

Creating Culturally Responsive, Inclusive Classrooms

Winifred Montgomery

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Let's repeat that: ***Culturally responsive classrooms specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform.*** In such programs teachers recognize the differing learning styles of their students and develop instructional approaches that will accommodate these styles. In light of the value of culturally responsive instructional practices, schools and dis-

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tricts need to support teachers in their quest to learn about the use of these strategies (see box, "Our Increasingly Diverse Classrooms"). This article provides guidelines for creating culturally responsive, inclusive classrooms. Teachers can use these guidelines with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in all kinds of classrooms, but particularly in inclusive settings where general and special educators work together to promote the academic, social, and behavioral skills of all students. First, teachers need to take an honest look at their own attitudes and current practice.

Conduct a Self-Assessment

Many teachers are faced with limited understanding of cultures other than their own and the possibility that this limitation will negatively affect their students' ability to become successful learners. Hence, teachers must critically assess their relationships with their students and their understanding of students' cultures (Bromley, 1998; Patton, 1998). The self-assessment in Figure 1, based on the work of Bromley, 1998), is one tool teachers can use to examine their assumptions and biases in a thoughtful and potentially productive way.

Figure 1. Diversity Self-Assessment

- What is my definition of diversity?
- Do the children in my classroom and school come from diverse cultural backgrounds?
- What are my perceptions of students from different racial or ethnic groups? With language or dialects different from mine? With special needs?
- What are the sources of these perceptions (e.g., friends, relatives, television, movies)?
- How do I respond to my students, based on these perceptions?
- Have I experienced others' making assumptions about me based on my membership in a specific group? How did I feel?
- What steps do I need to take to learn about the students from diverse backgrounds in my school and classroom?
- How often do social relationships develop among students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds in my classroom and in the school? What is the nature of these relationships?
- In what ways do I make my instructional program responsive to the needs of the diverse groups in my classroom?
- What kinds of information, skills, and resources do I need to acquire to effectively teach from a multicultural perspective?
- In what ways do I collaborate with other educators, family members, and community groups to address the needs of all my students?

Source: Adapted from Bromley (1998).

Following self-assessment, teachers need to take time to reflect on their responses (what they have learned about themselves) and make some critical decisions regarding ways to constructively embrace diversity and, thus, create learning environments that respond to the needs of their students.

Use a Range of Culturally Sensitive Instructional Methods and Materials

In addition to self-assessment, an important component of effective culturally responsive classrooms is the use of a range of instructional methods and materials (Bromley, 1998). Teachers need to use instructional methods that are tailored to suit the setting, the students, and the subject. By varying and adapting these methods and materials, teachers can increase the chances that their students will succeed. The following are effective culturally sensitive instructional methods.

Explicit, Strategic Instruction

Explicit, strategic instruction shows students what to do, why, how, and when. An effective strategy is the think-aloud method, a procedure that takes advantage of the benefits of modeling. In a “think-aloud,” the teacher reads a passage and talks through the thought processes for students. The objective is to show students how to ask themselves questions as they comprehend text.

Another important strategy is reciprocal questioning where teachers and students engage in shared reading, discussion, and questioning (Leu & Kinzer, 1999). The primary goal of this strategy is to help students learn to ask questions of themselves about the meaning they are constructing as they read.

Interdisciplinary Units

Interdisciplinary units include and connect content area learning with language arts and culturally diverse literature (Cooper, 2000; Leu & Kinzer, 1999). Many effective classrooms are organized around an interdisciplinary, or cross-curricular, theme with students participating in meaningful reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks as they explore the theme through a vari-

Our Increasingly Diverse Classrooms

For many reasons, U.S. schools are serving a growing number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Obiakor & Utley, 1997; Salend, 2001). In fact, the student population in the United States is growing fastest in those segments with which American education has traditionally been least successful—African Americans and Hispanics.

