

# FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL children

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## At-Risk Students and Environmental Factors

*Rosemary Lambie*

This article begins by describing the impact of socioeconomic factors on children and the family. The next section, "Ethnic Differences," focuses first on the general life strategies of various ethnic groups, then on the cultural values of Hispanic, African, Asian, and Native Americans, and ends with a discussion of differences in cognitive styles prevalent in each ethnic group. The third section, on affirming diversity and promoting equity, concludes the article, describing activities and programs that can be used for achieving greater understanding of ethnic differences.

### CULTURE AND SENSITIVITY

By being exposed to differing socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural influences, people can enhance their sensitivity to others (D. Johnson, 1997) and help to dispel stereotypes about families in a particular cultural category. Regardless of cultural background, families have more similarities than differences. They struggle with similar issues and demands throughout the life cycle and strive toward the same ends.

Ethnic background influences how families cope, express themselves, and interact with external systems such as schools. It is helpful for professionals to ask themselves, "Within this person's experience, is this behavior adaptive, normal, or pathological?" For example, when African American, Hispanic, or Asian American parents discipline their child, they expect the child to indicate acceptance by lowering his or her eyes. Making eye contact may be interpreted by a parent from these backgrounds as defiance. In contrast, parents from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds expect their children to maintain eye contact to indicate attentiveness when being disciplined. The Anglo child who lowers his or her eyes may be thought of as being passively resistant.

A meeting of the minds between family members and school professionals about the definitions of problematic behavior is essential. This type of understanding can often be facilitated when educators have knowledge of the family's socioeconomic status, history, and ethnic and cultural patterns. The purpose of this article is to help school professionals understand and respond appropriately to these influences.

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## SOCIOECONOMIC DIFFERENCES

The most powerful cultural determinant of how families interact with society is socioeconomic status (J. S. Coleman, 1987). This is particularly evident when comparing middle-income families with families coping with poverty. Many of the most common ethnic stereotypes derive more from the environmental influences of socioeconomic status than from ethnic background. For example, a middle-class African American family has a lifestyle more similar to that of a middle-class white family than to the lifestyle of a poor African American family, regardless of common African heritage. As Wilson (1982), a sociologist, argued, "Class has . . . become more important than race in determining black life chances in the modern industrial period" (p. 389).

Weissbourd (1996) related that "in 1993, 22 percent of all children under 18 lived in families with incomes below the federally established poverty line—which was then about \$14,764 for a family of four" (p. 10). He also indicated that most poor children are poor on a temporary basis. In America, only 8% are poor for more than 6 years, and more than 30% experience poverty some time in their lives. About 17.5% of children who are poor live in ghettos. About 19%

of children who are African American live in ghettos. Educators know that these children are at risk. Weissbourd suggested that we view these children as vulnerable but not create a self-fulfilling prophecy that dooms them to failure. He related that "over 75 percent of poor children ages 6–11 have never experienced significant developmental delays, or emotional troubles, or a learning disability in childhood" (p. 17).

DeVillar and Faltis (1994) related demographic data indicating disproportionately large birth and emigration rates among minority populations. The younger ages and increasing poverty of minority populations, they wrote, "compound the bleakness of their educational futures and add to the mounting pressure for institutional change" (p. 1).

## Family Systems Factors

One of the first issues professionals meet when working with low-income families is facing the realities of how a poor environment affects the normal workings of family life. Aponte (1976a, 1994), who worked with poor families from inner-city Philadelphia, found that the structure of these families was loose and undefined. He used the term "chaotic" to describe the lack of clear leadership, poorly defined boundaries, and unstable structure that he found when trying to help poor inner-city families. About his perceptions of the relationship between professional and family, he stated, "The socioeconomic difference creates a communication gap that complicates the task of mutual understanding" (1976b, p. 432). He wrote the following about the underorganization in the poor family:

This brings us to a specific phenomenon that is, I believe, central to understanding what it means to do therapy with the poor—*underorganization*. Social destitution in the *absence of a strong sense of self and cohesive familial and social network* can injure the fundamental structure of the individual's psychological development, the formation of family, and the vitality of a community. Individuals may fully develop neither their intellectual and emotional capacity, nor the ability to form intimate and committed personal relationships, nor their potential to perform effectively in society. Families may fail to serve as stable, safe, nurturing nests for their members. People may not learn to live in community where they learn to depend upon one another. Life becomes difficult, painful, and even frightening. (Aponte, 1994, p. 15)

Aponte communicated that socioeconomic factors affect the most basic development of the family and its communication with the world. In 1994, discussing the poor in America, he wrote: "People certainly suffer deprivation, but I believe that at the core they suffer a poverty of *despair*. This is a poverty that robs people of their souls—of meaning, purpose, and hope" (p. 1). To be socioeconomically disadvantaged represents an extreme stressor on the integrity of

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the family system. Because the adjustment of students to the school environment is tied to the well-being of the family, when family stability is threatened by poverty, as with other stressors, students will suffer. Children from poor families are obviously at risk, and if a child with special needs is included in the family, the stress is multiplied.

### Parent Factors

The stress of financial instability influences how parents feel about themselves as providers for and protectors of their children. How much stress the parents feel will influence their involvement with and availability to their children, their discipline style, and the value system that they teach their children.

Homelessness results in a major strain on children in schools. M. E. Walsh and M. A. Buckley (1994) noted that on any given night in the United States, between 60,000 and 100,000 children are homeless and that children make up 24% of the homeless population. Of the children who are homeless, 43% do not attend school and 30% are one grade or more behind their peers (J. A. Hall & Maza, 1990).

Numerous studies have shown that low-income mothers have the highest rate of depression of any demographic group (Eheart & Ciccone, 1982). Further, there is often no consistent, positive father figure in low-income families but rather a male "floater" (Fischgrund, Cohen, & Clarkson, 1987) or a father living in the home who is chronically out of work. If there is an unemployed father at home, he is often tyrannical in his authority and discipline. As Montalvo and Gutierrez (1983) wrote, "The more the man fails against competitive barriers of the American society, the more uncompromising and absolute his power must be at home" (p. 29).

A child growing up in a home with an extremely depressed parent or a parent who is experiencing role loss due to joblessness will bring the effects of these concerns with him or her to the classroom. The following case example of a child at risk illustrates this process:

A 7-year-old who had been doing well in his first year of school suddenly began to be distracted in the classroom. He was not listening to the teacher's directions and had received numerous negative consequences over a 3-week period. After 3 weeks, when the teacher called home, she discovered that the father had been laid off from his job 1 month before. When asked, the boy volunteered that his father's job loss was a principal source of anxiety for him. He stated that he worried all the time about his family and money problems. The teacher began to make her school contacts directly with the father, who was now at home. She told the father of his son's concerns and asked that he provide some reassurance for the boy. She met with the father to devise a plan for getting his son's behavior back on track and for reinforcing the boy's behavior when he began to pay attention again.

