

# From preschool to prison and somewhere in between: special education must strive to leave no child behind

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In the role of guest editor, I lamented capturing the urgency of the challenges that face educators, general and special education alike, researchers, service providers, special education teachers, families and communities, legislators, and policy makers during the next decade as they continue to grapple with legal, legislative, scholarly, and moral compasses to design and deliver an appropriate and accountable education to *all* children and youth. This sense of urgency to educate all children, including those with disabilities, is pervasive throughout national and statewide education reforms that, with each passing decade, seem to call for more and higher standards for student performance and accountability that students and their teachers meet these predetermined standards. Among those standards to be met include improving outcomes of “disadvantaged” students, boosting teacher quality, moving limited English proficient students to English literacy, promoting informed parental choice, encouraging school safety, increasing school funding, and encouraging freedom and accountability. However, in the fray of discussions about these efforts to rejuvenate K–12 general education and produce student outcomes at proficient levels, special educators continue to debate the inclusion, or rather potential exclusion, of students with disabilities and their rights to appropriate, individualized instruction in the face of school reform initiatives. As calls for improved educational outcomes for all children and youth are sent forth throughout the academic communities, so are national directives to “leave no child behind” (Bush, 2001, p. 1). Yet, as the authors in this special issue argue, without bold and culturally responsive interventions that are unique to those children likely left behind, including diverse learners with disabilities, *some* children will be not only left behind but also left out. They will be left out of both our research agendas and dialogues about best practices for students with disabilities. Thus, such omissions must be examined (see for e.g., Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997; Bos & Fletcher, 1997; Pugach, 2001).

Indeed, during the last three decades special education has witnessed laudable accomplishments in assuring access to quality and individualized special education for many students with disabilities. Without steadfast, unrelenting advocacy and agency, many of them, without cause, would have continued to be excluded from equal opportunities to learn in settings with their peers without disabilities or to develop their potentials fully. Special educators and other scholars, for example, continue their efforts to (a) identify and classify children using validated and valuable measures, (b) determine judiciously the kinds of heterogeneous classroom settings that will produce optimal learning for all children and (c) engage in theory building, evidence gather-

ing, and practical pursuits that encourage sustained teaching practices and instruction known to benefit children with difficulties in learning. As a result, many students with disabilities do benefit from quality special education services. Many students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, however, do not have access to either equitable instruction in general education programs or quality special education and leave school ill prepared to engage in productive, independent, and responsible living. Thus, special education continues to fall short in its mission to (a) find all individuals with disabilities based on multidisciplinary, culturally, and linguistically appropriate assessments and (b) provide them with specialized instruction unique to meet their educational needs (in this case, unique special education is culturally and linguistically responsive).

As we have learned from those who scrutinized our efforts on at least two occasions during the past 20 years (e.g., Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982), for the populations of children and youth highlighted in this special issue, we have not yet reached levels of knowledge or intervention that promote school achievement for *all* children at risk for or with disabilities. I attempted to illustrate in this special issue that the field's inability to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse youngsters effectively can begin with their entry into early childhood programs; it can continue well after their exodus from our classrooms; and, that, in between their entry into and exodus from special education many are at risk for never receiving appropriate services. For example, there is an increasing awareness that a substantial number of today's incarcerated youth and adults once called special education classes "homeroom." Although evidence mounts that disproportionality and inadequate service delivery remains commonplace for culturally and linguistically diverse groups, the field struggles to locate the "right" assessment tools and identification procedures, behavior, language, and academic intervention models, family and community involvement, inclusion models, and professional development programs. However, as Bos and Fletcher (1997) argued, appropriate service delivery for culturally and linguistically diverse learners with disabilities is possible only with the reexamination of current standards of special education research methodology and practice to include sociocultural frameworks that improve our understanding of how context and culture interacts with and influences students' achievement in today's classrooms. Pugach (2001) indicated that resolve to recurring phenomena (e.g., disproportionality) rests with qualitative storytelling that adds clarity to dialogue about the relationship of race, language, culture, socioeconomic status, gender *and* disability. Thus, the articles in this special issue are born out of this recognition that there remains a need for contextualized research and practice to meet the educational and social needs of all students with disabilities.

