



Council for Exceptional Children

Project 20/20 White Paper

Responding Responsibly to Diverse Exceptional Learners in

Research and Federally Funded Projects

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The critical need for this white paper became apparent during the death of George Floyd and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Recent society events confirmed for many and revealed to others how systemic racism differentially impacts students and families from culturally/linguistically and economically diverse backgrounds. Members of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) are aware of the ways race, gender, linguistic differences, and socio-economic status intersect, resulting in disparate outcomes for individuals with disabilities and those with gifts and talents. CEC members are committed to ensuring students with exceptionalities receive high quality services, that address the full range of issues facing children with disabilities, their parents, and school personnel. Moreover, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is an international professional organization whose members are dedicated to advancing policy and practice related to students with diverse learning needs worldwide.

To remain faithful to this mission, the Council for Exceptional Children implemented Project 20/20. Project 20/20 is an outcomes-based project designed to affirm the organizational

commitment to equity and social justice. Members of Project 20/20's Engagement Committee expressed concern regarding the insufficient attention given to the ways the profession of special education inadvertently reinforces systems of racism and marginalization. Our comments emphasize how composition of research teams and time-honored data reporting practices may result in more entrenched educational inequities. We intend to provide recommendations that will lead to more equitable research practices. We hope this white paper will encourage national funding organizations to institutionalize practices that deliberately enhance diversity requirements among research teams and necessitate data reporting procedures that feature within-group learning differences.

Educational research serves as a vital tool for establishing policy and practice within the profession of special education. Our research operates as a determinant of quality-of-life outcomes for historically marginalized children and youth with disabilities. It is necessary, then, to approach research as more than an intellectual exercise. We must thoroughly critique the consequences of our research traditions to excavate and eradicate all forms of educational inequities that occur due to our processes and practices.

Section I: Importance of Inclusive Representation on Special Education Research Teams

In this section, we make the case that the issues and problems faced within special education and gifted education necessitate that researchers use the lenses of social justice, equity, anti-racism, inclusion, and belonging (Trainor & Robertson, 2020; Coleman, et al., 2021; DR CEC, 2022). In addition, we address the importance of inclusive research teams that intentionally incorporate the perspectives of non-mainstream groups that have often been disenfranchised within the research culture (Arzubiaga, et al., 2008; Skiba, et al., 2008). Last, we discuss strategies to enhance the representation of marginalized voices within the research process.

The Role of Research in Tackling Wicked Problems within Special Education

Many of the challenges we face in education are complex, ill-defined, and persistent; Rittel and Webber (1972) call these “wicked problems.” Factors that make these problems so difficult include: how the problem is defined depends on who you ask; each problem is unique with its own set of stakeholders, and outcomes depend on a complex web of contextual variables that are impossible to control. The negative impacts special educational policies and practices can have on culturally/linguistically diverse students and economically disadvantaged groups can be defined as a wicked problem. Wicked problems exist within a complex social milieu, and this social complexity makes solving them challenging. Conklin (2001) points out that because of this social complexity, “solving wicked problems is *fundamentally a social process*” (p. 17, italics in original). Because of the wicked nature of many research problems, we must look at both the role of research within special education and the nature of the researchers.

Through research, we build knowledge, test theories, and compile evidence about the effectiveness of practices and policies (Gallagher, 2006). These, in and of themselves, are beneficial; however, research is a *means*, not an *end*. The primary goal of research is to improve outcomes for students served within the margins of education. Research findings must be translated into policy and practice (Wasik & Coleman, 2019). If research findings are to be useful in improving outcomes for culturally/linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged students served within special education, researchers must use the lenses of social justice, equity, anti-racism, inclusion, and belonging (Trainor & Robertson, 2020; Coleman, et al., 2021; DR CEC, 2022). Further, the applicability and relevance of research findings for students from culturally/linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged groups must be intentionally considered throughout the research process. We must, as Arzubiaga and colleagues

(2008) point out, “produce research that responds to the growing diversity of the student populations across and within multiple contexts.” (p. 341).