With this plan, the teacher was able to give the father a new identity as a powerful figure for his son, regardless of his temporary joblessness. As demonstrated by this example, the parental roles in the home will often have an effect on what interventions will work with a particular student in the classroom and in the home environment.

It is also important that the school professional take into account parental needs and demands when planning family contacts. Looking at parental needs, Eheart and Ciccone (1982) studied 36 low-income mothers whose children were diagnosed with developmental delays. The authors found that the biggest problem reported by these mothers was the stress of meeting basic needs of their children such as feeding, cleanliness, and safety. What the mothers wanted most in terms of services was a support group where they could talk to other mothers who were having similar problems.

Maslow (1970) proposed that love and belonging as well as self-care needs cannot be addressed before basic physiological and safety needs are met. Within this context, talking with an impoverished mother about showing unconditional positive regard for her child or even about establishing a home behavioral program may be useless when she is trying to make sure she has electricity in the home. The mother may feel more inclined to talk with someone who will listen to her feelings and struggles than with someone who is trying to tell her how to handle her child differently. It is only after the mother feels heard and supported that she will respect suggestions about her disciplining.

The following story, relayed to me by my colleague Chris Mohring, illustrates how one school professional responded to a child-related school problem stemming from parental poverty.

Charles was a 14-year-old placed in a special education program because he was a slow learner and demonstrated aggressive, out-of-control behavior. In the program for 2 months, he had been experiencing failure and rejection by his peers. After some observation, the director found that Charles had personal hygiene problems. Charles's dirty clothes and body odor led his peers to taunt him, which, in turn, led to his aggressiveness and withdrawal. Engaging Charles in the classroom was futile. If pushed, he would explode and become verbally or physically abusive. The director talked to Charles and found that he was aware of his body odor. He had no running water at home and was able to take a bath only about once a week. At an age when he was increasingly sensitive to peer group social interactions, he was also aware of his lack of academic achievement and the inadequacy of his hygiene, leaving him with a profound sense of alienation. The director asked the parents' permission to have Charles shower in the gym before school each day. Charles began bathing every morning and the teasing diminished. He obviously felt better about himself, and he began to succeed in school.

In this case, the school professional understood the parents' poverty and the dilemma that it created for Charles and intervened to provide for one of Charles's basic needs.

### Student Factors

School professionals must also be aware of the world view and self-image of economically disadvantaged students. Most children growing up in a poor environment experience prejudice on a daily basis. In addition, poverty has an impact upon where the family will live, because fewer and fewer living options are available when income is low or the family is dependent upon welfare programs. All of these factors influence the growth and development of children within the family and how they approach the demands of growing up, including the demands of the educational system (Garmezy, 1991).

Socioeconomically disadvantaged children have experienced so many unmet needs that they see little hope of ever changing their lives or fulfilling their dreams. They become frustrated over the lack of opportunities available to them and can become aggressive, violent, apathetic, and depressed (A. H. Smith, 1978). In addition, they are at risk for school failure.

Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerny, Rosman, and Schumer (1967) studied 12 low-income families with delinquent boys between the ages of 8 and 12 who were living in a residential treatment center and 10 low-income families with children who were not delinquent. They found that the delinquent children viewed their home environments as impermanent and unpredictable and that they had learned to react to the present moment rather than to what might be in the future.

Minuchin et al. (1967) also observed that parental responses in the families with delinquent boys were random and unpredictable, hindering the children's ability to internalize rules and set limits for themselves. The emphasis in the delinquent families was on control of behavior rather than on guidance. Because the boys had no expectation of predictable rewards for their performance, their motivation was reduced and they did not learn to be proud of themselves for competence or achievement. Instead, these boys learned that gang involvement and hustling were the subsistence and survival strategies that meant competence in their culture (Coates, 1990).

By the time children who grow up in poverty reach adolescence and are able to think abstractly, they realize that the things they see in the media are not available to them and will not be theirs without years of hard work and a great deal of luck. The disillusionment that sets in is a source of stress in itself, and quick sources of gratification become even more appealing. In the study by Minuchin et al. (1967), many of the delinquent boys had been caught stealing or

selling drugs as a way of quickly obtaining the money and status that they desired.

Abi-Nader (1991) wrote of her observations of a program entitled PLAN (Program: Learning According to Needs), which is specifically geared to address the feelings of powerlessness that many disadvantaged Hispanic high-school students face. The approach includes a mentor program in which Hispanic college students talk to high-school students about their experiences. The program also seeks to provide the high-school students with successful Hispanic role models. Finally, the curriculum includes frequent references to the future in positive terms, using phrases like "when you go to college" rather than "if you go to college." The outcome of this program is that 60 to 65% of the PLAN students ultimately attend college.

### Conclusions

When dealing with socioeconomically disadvantaged families, the educator must consider family systems factors, parent factors, and student factors (Garmezy, 1991). For these families, the process of developing a conceptual style, a world view, and a motivational style begins long before the children enter the school system. By the time school professionals encounter families who are economically disadvantaged, the factors of frustration, apathy, and depression must be included in any realistic picture of the overall family system. These factors typically have immediate impact on the nature of the families' interactions with the educational system, and they do so with the potency of generations of importance.

Many school professionals have experienced the suspicion, mistrust, and reticence that seem to be common in the reactions of many poor families to school personnel. Professionals should not take these reactions personally. Instead, it is important for professionals to remember the historical and socioeconomic context that breeds this type of negativity and to strive to convince the parents that the common goal is the adjustment of their child or adolescent. Professionals can best serve the child by maintaining their personal boundaries and by understanding the parents' initial response to school contact.

### ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

This section focuses on the complex issue of ethnic differences and attempts to sensitize the reader to the diversity of ethnic traditions in our nation. U.S. Census Bureau statistics indicate that dramatic increases in non-Whites in the United States will lead to 30% of the population under age 18 being of African, Hispanic, Native, or Asian descent in the future (Ho, 1992). Thus, it is vitally important for school professionals to consider different cultural realities when

working with families in educational contexts. Methods for doing so are described in this section. However, reading about cultural issues is inadequate to the task of understanding the richness that tradition brings to a family. School professionals must also develop personal sensitivities to and methods of exploring these issues with the families they encounter. Only through interaction and exchange with the families themselves can we be educated about our differences and similarities.

It is also important for school professionals to keep in mind that not all members of an ethnic group are alike in respect to life styles, values, or achievement. In a text on African American families, Willie (1991) indicated that different and distinct lifestyles exist among African Americans from different class levels (affluent, working-class, poor) that relate to family composition, child-rearing, as well as community participation. The author found that affluent African American parents were very active in their children's schools, the working-class mothers attended some school meetings, and the poor African Americans had little community involvement beyond church attendance.