The authors in this special issue proffer different ways to conceptualize and research continuing and emerging challenges of providing special education services for culturally and linguistically diverse children and youth. They ask different questions and prompt us to ask questions differently. These authors describe the need to conduct research that is grounded contextually in schooling practices, sociopolitical mandates and constraints, and cultural and racial epistemologies to "unravel the knotty complexities of failed schooling experiences" (Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 61) for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their work represents a departure from status quo conceptual mantras and empirical validations of disability and appropriate treatment of individuals with disabilities and situates them as scholars with "epistemic responsibility" to the studied community (Code, 1987); that is, they

reject notions that disability can be understood only from a singular, often dominant culture, ways of knowing, and evidencing knowing, and instead point to the need for diversity in our research epistemologies (Pallas, 2001; see also, Scheurich & Young, 1997) to explain difference-disability phenomena. Further, it becomes clear that research and subsequent practice should be driven by teachers' and students' reality of their existence as they experience it. To understand how sociocultural and situational contexts determine special education status and identification for overwhelmingly disproportionate numbers of diverse learners, and the kinds of learning experiences they receive, becomes an important research-to-practice enterprise for educators, researchers, and policy makers.

This special issue begins with a qualitative analysis of the existing professional literature of multicultural and bilingual special education published over 27 years in five major special education journals. McCray and Garcia conceptualize a research agenda for multicultural and bilingual special education by documenting omissions in the empirical research to frame the need for a special education knowledge base that includes four themes: authenticity, legitimization, and multiplicity of voices; validation of culturally and linguistically responsive special education service delivery models and intervention; multicultural preparation of special educators; and underserved populations in special education. Next, Gay describes a theory of culturally responsive teaching for special education. This multicomponent approach to pedagogy includes elements such as critical cultural consciousness of teachers, culturally pluralistic classroom climates, diverse communities of learners, and multicultural curriculum and instruction. Gay argues that, without cultural responsiveness in our assessments, curricula, service delivery models, and professional development, education can never be the best it should be for students who are not part of the majority and mainstream of schools and society.

The special issue then focuses attention on the need for multicultural special education research. Moore-Reynolds examines African-American early childhood teachers' decisions to refer African-American students to programs for early intervention and early childhood special education. She argues that African-American teachers' referral decisions are grounded in their collective ways of knowing and socially constructed images of race and gender. African-American early childhood teachers, unlike their European-American counterparts, are likely to base their referrals on their own need for assistance in instructing the child or in finding assistance for the child. In the next paper, Webb-Johnson poses an interesting question in her qualitative study about the readiness of schools to address effectively the dimensions of African-American culture among students with behavior and emotional disorders. Webb-Johnson concludes that African-American learners often achieve limited academic success in classrooms because these settings are devoid of culturally responsive pedagogy; even students who were found working quietly and were behaviorally compliant were seldom found to be academically engaged. In an effort to link linguistic theory to research, Green tackles a 30-year-long educational concern for many African-American learners, namely, their use of African-American English (AAE) and school achievement. In fact, Green notes that very few topics have been debated in the literature as have issues related to language use and the education of African-American youth. Green posits that understanding constructions in the different components of AAE grammar will lead to more accurate descriptive analysis of the AAE system and be useful in advancing current linguistic theory and its application to special education research and practice.

In their work on identifying neglected and underserved groups in special education, Keith and McCray examine an uncharted area: juvenile offenders with special needs and their fragmented and incomplete educational opportunities. They provide an overview of major issues and challenges facing educators who must meet the educational needs of this group of adolescents, and offer that resolution to this problem requires a unique and collective effort of special education, the juvenile justice system, families and communities, and social services to provide equal education opportunity to incarcerated adolescents. Collective efforts will be necessary to address problems related to literacy development, recidivism, and school dropout. Trainor further extends the discussion of student outcomes through her work on culturally and linguistically diverse learners with learning disabilities. In her paper, she considers whether the current emphasis on teaching students with learning disabilities to be self-determining during postsecondary transition planning is beneficial for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. She concludes that qualitative research methods, used with student participants, have the potential to inform preferred practices as well as research gaps in special education by capturing how diverse students respond to self-determination during postsecondary transition planning.

Finally, Townsend addresses a major issue for the field today: the discontinuity between the demography of students with disabilities and the teachers who are trained to teach them. Townsend takes a bold step and calls for teacher preparation programs that are more culturally responsive and mandatory certification in culturally responsive pedagogy. Townsend grounds her position for this type of teacher preparation for diversity on lessons learned from a cross-cultural teacher education program and the participants' perspectives on this training.

Collectively, the authors in this special issue challenge us to reexamine our empirical and practical support for special education services to all children and youth with disabilities, especially for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In this endeavor special educators, researchers, and other scholars face two realities: There are stories we may choose to tell to improve special education services for students with disabilities (Pugach, 2001) *and* there are stories we must tell if we intend to leave no child behind.

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