The Importance of Inclusivity and Representation for Research Teams

Conducting special education research that is applicable to and relevant for culturally/linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged students calls for greater inclusivity within research teams and deeper collaboration with key stakeholders. Inclusivity is paramount to ensure that non-mainstream perspectives are incorporated within the research design (Arzubiaga, et al., 2008). Collaboration with key stakeholders (e.g., family members, teachers, neighborhood organizations, the students themselves) is central to ensuring research findings are relevant and applicable to students in complex real-world settings (Wasik & Coleman, 2019). Indeed, the failure to consider non-mainstream perspectives and key stakeholder input may be at the heart of why many wicked problems are so persistent (Coleman, et al., 2020). Inclusivity and collaboration must be built into the entire research process from the beginning, framing the “problem” under study through the transformation of research findings into policy and practice (Coleman, et al., 2021; Arzubiaga, et al., 2008; Skiba, et al., 2008). Trainor and Robertson (2020) explore how current research practices impact how we study diversity and equity and make the critical point that “...how we study a problem influences how we solve it.” (p. 2).

Creating inclusive research teams is more complex than having a person of color on the team; teams need to consider members’ cultural backgrounds, areas of expertise represented on the team, and members' abilities to advocate, build coalitions, and collaborate with multiple stakeholders. There are several ways that research teams can become more inclusive and representative, we recommend that researchers:

- Build more diversity within the research team
- Create advisory boards or panels that reflect non-mainstream perspectives
- Conduct focus groups, interviews, surveys to secure stakeholder input
- Partner with stakeholders throughout the research process.

The purpose of becoming more inclusive and representative in research is to improve outcomes for students served within special education, including students from culturally/linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged groups. By products of being more inclusive and representative in our research practices may also include: expanded opportunities for collaboration across stakeholder groups; increased applicability of research findings to real-world contexts; and improved translation of research findings to policy and practice (Waski & Coleman, 2019).

Section II: The Importance of Disaggregated Data within Evidenced-Based Intervention Studies

In this section, we emphasize the importance of reporting disaggregated data. Increased diversity in our nation necessitates that researchers account for contextually nuanced characteristics of students found in their study's population samples, such as racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic status. The United States has experienced a population growth of 23 million citizens who identify as Asian, Latin@, African American, or more than one race. The 2020 U.S. Census data underscore the importance of establishing a requirement that researchers report disaggregated demographic data of culturally/linguistically and economically diverse youth within their intervention studies. In this section, we explore notions of diversity and press upon the need to embrace lenses of equity, social justice, and anti-racism. Our ability to engage in inclusive conversations about cultural differences increases trustworthiness among

culturally/linguistically and economically diverse learners and family members who are beneficiaries of our investigations.

The Importance of Understanding the Nuanced Context of Culture

Our changing demographics require research practices to shift to account for student diversity across and within various contexts. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) indicates that 47% of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools are European-American, 15% are African American, 27% are Latin@, 5% are Asian American, and 1% are Native, and 4% of students represented two or more races. The long-established research practice is to apply these six racial categories as reported by the NCES. An unintentional consequence of this time-honored practice is the overgeneralization of conceptualizations of race, ethnicity, language, and culture.

Subtle differences in racial, ethnic, regional, language, and economic status, which influence learning outcomes for culturally/linguistically and economically diverse students with disabilities, remain unaccounted for when applying the six racial categories within research analyses. Teranishi, et al. (2020) explore how the absence of disaggregated data based on race, ethnicity, disability, and economic status “leads to statistically erasing populations, as they do not appear in the data” (p. 17). An anti-racist and inclusive approach to special education research methodologies require that scholars problematize our longstanding conceptions of race, ethnicity, and even notions of disability. Thus, allowing for greater generalizability and respect for the cultural differences found within our ever-changing U.S. population.

Students’ racial status is often used as a proxy for all cultural differences. However, the traditional data reporting process of the six racial categories within the U.S. census data (and educational interventions) does not account for within-group differences (Teranishi, et al., 2020).