### Life Strategies

Cultural background affects every person's value system, style of responding to stress, way of defining self, and approach to life. For example, the way members of different cultures respond to emotional problems (their own and those of others in the culture) is based on the overall life strategy of the culture.

Middle-class Americans, particularly those from a British cultural background, tend to be independence-oriented and to develop a concept of self based on one's potential future. When emotional problems are encountered, they want to know how the person can be helped to function as an adult member of society. Much inner turmoil may precede any external expression of discomfort in British/Irish families, where emotional experience is taught to be contained within the individual (McGill & Pearce, 1996).

Japanese American culture assigns shame to the emotionally distraught individual. Internal conflict is viewed as the lack of centeredness of the individual within society. This view stems from traditional Asian cultures, in which the general emotional strategy is one of role conformity, centeredness, and a balancing of life forces within familial and societal roles (Ho, 1992; Kuo, 1984). Asian Americans tend to keep family members with mental disorders in the home, unless they are acting out, and to underutilize mental health resources (Lee, 1996; Lin, Inui, Kleinman, & Womack, 1982).

In contrast, the Jewish American culture tends to attribute emotional problems to external influences. This approach stems from an Eastern European and Middle

Eastern life strategy that teaches the sharing of life. In this culture, life is with and from people, and problems are solved by sharing them. Individual expression is secondary to family and community.

Coming from this same cultural root, Iranians and Italian Americans tend to project emotional problems onto outside events or forces such as loss and social or religious prejudice rather than attributing them to internal processes. For the most part, however, in these two cultures, outsiders are not involved in family business. The family solves its own problems—family loyalty and solidarity are the first priority (Giordano & McGoldrick, 1996; Jalali, 1996).

In these cultures, disgrace to the family is the worst crime. Because of this credo, psychological problems are often ignored, disguised as physical complaints, or contained within the family for long periods of time before any outside intervention is sought. By the time help is pursued, many difficulties have become physical problems such as ulcers, anorexia, and bulimia.

A final example of differing ethnic approaches to psychological problems comes from the Native American culture. Native Americans acknowledge culture-specific syndromes that are born out of a belief in spiritualism, harmony with nature, and reincarnation rather than acknowledging traditional forms of mental illness. Some of these syndromes include spirit intrusion, in which ghosts of past ancestors return to affect a person's behavior; soul loss, resulting from behavior that is against tribal law; and windigo psychosis, which is an extreme form of psychotic behavior that is connected with the seasons (Kelso & Attneave, 1981). The school professional who deals with Native American families will need to understand their cultural definitions of illness to be able to join with the family in defining a problem (Sutton & Broken Nose, 1996).

### Cultural Values

Aponte (1994) wrote poignantly about culture and values:

The poorest in America, either through slavery (African Americans), conquest (Native Americans), or colonization (Puerto Ricans), have lost much of their original cultures. These cultures once told them who they were and gave them values that helped structure their families and communities. With these cultures there also came purpose, whether in mythology or religion. They had reasons for living and loving that were independent of economic achievement.

America's pragmatism and consumerism have since filled the space created by the loss of the original traditions and rituals of these cultures. The result has been tragic for minorities. (p. 2)

Aponte went on to describe the sad degeneration of these cultures and the willingness of their members to steal or even kill for clothes symbolizing status. Distanced from

their heritage, they have attempted to replace their lost cultural values and traditions with American substitutes, such as consumerism. Aponte juxtaposed this situation with that of immigrants from Europe and Asia who, not subjugated, were accompanied into America with their heritage. "Their ghettos, even with poverty and discrimination, became nurseries that fostered identity, social role, personal values. They contended with American society from a core that affirmed who they were, what they were worth, and why they should strive" (p. 3).

Minority students are overrepresented in special education programs. Particularly at risk are Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, who compose 21% of the overall population but are the most represented group in the special education population (Peschley, 1988). According to Hodgkinson (1990) Native Americans have the highest rate of school dropouts (35.5%) of all the ethnic groups in the United States. Because of language and color barriers, these four groups are the least well assimilated in our present culture. By virtue of their minority status alone, many of these families feel isolated from educational institutions. This sense of isolation puts the children at risk for educational and behavioral problems. The following sections describe the general, traditional values of each of these four cultural groups. This discussion is not intended as an exhaustive picture of specific family and community values within these cultures but rather as a broad overview of old-world values that are a part of the legacy of each culture.

### *Hispanic Americans*

This ethnic group includes many different specific cultural groups, such as Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, Salvadoran Americans, mainland Puerto Ricans, and Latin Americans. The discussion in this section focuses on the commonalities of cultural values across the subgroups rather than on the specifics of any one subgroup. Ho (1992) indicated that the Hispanic American population is "the fastest growing ethnic group in the country. If present trends continue, this group will someday replace Blacks as the nation's largest minority group" (p. 94). Over 60% of Americans from Hispanic backgrounds live in the states of California, Texas, and New York.

In general, traditional Hispanic values place importance on dependence, the theory of sacrifice, respect, machismo, and virginity (Garcia-Preto, 1996). Family members are viewed as interdependent, and no sacrifice is seen as too great for the family. It is the parents' job to sacrifice and give themselves up for the children. Children, in turn, are to show gratitude by submitting to the family rules. Although the mothers conduct the everyday running of the family, including discipline, they are seen as more passive than the fathers; their job is to teach respect for the father, who is the ultimate

decision maker. Boys are to be aggressive and macho in the outside world but, in contrast, are to mind their mothers at home. Girls are viewed, traditionally, as helpless and needing protection (Adkins & Young, 1976; Garcia-Preto, 1996).

Ho (1992) identified unifying cultural concepts across the Hispanic American subgroups. These include familism, or the importance of family and family obligation and of putting aside one's own needs for the betterment of the family; personalism, which relates to self-respect and dignity as well as to respect for others; a sense of hierarchy, which is related to socioeconomic status, the father being the head of the household, and the children obeying their parents and older siblings; spiritualism, which is seen as more important than material satisfaction and emphasizes linking directly with the spiritual realm; and fatalism, with an emphasis on transcendent qualities "such as justice, loyalty, or love" (p. 99).

These cultural values may be evidenced in several ways in the classroom. For one, Mexican Americans and Native Americans share the highest school dropout rate of all ethnic groups in this country (C. I. Bennett, 1990). In addition, adolescent Hispanic girls may seem, from a European American perspective, to be overprotected and denied privileges that are appropriate in the Anglo culture. In contrast, when the teacher believes a Hispanic male child needs discipline, the parents may see the behavior as natural and driven by the male's inherent nature to be macho and somewhat out of control from the Anglo point of view. In these instances, an unspoken conflict arises between cultural value systems.

