Chapter 7
Culturally Competent Practices and Implications for Special Education Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The over-identification of minorities in special education in the United States continues to exist. Such over-representation separates these students from their general education peers to the degree that they may not have access to challenging academic standards and effective instruction. Factors impacting these students include a systemic lack of understanding of cultural frames of reference and curriculum and leadership issues that influence the referral and placement processes in special education. This chapter will address the five culturally competent practices with regard to inclusion and special education. Implications for educational leaders will be discussed.

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The National Summit for Educational Equity reported that culturally competent leadership is key to the United States’ racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse public schools, especially addressing disproportionality (NSEE, 2017). For decades, an abundance of research documented that students from diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in special education compared to their counterparts across the United States (Díaz-Rico, 2018; Ford, 2012; Sullivan, 2017). In today’s schools, treating students and families from different backgrounds and cultures thoughtfully and with equity has become a pivotal concern (Chang, 2007; Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017). School leaders must engage in ways that enable both the individual and the organization to respond effectively to people who are different from themselves (Kirven, 2009). According to IDEA (Díaz-Rico, 2018), schools are mandated to provide educational opportunities to benefit all students; however, many of our students in special education classrooms are not succeeding. Gaps exist in graduation rates, suspensions, expulsions, retention, achievement, and special education, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Gay, 2002; Ford, 2012).

Culturally competent leaders esteem culture and understand how to work with students by interacting effectively in a variety of cultural environments (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). Such leaders advocate for lifelong learning for the purpose of being effective in serving the educational needs of cultural groups in the school community (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). In the same manner, culturally competent special education leaders engage in practices that improve services and outcomes for all students. Those leaders are proactive and apply cultural competence practices to both the organization and individual behaviors (CEEP, 2006).

This chapter addresses cultural competence in education and offers specific implications for special education leaders. The authors suggest that creating and implementing Culturally Competent Practices that moves education towards optimum results in culturally rich settings.

Three questions were formulated in accordance with the purpose of this research:

1. What culturally competent practices are imperative to improve student services for CLD students in special education?
2. To what extent do cultural competencies inform the interactions of special education leaders in the school environment?
3. What are some recommendations for educational leaders to become more culturally competent?
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