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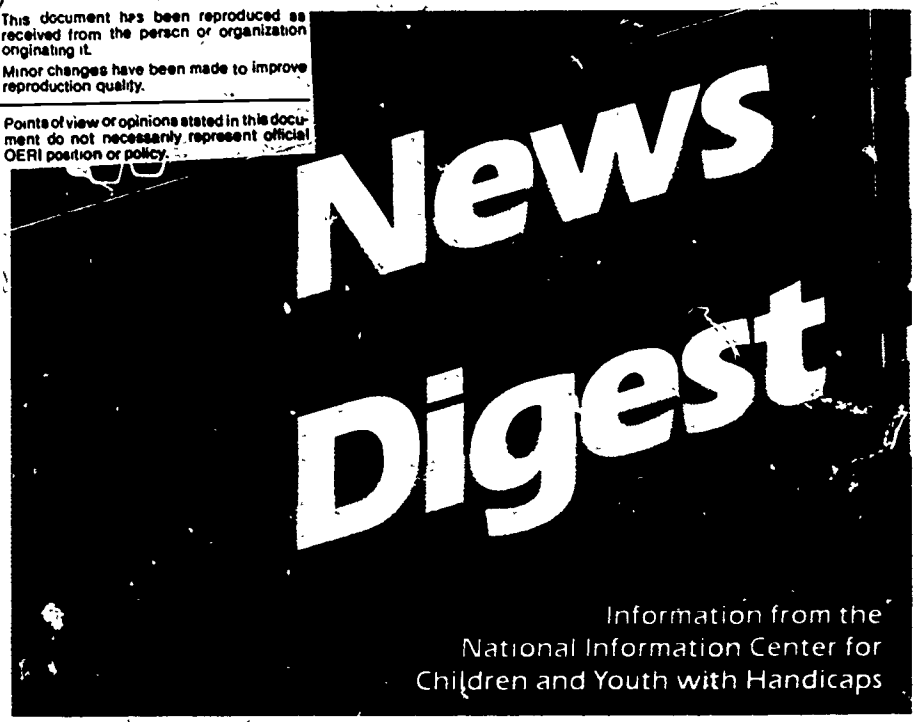
ABSTRACT

This edition of the newsletter of the National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth is intended to help special educators and human service professionals improve the availability of services to handicapped children from minority groups. The first part of the paper focuses on current trends including: (1) the increase in the number of minority children attending U.S. schools; (2) the persistence of poverty in minority communities; (3) the vulnerability of minority children to developing disabilities early in life; and (4) the placement of disproportionate numbers of minority children in special education classes. The second section makes specific suggestions for increasing the number of special education teachers from minority groups; for increasing the sensitivity of special educators to minority concerns, and for enhancing the effectiveness of outreach to minority communities. (DB)

# MINORITY ISSUES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A PORTRAIT OF THE FUTURE




1987 NUMBER 9

Providing an appropriate and effective education for minority group students who are both exceptional and come from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds is one of the important challenges facing special educators.

This issue of *News Digest* has been written to help special educators and human service professionals improve the availability of services to children from minority groups. The first part of this paper focuses on trends that make improved services to minority children with disabilities an important concern. These trends include: 1) the increase in the number of minority children attending U.S. schools, 2) the persistence of poverty in minority communities, 3) the vulnerability of minority children to developing disabilities early in life, and 4) the placement of disproportionate numbers of minority children in special education classes. The second section makes specific suggestions for 1) increasing the number of special education teachers from minority groups, 2) increasing the sensitivity of special educators to minority concerns, and 3) enhancing the effectiveness of outreach to minority communities.

## Growth in Minority School Enrollments

The United States is in the midst of a shift in the racial composition of its population which has important implications for all aspects of public education including special education services. According to the 1980 census, 50 million (21 percent) of the 240 million Americans were black, Hispanic or Asian. (Information on population is presented in summary form. Readers wishing a more complete discussion of this topic are urged to consult "Today's Numbers, Tomorrow's Nation: Demography's Awesome Challenge to the Schools," *Education Week* (May 14, 1986).) Demographic projections indicate that shortly after the turn of the century, one out of every three Americans will be non-white. The growth in the population of Hispanics is especially noteworthy. Between 1970 and 1980, Hispanics increased their number in the U.S. population by 61 percent. A recent Census Bureau estimate indicates that the Hispanic population has grown an additional 30 percent since 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1987). Comparative growth rates for the period 1970 to 1980 were 6 percent for whites, 18 percent for blacks and 11 percent for the U.S. population as a whole. According to the 1980 census, Hispanics represented 6.4 percent (14.6 million) of the U.S. population, and blacks represented 11.7 percent (26.5 million). If current growth rates continue, by the turn of the century Hispanics will outnumber blacks and become the largest segment of the minority population.