In a study of Puerto Rican families, Montalvo and Guitierrez (1983) found a large number of children experiencing elective mutism after entering preschool. These authors characterized the identified children as coming from families that had limited interaction with the outside world. The parents spoke Spanish at home and were often shy and fearful of the English-speaking culture. They communicated to their children that the outside world was a frightening place. Soon after these children entered preschool, many witnessed some type of teasing, perceived intimidation by an adult, or their parents acting intimidated by the school personnel. From that point on, the children, who could speak English, did not speak at school though they continued to speak Spanish at home. The teachers left the children alone about their mutism. They backed off and gave them more time to integrate into the English-speaking environment. Montalvo and Guitierrez found it to be more helpful for parents to be empowered to ask the school to make more demands, rather than fewer, upon their children. When parents were able to be more assertive with the school, their confidence in other areas increased and positive changes for the children followed.

**Families with special needs.** Nazzaro (1981) presented a paradigm for general characteristics of children with disabilities from various ethnic groups. According to this classification, the primary problems encountered by professionals in diagnosing and working with Hispanic children with special needs are the pervasive difficulties posed by bilingualism.

When facing stress, Puerto Ricans will ask their family for help. The expectation is that someone in the family, particularly someone in a stable position, will help others who have a problem or crisis (Garcia-Preto, 1996). Thus, accessing social services becomes a last resort.

In a study of Puerto Rican parents with children having learning disabilities or mental retardation, Harry (1992) found that the parents discounted the labels placed on their children because of the different cultural meanings of disability and normalcy that they held. Harry recommended that professionals become sensitive to the values and norms of their students. She cautioned, however, that professionals must first "become aware of their own values, and of the fact that most human values are not universal but are generated by the needs of each culture" (p. 36).

Adkins and Young (1976) wrote of their experiences with an early intervention program for Hispanic children in El Paso, Texas. They found that many factors interfered with Hispanic families being able to obtain appropriate help for their children with disabilities. They noted a mistrust of medical institutions and a fear of medical procedures and testing that kept many children from obtaining adequate diagnosis of their difficulties. Even when a diagnosis was made, families often turned to religion, folklore, or superstition rather than to doctors or educators for advice on how to intervene with their child. The families also felt cultural pressure to take care of their own problems, including those associated with children who were not functioning normally, and a fear of losing face if a family member were to be found to have a disability. Finally, there was a cultural tendency toward overindulgence for children who are found to have a disability. These children were generally treated as dependent and incapable and had everything done for them. When professionals from outside the culture begin to recommend that families try to teach their child independence or self-help skills, they often are confronted by the force of this cultural stereotype.

### **African Americans**

Like Hispanic cultures, the African American culture includes a diverse group of people, such as Caribbean and African cultures and American southern and urban groups. The discussion in this section, like that for the Hispanic culture, should be taken as global rather than specific to a particular heritage. Ho (1992) related that 12% of the American

population is African American. That percentage is expected to rise to 13.3% in the future.

The following statistics may help provide an understanding of the African American experience in America. Fischgrund et al. (1987) found that while 8 in 10 white children live in two-parent families, only 4 in 10 African American children live in two-parent families. The African American children lived in female-headed homes over 3.5 times as often as children from Caucasian backgrounds. Nearly 10% of the African American children lived in homes that involved supervision by a welfare agency. For Caucasian children, the figure was approximately 2.5%. Further, the authors reported that African Americans earned 60% less than Caucasian families. They also found that nearly half of African American children are considered poor, as contrasted with approximately 17% of Caucasian children.

The African principles of human connectedness and interdependence can be seen in present-day African American cultures (Hale-Benson, 1982; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Ho, 1992). Most African American families are embedded in a complex kinship and social network. This network may include both blood relatives and close friends. The concept of an augmented family, one in which extended family or friends live in the home for various periods of time, is an integral part of the African American culture. The humanistic values of cooperation and "we-ness" that are inherent in the augmented family arrangement are extensions of an African cultural base (Delaney, 1979; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). The kinship bonds that developed in this culture were also influenced by shared trauma and remain essential for coping with the oppression experienced in U.S. society (Staples, 1994).

Another characteristic of the African American culture is role flexibility or adaptability (Hale-Benson, 1982; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; C. C. Mack, 1981). Various people within the family may interchange roles and functions without engendering a sense of instability in the family system. Thus, older children, grandparents, or neighbors—whoever is at hand—may provide child care, discipline, or household tasks at various times. The school professional may need to expand his or her definition of who is "family" or who is responsible for helping a student with problems in this cultural context.

A final consideration in the African American culture is the importance of childbearing and child rearing as validation for women. Prior to the emancipation of the slaves, families were frequently separated, and African American men and women were not allowed to legalize their marriages. Procreation was encouraged to increase the labor supply, and fertility in an African American female was considered an asset. A woman's identity was tied to her role as a mother (Hines, 1990). A matriarchal society with multiple

nurturing figures resulted (Pinkney, 1975). Child-rearing styles became authoritarian to encourage self-sufficiency and toughness in children, because the mothers knew that the children could be taken away from them at any time that they became useful. African American women were viewed as all-sacrificing and frequently turned to religion to help themselves deal with the grief of constantly losing their children. It is upon this basis of physical disconnection that the present African American experience was formed. School professionals need to increase their awareness of these multigenerational forces before attempting to intervene in the relationships among parents and children in this culture.

An example of how African American cultural values extend to the school experience may be seen by many school professionals at the high-school level. Counselors and teachers have expressed frustration at the large number of African American girls they work with who become pregnant early in adolescence and drop out of school in favor of taking on a parenting role. For many of these girls, the self-esteem that they feel in being a mother outweighs the motivation to continue their studies and work to achieve a career identity (Hale-Benson, 1982; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). Unfortunately, many of our social welfare programs have functioned to reinforce this dynamic. Even for African American girls whose mothers are working at professional jobs and are career-oriented, the peer culture often perpetuates the sense that motherhood is the only identity of value. With an understanding of the multigenerational patterns that contribute to a primary maternal identity, educators may be able to help young people develop alternative role models and begin building self-esteem around competency early in the educational process.

**Families with special needs.** Nazzaro (1981) identified two primary issues as affecting the diagnosis and treatment of African American students with disabilities. First is the tendency of an Anglicized culture to diagnose African American youth as conduct-disordered or juvenile delinquents when they have behavioral problems. Nazzaro argued that behavior viewed as antisocial in a disadvantaged African American culture, which is often behavior used to achieve status, may go unnoticed when working within "the majority controlled system." Second, African American students with learning disabilities are often misdiagnosed with mental retardation because of test biases and dialectic use of language.

