

# Culturally Sensitive Classrooms

Cultural diversity is the norm for many schools today, with few teachers having homogeneity of student cultures, languages, and background experiences in their classrooms. And the classrooms of tomorrow will be even more diverse. For example, among the age group from birth to 18, only 46 percent of the population is projected to be non-Hispanic White in 2050 compared with 64 percent in 2000 (Marx 2000).

This issue of the *Supporting Good Teaching Series* takes a closer look at the relationship between culture and learning, its growing importance in classrooms, and the considerations teachers should take into account as they work to meet the needs of a culturally diverse student population. It also provides tips on how to develop culturally sensitive classrooms, while cautioning teachers to avoid cultural stereotypes.

## Why Culture Matters

All children grow up within a cultural environment that influences how they present themselves, understand the world, and interpret experiences. A child's cultural context can affect how he or she processes and organizes information, communicates verbally and nonverbally, and perceives physical and social environments. Each of these factors in turn can shape a child's learning patterns and affect later school experiences (National Academy of Sciences 1994).

Schools have a culture of their own, and many mainstream schools reflect and operate according to what might be described as middle-class European American cultural standards. Students from other cultural backgrounds may experience cultural conflicts in such classrooms because their accustomed ways of learning and communicating may not match mainstream routines—hence creating barriers to effective learning.

Trumbell, Rothstein-Fisch, and Greenfield remind us of how interwoven culture is in our daily lives—and in the daily lives of schools:

Culture is like the air we breathe, permeating all we do. And the hardest culture to examine is often our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem second nature.... Like individuals and groups, schools have cultures, too. These usually mirror the

Culturally sensitive instruction aims to support the ability of all students to meet high standards, using approaches best suited to meeting students' individual needs.

culture of the dominant society. We know the struggle many children and their parents face in learning English as a second language, and we understand that refugees from troubled homelands often bring emotional burdens. But we may not realize what an enormously difficult transition many must make in learning to decipher a new culture. This is often true, too, for native-born American children when the cultural values at home differ significantly from those of school (2000, online).

Cultural conflicts can interfere with a child's progress by producing misunderstanding, discomfort, possible rejection, and, ultimately, low achievement. Jordan summarizes this process:

By the time children come to school, they have already learned very complex material as part of being socialized into their own culture. This means that in minority schooling we are dealing with a situation involving two cultures—the culture of the school and the culture of the child. When the two are not compatible, the school fails to teach and the child fails to learn (1984, 61).

This theory, often called *cultural discontinuity*, suggests that culture conflict, rather than low ability or the lack of desire to succeed, is often the reason that the achievement of children from some ethnic groups lags behind that of their majority-group peers. Nelson-Barber describes this conflict as “transactional”—something that happens between the school and the student and not something inherent to the student (1999, 11).

Koki explains the notion of the impact of cultural differences on education in common sense terms:

Perhaps one of the most important findings about learning is that comprehension is not transferred directly from a source—the teacher—to a learner. Instead, the brain—“filters” information to make sense of it in light of what the learner already knows. In today's diverse classrooms, students have many experiences and knowledge bases that may not be familiar to teachers from the “mainstream” culture. Researchers suspect that many teachers—whether they are dealing with minority children who are geographically isolated or

inner city children in a highly urban setting—may inadvertently overlook what children already know, and thus fail to connect the information or skills the children need to have with the children's prior experiences (Koki n.d., 2).

Culture does not determine a child's ability or intelligence. But it can produce many different ways of knowing and learning. Teachers will be able to ensure high levels of learning from more students in increasingly diverse classrooms by learning how to use cultural characteristics as strengths instead of barriers to learning. Even the youngest children bring knowledge and experience with them to school, and effective teachers design instruction so these are “acknowledged, valued and incorporated in the classroom” (Ladson-Billings 1994).

## A Closer Look at Culturally Sensitive Instruction

Teachers who have worked to make their classrooms more culturally sensitive would agree that the process is not always easy. It takes standing back and consciously reflecting on the way you teach—then asking whether your own approach is currently successful with all your students. From that perspective, the features of culturally sensitive instruction are closely aligned with what we recognize as good teaching.

For example, [the first feature of culturally sensitive instruction is its pro-student philosophy](#). All students are seen as having the inherent resources and ability to experience academic success. The idea is to capitalize on each child's strengths, viewing cultural ways of learning as resources to be used rather than deficits to be remedied.

