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## A Phenomenological Study of Cultural Responsiveness in Special Education

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# A Phenomenological Study of Cultural Responsiveness in Special Education

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## **Keywords**

cultural responsiveness, special education



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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the factors affecting elementary teacher's ability to understand the academic needs of their racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse special education students and the ways in which their values and beliefs influenced their use of culturally responsive practices in the special education classroom. This study revealed five major reasons for the disproportionate number of Black students in special education as perceived by three White teachers in North Carolina: (a) the inadequate coursework in teacher education programs regarding teaching strategies to effectively teach racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse (RCED) students, (b) the cultural dissonance that created a divide between White teachers and their racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students, (c) lack of knowledge on the instructional strategies that should be utilized in order to effectively teach racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students, (d) cultural considerations for Response to Interventions (RtIs) and (e) a disconnect between the home-school cultures. It is significant because findings from this study could add to the knowledge base of strategies to close or eliminate the achievement gap of racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students in special education programs. Furthermore, these experiences may provide an additional opportunity for local educational agencies (LEAS) to examine the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices on the achievement of RCED students in the special education classroom.

*Keywords: cultural responsiveness, special education*

### **Introduction**

The overwhelming majority of elementary school teachers in North Carolina are White females and this seems to be the norm nationwide (Gershenson et al., 2015). For example, historical data collected from North Carolina indicated that White females are overrepresented among educators while minorities are underrepresented when compared to the student population (Sullivan & Kozleski, 2009). The overrepresentation of White teachers in a diverse student population is a problem for schools and knowing this raises concerns about whether White teachers are prepared to teach students whom they share no racial or cultural background (Gay, 2010a).

Teachers have always been challenged with how to cope with the diversities that students bring into the classroom. Now more so than ever, teachers are expected to be subject matter experts in the classroom. Many teachers have limited intercultural knowledge, so the challenges of teaching students with disabilities becomes compounded when these students also have cultural differences that differ from their teacher (Praisner, 2000).

### **Disproportionality in Special Education**

Research has suggested that a disproportionate number of RCED students are referred and placed into special education programs and are thus overrepresented in these programs (Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). Although federal legislation has been enacted to prevent inequitable education for special education students, inequalities still exist in regards to the racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the students.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulations require states to have policies and procedures in place to prevent the disproportionate representation of children based on race, ethnicity or disability (Imber & Van Geel, 2014). Despite these regulations, disparities in special education placement continue to be documented for RCED students (Skiba et al., 2011). In the United States, RCED students, particularly Black students, are identified and placed in special education programs, than their White peers (Chakraborti-Ghosh, Mofield & Orellana, 2010). Black students are found to be placed in special education services at rates higher than proportionate to their percentages within the student population at their school (Martin, 2014). This placement also suggests a disparity in the identification and referral processes for special education services (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013).

### **North Carolina Disproportionality Data**

As of January 2016, data from the North Carolina Exceptional Children's Disproportionate Report remains unavailable, as the district website indicates, the report is currently being updated. However, researchers agree Black students, are overrepresented in special education (Sullivan & Artilles, 2011). The most recent North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Facts & Figures Report (2013), and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's December 2014 head count, reflects that Black students comprise approximately 26.1% of the total public school population in the state of North Carolina but account for 32.2% of the student population receiving special education services in the state.

### **Method**

The nature of this research study called for a phenomenological qualitative approach as outlined in Creswell (2014, p. 4). This approach was necessary in an effort to explore the factors affecting the elementary teacher's ability to understand the academic needs of their RCED special education students. It was also necessary to understand the ways in which their values and beliefs influenced their use of culturally responsive practices in the classroom. A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of individuals (p.285). Seidman's (2012) in-depth phenomenological interview approach was used. This approach outlines three levels of questioning: 1) gathering background information about the participants; 2) investigating how individuals recall events associated with the phenomenon in relation to their personal thoughts and actions; and 3) exploring the meaning and impact of the phenomenon on the participants (p. 15).

### **Research Questions**

The study used three research questions that sought to explore the factors affecting the elementary teachers' ability to understand the academic needs of their RCED special education students and the ways in which their values and beliefs influenced their use of culturally responsive practices in the special education classroom.

After a review of current and historical literature, the following questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of White teachers' who have adopted culturally responsive instructional practices and are serving as special education teachers of RCED students in North Carolina?
2. What factors contribute to White teachers becoming proponents for culturally responsive teaching practices for their RCED special education students in North Carolina?
3. What impact do culturally responsive instructional practices have on a teachers' ability to meet the diverse needs of all students in the classrooms?

