

The importance of multicultural education:

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The Importance of Multicultural Education: A Culturally Responsible

Pedagogy The student population in the United States is becoming more and more culturally diverse. According to Zion and Kozleski (2005), " In urban centers, almost two-thirds of the students are neither European-American nor middle-class" (p. 2). In contrast, the current teaching force continues to be composed of white middle-class women and I find my own situation reinforces this statistic. As a teacher today, I can expect that many of my students will bring customs, values, beliefs, behaviors and experiences into my classroom that are very different from my own. After reflecting on classroom discussions and the articles provided I realize that I must prepare myself with specific characteristics and skill sets to be a culturally responsive teacher. This new knowledge has impacted my teaching philosophies and pedagogy. It has inspired me to think of ways I can implement these ideas into my teaching practice. In doing so, I am confident that I will be able to provide a more equitable learning environment for all of my students. We as teachers must become culturally responsive in order to meet the needs of our students. Zion and Kozleski (2005) stated that cultural responsivity is about, " cultivating an open attitude and acquiring new skills, and it involves exploring and honoring your own culture while learning about and honoring other people's cultures" (p. 15). Understanding that culture influences a person's thoughts and actions is an integral part of becoming a culturally responsive teacher (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). Many times we make assumptions about a person based on one cultural indicator like race, ethnicity, social class, language, religion or gender. In reality, culture is made up of a blend of all the groups we belong to as well as how they

influence our values, beliefs and behaviors (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). We must understand that we are all members of different cultural groups created by our own individual life experiences. Teachers must understand reading a book about Kwanza will not allow us to understand all African American people and their culture. Listening to salsa music will not guide us to understanding the values of all of our Hispanic students and going to a Chinese restaurant will not provide insight in to the beliefs of all Asian people. That is because culture is much bigger than visible traditions (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). The first step to becoming a culturally responsive teacher is to develop cultural self-awareness and realize that others may hold values and attitudes that are different from my own (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). As a white middle-class woman this meant realizing that my culture is the dominant and privileged culture that our country has inherited (Johnson, 2006). I now realize that ideas I had surrounding appropriate behavior, attitudes and values come from my cultural biases, which may not be held by my students and their families. In order to provide an impartial learning environment for all of my students I must discover and examine my own behaviors and expectations as well as those held by my students and their families. Do they align? More than likely they will not and if I allow my cultural biases to influence my practice I will be minimizing my teaching effectiveness. How can we examine the behaviors of our students in the classroom? The Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching recommends Critical Incident Analysis on events in our classroom that we interpret as a problem (ProDait. org). A CIA allows us to evaluate our own practice and find better ways to respond to our students' needs. Instead

of simply acknowledging that a problem exists in our classroom, it allows us to uncover why it exists. For example, instead of saying, " Sam and Alicia talk during writing workshop, " we can say, " Why do Sam and Alicia talk during writing workshop? " We may find out that in Sam ' s and Alicia's homes collectivism is valued over individualism. Students with collectivist values are taught to assist others and to contribute to the success of any group they belong to. As such, Sam and Alicia collaborate during writing workshop rather than working individually. In contrast, western schools tend to foster individualism and often times look down on student collaboration (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Trumbull, 1999). By evaluating the situation we may find that allowing Sam and Alicia to work together is more aligned with their values and actually helps them to realize educational goals where a more individualist approach would hinder their progress. Without CIA we may miss out on important opportunities to positively impact our student's achievement. The next step towards becoming culturally responsive is to appreciate the value of diverse views and simultaneously avoid imposing our own values on others (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). We must make a conscious effort to understand and value others' perspectives. I realize that my life experiences have created a lens from which I view the world. My assumptions that others hold similar values to mine may cause me to misinterpret their behaviors, thoughts and feelings. It is a widely held assumption that despite superficial differences we are all inherently the same and we hold the same values (Bennett, 1998). This view is simply not true and by ignoring that fact we risk placing harmful judgments on our students. Resisting stereotyping and scrutinizing our own teaching for