Also of importance to the growth of minority populations is the high rate of immigration experienced in the last few years. For instance, in 1985 an estimated 544,000 immigrants entered this country legally. An estimated 3,500,000 illegal immigrants came into the country during the same year. A high percentage of both legal and illegal immigrants came from Central America, Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean. Forty percent of the legal entrants came from Asia.

These statistics are important because school systems are among the first institutions to reflect demographic changes. Significant changes have already become apparent in the nation's public schools. Minority school enrollment has increased at the same time that white enrollment has decreased. In 1970, the nation's public schools were 21 percent non-white; by 1980, the systems were 27 percent non-white. The impact of the diversity in the school population is heightened by the continuing high rates of immigration from countries in Asia, South America and Central America. Currently, in each of the 25 largest school systems in the country, minority students comprise the majority. Black school enrollment is highest in Washington, DC, Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia. Hispanic students are most heavily represented in New Mexico, Texas, California, and Arizona. California currently has a majority of minority students in its elementary schools. Forty-six percent of students enrolled in the public schools in Texas are black or Hispanic.

The disproportionate placement of minority children in special education programs is a concern because such placement has the potential of stigmatizing the child both in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of society.

## Vulnerability of Minority Populations to Factors that Increase the Risk for Developing Disabilities Early in Life

Children from minority populations have a greater risk of developing disabilities early in life. Drug and alcohol abuse by pregnant women, prenatal infection, poor maternal nutrition, prematurity and low birthweight have been cited as potential causes of disabilities and developmental complications. These same factors have also been linked to the high rate of infant mortality and low birthweight among blacks and other minority populations (Report of the Secretary of Health and Human Service's Task Force on Black & Minority Health (Vol VI, Infant Mortality and Low Birthweight), 1986).

Between 6.8 and 7 percent of all the babies born in the U.S. are low birthweight, less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces. The low birthweight rate for blacks is more than twice the rate for whites (12. 5 percent compared with 5.7 percent). Blacks account for 16.5 percent of all live births and 30 percent of all low birthweight births. Certain other minority groups such as Puerto Ricans and Filipinos also have higher than average rates of low birthweight.

The implication of these findings is that there continues to be a great likelihood that relatively large numbers of black and other minority children will develop conditions that will require special education services.

## The Impact of Poverty

The Census Bureau has estimated that there were 32.4 million Americans living in poverty during 1986 (13.6 percent of the population). Black people had a poverty rate of 31.1 percent during 1986. The rate was higher than the 1978 rate of 30.6 percent. Similarly, the poverty rate for Hispanic people was 27.3 percent, a figure above the 1978 rate of 21.6 percent.

Seven million American families were living in poverty in 1986. Twenty-two percent of children under six were poor. Black children under six had a poverty rate of 45.6 percent, Hispanic children 40.7 percent, and white children 17.7 percent (Pear, 1987).

While the fact that a child is poor does not automatically mean that he or she will have difficulty in school, poverty can lead to health problems and influence social environment in ways that can interfere substantially with the child's ability to learn. Children from poor families are more likely to have low birthweights, higher rates of infant mortality and a higher risk for developing disabilities and health problems early in life. Furthermore, problems associated with poverty such as unemployment and cultural isolation can affect the emotional climate in the home and adversely affect the ability of parents to provide guidance to their children (Chan and Rueda, 1979). The strong link between poverty and the prevalence of disabling conditions and learning problems makes the persistence of poverty among members of minority groups a significant concern to special educators.

## Placement of a Disproportionate Number of Minority Students in Special Education

For a long time observers have noted that a disproportionate number of minority group students have been placed in special education classes serving such stigmatizing categories as Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR), Trainable Mentally Retarded (TMR), and Seriously Emotionally Disturbed (SED). A study analyzing statistics gathered from a nationwide survey of school districts by the Office for Civil Rights found that EMR and TMR labels were the most disproportionately assigned. A minority student was found to be 2.3 times more likely than a white student to be classified as EMR. A minority student was 1.7 times as likely to be classified as TMR and 1.4 times as likely to be classified as SED ( based on statistics appearing in Killalea Associates, Inc., 1980, cited in Finn, 1982).

