

# Recruiting and Retaining Culturally Diverse Special Educators

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In light of the current challenges in addressing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, the persistent problems of disproportionality in special education, and the dismal post-school outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and those living in poverty, it is critical that successful models of teacher recruitment and retention are developed and implemented. In this article we review current literature on multicultural issues in special education that underscore the need for a more diverse teaching workforce and look at the recruitment trends described in the retention of teachers who are prepared to effectively serve PK-12 students and their families from diverse backgrounds. We also share preliminary data on our efforts to recruit and retain graduate students in an advanced special education program at a Hispanic-serving institution of higher education. To further guide the efforts of others, we provide recommendations for program development and future research.

**Keywords:** teacher recruitment and retention, multicultural issues, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, special education, teacher preparation

The growing diversity of America's public school students and the need to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds continue to remain one of the critical issues in the field of education (Ayalon, 2004; Lau, Dandy, & Hoffman, 2007; Villegas & Davis, 2007). The lack of ethnic diversity among the teaching workforce is exacerbated in urban and rural settings, and particularly in the field of special education (Bradley & Loadman, 2005; Howard, 2003; Prater, 2005; Strosnider & Blanchett, 2003; Sundeen & Wienke, 2009; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). The implications of failing to provide an ethnically diverse teaching workforce that is prepared to effectively meet the unique needs of ethnic minority students are far-reaching. In light of the current challenges in addressing the growing achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, the persistent problem of disproportionality in special education, and the dismal post-school outcomes for CLD students, particularly those with disabilities, it is critical that successful models of teacher recruitment and retention are developed and implemented, especially in high-need areas affected by a variety of risk factors.

## Addressing Cultural Diversity in Special Education

There are a number of reasons why it is critically important to diversify the teaching workforce. The most important is the growing diversity of students in America's public schools and the evident population shifts in the number of school-age students speaking a language other than English (Brisk, Barnhardt, Herrera, & Rochon, 2002). Urban schools are characteristically diverse in their student populations, and according to Ornstein (1991), the majority of students served in the 25 largest school districts in the country are students of color. "The percentage of public schools where White students accounted for more than 50 percent of enrollment was lower in 2008–09 than in 1998–99 (63 vs. 72 percent). In contrast, the percentage of schools where Hispanic students accounted for more than 50 percent of enrollment was higher in 2008–09 than in 1998–99 (13 vs. 8 percent). In both years, the percentage of schools where Black students accounted for more than 50 percent of enrollment was approximately the same (11 percent)" (NCES, 2011, p. 84).

In 2006, in the area of special education, 39% of students (ages 6 through 21) were from CLD backgrounds. Yet, the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) reported that 86% of special education teachers were White and female (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The disparities in the demographic representation of students and teachers is what some characterize as a cultural mismatch or disconnect between students from CLD backgrounds and their predominately White teachers (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Irvine & Armento, 2001).

A review of research on the recruitment and retention of CLD teachers emphasizes the need to ensure that CLD teachers are represented in the teaching ranks to serve as role models to all students because they have unique pedagogical contributions which have been captured in the literature on culturally responsive and relevant teaching (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 1989, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ware, 2006). Also, because CLD teachers may be more committed to issues related to social justice and have experiences similar to their CLD students which can impact the teaching and learning process for these students (Haberman, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). Tyler et al. (2004) synthesized research on teacher demographics and its impact on student outcomes and found that although many teacher education programs profess a commitment to diversity, structural barriers such as entrance and exit policies, institutional and state standardized assessments, and lack of culturally responsive content and programming contribute to difficulties in recruiting and retaining teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds. In addition, many faculty members in teacher education programs lack the knowledge and experience to embed the curriculum with the cultural competence skills necessary to effectively prepare culturally responsive future teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2005). The cultural mismatch between students and their teachers is also evident in higher education where about 88% of full-time teacher education faculty is White (Ambe, 2006). In the field of special education, where the problem of disproportionate representation frames many of the experiences of students and families from CLD backgrounds, faculty from diverse backgrounds may offer an alternate lens through which to address issues of racial and ethnic diversity.

