

Increasing the Cultural Competence of Assessment Professionals via Online Training

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Abstract

The preponderance of literature suggests that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners demonstrate unexpected underachievement in academic areas, mainly due to educators' inability to differentiate between students' cultural attributes rather than demonstrable cognitive dysfunction. Thirty assessment practitioners participated in a study to investigate the effectiveness of teaching cultural information and culturally-relevant assessment practices via an online teaching platform. The Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE) and short-answer tests were used to obtain participants' pre- and post- training attitudes and knowledge regarding cultural diversity. Results indicated that online training improved attitudes toward multicultural issues in education. A number of suggestions for more equitable assessment services with CLD students are provided.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners in the United States often demonstrate unexpected underachievement in academic areas leading to referral, assessment, diagnosis, and placement in special services. The literature clearly documents that large numbers of this population are inappropriately subjected to pull-out special service treatment designs (resource and content mastery classes) due to unique cultural attributes rather than demonstrable cognitive dysfunction (Artiles & Ortiz, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Fletcher, Barns, & Francis, 2002; Garcia & Dominguez, 1997; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Ortiz & Kushner, 1997; Ortiz, 1997; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and the re-authorization of IDEA in 2004 now require a significant paradigm shift that incorporates authentic, dynamic and non-discriminatory diagnosis and placement regarding CLD learners.

Dunn (1968) challenged American general and special educators to become morally and educationally responsive to the needs of ‘misfit’ students that he identified as “children from low status backgrounds—including African Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Rican Americans; those from nonstandard English speaking, broken, disorganized, and inadequate homes; and children from other non-middle class environments” (p. 6). Skiba et al. (2008), more than 40 years after Dunn’s initial challenge, contended that “it is ironic that racial and ethnic disparities in special education remain a key inequity issue in our nation’s educational system” (p. 264). What makes the disproportionate representation issue even more poignant is that it has persisted in spite of efforts such as:

- lawsuits on behalf of special education students [e.g., *Diana v. California State Board of Education*, 1970; *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1972; *Mills v. Board of Education*, 1972],
- mandates in federal legislation [e.g., *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (PL 93-112), the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (PL 94-142, 1975) and its amendments (PL 105-17, in 1997), (PL 108-446, in 2004), *The American with Disabilities Act of 1990* (ADA) (PL 101-336), and *No Child Left Behind of 2001* (NCLB) (PL 107-110)],
- research demonstrating the over-representation of ethnic minorities in special education programs (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, & Wishner, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999),
- national efforts to prevent over-referrals and misdiagnosis of low achieving, ethnic minority students by general educators [e.g., mainstreaming/least restrictive environment as defined in PL94-142, regular education initiative (REI) (Will, 1986), and response to intervention (RtI) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006)], and
- making available “best instructional practices” for culturally and linguistically diverse students (e.g., Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Garcia, 1991; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002; Thomas & Collier, 2003; University of Texas Center for Reading & Language Arts & Texas Education Agency Division of Special Education, 2003).

Current research reveals that many CLD students continue to fail in school at rates significantly higher than Caucasian students (Lee, 2006). CLD students have lower graduation rates than Caucasian students (Planty et al., 2008), and African American students continue to be

the most over-represented group in special education programs in almost every state (Parrish, 2002). If these trends persist as they have in the previous four decades, educating ethnic minority students has the propensity of becoming not only an educational issue but a civil rights and moral issue for policy-makers, educators, and personnel preparation programs.

According to demographic data, CLD students will comprise nearly half of the American elementary and secondary school population by the year 2020 (Murdock, 1995). Not surprisingly, Planty and colleagues (Planty et al., 2008) reported that some states already surpassed this predicted figure. In 2007, four states reported that African American and Hispanic students accounted for over 50% of their student enrollment—California (64.6%), Mississippi (53.3%), New Mexico (64.5%), and Texas (62.2%). In this same time period seven states reported African American and Hispanic student enrollment between 45% and 49.9%, including Arizona (48.4%), Florida (47.9%), Georgia (49.3%), Louisiana (47.5%), Maryland (48.5%), Nevada (49.1%), and South Carolina (45.1%).

