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Multiculturalism and Students with Visual Impairments in New South Wales, Australia

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Abstract: This study found that a large number of students with visual impairments in public and private schools in New South Wales come from culturally diverse backgrounds, that teacher training does not incorporate multicultural perspectives, and that instructors and itinerant vision teachers lack knowledge and skills to teach from a multicultural perspective. Recommendations are provided to guide the inclusion of multicultural perspectives in teacher preparation programs and teachers' practices.

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Australia is ethnically varied to a considerable extent and has a proportion of students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds. Australia's multicultural education policies require that itinerant vision teachers use multicultural-based teaching approaches to enable students with visual impairments who are from culturally diverse backgrounds to gain access to the school curriculum. Thus, it is necessary that instructors in teacher preparation programs in visual impairments and itinerant vision teachers have the knowledge and skills to teach from a

multicultural perspective--that is, to teach in a way that acknowledges, encourages, and respects students from all cultural backgrounds (*LEP Multicultural Perspectives*, 2001). A multicultural teaching perspective takes into account and responds to students' learning styles and variations in language. For example, it may include the provision of educational resources in languages other than English, using interpreters to facilitate communication with students and parents, and using culturally relevant assessment techniques (*LEP Multicultural Perspectives*, 2001).

Review of the literature

Although no research has investigated the use of multicultural perspectives in the preparation of teachers of students with visual impairments and their effects on teachers' practices, the educational needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds have been recognized and listed as a priority in the literature on visual impairments. For example, Sheik (1998) observed that students with visual impairments from families that restrict the use of English at home or who have limited English skills have difficulty using English in the classroom. Consequently, these students have difficulty completing homework, understanding the curriculum, and communicating with teachers and are at risk of academic failure. Sheik noted that it is necessary for itinerant vision teachers to be knowledgeable about a range of strategies, such as clarity of speech and the use of tactile aids or colorful pictures, to enable the development of ideas and concepts that may assist visually impaired students who have limited English skills to comprehend and express themselves in English. In addition, Milian (2000) suggested that although students with visual impairments learn English through bilingual or other English language programs, itinerant vision teachers could assist them in this process by providing materials in the students' native languages, working with English as a second language (ESL)

teachers to modify instruction to promote the comprehension of braille, provide English instruction in a way that supports the ESL program, and use interpreters or bilingual professionals.

Some specialists in visual impairments have also emphasized that it is important to consider family attitudes toward visual impairments, culturally based behavior and approaches to learning, and the student's family system in planning educational programs, since these aspects can affect a student's capacity to engage fully in the school curriculum. For example, Milian (2000) reported that a parent's culturally based attitudes toward visual impairment can affect the extent of the parent's involvement in the child's education, the degree to which the parent may accept recommendations from the itinerant vision teacher, and the extent to which a child will involve himself or herself in the school curriculum. By assessing and understanding students' and parents' attitudes toward visual impairments, the itinerant vision teacher can plan an educational program that is suitable to an individual student and acceptable to the family (Milian, 2000).

According to M. Akhtar (itinerant vision teacher, personal communication, September 15, 2001), some families from Middle Eastern backgrounds attempt to conceal their children's visual impairments because they are concerned that knowledge of their children's visual impairments by others in their community will reduce the chance of their children's siblings being accepted in arranged marriages. Consequently, to conceal their children's visual impairments, some parents prevent their children from using a long cane outside the school grounds. According to Milian (2000), itinerant vision teachers must recognize parents' opinions and respond appropriately. In this case, an itinerant vision teacher, in conjunction with an orientation and mobility (O&M) instructor, could develop alternative methods of O&M that a child could use outside the school grounds. This approach is

more likely to receive the support of the family, who may encourage the child to continue to use O&M strategies.

In addition, Scholl (1986) advised itinerant vision teachers to seek explanations for unexpected behavior by students or their parents from culturally diverse backgrounds that may differ from the behavior of the majority student population. Scholl reported that judgements of behavior that are based on Anglo-Celtic expectations may lead to negative attitudes toward these students by itinerant vision teachers or other students, which will reduce the students' self-esteem and confidence to participate in classroom activities.