- **Special Education Overrepresentation.** A disproportionate number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are inappropriately referred to and placed in special education (Yates, 1998). Data from the Office of Civil Rights reveal that African-American and Hispanic-American students, particularly males, are overrepresented in terms of their identification in the disability categories of serious emotional disturbance and mental retardation (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999). These data also indicate that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds identified as needing special education services are more likely to be provided these services in more restrictive settings than their caucasian counterparts.
- **The Negative Effects of Tracking.** The overrepresentation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education can have a negative effect on students and their school performance because it places them in a separate and unequal track that denies them access to the general education curriculum. In addition, once placed in special education classes, these students often encounter lowered teacher expectations, a watered down curriculum, and less effective instruction that can have deleterious effects on their school performance, self-esteem, behavior, education and career goals, and motivation to achieve (Nieto, 1996). As a result, these students often do not return to general education placements and frequently leave school before graduating.
- **Need for Culturally Responsive Instruction.** Though several factors contribute to the disproportional representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education (Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997), one important factor is the failure of general education teachers to use culturally responsive instructional practices that address their educational, social, and cultural needs (Smith, Finn, & Dowdy, 1993).

ety of activities and books. The topic can be drawn from children’s lives and interests and sometimes from the curriculum. Teachers can help their students successfully engage in cross-curricular activities by demonstrating how to make connections across the curriculum through literature, by making explicit connections among books, and by helping them recall how previous activities and experiences relate to current studies.

Instructional Scaffolding

Instructional scaffolding involves the use of teacher demonstration and the modeling of strategies that students need to be successful with content area texts (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997; Leu & Kinzer, 1999). In scaffolded instruction, teachers determine the dif-

ference between what students can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with instructional support. Teachers then design instruction that provides just enough scaffolding for students to be able to participate in tasks that currently are beyond their reach. Over time, as the tasks become more under the control of the learner,

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the teacher can introduce more difficult tasks.

Journal Writing

Journal writing provides opportunities for students to share their personal understanding regarding a range of literature in various cultural contexts that inform, clarify, explain, or educate them about our culturally diverse society (Montgomery, in press). For example, character study journals permit students to make their own personal connections with a specific character as they read the story. Students develop their own insight into the characters and the events in the story, and they are given the independence to write what they want about the character. The teacher provides time for students to share their journal writings in small cooperative learning groups, with their teachers, with their tutor(s), or with a reading buddy.

Explicit, strategic instruction shows students what to do, why, how, and when.

Open-Ended Projects

Open-ended projects allow students to contribute at their varying levels of ability. Such projects work well with diverse learners because they need not start or finish at the same time. Students can explore a topic of interest drawn from their readings of culturally rich literature or a content area topic they are currently studying. They may choose to write reports or prepare oral presentations and create artwork to illustrate some of the major concepts embedded in their topic. Goforth (1998) suggests a project in which interested students make artifacts such as dolls or “story cloths” representing an ethnic or cultural group. They may also want to write stories or poems about their artifacts.

Establish a Classroom Atmosphere That Respects Individuals and Their Cultures

Teachers can enhance students’ self-esteem when they construct learning environments that reflect the cultural membership in the class. This strategy goes beyond wall decoration to atmosphere: Teachers must attend to all students and try to involve them equally in all class activities. This recognition gives students a positive feeling about their worth as individuals and as pro-

Culturally Complex Atmosphere

Creating a *book corner* that appeals to all children can be a challenge for the teacher. The Internet has become an excellent resource for the kind of quality literature that will introduce children to other cultural contexts. Teachers will find valuable links to appropriate children’s literature that will help their students appreciate and begin to understand the range of human experiences and cultural backgrounds.

- The Web site *Multicultural Resources* provides articles, reviews, and literature selections organized around specific cultural groups (<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/multipub.html>).
- An excellent Web resource for children’s literature that addresses cultural differences is *The Children’s Literature Web Guide* (<http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/lists.html>)
- *The Reading Zone of the Internet Public Library* (<http://www.ipl.org/youth/lapage.html>) is a central site that is useful for teachers and students.

ductive members in their classroom. Some strategies to accomplish a positive classroom atmosphere include:

- *Current and relevant bulletin boards* that display positive and purposeful activities and events involving culturally diverse people. Include, for example, newspaper articles (local and national) reporting newsworthy events or accomplishments that involve people of color, photographs of community leaders from culturally diverse backgrounds, student-made posters depicting culturally relevant historical events, and original (student-written) stories and poems with culturally diverse themes.
- A *book corner* with a variety and range of culturally diverse literature, fiction and nonfiction (see box, “Culturally Complex Atmosphere”).