D. Y. Ford and J. J. Harris (1995) found that person-environment transactions and related sociocultural influences were stronger predictors of underachievement among gifted African American students than intellectual and academic factors. "Such factors as a positive self-concept, an

understanding of racism, and the existence of support systems," they wrote, "are more predictive of African-American success than academic ability" (p. 198).

The entire October/November 1992 issue of the journal *Exceptional Children* was devoted to issues in the education of African American youth in special education settings. The topics of the articles range from self-concept to early pregnancy of teens. Administrators may find it useful to distribute reprints of some of these articles at faculty meetings.

### *Asian (Pacific) Americans*

This general cultural category includes the Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese. Ho (1992) indicated that this population has doubled in America since 1970. As reported by Momeni (1984), Asian Americans have the lowest proportion of households headed by women, the lowest divorce rate, and the lowest childbirth rate of all ethnic groups in the United States.

The major socialization goals for Asian American children reflect traditional values: a sense of collectivity and identification with the family, dependence on the family, obedience, and a sense of responsibility and obligation to the family (Lee, 1996; Serafica, 1990). These strong ties mean that often at least one grandparent is living in the family home. Ho (1992) listed the following important cultural values that operate among Asian Americans:

- Filial piety and unquestioning loyalty toward parents
- Shame as a behavioral influence for reinforcing expectations of the family and for communicating proper behavior
- Self-discipline, modesty, humility, and stoicism in adversity, with an emphasis on the middle-position virtue of feeling neither haughty nor unworthy
- Focus on a sense of belonging and togetherness in contrast with the typical American search for perfectionism and individualism
- Awareness of social milieu and sensitivity to the opinions of others
- Fatalism, or detachment with resignation to fate's impact on one's life, bringing equanimity as well as a pragmatic orientation
- Inconspicuousness stemming from fear of being picked out as an illegal immigrant or of being ostracized by the racist segment of American society

Traditional Asian roles identify fathers as educators and disciplinarians and mothers as protective and nurturing. A wife is expected to have complete obedience to her husband. Loyalty and respect for one's parents and elders is of primary importance. Behaving well is valued more highly than self-expression (delCarmen, 1990; Lee, 1996).



The most stressful period of development for Asian Americans is adolescence, a period in which many of the traditional Eastern values are in direct contradiction to the Western American values of independence and self-sufficiency. Whereas creative ideas and questioning of values are encouraged in the U.S. educational system, Asian American culture stresses loyalty and obedience. Whereas self-expression and self-disclosure are considered desirable in American society, expression in the Asian culture is implicit, non-verbal, and intuitive.

There is increasing evidence that more egalitarian views of male and female roles are being accepted in the Asian American community (Lee, 1996). However, such a dramatic change in values may cause some role and marital strain in early generations of Asian immigrants. School professionals may see the effects of parental disagreement about gender roles being enacted in role confusion and anxiety in students, particularly adolescents who are struggling with their identity. The school professional needs to be aware of the possibility of this conflict and avoid triangulation into the primary struggle between the parents.

**Families with special needs.** One of the most frequently cited areas of concern regarding Asian Americans is their general underutilization of mental health services (Ho, 1992; Lee, 1996; Tashima, 1981). Although foreign-born Asians and Asian women married to American military men are at very high risk for adjustment problems, their reliance on mental health services tends to be limited. When they do receive mental health services, they tend to be diagnosed as schizoid, schizophrenic, or retarded due to the language barrier and their style of low emotional expressiveness. Frequently, however, the diagnosis is inappropriate. Therefore, children of these two populations may grow up in a household with a severely depressed or dysfunctional parent who is not receiving treatment or who is receiving inappropriate treatment. The children may show signs of moodiness, physical and cognitive lethargy, or withdrawal that come from their experience of modeling the behavior of a parent.

Typically, Asian Americans show strain through somatic complaints (Ho, 1992). In the holistic view of health adopted by Asian American culture, physical complaints stigmatize the individual less than emotional problems do. Also, because self-disclosure and strong expressions of feeling are discouraged, physical complaints can be used to express personal and interpersonal problems. This internalization of problems makes school phobia more likely.

Nazzaro (1981) spoke to the impact of bilingualism on the diagnosis of Asian American children, particularly in the areas of hearing, language arts, and learning disabilities. The passive learning style and the self-controlled emotional style of this culture often results in misdiagnosis. Both of these

qualities may lead school professionals to view Asian American children as cognitively slow, disinterested, or nonmotivated.

### *Native Americans*

In the United States, over two million people from 500 tribes and 314 reservations identify with being of Native American descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993). Although Native Americans make up only 1% of the U.S. population, Native Americans have been described as having "fifty percent of the diversity" existing in the country (Hodgkinson, 1990). Some have a great-grandparent who was Native American, others were born on a reservation. Some who claim Native American descent have no identification with being Native American, having always lived in a city and having had no exposure to native customs or language. Many live in both worlds, balancing their two identities. Thus, speaking of Native Americans in general is difficult yet helpful for those unfamiliar with their rich heritage.

Among the tribes cultural identification varies widely. Each tribe holds a different world view. Tribes have dissimilar practices and customs as well as differences in family structure and views of spirituality. Those Native Americans connected with tribal traditions, have "a radically different view of themselves than the one created by the dominant culture. The importance of this should never be underestimated" (Sutton & Broken Nose, 1996, p. 35).

Whereas the dominant culture in the United States identifies siblings as brothers and sisters, in the Native American culture the extended family of cousins is referred to as brothers and sisters with the grandparents being the primary relationship. A grandaunt or granduncle would hold the same position as grandparent in providing training and discipline. Parental roles are filled by the parents as well as by the parents' siblings (aunts and uncles). An in-law is not spoken of in Native American culture; the person referred to as a daughter-in-law in the dominant culture's reference to daughter-in-law would be called a daughter in Native American culture. Marriage thus erases distinctions between natural and inducted family members. Families become blended rather than joined by marriage.

Native Americans value the family solving problems together. They think in terms of "we" (Sutton & Broken Nose, 1996), as opposed to the competitive "I" of the dominant culture. Communal sharing is highly valued, and those who give much to others are held in the highest regard. Native Americans place great value on feeding, housing, clothing, and transporting visitors or travelers (Attneave, 1982).