Akhtar, an itinerant vision teacher, suggested that an itinerant vision teacher will be better able to assist a student if he or she is sensitive to the student's family system (personal communication, September 15, 2001). Akhtar observed that some families of various cultural backgrounds are patriarchal in nature and that some male relatives from these cultural backgrounds may be unwilling to receive or resentful about receiving advice from female itinerant vision teachers. In addition, sensitivity to the family system may enhance parent-teacher communication, which may foster positive attitudes to learning by students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLinden, 1990; Ramey, Krauss, & Simeonsson, 1989).

Within family systems, the gender-role values of adults are likely to determine child-rearing practices, such as discipline and the amount of freedom that children experience. Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba's (1991) ethnographic study of children of immigrant Mexican and Central American families reported that rules differed on the basis of gender. Boys from Mexican families were allowed more opportunities to leave the home, while girls were expected to remain at home. Such parental practices have

implications for the quality of the educational experience of visually impaired students from culturally diverse backgrounds. For example, visually impaired female students from some cultural backgrounds may have fewer opportunities to attend what are sometimes called "vision camps." These camps, which are conducted outside school hours, give students with visual impairments the opportunity to learn and practice O&M skills, daily living skills, braille, and socialization. Thus, itinerant vision teachers may need to provide female students who are not allowed to attend such camps with alternative opportunities to practice these skills.

Regarding the inclusion of multicultural perspectives in teacher preparation programs in visual impairments, Milian and Erin (2001) suggested that these programs could take a number of approaches to facilitate the development of cultural competence in their student teachers. For example, these programs could include general courses that address diversity and multiculturalism and offer specific courses in multicultural topics, such as bilingual special education.

The effectiveness of teacher training in multicultural perspectives has been demonstrated in studies of mainstream teachers. For example, Pohan (1996) reported a strong positive relationship between multicultural course work and cultural responsiveness in 492 teachers from four universities and between cross-cultural experiences, such as time spent in another country or tutoring culturally diverse students, and cultural sensitivity. Similarly, Mahan (1982) immersed 291 student teachers in the Hopi and Navajo Native American cultures. Prior to their field placements, the students had completed on-campus cultural preparation through workshops, film, seminars, and readings. Each student teacher spent 17 weeks working, teaching, and living with Native American students in their communities. The results were positive in every area that was investigated, including students' attitudes

toward the Native Americans, greater employment opportunities for teachers in culturally diverse settings, and effective teaching.

Milian and Ferrell (1998) implemented multicultural perspectives in a teacher preparation program in visual impairments by incorporating cultural aspects and introducing courses on reading in Spanish, the Spanish braille code, reading and writing methods to teach students with limited English skills, and adapting materials to facilitate instruction in English and students' native languages. Their teacher training program prepared 32 special education graduates to teach students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds. In addition, the students spent 10 hours observing ESL teachers in public schools. Unfortunately, no follow-up was conducted to determine whether this project had a positive impact on the teachers' subsequent teaching practices. However, Milian (personal communication, November 2, 2002) said that the graduates continue to contact the college to discuss their multicultural teaching approaches and to obtain additional multicultural-based information.

The purpose of the study presented here was to investigate the extent of multicultural perspectives in Australia's postgraduate curriculum on visual impairments and of multicultural perspectives in the practices of itinerant vision teachers. This article reports the number of students with vision impairments who were enrolled in public and private schools in the state of New South Wales (NSW), the extent and type of multicultural teaching approaches used by the itinerant vision teachers, and the extent to which multiculturalism was included in curricula of the educational institutions from which itinerant vision teachers had received their postgraduate training in education of students with visual impairments.