Problems of disproportionality and the discrimination of students from CLD backgrounds have been studied from a number of vantage points (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Klinger, 2006; Mercer, 1973; Patton, 1998). Although

referral to special education is a process which begins in general education, it has generally resulted in the overrepresentation of students from CLD backgrounds in certain special education programs (e.g., intellectually disabled) and the need for special educators in those settings that are willing and prepared to meet the personal, social, emotional, and academic needs of their students. Factors such as the impact of poverty on student development, ineffective or poor instruction in general education classrooms, racial/ethnic bias, and the cultural mismatch of students and their teachers have been posited as contributing factors in the persistence of disproportionate representation and discrimination (Blanchett, 2006; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry, Klingner, & Cramer, 2007; Manning & Gaudelli, 2006; McHatton, 2007; Wang, 2005). The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) most recent report on minority representation in special education highlights the growing prominence of poverty as a major contributing variable in the referral and placement of a large number of CLD students to special education programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Further, researchers have documented the underrepresentation of CLD students in programs for the gifted and talented using similar vantage points (Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002).

Despite the influence of contextual variables such as race, culture, and socioeconomic status on the teaching and learning process, there has been a plethora of research documenting the powerful role of teachers in making the greatest difference in student achievement and positive outcomes, especially for students in high-need areas (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Good, 2001; Good & Brophy, 1994). Over the last decade, emphasis on teacher quality has grown in relevance as a result of increased attention to school reform initiatives, the implications of these broad-based initiatives on student achievement and overall family functioning, and mandated systems of accountability (Berliner, 2005; Blanton, Sindelar, & Correa, 2006; Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2003). In addition to examining the link between teacher quality and student achievement, a number of scholars have addressed the preparedness of special educators to work effectively with students from CLD backgrounds (Gay, 2002; Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002; Kea & Utley, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Still, there remains a great deal of work to be done in ensuring that special educators are able to understand the distinctiveness of cultural diversity and disability and the implications for student achievement, service delivery, and the impact of family involvement in the educational decision-making process (Harry, 2002; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Seidl & Pugach, 1998).

### **Recruitment and Retention of Culturally Diverse Special Education Teachers**

In recent years, much of the literature on teacher recruitment and retention has focused on the need to prepare “highly qualified” teachers as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB or Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA]) (Berry, 2004; Brownell et al., 2004; Jameson & Huefner, 2006), and more recently supported by recommendation of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) for a highly effective professional workforce as the reauthorization of ESEA is a priority. As a result, the field of special education has become entrenched in critical conversations about the changing roles of both general and special educators and the impact this is having on the placement and delivery of services to students with disabilities and their families (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Pugach & Warger, 2001; Shealey, McHatton, & Farmer, 2009). Prior to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, defining “highly qualified” special educators had rarely been addressed in school reform initiatives or school-wide strategic plans. However, due to

the renewed calls for accountability at all systems levels and the prominence of high-stakes testing for all students, it is critical that special educators are effectively prepared to be content- and pedagogical-knowledge experts as well as advocates, change agents, and collaborative partners with general educators, families, and related service personnel.

What continues to be missing from the discourse on the preparation of special educators is a discussion of the implications of failing to effectively prepare professionals who place students' culture, values, and beliefs at the center of the teaching and learning process and understand that a student's culture can be used as a basis for teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Researchers have asserted that many students from CLD backgrounds living in poverty are most likely to be taught by an inexperienced teacher in a setting with limited resources and supports (Berry, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Howard, 2003). For these students, many of whom are at risk for placement in special education, the shortage of highly qualified and effective educators can have devastating implications for student achievement and related outcomes (Howard, 2003). Thus, it is incumbent upon special education teacher preparation programs to develop models of recruitment and retention that are responsive to the unique cultural needs and perspectives of diverse teacher candidates, as well as address the growing emphasis on accountability, data-based decision making, and assessment in the preparation of educators.