### **Participants**

The selection of teacher participants was based on a convenience sample. Creswell (2014) outlines a convenience sample as one in which respondents were chosen based on their convenience and availability (p. 158). Teachers in the convenience sample were White teachers who self-identified as educators in the state of North Carolina. The participants were nominated by their peers to be participants in the study. Through "snowballing" a sampling strategy outlined in Creswell (2014), three teachers were identified for the purpose of this study. Every attempt was made to include the narratives of participants from a range of school types (i.e. urban, suburban, rural).

Biographical profiles of the study participants were developed based on information gathered from focus group interviews. These narratives highlight the participants' individual demographics; lived experiences; instructional practices; and perceptions of the impact of using culturally responsive teaching strategies with RCED special education students. For confidentiality purposes, participants were assigned first-name pseudonyms that are used as appropriate when referring to each participant.

### **Ashley**

Ashley was born in rural upstate New York and lived there until she enrolled into a University in North Carolina. She has been teaching for two years at a public, Title I urban school. As a child, Ashley loved the idea of becoming a teacher and was ecstatic about her acceptance into college. After babysitting for a neighbor whose child had disabilities and discussing with the child's mother the difficulty that she was having in school, Ashley chose to major in special education after becoming disheartened from their conversation and truly felt that it was her destiny to become a special education teacher. She was raised in a small farm town that was not very diverse. She could not recall knowing anyone personally in special education classes and she did not have friends that were outside of her race. Her parents were not racist she states, but they did not encourage her to embrace others outside of her cultural and socioeconomic background.

### **Blake**

Blake is a ten-year veteran at a public, suburban school. Blake "fell into education" after working in corporate America. Blake's father and grandfather were teachers and so he was expected to become one as well. He recounts times when his father would come home disheartened by the way in which certain groups of children were treated. He heard his father recount that his teacher preparation and coursework did not prepare him to deal with the differing learning styles and cultures in his classroom. His father would often voice that he wished parents and teachers had a better connection. Becoming a teacher had not crossed Blake's mind and it was only after a company mentoring relationship with a special education class at a local school did he give "teaching" any real thought. Once employed as a teacher, Blake

questioned why there were so many "minority" students in the special education classroom when they did not make up a large percentage of the school's population.

**Carol**

Carol began teaching at 23 years old. She has now served 34 years as an elementary teacher in a public school in a rural area. Like Ashley, she also grew up in a rural town. Carol has lived her entire life in North Carolina and did not have much exposure to people who were RCED while growing up. Carol stated that she always knew that she would become a teacher because it was a family tradition for the women in her family. Carol has 3 children, one of which is a recently adopted Black male child with intellectual disabilities.

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the participants.

Table 1.

Participant	Age	Gender	Participants Demographics		
			Race	Years of Experience	School Type
Ashley	25	Female	White	2 Years	Public, Urban
Blake	45	Male	White	10 Years	Public, Suburban
Carol	57	Female	White	34 Years	Public, Rural

**Data Collection**

Three semi-structured focus group interviews were used to collect information on the factors affecting the elementary teacher's ability to understand the academic needs of their RCED special education students. The interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes and took place at a location neutral for all participants. Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was used to analyze the data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes. Transcripts were coded for themes and edited. Member checking enabled each participant to review, check, and confirm the narrative data to provide measures of validity and reliability.

**Themes**

The participants in the study each shared their individual experiences through focus group interview questions and some common themes emerged. These themes were used to describe the phenomenon.

**Theme 1. Teacher Preparation**

Teacher training plays a critical role in the success of students. Many teachers are not prepared to meet the needs of the diverse students in the classroom (Au, 2009; Banks, 2004, 2013; Gay, 2010b; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2002, 2009). The participants in the study did not perceive themselves as having a solid training and understanding of cultural responsiveness. Participants felt that due to their lived experiences that they were not able to provide culturally responsive instructional strategies for their students in the absence of teacher preparation. The participants reported the following regarding their preparation to teach RCED students in special education:

Ashley stated:

My experience interacting with RCED people was limited. After accepting a position in a Title I urban school, I became worried about how I would teach RCED students. I had no

prior knowledge about their cultures, behaviors and learning styles. I only knew what I'd learned through beginning coursework and field experiences; my initial understanding of disability was framed by my educational philosophy that I developed throughout my coursework. I didn't understand the demands of teaching special education students, especially RCED students ...I was lost.

Blake responded:

I took a course in multicultural education but it in no way prepared me to teach students from diverse backgrounds. I learned very little during my student teaching... it was not sufficient enough to train me to be culturally responsive so that all my students' needs could be adequately addressed.

