

Creating a Multi-Cultural, Student-Centered Classroom

Lee Ann McNERney, Eastern Oregon University
Hiromi Beppu, Nyssa Elementary School

The population of United States is among the most diverse in the world. However, the majority of K-12 teachers in the U.S. are relatively homogeneous: of European descent, female, native English speakers, and middle-class. According to 2004-2005 school data, about twenty-seven percent of students in the average Oregon K-12 classroom were from minority groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) and eleven percent had a language other than English as their first language (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2005). The number of teachers in Oregon who represent minorities is much smaller. In the Portland School District, with about a 40% minority population, only about 12% of teachers are themselves members of minority groups (Murphy, 2005).

Since so few teachers are themselves members of minority groups, many teachers in the United States are left unprepared to deal with language and cultural barriers that can lead to high student attrition rates, boredom, and non-engagement in the classroom. To prevent these problems, effective instructional strategies must be derived from the cultures of all students and their families, not just those of the teachers or dominant group.

Current Challenges

K-12 teachers face many challenges in dealing with both newly arrived and second-generation immigrant students who lack mastery not only of English, but possibly also of their own native spoken and written language. In addition to a language barrier, students face socio-cultural barriers as seen in school curriculums that reflect the culture and

values of the dominant society and largely ignore or denigrate students' ethnic backgrounds (Gollnick and Chinn, 2006).

For example, many schools have set aside the month of February to celebrate black history. Although this may be a helpful strategy for learning about a specific ethnic group, it often precludes the integration of contributions and experiences of African-Americans and other ethnic groups into the regular curriculum the rest of the year. The learning advantage in these cases goes to the students of the dominant group because school curriculum is almost always centered on their culture (Gollnick and Chinn, p. 103).

In addition to this culturally-biased curriculum, traditional teaching practices favor Western beliefs about individualism and competition.

Being culturally responsive pedagogically is important for all teachers, yet the current curriculum used in U.S. schools supports the superiority of Western thought over all others and provides minimal or no introduction to the non-Western cultures of Asia, Africa, and South and Central America (Gollnick and Chinn, 2006). A high percentage of many students who belong to different ethnic groups, especially Hispanic students, drop out every year because the curriculum is boring to them and they do not identify with it (Nieto, 2006).

In addition to this culturally-biased curriculum, traditional teaching practices favor Western beliefs about individualism and competition. We still observe math teachers sitting at the front of the room, assigning a math problem, and asking students to work on the problem for the rest of the class period (Freeman and Freeman, 1998). Reading teachers often have students sit quietly reading a book for the entire class period and then answer questions at the end of the

summary without any interaction with the teacher or other students. Schools need to provide environments in which students can learn to participate in the dominant society while maintaining connections to their distinct ethnicities if they choose. Respect for and support of ethnic differences will be essential for all teachers in this effort.

This article will describe how teachers can better understand cultural differences and their own biases, adapt lessons using students' own prior learning experiences, use non-traditional assessment tools, and involve parents to create a successful multi-cultural, student-centered classroom. Doing so not only benefits minority student groups but also opens teachers and the dominant group's minds to a whole new world—one in which all people and their cultures are valued.

Understanding Student Differences

Many in-service and pre-service teachers are aware of individual differences in learning style. However, according to Cho and DeCastro-Ambresetti, many pre-service teachers expressed a sense of being ill-equipped to teach students from diverse backgrounds (2005). One reason, according to Cho and DeCastro-Ambresetti, is that many students from different cultural backgrounds are stereotyped as “failures” or “trouble makers” because of high dropout rates.

Throughout our research on how to help teachers be more pedagogically responsive, we discovered that many have stereotypical beliefs about students from different cultural backgrounds, such as: African American students don't learn as well as white students; Hispanic parents do not value education; or Asian students do not participate in classroom discussions. While many teachers understand and respect different learning styles in individual students, they also need to be aware that “students have different areas of talent and difficulty, different priority experiences, interests and goals” (Knapp, 2005, p. 202).

Here are some examples of typical U.S. classroom values that may or may not be shared by students and their parents from different backgrounds:

Independence: Teachers from the dominant culture in the U.S. value and promote

student independence, while students from other backgrounds might place greater importance on both cooperation and interdependence.

Public praise: Many teachers from mainstream culture over-praise to build their students' self-esteem, while some students from different backgrounds might not be comfortable receiving praise in public.

Oral expression: Many educators in this country believe that students must express themselves, always engage in class discussions and use critical thinking skills. Some parents from different cultural backgrounds might think quiet students learn more and are more respectful than the ones who speak up (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003).

While these examples are very broad generalizations, they underscore the importance for teachers to understand and accept the cultural differences in their students before pointing out students' misbehavior, under-achievement, or spoken and written errors in English. Teachers need to remember that something that seems important and acceptable to them may not be so to a student from a different cultural background. According to Bae and Clark, “The language and culture of different ethnic groups is unique, and educators should respond to that uniqueness with mutual respect” (2005, p. 49).