The disproportionate placement of minority children in special education programs is a concern because such placement has the potential of stigmatizing the child both in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of society. Placement in a special education program frequently means placement in a setting which is to one degree or another segregated from students in regular education. Inappropriate identification of minority students as having disabilities increases the likelihood that they will be unnecessarily segregated.

Bickel (1982) states that standardized I.Q. tests tend to dominate EMR placement decisions. Such standardized tests have been criticized as: (1) using items that are based on white, middle class values and experiences, (2) putting children whose linguistic styles are different than the majority culture at a disadvantage, (3) sampling cognitive styles opposed to those found in many children from low-income families, (4) penalizing minority children because the test is administered in a racially or culturally differ-

ent setting, such as when those administering the tests are white and the group taking the test are predominantly black, and (5) scoring children's performance based on norms derived from predominantly white, middle class standardization groups (Bailey & Harbin, 1980).

Recommendations aimed at reducing the likelihood of inappropriately identifying minority students have emphasized the need to broaden the process of identification and assessment beyond the standardized tests now used. One important element in a completely nonbiased assessment is an evaluation of the child's needs from an ecological perspective. This means that a child's performance must be evaluated within the total environment in which he or she functions, including the home, the school, peer groups , and community (Bailey & Harbin, 1980).

## The Implications of Expanding Infant, Toddler and Preschool Programs

In the past minority children with disabilities were unlikely to be identified as needing special education services until they started school. However, as a result of the Preschool program and Infant and Toddler programs authorized by the Education of Handicapped Amendments of 1986, (Public Law 99-457), it is likely that many more minority children will begin receiving services at birth, shortly thereafter or during the preschool years. Given the projected increase in the number of children who are identified as having a disability or at risk of developing a disability and the requirement under the Infant and Toddler program that an Individual Family Services Program (IFSP) identifying services needed by the family be developed, it is essential that professionals possess the ability to relate effectively to minority parents.

Unfortunately, the under-representation of minority professionals in special education is likely to persist in the near future.

## Meeting the Needs of Minority Children with Disabilities and Their Families

In order to better meet the needs of minority children with disabilities and their families, special educators should take the following actions:

1) Increase the number of minority professionals in special education.

2) Provide professionals in special education with training to make them more aware of the needs of minority populations and better able to meet those needs.

3) Conduct systematic outreach in minority communities designed to increase awareness of special education services and the provisions of Public Law (P.L.) 94-142.

## Minority Recruitment

While there are no statistics on the number of special education teachers from minority groups, observers have commented on the imbalance between the numbers of minority teachers and the number of minority children placed in special education programs (Baca & Chinn, 1980). This is an important consideration because:

> PL 94-142 requires a free and appropriate education for handicapped students. The term *appropriate* [emphasis in original] is not defined as such in the law but receives its definition for each child through the written individualized education program (IEP) required by law. ... To meet the needs of children from different cultures, the IEP should address any unique educational needs related to cultural and linguistic differences. Unfortunately, there are at present neither adequate numbers of ethnic minority teachers nor are teacher education programs equipped to develop sensitivity in their students toward the needs of minority group children (Baca & Chinn, P. 36).

Unfortunately, the under-representation of minority professionals in special education is likely to persist in the near future. According to a report which synthesized four national studies of special education teacher training, only 4 percent of special education teacher trainees were black and less than 2 percent were Hispanic. Universities also reported that fewer minority students are enrolling in special education teacher preparation programs than in previous years (Noel, Spence, and Valdivieso, 1986).

Special recruitment programs are needed to increase minority participation in training programs. Though minority special educators are needed throughout the country, minority recruitment efforts are most critical in those states that are likely to experience the greatest growth in minority enrollment. This group includes the states from New York down the East Coast, around the Gulf Coast to California. State education agencies, local education agencies and college and university training programs should be reaching minority students at the junior and senior high school

Insensitivity to the cultural differences of minority group parents has created barriers to parent participation in the schools.

level, early in their undergraduate programs and even during their graduate programs to make them aware of the opportunities in careers in special education. Attracting well qualified students may require providing incentives such as financial assistance.

