

## **Adding Culture to the Tools of School Psychologists**

**by Mittie T. Quinn, NCSP & Evelyn Jacob**

**NASP Communiqué, Volume 28, No. 1**

Miguel, a Salvadoran youngster, experienced anxiety attacks each March, resulting in aggressive outbursts toward his fellow students. Repeated phone calls to his parents went unanswered. His behaviors escalated and ultimately special education evaluators determined that he was SED (Seriously Emotionally Disturbed).

Meeting the needs of students of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds presents a challenge for special education. When called upon to assess students like Miguel, school psychologists must identify the factors contributing to the students' performance. Traditionally, school psychologists have relied on standardized measures. However, as schools in the U.S. become increasingly diverse, creative and systematic appraisals of the student's culture, the culture of the school context, and their interactions must supplement traditional evaluation methods (Baca, Clark, Figueroa, Kovaleski & Ortiz, 1994). The APA Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations (1993) suggest that "providers need a sociocultural framework to consider diversity of values, interactional styles, and cultural expectations in a systematic fashion."

### **Challenges in Identifying Cultural Influences**

Identifying cultural influences on a student's performance is not an easy task. School psychologists and child study committees confront two fundamental challenges in developing culturally sensitive interventions for special needs populations: the exclusion of certain factors by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the limitations created by categories of disabilities.

IDEA includes the exclusionary clause that states: "children with specific learning disabilities. . . do not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of . . . cultural . . . disadvantage." To deal with this definition, many school systems set up policies or practices to "rule out" cultural influences. For example, some will not evaluate an immigrant student for learning problems until the student has been in the U.S. for two years. This practice assumes that foreign born students need two years in U.S. schools before they can perform satisfactorily and that after two years culture no longer influences performance. The problems with this practice are twofold. First, although a student's performance may improve during the waiting period, it is also possible that the student's progress will stall or deteriorate. Second, such a practice ignores culture as a relevant concern after the waiting period. Moreover, the practice does not consider cultural influences on the performance of non-immigrant students.

The second challenge is that school psychologists may rely on "special education categories" when trying to understand a student's performance (Mehan, Hertweck & Meihls, 1986). These categories derive from a medical model of disease and focus on disabilities within the student

as the source of their performance problem. Focusing only on traditional categories may prevent school psychologists from seeing cultural influences on the student's performance. As a result, students who exhibit behaviors and learning problems that do not fit neatly into a category may be assigned a category, or they may be left in a regular education classroom (Mehan, et al., 1986).

The result of these two challenges is that the current special education identification process often under-identifies culturally diverse students in the pre-referral "waiting" period and over-identifies those students for placement in special education services (Ogbu, 1993; Artiles & Trent, 1994).

### **A New Lens**

The Cultural Inquiry Process (Jacob, 1995; Jacob, Johnson, Finley, Gurski & Lavine, 1996) offers a lens to move beyond such challenges and assists educational practitioners in understanding school difficulties of culturally diverse students. Using this approach, professionals frame behavior they do not understand as a "puzzlement" rather than as a problem. They consider cultural influences that might contribute to the puzzling situation, rather than focus on child-centered pathology. To complete the process practitioners gather and analyze relevant information, develop culturally-based interventions and monitor outcomes.

Drawing on the Cultural Inquiry Process, we present culturally-based questions and interventions that could be incorporated into the special education process: pre-referral, referral, assessment, decision making and consultation. Consistent with a cultural focus, we present questions about the school context before those about students.

### **What cultural assumptions of educational practitioners might be contributing to the puzzlement?**

Becoming an ethnically competent professional involves an awareness of one's own cultural framework (Flanagan & Miranda, 1996; Green, 1995). Self-awareness precedes an understanding of the subtle ways that one's own cultural behaviors and values might conflict with the populations served.

*Abra, a Sikh student, had problems in his physical education class. Abra's teacher insisted that he remove his turban for class. When Abra refused, the teacher suspended him from class. Discussions with the teacher revealed cultural assumptions about "dressing out" for PE which conflicted with Sikh traditions. The PE teacher and the Child Study Committee explored and discussed the beliefs and artifacts of the Sikh culture and identified points of conflict with the teacher's cultural assumptions. The teacher met with the student, discussed their cultural differences and arranged a compromise for the PE class.*

### **What aspects of the school culture(s) might be influencing the puzzling situation?**

School-level factors, such as competition, can influence students' engagement in school (e.g., Davidson, 1996; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard & Lintz, 1996). While competition is not

inherently good or bad, when the system is set up so that some must fail in order for others to succeed, some students (especially those with a history of failure) may decide to stop trying.

