

Who Are Today's Students in a Diverse Society?

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Who Are Today's Students in a Diverse Society?

Student diversity is a major topic in education today. Diversity will not be going away any time soon. Even over thirty years ago, educators were beginning to discuss the subject of diversity and multiculturalism. In fact, during the 1970's and 1980's; the word *diversity* was seldom used at all. The term *multiculturalism* was at the forefront of the scene.

Although the world was diverse during the decades of the 70's and 80's, many educators did not seem to recognize the importance of *multiculturalism* and *diversity*. In the past decade and more, especially with the enactment of NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND, classrooms have become much more diverse. Due to diversity, teachers have had to change their methods of teaching considerably to meet the needs of *all learners*. During the last decade of the increasing population of Hispanics and other people from various parts of the world moving to the United States, teachers are now realizing how diverse their classrooms are becoming. Old lesson plans that once worked well for students are being discarded with new lesson plans accommodating the needs of the diverse population. In the "Leave it to Beaver" days, society was not nearly as diverse. Teaching was most likely less challenging then, in that society was much different and less diverse. Teachers today have much diversity in their classrooms.

It is important that teachers keep in mind that *diversity* takes on many forms. Some educators only view *diversity* as students of a different 'race, ethnicity, and culture.' This concept, although a narrow focus, is a place to start, because of the recent influx of immigrants to the country. Undergraduate pre-service teachers and also graduate education students need to know clearly the definition for all three terms.

RACE – Race refers to people with a common ancestry and physical characteristic which usually come from one geographical location in the world.

ETHNICITY – Ethnicity applies to people who share *a common culture* that usually includes language, customs, and religion.

CULTURE – Culture refers to any group of individuals who share usually the same language, customs, and usually religion.

Even in the United States, although typical Americans share some of the same beliefs, (i.e. patriotism to the American flag), there are many sub-cultures in America regionally, state by state. Even in an individual state (i.e. Arkansas), there are even many sub-cultures where people generally think and act different from other sub-cultures. This knowledge is essential to any teacher in Arkansas. There is no typical Arkansas. Each classroom demographics varies in many ways. Classroom teachers need to understand the backgrounds of all children in order to make connections in learning which eventually will lead to formal assessment of learner outcomes.

Other than race, ethnicity, and culture, *diversity has many more facets*. Diversity is more complex. Although all human beings have the same Adler and Maslow basic needs (safety, love belongingness), all people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures, in reality, have differences. And in all sub-groups of diversity, some groups of people value education more than other groups. For example, many Hispanic parents teach their children to be respectful to teacher; they value the education process. They treat teachers with respect and are extremely supportive with parent partnerships. However, on the flip side, many teachers report that parents of American-born Caucasian children at times show disrespect, lack of trust, and lack of cooperation to the regular

education teachers. It is possible that these parents being born in this country, believe that a free American public school education is a 'right'; thus, thus, never facing the possibility of their children not being education, some parents do not truly appreciate what they have for their children. Therefore, many Hispanics in reality, very well may appreciate the educational experience much more! Because of the respect and admiration for the educational opportunities for their children, I have often heard graduate students in my classes at the university say, "*I would rather have 100 percent Hispanic children over white children any day!*" Obviously, the job of teachers is much easier when parents appreciate and are supportive in the education process.

Based on the above thoughts, teaching is easier when teachers work with supportive parents. Yet, teachers will also deal with certain cultures that do not value learning or constantly see faults in teachers. These parents can often be more vocal than supportive parents. The lack of 'value' for teaching and learning can consciously or subconsciously transmit to their children. Children then become unmotivated to learn without their parents cheering the on! Teachers then have to find a way to motivate these types of children, regardless of these negative home environments. The philosophy of teachers must still prevail: ***All children can learn. All children will learn!***

Most children come school come motivated to learn, regardless of their home environments, supportive of schooling or not. Children crave learning. Children are naturally curious. They want to see, touch, and act upon the environment around them.

We, as teachers have the wonderful, opportune opportunities to shape the *mind* and *will* of **all diverse children**, even the children who come to school with very minimal prior learning

experiences. Those children with lack of experiences may appear to be lethargic, slow, lazy, and unmotivated. Yet, once teachers show how exciting learning can be, these children can be motivated to learn! This type of diversity is a challenge in 'at risk' schools, yet dedicated and caring teachers are successful reaching these children every day.

As a first and second grade teacher in public schools, I was shocked to see that some children resisted learning anything new. They were withdrawn, rebellious, and sometimes trouble-makers. Even some students were severely depressed. Teaching in a Title I, Missouri poverty school was a big surprise, definitely not a good one.