Carol stated:

Understanding RCED in the context of education is invaluable, probably necessary for understanding how to effectively reach these students...when I began teaching, I didn't have to worry about teaching RCED students...there weren't any in my community...there were no special coursework to train me either...it was only recently that we were offered professional development in effective teaching strategies to reach diverse learners...my heart broke, I saw how I had disadvantaged an already disadvantaged student population.

The participants believed that additional professional development training and coursework for special education teachers is needed and should be ongoing. They suggested that subsequent trainings and coursework would further their understanding of cultural responsiveness in the special education classroom and could assist them in meeting the educational needs of their diverse learners.

## **Theme 2. Cultural Dissonance, Values, Beliefs**

Ford (2012) examined the cultural differences among students and their teachers and noted that the majority of students are being taught, mostly, by White female teachers.

Ashley stated:

You don't realize how unprepared you are until you get into the classroom. You think that your teacher education coursework and student teaching has prepared you to teach to every child but it doesn't. How can you teach to every child when you don't know anything about some of them...have never had any real interaction with them and only have societal stereotypes to base your opinion of them on?

Whether White teachers realize it or not, one of the areas they, as a group, have difficulty with, often lies in the area of "self-fulfilling prophecy" and they may unwittingly be stifling the learning of their students of color, by "lacking faith in the students' ability to achieve" (Villegas, 2007, p. 374).

Participant Carol demonstrated a lack of understanding RCED students when she stated:

After working in the classroom a few years without seeing any progress from them, I truly believed that the inherent characteristics of these students were no fault of the failure of the educational system and resulted from deficiencies from their cultural background and that my teaching style had nothing to do with this. I was wrong but I had initially developed negative attitudes toward RCED student with disabilities. Throughout all these years, I wonder how much damage have I done to these students.

The participants all expressed their lack of understanding for their diverse students. They all expressed that as first year teachers, they unconsciously imposed their White, middle class values onto them. They did not believe that all their students could be successful, most

specifically, the Black students whom always appeared to have behavioral issues. Teachers who are not familiar with the background and needs of RCED students are more likely to identify certain behaviors of these students as needing a referral for special education (Klingner et al., 2005). Prior research suggested that teachers' attitudes and beliefs impacted special education referrals (Hornstra, Dennessen, Bakker, van den Bergh, & Voeten, 2010).

### **Theme 3. Instructional Strategies**

The participants of the study all voiced receiving support from their school leadership team when they incorporated culturally responsive instructional practices into their curriculum. They felt that teachers who incorporated culturally responsive instructional practices into their classrooms reflected that the focus of the classroom was designed around the instructional needs of their students. Given that the primary role of teachers is to shape the learning based on the needs of their students, Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley (2010) discussed that "almost 60% of teachers in schools with at least 90% Black students strongly agreed that they provided culturally relevant materials in addition to the textbook, while only 41% of teachers in schools with 10% or fewer Black students agreed strongly (p. 41)."

Ashley stated:

The leadership team in my school realized that although the student population was racially, culturally and ethnically diverse; the majority of the teaching staff was White and did not understand how to teach RCED students. The school leadership team provided us with workshops and professional development. Additionally, the curriculum coordinator and the beginning teacher support coordinator designed aspects of the beginning teacher program to expose us to culturally responsive teaching materials and strategies.

Teachers who lack exposure to diverse cultures may have limited abilities to match effective instructional practices and resources to the learning needs of their students (Orosco & Connor, 2011). The cultural and learning needs of RCED students must be considered as academic instruction is being planned. Culturally responsive instruction has been supported as the most promising strategy for diverse students (Nieto & Bode, 2012; Banks, 2013; McIntosh et al., 2011).

### **Theme Four. Cultural Considerations for Response to Interventions (RtI)**

The Response to Intervention Framework is an instructional strategy. This strategy requires LEAs to examine their instruction, their processes, and strategies for evaluating the students they've deemed at-risk for academic failure, and reassess when students are referred for special education services (Special Ed Connection, 2010). Proper use of RtI can be used as a means of combatting disproportionate placement of RCED students into special education. The study participants all agreed that factors, such as personal philosophies of teaching and learning may influence RtI outcomes.

### **Theme Five. Home School Connection**

The study participants voiced their concerns about the cultural dissonance between home and school. Participant Ashley expressed her concern when she stated:

It would have helped if I were aware of the backgrounds and home culture of my students. This would have clarified a lot about the perceived behaviors and learning problems that I saw. Based on what I knew...this is how they acted...they moved around a lot and tapped their pencils on the desk to an imaginary beat...that is what I saw in the



movies that depicted RCED students in classrooms. I didn't know better...remember, I didn't have any real coursework or training teaching RCED students...if so, I might have tried to teach them differently.

