Teaching Every Child in Every Classroom

Students from diverse backgrounds achieve at higher levels when teachers demonstrate cultural competency.

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According to a recent article in the New York Times (Thompson, 2009), in the past decade a record number of immigrants have “fueled the greatest growth in public schools since the baby boom.” Although our classrooms have become incredibly diverse places, the majority of teachers—especially in the elementary grades—remain middle-class and white. And while it is true that students can benefit from teachers who “look like them,” it is not true that students from diverse backgrounds cannot learn in a classroom where the teacher does not share their cultural, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. Any child can learn from any teacher who commits to making his or her teaching more culturally responsive.

According to Bondo Nyembwe (2008) of the Minnesota Department of Education: “There is no research that shows a positive correlation between high academic achievement and support by a teacher of the same ethnic background. Research does show, however, that academic success in the classroom depends on the quality of the teacher.”

Rather than worrying about a teacher’s race or ethnic background, Nyembwe writes, it’s important to focus on the skills and abilities that contribute to effective teaching. “Reliance on a teacher of color as the solution to educating minority students is a myth,” he says, “and should not be considered as a factor for poor student performance.”

Good teachers, regardless of race—or ethnic or cultural background—share certain common characteristics. According to Nyembwe, they include holding high expectations, having the right mind-set, using proper strategies, and having a cultural appreciation for racial equality (CARE).

While Nyembwe calls this characteristic CARE, others refer to it as cultural awareness, cultural responsiveness, cultural relevance, or cultural competence—the latter is a term that arose in connection with health care services that is now also in common use among educators. One of the most frequently cited definitions of cultural competency was offered by Cross et al. (1989), who defined it as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations.”

More recently, Olsen, Bhattacharya, and Scharf (2006), defined cultural competency as:

the ability to work effectively across cultures. For individuals it is an approach to learning, communicating and working respectfully with people different from themselves. For organizations, cultural competency means creating the practices and policies that will make services more accessible to diverse populations, and that provide for appropriate and effective services in cross-cultural situations.

Regardless of what we call it or how we define it, however, the first step in developing cultural competency is to focus on self-awareness, or what Davis (2007) calls “looking at ourselves through our own unique lens.”

Teachers, she says, must “examine their own culture and inherent values, consider the different cultures and values of their students and the students’ families, and explore how to meet the needs of each student by acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating the culture and value system of the family.”
Strategies Any Teacher Can Use

The Denver Public Schools (n.d.) has developed a brief guide, *Strategies to Support Culturally Competent Instruction*, which includes a numbers of specific recommendations for what teachers can do to establish a culturally responsive foundation for education. Those strategies, based on the work of Cole (1995), include:

- Maintaining high standards and demonstrating high expectations for all ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students;
- Learning about the home and community culture of students in order to better understand the behavior of those students and to capitalize on that background during the learning process;
- Working with parents and encouraging their active participation in the education of their children;
- Using culturally relevant resources and materials that recognize, incorporate, and accurately reflect the racial heritage of students and the contributions of members of various ethnic groups;
- Using language and materials that are nonsexist, nonracist, and nonethnocentric and pointing out stereotypes when they exist;
- Using cooperative learning strategies that encourage inter-ethnic friendships and cultural understanding; and
- Demonstrating respect for each student’s language and allowing bilingual students to alternate between English and their native language while working together.

As these strategies indicate, the bottom line is that cultural competency is about good teaching. Students will learn when they feel respected and understood, when they understand why what they are doing in school is important, and when what they are doing is tied to their personal experience. And while the focus here is on diversity, that statement applies to all classrooms, regardless of the race, culture, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status of the students who populate them.

References


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