For example, our reporting methods do not distinguish between learning outcomes for a Latin@ student who is U.S. born and socialized in an urban area versus a Latin@ student who has recently immigrated to the U.S. Traditional racial categorizations similarly obscure ethnic differences for students within the Black or African American category. Students within this category include African Americans, continental Africans, Caribbean Americans, African Latinos, and African Canadians who may reside in the U.S. Ladson-Billings (2020) asserts that racial and ethnic categories within educational research studies are often conflated and, consequently, lend themselves to reinforce stereotypes about culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Moreover, our traditional notions of race and ethnicity ignore the fluidity of our changing demographics. Underexamined notions of race and ethnicity can lead to research interventionists that further marginalize students and reproduce racial inequities in schools (Teranishi, et al., 2020). Adequately addressing the changes in our demographic landscape requires a critical examination of how established research practices reinforce systems of racial inequity.

There is also evidence to substantiate that statistical reporting related to culturally/linguistically and economically diverse students are overwhelmingly absent from reporting data. Sinclair, et al. (2018) examined 495 intervention articles across 12 special education journals and found that only 54% of the studies provided limited information about the cultural/linguistically and economically diversity of participants. We propose that there is a need for clear reporting on what is available in the data and exhaustive descriptions of where data were collected. Further, we recommend that explicit conversations are necessary about the researchers' decision to include and report on specific demographics of students represented in

the study. Limitations of generalizability become more transparent when we explicitly describe the learning outcomes for which students in the intervention were effective and not effective.

We must also recognize the social construction of race, ethnicity, and disability within our schools and community and how our data reporting practices reinforce categorizations of human difference (see *The Center on Community Solutions*, 2020). An examination of the ways teachers and researchers understand these markers of difference is needed (Banks, 2015).

Finally, researchers and practitioners must acknowledge how evidence-based interventions are mediated by the more nuanced, dynamic, and contextualized communities in which they exist.

There are multiple ways to ensure equitable representation of data sampling and to determine the impact of the intervention on specific groups of diverse learners and we recommend that:

- Research teams can examine sampling procedures to ensure samples reflect or take into account the population of students for whom the intervention is designed
- Research reports should provide transparent and explicit discussions of their sampling and data collection processes as it relates to diverse students, families, and communities
- When ethically feasible, research reports should share disaggregated data analysis examining results for different target populations
- Researchers should self-report on their positionality for qualitative and quantitative data reporting.

We contend that decontextualized discussions of evidence-based interventions can conflate race, ethnicity, language, and culture; and simultaneously reinforce stereotypes about learners from culturally/linguistically and economically diverse backgrounds.

Section III: Targeted Federal Funding for Special Education and Learners with Diverse Learning Differences

In this section we address research topics that are central to building a foundation of social justice and equity within special education and gifted education funding sources. We address the need for federal agencies to identify topics in special education that advance our understanding of effective pedagogies for culturally/linguistically and economically marginalized children and youth with disabilities. We also address the need to enhance the identification processes for culturally/linguistically and economically diverse learners with gifts and talents. Several topics should be further explored and funded through federal research funds. The suggested topics described would address the current lack of research in this area and inform policy and practice relevant to the students we serve.

Research needs to consider students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the impact of community and family engagement. In addition, we know that education has been constructed on systems and structures that were not built to include all students. Therefore, research that illuminates the systemic factors that impact outcomes for students with disabilities and particularly students whose identities include the intersection of disability and race, class or linguistic differences, needs to be supported. Finally, the most important factor in student achievement is the teacher in the classroom. Given this, research focused on improved teacher preparation, recruitment, retention, and ongoing professional learning should be encouraged. Below we explain each of these areas in more depth.