Much has been written about the implications of over-referring, misdiagnosing, and placing ethnic minority students into special education programs on the basis of classroom teachers mistaking cultural differences for cognitive or behavioral disabilities (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988, 1997, 2006; Gottlieb, et al., 1994; Ortiz, 1997), especially in districts where the teaching force is more than 60% White (Ladner & Hammons, 2001). Negative perceptions and stereotyped beliefs about CLD students' intellectual capabilities and behavioral characteristics have been translated into mainstream instructional approaches and behavioral management practices that have resulted in discrepant and atypical student responses that trigger the referral process. The enduring practice of applying a referral and diagnostic process with the standard goal of looking for causation has led to labelling of many underachieving CLD students as eligible for special education placement. As a rule, the "diagnosis tends to stop when something has been found wrong with the child, when the why has either been found or conjectured, and when some justification has been found for recommending placement in a special education class" (Dunn, 1968, p. 8).

Gottlieb, et al. (1994) believe that the practice of over-identifying and placing CLD students in special education presents several problems.

First...it diminishes the credibility of the entire assessment system and renders it vulnerable to accusations of bias and discrimination. Second, there could be a "spread of effect" in public perceptions regarding the ability of clinicians to classify a child properly for any of the disabling classifications. Third...if the vast majority of children who are referred will be removed from the general education class for at least part of the day, there is little incentive for the general education system to retain them. The fourth, and perhaps most damaging, consequence of the well-intentioned classification practices is that they may actually result in harm to low-achieving, although not learning disabled, children by placing them in special classes from which few ever emerge, and from which dropouts during adolescence are overly abundant. (p. 459)

In addition to the moral and ethical issues of inaccurate referral and diagnosis, the financial cost is staggering. There is added cost in employing specialized and highly trained service personnel and the additional technology and instructional materials required to provide appropriate instruction to the special education population. The President's Commission on

Excellence on Special Education (2002) concluded that expenditures for special education services in 1999-2000 totalled an estimated \$50 billion. This did not include an additional \$27.3 billion spent on regular education services and an additional \$1 billion spent on other federally funded special needs programs (e.g., Title I, English language learners or Gifted and Talented Education). Therefore, the total *estimated spending to educate students with disabilities* found eligible for special education programs in 1999-2000 was approximately \$78.3 billion.

The issue of over-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in special education has been a grave concern since the inception of these services. The literature is replete with warnings that, if not checked, the use of poor and inappropriate instructional and diagnostic practices with this population propagates moral and ethical issues, promotes cultural inequality, and leads to financial constraints. Therefore, it should be no surprise that the unwillingness to acknowledge or the inability of instructional and diagnostic personnel to differentiate between cognitive dysfunction and learning difficulties due to cultural and linguistic differences has been at the root of the continuing disproportionate representation debate. Approaches developed to curb CLD students' overrepresentation in special education and underrepresentation in gifted/talented programs have fallen short in changing the course of the debate. Two recent approaches show promise in bringing equity into the educational system for CLD students, Response to Intervention (RtI) and cross-battery assessment.

The Response to Intervention (RtI) process has been lauded as a promising avenue to deal with the concerns related to disproportionate representation (e.g., Vanderwood & Nam, 2008). Response to Intervention is a problem-solving process that requires the use of early intervention strategies, progress monitoring, and the child's response to interventions as diagnostic tools to obtain information to determine whether or not the student has a disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Cross-battery assessment (Flanagan, Ortiz, & Alfonso, 2007) is an individualized approach to assessing cognitive abilities. Subtests are chosen from several assessment batteries depending on the suspected learning issues of the individual. This assessment approach is deemed appropriate for CLD students because it allows for selection of subtests based not only on suspected learning issues, but also their degree of culture-specific content and language demands. While this is a promising approach, the authors argue that "...this approach addresses only those issues involved in test selection and interpretation...there are numerous sources of potential bias that can affect any given individual's performance on standardized tests" (Flanagan, et al., 2007, p. 201). In sum, RtI and cross-battery testing, although promising, are not the panacea that takes into consideration how "culture mediates learning" (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, 2005, p. 1) or how other variables in the teaching-learning process contribute to CLD students' underachievement.