All of the participants in the study seemed to lack an awareness of the disconnect between the home-school cultures, and as a result, did not fully understand the educational needs of their RCED students. Booth & Dunn (2013) posited that a cultural dissonance between home and school may influence poor student educational outcomes.

### **Findings**

Teachers today must be engaged in educating students in a changing world and thus there is an imperative to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to teach cross-culturally to meet the needs of RCED students. This is particularly true when it comes to addressing the instructional needs of these students. This study revealed that there were five major reasons for the disproportionate number of Black students in special education as perceived by three White teachers in North Carolina: (a) the inadequate coursework in teacher education programs regarding teaching strategies to effectively teach racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse (RCED) students, (b) the cultural dissonance that created a divide between White teachers and their racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students, (c) lack of knowledge on the instructional strategies that should be utilized in order to effectively teach racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students, (d) cultural considerations for Response to Interventions (RtIs) and (e) a disconnect between the home-school cultures.

The participants in this study came from various socioeconomic backgrounds and were raised in families that held varying beliefs and attitudes concerning people who were RCED. It did appear from the transcripts that their lived experiences were a factor for each of them to implement culturally responsive practices for their RCED special education students. While the teachers in this study demonstrated some understanding of the academic needs of their students, their understanding was not sufficient for the RCED students. They voiced that it was only when their schools held parent-teacher workshops to discuss the impact of a students' home culture on their academics did they get an opportunity to understand how the home culture is carried over into the school culture. The participants were all disheartened to realize that they may have failed some RCED students in the process of their learning. This process began the turning point in the lives of the participants. With the support of school leadership they began searching for professional development and researched-based materials to help them better understand how to become a culturally responsive teacher. The participants all agreed that once they began to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies in the classroom that all of their students, including the special education students began to become more engaged with the content.

Blake stated:

Although this was something that my father often spoke about as a teacher, I really felt as if it was the sign of his times and that as a member of a younger generation, I'd be able to connect more with the parents. I really had a lack of awareness about the disconnection that I created between school and home. I didn't really try to get to know my students or their home cultures, at first, and this probably did not help them succeed in my class. I didn't fully understand why creating this cohesion was important to the needs of my students. I now know better and so I do better.

The participants all stated that the acquisition of new knowledge and instructional strategies for serving RCED students were required, as well as, for serving RCED special education students. Carol surmised:

When using RtI it is important to examine how internal and external factors may affect teacher responses and negate the purpose of RtI implementation.

### **Summary and Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the factors affecting elementary teacher's ability to understand the academic needs of their RCED special education students and the ways in which their values and beliefs influenced their use of culturally responsive practices in the special education classroom. The data analysis revealed five emerging themes. These findings are significant because findings from this study could add to the knowledge base of strategies to effectively teach RCED students. The identified themes discussed and identified participants' perceptions for the disproportionate number of Black students in special education as perceived by three White teachers in North Carolina. Overall, the findings were consistent with the review of the literature and other researchers' findings. The experiences of the participants may provide an additional opportunity for local educational agencies (LEAS) to examine the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices on the disproportionate placement of RCED students into the special education classroom.

The study's findings suggested that teachers need to fit their teaching styles to meet the academic needs of all students (Banks, 2013). Findings from this study highlight that the lived experiences of the participants played a role in their desire to meet the needs of the RCED students in their classroom. The results did not reveal any difference in the way the genders conceptualized the benefits of culturally responsive teaching. Regardless of participants lived experiences, all participants discussed a lack of understanding about RCED students' cultures and how this impacted the manner in which they referred them for special education services and conducted RtI strategies. The participants understood that RtI is a multi-tiered system developed to provide multiple levels of intensity of instruction to students who have been identified as having a deficiency in specific areas of instruction. However, due to the lack of understanding of RCED students, the participants felt that they were guilty of identifying RCED students for special education services when in fact, these students may not have necessarily needed them.

The participants from the study agreed that educators who ignored students' cultural needs may cause students to view the course as irrelevant and subsequently lose interest because students learn in a sociocultural context. The findings from this study indicate that there are other variables besides participants lived experiences that led to their desire to become culturally responsive teachers.

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Dr. Marquis Carter Grant is a special education teacher in the Winston-Salem, Forsyth County School District in North Carolina. Her research interests are special education, reading interventions and autism. She earned a master's degree in Curriculum & Instruction from the University of West Florida and an Ed.D from Argosy University.