Native Hawaiian students traditionally have fared poorly in Hawaiian schools. D'Amato (1993) argued that traditional whole-class instruction is a form of competition because it produces conspicuous winners and losers in the classroom. He found that when teachers reduced traditional competition by using small group instruction, permitting students to overlap their comments and build on others' statements, reducing criticisms of task performance, and distributing praise more evenly among students, Hawaiian students were more likely to comply with classroom routines.

### **What aspects of the curricula and materials might be contributing to the puzzlement?**

The curricula and classroom materials in most U.S. schools are still dominated by Euro-American culture. Some students may not be motivated to do their best if they do not see evidence of respect for their experience and culture. To address their concerns about poor student performance, educators in Tucson, Arizona documented the extensive "funds of knowledge" present in Latino and Native American communities. Teachers used the information gathered to link the school and community and to broaden the curriculum. Educators reported positive outcomes when these local funds of knowledge were incorporated into the curriculum (González, 1995; González, et al., 1995).

Changes in the curriculum or materials are not always needed. Sometimes the perception that educators understand and care about a student's culture is sufficient for change to occur (Paradise, 1994; Erickson, 1993). A multidisciplinary team of educators found this effect using the Cultural Inquiry Process with Preeti, a recent immigrant from India, who was socially isolated and had a poor academic performance (Jacob et al., 1996). The team initially wondered whether different gender norms and expectations in Indian and American schools might be contributing to Preeti's difficulties. To gather information a teacher on the team interviewed her twice, asking about aspects of Indian culture and Preeti's view of her school experiences. To the team's surprise, Preeti immediately "blossomed," becoming more outgoing and performing better in her school work. The interviews conveyed to Preeti that her teachers respected and were interested in her and her culture.

### **What perceived imbalances in power might be contributing to the puzzlement?**

White females continue to predominate in school staff positions despite recent employment and empowerment of professionals from non-Eurocentric cultures. Parents and students may feel disenfranchised in this situation. Recruiting professionals from diverse cultural backgrounds for faculty and staff positions can help to reduce their sense of powerlessness.

In many schools, neither students nor parents from non-majority cultures have much power to influence decisions about students' education. Davidson (1996) found that high school students felt powerless when they experienced depersonalized relationships with adult authorities and bureaucratic practices based on adult control. When parents have little power to influence educational practices, they may distrust the system and convey that sentiment to students. Involving students in decisions that affect them (Davidson, 1996) and fostering parental empowerment in school-level decisions (Harrison, 1993) can promote student

success.

Another aspect of power relationships that may be disrupted by the special education process is the power hierarchy within the family. In some situations, students may be utilized as translators. Information that should be communicated directly to parents is placed in the control of the student. Parents become dependent on the child for obtaining important information. This reversal of dependency roles may cause parents to feel embarrassed and angry. Students' performance may suffer if parent-school cooperation is diminished under these circumstances. This highlights the importance of using adult translators for communication with parents.

### **What peer (mis)interpretations of the student's culture might be contributing to the situation?**

Sometimes peers negatively judge students because of the clothing, ceremonies or symbolic behaviors required in their cultures. This can result in students being ostracized or tormented by their classmates.

*Mayim, a Muslim female, received taunts and jeers at the point that she began to wear a veil. She became depressed and her grades dropped. An evaluation of the situation and context led to an intervention that addressed the peer misunderstanding of the requirements of her culture. The school guidance counselor presented workshops about the Muslim faith and the meaning of the required dress. Mayim was appointed as a school patrol, a position of responsibility and respect. Her depression lifted and her grades returned to their previous level.*

### **How might the student's facility with English contribute to the puzzlement?**

Although students may have "graduated" from ESL programs with adequate conversation skills, it may take them as long as 7-10 years to develop the academic language skills necessary to succeed in mainstream classrooms (Collier, 1989, 1995). Child study teams should consider that second language learners' academic performance may be due to insufficient English language skills rather than learning disabilities.

