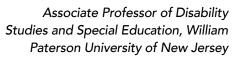## Teachers' Corner

Moving Past the Present, the Future Must Be Bright: A Journey of Special Education for DEIJ

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History of IDEA

While multiple landmark legislative decisions have defined the laws of special education, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), frequently referred to as P.L. 94-142, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), are often referred to as the foundation for special education today. Prior to 1975, special education existed in only a few locations across the country. In 1975, Congress passed P.L. 94-142, special education legislation that provided:

1. Guidance to states for individualized, appropriate, free and public education access for ALL children;
2. Financial assistance for special education and related services;
3. Procedural safeguards or protections;
4. Guidelines around integration into the least restrictive environment (LRE); and
5. Appropriate testing and evaluation materials and procedures.

Changes to EAHCA have occurred during reauthorization periods, but they also continue to take place in response to litigation and activism by disabled individuals and their parents. Most notably, in 1990 EAHCA was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This changed the identification and terminology of the law, but the basic principles remained the same, e.g., LRE, IEP, and FAPE. Under IDEA, (a) students must be identified within at least one of the 13 categories of disability, (b) that the disability interferes with their access to education, and (c) that they must receive special education services (IDEA, 2004).

Despite the nature and intent of the legislation, these laws do not guarantee that all students are educated in the general education classroom, have access to the general education curriculum, or that *disproportionality* (i.e., when there is a difference between the proportion of a given demographic group identified for special education in general or within specific categories) is dismantled. Originally noted by Dunn's (1968) seminal article, patterns of disproportionality in special education have persisted for decades (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Disproportionality exists when assessment, instruction, and disciplinary procedures are not responsive to the individual needs of diverse students which in turn limits access to the general education curriculum and creates more restrictive placements for students (Skiba et al., 2011). For example, students who are male and Black tend to be overrepresented in high-incidence disability categories (i.e., categories with large numbers of identified students relative to other disability categories). Native Alaskan and Native American students are overrepresented in the category of specific learning disability (SLD). Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students tend to be underrepresented in the gifted and talented category, whereas Asian and Pacific Islander students are underrepresented in almost every category (Hosp & Reschly, 2004).

Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD)

Founded in 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the success of youth with disabilities. CEC played a major role in bringing the EAHCA law to fruition, as well as advocating for addressing disproportionality in special education. Founded as a **Special Interest Division** of CEC, the

Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD) is an organization composed of people committed to enhancing the quality of life of youth and adults with intellectual disability and/or other developmental disabilities, and autistic individuals. DADD seeks to promote and disseminate research-based practices (e.g., practices that have been subjected to scrutiny under high-quality experimental conditions), but we also recognize that *intersectionality*, (i.e., another way to view disproportionality; a framework used to understand how multiple overlapping social identities impact and oppress certain populations; Crenshaw, 1991) has not been consistently addressed in teacher education programs (Gay, 2002). In other words, race, ethnicity, and disability all coexist and intersect as they relate to the PreK–12 environment and special education (Boveda & Aronson, 2019), and unless special education practitioners are purposefully being taught to identify, analyze, and incorporate their students' holistic identities, experiences, and needs into their daily practices, they may not be equipped to fully support their students. The impact of intersectionality can be addressed through culturally-sustaining, evidence-based instructional practices (Boveda & Aronson, 2019; Whitford & Carrero, 2019). In the following sections, we offer tools aligned with these instructional practices that practitioners can embed within the school environment and in clinical settings.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Across the United States (US), students of color (i.e., Black, Hispanic/Latine, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American) have experienced a deep-rooted history of institutionalized racism that has led to inequitable access to education, and ultimately disparate educational outcomes (Hugh-Pennie et al., 2022). Although student demographics in US schools are becoming much more diverse, the teacher workforce does not share this diversity. Implementing *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP) allows teachers to bridge these socio-cultural gaps and provide equitable educational experiences. CSP focuses on the cultural and linguistic identities, knowledge, and experiences of diverse persons; rather students, family/caregivers, and/or communities. This strength-based approach affirms that culture is a fluid collection of beliefs and practices that varies across socio-cultural identities and can use these funds of knowledge to enrich the experiences of all involved. Adopting CSP helps practitioners highlight and validate their students' and clients' identities and engage the communities they represent. Research has shown that when embedding CSP, student performance in attendance, engagement, and academic success has increased (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Using Culturally Sustaining Practices in Schools

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) may look very different from classroom to classroom due to the focus on the students' identities and backgrounds that are embedded into the school environment. However, several common elements can be seen when using CSP, such as incorporating student and intergenerational community agency and inputs; supporting positive

relationships with the land and the people; centering dynamic communities and their languages, practices, and knowledge; and providing structured opportunities to contend with internalized oppressions and stigmas (IES, n.d.). Across educational agencies, individual classrooms, and schoolwide programs, CSP can be embedded with ongoing Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Integrated Multi-tiered Systems of Support (I-MTSS) practices, and the use of cultural informants.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework that differentiates the ways students engage with material, the ways practitioners represent knowledge, and the actions and expressions students use to showcase that knowledge. When practitioners adopt CSP with UDL, students have designed and curated opportunities to access knowledge and showcase their understanding in a way that is meaningful to them (Griendling et al., 2023). Through embedding CSP with UDL, practitioners create a "crosswalk" (Kieran & Anderson, 2019) that promotes strategies such as culturally mediated instruction, student centered instruction, learning with a context of culture, reshaping the curriculum, seeing teachers as facilitators of knowledge, and communicating high expectations. For example, instead of using the traditional poems in the language arts curriculum, have students analyze their favorite songs and look for literary devices. Instead of doing basic addition fact sheets, students could create grocery budgets for their local food store and go with their guardian to see math strategies in daily living.