Method

Participants

There were 107 participants in this study. These 107 included 90 (70 women and 20 men) of the 136 itinerant vision teachers who were actively employed in NSW public and private schools and 17 university instructors who had provided the surveyed itinerant vision teachers with postgraduate training in education of students with visual impairments from 1970 to 2001. Of the 90 itinerant teachers, 46 were aged 46 and older, 30 were aged 41-45, and 14 were aged 26-40. Of the 17 instructors, 12 were based in Australia and included all the instructors in teacher preparation programs in visual impairments, 3 were based in the United States, and 2 were based in England.

The itinerant vision teachers provided information via questionnaires about students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds who are on their current caseloads. This information included demographic characteristics, the use of assistive devices in languages other than English, knowledge of the students' cultures, and the course work included in their teacher preparation programs. The instructors provided information via telephone interviews about their education in visual impairments and the multicultural perspectives that were incorporated into the courses they taught.

Data analysis

The questionnaire was descriptively analyzed using STATISTICA software. Responses to open-ended questions were coded by a statistician and the researcher by identifying major themes that had been identified as reoccurring throughout the responses to each question. The results of the 17 telephone interviews with the instructors were transcribed and imported to the qualitative statistical package NUD*IST for analysis. Interview questions that received a large number of different

responses were coded by a statistician and the researcher by identifying the major themes that appeared in the responses to each question.

Results

The students

Of the students with visual impairments who were on the caseloads of the 90 itinerant vision teachers in August-September 2001, more than 25% (138) were from culturally diverse backgrounds (see [Table 1](#)). Of these students, 91 (47 male and 44 female) were attending public schools and 47 (28 male and 19 female) were attending private schools. Of the 90 itinerant vision teachers, 49 (54%) taught students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds, and 41% (20) of the 49 taught students with limited English skills. The majority of the students with limited English skills were aged 6-10 (see [Table 2](#)).

Of the 49 itinerant vision teachers who taught students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds, 67% taught students who spoke languages other than English. These students spoke 23 languages other than English, and some spoke more than 1 language. The six most common second languages spoken by the students were Arabic ($n = 22$), Italian ($n = 5$), Greek ($n = 4$), Chinese ($n = 3$), Hindi ($n = 3$), and Urdu ($n = 3$). In addition, nearly half (41%) the parents of these students had limited English skills. Furthermore, the 138 students with visual impairments came from 27 discrete cultural backgrounds, the 10 most common of which were Lebanese ($n = 28$), Indigenous Australian ($n = 19$), Middle Eastern ($n = 12$), Italian ($n = 11$), Chinese ($n = 10$), Greek ($n = 7$), Indian ($n = 6$), Filipino ($n = 5$), Fijian ($n = 4$), and Maori ($n = 4$).

Teaching practices and multicultural perspectives

Almost all (92%) the 49 itinerant vision teachers who had students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds on their caseloads agreed that it was important to know the students' family traditions, but 65% said that they had either no or a small amount of knowledge of these traditions. In addition, the majority of the 49 teachers strongly agreed (55%) or agreed (43%) that it was important to have knowledge of the parents' goals for their children, but 48% had either none or a small amount of knowledge about these goals.

Twenty-seven (55%) of the 49 itinerant vision teachers had experienced culturally related educational issues. For example, some students had limited English skills, and the teachers found it difficult to teach spatial concepts and the curriculum without the assistance of an interpreter; some male students refused to be taught by female teachers; and some teacher respondents were prejudiced against visually impaired students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The teachers experienced other culturally related educational issues when they attempted to relate to the students' parents. For example, in some instances, communication was challenging because the parents had either limited or no English skills, the parents refused to attend meetings to plan educational goals for their children, the parents did not allow their children to learn braille or to use low vision or mobility aids, the parents' expectations of success for their daughters were low, and the daughters were not allowed to go on excursions.