School psychologists may also find that a lack of proficiency with academic English interferes with accurate assessment of students' capabilities. Increasing numbers of assessment tools are available for use with second language learners. Many non-verbal tests, for example the C-TONI (Peterson, 1995) and the UNIT (McCallum & Bracken, 1996) have been created, and the use of interpreters is increasingly commonplace. Dynamic assessment models pose an alternative method for presenting standardized materials (Jitendra & Kameenui, 1993).

Parents' English proficiency may be relevant to understanding students' and parents' behaviors. In the case of Miguel, school personnel left phone messages in English for his parents, which they did not understand. Their lack of response was not due to a lack of concern, but rather to a lack of comprehension. When messages were left in Spanish, the home-school cooperation efforts multiplied. Parents were able to support school interventions

and Miguel's behaviors improved.

### **What conflicts in styles of communication might be contributing to the puzzlement?**

While assessments have been developed to evaluate the impact of a second language, there often is less attention to the influences of communication style. Cultural groups vary considerably in their norms for communication (Heath, 1982; Taylor, 1989; Irvine & York, 1995). For example, cultural groups can indicate respect in a variety of ways such as averted eyes, bowed heads, or female silence in public. The definition of personal space and physical contact can carry different meanings. Cultural variations in the meaning of silence or the format of questions can also influence communication behavior.

*In one situation, volunteers working in an inner city school with African American students routinely asked students to "look" at them when they were speaking. Frequently the students were reluctant to comply and on one occasion a student cried. A better understanding of the culture revealed that eye contact with adults was made primarily in situations where the adult was shaming or blaming a student for some misdeed.*

Misinterpretations and conflicts between the interactional styles of school staff and the student can contribute to academic problems. Changing classroom or consultation styles to be more culturally compatible can contribute to improved academic performance (e.g., Osborne, 1996; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1993). Showing respect in nonverbal fashion for the culture of the parents will facilitate a long and profitable relationship that will in turn benefit their child.

### **How might conflicts between home child rearing practices and school routines be contributing to the puzzlement?**

Child rearing practices may affect many aspects of student's behavior in school:

*Miko's dependence on a teacher for completing class work was traced to the family practice of caring for the child, including carrying bookbags or the child himself to school. These customs provided Miko with mixed messages about school requirements. By addressing the apparent over-dependence as a culturally based phenomenon, a very different intervention was developed than might have been if Miko's school behaviors had been framed as emotional insecurity or anxiety. In this case, the Assistant Principal met with the mother and student and asked that Miko carry his materials and walk under his own power on school property.*

### **What conflicts between the student's beliefs and those of the school might be contributing to the puzzling situation?**

Home values and religious beliefs may contradict norms of the school culture: *Matthew's teacher found him to be disrespectful and rude and reported that he had ongoing difficulty with the all-female school staff. His problems escalated to the point that his teacher thought that he had serious emotional difficulties. Taking a cultural perspective, the school psychologist linked Matthew's behavior to his cultural beliefs about the role of women. Following consultation with school staff and family, his teachers gained a different perspective. Like parents who try not to react when a child says, "I hate you," the teachers*

*learned to depersonalize Matthew's comments to them. Matthew and his parents met with the teacher where he observed them demonstrating respect for his teacher's authority. He also participated in counseling where he learned to express his feelings and beliefs in more socially acceptable ways.*

### **How might cultural identities and the meaning of school and school success be contributing to the puzzling situation?**

An example of how cultural identity can negatively affect school performance is clearly demonstrated in Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) research that showed that some African American students in the District of Columbia interpreted high academic achievement as "acting white."

Students often negotiate multiple cultural identities. Wu (1996) describes the problems created for Korean immigrants who are a part of the "1.5" generation. These are students who immigrate during their adolescent years. They identify strongly with their country of origin, yet are thrown into American schools and encouraged to affiliate with age mates who are more acculturated. Students who come from bicultural families also have complex cultural identity.

School programs can help students negotiate multiple identities and develop cultural identities that are consistent with school success (Abi-Nader, 1990; Mehan et al., 1996). The AVID "untracking" program, for example, has helped low-achieving students from poor and non-majority backgrounds develop an academic identity and also affirm their cultural identities (Mehan et al., 1996). AVID accomplishes this by bringing students together in a daily class that provides a variety of academic supports, facilitating friendships among academically oriented students, and providing markers of group identity. Similarly, Gibson (1993) found that with Punjabi students, the best school outcomes occurred when students maintained ties to their family identity and felt support for selective rather than total acculturation issues to negotiate.