cultural bias is the next step towards becoming a culturally responsive teacher (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). Most educated people do not want to be considered capable of stereotyping, holding biases or racism but in reality many of us hold unconscious biases, which lead to unintentional racism. In certain situations our unconscious attitudes may be conflicting with our well-meaning values but they will still affect relationships with our students, their families and our coworkers (Moule 2009). We often times inadvertently reinforce unintentional racism with the use of our words (Castania 2003). According to Moule in his article, " Understanding Unconscious Bias and Unintentional Racism, " " Understanding our own biases is a first step toward improving the interactions that we have with all people and is essential if we hope to build deep community within our schools. " We must be completely honest when examining our biases in order to uncover hidden prejudice that may exist. Many people who belong to the dominant white society ignore the issue or become defensive which prevents us from rectifying the problem. By identifying our own biases and openly examining the issue, we can more carefully reflect on how we interact with people and correct for any bias (Moule 2009). So how can we learn about each individual student's culture if it is unique? An important part of understanding a person is to analyze and comprehend his or her household and community dynamic (Moll, 1992). Planning a visit to each student's home and immersing ourselves in our students' communities can provide important insights into behaviors, values, thoughts and attitudes that we may not understand. A home visit allows us to go beyond a superficial understanding of our students' cultures (Moll, 1992). As Zion and Kozleski (2005) stated, " An awareness and

understanding of the role of culture in the classroom, and the different values and behaviors that may accompany culture can remove unintentional barriers to a child's success" (p. 4). If we don't make a cognizant effort to learn and understand our students' cultural identities and the impact they have on behaviors and values, we may assume that our own beliefs are normal, privileging our own cultural characteristics at the expense of our students (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). At these visits we can find out about our students' interests and what is important to them. Children learn best if we as teachers can create an environment where students can use past knowledge and experience to construct their own new knowledge (Freire, 1998). Teachers need to know about their students' experiences outside school to engage them in the production of knowledge. We can ensure students play an integral part in their own learning by finding out what they already know, what they are good at and what they want to learn. Building on a student's strengths can improve his or her confidence and can increase our students' success in other, more challenging areas (Zion and Kozleski, 2005). Teachers can enhance the motivation to learn by finding out their students' hobbies and favorite activities then systematically tie those interests, concerns, and strengths into their teaching (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). Our ultimate goal is for our students to be successful and this is just another avenue towards that objective. So how will this new found information impact my pedagogy and teaching practice? The first thing I will do is learn about each of my students' cultures, beliefs and values through home visits. According to Moll (1992) research showed, " by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom

instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (p. 132). I will also devote time on the first day of school to find out my students' interests and hobbies. I will determine what they want to learn throughout the school year through a class discussion, which will be recorded on chart paper and displayed in the classroom. I will ensure that each idea is incorporated into our curriculum to make certain that each child plays a role in our lesson development. I hope that this will engage my students and promote classroom community and confidence in knowing that what they value is important to me. I will incorporate Critical Incident Analysis into my teaching practice as a way to monitor my teaching effectiveness. This will allow me to remember that there is a reason behind every behavior and unless I get to the root of problematic incidents I will not be able to find the best solution. This tool will allow me to continually refine my teaching practice to meet the needs of each of my students. I plan on developing a network of colleagues with whom I can discuss my teaching practices. I will ensure that this group is composed of people with different cultural beliefs and values from my own so that they can offer guidance in areas where I do not have life experience or appropriate perspective. This will be an important part of analyzing behaviors in my classroom (ProDait). It will also provide insight into my own reactions to behaviors and whether or not they are appropriate or simply an unfair bias towards my own values. I will create a safe place to discuss unconscious biases and stereotypes that exist as well as develop respectful language I can use to create harmonious relationships (Castania, 2003). I will accept critique openly, knowing that it will allow me to facilitate change,

break divisions and move towards an equal opportunity environment for students, educators and families of all cultures. Ultimately my goal as an educator is to offer an equal opportunity for each of my students to succeed regardless of their culture or my unintentional biases. In order to accomplish my mission I must devote myself to cultural responsiveness to foster student achievement through teaching practices grounded in cultural understanding and awareness. I must leverage Critical Incident Analysis to resolve key classroom issues and enhance the learning environment for every student, and I must build a strong teaching network to further analyze and refine how I operate in the classroom. By devoting myself to these philosophies, I am confident every student I teach will have an equal learning opportunity and positive classroom experience.

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