[The second feature of culturally sensitive teaching is its development from a basic premise: There is no single best teaching method that will effectively reach all students at all times](#). Effective teachers diversify their instruction in response to individual students' interests, personalities, and abilities—this naturally should take into account differences in culture while not ignoring students' need to learn skills necessary for success in the larger community.

For example, to assist students who do not initially respond well to mainstream techniques, instructional methods that are more “culturally compatible” can be used to present new or difficult material—a form of scaffolding. Mainstream methods can then be used to

further develop concepts, reinforce learning, and assist with skill mastery. This system of alternation both expands skill development for all classroom students as they learn to absorb and apply knowledge in a variety of different ways and better prepares students to navigate the broader culture. It fits with the notion that good teaching requires that the teacher continuously—and almost seamlessly—adjust instructional approaches to the needs of the students.

A third key feature of culturally sensitive instruction is its adherence to the “principle of least change” (Jordan 1985, 112). This framework suggests only the minimum number of changes necessary to produce desirable learning effects should be undertaken at one time. Such a framework helps make change a clearly defined, focused, and manageable process. In other words, teachers do not need to duplicate the cultural environment of their students’ homes. Rather, both teachers and students can strive for mutual accommodation, treating each other’s culture with respect while working together towards academic excellence.

Finally, the fourth key characteristic of culturally sensitive instruction is its emphasis on the maintenance of high expectations and high academic standards for all children. The key to success in diverse classrooms becomes “modifying the means used to achieve learning outcomes, not changing the intended outcomes themselves” (Gilbert and Gay 1985, 133). In this way, equity and excellence are simultaneously maintained by a teaching system that features a single, common goal of educational excellence—with an understanding and use of the diversified paths students travel to achieve that goal.

### It Is Also Just Good Teaching

Although the characteristics above highlight the need to mesh culture and instruction, the appropriate place to start the discussion is by focusing on what we know about both learning and good teaching and then use that knowledge as the bedrock for designing effective student-teacher interaction. It can serve as a reminder of how important it is for teachers to understand the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of all of their students—and to design instruction around these. It also suggests that teachers using a variety of teaching approaches in their classrooms may already be incorporating many culturally compatible elements into their instruction.

Some links between what we know about effective teaching and teaching that includes attention to culture

are readily apparent. For example, researchers at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) propose the following five standards for effective pedagogy as “critical for improving learning outcomes for all students, and especially those of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or economic backgrounds”:

- joint productive activity that, for example, might embed in it instruction on how students should work in groups;
- language development with efforts made to link students’ natural language with the language of the classroom;
- contextualization—making meaning through connecting school to children’s lives—which not only provides students with concrete examples of the concepts being learned but also assumes that teachers will learn more about their students;
- challenging activities that teach complex thinking and challenge even students typically considered at risk; and
- instructional conversation in which teachers encourage students to engage in purposeful dialogue (Doherty, Echevarria, Estrada, Goldenberg, Hilberg, Saunders, and Tharpe 2002, online).

Obviously, most effective educators will recognize the instructional strategies described above as simply indicators of good teaching—even though, as the CREDE researchers emphasize, they may be especially helpful to students from non-mainstream cultures. Finally, Strong, Silver, and Perini (2002) are clear: the current focus on standards—the what that students should know—should not be viewed as limiting how the content must be taught.

### Learning More about Your Students’ Cultures

The way we teach profoundly affects the way students learn. In response to this, instruction in a culturally sensitive classroom is sometimes adjusted to make it more congruent or compatible with the cultural and learning styles of minority students. Teachers must actively look for ways to help students make connections between their experiences and the academic content (Montgomery 2001).

Identifying those “ways” requires that teachers first learn more about their students’ culture and ethnicity. This knowledge then provides a “framework for inquiry”

as they plan instruction (Banks et al. 2001). A culturally sensitive teacher need not become an expert on every culture. Being culturally sensitive does, however, require a basic understanding of some of the general beliefs, values, traditions, and norms that diverse groups hold (Ford and Trotman-Frazier 2001). Sileo and Prather (1998) suggest that teachers begin by asking questions such as these:

- What roles do silence, questions, and responses play in the student's culture?
- How do students' quiet and obedient behaviors (e.g., lack of overt responding and calling attention to oneself) affect the teachers' perceptions?
- Do students' inappropriate behaviors result from a lack of language proficiency and/or misunderstanding?
- Does the teaching style (e.g., teacher-directed instruction) differ from the student's accustomed learning style (e.g., peer-mediated instruction)? (Sileo and Prather 1998, 329).

