

Dr. Reece L. Peterson by Brittany Skosnik

At A Glance

[Reece L. Peterson](#) is an innovator in the field of education. He has published numerous articles concentrating on areas such as school discipline, violence and behavioral interventions. He is a leading advocate researching and endorsing alternatives to seclusion and restraint within the school systems.

Most importantly, Dr. Peterson has a deep interest in policy issues as they pertain to special education and particularly, children with behavioral needs. He currently works as a professor at the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#) in the [Special Education and Communication Disorders](#) department, where he teaches courses on various aspects of special education.

Personal Life

Dr. Peterson grew up in Minnetonka, Minnesota. He is married and has two children, and one grandchild. Dr. Peterson's wife, a former special education teacher, is now an assistant principal. His daughter works in the field as well, which Dr. Peterson jokingly attributes to being in the family "genes" (R. L. Peterson, personal communication, November 11, 2010). In addition to being an esteemed leader on the forefront of special

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education, Dr. Peterson is also a licensed pilot, and takes pleasure in flying his Cessna 182 four-place plane. He and his family enjoy spending their summers at their second home near Elbow Lake.

Education

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in public affairs from the [University of Chicago](#) in 1970, Dr. Peterson went on to receive a Master of Arts in teaching from [Brown University](#) in 1971. He completed his education at the [University of Minnesota-Twin Cities](#) in 1980 with a Ph.D. in special education. While at the [University of Chicago](#), Dr. Peterson had the opportunity to take a class on Freudian psychology, taught by [Dr. Bruno Bettelheim](#). Dr. Bettelheim is known for the controversial concept of "refrigerator parent" as it relates to autism (R.L. Peterson, personal communication, November 11, 2010). The class sparked intrigue in Dr. Peterson, and contributed to his decision to pursue a career in special education.

Looking At Behavior From a Cultural Perspective

An area of interest to Dr. Peterson is the comparative treatment of students from different cultural backgrounds. "The disproportionate racial/ethnic student membership in special education, and the changing demographics of this country have

propelled an examination of the philosophical bases for, and practices involved in, the entire special education process” (Peterson and Ishii-Jordan, 1994). Dr. Peterson, along with his colleague [Dr. Sharon Ishii-Jordan](#), has brought attention to factors supporting a disproportionate number of minority students being categorized in special education, particularly when it comes to behavior disorders. These students could be acting well within the norms of their own cultures yet be perceived as abnormal to the majority of the society in which they live. Conversely, if students exhibit legitimate behavioral concerns cross-culturally, it is important to be aware of differences that may exist in the assessment as well as treatment of these disorders (Peterson and Ishii-Jordan, 1994).

Disparity and Punishment

Similar to his work linking cultural bias to the field of special education, Dr. Peterson has also published several articles addressing school punishment and the discrepancy between white and minority students. He particularly investigates black students as recipients of the “application of harsh discipline” (Skiba and Peterson, 1999) within the school system. Significantly more black students are suspended and expelled than their white counterparts. While other contributing factors, such as socioeconomic status, cannot be ruled out entirely, studies have consistently yielded results reinforcing “discrepancies in school punishment for black and white students” (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002). Dr. Peterson has also gauged punishment from a broader

policy perspective. An example is the effects of drastic policies such as zero tolerance. Since schools began implementing such strategies as a universal treatment of academic and behavioral infractions, both suspension and expulsion rates nationwide have increased (Skiba and Peterson, 1999). The high correlation between suspension rates and subsequent drop-outs has resulted in an alarming trend. Dr. Peterson has thus provided even further insight into the world of punishment. He offers alternatives to suspension including interventions such as counseling, community service, and restitution, as a means of reducing drop-out rates and other deleterious consequences (Peterson, 2005).

Restraint

Furthering his work with multi-cultural students in special education and the adverse effects of certain punitive measures with students, Dr. Peterson has questioned the efficacy of the use of restraint in schools. In an interview conducted by Michael F. Shaughnessy, Senior Columnist for EducationNews.org, Dr. Peterson states:

“Given the problems with the apparent abuse of restraint and seclusion that have been emerging over the past few years in schools across the country, more strict and uniform policy requirements for schools on these topics may be needed”
(Shaughnessy, 2008, p. 8).

His research emphasizes the risk associated with restraint procedures when staff are inadequately trained (Ryan, Robbins, Peterson and Rozalski, 2009). While he does not call for the universal abolishment of all restraint practices, Dr. Peterson does focus on the need for specific statewide policy and adequate staff training. As a result he hopes to reduce the number of senseless injuries and eliminate the deaths that occur when such preventative measures are not taken. His efforts have proven influential as is evidenced by his speaking engagement at a hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor (Anonymous author, 2009).

In Summary

Clearly, Dr. Peterson is an advocate for the fair and safe treatment of all students. His progressive thinking provides us with a framework of potential problems in education, as well as solutions for improvements that are advantageous to all involved. He is an activist for students whose voices may not otherwise be heard. He achieves this not only through research, but also by calling for change from a legal standpoint. His honesty and compassion have earned him national recognition while his work has touched the lives of countless students.

Positions Held

- Professor – [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#)
- Governmental Relations Chair - [Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders](#)
- President – [Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders](#)
- Vice President – [Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders](#)
- Board Member - [Child Guidance Center](#)
- Board Member – [Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders](#)
- Assistant Professor – [Drake University](#)

Recent Journal Publications

- Review of Crisis Intervention Training Programs for Schools (*Teaching Exceptional Children*)
- Council for Children with Behavior Disorders: CCBD's Position Summary on the Use of Physical Restraint Procedures in School Settings (*Behavioral Disorders*)
- State Policies Concerning the Use of Seclusion Timeout in Schools (*Education and Treatment of Children*)
- A Guide to Computer Maintained IEP Record Systems (*Teaching Exceptional Children*).
- IDEA 2004 and Disciplining Students with Disabilities (*National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*)

- Reducing Seclusion, Timeout, and Restraint Procedures with At-Risk Youth (*Journal of At-Risk Issues*)
- A Framework for Planning Safe and Responsive Schools (*Beyond Behavior*)
- Using Office Referral Records in School Violence Research: Possibilities and Limitations (*Journal of School Violence*)
- Beyond Guns, Drugs, and Gangs: The Structure of Student Perceptions of School Safety (*Journal of School Violence*)

Books

- Multicultural Issues in the Education of Students with Behavioral Disorders

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