Research on preparing special education teachers from CLD backgrounds has traditionally focused on preparing these individuals to work in settings where CLD students and students living in poverty are the majority culture (Campbell-Whatley, 2003; Kea & Utley, 1998; Prater, 2005; Tyler et al., 2004). In preparation for these challenging settings, teacher preparation programs have developed specialized recruitment and retention strategies aimed at preparing teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work effectively with students and families from CLD populations. A review of literature on teacher preparation programs emphasizing the recruitment and retention of teachers from diverse backgrounds reveal strategies grounded in an understanding of the role of culture in teaching and learning (Campbell-Whatley, 2003; Kea & Utley, 1998; Patton, Williams, Floyd, & Cobb, 2003; Prater, 2005; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Tyler et al., 2004). These strategies may include making contact with potential candidates through other CLD students and alumni, faculty, professional colleagues, and community partners using what is referred to as the "word of mouth" process (Tyler et al., 2004; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Thus, teachers from diverse backgrounds can serve as role models and cultural brokers for CLD students and their families. Accessing culture-specific groups in colleges and universities, college students in majors outside of education, and paraprofessionals may also yield a diverse and oftentimes non-traditional pool of candidates (Ayalon, 2004; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Sundeen & Wienke, 2009; Villegas & Davis, 2007).

Retention strategies developed in response to research documenting the needs of CLD college students address academic and financial needs, particularly for students who speak English as a second language and first-generation college students, as well as the importance of interpersonal support (Howard, 2003). Interpersonal support can be derived from consistent mentoring from CLD faculty in addition to support among students in the program and family. The cohort model is often cited in the literature as a successful approach in creating opportunities for students to develop relationships, which result in individual and group gains (Sundeen & Wienke, 2009; Tyler et al., 2004).

## **The Special Education Program Recruitment and Retention Design**

### **Context**

Florida has one of the largest and ethnically diverse populations in the Southeast: 22% (4,223,806) Hispanic; 16% (2,999,862) African American; and approximately 3% (454,821) Asian (Census Bureau, 2010). In addition, Florida ranked 5<sup>th</sup> among all U.S. states in immigrant population growth (Monarch Center, 2004); admitted over 59,000 new US immigrants in 1998 (Census Bureau, 2005); had a population increase of 23% since 2004; and ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the nation for population increase over the decade (Census Bureau, 2005). The South Florida area, specifically Miami-Dade County, is the largest and most highly populated county in the State of Florida. Individuals who speak a language other than English comprise 68% of the county's population. The Miami-Dade County Public School System (M-DCPS) is the 4th largest school system in the U.S., serving Miami-Dade and the immediate area around the city. It has the largest student membership (PK through 12<sup>th</sup>) compared to other school districts in the State of Florida, with a student enrollment of 380,006 (as of July 2010) in which 91% of its students come from CLD backgrounds. M-DCPS is also the second largest minority-majority public school system in the country with 62% Hispanic, 26% African American, 9% White, Non-Hispanic, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 2% from other minority groups.

### **Setting**

This research study was conducted at a large public research university that prepares the majority of its teachers for instructional or administrative positions. The university is the top producer of Hispanic graduates in the U.S. at both the bachelor's and master's level, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest producer of minority graduates. The student body reflects diversity at all levels with 60% Hispanic, 17% White, Non-Hispanic, 12% Black, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7% Other. And, the university serves a large percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Nearly 50% of all undergraduate students receive financial aid and nearly 60% of these recipients come from families with annual household incomes under \$30,000.

### **Program Description**

The curriculum for the advanced master's degree in special education is a 36 credit hour program with a variety of options for specialization tracks (e.g., early childhood special education [ECSE], autism spectrum disorder [ASD]). The coursework is comprised of a research core, advanced special education core, specialized courses, and a culminating project and presentation. The program was designed based on the learning principles of hands-on opportunities to practice newly acquired skills, evidence-based practices, active involvement through field-based experiences; ongoing consultation from faculty, mentors, consultants, and experts in the local community; and building on an already established knowledge base in special education.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 36 graduate students comprising 35 female (97%) and 1 male (3%) with an age range of 22-55 years (average age = 32.6 years) participated in this study. At the time of the study, students were in their second year of study in the program and expected to graduate during the 2010-2011 academic year. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the students were Hispanic. All of the students had a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) or Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in special education

from a locally accredited college or university. Also, all of the students were state certified in special education (ESE K-12). The majority (80%) was endorsed to teach English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Other areas of certification or endorsement reported were Elementary Education K-6, Reading, Math 5-9, and Middle Grades Integrated Curriculum 5-9. The undergraduate grade point average (GPA) for the group ranged from 3.00-4.00 (M=3.59). In Year 1 of their program, the GPA for the group ranged from 3.39-3.89 (M=3.50). In Year 2 (Fall 2010; Spring 2011), the GPA ranged from 3.53-3.90 (M=3.76). Table 1 shows a breakdown of the demographic characteristics of these students.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of Graduate Students**

