

Diversifying the Special Education Workforce

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

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INTRODUCTION

The need for teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds or historically underrepresented groups has become a national concern. School districts nationwide list the recruitment and retention of teachers of color as a priority; however, many cite difficulties in finding adequate personnel, particularly in the area of special education.

This paper synthesizes research on teacher-student diversity and its impact on student outcomes. Challenges faced by aspiring teachers of color and the teacher preparation programs that train them are summarized. Strategies for increasing the numbers of special educators from diverse backgrounds and recommendations for future research are discussed.

DIVERSIFYING THE WORKFORCE

Evidence from the U.S. census indicates that this country will continue to diversify rapidly. Our schools must respond to the changing needs created by increased diversity. The need is critically important in the field of special education.

Demographics of the Special Education Workforce

Ironically, new opportunities in many other American occupations outside of education have decreased diversity in the teacher workforce in the past 30 years. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s presented numerous employment opportunities for people of color and women who might have otherwise aspired to teaching.

There is a severe shortage of individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the special education workforce, and the percentage of diverse teachers does not reflect the demographics of the student population. But recruiting special education teachers to meet diversity goals may be difficult. The number of teachers from diverse backgrounds is small and declining, and most school districts report special education teacher shortages. Only 14% of current special education teachers are from historically underrepresented groups.

The Importance of Diversity

School districts cite the challenges of educating students with multiple primary languages, diverse backgrounds, and varied histories of formal schooling in other countries to prove the serious needs for a diverse workforce. In addition, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are often found to be overrepresented in programs for students with mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disturbances and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs.

The rationale for increasing teacher diversity includes three common justifications:

The reality of student diversity. American society is diverse, and public school students are diverse; consequently, the teaching force should reflect that diversity.

Benefits of diverse special education teachers. More CLD teachers in general education who are aware of cultural differences might reduce the overrepresentation of students from CLD backgrounds in special education.

Positive impact on student learning. There is an assumption that CLD students will do better academically if teachers mirror their race or ethnicity.

Diversity in Teaching: The General Consensus

There are recognized benefits for students from underrepresented groups to have teachers from diverse groups. Students' comfort levels in the school setting can be increased by having a teacher who speaks their language or reflects their ethnic/racial background (e.g., it may be easier for students to approach a teacher to ask for additional help or support.) Teachers from diverse racial backgrounds can be role models, encouraging students to recognize that their own differences are strengths. With the experience of learning from a diverse group of teachers, all students (CLD and non-CLD) will have the opportunity to develop the intercultural understanding and multicultural communication skills that are essential for the 21st century.

Research on Teacher Diversity and Student Impact

There is a plethora of subjective writings on the importance of diversity, but very few studies have attempted to show direct relationships between student-teacher racial pairings and academic outcomes. Dated research (14 studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s) falls into three groups:

Teacher perceptions. Race was a factor in the perceptions of student abilities by European American teachers, but there was no research on comparable perceptions of CLD teachers.

Teacher behavior. Several studies have examined teacher interactions with CLD students. Unfortunately, design flaws did not allow conclusions to be drawn about the effectiveness of teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds teaching similarly diverse students.

Teacher ratings/referrals for special education. Research results in this area were not clear. While students from diverse backgrounds were placed in lower reading groups and referred at a higher rate for special education, they also performed lower on curriculum-based assessments, and correlations between teacher and parent ratings were low. Yet, no CLD teachers were included in these studies for comparison purposes.

Current research. Research in the last decade yielded 11 studies that involved the influence of teacher diversity on perceptions, referrals, and student outcomes. None of the studies, however, focused specifically on special education teachers or students. Again, while students of color were identified more frequently as being difficult to teach or requiring additional supports, the students also had substantially lower academic functioning than their peers. Findings on the impact of teacher race on student academic outcomes were contradictory; one study found significant effects while another did not. However, teacher race was found to be a significant determinant of subjective evaluations of students (e.g., viewed student as a hard worker, expected that student would attend college), and significantly impacted teachers' classroom interactions with students.

Summary and Recommendations

Consideration of workforce diversity as a goal in special education focuses on several main issues.

Questions of equity. What level of diversity is considered appropriate? Should teachers reflect national, regional, state, or local diversity proportions? It may be easier for teachers in urban areas to reflect the diversity of the local community (e.g., Los Angeles, Miami) as well as the nation; but not all communities are so diverse. Rural communities may face particular challenges. CLD teachers may experience social isolation of their own. Issues of discomfort, intercultural communication, and cultural competence need to be considered for teachers, students, and the community as a whole.

Reduction of disproportionate CLD representation among special education students. While it has been further documented that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in special education referrals and placement, more attention to the

underachievement by students of color is warranted. Future research must assess the impact of a diverse teaching force on the referral and placement rates of CLD students.

Student achievement. There is dated evidence that European American teachers have different teaching/interaction styles with diverse students, yet there are no comparable data on the teaching styles of teachers from diverse backgrounds. Quantitative and qualitative research is needed to determine the impact of teacher diversity on student academic outcomes, motivation, and comfort levels.

TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

The majority of teachers in the workforce are trained in four-year colleges and universities, and the paper reviews the training of diverse students in these settings.

Challenges to Entering the Workforce

Several factors make academic preparation more difficult for CLD students.

Poverty. The relationship between the education/income level of parents and student achievement is well documented, which directly impacts academic preparation (discussed next). Lack of financial assistance is a major deterrent to college entry for students of color.