Research that Disaggregates Results of the Student Population

For decades, special education research has been published on the effectiveness and implementation of evidence-based programs and practices, but this research rarely disaggregates results by race, SES, or English learner (EL) status. Sinclair and colleagues (2018) highlighted the need to support research that reflects the diversity of student population across the country. In

their examination of intervention research, Sinclair et al. (2018) found that, despite some progress in including diverse participants over the past years, students from racial and ethnic populations are still underrepresented. This lack of information on how interventions and programs impact these students specifically adds to cultural blindness and potentially masks important differences in effectiveness. Research that examines intervention, instruction, and program effectiveness for all students with disabilities, including students who are also ELs, low-income, and culturally diverse is needed.

Research that Includes the Role of Communities and Families

There is currently a dearth of research around what programs, interventions, and instructional approaches work in under-resourced settings. Research should consider community and school contexts and how these factors impact educational outcomes. Given the important and clear role of poverty on student engagement and achievement, research topics examining the positive facilitative factors for academic achievement in urban, rural, low-income, and underserved communities are needed. Research that illuminates the role of communities and families in the education of students with disabilities and students with gifts and talents, particularly culturally/linguistically and economically diverse students, should be supported.

This research would take a broader perspective of school outcomes, taking into account the important role of school context, the role of the community, and factors that may inhibit or promote positive outcomes for students with disabilities. For example, research on the importance of family engagement is clear but what is less clear is how low-income, urban and rural communities contribute to student outcomes for culturally/linguistically and economically diverse students with disabilities.

Research on Teacher Quality: Teacher Preparation, Retention, Recruitment and Professional Learning

Research indicates that students of color and low-income students are more likely to be taught by less experienced and less qualified teachers. Teacher experience, preparation, and turnover impact students in high need schools more than others, yet there is an absence of research that points to what can be done to mitigate this impact. Additionally, the field of education comprises approximately 83% white women compared to the student population, which is much more diverse. To address this gap, research around effective teacher preparation for diverse students, ongoing preparation of culturally proficient teachers, and research around recruiting and retaining a more diverse teacher and leader workforce is needed (Jackson & McCray, 2016). The special education profession can benefit from understanding the experiences of culturally/linguistically and economically diverse teachers. Additionally, research around how educators are prepared and supported to be culturally and linguistically proficient is needed to inform policy and educator preparation and retention better (Fowler, Coleman, & Bogdan, 2019).

Research to inform systemic improvement efforts

Our education system was created during a time when inequity was an accepted societal norm and prejudice was encouraged (Coleman et al., 2021). Additionally, many schools still operate under a “factory model” that does not consider how students learn differently (Learning Policy Institute, 2020). Though progress has been made over time, we still see the impact of discriminatory policies and practices today. Research is needed to examine the systemic factors that play a role in creating inequities. These factors include policies, funding structures, procedures, and practices. With increased research in this area, we can do more than remove barriers to achievement, but we can effectively build pathways for success.

Research to Identify and Support Scaling-up Existing Successes

While challenges exist within special education, there are “pockets-of-excellence” where things are already working well. These may be a school district, a school, or a classroom where students are successful, families are included, and outcomes are positive. Finding and studying these pockets-of-excellence is a worthy area of research. The study of success sets a foundation for the future. Identifying why and how something works well is critical to bring the practice to scale. While there are any number of reasons why a practice fails, there are often only a few key elements that are critical to its success. Identifying the critical elements needed for a practice to be successful for diverse learners builds capacity for reaching scale.

Section IV: Request for Proposals to Incentivize Inclusivity in Research Practices

In this section we make the case that federal funding agencies must prioritize diversity, inclusivity, and social justice. This section reiterates the importance of creating inclusive research teams that include researchers and stakeholders who can provide non-mainstream perspectives. Further, we discuss ways to ensure principal investigators (PIs) are knowledgeable about topics of diversity and engage research teams in continued learning about culturally/linguistically and economically diverse learners identified with special needs.

