

## Making Classrooms Culturally Sensitive

Robert C. Morris and Nancy G. Mims

Department of Educational Leadership and Professional Studies  
State University of West

Everywhere teachers are attempting to make their classrooms more "culturally sensitive" and to create lesson plans that are rich with information about the diversity in their community. These efforts by teachers to be more sensitive and consciously aware of the different backgrounds of their students and community members are becoming the norm rather than the exception. Interestingly, there are no real guidelines or set programs for today's teachers on how to develop cultural awareness in their classrooms and at the same time teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Can teachers realistically be expected to meet the different learning and instructional needs of their students while at the same time help them to become better members of our ever-changing society? There are as many different variations and answers to that question as there are people asking it, but a general consensus of insight points toward increased awareness and sensitivity.

As educators take a closer look at what encompasses awareness and sensitivity of diversity and cultural ethnicity, they need to understand just what is involved in multiethnic education. For many it's learning about oneself as well as understanding the next-door neighbors who may be different in culture, age, abilities, or even spoken language. Where then is the beginning point for most teachers as they struggle to understand, interact with, and utilize those diverse populations and cultures within their communities? Essentially, *one begins by becoming sensitive and appreciative of individual differences, without becoming judgmental* (Diaz, 1993).

It is felt by many that as American schools and educators become more and more sensitive to the diversity of their community, their students can be guided to appreciate and respect these differences and to coexist peacefully. Various combinations of cultures such as African-Americans, Irish and German-Americans, Hispanics, Chinese-Americans to name a few, are learning how to work and live together while maintaining their own cultural heritage. The students of today who embrace their cultural heritage are trying to keep the values of their parents and grandparents, and still fit in with the students and cultures surrounding them. This dual search often confuses students and causes anxiety as they seek their own identity but attempt to live with other cultures. School systems and individual schools themselves can be extremely powerful agents in this process by providing insights to difficult cultural questions and issues facing students. Of course, a diverse school faculty can help by

modeling behaviors that encourage classrooms to be settings where differences can be observed and studied. These same classrooms can help students begin to share, respect, and learn how to work with others. But it all starts by discovering and acknowledging individual and cultural differences and then by focusing on those things common to the group. To get a better picture classrooms that strive to be sensitive and aware four steps/stages for investigating cultural differences in classrooms have been developed and will now be discussed.

### *Four Steps Toward Creating Culturally Sensitive Classrooms*

#### *Step One: Creating a Multicultural Climate in the Classroom*

When teachers decide to make their classrooms culturally sensitive, where do they systematically begin? First, for multicultural education to be effective, it must be used throughout the various subject areas or programs of study. This may in effect require modification in attitudes and teaching strategies. But, this is the most important step for a teacher as he/she comes to realize (or buys into) the importance of promoting such learning. Multicultural awareness may be taught in all academic areas of the school's curriculum, however it fits nicely into: language arts, math, social studies, geography and science (Spann, 1992). *Once of the most important things for a teacher to be able to do is to recognize a teachable multicultural moment when it is encountered.* This may happen when reading and studying about different countries, or when interesting facts in science are discussed, or when mathematical terminology differs and language study helps students to understand cultural changes. But taking advantage of the "moment" a teacher can punctuate the relevance and importance of an event or activity.

In this same vein of thinking, teachers should surround students with a classroom that reflects the diversity of their world. Leave the world map unrolled, so students can see it. Students should be encouraged to study maps and investigate those places and cultures that interest them. The use of pictures, posters and displays that reflect a variety of people, places, and customs often promotes questions and discussions. Learning centers with multicultural activities containing folk storybooks and different artifacts from around the world and perhaps brought from home, will generate interest and discussion. This is especially true when students bring items from their own cultural background; it enhances self-esteem and makes them proud of their own history.

Table #1  
A Teacher Checklist\*

*Classroom Setup*

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 1. Do bulletin boards include pictures of people from different cultures involved in various occupations, games, celebrations, and so on?                                                                                                                                   | Yes | No |
| 2. Are my students' desks or work areas to encourage interaction? My student groups include members of both sexes as well as members of different cultures?                                                                                                                 | Yes | No |
| 3. Do my students have a place, such as a cubby or locker, where they can display their cultural identity through pictures or other special items from home?                                                                                                                | Yes | No |
| 4. Does my classroom library include books about people from a variety of cultures? Does it include magazines for specific cultures as well as magazines that reflect a diversity of cultures?                                                                              | Yes | No |
| 5. Does my classroom record and tape collection feature music from many cultures and countries?                                                                                                                                                                             | Yes | No |
| 6. Do my art supplies include paint and paper that the children can use to represent a variety of skin colors and tones, including their own?                                                                                                                               | Yes | No |
| 7. For younger children I provide traditional and contemporary clothing from different cultures to use during dress-up play. Objects that are a part of daily life in various cultures, such as a wok or rice bowl, are among the items available for use in dramatic play. | Yes | No |

