

# The Research Brief



College of Education  
Sam Houston State University

Volume 2, Issue 4

Fall, 2010

## *Adapting Instruction or Programs to Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners*

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*"Every human has four endowments- self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to choose, to respond, to change." ~Stephen R. Covey*

**Question** In what ways can educators adapt instruction or programs to meet the needs of diverse learners?

### **Summary of Findings**

Toward the goal of answering this question within today's educational context, consideration must be made to the 21st century societal landscape--which shapes (and ultimately prescribes) the knowledge and skills necessary to become a contributing citizen in today's global society. Therefore, through this particular lens, the following areas in education will be addressed:

(a) education's role in a changing world;  
(b) the educator's role in a changing world; and (c) culturally responsive instruction and program design.

### **Education's Role in a Changing World**

The role of public educational institutions has been to provide learning opportunities which ultimately support the life and career skills that are deemed by society as important. The needs of society have drastically changed throughout time, thus skill-sets have changed also. A glimpse into educational history substantiates this timeline of reasoning as education has developed from agricultural, to industrial, to an information-based society.

Today, as an information-based society, schools are responding to the need for higher level thinking skills in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning (Kagan, 2004)—skills that business and corporate entities have expressed as valuable in today's competitive society. In a survey conducted by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management (2006) nearly 50 % of the employer-participants indicated that young people right out of high school were "deficient" (p. 1) in their overall preparation for careers. Specific deficiencies included:

- Oral and written communications
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Professionalism and work ethic
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Working in diverse teams
- Applying technology
- Leadership and project management

Additionally, skills including *outside of the box* thinking and interpersonal skills are also highly valued in today's market place (Kincaid, 2010; Sawchuck, 2009).

### **The Educator's Role in a Changing World**

The identification of these needed skills has led educators at all levels to examine and explore more closely how to transform traditional ways of learning --to learning which mirrors the world's

*The Research Brief provides a synthesis of research on current educational or counseling issues. Each brief is authored by graduate faculty and/or graduate candidates in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University.*

*Published by the College of Education Graduate Programs with funding from SHSU University Advancement.*

*Sam Houston State University is a Member of The Texas State University System.*

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needs and attends to those from diverse backgrounds. However, before doing so, educators must also examine their own learned teaching styles toward complementing the characteristics reflective of a 21st century educator. Churches (2007) explored specific characteristics which include:

- **The Adaptor** - must be able to adapt the curriculum in imaginative ways; understand and apply different learning styles; must be able to adapt their own teaching style to be inclusive of different modes of learning and diversities.
- **The Visionary** - must be able to use creativity and imagination; look at other ideas and envision how they would use these ideas in their own teaching; looks across disciplines and through the curricula.
- **The Collaborator** - must be able to use collaborative tools to enhance and captivate diverse learners (i.e. social technologies); must be collaborators themselves through sharing, contributing, adapting and inventing.
- **The Risk Taker** - must be able to take risks by using students' knowledge as teaching moments. Students today are knowledgeable regarding new platforms for learning, therefore letting go of the control and trusting your students is paramount.
- **The Learner** - must have a passion for continuous learning and be willing to change and learn as education continues to evolve.
- **The Communicator** - must be able to use current modes of communication toward learning, facilitating, manipulating, moderating and managing.
- **The Model** - must be able to model the same behaviors expected from students including: reflective practice, tolerance, acceptance, global awareness, and the ability to envision a "bigger picture."
- **The Leader** - must be able model positive leadership characteristics toward projects/ goals.

## *Culturally Responsive Instruction and Program Design*

Culturally responsive educators should develop a curriculum that supports understandings and perspectives of different groups while attending to the development of higher level cognitive skills (Banks,

1991, 2003). This involves selecting material that is inclusive of the contributions and perspectives of different groups (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2002) and that is responsive to the particular context within which one teaches (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Knapp & Shields, 1991; Sleeter & Grant, 1999; Villegas, 1991). To create a curriculum that creates connections for learners, educators need to have wide-ranging knowledge of subject matter content, so that they can construct a curriculum that includes multiple representations addressing the prior experiences of different groups of learners (Lee, 1993; McDiarmid, 1994).

Banks et al. (2005) posited that leaders of culturally responsive programs will:

- allow for opportunities where educators can spend time in the communities where they teach
- encourage hiring and admission procedures that are representative of the community
- develop a curriculum and pedagogy that helps people learn how to learn from those of diverse backgrounds

## *Tying It All Together*

Education as a whole should carefully consider the skills that are needed in today's society by encouraging educators to model the characteristics that are reflective of, and conducive to learning that encompasses varied and diverse learning experiences. Modeling these characteristics coupled with specific attention to culturally responsive instruction and program development will afford all learners an experience rich in diversity, equity, and social justice.

### Additional Resources:

*Preparing teachers for a changing world* (Eds. Linda Darling-Hammond & John Bransford) - This book is an excellent resource addressing what teachers today should know and be able to do. ISBN: 13 978-0-7879-9634-5

### Selected References

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