles in the teaching and learning process of multicultural students, especially those with special education needs. At the school level, the school administrator is the designee appointed to ensure that each student receives a quality education (Williams et al., 2002). The effectiveness of a school's educational program is ultimately determined by the leadership and attitude of the school administrator (McCray, Alston, & Beachum, 2006). Earlier, Goor and Schwenn (1997) asserted that educational leadership is the number one variable associated with effective schools. School administrators produce the climate that makes learning possible and programs successful (Beachum & McCray, 2004). Hence, they should play a key role in providing culturally responsive leadership for multicultural students (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004), especially those with special needs.

However, because of increased duties, many school administrators are unaware of the extent of their responsibilities as they relate to these students (see Goor & Schwenn, 1997). As a result, they delegate related tasks to the special education teacher, diagnostic teacher, or another designee. As they delegate tasks related to special education students, unfortunately they often delegate their authority to staff who have little cultural connection to the students. With increased debates over various aspects of special education (e.g., the quality of education received in special education programs and inappropriate placement and miscategorization), it has become apparent that multicultural leadership is needed to prepare school administrators and teachers to design effective special education programs (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). This, of course, is the thrust of this article.

## Successful Programs for Multicultural Students with Special Needs

In schools across the nation, several strategies have proven to yield positive outcomes for multicultural students, especially those with special needs. Boswell (2005) noted that educators implemented the Responsiveness to Intervention program (RTI) to aid English language learners in California. The RTI program was fueled by the notion that

even after implementing the best practices in schools, there was still much work to be done. Students needed more intervention. Hence, in addition to existing interventions, fourth and fifth grade students still struggling spent an extra 45 minutes of instruction with a speech and language pathologist or resource specialist over a nine week period. As a result of this intervention, these students gained more than a year's growth in reading (Boswell, 2005). Furthermore, after the first year of the program, only 4 of the 63 participating students were referred for special education services. According to Boswell, this program received the Golden Bell Award by the California School Board Association. In addition to programs like RTI, another intervention is administering effective mentoring and tutoring programs. Mentor programs have proven to be very successful in decreasing absenteeism and increasing academic achievement in students. Gensemer (2000) noted that peer mentor programs in elementary schools can increase the use of critical thinking skills, improve interpersonal skills, and increase the use of conflict resolution skills. Students learning from each other has proved to be very successful. Barone and Taylor (1996) contended that cross-cultural tutoring enhances students' self-esteem, academic learning time, and sense of responsibility.

In the administration of successful programs for multicultural students, especially those with special needs, finding ways to get and keep parents involved is paramount. An approach that has yielded positive results is literature and book clubs. For example, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a former Director of Educational Services, started a program called Literature Circles. In an informal interview with a teacher at one of the participating schools, she noted how much more parents were stressing literature at home by how her students responded at school (Talley, 2003 personal communication). Such literature programs are needed to keep parents involved in the learning process of their children. According to Lilly and Green (2004), "Educators can foster collaborative partnerships with parents by creating a link between home and school. The implementation of multicultural literature promotes sensitivity to other cultures, instills a sense of pride in one's heritage, and encourages appreciation for diverse literary traditions" (p. 131). Another program to assist multicultural students is Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) (Elementary & Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center, n.d.). This preventive program assists teachers with strategies to better educate students who exhibit academic, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. TAT was developed as a strategy to provide students with assistance in the classroom rather than pulling them out to receive services. Such an approach provides students with greater access to the general curriculum. TAT allows a team of teachers, psychologists, parents, and counselors to brainstorm strategies to assist struggling students prior to being considered for special education.

More preventive programs and strategies must be implemented to address the learning needs of multicultural students and to decrease their overwhelming presence in special education programs. The programs mentioned above are merely samples of those used in schools across the country. However, effective implementation and administration of these programs is the key. Therefore, it is critical that school administrators and teachers are prepared to implement such programs aimed at meeting the academic challenges experienced by multicultural students.

### **Effective Administration for Multicultural Students with Special Needs**

For many years, much attention has been given to the overrepresentation of multicultural students, particularly African Americans in special education (Artiles & Trent 1994; Lara, 1994; Patton, 1998; Serwatka & Deering, 1995). For instance, Lara described the disproportionate placement which occurs when the representation of a group in special education is disproportionately higher or lower to their numbers in the school district as a whole. If positive change is to occur, there must be a change in the type of administrative leadership in urban school districts. School administrators must recognize the cultural disconnect between majority white teachers and the multicultural students served (Beachum, Dentith, & McCray, 2004; Kailin, 2002). In addition, school administrators must help teachers to understand how this disconnect contributes to the disproportionate number of multicultural students. Hence, school administrators must promote multiculturalism to meet the needs of the wide range of multicultural students present on a daily basis (McCray et al., 2004). Clearly, administrators who embrace multiculturalism recognize and address the differences of their teachers, students, and parent population (i.e., linguistic, ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and learning differences). Such administrators view student differences as qualities that make each individual unique and valuable; recognize and promote cultural differences; and provide opportunities for growth and development (Sapon-Shevin, 2001). Additionally, such school administrators are aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses as they collaborate with and empower teachers and other staff around them to help provide all students with support (Ryan, 2006).