### **What significant events in the current or recent history of the student's country of origin might be contributing to the puzzling situation?**

The impact of a nation's misfortunes continues to impact on immigrants long after their arrival in the U.S. In schools that incorporate numerous cultures and countries of origin, school personnel should be sensitive to students from countries that are in adversarial positions. For example, Korean and Japanese students may experience difficulties in cooperative learning groups as a result of historical conflicts between these two countries.

*In the case of Miguel, questions about his spring activities revealed that the family continued to identify strongly with their home place of El Salvador. Additional questions about their leisure pursuits revealed that each spring the family traveled to El Salvador to deliver food, medicines, money and even a car to family members left behind. Miguel's behavioral deterioration corresponded to departures for this war-torn country. Further consideration of the cultural identity of this family and the political situation in their homeland might have precluded the erroneous labeling of Miguel as SED.*

### **How might variations in the meaning of disability or special education be contributing to the puzzling situation?**

Although cultural factors may be at the heart of some school puzzlements, there are culturally diverse students who have learning problems that are addressed through special education. Because special education draws from a medical model, beliefs about medicine and healing impact on this process. Many cultures link mind and body, that is, cognitive difficulties may be attributed to physical illness. Families from some cultures may request a prescription from a physician to cure the learning difficulty. These students may turn to a "doctor" to prescribe a solution. Such individuals are not accustomed to asking the school for healing.

After placement, new confusions may arise that are the result of conflicting beliefs about special education. Morris (1997) found that the meaning of "learning disability" differed among boys from three different cultures. Latino boys from El Salvador viewed LD as an internalized, negative characteristic similar to retardation, which negatively influenced their self esteem. European American boys viewed LD as an "intrinsic, neurological impairment" that was biologically based and therefore existed through no fault of their own. African American boys equated LD with the academic support received in that program, which they saw as something that could ultimately help them achieve high school and college degrees.

### **Conclusions**

In an increasingly diverse population, school psychologists are in a position to take the lead in transforming the way culture is taken into account in understanding and addressing students' needs. The stance and questions derived from the Cultural Inquiry Process offer a useful lens through which to understand students from diverse cultures. Such a lens can help school psychologists distinguish between cultural and intra-child influences on students' school problems.

The preceding discussion highlights several important points related to cultural influences. First, culture is not just something that students bring to school. The cultures of school personnel, the school and interactions among these cultures and those of students can influence students' behavior. Second, more than one cultural influence may be operating in any situation. In Miguel's case, for example, the language used by the school in communicating with his parents and significant events in Miguel's home country both contributed to Miguel's situation. Third, taking a cultural perspective can be extended to understanding parents' as well as students' behavior. Because parental attitudes and behavior can influence students' attitudes and behavior, a culturally sensitive understanding of parents can have positive influences on students.

In sum, adding culturally based questions and interventions to the tools of school psychology will facilitate the creation of an environment where all students--including those like Miguel, Abra, Preeti, Mayim, Matthew and Miko--may achieve their fullest potential.

### **References**

Abi-Nader, J. (1990). "A house for my mother": Motivating Hispanic high school students.

Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 21, 41-58.

American Psychological Association. (1993). Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations. *American Psychologist*, 48, 45-48.

Artiles, A. J. & Trent, S. C. (1994). Over-representation of minority students in special education: A continuing debate. *Journal of Special Education*, 27, 410-437.

Baca, L., Clark, C., Figueroa, R., Kovalski, J., & Ortiz, A. (1994). Reconstructing the bilingual special education interface. [NCBE Program Information Guide Series No. 20]. Washington, D.C.

Collier, V. (1989). How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23, 509-531.

Collier, V. (1995). Second-language acquisition for school: Academic, cognitive, sociocultural, and linguistic processes. Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics (GURT). Baltimore, MD.

D'Amato, J. (1993). Resistance and compliance in minority classrooms. In E. Jacob and C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 181-207). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co.

Davidson, A. L. (1996). *Making and molding identity in schools: Students narratives on race, gender, and academic achievement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Erickson, F. (1993). Transformation and school success: The politics and the culture of educational achievement. In E. Jacob & C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 27-51). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co.

Flanagan, D. P. & Miranda, A. H. (1995). Working with culturally different families. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology- III* (pp. 1049-1060). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Fordham, S. & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting white'." *The Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.

