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Multicultural Education for Learners with Special Needs in the Twenty-First Century

Reviewed by Audrey Cohan & Joanne O'Brien

Title: *Multicultural Education for Learners with Special Needs in the Twenty-First Century*

Author(s): Festus E. Obiakor & Anthony F. Rotatori (Eds)

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As with much of Festus E. Obiakor and Anthony F. Rotatori's work, the authors are champions for effective, sustained, and comprehensive multicultural education. In this edited book, *Multicultural Education for Learners with Special Needs in the Twenty-First Century*, students with special needs are the focus of the in-depth chapters supported by compelling scholarship. Through their superior chapter selection, the authors did not shy away from the controversial arguments that have plagued special education programs throughout the country, including: disproportionality, assessment, broad government initiatives, or the stigma often associated with special education. At the same time, they highlight the common obstacles that have kept educators from truly meeting the needs of the diverse, struggling or impaired learner—misidentification and misinstruction as well as three other “misses” that our society seems to be taking in regard to this growing population. This book represents a merging of multicultural ideas and frameworks while successfully keeping in mind culturally and linguistically diverse students with special needs.

The succession of the chapters makes sense if you are reading straight through the book, although many readers will select specific topics that they are interested in. This edited book is not for the beginning educator, but rather aligned with the perspectives of experienced teachers and administrators who find themselves challenged by “roadblocks” (p. ix) that never seem to adjust whether the students are enrolled in large urban districts or smaller public school systems. Regardless of the author of the chapter, or the lens through which they examine the complex topics, clear writing and practical strategies are the hallmark of this edited volume.

Chapter One sets the tone for the edited book as it is written by Festus E. Obiakor and Satasha L. Green, offering the rationale for the entire volume and defining multicultural education as “a movement that proposes to increase equity for victimized groups without limiting the opportunities of others” (p. 2) while recognizing the extraordinary contributions of Banks and other theoretical groundbreakers in this introduction. Additionally, they discuss the disproportionate representation in special education respective to culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLD) because of a lack of understanding of cultures and linguistic differences (p. 4) while citing statistics to support their point.

The second chapter by Laurel M. Garrick Duhaney is as important as reading the rationale in Chapter One, as the author addresses numerous issues which account for disproportionate representations: limited use of culturally relevant assessments, differential appropriation of educational funding, and the lack of homeschool collaboration. To that end, ways of addressing these issues are delineated and include practical suggestions such as: providing certified, academically competent and caring teachers; fostering culturally sensitive instructional classroom environments; employing culturally responsive evidence-based behavioral practices; employing evidence based pre-referral strategies; implementing culturally response-to-intervention models; incorporating the principles of Universal Learning Design

(ULD); using authentic assessments; and working with families. This is a chapter not to be skipped.

Assessment is confronted in Chapter Three as Tes Mehring acknowledges that appropriate assessment for students with special needs has been a concern for several decades. The debate over authentic assessments is re-voiced in this account. Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven attend to the unique cultural needs of specific student groups and give insightful suggestions on how to best address learning needs. Respectively, these chapters focus on Latino/a students, African-American students, Asian-American students, and Native American learners with special education needs. Chapter Eight adds yet another high needs group to the mix by focusing on foreign born English language learners. The Culturally Sensitive Intervention model (CSM) is introduced here and this is another chapter not to be missed. The authors delineate the following as important components in meeting the needs of immigrants: valuing the self, valuing the family, valuing the school, valuing the community, and valuing the government.

It is when reading this section, that educators are reminded of the scope of the challenge in educating culturally and linguistically diverse students. This begs the question as to why CLD learners are often underachievers and then referred to special education through a system of misidentification. We are also reminded that the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST) “reported disproportionality by race for all disability categories within the United States” (p. 3). It is impossible to read the statistics purported throughout the book without becoming increasingly alarmed and wondering aloud how to change the paradigm to one of academic success.

The concept of leadership is represented in Chapter Nine, which was written by Floyd D. Beachum and Carlos R. McCray, “The purpose of the chapter is to advocate for culturally relevant teaching and leadership approaches and provide for practical recommendations for teachers and administrators” (p. 137). This may seem like a tall order but the chapter meets the stated goal. Additionally, the authors define culturally relevant pedagogy, teaching, and the critical characteristics that leaders and teachers need to be culturally responsive.

Chapter Ten is a stand-alone segment in which the authors discuss decisions that need to be made when using assistive technology and the use of ULD in working with multicultural students with disabilities; embedded in this part of the book were examples of readily available technologies, and as with many current and emerging technology-based articles, the suggestions were very specific. The last chapter raises the issue of why CLD children with special needs often present different behavioral patterns and asks the educator to consider the social context in which students are raised. Building on a frequently debated point, educators—both general and special educators—should be cognizant of the culture and social environment of the students they teach. Similar to Chapter Three when the author asks the reader to reflect on the range of diversity in schools today, the characteristics of a culturally responsive classroom management system (CRCM) cannot be overlooked. These authors also address the idea that “caring is a foundational pillar of effective teaching and learning and the lack of it produces inequities in educational opportunities and achievement outcomes for ethnically different students” (p.183).

The themes that unite the contemporary perspectives in multicultural education are not centrally focused on issues of bias as a reader might suspect. Rather, the ideas and examples incorporated in the chapters offer hope and a “road map” to successful practice. The editors of this book are well established and have made significant contributions to the multicultural literature. This book raises the level of discussion about culturally and linguistically diverse

learners with special needs and does so through the lenses of dedicated educators who are conversant and knowledgeable about the disparity in services, the roles of school professionals, and the direction in which they need to go to achieve equity.