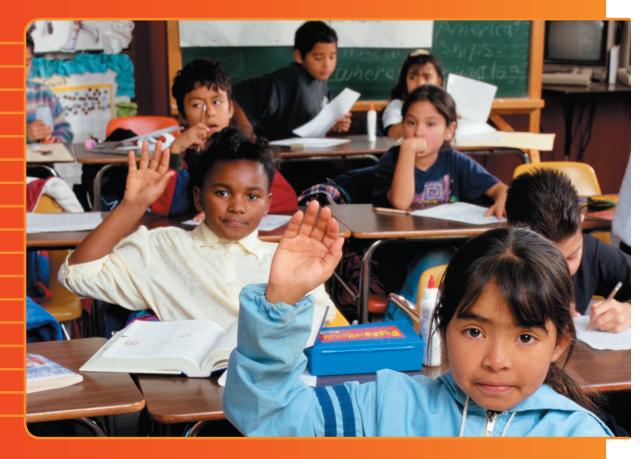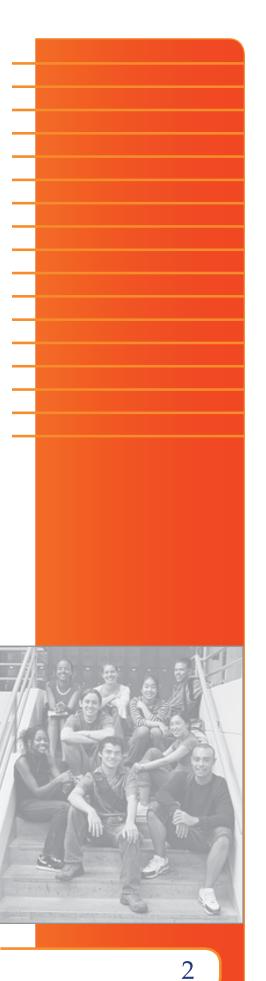# LASER

## Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources



**RESEARCH TO PRACTICE BRIEF:**

# Creating Culturally Responsive Classroom Environments

# RESEARCH TO PRACTICE BRIEF:
# Creating Culturally Responsive Classroom Environments

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# The Problem

African-American and Hispanic males are overrepresented in programs for students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) (National Research Council, 2002; McCray & Webb-Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, students identified as EBD fail more courses, obtain lower grade point averages, miss more days of school, and are retained at grade level more than other students with disabilities (Wagner, 1995; Anderson & Webb-Johnson, 1995). Approximately half of all students attending EBD programs drop out of grades 9 through 12, and 73 percent are arrested within five years of leaving school (United States Department of Education, 1994; Meyer & Patton, 2001).
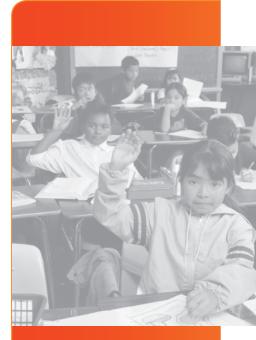
Nationwide teacher shortages in special education have resulted in the pervasive use of unqualified personnel in classrooms for students identified for special education services. Furthermore, there is a dearth of teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in such programs. While 38% of students identified for special education services are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (U.S. DOE, 2000; Irvine, 2003), only 14% of teachers serving these students are from historically underrepresented groups (Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2002). This trend is exacerbated by the subjective special education referral process utilized by teachers and administrators in public school settings. Research suggests that referrals of students for assessment of EBD by general education classroom teachers are often based on limited understanding of behavior in relationship to cultural influences (Gay, 2000; Riccio, Ochoa, Garza & Nero, 2003). As Anderson (1992) observes, this process occurs when "any behavior causes discomfort for the classroom teacher" (p.94). The disproportionate number of minority male students in special education classrooms taught by a predominately European-American female teacher workforce has resulted in a classroom climate of "cultural dissonance" that leads to school failure and the propagation of generations of young men of color who are not prepared to take their places as productive and responsible members of American society (Hale, 1986; Harry & Anderson, 1999; Voltz, 1998; Anderson & Rochon, 1999; Webb-Johnson, 2003).

# Implications for Teacher Practice

## A Call for Reform

In 1990, the 12th Annual Report to Congress stated, "…increased program options, improved services, alternative curricula and other creative interventions" (p. C-10) are needed if trained personnel are to provide the most effective instruction and integrated programs for African American males labeled SED and their non labeled peers exhibiting troubling behaviors in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1990).