Cautioning that the Native American population is not a homogenous group, Garrett (1995) described Native American values as consisting of "sharing, cooperation, noninterference, being, the group and extended family, harmony

with nature, a time orientation toward living in the present, preference for explanation of natural phenomena according to the supernatural, and a deep respect for elders" (p. 188). Going on to describe the values of the dominant culture in the United States, Garrett showed that the two world views are diametrically opposed to one another:

*Mainstream values emphasize saving, domination, competition and aggression, doing, individualism and the nuclear family, mastery over nature, a time orientation toward living for the future, a preference for scientific explanations of everything, as well as clock-watching, winning as much as possible, and reverence of youth. (p. 188)*

According to Garrett, in Native American culture there is a focus on self-mastery and inner strength as well as on developing personal abilities in children. Ideals held in high regard include kindness, sharing, autonomy, and noninterference. Values are communicated by the elders through storytelling. Spiritual and humanistic qualities are emphasized, as is modesty.

Humor has also been described as important to the Native American culture. Focusing on the use of humor in Native American Indian cultures, Herring and Meggert (1994) wrote, "Indians use humor's ability to erase, cleanse, or change what was embarrassing, oppressive, sorrowful, or painful" (p. 68). After reviewing the influences of humor on the Native American culture, the authors discuss specific strategies involving humor that counselors can use when working with Native American children.

Coming from a history of victimization, Native Americans look for authenticity, respect, and concern for others when they meet with professionals (Sutton & Broken Nose, 1996). Respect is paramount for school professionals who work with students of Native American descent.

**Families with special needs.** Native Americans share with Mexican Americans the highest school dropout rate of all the ethnic groups in the United States. According to Hodgkinson (1990, cited in Garrett, 1995), the school dropout rate for Native American students is 35.5%. Garrett, focusing on *cultural discontinuity*, placed the blame on a cultural clash with the dominant culture. Whereas Native American culture stresses family, leadership, and noninterference, the dominant culture emphasizes achievement and monetary gain. Garrett provides many usable recommendations for school professionals for alleviating cultural discontinuity in the schools.

According to Saunders (1987), Native American children come to school ready to learn, yet by the end of fourth grade their achievement declines rapidly. This finding is in line with Garrett's explanation that changing family life quality and the pressure to succeed applied by educators conflict with Native American cultural values that place

family ties, intrinsic worth, and traditional beliefs first (Garrett, 1995).

Sexual abuse in a Native American family is a thorny issue, since sex is not considered an acceptable topic for discussion. Child abuse prevention education requires pre-work to build trust (Willis, Dobrec, & Sipes, 1992).

The difficulty of working with Native American adolescents who are attempting to differentiate from the family was highlighted by Topper (1992) in a case study. He viewed development of an independent adult identity as challenging in this culture because of the economic underdevelopment of the reservations, their restricted funds for support services, the culture clash already described, and fall out in social and medical areas stemming from all of these factors.

Alcohol and drug abuse are high among Native American youth. Trimble (1992) likened the effect of this abuse to a second "trail of tears," noting that Native American youth have a higher rate of abuse than any other minority. Discussing the difficulty of using traditional approaches to deal with problems of Native American youth, Trimble recommended a cognitive-behavioral approach for drug abuse prevention and intervention. He described a group prevention-intervention program tailored to Native American youth.

### Cognitive Styles

Another consideration for school professionals is the influence of culture on cognitive style. For the past 30 years, studies have been conducted that attempt to discern the differences between the thinking of mainstream American cultural groups, such as Anglo-Americans, and that of minority groups, such as Hispanic, African, and Native Americans (J. A. Anderson, 1988; R. Cohen, 1969; Hale-Benson, 1982).

In general, the research indicates that two very different cognitive styles exist in mainstream and minority cultural groups. These styles have been referred to by various researchers as *field-independent* versus *field-dependent* (J. A. Anderson, 1988), analytic-cognitive versus relational (R. Cohen, 1969), and linear versus circular (Hale, 1981). Euro-Western or Anglo thought is characterized as field-independent, analytic-cognitive, and linear in nature, whereas Hispanic, African, and Native American thought tends to be field-dependent, relational, and circular in nature.

Historically, American public schools have tended to reward Euro-Western cognitive styles. Characteristics of this type of thought are as follows:

- Task-oriented
- Standardized
- Objective
- Meaning is absolute
- Mechanistic
- Logical
- Scheduled
- Factual
- Individual mastery
- Deductive

In contrast, characteristics of minority thought include the following:

- Process-oriented
- Creative
- Subjective
- Meaning is contextual
- Humanistic
- Affective
- Flexible
- Group cooperation
- Inductive

School professionals must begin to adapt their teaching methods and curriculum to address these contrasting forms of thought (Reed, 1993).

For school professionals who wish to study the issue of cultural diversity in more depth, the seminal work on ethnic issues in families is an edited volume by McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano (1982). A revised edition (1996) includes discussion of many varied ethnic backgrounds and how knowledge of ethnicity can be useful to the professional in understanding family functioning. The authors describe how life-cycle and situational stressors, such as the diagnosis of a child with a disability, may put families into greater contact with the roots of their traditions and belief systems and challenge their identity, and they suggest cultural-specific intervention strategies that professionals may find useful.

## AFFIRMING DIVERSITY AND PROMOTING EQUITY

Increasing understanding of ethnic differences is approached on two levels in this section. First, activities aimed at achieving a greater personal awareness and sensitivity to differing backgrounds and families are recommended. Second, specific programs that have been used to increase intercultural awareness and connection on the school and community level are described and suggestions are made to help educators be more culturally sensitive. At the end of the section the issue of promoting equity is focused upon briefly.

### Personal Awareness

McGoldrick, Giordano, and Pearce (1996) proposed that "the most important part of ethnicity training involves . . . coming to understand (your) . . . own ethnic identity" (p. 22). Only by becoming aware of our own prejudices and values can we learn to open our minds to the values of other cultures. To heighten your understanding in this area, you may want to ask yourself the following questions, which were adapted from McGoldrick and Giordano (1996, p. 24):

1. How would you describe yourself ethnically and socioeconomically? Is your present socioeconomic position the same or different from that of your parents and grandparents?

2. Who in your family influenced your sense of ethnic identity? How did they teach you these values?
3. Which ethnic groups other than your own do you think you understand best and least?
4. Which characteristics of your own ethnic group do you like most and least?
5. Imagine that your socioeconomic level decreased drastically over the next year. What would change about your life?

By asking yourself questions such as these and discussing your answers with friends and colleagues, you may increase your awareness of your values, prejudices, and fears.

To increase personal awareness of other ethnic groups, the school professional will benefit from developing an attitude of problem solving in alliance with the family being counseled. When beginning contact with a family of differing cultural or socioeconomic background, a stance of respectful curiosity and openness to learn is helpful. The following techniques may prove useful:

1. *Self-disclosure and joining.* Introduce yourself as "Ms./Mr./Dr. \_\_\_\_\_. I'm your son's \_\_\_\_\_." Don't use the parents' first names unless they give you permission to do so. Tell the family an interesting story about your cultural background. "I grew up with a house full of kids and my husband is an only child. What a difference that makes."
2. *Family self-identification.* How do the family members see themselves? "Your last name is pretty unusual. Is it German or Swedish? Do you know anything about that background?"
3. *Clarification about questions.* Tell the family why you need to know the information you're asking; how it will be used. "Could you tell me something about the Mormon religion? I'm really not that familiar with it. I wonder how Mark might share some of your traditions with our class."
4. *Cultural heritage.* Ask questions about family rituals. "The holidays are coming up. How does your family celebrate?"

