

6 Ways Teachers Can Foster Cultural Awareness in the Classroom

A multicultural society is best served by a culturally responsive curriculum. Schools that acknowledge the diversity of their student population understand the importance of promoting cultural awareness. Teachers who are interested in fostering a cultural awareness in their classroom should actively demonstrate to their students that they genuinely care about their cultural, emotional, and intellectual needs. To this end, there are several strategies that you can use to build trusting relationships with diverse students. To incorporate cultural awareness into your classroom curriculum, you should:

- 1. Express interest in the backgrounds of your students.** Encourage your students to research and share information about their ethnic background as a means of fostering a trusting relationship with fellow classmates. Analyze and celebrate differences in traditions, beliefs, and social behaviors. It is of note that this task helps European-American students realize that their beliefs and traditions constitute a culture as well, which is a necessary breakthrough in the development of a truly culturally responsive classroom. Also, take the time to learn the proper pronunciation of student names and express interest in the etymology of interesting and diverse names.
- 2. Redirect your role in the classroom from instructor to facilitator.** Another important requirement for creating a nurturing environment for students is reducing the power differential between the instructor and students. Students in an authoritarian classroom may sometimes display negative behaviors as a result of a perceived sense of social injustice; in the culturally diverse classroom, the teacher thus acts more like a facilitator than an instructor. Providing students with questionnaires about what they find to be interesting or important provides them with a measure of power over what they get to learn and provides them with greater intrinsic motivation and connectedness to the material. Allowing students to bring in their own reading material and present it to the class provides them with an opportunity to both interact with and share stories, thoughts, and ideas that are important to their cultural and social perspective.
- 3. Maintain a strict level of sensitivity to language concerns.** In traditional classrooms, students who are not native English speakers often feel marginalized, lost, and pressured into discarding their original language in favor of English. In a culturally responsive classroom, diversity of language is celebrated and the level of instructional materials provided to non-native speakers are tailored to their level of English fluency. Accompanying materials should be provided in the student's primary language and the student should be encouraged to master English.
- 4. Maintain high expectations for student performance.** Given that culturally responsive instruction is a student-centered philosophy, it should come as no surprise that expectations for achievement are determined and assigned individually for each student. Students don't receive lavish praise for simple tasks but do receive praise in proportion to their accomplishments. If a student is not completing her work, then one should engage the student positively and help guide the student toward explaining how to complete the initial steps that need to be done to complete a given assignment or task.

- 5. Incorporate methods for self testing.** Another potent method for helping students become active participants in learning is to reframe the concept of testing. While testing is usually associated with grades (and therefore stress) in traditional classrooms, in a culturally responsive classroom frequent non-graded tests can be used to provide progress checks and ensure that students don't fall behind on required material. Teaching students to self-test while learning new information will help them better remember and use what they've learned in class and will help them realize on their own when they need to study a topic in greater depth.

- 6. Maintain an “inclusive” curriculum that remains respectful of differences.** A culturally responsive curriculum is both inclusive in that it ensures that all students are included within all aspects of the school and it acknowledges the unique differences students may possess. A culturally responsive curriculum also encourages teachers' understanding and recognition of each student's non-school cultural life and background, and provides a means for them to incorporate this information into the curriculum, thus promoting inclusion.

Schools have the responsibility to teach all students how to synthesize cultural differences into their knowledge base, in order to facilitate students' personal and professional success in a diverse world. A culturally responsive curriculum helps students from a minority ethnic/racial background develop a sense of identity as individuals, as well as proudly identify with their particular culture group. Teachers can play a big role in helping these students succeed through the establishment of culturally responsive classrooms.

Source: Education Week Blog, November 30, 2014

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