*Lessons and Activities*

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |     |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 1. I integrate information about different cultures when I teach other subjects, rather than limiting such content to multicultural units or holiday celebrations.                                                                                                                       | Yes | No |
| 2. During discussions, I help my students focus on the similarities among peoples. I explain differences in a positive way that will deepen the children's understanding and appreciation of other cultures.                                                                             | Yes | No |
| 3. I regularly read aloud to my students from stories and picture books that accurately portray different cultures and diverse family groups.                                                                                                                                            | Yes | No |
| 4. I plan field trips during which the children see people from different cultures at work in a variety of professions.                                                                                                                                                                  | Yes | No |
| 5. I invite members of different cultural groups to visit and talk with my students. When possible, the guest speakers sing or read in their native language for the children.                                                                                                           | Yes | No |
| 6. I encourage parents to participate in classroom activities on an ongoing basis. I provide opportunities for them to direct special cooking or craft projects, prepare ethnic dishes for the children to sample, or teach the children the names of common objects in other languages. | Yes | No |

\*Chart adapted from Peel, et al., (1994). Test Your Cultural Sensitivity Quotient. *Learning*, March, pp. 54-55.

Teachers should locate and use all the resources in their community that deal with different cultures. Since parents are the best source of family history, creating a questionnaire for parents can assist in finding out more about available human resources. Parents can then be invited to share their family heritage with the class. It is also important, when ordering supplies, to include multi-colored crayons, paints and paper in all the true-to-life skin tones. Observations about school demographics can also help teachers become sensitive to the different cultures that are all around them and their students (Spann, 1992). To check your own cultural sensitivity, consider the questionnaire found in Table 1 (Peel, 1994).

#### *Step Two: Involving Students*

Teachers should introduce their students to multicultural studies in a way that will make them eager to learn about each other's heritages. Depending on the grade level being taught, this activity can be as simple as learning about their own family backgrounds or doing an in-depth study of different cultures around the world. The term "multicultural education" of course, means different things to different people, and it assumes different purposes in different contexts. In some areas or regions it may mean trying to foster pride and self-esteem in minority students. In other areas, it may mean learning to appreciate various cultures within the United States and abroad (Ryan, 1994). Teachers must be careful not to use racial and ethnic stereotypes and realize that there is more than one way to view and understand an event. By understanding how they are part of a social network, not just ethnic or racial ones, students can turn their experiences and distinct individualities into positive involvement.

#### *Step Three: Making a Place for ESOL Students*

Students who come from homes where English is not the primary language are often placed in English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes. In these classes, students receive extra help in learning English and to ease communication in a new language. The hope is that as these students will begin to understand language patterns and idiomatic expressions, and hopefully they will begin to feel at ease in their new school. According to Mohr (1994), there are five activities or areas that teachers can focus on to facilitate ESOL student learning. They include:

##### 1. Procedures and Course Organization

Teachers of ESOL students can give their students a clearly written class expectation list along with a calendar of events. For middle school and high school students, state mandates and requirements can be clearly stated at the beginning of the class. This will help students comprehend and plan their work. The key here is to try and focus on the *critical concepts of course content* during the beginning of the course.

##### 2. Language Acquisition and Development

When possible arrange class seating so that the ESOL students are close to, or at the front of the class. Also, when possible, allow these students to write answers to questions rather than giving oral answers. Next, write new vocabulary words on the board rather than just giving them orally. Be willing to repeat explanations in private to ensure they are understood. Teachers must be sure to be good models of English by not using dialect or slang in class. Try to avoid talking too fast, too softly, or in monotone while writing on the board.

##### 3. Adjustments to the Culture and Educational System

Allow enough time for the ESOL students to get used to their new school. Do not label these new students or assume, for example, that all Spanish-speaking students are from Mexico or that all Asians are alike and speak the same language.

##### 4. Communication and Interaction Needs

Increase communication with families of ESOL students. Schedule conferences to talk with the parents [be sure to arrange for an interpreter if necessary]. Some students may *believe* that everything is okay when it isn't or they may not feel they have the right to ask their teacher questions. Use the conference to learn how to communicate to help the ESOL student, not to criticize. Encourage students to take full advantage of all help available. Help upper grade students mentor other students who speak the same language. Additionally, English speaking students may learn another language from helping ESOL students. Changing group membership can allow all students to work with everyone. This will assist ESOL students with their interactions with the others. They will also learn, by observing others, when to speak out, how to whisper, how to work in small groups, and how to give answers.

##### 5. Evaluation Policies

Explain test-taking procedures to all new students. They may feel that multiple choice questions are just guessing games, or they may have no idea what to do with true-false or matching tests. Teachers need to explain how to take these different kinds of tests and what is the objective of each type of test. Interestingly, in some countries, group exams are the norm and groups are often more important than individuals. Finally, the teacher needs to be the person who grades the ESOL students' papers because the teacher him or herself will be the most able to evaluate and assess the ESOL student's responses.