The Role of Funding Agencies in Institutionalizing Strategies to Incentivize Inclusivity

One of the concerns regarding federally funded proposals is that federal agencies do not prioritize submissions that include diverse research teams and disaggregated data. Although most special education researchers would agree on the importance of embracing diversity, a focus on diversity is not incentivized within the various request for proposals. The process of incentivizing diversity in federally funded research proposals requires that quality points are provided to proposals that consider the inclusion of diverse research teams, stakeholders, and

targeted low-resourced communities. Incentivizing strategies to enhance diversity in proposal submissions also creates a process of accountability that has previously been absent.

Building Knowledge of Diversity, Social Equity, and Anti-Racism

There is currently ample research to acknowledge that cultural competence requires exposure to diverse communities, continuous personal reflection, and willingness to embrace new ways of thinking. Researcher background, knowledge of diverse communities, and positionality also influence how proposals are designed, evaluated, and implemented. To this end, incentivizing an inclusivity development plan within submitted proposals would encourage research teams to prioritize topics of cultural/linguistic and economic diversity. An inclusivity enhancement plan would require that PI's discuss how the research team will work to eliminate cultural/linguistic bias and ableism with the intention to build the cultural competence of researchers. An inclusivity enhancement plan would demonstrate the team's commitment to reducing personal bias and learning about the diverse communities they plan to serve.

Our limited knowledge about which interventions and instructional approaches work for targeted culturally/linguistically and economically diverse learners identified with disabilities and gifts and talents impedes our ability to positively impact their educational outcomes. Our professional negligence in this area contributes to reinforcing systems of inequity. Given the importance of building a more just and equitable society (and profession), there is also a need to offer seed-funding to proposals designed to determine the effectiveness of interventions for culturally/linguistically and economically diverse children and youth with disabilities. And, there is a need for funding opportunities that would allow researchers to scale up their research when promising practices are identified.

The Role of Federal Funding Agencies in Developing Equity-Focused Research Teams through Think Tanks

This process of assessing the effectiveness of interventions and instructional practices requires that researchers who are committed to issues of anti-racism, social justice, and equity are provided opportunities to engage in mentorship and think-tanks which have the purpose of improving upon teacher preparation programs and research practices. In the past federally funded programs, such the Center of Minority Research in Special Education (COMRISE I and II), Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources (LASER), and The Monarch Center a National Outreach and Technical Assistance Center on Discretionary Awards for Minority Serving Institutions provided opportunities for special education teacher educators at minority-serving institutions to receive mentorship in grant writing, hands-on practice in curriculum design, and opportunities for collaboration. Faculty members attended workshops with the intended focus of developing projects that would meet the needs of diverse teacher educators and culturally/linguistically diverse children and youth with disabilities. The national focus on anti-racism, equity, and social justice requires reintroducing programs of this type. Moreover, there is a need to provide opportunities that would include think-tanks for researchers committed to areas of diversity and social justice and who represent majority and minority-serving institutions.

Prioritizing areas for research is a critical role of the funding agency. This prioritization is reflected in the topics addressed in the call for proposals, but also in the guidance given to reviewers as they assess the quality of the submissions. We recommend the use of quality points to clarify the important priorities such as:

- Research teams that explicitly address representative inclusion of diversity
- Methodology which engages key stakeholders as part of the process

- Methodology that addresses systemic factors which influence outcomes for participants
- Sampling procedures that explicitly address target populations with the use of disaggregated data
- Instruments and procedures that reduce bias.

Summary

The components of the Project 20/20 white paper are proposed as a foundational expectation for advancing anti-racism, anti-ableism, and social justice in our special education and gifted and talented research practices. A commitment to equity and social justice topics requires the reexamination of structural norms within the practice of special education research. Specifically, we recommend that researchers in special education begin by:

1. Prioritizing research that addresses social justice, equity, anti-racism, inclusion, and belonging within special education and gifted and talented education.
2. Ensuring that research teams reflect diversity and incorporate non-mainstream perspectives.
3. Disaggregating data to explore more nuanced outcomes and impacts for targeted populations.
4. Selecting topics for funding that examine systemic factors that impact outcomes for students whose identities include the intersection of disability, race, class, or linguistic difference.
5. Using quality points to establish clear priorities for research proposals.

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