Characteristics	Frequency		M
	n	%	
Gender			
Female	35	97	
Male	1	3	
Ethnicity			
Hispanic	24	66	
White	6	18	
Black	4	11	
Other	2	5	
Degree			
B.S.	34		
B.A.	2		
Areas of Certification/Endorsement			
ESE K-12	36	100	
Elementary Education (K-6)	12	33	
Reading	2	6	
Math 5-9	1	3	
Middle Grades Integrated Curriculum 5-9	1	3	
ESOL	29	80	
Grade Point Average (GPA)			
Undergraduate      3.00 - 4.00	36		3.59
Year 1 in Program   3.39 - 3.89	36		3.50
Year 2 in program   3.53 - 3.90	36		3.76

### Recruitment Plan

The recruitment and retention strategies used in this study represent our attempt to provide a comprehensive framework for increasing the pool of qualified CLD applicants; and formalizing supports and resources identified as critical to the retention of graduate students that have the

necessary skills to serve students and families from diverse backgrounds. Salend, Whittaker, Duhaney, and Smith (2003) developed a framework for diversifying teacher education programs to successfully recruit and support graduate students from populations traditionally underrepresented into the field of special education. This framework was used to guide the recruitment and retention efforts in our advanced master's degree program. We implemented a comprehensive recruitment process by targeting activities at the national, state and community, university, and individual levels.

***National level.*** At the national level, efforts were initiated through collaboration with the Monarch Center and the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt). These two federally funded technical assistance and dissemination projects support the needs of minority serving institutions and diverse communities by disseminating recruitment materials at national conferences in the areas of early childhood, special education, and teacher education; and by disseminating program information through a variety of listservs for professional organizations (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), CEC Division for Early Childhood).

***State and community level.*** Recruitment activities at the state and community levels included the dissemination of flyers to local colleges and universities supporting teacher preparation programs in special education, electronic postings on local school district websites, and websites of public and private agencies in the community serving children with disabilities and their families. These efforts also included presentations at community meetings and personal communications with the directors of local agencies and organizations.

***University level.*** Recruitment efforts at the university level included periodic presentations and the dissemination of recruitment materials in targeted undergraduate courses, faculty referrals, and electronic postings on the main College of Education and department websites.

***Individual level.*** At the individual level, recruitment involved accessing potential graduate students. Activities at this level included dissemination of recruitment materials through personal contacts and increasing awareness of teacher preparation programs through referrals from leaders in the community and the local school district.

One key feature of the special education program is the presence of an established Special Education Advisory Board. This group is comprised of diverse and interdisciplinary faculty, educators, public school administrators, community agency representatives, and individuals with a disability or family members of an individual with a disability that serve on a voluntary basis to assist in the further development and evaluation of programs in special education. This board has been in existence approximately 11 years and typically meets twice each year (once a semester). The function of this board in relation to this project was to assist in recruitment efforts and offer feedback for program improvement.

As researchers, we were familiar with and understood the structural barriers documented in the literature that is prevalent in many institutions of higher education, and we were aware that these barriers contribute to the limited presence of students from diverse backgrounds in teacher

education programs. Specifically, we wanted to *broaden the admissions process* by including the traditional submittal of documents that demonstrate academic and professional competence (e.g., transcripts, teaching certification) in combination with an on-site entrance interview for the purpose of understanding the applicant's interest in further expanding their knowledge base in special education. Entrance interview questions (e.g., *Can you provide examples of teaching practices that you have found effective in teaching students with disabilities and those from diverse backgrounds? Describe your skills in developing collaborative partnerships with others.*) were designed to tap into each applicant's knowledge of pedagogy, effective instructional practices, overall interest in the program, and knowledge of diverse students and families. A total of 67 interviews were conducted at initial recruitment, and 36 applicants were selected based on their interview scores.

### **Retention Plan**

The recruitment and retention of graduate students from traditionally underrepresented groups was facilitated by *opportunities for mentoring, financial support, building community, engagement in meaningful and relevant field experiences, and professional development* (Cartledge, Gardner, & Tillman, 1995; Eberhard, Reinhardt-Mondragon, & Strottemyer, 2000; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002). We postulated that by responding to structural and attitudinal barriers inherent in institutions of higher education and providing culturally responsive retention strategies to address the unique needs of students from diverse backgrounds, teacher preparation programs will be better equipped to respond to the chronic shortage of teachers that are prepared to effectively work with students and families from CLD backgrounds.