Multicultural Adaptations of Lessons

According to Krashen and Terrell (2000), one of the ways teachers break down barriers in the classroom is by lowering the affective filter, making students more comfortable and less intimidated. Teachers can do this by creating lessons that match students' ways of learning and communication and give students opportunities to affirm and honor their own culture (Black, 2006). According to Gollnick and Chinn, “A multiethnic curriculum permeates all subject areas at all levels of education, from pre-school through adult education” (2006, p. 107).

Classroom learning that is integrated, interdisciplinary, and student-centered should give students choices in how they will study and learn. By creating lessons that reflect students' cultures, teachers are

able to help students from different backgrounds improve their self-esteem, academic skills, values, and positive identity with their ethnic group. On the other hand, “if children receive negative feedback about how they look (race, appearance), how they behave (gender, culture), and how they demonstrate competence (ability, age), then it will be extremely difficult for them to feel positive about anyone else” (Hall, 1995, p. 2).

Teachers also need to be aware of both the academic and language needs of their students in their lessons. If a teacher is teaching math or science to English language learners, depending on the students’ English proficiency and their academic preparation, the teacher will focus more on either language or the academic subject. In every situation, the teacher must be aware that he or she is teaching both academic content and language. To engage students, teachers must give them meaningful, purposeful, comprehensible, and interesting content. If the students understand the concepts they are taught, teachers need not point out small errors in their English.

What is important is that all students be given equal opportunities to share their thoughts, experiences, and interests comfortably in the classroom. Research has shown that cooperative learning, which involves student participation in small-group learning activities that promote positive interactions, can be effective for students with different learning styles and at all academic levels. Real learning occurs when students are given meaningful tasks that attract and hold their interest and give them the opportunity to work cooperatively and collaboratively with peers from all walks of life.

Assessment in the Multicultural Classroom

Assessment can help teachers understand what students know so that curriculum and classroom activities can be designed to increase their knowledge and skills, rather than sort students by levels of academic achievement. Teachers should be aware of cultural and language bias and not rely on test scores as the only indication of students’ intelligence and academic potential. Gollnick and Chinn strongly assert that “traditional multiple-choice tests should be replaced by performance assessment” (2006, p. 110).

These alternative assessments use observations, portfolios, and projects in different ways to demonstrate what students know. When appropriate, teachers should provide students from different cultural backgrounds with extra time, a paraprofessional or translator, or picture cues, while removing elements that reflect cultural bias. Moreover, teachers may want to allow their students from differing linguistic backgrounds to use their first language if necessary.

Parental Involvement

Some teachers are afraid of being rejected by minority students and their parents due to ethnic differences. “Their parents might not accept me because I don’t know about their culture” (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005, p. 27). This common fear is created by having limited exposure to and experience in dealing with people from different backgrounds. To combat such fears, teachers should try to empathize with minority students and their families.

Teachers can “take time to imagine what it feels like to be one of a few African-American or Chinese in a white class” (Molland, 2004, p. 24), for example. By doing so, teachers can develop and maintain a positive perspective on culturally diverse students and their families, and as a result, feel more confident in meetings with parents to discuss hopes and aspirations for their child, what their child needs to succeed, and ways the school can help their child.

A teacher can communicate with parents in many ways, such as with newsletters, conferences, or home visits. If a teacher is not able to communicate with parents who have limited English competency, or parents do not feel comfortable with the parent-teacher conference, he/she can invite them to school for more public events. For example, cultural festivals with food and dance representing different countries might be a great tool for teachers to bring in hesitant parents.

A teacher can also ask parents to help create bulletin boards with pictures or artifacts from different cultures and celebrate all the diverse families within the community. It is important for teachers to remember that “parents or community members from diverse cultural backgrounds or who have different cultural experiences can share valuable information

with them and their students, fostering better mutual understanding” (Bae & Clark, 2005, p. 50). By doing so, teachers can “engage parents as resources in multicultural projects so that they feel they are part of the solution” (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003, p. 261) and give them a feeling of entitlement and empowerment. As education is team work, teachers should invite individual parents as well as community members to promote genuine understanding of their “real-life.”

Teacher Experiences

Creating a student-centered classroom is one of the most important keys to creating a successful learning environment where diverse groups of students are fully engaged. As each child’s interests, strengths, and prior experiences are different, a teacher needs to prepare lessons that leave some flexibility for students to choose what interests them and the manner in which they will study and learn a topic. According to Gollnick and Chinn, this is one of the best ways to make subject matter more interesting for multicultural students.

