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The Importance of Cultural Competency in Special Education

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By [Tanika Johnson, EdD, MA, LPC-MHSP, LMHC, NCC, BC-TMH, CCTP](#) on April 19, 2022

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As champions of education, we must create a platform for removing racial division and inequities for all children. Our children deserve to feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe in their homes, schools, and communities. This begins with addressing and encouraging a growth mindset for empowering the next inclusive generation of children and embracing unification through education.

By embracing cultural competence, we allow children the opportunity to appreciate their cultural identities and linguistic traditions. We are the cultural and linguistic ambassadors of special education. Inclusive and culturally diverse learning communities matter.

What Is Cultural Competency?

Cultural competency is our self-awareness of language and culture, understanding of communicative principles, engagement strategies with

intercultural experiences, and potential to learn through intercultural environments.¹ Our children's past intercultural encounters can greatly



and emotional development may be positively or negatively influenced by the mainstream culture and language.

While grasping the concept of cultural competency, we must eliminate the likelihood for a first generation, emerging bilingual student receiving an inappropriate special education referral. Emerging bilingual students face significant challenges with emigration, assimilation, and acculturative stress to western cultural norms and behaviors along with the expectation of learning the language of instruction. Isolating a child's language barriers from a potential disability is an uncomplicated task.²

Self-Knowledge, Awareness, and Responsiveness

Cultural competency is at the intersection of self-knowledge, awareness, and responsiveness toward the role of culture in shaping the customs and traditions that are significant to a child, family, or community. As we deepen our understanding and interpersonal relationships within our children's cultural groups, we will strengthen our framework for culturally specific interactions.

Children with disabilities and special education services deserve high-quality texts and materials along with culturally relevant classroom experiences. Primary-aged school children need exposure to multi-modal learning formats within positive, secure, and nurturing environments. School administrators, educators, and related service providers should offer culturally responsive and anti-bias experiences to enhance learning outcomes for all children with disabilities.

Cultural Responsiveness and Diverse Learning Practices

We can foster cultural responsiveness and diverse learning practices by:

1. **Reflecting on our own cultures, backgrounds, and unconscious biases through self-examination and their impact for diverse classroom**

learning practices. Our life perspectives and biases are molded through educational experiences, colleagues, peers, and family engagement, religion, customs, and many more institutions and systems.

2. **Considering conscious self-awareness, cultural responsiveness, and sociocultural consciousness as we explore our biases and prejudices.** As it relates to implicit biases, microaggressions, and racial injustices, we must adopt a growth mindset and mindfulness approach to eradicating unconscious and subtle forms of oppression.
3. **Giving thought to how our cultural differences influence the cultural diversity of our children and families.** We are role models to our students and families. Our families are entrusting us to cultivate learning communities that honor children's cultural backgrounds and interests.
4. **Developing a school-wide framework for cultural responsiveness and inclusiveness for those we serve.** This is inclusive of all school and community partners supporting the diversity in students' and families' value systems and ways of life.

Culturally Responsive School Environments

Culturally responsive school environments integrate cultural competence by initiating the following:

1. Assemble a **cultural competence committee**, and develop a cultural competence plan with stakeholder feedback (i.e., parents, families, children, administrators, educators, related service providers, support staff, and community partners and leaders).
2. Discuss cultural competence in **strategic planning processes** with a clear set of values and principles as well as expected intercultural policies and structures.
3. Monitor the school's **culturally responsive practices and services**, and administer school-wide cultural competence self-assessments.
4. Incorporate **cultural competency curriculum, plans, and training**, and develop outreach strategies for promoting and strengthening cultural competencies.

Cultural Awareness, Beliefs, and Values

Administrators, educators, and related service providers can contribute to the healthy development of the system of beliefs and values unique to each child.

We must reflect upon the culture of the child (values and beliefs students bring to the classroom), the culture of the school (existing values, expectations, and practices), and the resulting culture in the class setting (students' practices intersecting with school practices). Incorporating approaches such as parent and family home visits and collecting narratives of the family's structure, gender roles, and economic support can increase cultural awareness.

We have the power to strengthen family and school partnerships, improve academic achievement, and apply acceptable policies and standards for special education referrals. Every stakeholder has a pivotal role in promoting cultural competency and creating culturally and linguistically diverse environments. Our advocacy efforts must be at the forefront of appropriate decision-making for instruction and special education services.

If you're interested in learning more about developing your cultural competency, MedBridge instructor [Celeste Roseberry-McKibbin's 5-part series of courses on English language learners](#) offers current research on language impairments in culturally diverse pediatric populations, assessment and evaluation tools, strategies to address common hurdles faced by students for whom English is a second language, and more.

Below, watch [Celeste Roseberry-McKibbin, PhD, CCC-SLP](#) discuss **choosing the language of intervention** in this short clip from her course "[English Language Learners Part 5: Language Impairment Intervention](#)."



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She holds professional teaching licenses in both psychology and special education. Additionally, she has a wealth of experience with education advocacy and serving the special education community and exceptional needs of children, adolescents, and adults with disabilities.

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