After I signed my teaching contract, another teacher told me that most of the children were on free lunches. I knew nothing about real poverty and how some children were *drug up* and very transient. In all of my years teaching students from poverty, our school only had professional development meeting on literacy and language, yet had no professional training in 'children from poverty.' This was unfortunate in that teachers were not always a 'good fit' for these children, in that they were in the middle socio-economic class and had a lack of understand of poverty, in general. Little by little, I learned that I had to no more about children's backgrounds and what excited them in order to connect content for authentic learning. Children's literature was a great source to make these dire connections. These types of children presented me with one of this type of diversity, yet I became a much better qualified teacher (even with a Ph.D.) than I was before teaching only middle-socioeconomic class children. I had to find out about some of their prior experiences (especially working with them using children's fiction books). Without knowing their prior experiences, I could not be effective with children from poverty diversity), in that they had many lack of prior life experiences.

One example one day: I was behind in instruction in that many distractors entered the classroom not by my choice. This often happens in teaching. Thus, I needed to work with my last reading group. With each reading group, we would go through a picture walk through a children' book and then talk and ask pertinent questions about what 'might happen' in the book. Yet, that day, I skipped my 'pre-reading 'strategy' and our group began to read the book, *The Car Washing Street*" by Denise Lewis Patrick. The book has to do with a delightful story about a Puerto Rican family living in a large city, in a town house. It was a bright and beautiful Saturday morning. A father came out, hooked up a hose and filled a bucket with water and soap. He began to wash his car. As the neighbors looked out their windows and saw this event, little by little, all of the neighbors came out and had a wonderful time washing their cars. It turned out to be a fun and delightful day. End of story.

Case in point: The students were stumbling over the text of the book. Their reading was disjointed, bumpy, and they made multiple mistakes. The children were not reading as well as they read in preceding days and weeks. As a teacher, I became confused. I then nicely asked, "*What is going on? Why are we all having trouble, reading today?*" Each student in the group said the same statement: "*We don't know what a hose is. We've never seen a hose before. The only car wash we know of is the one that Mommy puts money in the slots and we drive through this little building the water goes all over our car like woop, loop, loop.*" At that point, I thought, "Oh my! I've wasted the entire fifteen minutes because I missed assessing **prior knowledge.**"

All teachers need to assess prior knowledge with all students, yet especially for at-risk children. I then told the children, "*Thanks for telling me that. We'll talk about this book tomorrow before we read. Now you can go back to your seats.*" Later in the day, I asked a

much more experience teacher of this population of students why they didn't know what a hose was? In a gentle, mentoring manner, she told me that many of the students lived in poverty slum apartments. If there had been a hose at any of these apartments, it was probably stolen. Therefore, it was no surprise to her that these children did not know what a hose was for. They don't water plants or have a garden where they would need a hose. I learned a very valuable lesson in always assessing prior knowledge!

Another common form of diversity is the likes and dislikes of students. Years ago, when I was a child in the 1960, teachers felt like they had to be the main authority in the classroom. Teachers were authoritative and some of them ruled by power, threats, and many paddings. Teachers did not tell much personal information about themselves. Even after Thanksgiving or Christmas breaks, they told us nothing about how they celebrated these holidays. They never spoke of their husbands or children. We did not really much about our teachers. In turn, they did not know much about their students. That was the age where 'children should be seen and not heard.' There was no active engagement in the classroom. Also, it's possible that teachers of the day believed that if we all got to know something about each other, the classroom would be more relaxed, the teacher would not rule anymore, and the children would take over control.

It is quite to the contrary now. Teachers have discovered with various models of teaching that the more they know about children, the better they can teach and reach children on a personal level. Also, teachers are now more humane and often tell appropriate personal stories to appear more human. Yet, in the process, they still can hand classroom management well. The teacher remains the authority of the classroom.

Today, school teachers try to get to know children's likes and dislikes. The wise teacher finds out appropriate information about the child without prying into highly personal information. Some teachers send home brief parent interview questions about the child. Parents usually always like giving teachers information on their child. The assumption is: Parents know their children best." Why not use parents as a valuable asset in getting to know each individual student well. Instruction, then can be geared toward the children's personalities, strengths, weaknesses, abilities (what the child does best), and various areas of expertise/interest. All of these **diverse factors** lead to more effective lesson planning and assessment. One again, parents are a valuable source to teachers.

Obviously, the world is a diverse place. Any classroom from year to year can be extremely diverse and difference from the preceding classroom. A new group of students can be a surprise to any teacher. What worked last year might not work this year. Teachers have to be flexible and stay tuned to the ultimate goal of meeting all learners' needs. Classes will have students with IEP's. Some classes will have high achievers. Some will have low-achievers. All of these areas are a part of *diversity*. Teachers today are expected to document what they are doing with all groups of diversity. Rather than viewing *diversity* as a 'negative' in the classroom, the challenge can be positive and can make all teachers better teachers.

Rather than viewing *diversity* as a bad thing or an inconvenience in the classroom, knowing that teachers can make a positive and memorable impact on a person's life is an awesome feeling. It is a challenge. When approached positively, *diversity* is a challenge, not a pain to suffer!