Two years later, the 14th Annual Report to Congress further clarified that, "…if schools can give students powerful reasons to come to school and can help students achieve in their courses, they can help many students persist in schools, and will have improved students' prospects for success in their adult years" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, p. 6). Twelve years later, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) developed the National Agenda for Children and Youth with Serious

Emotional Disturbance (United States Department of Education, 1994). One of the emergent themes developed by the National Agenda is related to the development of culturally responsive classroom environments.

## Where Are We Now?

A careful examination of the persistent trend of over-identification of African American and Hispanic male students in classes for EBD and the lack of, or poor preparation of the teachers who teach them, sounds the alarm for the continuing need to develop high quality, culturally relevant teacher preparation programs. Teacher education programs for general and special educators do not provide adequate training for teachers to promote self-determined communication behaviors and self-regulated decision-making processes that foster successful student-student and student-teacher interactions (Anderson & Webb-Johnson, 1995; Eisner, 2002). Teachers and students would fundamentally benefit from deliberate instructional approaches that provide opportunities to acquire the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary for controlling and benefiting from proactive communication choices.

# Tips for Teachers

### Incorporating Selected Theater Rehearsal Technique Activities

One such educative communication approach is *Selected Theater Rehearsal Technique* (TRT) (Anderson, 1992). Selected TRTs challenge and empower students to experiment with their communication choices as communication performances, in self-satisfying and socially effective ways.
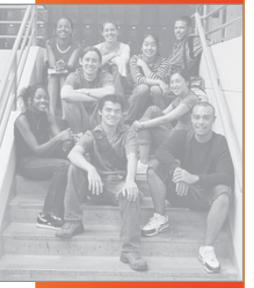
### *What are Selected Theater Rehearsal Technique (TRT) Activities?*

Theatre Rehearsal Technique (TRT) activities are improvisational communication experiences used to prepare actors for stage performances. TRT activities allow actors to try out alternative ways of communicating, and make choices about which performance works best for them (Way, 1967). Selected TRT activities in the classroom use everyday conversational behaviors to provide an interactive and visual format for presenting, examining and defining communication choices as objective and controllable events. These activities provide opportunities for students to examine, and change the way they feel about, understand and use their own conversational behaviors to maximize effective social interactions and promote self-determined and beneficial communication outcomes. By personally experiencing and articulating the feelings and thinking inherent in selected TRT activities, teachers and students, regardless of labels, can use the activities as alternative ways of investigating how what they say feels to them and influences what happens to them.

*Dr. Mary Anderson explains the use of selected TRT activities in the classroom:*

### *A Selected TRT Activity: "Opposites"*

"Whenever I hear students calling each other names to communicate feelings of anger or meanness, I initiate a TRT. This activity gives students and opportunity to pay attention to their personal feelings about words while trying to influence or change the minds of others. The expressive nature of this perspective provides

a visual format for experiencing the affective relationship between personal feelings about language and individual verbal conduct choices. This TRT is called 'Opposites'".
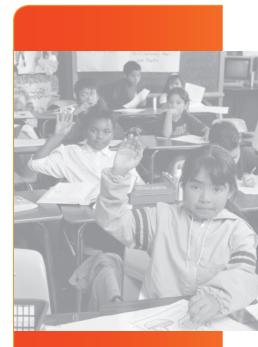
## Instructions:

"Give each student a word from a list of opposites such as *love-hate, right-wrong, fat-skinny, good-bad, yes-no, stupid-smart, life-death*. Tell the students, 'When I say BEGIN, you are to get up from your seats and walk up to as many people as you can saying your word. You can only say your word so say it in as many ways as necessary to get people to abandon their word in favor of yours. If you don't like the word you have been given and you hear another word you like better, feel free to abandon your word for the more favorable word and begin walking with that person, saying their word to other people, trying to get them to join you and abandon their words. If you hear another word you like better, feel free to abandon your first choice and change again. You may change as often as you like before I call TIME. If you choose to keep your word, do so. You do not have to change. You will have one (1) minute to communicate with each other."

The teacher tells the students, "BEGIN".

After one minute (teacher keeps time) the teacher calls "TIME" and tells the students to stay with their group and form one big circle. Once everyone is in the circle, ask students to shout their word across the circle, from wherever they are, trying to persuade others to join them. People are free to change, and physically walk across the circle to join the new word-group and begin saying their word to persuade others.