Another common educational framework is Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for academic growth (i.e. Response to Intervention, RTI) and behavior interventions (i.e. Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, PBIS). Educational environments that combine the academic growth and behavioral interventions into a single Integrated-MTSS or I-MTSS and then infuse this with CSP have shown great success across research (Brown et al., n.d.; Freeman-Green et al., 2021; Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018). Embedding CSP into I-MTSS creates an equitable environment for all learners and fosters inclusivity. This combination will look different as practitioners work within the various tiers of an I-MTSS model embedded with CSP. For example, within Tier 1, practitioners can select materials and curriculum that includes multiple representations and diverse voices and reflect how current classroom policies and procedures may marginalize certain populations within the school. In small groups or Tier 2, students can share elements of their culture and family history for writing prompts or enrichment activities. For Tier 3 individualized instruction, practitioners can focus on using student and family centered approaches for assessments, instruction, and evaluations. Through combining CSP and I-MTSS, practitioners can implement specialized interventions that are culturally responsive, sustaining, and intersectional (Griendling et al., 2023).

One way practitioners can incorporate CSP without using existing educational frameworks is the use of cultural informants. A *cultural informant* is an individual who is knowledge-

able of the nuance and practices of their own culture AND can communicate these practices effectively to those outside of their culture (Fuller et al., 2024). Cultural informants provide real life accounts from diverse voices that have historically been silenced or underrepresented in educational curriculum and policy. Through concepts like storytelling and counter-storytelling (a key tenet of Critical Race Theory), cultural informants can be incorporated into classroom discussions, invited as guest speakers to see diverse perspectives, or used as resources for programing and implementation.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Applied Behavior Analysis

Despite the growing diversity among students, teachers are still largely white, and primarily [cisgender] female. These statistics also extend to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) professionals (Hugh-Pennie et al., 2022). Nearly 72% of Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) are white.

ABA is not a single intervention, but rather a range of practices and procedures such as discrete trial teaching, pivotal response training, reinforcement, and verbal behavior training (Anderson, 2023). For many autistic students and their families, ABA has been the first recommendation to address student support needs (Anderson, 2023). ABA, however, has also been deemed incompatible with some autistic self-advocates' goals for interventions because, according to Anderson (2023) it (a) is historically rooted in a deficit orientation of "fixing" the autistic person and (b) causes psychological and/or physical harm (i.e., trauma).

Despite the contentious history of ABA, behavior analysts have contributed to the science of teaching and have the capacity to support classroom-based pedagogy (Hugh-Pennie et al., 2022) through the implementation of culturally responsive, ethical, strengths-based practices, grounded in principles of behavior. Coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings, *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP) is a conceptual framework that highlights specific behaviors that effective teachers implement to support Black students in the classroom (Hugh-Pennie et al., 2022). Behavior analysts, educators, and related service providers can engage support behavior using strategies that are grounded in cultural competence, sociopolitical awareness, and designed to ensure academic excellence. Behavior analysts, educators, and related service providers who provide behavioral support for students with disabilities can:

- Demonstrate *cultural competence* by helping students understand their cultural history and background, and by engaging in classroom instruction that intentionally reflects elements of students' cultures.
- Help students develop their *sociopolitical awareness* (or critical consciousness), which is the ability to critique the world and make connections to the bigger picture. As students develop this skill, they can begin to challenge and shift social norms that often facilitate and sustain disparities. Educators can facilitate this process by incorporating social issues into classroom lessons

and guiding students through critical self (Hugh-Pennie et al., 2022).
- Strive for their students' *academic excellence* by ensuring that multiply marginalized students have access to the "culture of power." In other words, professionals must help students understand how their knowledge of the dominant culture can impact academic access and outcomes (Hugh-Pennie et al., 2022).

Summary

ABA has a contentious past and currently still faces critique, but culturally relevant pedagogy can be applied to the principles of behavior to provide supports for disabled students and honor students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. Furthermore, educational professionals who utilize CSP within the classroom can increase student engagement and offer diverse perspectives not usually presented in traditional curriculum. Professionals in these spaces must be committed to implementing evidence-based practices that are ethical, socially valid for individuals with disabilities, and rooted in culturally sustaining pedagogy. To do this, professionals must continue to educate themselves on ways to embed CSP into classroom and behavioral practices and seek diversity and inclusion in policy and practice. Using these practices promotes a brighter future for diverse students within special education, and society as a whole. ■

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