***Opportunities for mentoring.*** Programs that enlist professional development and mentoring achieve the greatest success, and empower and reduce the attrition rates of teachers (Eberhard, et al., 2000). Simply stated, effective mentoring programs provide support and alleviate attrition; and teachers supported with mentoring have higher job satisfaction, display greater commitment to their profession and students, and show less signs of stress and burnout.

Graduate students enrolled in the ASD track of the advanced master's degree program were assigned a mentor during their second year in the program. A total of 6 mentors currently working in the public school system were recruited, selected, and matched with a mentee in the program. These mentors were drawn from a pool of teachers (5 females, 1 male; comprising 3 Hispanic, 2 White, 1 Black) eligible to serve as mentors. All mentors had a Bachelor of Science degree in Special Education or a related field, and 4 had a Master of Science degree in Special Education or Counseling. Each mentor met the selection criteria: (1) Florida's clinical supervision training requirements; (2) three or more years of successfully providing services to K-12 students with ASD (e.g., teacher, speech/language pathologist); (3) nationally board certified or evaluated highly by district administrators; (4) a family member of a child with ASD; and/or (5) an expert in the field of special education.

Mentors and mentees were matched on similar teaching and learning philosophies (e.g., whole group learning/instruction, behavior management, differentiated instruction) and professional interests or experiences. Key project personnel conducted an initial orientation with the mentors to discuss a shared vision, roles, expectations, and responsibilities. Also, two follow-up meetings were held with both mentors and mentees to establish structured opportunities and dialogue for

collaborative work (e.g., shared vision, diversity, and affiliations). To facilitate mentoring activities, mentees were asked to keep an online reflective journal using the framework proposed by Cooper and Larrivee (2006) to *engage* them in ongoing *reflection* during the mentoring process and *encourage dialogue* with their mentor. Guidelines for reflective journal entries included “open entries” where mentees had an opportunity to share any thought, anecdote, question, experience, or reaction they may have relative to serving PK-12 students with disabilities and their families as well as “structured entries” around targeted probes (e.g., turning points, peak experiences).

***Financial support.*** Graduate students who were accepted into the advanced master’s degree program in the specialization tracks of ASD and ECSE received full financial support for in-state tuition based on 36 credit hours, and student incentives that covered the cost of books for an academic year and travel reimbursement for participation or presentation at a professional conference. These supports were made possible with federal funding, which allowed many CLD students who were previously unable to pursue the master’s degree due to the costs involved, to return to the university for an advanced degree.

***Building community.*** To promote group cohesiveness, enhance learning opportunities, and increase diversity among graduate students, we formed student educational cohorts. Within a cohort educational model, students are grouped together and move along a pre-designed program of study (Barnett, Bascom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Research on cohorts is framed around social cognition and Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development that supports the notion that a student learns more effectively when they have opportunities to share experiences, interact with others in the group, problem solve, and seek assistance from others (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003; Ross, Stafford, Church-Pupke, & Bondy, 2006). Moreover, this form of group cohesiveness, unity, and sense of community motivate students to perform at an optimal level throughout their program of study (Monteith, 2000; Ross et al., 2006).

Graduate students in the program formed both professional and personal bonds which became evident in the way they openly interacted in courses, shared their opinions and ideas, assisted and engaged in solving academic problems for each other, and arranged study groups to review assigned reading materials and assignments. During a debriefing session, a faculty member shared the following observation—“[graduate] students were eager to assist one another in and out of class and became a very close cohort throughout the semester.” Interestingly, during a debriefing session of the graduate students, it was commented that they were eager to learn, and their “participation level and motivation were high...and they openly shared their knowledge and experiences with fellow classmates.” In a course on diversity, the professor stated, “the [graduate] students were very respectful and were well-prepared by having read and completed assignments. Students were easy to engage in discussion and activities, and most were capable of graduate work.”

