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Restrictiveness and Race in Special Education: The Issue of Cultural Reciprocity

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The issue of segregation of students with disabilities across cultural groups is a function of cultural values demonstrated by charter schools and the resulting dissonance *between these values and those demonstrated by families. Lack of understanding about school culture and diverse family value systems can lead to varying family responses to the school culture, including assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Assuming a posture of cultural reciprocity is suggested as a means for education professionals in charter schools to more effectively understand families of children with disabilities. This four-step process includes (a) identifying the education professional's interpretation of family and child needs; (b) determining the degree to which the family values these assumptions and how the family's perceptions may be different; (c) acknowledging and respecting differences identified, and explaining the basis for professional assumptions; and (d) determining how to adapt professional interpretations or recommendations to the family's value system.*

Keywords: Culture, Values, Disability, Charter Schools

As the debate rages regarding charter schools and whether these institutions can appropriately serve children with disabilities (Donahoo, 2001; Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnigan, 2000; RPP International, 2000) educators are becoming increasingly aware of their responsibilities to examine the influence of culture and ethnicity on such institutions and how culture affects decision-making. Unfortunately, many education professionals continue to demonstrate relatively little understanding of variations across cultural and ethnic groups and how strongly held value systems may influence perceptions of and participation in schools. Nearly two-thirds of all the newly created charter schools have been started "to realize an alternative vision of schooling" (RPP International, 2000, p. 76), though this alternative will continue to inhibit participation by many families who have children with disabilities across cultural groups.

Many see the charter school movement as opportunity to act on strongly held values and create new schools that allow educators to do things differently in order to achieve their vision (Detrich, Phillips, & Durrett, 2002). This vision may have been influenced by seeing charter schools as alternatives to (a) prior negative experiences with the public schools (Ahearn, 2001) where insensitivity to the cultural values and needs of families may have been exhibited; or (b) realizing their best ideas about schooling children (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998). This, however, assumes that family members exercise *choice* and are *proactive* in educational decision-making about their children. Unfortunately, many families may be reluctant to

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exercise such choice and initiative given strongly held cultural values that education professionals should make decisions for them and their children since educators are deemed to be experts (Parette & Huer, 2002; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2002). The extent to which acculturation occurs across families, or their alignment with values of the mainstream culture or particular school cultures also varies markedly (Parette, Huer, & Scherer, 2004).

The issue of de facto segregation of students with disabilities across cultural groups suggested in the study by Fierros and Blomburg may, in fact, be principally a function of shared cultural values demonstrated by charter schools and the resulting *dissonance* between these values and those demonstrated by many families. Dissonance between school values and those of families have been examined for decades (Boykin, 1994; Gordon & Yowell, 1994; Greenbaum, 1985; Moore, 1985; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1994; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1992). For example, African American children, both with and without disabilities, often prefer and do better in cooperative learning settings, while Euro-American students prefer and do better in competitive learning settings (Boykin & Bailey, 2000; Parette, 1998). Other research suggests a relation between cultural differences in child-rearing environments and intelligence test performance (Moore, 1985). Cultural dissonance may also lead to erroneous interpretations of parent behaviors (e.g., head nodding during conferences that might be interpreted as agreement vs. affirmation of having heard and giving deference to the professional position), creating misunderstandings between home and school (Misra, 1994; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1994). Cultural differences have also been reported to affect the responses that family members have to disability (i.e., they may perceive disability more or less favorably than school professionals; Chan, 1986; Hanline & Daley, 1992; Zborowsky, 1969), as well as their willingness to receive interventions from professionals who use interaction styles that differ from those used by families (e.g., authoritarian or nonauthoritarian) (Harry et al., 1995; McGoldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1982).

However, despite the presence of dissonance among families from varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds, professionals in special education have historically expected families to adapt to the expectations of the Euro-American culture (Correa, 1987). Given that charter schools focus on *shared values and needs* among children and families that they serve (Grove, 2004; JoanneJacobs.com, 2003), this unquestionably may result in less diverse school settings and more homogeneous value systems, resulting in the increases reflected in White charter school enrollments reported by Fierros and Blomburg. If a charter school is designed to address certain values, e.g., independent thinking, competition, and individual achievement (Schneider, 1999), it may be less attractive to families who value cooperation, responsibility to the group (vs. the individual), and being accepted by the community. Such values have been reported for many Hispanic, African American, and Native American individuals (Lynch & Hanson, 1997; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2002) who may also have children with disabilities. High context cultures, such as Asian American, Native American, Hispanic (Hall, 1974, 1984; Lynch, 1997) and African American, place greater emphasis on the amount of information transmitted through the context of situations, the relationship of persons involved in the interaction, and physical cues. In a charter school setting that emphasizes oral transmission of information with less emphasis on context,

some families may choose not to participate given the dissonance between their preferred communication styles and what is valued in the charter setting, i.e., they refuse not to be assimilated (Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002; Swaidan & Marshall, 2001). Such differences in values—those demonstrated by the charter school and those of families—might very well militate against family decisions to participate in charter schools, particularly if charter personnel are not well-trained in family and culturally sensitive communication approaches.

The issue of insensitivity to families from varying cultural backgrounds may further be exacerbated if charter school personnel are unfamiliar with the various cultural positions that a family may present. For example, families may have interaction styles and behaviors that are (a) *monocultural* (i.e., based on their own individual cultural backgrounds or their perceived similarity to others) (Smart & Smart, 1992); (b) *bicultural* (i.e., identifying with two cultural groups and interact comfortably with both (Hanson, Lynch, & Wayman, 1990); or (c) *multicultural* (i.e., identifying with the value systems of more than two groups).