The books that are chosen must also deal fairly with disabilities and special needs. The characters should be integrated naturally into the story and not depicted as anomalies or peculiarities in society (Russell, 1994).

- *Cross-cultural literature discussion groups* in which students discuss quality fiction and nonfiction literature that authentically depicts members of diverse cultural groups. Discussion groups help all students feel pride in themselves and in their culture when they see their backgrounds valued in classroom reading and study activities. In small groups, students can read a single work of literature on their own, follow the experiences of a particular character and his or her problems, form opinions about a specific issue put forward in the text, or respond to a significant event that occurred during the character's life (Montgomery, 2000). For example, the content and characterizations in culturally diverse books such as *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), *Local News* (Soto, 1993), *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994), *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995) and *Black Cowboys, Wild Horses* (Lester & Pinkney, 1998) can stimulate greater interest in reading and in reading to learn.
- *Language arts and social studies programs* provide opportunities for students to share written and oral reports pertaining to their heritage and cultural traditions. Teachers can introduce thematic units that offer excellent opportunities for children to explore a range (in terms of readability) of different forms of literature that look intensively into a single cultural or ethnic experience (Leu & Kinzer, 1999). If learners are to be successful in understanding cultural traditions, trade books must be available in the classroom and in the school library to support these strategies.

Foster an Interactive Classroom Learning Environment

Students must have opportunities to interact with each other—to engage in shared inquiry and discovery—in their

efforts to solve problems and complete tasks. The following are suggested activities for interactive engagement in the learning process:

- *Cooperative learning groups.* Cooperative groups bring students together within a variety of supportive and collaborative learning activities. The use of this kind of learning group allows all children to see the benefits of bringing together people with diverse backgrounds for problem-solving tasks. They use listening, speaking, reading, and writing together to achieve common goals and in the process become accountable since their performance affects group outcomes. They become active language users and learn to respect each other's opinions (Bromley, 1998). For example, the I-Search Strategy (Leu & Kinzer, 1999) is an interdisciplinary, student-centered inquiry process that emphasizes participation and sharing of research findings in small cooperative learning groups, as well as in whole-group settings. To implement this strategy, children choose a motivating theme; with the teacher's assistance, they formulate their own research plans; next, they follow and revise their plans as they gather information, and then they prepare papers, posters, or presentations using computer software, or they prepare oral reports.
- *Guided and informal group discussions.* Informal discussions provide opportunities for able students and less able students to collaborate in constructing meaning from text and enable them to learn from each other by sharing their reflections, opinions, interpretations, and questions. The teacher models discussion techniques and guides the students through early discussion sessions. As students develop their discussion skills and begin to feel comfortable talking about story content and their opinions, they will begin to try out ideas without worrying about being wrong or sounding as if they do not understand the story.
- *The Internet.* On the Web, children can experience exciting cultural exchanges. Keypals (see box) is the

Keypals

The Internet expands the appeal of pen pal activities in the classroom. A great site for Keypal contacts is:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc>

At this site, intercultural *E-Mail Classroom Connections*, teachers will find a good source for developing keypals from different countries. There are several mailing lists for teachers looking for partner classrooms. Teachers can subscribe directly from this Web page.

online equivalent of pen pals. It is an e-mail activity that may be particularly beneficial to second-language learners because the students are able to communicate in their native language with children from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, important friendships can develop among *all* students as they find out about life in another part of the world, share useful Web sites, and even help one another with homework (Leu & Kinzer, 1999).

Employ Ongoing and Culturally Aware Assessments

In culturally responsive classrooms, teachers employ ongoing and systematic assessment of student abilities, interests, attitudes, and social skills. This information provides a basis for instructional decision making and offers

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insights into what to teach and how to teach. In addition, there is an emphasis on student involvement in the assessment process. When students are permitted to participate in their assessment, they are able to reflect on their own progress and offer insights that adults may not have. Examples of culturally sensitive assessment include the following:

- *Daily observation of students' social and learning behaviors in all classroom situations.* Observations can be recorded on checklists, in notebooks, on file cards, or in any way that permits the teacher to summarize observations in a consistent and meaningful way. For example, the class roster can be used as a convenient recording form for observations. The teacher lists the names of the students in the class and then heads subsequent columns across the top of the roster to identify the project, activity, or behavior that is observed.
- *Portfolio assessment.* Student and teacher select samples of work that reveal the diverse needs and abilities of the student. Teachers, students, and family members reflect on what

Through the Internet, second-language learners may communicate in their native language with children from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

students have done over time, how well they are doing, and what areas need to be improved.