***Engagement in meaningful and relevant field experiences.*** Providing well-designed and planned field-based experiences for graduate students was critical to ensuring that they acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work and serve PK-12 students with disabilities and their families by taking into consideration cultural and community issues related to differing values and belief systems. For example, graduate students in the program worked on a project for

one semester that required them to select a family and engage in a variety of activities within the family's home and community settings (e.g., observation of a typical and daily family routine) or administer a series of assessment instruments in collaboration with other professionals. Below are some excerpts shared by graduate students during group debriefing sessions.

*I feel more comfortable now about the proper guidelines and best practices that should be followed in order to keep the family involved and at the center of the assessment process...advocating for what should be done and how assessment should be handled when working with families.*

*The family project taught me the value of communication and really listening to what parents need and are concerned about.*

*I learned the need to establish solid and honest rapport with families, understanding the critical roles both fathers and mothers play in the assessment and evaluation process of a child with a disability, and most importantly I recognized the impact my own beliefs and perspectives can have on working with families.*

These reflections suggest that students who are more prepared for and comfortable in their roles will be more likely to remain in these roles as teachers.

**Professional development.** A series of professional development seminars were designed as part of the advanced master's degree program in special education to ensure that graduate students extended their learning opportunities beyond the course level. These seminars were designed around topical issues not covered in depth in their program of study, which we considered critical to their preparation, ongoing professional development, and area of specialization (ECSE, ASD). The majority of seminars were designed and conducted by individuals in local community agencies (e.g., University of Miami/Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities Card (UM/NSU CARD), Early Steps, Parent to Parent of Miami, Inc.) that had expertise and hands-on experience working with a diverse population of children and students with disabilities and their families.

A total of 8 professional development seminars were offered (see Table 2), and an average of 18 students attended and participated in these seminars on a regular basis. At the conclusion of each seminar, graduate students were asked to complete an evaluation form by giving feedback on the usefulness and relevance of the seminar.

Evaluation data gathered across these seminars yielded an overall rating of “excellent” in response to presenters selected (94%), usefulness of topics offered (95%), and organization of the presentations (92%). The implication of these findings is that keeping teachers engaged in current practice in their field can empower them to remain in the field (Eberhard et al., 2000).

**Table 2**  
**Professional Development Seminars**

Seminar	Description	Learning Objectives
Education Research (Part 1)	Learning to navigate the university library's research collection is essential for academic and professional success. This workshop will enable participants to develop the necessary research skills to locate, identify, select, and evaluate information in today's complex information environment. A brief overview of <a href="#">RefWorks</a> , a Web-based tool that helps you to organize your references, insert citations in your assignments, and prepare bibliographies in APA format, will be provided.	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigate the Library's webpage.</li> <li>• Access and use ERIC to retrieve journal articles/research studies.</li> <li>• Generate useful keywords and descriptors for searching.</li> <li>• Conduct an advanced search for relevant articles.</li> <li>• Identify a variety of articles appropriate to your topic.</li> <li>• Use ERIC database features to export, save, and email citations.</li> <li>• Access RefWorks and export ERIC citations to create a bibliography in APA format.</li> </ul>
APA Writing (Part 2)	American Psychological Association (APA) Style is the writing format most commonly used in the social and behavioral sciences (e.g., psychology and education) to communicate research and information. APA Style provides guidelines to ensure that an author presents his or her writing/research in an organized, concise, and unbiased nature. APA Style citations allow readers to cross-reference and locate sources/publications cited by the author in his or her manuscript.	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become acquainted with APA Style (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) and its purpose in the writing process.</li> <li>• Understand the parts (e.g., title page, abstract, headings, subheadings) of a scholarly manuscript.</li> <li>• Understand the most common APA rules (e.g., formatting, running head).</li> <li>• Understand proper citation styles, including in-text and parenthetical author-date citations and construction of a reference page.</li> <li>• Analyze samples of papers written in APA Style and engage in hands-on writing activities.</li> </ul>
Teachers as Advocates: A Collaborative Partnership	Advocacy is not an event; it is an ongoing collaborative process between teachers and families on a child's behalf. It requires creating a relationship built on trust, honesty, and respect. Establishing and maintaining positive collaborative relationships with families requires an understanding of the different roles that teachers play in a child's education and schooling.	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become aware of a family's rights and responsibilities under the law as well as the teacher's role.</li> <li>• Be able to identify the six (6) principles of IDEA (2004) outlining organizational system and program options.</li> <li>• Be able to further develop their collaboration skills in the IEP process.</li> </ul>
Introduction to the Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP)	Early Steps is Florida's early intervention system that offers services to infants and toddlers (birth to thirty-six months) with special needs and disabilities. The	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become familiar with the Early Steps process from referral to initial IFSP development.</li> <li>• Have the opportunity to observe the development of an IFSP.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Professional Development Seminars (continued)