In addition to these difficulties, the majority of the teachers could not read, write, or braille in the second languages spoken by their students, and only one teacher, herself from a culturally diverse background, could speak a language other than English that was spoken by her student. Furthermore, the majority of the teachers never used such resources as assistive language devices (86%), braille books in languages other than English (92%), or print

books in languages other than English (92%) with their students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

The majority (84%) of the 49 itinerant vision teachers disagreed that it was important for them to speak a language other than English that was spoken by their students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds, but 65% agreed that it was important that they have resources in languages other than English, even though the majority had never used such resources. Furthermore, although 96% of the teachers agreed that it was important to use interpreters and bilingual professionals to communicate with families of students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds, 67% had never done so. In addition, although 67% of the teachers said that it was also important to use interpreters and bilingual professionals to communicate with students from culturally diverse backgrounds, 73% had never done so.

Postgraduate training in visual impairments

Of the 90 itinerant vision teachers, 13 (14%) had no university-level undergraduate or postgraduate education in teaching students with visual impairments. Of the 77 teachers who did, 65 (84%) received postgraduate training at Australia-based universities in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and Sydney (52 from universities in Sydney). The remaining 12 teachers received postgraduate training in England ($n = 10$), the United States ($n = 1$), and the Republic of South Africa ($n = 1$).

Of the nine course categories that were included in the itinerant vision teachers' curricula in education in visual impairments from 1970 to 2001, no specific course was related to multiculturalism or cultural diversity in any of the postgraduate programs in visual impairments. In this regard, 60 (78%) of the 77 itinerant vision teachers who had received postgraduate training in visual

impairments reported that the courses in their curricula had not incorporated multicultural perspectives, and 17 (22%) noted that one or two courses had incorporated multicultural perspectives in a brief and general way (for example, reviews of case studies, general comments on cultural differences, eye conditions that are prevalent in indigenous communities, and the importance of the parent-teacher partnership). Furthermore, 60% of the itinerant teachers said that they did not learn about the NSW multicultural education policy or other multicultural education policies during their postgraduate training in visual impairments, although some (31%) reported that they knew that an NSW multicultural education policy existed.

Postgraduate instructors

The majority (77%) of the postgraduate instructors of the itinerant vision teachers were born in Australia and the United Kingdom and lived and lectured in Australia; the remainder had been born in Palestine ($n = 1$) and Sweden ($n = 1$). All the instructors had more than one tertiary qualification. The majority (59%) spoke English only; only one instructor who was born in a country in which English is the first language could speak a language other than English fluently (French).

The 17 instructors taught a range of courses, such as literacy, O&M, technology, integration and inclusion, and the core and expanded curriculum. None of the courses or their goals referred to multiculturalism or cultural diversity. Influences that affected the instructors' development of courses included opinions expressed in the literature by other experts in the field, collaboration with other experts in the field, texts, students' requests for specific information, and opinions of the NSW Education Department.

Seven (41%) instructors reported that they made no reference to

multicultural perspectives in their courses. Two instructors who were based in the United States said that although they did not include multicultural perspectives in their courses, the philosophies and goals of their visual impairment programs included the importance of addressing cultural and linguistic diversity. The remaining 8 (29%) instructors included multicultural perspectives if questions related to multicultural issues arose in class. Five (29%) instructors reported feeling "culturally incompetent" (that is, they thought that they did not have adequate knowledge about multiculturalism or multicultural teaching methods to teach from a multicultural perspective).

The majority of the instructors considered multicultural perspectives to be very important (53%) or important (41%) in the postgraduate teacher education curriculum. Of the 12 (71%) instructors who had no knowledge of a national or state multicultural education policy, 10 were based in Australia.

Discussion

It is necessary for itinerant vision teachers to be knowledgeable about strategies to assist students with visual impairments and limited English skills to comprehend educational ideas and concepts (Milian, 2000; Sheik, 1998). However, the findings of this study revealed that although a number of their students had limited English skills, the itinerant vision teachers lacked such strategic knowledge. Furthermore, the majority of postgraduate instructors and itinerant vision teachers did not speak languages other than English, did not use resources or assistive devices in languages other than English, and did not use interpreters or bilingual professionals to assist in communication. The teachers' lack of communication methods in languages other than English also indicates that the teachers' communication with the large number of parents with limited English skills was limited. This limited communication may have a detrimental effect on students'

learning and socialization (Brofenbrenner, 1979; McLinden, 1990; Ramey et al., 1989).