At the junior high school level, information on careers in special education should be available from counselors and be provided at career fairs and other career awareness activities. Career awareness at this age is important in helping young people make plans for their future including selection of appropriate high school courses. In order for these activities to be effective, career counselors should receive training and materials about careers in special education.

More college level recruitment programs might be directed toward institutions that have large minority student populations, as well as minority student organizations such as fraternities and sororities at other colleges and universities. One possible target for this kind of recruitment effort is the group of predominantly and historically black colleges and universities, many of which are located in the South. Similarly, colleges and universities in Texas and California, which have the majority of the nation's Hispanic college students, have the opportunity to increase the number of special education professionals with Hispanic backgrounds. Recruitment strategies aimed at these and similar institutions may prove critical to increasing the number of minority professionals in special education.

## The Need for Multicultural Training of Special Education Personnel

Multicultural training is a means to provide professionals with the cultural knowledge and sensitivities needed to provide for individual differences (Fuchigami, 1980). Such training is particularly important and necessary for special education teachers, who are charged with the delivery of appropriate individualized education, and other helping professionals. According to Glimps (1985), special education teachers need to develop multicultural sensitivities to eliminate stereotypes and fears. Teachers are urged to recognize the cultural values of their minority students with disabilities and to learn the acceptable behaviors in the various minority cultures. To provide appropriate special education to minority children from different cultural backgrounds, teachers and other service providers must recognize that children vary socially and culturally, and be aware of how these differences may influence the way children learn. Teachers should be aware of specific differences in learning and interpersonal styles that require flexible approaches to teaching.

For example, in teaching Mexican-American children with disabilities, gestures such as meaningful looks and smiles should be used as reinforcers. Mexican-Americans tend to display emotions freely and students respond to such displays on the part of teachers. Insights such as this would be useful in providing instruction that is sensitive to the student's culture. However, teachers are cautioned not to assume that all children within a minority group are alike, as there is a great diversity in all groups of individuals. It is particularly important for special education teachers to realize that they are teaching minority individuals, not groups.

Insensitivity to the cultural differences of minority group parents has created barriers to parent participation in the schools. Parents are often reluctant to interact with school personnel who may not understand them, their values, or lifestyles. For example, relating to black and Hispanic families with children with disabilities may be different than working with majority families.

Black Families - Often in black families, strong extended family networks and religious orientation provide the familial support and substantive knowledge to cope with a child with a disability (Utley and Marion, 1984). Marion (1980) suggests that in black families the birth of a child with a disability does not produce the shock, anger, and guilt often expressed by majority families. Rather, the strong religious foundation engenders the acceptance of the child as the "will of God", and the extended family provides encouragement and emotional, psychological, and financial support.

Hispanic Families - Eagar (1986) documents similar networks of strong extended family structure in Mexican-American and other Hispanic cultures, augmented by "compadrazgo" systems, godparent associations. Children are raised by their parents, but other family members are authorized to discipline, train, and care for the children. The teaching of courteous behavior and good manners is an integral component of child rearing. Mexican-American children who acquire appropriate manners are referred to as "bien educado" which means well educated, a notion that is clearly inconsistent with the majority culture's concept of being well educated. Minority parents often recognize that such cultural differences are unknown to school personnel, which causes parents to fear being misunderstood. This fear often interferes

with communication with school personnel (Marion, 1980). These and similar circumstances make multicultural training for special education personnel a necessity.

Multicultural training for educators is not a new concept. It dates back to the late 1960's when educators began to recognize the importance of the inclusion of ethnic studies in school curriculums and similar training for teachers. Recognizing the benefits of such training for teachers, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) began in 1979 to require as a condition for accreditation that a multicultural training component be included in all teacher education programs. Institutions can meet this requirement by giving attention to multicultural education in "courses, seminars, directed readings, laboratory and clinical experiences, practicum, and other types of field experience." This action was endorsed by national organizations such as the National Education Association and the Council for Exceptional Children.

Despite the NCATE requirement, it is not clear that teacher education programs are providing the kind of culturally sensitizing experiences envisioned by the standards.