## Integrating Culture into your Classroom Practices

The challenge for teachers, once possible cultural conflicts are identified, is to modify instruction so that learning can take place in the most effective way possible. Pewewardy (1999) offers the following suggestions to guide your efforts toward more culturally sensitive teaching:

- Understand and use students' prior cultural knowledge as a foundation in the teaching and learning process.

- Ask whether your classroom practices are compatible with students' language patterns, cognitive functioning, motivation, and the social norms and structures to which they are accustomed.
- Make an effort to integrate the strengths that students bring with them—for example, experiences with storytelling—into instruction.
- Realize that you might sometimes need to be a “cultural mediator” and provide assistance through the use of questions, feedback, and scaffolding.
- Ask yourself if the approaches you use for assessment reflect the diversity of student strengths and styles.

Embedded in Pewewardy's suggestions is the need for teachers to carefully study their own practices—even though these practices might have been successful with most of the students they taught in the past—and to think about them in terms of a more diverse classroom.

Teachers who were part of a Bridging Cultures project experimented with specific ways to make their classrooms more “culture-friendly” for those students with backgrounds that stressed the importance of collaboration. Together they developed a list of some simple modifications to classroom routines that capitalize on children's values of helping and sharing:

- Select two classroom monitors rather than one, and allow them to work together.
- Allow students to help each other study vocabulary (students with greater English proficiency help those with lesser).

## Nonverbal Communication as a Cultural Variable

Differences in behavioral cues and nonverbal communication patterns also can cause conflict. All children and teachers, regardless of cultural background, experience universal feelings such as excitement or confusion. Ways of expressing these feelings vary widely from culture to culture, however, and a single action or behavior can have contrasting meanings when viewed from different cultural perspectives.

For example, one student teacher, in an effort to be friendly and communicate well with a Korean kindergartner, placed himself on the child's level by crouching on his knees and sitting close to the student. The child was uncomfortable with this close contact, in accordance with the Korean cultural custom of maintaining a “certain physical space between him and his teachers as a signal of respect” (Kleifgen 1988, 222). This teacher later realized that his own style of being “warm” and “helpful” could be misinterpreted in a way that interfered with successful communication and instruction.

## Cooperation vs. Competition

Sileo and Prather talk about the cultural characteristics of competition versus cooperation:

“Students who have been raised in cultures that foster cooperative behaviors may need direction regarding the appropriateness of cooperation in school. They may be quick to share their belongings with peers, which could potentially extend to allowing others to copy their schoolwork or answers on examinations. These students may view themselves as helpful or generous and, therefore, not interpret their behavior as inappropriate or problematic within the school’s culture” (1998, 333).

- Allow students to work in small groups to preview their homework assignments, discussing possible strategies for problems and assuring that all understand the assignment. (This also helps students whose parents may not be able to read the assignment in English.)
- Use choral reading, as well as individual reading.
- Have more than one “child of the week,” so that the attention is shared.
- Share cleanup of the whole room at once, rather than having each group clean up an activity center before the children move to another (observed in a kindergarten classroom).
- Allow joint “ownership” of classroom crayons rather than a box per child (Trumbell, Rothstein-Fisch, and Greenfield 2000, online).
- approximate space and numbers rather than adhere to exactness;
- focus on people rather than things;
- be more proficient in nonverbal than verbal communications;
- prefer learning characterized by variation and freedom of movement;

## Snapshot of Select Cultural Characteristics

Keeping the above cautions about stereotyping in mind, it can still be helpful to learn from the extensive knowledge base—from anthropology, psychology, and sociology—of characteristics predominantly found in some racial or ethnic groups. As you read the information below, think about what the elements might mean to teaching and learning in your classroom.

### *African American Learning Styles*

A summary of the research suggests that African Americans are holistic learners who tend to:

- respond to things in terms of the whole instead of isolated parts;
- prefer inferential reasoning as opposed to deductive or inductive;

### **Caution: One Size Does Not Fit All**

The teachers in the Bridging Cultures project began by increasing their knowledge about the children in their classes and about the culture-based learning they brought with them to school. While information about cultural characteristics is critical to the process of making classrooms more culturally sensitive, a caution is also in order. Descriptions about cultural characteristics—and some of these are provided in this brief overview—can only provide some possibilities to consider. They should not be used to create a picture of one specific child.

Within any given ethnic group, individuals vary greatly in their experiences, beliefs, and practices. All children, regardless of their heritage, will display individual preferences and variations in personality, learning patterns, and behavior. While general cultural information can give us useful and important clues about learners, it is still essential for teachers to regard every student as an individual.