Seminar	Description	Learning Objectives
	<p>Individualized Family Support Plan sometimes referred to as the IFSP, identifies the specific concerns, priorities, and resources a family has about their child's development. This plan begins with building partnerships with the professionals who will provide services and supports based on the family's needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop outcome statements, timelines, and strategies on an IFSP to address specific developmental outcomes.</li> <li>• Become familiar with the rest of the Early Steps journey from initiation of services after the initial IFSP through Transition.</li> </ul>
<p>Overview of the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social-Emotional Competence in Young Children</p>	<p>There is a need to focus attention on increasing children's ability to follow directions, play cooperatively, solve social problems, and identify and regulate their emotions. Helping families understand the importance of nurturing social-emotional skills and providing them with the tools to do so is an important part of improving the abilities of young children. There is a need to improve the overall quality of early childhood programs, which includes ongoing support and training for staff to improve the skills needed to address challenging behaviors.</p>	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe an evidence-based framework for addressing social-emotional development and challenging behavior.</li> <li>• Be able to describe the relationship between environmental variables and children's challenging behaviors.</li> <li>• Be able to discuss why it is important to be intentional about teaching social-emotional skills.</li> <li>• Be able to identify the importance of teaching problem-solving and will be able to identify problem-solving steps.</li> <li>• Be able to identify the difference between Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS) and traditional discipline approaches.</li> <li>• Be able to identify when individualized intensive interventions are needed.</li> </ul>
<p>Leadership: Having a Voice</p>	<p>The ability to advocate entails leadership skills that extend throughout a teacher's career and throughout all aspects of their professional life. Leadership as a special education teacher is the ability to guide and direct students, families, and colleagues to advocate in the best interest of the students and their families.</p>	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain increased awareness of the teacher's role in advocating for students with disabilities and their families.</li> <li>• Gain an understanding of their attributes towards students with disabilities and how they may have a potential impact on promoting self-efficacy in their classroom and their advocacy efforts for the students.</li> <li>• Be able to identify the conflict resolution skills that will assist them in increasing support from administrators and other professionals in advocacy efforts.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Professional Development Seminars (continued)

Seminar	Description	Learning Outcomes
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Clinical Randomized Control Trial (RCT) of a Joint Attention Intervention for Young Children with ASD	This seminar will discuss the research design and preliminary results of a randomized control trial (RCT) to evaluate the effectiveness of a joint attention intervention, targeting initiation of joint attention (pointing, showing, and gaze shifting) for children with ASD. Specifically, the presentation will highlight (a) the efficacy of the intervention procedures to improve the 3 targeted IJA behaviors, (b) preliminary data aimed at determining whether the intervention program is effective in improving IJA when compared with a control group, and (c) to determine if individual differences in pre-treatment child characteristics (e.g., social motivation) predict differential acquisition of IJA skills for children receiving the intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be able to identify leadership strategies that can be used in advocating for students with disabilities in the classroom and on an administrative level.</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain an understanding of the concept of joint attention and importance of joint attention for typical development.</li> <li>• Gain an understanding of joint attention deficits in children with ASD and the rationale for developing interventions targeting joint attention.</li> <li>• Gain an understanding of the rationale for utilizing various research designs (RCT and multiple baseline) to evaluate treatment effectiveness.</li> <li>• Gain an understanding of different standardized and behavioral assessments to measure joint attention skills in young children.</li> <li>• Gain an understanding of behavioral intervention strategies and their effectiveness in improving joint attention skills in children with ASD.</li> </ul>
Role of Assessment in the Educational Planning of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	The assessment of students with ASD is complex because, while the core deficits of the disorder involve difficulty with social interactions and communication, the impact of those deficits commonly extends to other domains of functioning. The purpose of this seminar is to describe the role of assessment in educational planning, and to provide an overview of a range of assessment and evaluation tools.	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain an understanding of the importance of assessment and evaluation of students with ASD during educational planning.</li> <li>• Gain familiarity with a broad range of assessment tools appropriate for use with individuals with ASD.</li> <li>• Gain understanding about how to utilize assessment information to develop relevant teaching and instructional strategies.</li> </ul>
Professionalism for Advanced Leaders in Special Education	The ability to present oneself as a professional becomes increasingly important as teachers advance in their professional life. It is critical that as advanced leaders, teachers know how to present themselves and their research in a positive light.	<p>Participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain experience preparing a presentation of his/her research.</li> <li>• Practice skills for presenting information effectively.</li> <li>• Gain knowledge about professional organizations within special education.</li> </ul>

## Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications for Future Research

The changing landscape of America's public schools presents both opportunities and challenges in providing all students with equitable educational experiences that lead to positive outcomes. When documenting the educational outcomes for students from CLD backgrounds, researchers have found that many of these students have not received appropriate instruction in either a special or general education setting (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This is due in part to the rapidly changing student demographics and the need to recruit and retain highly qualified and effective teachers from backgrounds similar to the majority of the students.

In the field of special education, the disproportionate representation of children of color has plagued the field for over forty years. Researchers have examined the problem from a number of perspectives ranging from assessment bias and ineffective instruction to the role of poverty. High quality special educators committed to issues of equity and social justice, and knowledgeable about the role of culture in student performance are critical to the success of all PK-12 students, particularly those from CLD backgrounds.

Successful special education teacher preparation programs recruit teachers from diverse backgrounds, provide a curriculum that embraces culturally responsive and evidence-based practices, and implement strategies that contributes to retention efforts. The advanced master's degree program in special education that we discussed, and its design, build upon best practices and demonstrate promising practices in the areas of recruitment and retention of CLD teachers. The context in which the participating graduate students were prepared was rich with opportunities to develop cultural competence through coursework, diverse field experiences and projects, opportunities for professional development beyond the program of study, and interactions with mentors and local community experts serving diverse populations of children and students with disabilities and their families. The strengths of this program are documented by faculty and graduate students' anecdotal comments and by empirical data from graduate students' coursework and seminar evaluations.

From our experiences with this study, we established seven recommendations for program development—

1. Develop structures that facilitate ongoing dialogue between community constituents, teacher candidates, and faculty from various disciplines such as advisory boards and teacher education councils or committees.
2. Provide professional development for faculty in addressing the needs of teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds with an emphasis on the unique needs of candidates who may speak English as a second language.
3. Provide financial support and incentives for candidates confronted with economic challenges, and the growing number working full-time.
4. Increase the presence of faculty from diverse backgrounds and provide candidates with opportunities to experience other unique perspectives and commitment to diversity issues.

5. Develop and adopt a formal mechanism to support data collection and continuous program improvement and restructuring efforts.
6. Develop cohort structures for candidates to facilitate scheduling and consistency, as well as a system for internal support.
7. Provide ongoing professional development and implement a system for mentoring and induction opportunities.

Our study advances a number of avenues for promising lines of research on the recruitment and retention of diverse special educators, and the impact candidate diversity has on student outcomes. First, our study suggests that it is critical to examine the experiences of special education candidates from diverse backgrounds, particularly those in predominately White institutions. This research builds upon research previously conducted with graduate candidates from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds in other areas of education. It also underscores the need for culturally responsive programming that is grounded in the experiences of the candidates and racially and ethnically diverse faculty. Moreover, our study supports mechanisms such as mentoring, financial, and academic support.

The role of teacher quality on student outcomes as evidenced predominately by student achievement has also received a great deal of attention in recent years, thus advancing another critical area for future research. This research should focus on identifying the specific practices implemented by racially and ethnically diverse special educators and determining the extent to which these practices influence or impact student achievement, teacher-student engagement, and family-school collaboration in educational decision-making.

### **Final Thoughts**

During this time of increased demands for accountability in teacher education as it relates to student outcomes in PK-12 settings, it is critical that special education teacher education programs respond by developing high quality programs grounded in an understanding of the role of culture in teaching and learning. The personnel preparation support provided through grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), has created countless opportunities for teacher education programs at minority-serving institutions. This funding not only provides a gateway for the development of highly effective and innovative programs that emphasize the key features highlighted in this master's degree program but also serves as a catalyst to creating meaningful partnerships with communities most in need of highly effective teachers.

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