Poor academic preparation. Communities with high rates of poverty and often large CLD populations suffer most from shortages of qualified teachers. Faced with shortages, high poverty communities often hire teachers with minimal qualifications. Inadequate teaching, self-fulfilling prophecies, and tracking all contribute to low academic achievement.

Test requirements. Increasing concern has developed over the discrepant SAT and ACT scores between students of color and their White peers. College entrance exam requirements reduce the numbers of CLD students in higher education, while certification exams further reduce the number of potential teachers.

Recruitment

Despite the rise in high school graduation rates for culturally and linguistically diverse students, most are not choosing education as a college major. As the benefits of diversity have become increasingly appreciated by other professions, CLD students are aggressively recruited by disciplines that are considered more prestigious and offer greater financial incentives than education. The percentage of bachelors degrees awarded to culturally and linguistically diverse students in education was well below the percentages awarded in business, social sciences, health professions, biological and life sciences, and engineering in 1997.

Methods of recruiting diverse students into teacher education programs have included:

- Career counseling
- High school courses for college credit
- Summer programs
- Future Teachers Club and similar organizations
- Tutoring programs where CLD students tutor younger students
- Word-of-mouth campaigns by special education and other teachers
- College exposure (e.g., campus visit, toll-free number, meetings with diverse faculty and students, scholarships, invitations to special events)
- Media outreach
- Speakers bureaus
- Promotion of campus features such as minority student associations
- Highlighting curricula that reflect diversity.

Curriculum Considerations

The paper details ways of improving academic success for culturally and linguistically diverse students, including academic support programs, non-traditional courses, materials that reflect diversity, preparation for test-taking, and teacher training that requires experience in diverse communities.

Funding

Because cost is a limiting factor in the recruitment of diverse individuals into higher education, innovative means of providing assistance for CLD students in teacher training are needed. These can include tuition assistance programs, such as through federal funding, grants, wages for student teaching, and contingency funds for student emergencies.

Interpersonal Support

Students from diverse backgrounds can be aided by supportive people, including education faculty of color, mentors, friends, and family. Specific training (e.g., mentors) and awareness activities (e.g., for family) can help these individuals provide support to students.

Multi-Systems Support

Collaboration between 2- and 4-year institutions (such as cross-registration between programs) and coordination with school districts and community agencies have all been successfully proven to increase the college retention rate for students of color. Non-CLD and CLD institutions that provide teacher training have different resources to offer. Both types of institutions can collaborate toward the goal of increasing teacher diversity.

Alternative Certification

Many school districts have responded to teacher shortages by creating alternative certification avenues. The most popular types of alternative certification programs provide emergency certification or waivers so that students in traditional programs can teach while engaged in teacher education coursework. These students may have a bachelor's degree and previous experience in in another field. According to the National Center for Education Information, alternatively certified teachers represent about 10% of all newly certified teachers and 2% of the entire teacher labor force. Studies have shown that many seek alternative certification because they are drawn toward teaching as a satisfying occupation. Alternative certification students are typically older and more diverse than students in traditional training.

Attrition

Attrition from college training programs is a concern. One study of community colleges showed that nearly 70% of African American and 60% of White students left during the first year. Contracts that detail obligations to the program have reduced attrition rates. It is not enough to increase the number of individuals of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds entering teaching; teacher attrition is also a concern. Over one-quarter of the culturally and linguistically diverse teacher graduates do not actually enter the teaching workforce (based on 1993 data). However, once these teachers enter the profession, it is not clear that their attrition behavior is different from non-CLD teachers when pay scales, working conditions, and stress issues are considered. The paper reports on specific studies that provide information on various aspects of attrition.

Summary and Recommendations

An institution's hiring practices, student recruitment, admissions policies, and curricular programs are evidence of its degree of commitment to diversity. Among factors that decrease the number of culturally and linguistically diverse applicants and students are a lack of institutional commitment, rigid adherence to test scores for admission, stringent program entry/exit requirements, and requirements to pass national or state examinations.

Reliable data and ongoing systematic data collection in this area are needed to support recruitment and preparation of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers. Further information on alternative certification programs is also needed.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering the increasing diversity within schools and society, it is likely that most teachers will have multiple racial and ethnic groups represented among their students. It is doubtful that schools will begin to group classrooms by same-race teachers and students, even if this were desirable; and, in large cities with hundreds of ethnicities, this would be impossible. Research is needed to determine effective teaching practices that can be utilized by teachers from any racial or ethnic background with students from many racial and ethnic groups. The position of this paper is that cultural and linguistic diversity within the teaching workforce is important and that all educators must be culturally competent.

The paper recommends that future research should examine the following critical concerns:

- Issues of ethics and equity in the diversification of the special education workforce
- CLD teachers' perceptions of behavior, academic ability, and referrals of CLD students compared to those of their majority counterparts and the subsequent effect on disproportionality
- The short- and long-term effects of teacher race on academic and behavioral outcomes for students of all races with disabilities, separating the impact of teacher race from culturally relevant instructional practices
- Enhanced educational outcomes to increase the college enrollment for CLD students in special education teacher preparation programs
- A methodologically sound research design to collect and evaluate data on teacher recruitment and retention strategies that can be implemented efficiently
- The efficacy of AC programs as compared to traditional programs for training CLD individuals, including data on: (a) the attractiveness of AC as a means to enter the teaching field, (b) the pass rates on teacher licensing exams, and (c) subsequent teacher effectiveness in the classroom.
- Identification of effective teaching practices that can be utilized by teachers of any race or ethnicity with students from all racial/ethnic groups.