Cultural Humility and Universal Design for Learning as Disrupters for Disproportional Placement of Students of Color in Special Education

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Abstract

In this Opinion article, co-written by a self-identified White female PhD student, a self-identified Black female PhD student, and a self-identified White female professor, who have collectively taught elementary and secondary students with and without disabilities from a range of ethnicities who lived in urban, suburban, and rural regions in the United States and in international locations, the authors contend that students of color from multiple countries are disproportionately placed in special education. The authors describe how educators who develop cultural humility and implement universal design for learning techniques can be more sensitive to all students and more responsive to diverse learners.

Keywords: Cultural humility; Universal design for learning; Disproportionality; Students with disabilities; Special education; Implicit bias; Students of color; Marginalized students; Pandemic

Opinion

Internationally, students of color (SOC) are found eligible for special education services at disproportional rates [1-4]. For example, in the United States (U.S.), although Black students represent about 14% of the school-aged population, 18% are placed in special education [4]. Despite calls for employing culturally sensitive screening and evaluation practices as part of the special education eligibility process [5, 6] and remedying structural inequalities and cultural barriers that contribute to disproportionality [1], the preponderance of international research indicates "teachers have more negative implicit attitudes toward marginalized groups" [7]. We contend that it is prior to when general educators refer students for potential placement in special education that changed mindsets and pedagogies are needed. With over 79% of the teacher population in the U.S. identifying as White [8], they may be unaware how implicit biases influence their differentiated responses to SOC compared to White students [9]. In order to disrupt the pattern of SOC being disproportionately referred to and placed in special education services, examination of instructional environments and teachers' pedagogical responsiveness must occur. We focus on two critical disruption actions: educators developing cultural humility and implementing universal design for learning pedagogies.

Cultural Humility

The concept of cultural humility is rooted in the fields of medicine and public health, and it was developed in response to concerns that cultural competence and multicultural education, or simply attaining cultural knowledge, were not enough to disrupt systemic inequities and disparate health outcomes [10]. Tervalon and Murray-García [11] define cultural humility as a "lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing power imbalances" (p. 117). While educators in recent years have been schooled in multicultural education as well as cultural competence perspectives, these do not go far or deep enough to bring about and sustain the changes needed to disrupt the disproportionate referral of SOC for special education services. There is an urgent need for educators to embrace the diversity, strengths, and assets of all their students rather than misinterpreting cultural difference as disability and referring them for special education services [12].

Cultural humility engages educators in the work of truly knowing their diverse students and themselves so they can actively disrupt cultural bias and oppression. The four core values of cultural humility are: (1) an openness to interacting with culturally diverse individuals; (2) self-awareness or an understanding of one's own implicit biases, values, and beliefs; (3) a process of mutual and respectful dialogue and information seeking; and (4) a lifelong process of self-reflection and critique [13, 14]. Educators who practice cultural humility to learn from and with students and their families gain a better understanding of their students' learning needs within the context of their cultural communities, allowing educators to integrate this cultural understanding into their instructional practice and learning environments. This knowledge of the depths and complexities of students' experiences and culture can also have a profound impact on the disproportionate referral of SOC to special education by disrupting deficit views and lowered expectations for diverse learners. Moreover, such views and expectations must be authentically and rightfully replaced by valuing the students' cultural experiences and capital [15]. Engagement in the action-oriented, anti-bias, and anti-racist work of cultural humility prohibits stereotyping of students from diverse backgrounds, generates mutual trust, and allows educators to remove or restructure barriers to learning for marginalized students and their families [13, 16]. Cultural humility is one step in disrupting disproportionate patterns of referral for SOC.

Universal Design for Learning

Students of color are racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse, and they are uniquely impacted by public issues and environmental unrest. If K-12 educators and schools are to be a part of the solution to current pressing international issues of racism, injustices, and civic discourse, practitioners need to shift in ways that center on those issues [17]. Diverse schools and students require a coherent change from the traditional curriculum to be inclusive of universal design for learning (UDL) and culturally humility.

Student diversity requires educators to align their perspective and pedagogy in acknowledging the effect of distinct student characteristics on teaching and learning. Basham et al. [18] note that prior to the pandemic, the underlying foundation and assumptions of the current education system were unstable and in need of evolutionary and disruptive change. Further, these authors state that while the long-term impacts associated with the pandemic are yet unrealized, the global education community must determine whether this is a temporary disruption to business-as-usual or a seismic shift in educational practice. We assert that pedagogical restructuring must remove barriers to learning, which have been traditionally experienced by students with disabilities and other marginalized youth, by embracing practices that are universally designed.

Teaching diverse learners is a complex task with high demands for student proficiency [19]. Without an awareness of how these students' varied and valuable attributes impact learning, there is a danger of disproportionate representation in special education and a possibility of confusing one's disability with one's diversity [1,17]. The UDL framework provides a tool to account for learner variability and maximize student learning. However, using UDL principles without explicitly considering how cultural differences and perspectives affect learning may increase the disparity in achievement for students of color [21, 15]. UDL provides the foundation for supporting diverse learners by crafting a research-based planning framework that guides teachers' instructional decision-making [22].

CAST [23] present UDL as a framework to increase engagement and learning outcomes that is responsive to the characteristics of students with disabilities, yet broadly, UDL was designed as a means to *teach every learner.* Consequently, educators using UDL to *teach every learner* have the potential to be responsive to each learner's diversity, thus promoting success through multiple and flexible UDL pedagogies, which rest on three principles [24]. First, *multiple means of engagement* focus educators on ways to increase students' interest, motivation, and perseverance with learning while promoting high expectations for each learner. This domain has a goal of producing expert learners who are purposeful and motivated. Second, by *multiple means of representation,* teachers can present information to students to include differentiation in the delivery of information and ways students understand information, options for written and spoken language, and options for comprehension. This domain produces expert learners who are resourceful and knowledgeable. Third, *multiple means of action and expression* include various ways that teachers can utilize formative and summative assessment to evaluate and assess students as well as engage students in self-evaluation, thus producing expert learners who are strategic and goal oriented. Moreover, pedagogies derived from the UDL framework evidence learning for students with and without disabilities in general education settings [25, 26], thus corroborating responsiveness to all learners' needs.

Conclusion

There is an acute need to train and retain a teacher workforce willing and able to foster equity for students from nondominant racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds [5]. Such equity can be realized when educators combine cultural humility and UDL-based pedagogies toward capitalizing on learners' capacities to achieve. Our focus is not on disbanding special education services. Rather, our focus is on disrupting disproportional placement of SOC in special education by reconceptualizing how educators perceive and respond to learners' diversity through embracing cultural humility within the context of UDL. The impact of an educator's work is deeply woven within teacher and student identity as well as culture, history, and experiences that teachers and students bring to a classroom [5]. General and special educators are called to become more explicit and present in

discourse about ability, race, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers. As more teachers assume an equity and social justice praxis [17], we maintain that a changed institutional culture that demonstrates accountability to this focus requires cultural humility. Diverse schools and students require a change in the traditional curriculum toward implementation of universally designed practices that are culturally responsive. When cultural humility is practiced within universally designed classroom contexts, more students' needs can be met, thus reducing special education services for students of color who are diverse, but do not have disabilities.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare they have no economic or conflict of interests to report.

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