#### *Step Four: Creating a Culturally Correct Literature List*

One of the best tools a teacher can have is a comprehensive list of multiethnic authors and books that can be used in all areas of classroom instruction: math, social studies and science. Books should be chosen that not only focus on peoples' differences but also on their similarities. The

following is a checklist of some of the good primary authors who write about their cultures:

<i>African-American</i>	<i>Mexican &amp; Mexican American</i>
Ashley Bryan	George Ancona
Jeannette Caines	Carmen Lomas Garza
Donald Crews	Alma Flor Ada
Pat Cummings	Jorge Maestr
Nikki Giovanni	Patricia DeGarza
Jan Spivey Gilchrist	
Julius Lester	<i>Japanese &amp; Japanese American</i>
Walter Dean Myers	Mitsumasa Anno
Valerie Flouroly	Taro Yashima
Faith Ringgold	Satomi Ichikawa
Patricia McKissack	Allen Say
James Ransome	Yoshiko Uchida
	Fumiko Takeshita
<i>Native American</i>	<i>Chinese &amp; Chinese-American</i>
Joseph Bruchac	Betty Bao Lord
	Paul Yee
<i>Vietnamese &amp; Vietnamese-American</i>	Cheng Hou-Tien
Nhuong Quang Huynh	Ed Young
Quyen Van Duong	Jade Snow Wong
Vo-Dinh Mai	

A few suggestions for reviewing multicultural/multiethnic books:

- \* Be sure the characters are well-defined individuals from definite cultures, not generic.
- \* Use picture book and novels to encourage students to learn more about history and culture.
- \* If foreign words or phrases are used, be sure a pronunciation guide is given.
- \* Select books that show contemporary settings for different cultures.
- \* Select books that show common values, such as respect, sharing, and respect for others.
- \* Select books that show that all people of a culture do not share the same background.
- \* Select books with strong plots and believable characters.
- \* Be sure the illustrations are not stereotypes of the characters.
- \* Select books that do not show negative attitudes or stereotypes.
- \* Do not limit your list to just the cultures in your class, show all types of diversity. (Lewis, 1994)

Become a frequent reader of different teachers' magazines. They give wonderful lessons for books from all cultures. For example, in the 1995 *The Mailbox: Intermediate*, had insightful units on Africa; and one of the featured books, *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* by Margaret Musgrove gives an excellent pictorial of Africa. In the September/October 1995 issue of *School Days* there is a unit on China, which features several books on the giant pandas. Teachers can find lots of multicultural aids if they record exactly where information is located or comes from and keep a file of these multicultural materials and aids for sharing and later use.

#### *A Few Final Ideas*

Teachers can enhance sensitivity to different cultures by treating every student as a special, unique person and by emphasizing the following points:

- \* That the value of every person is recognized.
- \* High self-esteem and positive self-concept are fostered.
- \* All persons are taught about their own cultures and introduced to other cultures.
- \* There will be positive experiences exploring similarities and differences of cultures and groups.
- \* All persons will be encouraged to respect other cultures.
- \* The idea of living cooperatively in a diverse world is promoted through classroom activities and projects.

When teachers are teaching in diverse classrooms, they should implement culturally sensitive instruction by using varied communication strategies, cooperative learning, and by understanding the different learning styles that match multiethnic and cultural cognitive styles. By incorporating different strategies into their lesson plans, teachers can teach and work with culturally diverse classes with ease. By creating a culturally sensitive environment within a classroom teachers open the door for a variety of opportunities for their students and themselves, they include: 1) learning about one's own culture, 2) learning about other cultures, 3) learning to appreciate other cultures, and 4) learning to interact with other cultures.

#### References

- Cowling, T. K. (1995). China. *Frank Schaffer's school days*. 15(1) September/October, pp. 18-23.
- Diaz, M. (1993). Multicultural units for middle and high school students. *The Book Report*. 11(4), January/February, 1993.
- Editorial. (1995). Selecting multicultural books. *Instructor*. 105(4), November/December, pp. 47-53.
- Gress, B. (1995). Africa: Shedding light on "the dark continent." *Mailbox: Intermediate*. 9(3), June/July, pp. 15-22.
- Lewis, V. (1994). With mean voice: Talking about multicultural. *Instructor*. 103(6), February, pp. 38-41.
- Mohr, K. A. J. (1994). Making a place for foreign students in class. *The Education Digest*. 59(9), May, pp. 44-48.
- Peel, H. (1994). Test your cultural sensitivity quotient. *Learning*. 22(7), March, pp. 54-55.
- Ryan, F. J. (1994). Will multiculturalism undercut student individuality? *The Educational Digest*. 59(6), February, p. 28.
- Singer, A. (1994). Reflections on multiculturalism. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 76(4), December, pp. 284-288.
- Spann, M. B. (1992). *Literature-based multicultural activities: An integrated approach*, pp. 6-7.
- Woolfolk, A. E. (1995). *Educational Psychology*, (sixth edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon Pub, pp. 181-190.