Sarah, a pre-service teacher who worked in a multicultural setting, said, “I mostly worked with students from Mexico and they enjoyed reading different culture books.” Amanda also found reading and discussing stories from different cultures to be very effective in getting students interested in the curriculum and engaged in schoolwork:

When I did a unit on persuasion with my 8th grade mainstream and two ESOL students, I started off with a chapter “Inside Out” by Francisco Jimenez. I used the content of the chapter as a springboard to discuss whether or not languages other than English should be allowed in schools. Then I led students on to writing a persuasive letter about something in their school or community. Readings that represent multicultural settings help to show the students a better overall picture of the community rather than just their culture. Through this brief chapter they saw a glimpse into Francisco’s life.

I initially chose this selection with two Spanish speaking ESL students in mind. We read the chapter in English with the whole class. I thought it was a great opportunity to represent a piece of their culture into the curriculum. These students were in one of the four eighth grade classes. However, after I was surprised at how well students responded to the text and made connections between the culture in the chapter and to their own lives. It even went better than I expected. The class that got into the discussion about the English Only topic the most was not even the class with the ESL students. Students in another block drew out a vast amount of prior experiences that I never would have imagined. They were able to share their thoughts in order to

make connections between the mainstream culture and the culture in the book and relate it back to the topic of discussion.

In the same class we started off the year with a book called Seedfolks that represented a wide variety of cultures living together with a common connection. In a different unit, the students had to examine different myths, legends, folk tales and fables with a variety of themes. This naturally brought up how different cultures view common topics. Multiculturalism was integrated into the class in a variety of ways such as these. Some were subtle, whereas in others we talked about culture in a more concrete manner.

It is easy for teachers to expect autonomy in the classroom because the majority are part of the dominant group. They may lack exposure to minorities and have unrecognized biases in their teaching. Self-monitoring helps teachers work with their students and become more aware of their own prejudices. Also, teachers need to be cognizant of the potential to fall back into the dominant culture’s ways. By remaining aware, teachers can better help all students from different cultural backgrounds.

alternative assessments use observations, portfolios, and projects in different ways to demonstrate what students know

Conclusion

Many teachers do not know how to work with multicultural students in their classrooms. We still see teachers practicing traditional methods and holding onto stereotypes that have a negative effect on students' success. For teachers to break down stereotypes, they should look at students not only as being from different cultures, but also as individuals with different learning styles. It is important to bring students' prior background knowledge and experiences into lessons and cooperative learning activities so that they feel engaged and interested in what is being taught. Students must also be in an environment where they feel safe and are able to express themselves with ease. Portfolios, observations, projects and other accommodations will be better indicators of student achievement than standardized tests.

Including parents in school activities is vitally important because parents want to see their children succeed in school and to be part of that success. Parents can be a valuable resource for the teacher and students. Finally, teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices in order to see if they are treating the students fairly and meeting their students' individual needs. All of these tactics can help teachers to be more effective and feel more comfortable in multicultural classrooms. By making learning experiences student-centered and relative to students from all backgrounds, teachers create a learning experience that will benefit all students.

References

- Bae, S. J., & Clark, G. M. (2005). Incorporate diversity awareness in the classroom: What teachers can do. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 41*, 49-51.
- Black, S. (2006). Respecting differences. *American School Board Journal, 193*(1), 34-36.
- Cho, G., & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, D. (2005). Is ignorance bliss? Pre-service teachers' attitudes toward multicultural education. *The University of North Carolina Press, 24-25*.
- Escobar-Ortloff, L. M., & Ortloff, W. G. (2003). A cultural challenge for school administrator. *Intercultural Education, 14*(3), 255-261.

- Freeman, Y. S. & Freeman, D. E. (1998). *Multiculturalism in a Pluralistic Society*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Peterson Education.
- Gollnick, D. M., & Chinn, P. C. (2006). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society* (6th Ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Hall, N. S. (1995). *Creative resources for the anti-bias classroom*. New York: Delmar.
- Knapp, N. F. (2005). "They're not all like me!" The role of educational psychology in preparing teachers for diversity. *Clearing House, 78*(5), 202-205.
- Krashen, S. D. & Terrell, T. D. (2000). *The Natural Approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. Essex, England: Pearson Education.
- Molland, J. (2004). We're all welcome here. *Instructor, 114*(3), 22-26.
- Murphy, T. (2005). Minority Report. *Portland Tribune*, June 17. Retrieved from http://www.portlandtribune.com/news/story.php?story_id=30458 on November 25, 2006.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). Data retrieved from Common Core of Data at <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/> on November 25, 2006.
- Office of English Language Acquisition. (2006). Oregon rate of LEP growth 1994/1995-2004/2005. Retrieved from <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/policy/states/reports/statedata/2004LEP/Oregon-G-05.pdf> on November 25, 2006.
- Neito, S. (2006). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Lee Ann McNerney is currently an Assistant Professor of Education at Eastern Oregon University. She also is the coordinator for the English as a Second Language Program. Her main research interests include studying marginalized and multicultural populations.

Hiromi Beppu moved from Japan to the United States in 2003 to attend Eastern Oregon University and now is student teaching in Nyssa Elementary in Oregon. She wants children and all adults, especially teachers, to be aware of cultural differences around the world.