However, the itinerant vision teachers did state that it is important to have resources in languages other than English, even though they considered it unnecessary to acquire such languages. This finding may suggest that the teachers recognized the impracticalities of acquiring numerous second languages spoken by students from culturally diverse backgrounds, but acknowledged that resources in languages other than English may assist teachers to convey various educational concepts and ideas.

Some itinerant vision teachers reported that cultural issues, such as female students not having permission to attend vision camps and male students rejecting instruction by female itinerant teachers, were impeding the educational process. According to Milian (2000), Scholl (1986), and Sheik (1998), it is necessary to accommodate such familial and cultural attitudes to enable students to engage fully in the school curriculum. However, it appears that the majority of itinerant teachers lacked knowledge of their students' family traditions, cultural attitudes, and family systems and were therefore unable to devise strategies to accommodate such cultural aspects while continuing to work toward the students' educational goals.

According to Milian and Erin (2001), it is imperative for teacher preparation programs in visual impairments to include multicultural perspectives to facilitate cultural competencies in the practices of itinerant vision teachers. It appears, however, that multicultural perspectives were not present to any depth in the instructors' courses and that the lack of depth seems to have been reflected in the dearth of multicultural skills in the teachers' practices. It is important to note that although the majority of itinerant vision teachers needed to use multicultural teaching perspectives, they did not seek multicultural information or

resources. This observation further emphasizes these teachers' need for formal training in multicultural teaching methods and strategies.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of this study provide information on the extent to which multicultural perspectives were incorporated into Australia's postgraduate teacher preparation programs in visual impairments and the extent of multicultural perspectives in the practices of the itinerant vision teachers. The instructors did not include multicultural perspectives in their courses or as an individual course. In addition, the majority of itinerant vision teachers did not incorporate multicultural perspectives into their teaching practices. These results highlight the need for cultural considerations in postgraduate teacher preparation programs in visual impairments, itinerant vision teachers' practices, policies, and research on the education of students with visual impairments. On the basis of the results of this study, the following recommendations are presented to guide the inclusion of multicultural perspectives in postgraduate teacher preparation courses in visual impairments and in teaching practices.

Recommendation 1

Postgraduate teacher preparation programs in visual impairments should include multicultural perspectives.

Suggested action plan

- Provide professional development for existing itinerant vision teachers in multicultural issues and perspectives.
- Introduce a separate and compulsory course on multiculturalism in the curricula of teacher preparation programs. This course may include aspects of the history of

Australian migration and current migration trends, indigenous education, cultural issues, and strategies to resolve issues.

- Incorporate cultural competencies within each course in teacher preparation programs in visual impairments, including the use of resources and technology in languages other than English (such as Arabic); the use of student teaching in indigenous communities, ethnic schools, and non-Western countries; and the creation of a network of individuals and organizations that are knowledgeable in languages other than English and culturally diverse communities from which itinerant vision teachers could seek information and assistance.

Recommendation 2

Cultural diversity and an increase in male itinerant vision teachers need to be reflected in the teacher population.

Suggested action plan

- Replace retiring itinerant vision teachers with a proportion of teachers from the culturally diverse backgrounds of the major cultural groups in Australia who are fluent in languages other than English.
- Appoint additional male teachers to support students whose cultures direct they be taught by male teachers.

Recommendation 3

A vision-based educational policy needs to include multicultural aspects.

Suggested action plan

- Include multicultural perspectives in the charters of organizations that are responsible for devising and monitoring the implementation of policies and procedures for educating students with visual impairments.

Recommendation 4

Further research needs to be conducted to extend this study's findings and conclusions.

Suggested action plan

- Investigate the specific types of cultural issues that are experienced by itinerant vision teachers, parents, and students with visual impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Investigate the ways in which multicultural perspectives could be incorporated into existing teacher preparation courses on visual impairments.
- Investigate the effects of teacher preparation in multicultural perspectives on the teaching practices of itinerant vision teachers.

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