Another contentious point in the debate is a sustaining belief that professional educator preparation programs do not provide adequate training to assessment/diagnostic service providers (e.g., Educational Diagnosticians, Counselors and School Psychologists) regarding competencies required to identify unique cultural attributes that contribute to students' unexpected underachievement and behavioral concerns. Additionally, school administrative personnel (e.g., Directors of Special Education, Building Principals, and Curriculum Directors), chairing decision-making committees on behalf of CLD students have received little or no training in cross-cultural competencies. Consequently, the lack of cross-cultural training in professional educator preparation programs has led to the need for efficient and effective

in-service instruction to assist schools to come under compliance with existing federal and state standards that address equality of education for a burgeoning culturally diverse student population.

Professional standards dictate that assessment personnel consider cultural and linguistic issues when testing and working with individuals from diverse backgrounds (AERA, 1999; APA, 2002) and that they be trained in “relevant knowledge and experiences about the role of cultural and individual diversity” (APA CoA, 2002, p. 10). This should include training that: (a) develops personal awareness, (b) provides information about other cultures, and (c) allows for the application of this knowledge (Miranda, 2008). Although this training may initially occur within graduate education programs, much of it is also delivered as part of continuing professional development for assessment personnel.

Professional development is traditionally delivered in a face-to-face format. The advent of online instructional approaches, however, has made it possible to provide opportunities for educational personnel to gain essential information on demand. Much research has been done on the online delivery of traditional education but relatively little focusing on the training of inservice professionals (e.g., Donavant, 2009). Reviews of the research literature have indicated that online training can result in improved learning over more traditional face-to-face methods (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The question that remains, however, is whether or not online training can be effectively used in teaching information related to cultural diversity.

The present investigation was designed to determine the effectiveness of teaching culturally relevant information to special education assessment personnel via an online teaching platform. Pre- and post-data were obtained from participants using the Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE) (Munroe & Pearson, 2006) and locally developed short-answer tests. The MASQUE and short-answer data were analyzed using a matched-pair research design. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative techniques (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005). Specifically, the “open coding” strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was applied to participants’ written responses to search for the largest categories to describe the data.

Method

Participants

A total of 30 school district special education assessment professionals participated in online training to increase their knowledge of cultural diversity issues. These individuals completed the seven training modules related to background information on diversity issues in education, as well as two modules on strategies for assessing diverse learners through an online teaching platform. The mean age of the professionals was 49.9 years ($SD = 8.55$) and they reported an average of 23.0 years of experience in the field ($SD = 8.08$). Twenty-nine of the professionals were female and ninety percent identified themselves as Caucasian (10% identified themselves as Native American).

Procedure

Prior to completing the training modules, participants were asked to respond to the Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE; Munroe & Pearson, 2006), which was used to determine the participants' attitudes and knowledge regarding cultural diversity. Demographic and qualitative questions were also included. Participants were asked to complete the training modules within a month. Upon completion, participants were required to respond to a post-assessment which included the MASQUE and qualitative questions.

Training Materials

A total of nine modules were included in the training. Each training module contained: (1) a lecture, in the form of an Adobe Presenter presentation with audio voiceover and accompanying written materials presented in PDF format, (2) an assignment that required participants to demonstrate understanding of the topic through written application of concepts presented, and (3) a short-answer quiz that was used to gain participants' qualitative feedback regarding the perceived efficacy of the module. The training was divided into two major sections, each covering a number of topics.

The first section, Modules 1-7, covered background information to help participants understand CLD students' academic and social development issues at school as products of culturally incongruent experiences, language, expectations, and demands. The first two modules, "Cultural Sensitivity/Cultural Awareness" and "Understanding Culture and its Influences," provided a synopsis of culture and its influence on the developing individual. Module 3, "Acculturation, Language and Culture," provided information about how the acculturation process shapes and determines a CLD individual's path in academic and socio-behavioral pursuits. Module 4, "How We Perceive and Treat the Culturally Different" contained information about the consequences of being from a racially, ethnically, and/or linguistically diverse background. Information in the first four modules set the stage for understanding how CLD students are alienated and the consequences of being shunned, which is presented in Module 5, "Alienation and its Influence on Students." Module 6, "Language Proficiency and Testing," explained how language proficiency is the primary factor that determines CLD students' academic, behavioral, and alienation problems that lead to teacher referral. The prominent role that the language issue plays in determining results in the assessment process was also covered. The consequences of inappropriate referrals and the inappropriate assessment and misdiagnosis of CLD students was the focus of Module 7, "Disproportionate Representation of Racial, Ethnic, and Linguistic Minorities in Special Education." The first section of the training was approximately 108 minutes in length, divided approximately equally across the seven modules.