This activity lasts for one (1) minute. The teacher calls "TIME" and the first question asked is, "Who changed their word?" As students raise their hands, the teacher should ask each student the following questions: "What was your word?" and "Why did you change?" Students often respond by saying things such as: "My word was 'stupid' and I changed to 'smart' because I am smart and I don't like that word. It doesn't feel good to me." Or, "My word was 'sad' and I changed to happy because I'm not sad. I'm a happy person and I feel better saying 'happy' rather than saying 'sad.'" Once each student with a raised hand responds, the teacher then asks: "Who did not change their word?" and "Why didn't you change?" Students have often answered those questions by saying things like "My word was 'hate' and I kept it because there are some things I hate like child abuse and war. I think you should hate some things," and "My word was 'love' and I kept it because I love everybody."

Once people have expressed their feelings, the teacher should engage students in a discussion about the effect of words. I often say things like, "In the beginning of this TRT, I arbitrarily gave you a word. However, as you listened to why people changed or didn't change their word you should have begun to see that all words have feelings attached to them. Even words you never really think about have some kind of feeling associated with them. Some people even said, during this TRT, 'That word just feels better to me.' Just as you feel strongly about words, you should note that other people do too. As you talk to people after this TRT, pay attention to the words you choose to use to express what you mean and the underlying emotion you attached to each word. The way you choose to use language is something you can control. Ask yourself, 'What is my intention? How and why am I expressing

myself in this way?' 'What do I expect to happen? If what you expected to happen, happened, then you have successfully communicated". This TRT gives students an opportunity to feel good about their power to choose and more proactively, control what happens to them. It also provides a safe arena for personally experiencing how to be more accepting and more cognizant of the choices of others.

### Research-Based Best Practices

1. In order to develop cultural and cross cultural competence, teachers should self-assess and reflect on their own cultural experiences while engaging in active learning about the cultures represented in their classrooms (Patton, 2001).

2. Teachers should seek out on-going Professional Development through school district trainings and attendance at local and national conferences to develop culturally responsive instructional and classroom management techniques (Townsend, 2000).

3. Teachers should implement classroom activities such as selected Theater Rehearsal Technique (TRT) activities (Anderson, 1992; Anderson & Webb-Johnson, 1995) to promote successful communication learning experiences, effective social communication interactions and beneficial educational outcomes for students.

## Conclusions

For students identified EBD, it is imperative to note that when observable and persistent changes are evidenced in their social conduct, specifically, communication behaviors, school personnel are legally mandated to reassess the appropriateness of both the label and the placement. The reassessments would facilitate student exits from EBD classrooms and non-labeled membership in general education settings. As students gain and demonstrate communication competencies, they are, in essence, facilitating their own exits from special education (Anderson, 1992). Further, when students identified "at-risk" of the EBD classification demonstrate and gain social communication competencies, they would be preventing their exits from general education placements as well as reducing increases in EBD misclassifications and placements.

Finally, as culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, selected TRT activities are grounded in the everyday conversational language of the students. The communication activities emphasize and facilitate the experiential part of teaching and learning by engaging teachers and students in recognizing and experiencing multiple perspectives as distinctive ways of sense-making rather than deficit ways of behaving.
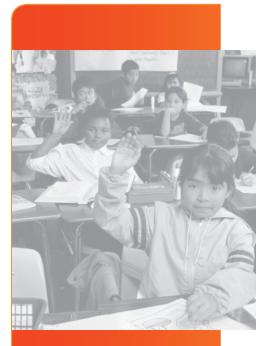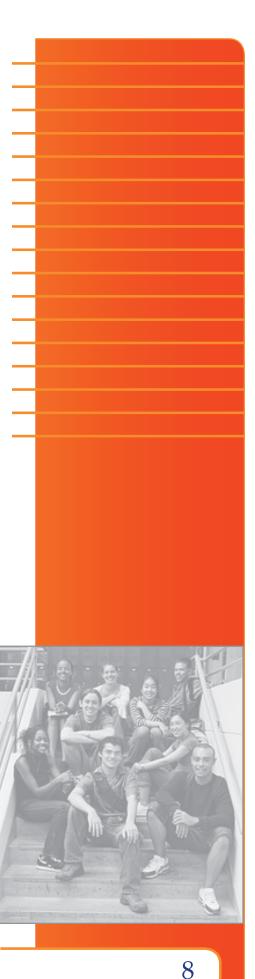
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## Web sites

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice:
http://www.air.org/cecp

Center for Multicultural Education:
http://depts.washington.edu/centerme/home.htm

National Multicultural Institute:
http://www.nmci.org

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