School administrators who embrace and utilize multicultural practices in their schools exhibit a sense of self-confidence that allows others to feel comfortable, and they do not prohibit others from being themselves. They trust and motivate others to work together to meet the academic and social needs of all students (Williams et al., 2002). In this learning community, school administrators establish a purpose and collaborate with teachers, parents, and community leaders to create a cohesive and cooperative environment that benefits all students, especially multicultural students with special needs. They do not look for ways to categorize students; they encourage individualities and build on them to create a multifaceted, multicultural, multi-talented learning community. This community works together to meet individual needs, value each member, and ensure higher learning through increased participation of various community members. Patton and Townsend (1997) noted that an inclusive environment is needed where educators address the sociocultural and psychosocial needs of African American students, families, and communities. In essence, school administrators celebrate diversity and view students' differences as assets rather than deficits.

Racist and discriminatory practices lie at the root of many social and academic achievement problems facing multicultural learners (Ford & Harris, 1994; Kailin, 2002; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Tatum, 1997). Such practices have proven to be detrimental to the quality of education that these learners receive. As Grossman (1991) pointed out:

Those who believe there are ethnic and class differences in intelligence find it understandable that some groups are disproportionately placed in classes for the retarded and that Euro-American middle-class students are more likely to be assigned to courses of study (tracks) for "high potential"

students in which teachers stress independent study and higher level cognitive skills. At the same time, Hispanic, Native American, African American, and working-class students are over represented in tracks for “low potential” students in which teachers stress instructional techniques that involve concrete, repetitive drill and practice. (p. 20)

Hence, the role of school administrators in the identification process of multicultural students for special education is critical. For instance, principals must ensure that students are not being conveniently referred into special education programs. They must also continuously attend inservice trainings on strategies to work with multicultural students, especially those with special needs. They also must empower and encourage teachers to try different techniques to maximize student achievement and minimize student placement in special education programs. In essence, school administrators and teachers must work collaboratively to address the educational needs of multicultural students prior to placement in special education as well as those students currently placed to ensure the quality of service provided. According to Goor (1995), “Collaborative principals who promote educational excellence take an active approach in the process in which teachers request help with students before referring for special education evaluation”(pp. 137-138). Thus, inservice and preservice training emerge as areas that need to be addressed in school leadership.

Clearly, one of the primary factors that contribute to African American placement in special education programs is lack of teacher training (Graybill, 1997). To provide a quality education for students with special needs, teacher preparation programs must be transformed to produce culturally responsive educators. Graybill (1997) noted that lack of teacher training, poor learning environments, and poor self-esteem are associated more with students being placed in special education programs than their ability to learn. Hence, improved teacher preparation regarding cultural learning styles may serve as a vehicle to address the number of referrals and placements of students in special education, and provide them with more opportunities to succeed (Ewing, 1995). In many cases, teachers and leaders enter multicultural urban settings with negative preconceived notions about teaching multicultural children. They often label these children as “failures” before giving them a chance to be winners. Delpit (1992) noted that teacher preparation programs expose student teachers and future leaders to an education based on name calling and labeling to conceal its flaws. Sileo (2000) argued that teacher attitudes and reactions to diverse youth influence classroom climate, student achievement, behavioral expectations, self-concept, and their sense of belonging. Obiakor (2001a) confirmed that when multicultural learners behave, look, learn, and talk differently than their teacher or other Euro-American students, teachers assume something is mentally wrong with them, often with the support of their school administrators. Furthermore, when college professors fail to provide balanced perspectives in leadership preparation programs, they indiscriminately encourage teachers to develop attitudes that prevent diverse learners from receiving a quality education (Dantley, 2005; Dooley & Voltz, 1999). Such practice has led to detrimental situations for many multicultural learners. Teachers must be educated on using culturally relevant practices that meet the learning needs of a wide range of multicultural students (Delpit, 1992). As Sileo (2000) pointed out, multicultural course transformations necessitate that teacher educators design and deliver programs that model inclu-

sive and culturally sensitive curricular, instructional, and assessment materials and strategies appropriate to diverse students’ learning needs.

To be effective and to address the educational needs of multicultural students, especially those with special needs, school administrators must implement best practices in their schools, and teachers must utilize best practices within their classroom. Effective leaders encourage teachers to be effective. Grant and Gomez (1995) reported that effective teachers: (a) have high expectations for their students and believe all students are capable of academic success; (b) communicate clearly, pace lessons appropriately, involve students in decisions, monitor students’ progress, and provide frequent feedback; (c) use culturally relevant teaching approaches that integrate students’ native language and dialect, culture, and community into classroom activities to make input more relevant and comprehensible, and (d) use curricula in teaching strategies that promote coherence, relevance, progression, and continuity. Boswell (2005) asserted that too many children are labeled as having a learning disability when they need better instruction. Hence, effective implementation of these strategies will yield more positive academic outcomes for multicultural students, especially those with special needs.