The second section of the training provided specific information on the assessment process as it relates to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Topics covered in Modules 8 and 9 included: ethical guidelines for assessing diverse learners, psychometric properties of tests, contextual considerations (e.g., language proficiency), assessment tools, and test interpretation and judgment errors. The second section of the training was approximately 58 minutes in length, divided across the two modules.

Instruments

Two measures were used to assess the impact of the training on participants. Both were given prior to and after participants completed the training. The first measure, the Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE), is an 18-item self-report measure designed to measure multicultural attitudes. The items are divided into three subscales, Know, Care, and Act, which reflect Banks' transformative model that postulates important roles for knowledge, empathy and active experience in multicultural education (Banks, 1999). Items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Items on the MASQUE are to be summed (with several requiring reverse scoring) and a total score obtained using all 18 items (Munroe & Pearson, 2006). Higher scores on the MASQUE indicate more positive attitudes towards multiculturalism. Internal consistency of the MASQUE was calculated using Cronbach's alpha and indicates the scale has adequate reliability when the total score is used ($\alpha = .80$). Validity data on the measure indicates it has adequate content and discriminant validity (Munroe & Pearson, 2006).

Second, a series of six short-answer questions required participants to define terms and explain their understanding of certain concepts related to cultural diversity (e.g., define the terms racism, prejudice, discrimination, and stereotype; explain how factors such as poverty and powerlessness have influenced the current conditions of minority groups; and discuss the potential bias of two assessment instruments frequently used with CLD students in the assessment process). Responses were scored as correct/incorrect and a percentage correct was calculated for each participant at pre- and post-training. Unique to the post-assessment measure, a series of five open-ended questions designed to assess participants' opinions regarding the utility of the training was asked of the participants. The final question asked them to explain how they felt the training would impact their assessment practices.

Results

Quantitative Analyses

A matched pairs t-test (one-tailed) was used to compare participants' self-reported ratings on the MASQUE. Results indicated there was a significant difference in the self-report ratings on the MASQUE before ($M = 85.17$, $SD = 6.89$) and after ($M = 89.23$, $SD = 11.94$) participants completed the training modules, [$t(29) = 1.092$, $p = .036$], with higher ratings occurring at post-training.

A matched pairs t-test (one-tailed) was used to compare participants' percentage correct on the short-answer questions. One participant was excluded from this analysis due to incomplete data, resulting in a total of 29 data pairs. Responses were scored as correct/incorrect and a percentage correct was calculated for each participant pre- and post-training. Results indicated that there was a significant difference in percentage of questions answered correctly before ($M = 89.67$, $SD = 12.92$) and after ($M = 95.99$, $SD = 9.61$) participants completed the training modules [$t(28) = 2.262$, $p = .016$], with higher scores occurring at post-training.

Qualitative Analyses

Open-ended questions from a self-report survey were included in the post-survey. For the purpose of this study, responses to one of the open-ended question were analyzed (“Will the knowledge you’ve gained from this training help you in your assessment of students from diverse populations? Please explain”). The responses were analyzed through “analytic induction as summary accounts of the practical work of social exploration and derivation of ideas” (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, p.833). The 27 responses to the question were analyzed using an “open coding” strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to search for the largest categories to describe the data.

Three main themes of interest emerged: the multidimensionality of English language learners, challenges of assessment, and cultural influences from the participants self-report on how the training would assist them assess CLD students. According to participants, the aforementioned themes need to be addressed when assessing CLD students. Although participants reported they had received prior training on CLD students, most gained new knowledge. The following response reflects one participant’s change in her role, “. . . I will never look at assessment of students in the same way. I see my role as much more than just giving a series of tests and obtaining scores upon which decisions of eligibility are made.” This statement is insightful because (a) it suggests that new knowledge was gained from the training, (b) it critically reflects on the participant’s current practices in her current role, and (c) it defines changes that need to be made to accurately assess students from diverse populations.