Families and their children across cultural groups are also affected by the process of *acculturation* that involves the extent of accommodation to a *newly introduced* culture experienced by an individual (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Parette et al., 2004). It is recognized that the process of acculturation varies markedly across individuals in the U.S. where there is both an overarching national culture and ethnic and other subsocieties and institutions (Banks, 1997). Families and their children with disabilities will belong to the U.S. culture, or *macroculture,* that includes many microcultural groups, each participating in the macroculture to varying degrees while simultaneously retaining aspects of the respective microcultures (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Factors such as “race, ethnicity, nationality, language, social status, and geographic location are key ingredients to the pattern of identity that emerges” (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999, p. 4). Compounding the problem is the fact that children with disabilities, families, and charter school personnel can develop affiliations with the norms and expectations of other groups and organizations that have differing mores and experiences, such as specific disability, family, or professional organizations. Some charter school personnel, as with public school personnel, may thus be disadvantaged socially since they are required to consume and value the cultural products produced by others (e.g., team decision-making strategies, curriculum; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Smart & Smart, 1997). This often results in the presentation of cultural products that reflect Euro-American, middle class values (Benner, 1998; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999), and *not* necessarily the values of particular cultural groups. For example, top-down, highly structured administrative structures in public schools (as well as business, the military, churches, and other institutions in the U.S.) are often dissonant with values that may be espoused by groups of individuals within schools who are from non-Euro-American backgrounds, and who may strongly feel that shared decision-making among all stakeholders is important (Edmund, 1998; Else, 2000). When such espoused values are not demonstrated in practice, family members may recognize the dissonance in values. Scherer (2003) has referred to this as the *hidden curriculum,* and the resulting dissonance can make families react in a variety of ways to the prevailing, or mainstream values of the school (Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992;

Berry & Sam, 1997). When families and school staff differ in their opinions about a child's special education needs, it may become apparent to families that the goals of the school staff are aligned with the goals of the school district (i.e., the hidden curriculum) (Scherer, 2003) rather than with those of the individual student, thus presenting a conflict for families (Harry, 1992b).

The family may become assimilated and simply adopt all of the values that are presented within the school culture, and choose not to identify with other values previously deemed important by the family. Some cultural groups prefer not to be assimilated (Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002; Swaidan & Marshall, 2001) in varying aspects of American society, including public schools. Other families will become integrated, clinging to certain strongly held cultural values while also desiring a high level of interaction with the school culture (Laroche, Kim, Hui, & Joy, 1996; Swaidan & Marshall, 2001). Still other families might respond by separation, or seeking low levels of interaction with the school culture while desiring a close connection with and affirmation of their native culture (Parette et al., 2004; Swaidan & Marhall, 2001). Finally, there may be other families who choose to respond to the prevailing value system of the school by being marginalized, or choosing not to cling to either of the conflicting value systems exhibited. For example, there has been a lengthy history of marginalizing persons with disabilities in the U.S. (Hahn, 2000; Hanks, n.d.). Separation involves resistance to the dominant culture and its value systems and attempts to change the environment where the person lives (Swaidan & Marhall, 2001). To summarize, then, successful school experiences occur to the extent that students, families, and professionals adhere to a primarily Euro-American "prescribed set of cultural content delivered through a narrowly defined curriculum and set of behaviors" (Carolan, 2001). This may manifest itself in discouraging families with children having disabilities from various ethnic groups from applying for admission, while justifying such practices due to (a) lack of fit between the student's needs and the school's curriculum or instructional approach; (b) concern about behavior problems; (c) inadequate student-staff ratio; (d) lack of needed related services (Fiore, et al., 2000); and of course (e) *choice* (Donahoo, 2001).

Both students with disabilities and their families have historically been expected to adapt to what has been offered, with the expectation that this would perpetuate relationships among groups in the social system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). However, dissonance (and choices not to participate) may occur when efforts to provide services operate under the assumption that children with disabilities and their families must adapt to the products and processes created by others that diverge markedly from their own. This recognition has led researchers to advocate for *cultural reciprocity*, or shared understanding of the cultures of professionals and families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Cultural reciprocity cannot flourish in environments where shared values result in homogeneous groups of students, and results in reticence on the part of families to participate in the charter school environment. Simply being aware of cultural influences on school participation is not enough to ensure effective collaboration with and participation by families across cultures. As noted by Kalyanpur and Harry (1999), *awareness* is merely the framework for such collaboration. It is just as important to provide strength to the collaborative relationship with families by

having *knowledge* about the beliefs and values of all parties. Developing cultural reciprocity may be achieved using a 4-step process that involves (a) identifying cultural values underlying the professional's interpretation of the family and/or student's school needs or in the recommendation for service; (b) determining whether the family recognizes and values professionally held assumptions, and if not, how their perception differs from that of the professional/s; (c) acknowledging and demonstrating respect to any cultural differences identified, and fully explaining the cultural basis of the professional assumptions; and (d) determining the most effective way to adapt professional interpretations or recommendations to the value system of the family (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

Unfortunately, while educators have attempted to better understand the values of broad cultural groups, relatively little is still known about the culture of disability, particularly within specific ethnic groups (Lynch & Hanson, 1997; Stone, 2004), where perceptions of disability and responsibility for providing services may differ markedly. It has been noted that disability categories are defined according to middle-class developmental norms (Luft, 1995) that reflect Western medical interpretations of disability (Harry, 1992a), and that such interpretations are arbitrary (National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research, 1999). Charter schools, like any other school setting, reflect an array of values that has been shaped by individuals and groups who share a specific constellation of experiences, acculturation influences, perceptions of disability, and other characteristics that are not easily understood, but which, in the final analysis result in the types of issues discussed by Fierros and Blomburg.

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