By expressing an interest in the family's beliefs and values, the professional begins the relationship with the family in a spirit of openness and acceptance. This beginning will provide the foundation for developing a problem-solving alliance with the parents, which is vital for helping their children adapt to the school environment.

Believing that ethnic pride is important to a healthy self-concept, B. A. Ford and C. Jones (1990) described a method used to promote cultural awareness within 9- to 12-year-old African American students with developmental disabilities.

The project involved 10 weeks of daily sessions, lasting from 30 to 45 minutes, from an ethnic feeling book. The students, their teacher, and the teacher educator who developed the ethnic feeling book were African Americans. Methods such as this can provide an ongoing means of promoting cultural awareness.

### Institutional Sensitivity

As described earlier in this article, one of the difficulties with educating minorities in American public schools is the fact that our educational institutions have been formed from a base of Euro-Western thought and values (Trimble, 1992). Hale-Benson (1982) argued that to optimally address the needs of minority children, schools must make changes in their ideology, method, and content (p. 152). Ideologically, education must teach minorities how to struggle and survive. Methods need to include cognitive strategies that are more relational and creative than cognitive and structured.

Content needs to be ethnocentric in nature, that is, teaching the history, crafts, music, historical and political figures, and important events of various ethnic groups. An example of an ethnocentric curriculum can be found in a guide developed by Wendell and Leoni (1986) for the Virginia Department of Education. The guide includes general information about the cultural values of 19 ethnic groups and provides suggestions for ethnocentric lessons and activities for each cultural group. Your local education department may have developed a similar guide.

To respond to the needs of various minorities, Cummins (1989) recommended that schools develop an intercultural orientation based on the values of inclusion, collaboration, interaction, and experiential learning rather than try to force minorities to conform to an Anglo orientation through the transmission of Anglo values. Some of the ways he and others have proposed to help schools create a climate that is welcoming to minority parents and reinforcing to students' identity follow (Cummins, 1989; Lynch & Stein, 1987):

1. Respect the various cultural groups in the school district by hanging signs in the main office that welcome people in the different languages of the community.
2. Recruit parents or other people from the community who can tutor students in different languages or provide a liaison between the school system and other parents. In some instances, these parents could be paid with money for teacher's aide positions or grant money allocated for this purpose.
3. Include greetings and information in the various languages in newsletters, parent handouts, and other official school communications. Make materials about school services available in the appropriate

languages at local churches, community centers, markets, and other businesses frequented by families.

4. Display within the school pictures and objects representing the various cultures and religious groups of the student body.
5. Encourage students to write contributions in their native language or about their family culture for school newspapers and magazines.
6. Provide opportunities for students to study their culture in elective subjects and in extracurricular clubs. It is often eye-opening for students to become aware that, for example, Africa and China had extremely advanced cultures at a time when the British (whom we typically study in history classes) were still living in dirty, flea-infested castles.
7. Encourage parents to help in the classroom, library, playground, and clubs so that all students have the opportunity to interact with people of different cultures.
8. Invite people from ethnic minority communities to act as resources and to speak to students in both formal and informal settings. These individuals can also be asked to provide in-service education to school personnel to sensitize the school staff to the values and beliefs of the families they serve.

Frequently, school professionals report that the services offered for parent involvement are underutilized. In an effort to discover the barriers to parent involvement in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood, Lynch and Stein (1987) conducted three studies, in which they interviewed a total of 434 families receiving special education services. The sample consisted of Hispanic, African American, and Anglo families from a metropolitan school district in southern California. According to family reports, the main barriers to parent participation in school meetings were work, time conflicts, transportation problems, and child-care needs. When asked what could be changed to help parents get to the school, the parents who were interviewed suggested that the schools hold bilingual meetings, select times convenient for parents, provide transportation, provide advance notice of meetings, provide child care, inform them of the subjects that pertain to their children, and send personal notes or make calls about the meetings.

This study highlights the importance of sensitivity to the needs of parents. The types of services offered by the school and the times of school and parent meetings may need to be geared differently based on needs of each unique community. Boyd-Franklin (1989) indicated that it is important to train African American parents for professional positions in the schools. They serve as role models as well as have considerable cultural material that will help the school.

Gorman and Balter (1997) reviewed the available quantitative research for culturally sensitive parent education programs that related to child rearing. They described in detail a number of programs for African American and Hispanic families. They did not find efficacy studies for Native American and Asian American parents but did describe efforts to serve them. Reading this review will provide educators with important information about the parent training programs that have been used with culturally different parents.

McIntyre (1996) presented guidelines for the provision of appropriate services to culturally diverse students who have emotional or behavioral problems. These guidelines were developed by a task force on ethnic and multicultural concerns formed by the Council for Children With Behavior Disorders. McIntyre related that the guidelines do not make distinctions between races, cultures, sexual orientation, or generational status and that educational and therapeutic practices should not be prescribed on those bases. Instead, the guidelines call for multifaceted and complex practices in schools and treatment. He wrote, "We cannot support, condone, or excuse behaviors, even culturally based, if they undermine basic human rights and the more commonly held values of humankind" (p. 142). The following seven goals were delineated as a result of the task force effort: removing culturally different students from special programs if their behaviors are culturally based rather than emotional and/or behavioral in nature; providing respectful and culturally appropriate education and treatment to those who do not have emotional and/or behavior disorders but are culturally different; implementing assessment procedures that are culturally and linguistically competent; recruiting professionals who are culturally different; providing training in modifications of practice that focus on the characteristics of culturally different students who have emotional and/or behavioral disorders; creating a welcoming atmosphere in which culturally different students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders are valued, respected, and safe; and enhancing the cultural knowledge of professionals, students, and the public.

Sontag and Schacht (1994) investigated differences among ethnic groups concerning the perceptions parents have of their need for information and sources of information as well as the nature and preference of parental participation in early intervention for children with special needs. In regard to the effective diffusion of information to minority families, the researchers found differences within specific minority groups; elusive local networks for communication, each having different opinion leaders and communication channels; an interest in funding as well as technical assistance to help develop culturally relevant solutions; and suspicion and skepticism within the community toward those who come from the outside to help make

changes. The researchers related that American Indian children receive a lower level of service than white children. Also, minority parents reported low level of involvement in early intervention activities with their children but wanted to increase their participation. These findings indicate that schools need to make a greater effort to include parents from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds in decision making.