- *Teacher-made tests that are closely tied to the instructional program.* Special attention is given to the cognitive styles of all the students and their evolving academic skills. For example, teachers can design a test to assess students' knowledge or performance within a particular content area lesson.
- *Student self-assessment.* Students can respond to questions about their learning during periodic teacher/student conferences. Portfolios can be used during these conferences. For example, students can be shown their work, discuss it with their teachers, and then assess their own progress.
- *Teacher self-evaluation.* Self-evaluation is an integral part of teaching effectiveness. The kinds of questions teachers ask themselves about their choices of teaching behaviors and strategies, the effectiveness and cultural relevance of their lessons, and their reactions and responses to the cultural diversity in their classrooms can greatly contribute to continuing growth in teaching and learning.

Collaborate with Other Professionals and Families

Collaboration and communication with culturally diverse families and with other professionals are essential elements of culturally responsive classrooms. Families are a critical component of a strong instructional program and should be regularly informed about students' progress and encouraged to participate in class and school activities whenever possible. It is also important to establish strong collaborative relationships with colleagues to develop instructional programs that broaden the learning opportunities of all students. The following are specific collaborative activities that teachers and families might use:

- *Consult and share ideas regularly with other teachers with whom students work.* Meet with teachers to discuss students' academic and social progress, as well as specific learning needs.

Send newsletters to all families providing an overview of culturally responsive curriculum goals, classroom activities, and selected student-written stories and poems.

- *Communicate regularly with families.* For example, send newsletters to all families providing an overview of culturally responsive curriculum goals, classroom activities, and selected student-written stories and poems.
- *Invite families to participate in classroom cultural celebrations and to assist in planning such events.* Encourage culturally diverse families to visit the classroom to learn what occurs in the learning environment and to see how well their children are doing—academically and socially.
- *Initiate a parent volunteer tutorial program.*
- *Use culturally diverse community resources.* Invite to your classroom culturally diverse civic leaders, business leaders, artists and writers, members of the police and fire department, college professors, and academically successful high school students.
- *Attend culturally diverse community or neighborhood events.*

Final Thoughts

Of primary importance in any culturally responsive classroom is the teacher's belief that children from culturally diverse backgrounds want to learn. Second, instructional strategies and specific teaching behaviors can encourage all students to engage in learning activities that will lead to improved academic achievement. Third, the development of instructional programs that prevent failure and increase opportunities for success should be the goal of every teacher. The strategies delineated in this article can become important ways of

Learn More About It

The following resources can help teachers evaluate the results of self-assessment.

Books

Au, K. (1993). *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Garcia, E. (1994). *Understanding and meeting the challenge of student cultural diversity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Journal Articles

Montgomery, W. (2000). Literature discussion in the elementary school classroom. *Multicultural Education*, 8(1), 33-36.

Nieto, S. (1994). Lessons from students on creating a chance to dream. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64, 392-426.

Web Sites

Cultural Diversity in the Classroom (<http://education.indiana.edu/cas/tt/v2i2/cultural.html>)

ERIC Digests on Cultural Diversity (<http://www.uncg.edu/edu/ericass/diverse/digests/tableoc.htm>)

helping all children find purpose, pride, and success in their daily efforts to learn.

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BooksNow

To order the book marked by an asterisk (), please call 24 hrs/365 days: 1-800-BOOKS-NOW (266-5766) or (732) 728-1040; or visit them on the Web at <http://www.BooksNow.com/TeachingExceptional.htm>. Use VISA, M/C, AMEX, or Discover or send check or money order + \$4.95 S&H (\$2.50 each add'l item) to: Clicksmart, 400 Morris Avenue, Long Branch, NJ 07740; (732) 728-1040 or FAX (732) 728-7080.

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