- prefer kinesthetic/active instructional activities;
- prefer evening rather than morning learning;
- choose social over nonsocial cues; and
- proceed from a top-down processing approach rather than a bottom-up approach (adapted from Irvine and York 2001, 490).

Foster's review of research on African American teachers identified characteristics and practices that could be helpful to other teachers. She found that they use an "authoritative style that integrates acceptance and involvement, firm control, and psychological autonomy [and] . . . deliberately structure classroom activities to link classroom content to the experiences of their students" (2001, 576). They focus on the whole child and attend to growth of social and emotional, as well as academic, skills. They use familiar cultural patterns in their instruction.

For example, they encourage students to work together in a cooperative, collective classroom and work to build a sense of community. They incorporate culturally compatible communication patterns in their teaching. For example, they are more likely than teachers in general to use metaphors, analogies, call and response, and rhythm. As an example, Ladson-Billings describes a teacher who "used the lyrics of rap songs as a way to teach the elements of poetry . . . [then] went on to more conventional poetry" (1995, 476).

### ***Latino American Learning Styles***

The research characterizes Latino students as holistic and relational learners who tend to:

- prefer group learning situations;
- be sensitive to the opinions of others;
- remember faces and social words;
- be extrinsically motivated;
- learn by doing;
- prefer concrete to abstract representations; and
- prefer people to ideas (Adapted from Irvine and York 2001, 490).

### ***Asian American Students***

Although diversity among Asian American groups makes overall descriptions difficult, there are general cultural characteristics, values, and practices shared by many Asians, particularly East and Southeast Asians, that are different from the mainstream American culture.

In many East and Southeast Asian cultures, Confucian ideals, which include respect for elders, deferred gratification, and discipline, are a strong influence. Most Asian American parents teach their children to value educational achievement, respect authority, feel responsibility for relatives, and show self-control. Asian American parents tend to view students' school failure as a lack of will and address this problem by increasing parental restrictions. Asian American children tend to be more dependent, conforming, and willing to place family welfare over individual wishes than are other American children.

Teachers in Asian cultures are accorded a higher status than teachers in the United States. Asian American children may be confused by the informality between American teachers and students. Asian children tend to need reinforcement from teachers and work more efficiently in a well-structured, quiet environment.

Self-effacement is a trait traditionally valued in many Asian cultures. Asian children tend to wait to participate, unless otherwise requested by the teacher. Having attention drawn to oneself—for example, having one's name put on the board for misbehaving—can bring considerable distress.

**“In minority schooling, we are dealing with a situation involving two cultures—the culture of the school and the culture of the child. When the two are not compatible, the school fails to teach and the child fails to learn” (Jordan 1984, 61).**

Many Asian children have been socialized to listen more than speak, to speak in a soft voice, and to be modest in dress and behavior. While a student may be told at school to challenge others' views, the same child may be told at home to be quiet and not challenge authority. To avoid such conflicts, teachers can organize classroom activities around naturalistic interactions that permit the child to take the lead and to build upon modeling (adapted from Feng 1994, online).

## **In Summary**

It is clear that culture plays an important role in teaching and learning. However, Delpit (1995) reminds us

that the goal is not how teachers can create the perfect “culturally matched” learning situation for each ethnic group, but rather how to recognize when there is a problem for a particular child and then to devise an approach that eliminates the barrier to learning. And Au has a common sense message for teachers who are trying to expand their repertoire of teaching strategies in order to connect with a broader spectrum of students. In her view, “[t]he specific strategies teachers use are not so important as *whether or not the strategies make good sense to the children*” (1980, 204) [italics added].

Diversity in our schools is both an opportunity and a challenge. The more we know about the implications of culture and learning, the more we can effect productive solutions to maximize academic achievement for diverse learners and prepare all students for a future in a global society. By consciously examining your behaviors and those of your students, you can help to minimize cultural conflict and maximize the potential for effective teaching and learning.

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## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Evaluate your own instructional techniques; do they adhere to the components discussed in this text? (e.g. pro-student philosophy, no single best teaching method, adherence to the principal of least change, and maintenance of high expectations)
- Reflect on the various cultures present in your classroom. List and discuss some of the culture-specific characteristics of these students with your fellow teachers. Use the questions provided by Sileo and Prather on page 4 for guidance.
- Discuss ways you might modify your instructional practices to insure that the learning environment is “culture friendly.”
- Brainstorm/discuss some additional culture-specific tips for parent-teacher conferences that might be helpful.

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