In schools, administrators must change their own attitudes as well as the attitudes of teachers to embrace the differences of a multicultural student population with special needs. Harry (2002) remarked that “understanding that our own beliefs and practices are but one cultural variation should make it easier to respect, and therefore to serve the wide diversity of families whose children are served by special education programs” (p. 138). With the high demand for educational accountability, in many cases administrators and teachers do not want students with special needs in their schools because they may bring down test scores or prevent other students from learning due to requiring much of the teacher’s time (Williams et al., 2002). Preparing administrators and teachers to embrace the concept of cultural diversity will require professional development which examines content, methods of instruction, and teaching material (Dooley & Voltz, 1999; Guillaume, Zuniga-Hill, & Yee, 1995). For example, Guillaume et al., noted that school administrators and teachers must:

1. Develop a deep knowledge base about diverse ethnic groups and have multiple opportunities for teachers to examine personal attitudes towards students of color.
2. Develop culturally and linguistically supportive strategies and approaches that make learning available and equitable for all students.
3. Have ample exposure to students of diverse backgrounds and to teachers who can model appropriate instructional approaches.
4. Commit to professional growth regarding issues of diversity. (p. 70)

### **Collaborative Leadership with Community Members and Parents**

To increase the academic performance of multicultural students, especially those with special needs, community members and parents must be involved. When parents feel included, involved, valued, and empowered, they set the stage for academic and social success for students (Tepper, 2003). The role that community

members and parents play in their children's education has been underestimated and downplayed. However, to effectively address the needs of multicultural students with special needs, the important role of community members must be recognized. School administrators and teachers must take steps to open lines of leadership communications with parents and community leaders to find out who they are so they can better educate their children. Chalmers and Olson (1995) agreed that communications with parents will reduce conflicts and enhance participation. According to Sheets (2005), many teachers are intimidated and overwhelmed because they lack knowledge of and genuine lived experiences with diversity. When community members and parents are involved in collaborative leadership, the dangers of misidentification, misassessment, mislabeling, misplacement, and misinstruction are taken seriously. For example, when a referral is made for possible special education consideration of a student, school administrators must be sure that parents are invited and present for meetings regarding their child. The absence of parents and community members in school-related activities should be an enormous "red flag" to school administration. Williams et al. (2002) indicated that many parents (especially those with less financial means) do not show up at school activities because:

1. They assume that they will hear a lot of negative comments regarding their children.
2. They cannot take off from work in the middle of the day to attend the meeting.
3. They assume that teachers know what is best for their child since they went to school to learn how to work with children.
4. They assume that their input is not needed since school personnel already know what they want to do with their child.

School administrators must maximize the opportunities for community members and parents to participate on assessment teams by scheduling meetings at times convenient for everyone and providing transportation, as well as child care accommodations if needed (Goor, 1995). Too often, scheduled assessment meetings occur without advocates or parents being present to voice their concerns. In addition, principals and teachers must ensure that information is being communicated in a language and at a level that all participants understand. Culturally responsive leaders empower parents and community members to take a proactive stance on behalf of their children (Obiakor, 2001b) because their voices are essential in helping to make a decision regarding educational services. Tepper (2003) noted that children of all ages can benefit when school leaders, community members, and parents cooperatively and effectively assist children to realize their full potential. School administrators must utilize community resources to educate multicultural students, especially those with special needs. Many opportunities that are present beyond school are limited to these learners because of what happens inside the school. In many instances, after graduation from high school, multicultural students with special needs have a difficult time obtaining meaningful jobs to support themselves and their families. When employers are notified of the "special education" status of these students, they are at increased risk of not being hired or being hired in low level positions (Williams et al., 2002). As a consequence, school administrators must ensure that multicultural students with special needs are included in various aspects of schooling. They must also help build collaborative leadership with teachers, parents, and students to see

that although students with special needs learn differently, they can learn and be given the opportunity to maximize their full potential in gaining and exploring community resources (Williams et al., 2002).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed several aspects of administering successful programs for multicultural students, especially those with special needs. The disproportionate number of multicultural students placed in special education programs is a disturbing reality that must be addressed (Kunjufu, 2001). School administrators must be proactive in preventing the misidentification, misassessment, miscategorization, and misplacement of multicultural students. It is important that school leaders utilize their influence to gather resources to meet the learning needs of all students. No longer can the academic needs of diverse students be dismissed as a hopeless endeavor. School administrators must provide culturally responsive leadership that ensures all students a high quality education. From our perspective, training must be provided. We must recruit more diverse leaders and teachers and prepare them to work with a wide range of multicultural students. School administrators, teachers and service providers must recognize, appreciate, and celebrate student diversity. In addition, they must assist teachers to develop and implement collaborative strategies to better educate multicultural students. When such strategies are implemented and practiced, students will be exposed to new learning experiences that will increase their academic performance, and schools will notice their decreased placement of students in special education programs.

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