Gibson, M. A. (1993). The school performance of immigrant minorities: A comparative view. In E. Jacob and C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 113-128). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co.

González, N. (Ed. ). (1995). Educational innovation: Learning from households. *Practicing Anthropology*, 17(3), 1-3 .

González, N., Moll, L., Floyd-Tenery, M., Rivera, A., Rendón, P., Gonzales, R., & Amanti,



C. (1995). Funds of knowledge for teaching in Latino households. *Urban Education*, 29, 443-470.

Green, J. W. (1995). *Cultural awareness in the human services*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Harrison, B. (1993). Building our house from the rubbish tree: Minority-directed education. In E. Jacob and C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 147-164). Norwood, NJ: Able.

Heath, S. B. (1982). Questioning at home and at school: A comparative study. In G. Spindler (Ed.), *Doing the ethnography of schooling: Educational anthropology in action* (pp. 102-131).

Irvine, J. J. & York, D. E. (1995). Learning styles and culturally diverse students: A literature review. In J. A. Banks & C. A. Banks, McGee (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 484-497). New York: MacMillan Publishing USA.

Jacob, E. (1995). Reflective practice and anthropology in culturally diverse classrooms. *The Elementary School Journal*, 95, 451-463.

Jacob, E., Johnson, B. K., Finley, J., Gurski, J., & Lavine, R. (1996). One student at a time: The Cultural Inquiry Process. *Middle School Journal*, 27(4), 29-35.

Jitendra, A. K. & Kameenui, E. J. (1993). Dynamic assessment as a compensatory assessment approach: A description and analysis. *Remedial & Special Education*, 14, 6-18.

McCallum, R. S. & Bracken, B. A. (1996). Using the Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT) to assess culturally and linguistically diverse populations. National Association of School Psychologists Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA.

Mehan, H., Hertweck, A., & Meihls, J. (1986). *Handicapping the handicapped*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Mehan, H., Villanueva, I., Hubbard, L., & Lintz, A. (1996). *Constructing school success: The consequences of untracking low-achieving students*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Morris, C. (1997). A study of labeling narratives for self and cultural voice [diss] (p. 160), Fairfax, VA: George Mason University.

Ogbu, J. U. (1993). Frameworks-Variability in Minority school performance: A problem in search of an explanation. In E. Jacob and C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 83-111). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co.

Osborne, A. B. (1996). Practice into theory into practice: Culturally relevant pedagogy for students we have marginalized and normalized. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 27, 285-314.

Paradise, R. (1994). Spontaneous cultural compatibility: Mazahua students and their teachers constructing trusting relations. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 69(2), 60-70.

Peterson, N. (1995). *Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Taylor, O. (1989). Verbal and nonverbal sources of miscommunication between cultural groups. *American Speech-Language-Hearing Association*, 69.

Vogt, L. A., Jordan, C., & Tharp, R. G. (1993). Explaining school failure, producing school success: Two cases. In E. Jacob and C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 53-79). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Wu, J. (1996). Korean 1.5 Generation. Paper presented. George Mason University Counseling & Development Conference, George Mason University.

*Mittie Quinn, MA, NCSP, is a doctoral student and Evelyn Jacob, Ph.D., is on the faculty of the George Mason University Graduate School of Education.*

---

Cultural Inquiry Questions:

Student Name Country of Origin:

Date of Birth:

Number of Years Child in US:

Cultural Identities:

Use the following questions to guide your identification and investigation of cultural influences that might be contributing to your puzzlement about a student.

- What cultural assumptions of educational practitioners might be contributing to the puzzlement?
- What aspects of the school culture(s) might be influencing the puzzling situation?
- What aspects of the curricula and materials might be contributing to the puzzlement?
- What perceived imbalances in power might be contributing to the puzzlement?
- What peer (mis)interpretations of the student's culture might be contributing to the situation?

- How might the student's facility with English contribute to the puzzling situation?
- What conflicts in styles of communication might be contributing to the puzzlement?
- How might conflicts between home child rearing practices and school routines be contributing to the puzzlement?
- What conflicts between the student's beliefs and those of the school might be contributing to the puzzling situation?
- How might cultural identities and the meaning of school and school success be contributing to the puzzling situation?
- What significant events in the current or recent history of the student's country of origin might be contributing to the puzzling situation?
- How might variations in the meaning of disability or special education be contributing to the puzzling situation?

*—from Quinn & Jacob*