Assessment professionals described the multidimensionality of English language learners and indicated they must look at more than the assessment scores to make appropriate recommendations. Moreover, they reported the acculturation of CLD students must also be examined. The training also assisted them to know what to look for and that there is much more to these students than what is visible and reported on assessment tools. Additionally, participants remarked about the importance of keeping up with current issues regarding CLD students.

The information presented in the modules also created an awareness of challenges participants will face to accurately assess CLD students. Assessment professionals discussed the process as tedious, requiring the use of multiple instruments and forms of assessment, (e.g., teacher reports and interviews). They also reported that assessment outcomes can be influenced by culture and that these influences cannot be gleaned from assessment instruments. Participants revealed that cultural incongruities between the assessor, teacher, and student can potentially impact assessment.

Although this data was not analyzed in a formal theory analysis, the researchers felt it was important to include participants’ views on how they will be able to implement the information gained from the training when they are assessing students from different populations. Self reported pithy quotes in Table 1 provide ways in which participants see themselves using the knowledge gained from the modules.

Discussion

Changes in the demographic makeup of today’s American schools and the continuing problem of overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special

education and their underrepresentation in gifted and talented classes requires that schools increase the cultural competence of their assessment professionals. Although the RtI process holds promise for improving the current state of affairs (Vanderwood & Nam, 2008), as does cross-battery assessment (Flanagan et al., 2007), each approach has yet to prove that they will have a significant impact in addressing the under- and over-representation of CLD students in special education and gifted/talented programs. In the absence of a perfect solution, there is still the need to train assessment professionals in competencies required to identify unique cultural attributes and other factors that contribute to CLD students' unexpected underachievement and behavioral concerns.

Although accredited training programs are required to include training in cultural competencies within their established curricula (e.g., APA CoA, 2002), the requirements for continuing professional development allow for opportunities to use innovative methods for improving the effectiveness of disseminating culturally relevant information so that future and practicing professional will become competent in educating CLD students. In addition to face-to-face training, online training is a venue for doing this. The results from the current study indicate that online training can result in an improvement in self-reported attitudes towards multicultural issues in education, an essential and important step in a professional's willingness to provide appropriate services to CLD students.

There are several findings in the present study that are important in providing equitable services to CLD students in schools. Among the important implications are the following:

- Assessment personnel view culturally relevant information as meaningful in their understanding the plight of CLD students.
- Participants learned that multiple factors can contribute to CLD students' unexpected and unexplained underachievement and behavioral attributes.
- It is imperative to measure the value of training on participants' attitudes and beliefs toward English language learners.

In addition to the findings about the training material, results of the present study on the use of online training of culturally related information provide important implications for teacher educators and school administrators. Several points about the viability of online training are listed as follows:

- Online training about cultural diversity may be more cost-efficient than traditional face-to-face training (e.g., little or no hard material duplication cost, less supplies expense, and less long-term instructional personnel cost).
- Because essential information is permanently captured, participants can review the same material as many times as desired or necessary to master the content.
- Specific aspects of an online training program can be selected to match relevant issues specific to given situations. Thus, online training can be highly individualized.
- Online training programs can be easily amended and/or updated to incorporate new culturally-relevant material.

- Online training provides opportunities for professionals to gain information on cultural diversity issues anonymously, who may otherwise perceive face-to-face training as intimidating or insulting.

The current study included several limitations. For instance, there are various issues with the use of self-report measures, many of which are reviewed in Mabe and West (1982). Second, the measures used in the study only evaluated the participants' knowledge and attitudes regarding cultural issues. Whether or not these have a direct impact on participants' behavior and assessment practices remains to be seen, but the literature suggests that increasing cultural knowledge is a necessary step in increasing cultural competence (Miranda, 2008). Results of the present study suggests that future research should investigate different avenues on how to impact not only assessment professional's attitudinal changes, but also their assessment practices and ultimately their eligibility decisions that impact students' educational and social futures.

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