## Implementing Mandatory Multicultural Education

To address the cultural differences of minority children with disabilities and their families, multicultural training should require coursework in special education, social work, psychology, health professions, and other related services at both at the preservice and inservice levels. Many times such multicultural courses are offered as electives. The majority of attendees are typically minority at both the student and professional levels. For the most part, majority students are not availing themselves of these training opportunities. Fuchigami (1980) contends that the large number of required courses in degree programs and continuing education programs deters attendance in multicultural classes that are electives. If our helping professionals are to be adequately prepared to provide appropriate services to minority children with disabilities and their families, multicultural training needs to be made a part of the required course sequence in our certification programs. To strengthen instructional programs, multicultural training should be both didactic and experiential. Evidence suggests that in addition to didactic and experiential techniques, training that includes cultural immersion techniques were consciousness raising (Lefley, 1985). Cultural immersion techniques are observations through visits to ethnic communities, restaurants, churches and minority families' homes. Such experiences provide "hands-on" opportunities to improve cultural awareness.

Such findings suggest that a lack of easily understood information on P.L. 94-142 often prevents minority parents from obtaining appropriate services for their children with disabilities.

## Outreach to Minority Communities

Paradoxically, though a large number of minority children are already receiving special education services, there still may be minority children of school age in need of special education services who are not receiving them. Often children who need such services go unserved because their parents are unaware of the rights guaranteed by Public Law 94-142. Researchers asked low income minority parents of children with disabilities about the school's responsibilities to educate their children. Seventy-five percent of the parents surveyed were unaware of the school's responsibility to provide special education services (Boone & Smith, 1981). The parents were unfamiliar with the provisions of P.L. 94-142. Similar findings were reported by Lowry (1983), who interviewed low income black parents in Baltimore and Atlanta with at least one child in special education. Generally, the parents in this study reported little knowledge of special education and due process rights under P.L. 94-142. Lowry concluded that often parents who have the greatest needs lack the knowledge necessary to advocate for their child. Interestingly, the parents in both studies identified a scarcity of appropriate written information about P.L. 94-142 as the primary reason for their lack of knowledge of the law even though they had received written information about the law from the school. It appears that the information distributed by the schools was inappropriate for use by minority parents because many of them do not speak English as their primary language, have limited reading ability, or have limited time to devote to reading. The finding was confirmed by Roit and Pfohl (1984) who reviewed the written information used in each of the 50 states to inform parents about P.L. 94-142. They concluded that the vast majority of materials were not appropriate for use by parents with low reading abilities, who were from minority cultures or whose principal language was not English. Such findings suggest that a lack of easily understood information on P.L. 94-142 often prevents minority parents from obtaining appropriate services for their children with disabilities.

The following suggestions are the result of the author's contact with community leaders, researchers and service providers. They are offered in the hope that they will be helpful to those responsible for enhancing the

relationship between minority communities and service providers.

- *Gaining Community Access*— Professionals initiating outreach into minority communities should realize that many times the majority society's values system and cultural perspective are significantly different. Sometimes professionals experience a kind of culture shock in their first experience with minority communities. Without a familiarity with the group's culture and lifestyle, the prospect of the outreach effort's success will be jeopardized.
- *Utilizing Community Leaders*— Usually, outsiders have a difficult time gaining access to residents of minority communities. Professionals will therefore need to develop relationships with community leaders. Leaders are individuals in the community whom residents seek out for help or guidance in solving problems. The leaders in a community may be individuals such as church or civic officials, directors of the community center, local business people or neighborhood leaders. These people can assist in bridging the gap between minority families and the schools or service providers. If the community leaders are going to be able to perform this function, they must become aware of the services that are available to children with disabilities and their families. Information about services should be provided to leaders through personal contact. Once community leaders accept and understand the need for services, they can assist the outreach effort by sharing information about the minority community. Leaders can provide information on how special education and related services may be viewed by the residents and insights on the values and customs that may influence the residents' decisions about education. Community leaders can help identify media serving the community such as newspapers, radio and T.V. stations, and other communication channels with which they may be familiar.
- *Information Sharing*— Information can be transmitted to the minority community in a variety of ways. There is no single best way, though personal contact is usually among the best. When scheduling a group presentation it is usually a good idea to have the presentation coincide with regularly scheduled community meetings and activities.

Materials to be used as part of outreach campaigns should be designed to be visually appealing. Information presented in pamphlets, brochures, etc. must be written in the primary language of the community residents. The tone should not be condescending. The literature should be made available in places frequented by community residents.

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