### Teacher and Counselor Applications

The literature also includes a number of strategies that individual teachers and counselors can use at the classroom or group level to increase cross-cultural awareness in their students. Schniedewind and Davidson's 1998 book *Open Minds to Equality: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities to Affirm Diversity and Promote Equity* includes different types of activities for upper elementary and middle school students that teachers can use to foster an understanding of cultural and racial differences. This book also includes resources and curriculum materials for teachers. I highly recommend that at least one copy be available in every elementary and middle school.

Hayes (1996) studied storytelling and its influences on first-grade students in a suburb of Chicago. She was looking at whether stories could increase interest in and positive feeling for people from different cultural backgrounds. She concluded that rich learning opportunities can be established in this manner. Phillips-Hershey and Ridley (1996) shared a model for increasing classroom acceptance of diversity in students with mental retardation. They recommended that the school counselor collaborate with general and special education teachers to provide "an integrative experience that incorporates the basic understanding of group processes and group developmental stages with planned neutral activities" (p. 291).

Isaacs and Duffus (1995) described a Scholars' Club used to increase achievement among high school minority students. Primarily an honor society, the club members also took part in community activities such as fashion shows, public speaking, peer tutoring, and mentoring. The researchers found that self-esteem was enhanced through such support experiences.

Moles (1993) reviewed the literature to provide suggestions for helping parents strengthen learning for their children. He suggested that low-income and minority families would benefit from a variety of family interactions including leisure reading; family conversations about current events or life in the family; home life activities, which would stimulate language development; and the demonstration of personal interest as well as intense involvement by parents in their child's development.

Garrett (1995) reiterated recommendations made by Little Soldier (1985) and Saunders (1987) for counteracting

cultural discontinuity in schools leading to dropout among Native American youth. The suggestions included increasing opportunities for visual and oral learning; using culturally relevant materials; respecting family-related and tribe-related absences; using Native American elders as mentors; using peer tutoring to amplify the values of sharing and cooperation; encouraging intergroup rather than individual competition; emphasizing the present with short-term goals; and modeling appropriate behavior and skills.

Values clarification exercises can also be useful for dealing with value conflicts. To help Native American students reach solutions to value conflicts that retain and strengthen their pride in their heritage and values, Garrett (1995) made the following recommendations to school counselors:

1. Encourage the youth to make choices and to take a look at specific choices as examples from everyday life.
2. Help the youth discover and examine available alternatives when faced with choices.
3. Help the youth weigh alternatives thoughtfully and reflect on the consequences of each.
4. Encourage the youth to consider what they prize and cherish (for example, by making a list or writing a short story together).
5. Give the youth opportunities to make public affirmations of the choices they have made (for example, through a role-play).
6. Encourage the youth to act, behave, and live in accordance with the choices they have made and to be able to justify their choices through appropriate communication.
7. Help the youth examine repeated behaviors and life patterns in relation to the choices they have made.

Also from the area of school counseling, M. E. Walsh and M. A. Buckley (1994) spoke to what homeless children have said they want from the adults who assist them. They do not want to be judged or labeled. They desire a trusting relationship that respects and honors confidentiality. Although they want to talk with others about their lives, they also want to choose when and where they talk. They want reassurance that they are not alone. "Finally, they express a great concern that others know that they, their families, and others in the shelter are 'nice people'" (p. 14).

Gustafson (1997) related how her sixth-grade class increased its ethnic awareness through their focus on a slain civil rights leader from their community, Edwin T. Pratt. The students learned much about civil rights, public speaking, writing grants, and public art. They created a memorial that was dedicated on the last day of school. Through this process all of the students grew in their appreciation of sacrifices made by those with the courage of their convictions.

Such activities encourage students to act, rather than remain idle.

For teachers to be successful in multicultural schools, they need to relate curriculum content to the cultural background of their students. In an article in *Educational Leadership* Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) outlined four conditions necessary for culturally responsive teaching and gave examples of norms under each of the four conditions. The conditions included establishing inclusion, developing positive attitudes, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence. The authors encouraged the use of holistic approaches for culturally different students that engage the students in the learning process. This article is helpful reading for all school professionals and those who train them.

Another article of particular interest written by M. Franklin (1992), describes culturally sensitive instructional practices for African American students. The article focuses on using and accepting dialect in specific situations; presenting real-world tasks related to students' cultural background; including a people focus through small groups, an instructional approach that meets the preferred learning style of many African American learners; using grouping patterns that allow African American students to problem solve together and be allowed to go off-task on occasion; employing cooperative learning for content-related tasks; using peer-cross-age grouping to allow informal interactions; and using peer tutoring to foster relationship building.

Sexton, Lobman, Constans, Snyder, and Ernest (1997) reported on early interventionists' perspectives on their multicultural practices with African American families having children with special needs. The professionals were positive about the multicultural aspects of their interactions with families. They also thought that there should be in-service training that focused on issues facing African American families. These same professionals were, however, less positive about administrative support for multicultural practices. They recommended that training be provided in multicultural issues and that administrators, as well as interventionists, attend the training. Sexton, et al. (1997) stated: "A portion of the training related to the use of positive behavioral supports with young children could consider how cultural values, beliefs, and preferences affect the acceptability of various behavioral techniques" (p. 326). They further recommended that parents from different perspectives speak to other families, interventionists, and administrators in training sessions.

### Promoting Equity

Sociologist James Coleman (1987) indicated that families are finding it more difficult to provide a context for which schools are the complement. However, organizations such as church schools can make a significant positive impact on dropout rates. These organizations cross generations and

provide children and youth with access to an adult community, promoting the development of social capital. He pointed to the need for the establishment of a new institution, stating, "It is a demand not for further classroom indoctrination, nor for any particular content, but a demand for child care: *all day; from birth to school age; after school, every day, till parents return home from work; and all summer*" (p. 38). He elaborated by noting that the new institutions must "induce the kinds of attitudes, effort, and conception of self that children and youth need to succeed in school and as adults" (p. 38).

Teacher and co-chair of the National Coalition of Education Activists Stan Karp (1997), reflecting on inequality and responding to others' views of educating for a democratic life, stated, "The core issue is inequality. Schools are being asked to compensate for structural inequities in our society that the economy has magnified in recent years" (p. 41). He went on to say that the structuring of schools leads to inequality from the inside, giving tracking as an example, and leads to inequality outside the school with schools merely reflecting divisions of race and class in the larger society.

## SUMMARY

The most important factor in dealing with families of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds is an openness and willingness on the part of the school professional to learn about family values and beliefs. The specific activities and strategies used to accomplish this goal will differ from community to community, from school to school, and from professional to professional.

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