Chapter 40

Multiculturalism in Special Education:
Perspectives of Minority Children in Urban Schools

Zandile P. Nkabinde
New Jersey City University, USA

ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to explore multicultural education in the context of special education. Multicultural education as an effective intervention in urban schools is discussed. Obiakor (2007) describes this era as that of accountability where schools are challenged to leave no child behind, which makes schools more responsive to students' needs including those with special needs who are linguistically and culturally diverse. In addition, Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter was conceived with a purpose to contribute on the debate about multiculturalism and special education. The discussion explores how these overlapping spheres of influence affect minority children in urban schools. Many educators acknowledge that teachers need to be able to work well with minority students who have special needs and their families in urban settings in order to ensure that their cultural background is used to support, rather than impede their progress in education (Tepper, Tepper, 2004). The concept of multicultural education and special education when combined with terms like minority children and urban schooling usually carries negative connotations. This brings to mind academic underachievement, helplessness related to race, culture, class, and urban decay. Minority students with special needs in urban schools have triple-layered problems: that of being culturally different, linguistically different and having special needs. Diaz (2001) argued that disability itself, when framed through

the lens of special education, tends to be equated with deficiency. Having these odds stacked against them presents challenges for teachers and demands creative ways to help minimize these negative forces.

Multicultural Education Defined

Haberman and Post (1998) define multicultural education as follows:

Multicultural education is a process built on respect and appreciation of cultural diversity. Central to this process is gaining understanding of the cultures of the world and incorporating these insights into all areas of the curriculum and school life with a particular emphasis on those cultures represented in our school community. Growing from these insights is a respect for all cultures and commitment to creating equitable relationships between men and women, among people of different ethnic backgrounds, and for all categories of people. Viewed in this manner multicultural education builds respect, self-esteem, and appreciation of others and provides students with the tool for building a just and equitable society (p. 98).

Banks (1994) defines multicultural education as an education for freedom that is essential in today's ethnically polarized and troubled world. Education according to Banks (1994) should not alienate students from their home and community cultures. However, it should also not confine them by their cultural boundaries.

Special Education Defined

Smith and Tyler (2010) defined special education as a specially designed instruction to meet the individuals' unique needs. It is characterized by individualized services for students with disabilities. The key component to the services provided to students with disabilities and their families is free appropriate education provided in the least restrictive environment.

Multiculturalism and Minority Students in Special Education Classes

Research studies in special education state that minority students in urban schools are more likely to fail grades, drop out of school, and get assigned to special education classes more than their white counterparts (Chu, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education as cited by Obiakor (2007) reported that though Anglo Americans represent about 67% of general public school enrollments, they represent about 43% of special education placements. On the other hand, while African Americans represent about 17% of general public school enrollments, they represent about 20% of special education placements. The report further stated that from 2000 through 2001, there was a national student population of 67% Anglo American, 17% African American, 16% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native. However, special education placement of these groups was disproportionate in terms of the racial/ethnic composition of students; 43% Anglo American, 20% African American, 14% Hispanic, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

While classification of students with disabilities is necessary for the provision of special services, it has also been used to exclude minority groups from receiving education in a meaningful manner. Such exclusion has destroyed the academic and social aspirations of many urban students (Grant, 1980). For instance, black students are more than twice as likely as students of other ethnicities to be labeled as

Related Content

Plurilingual STEAM and School Lunches for Learning?: Beyond Folklorization in Language Education
Daniel Roy Pearce, Mayo Oyama, Danièle Moore, Yuki Kitanoand Emiko Fujita (2021). *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education (pp. 1-25).*
www.irma-international.org/article/plurilingual-steam-and-school-lunches-for-learning/282070

Responding to the Needs of Prisoners with Learning Difficulties in Australia
Jason Skues, Jeffrey Pfeifer, Alfie Olivaand Lisa Wise (2019). *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education (pp. 113-121).*
www.irma-international.org/article/responding-to-the-needs-of-prisoners-with-learning-difficulties-in-australia/216377

Women in Digital Society and Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Belarus
Albina Sibirskaya (2022). *Gender Perspectives on Industry 4.0 and the Impact of Technology on Mainstreaming Female Employment (pp. 45-76).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/women-in-digital-society-and-entrepreneurship-in-the-republic-of-belarus/298278

Revisiting Intercultural Competence: Small Culture Formation on the Go through Threads of Experience
Adrian Holliday (2016). *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education (pp. 1-14).*
www.irma-international.org/article/revisiting-intercultural-competence/156494

Inclusive Education in Ghana: Enablers, Barriers, and Challenges of Inclusion
Might Kojo Abreh (2025). *Enablers, Barriers, and Challenges for Inclusive Curriculum (pp. 329-356).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/inclusive-education-in-ghana/381618