**Many students, Many cultures**

Who are our students?

Educators and others often make the mistake of assuming that diversity is a descriptive term reserved for anyone who does not look the way they do; this is particularly true if the educators are White. Their perspective is understandable given that in many areas of the country Caucasian ancestry still comprises the predominant culture and, Whites make up the majority of those teaching. Based on outward appearance, White teachers might well assume that they are homogeneous group and the students who are different from them are the ones who are diverse.

A student characterized as Asian could be a native-born American whose family immigrated to this country one or two generations ago. Or the student could have been born in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Korea, or Taiwan. The term Asian or even Pacific Islander will not help a teacher truly understand the culture or values of a particular student. The same is true of any classification assigned to people. Teachers must avoid generalizing based on a student’s country of origin. Generalizations simply do not lead to understanding or good educational practice.

Racial or ethnic identity is not the only way diversity is represented in our pluralistic schools and classrooms. Diversity can also refer to the differences among the family values students hold, with carious religious beliefs being the most notable beliefs are many differences.

Children who are members of families of migrant workers also attend our schools. They may be with their teachers for only a short time, and yet their time in the classroom must be designed to be as educationally meaningful as possible. Students with disabilities are being assigned to mainstream classrooms for increasingly longer periods under the practice of inclusion. Other students may look alike, speak alike, and share some common values but have very different preferred learning modalities.

The challenges to reaching and teaching each student

Every student presents unique challenges, and all students come from family systems and peer influences that color the lenses through which they view the world. The curriculum must be taught, learning must be assessed, and achievement must be documented.

Teachers often feel that they must make a choice between caring for the needs of individual students and pushing all students to perform well on tests. And pushing typically wins out because the pressures to do so are great and the support for the taking time to reflect on best practices is so limited.

Managing culturally diverse classrooms-Choices

Teachers have a lot to accomplish in classrooms on any given day. With so much curriculum to be covered, teachers will often seek faster, simpler, and easier ways to do a number of things, including manage their classrooms. They will use computer programs to record grades and attendance, prepare schedules and notices in advance, and just as often, employ a behavior management program that can be implemented quickly and enforced with a predetermined set of consequences. Too often, these approaches are based on regards and punishments rather than on students’ anilities to reason and problem solve.

Teachers using behavioral strategies simply tell students the behaviors that are expected and then reinforce the stipulated behaviors with some reward system similar to those. How students should demonstrate compliances is predetermined and consequences impose a preset range of punishments no matter how individual the problem. This sort of behavioral approach does not encourage critical self-reflection by students. Obedience is expected and rewarded. Students are not invited to participate in decision making but are simply expected to obey any request or demand made of them the instant they hear it. Rules of this sort fail to prepare students to be thoughtful and personally engaged participants in our larger democratic society.

Schools must help young people from diverse cultures attain the knowledge attitudes and skills needed to interact peacefully and respectfully with one another. To achieve this goal, those who set educational policy at all levels must change many of their basic assumptions and practices.

If educators are going to level the playing field for every student, they must create management structures that teach all students not about obedience, but rather about how to negotiate power relationships appropriately and how to make decisions that benefit themselves as well as all members of the class.

Creating democratic classroom structures

Democratic classrooms are not those in which students are in charge nor are they places where students make up the rules with no framework on which to base the rules. Instead democratic classrooms should be mirrors of the structure of our society. In other words, the language of rules used by democratic teachers and administrators protects and promotes those values that are commonly shared in our society, such as honesty, self-efficacy, respect, trust, and the need to be safe.

One of the foundational principles of public education is that it exists to ensure that our society is comprised of an educated citizenry. Because citizenship participation is based in large part on informed decision making, students should have many opportunities to learn and practice their decision making skills – skills that come into play in academic areas, such as math and science, as well as in governing their own behaviors.

Studies have shown a high rate of teacher burnout after the first year and certainly within the first 5 years of teaching. Many teachers who could enrich the lives of students for years leave before they ever realize their potential.

Difficult and challenging students exist, not in spite of them, that teachers need to learn strategies to help them share the responsibility for maintaining productive learning communities with their students.

The importance of a welcoming physical environment

Visual learners do better at any level if the classroom has interesting and appealing items on display. Although elementary teachers might spend time decorating bulletin boards, many teachers at the secondary level do not or only put up one or two notices.

Arranging desks in clusters or groups rather than in rows is more welcoming and serves the needs of students with disabilities because they can move or be moved more easily among the desks and around the room.

English language learners will have an easier time transitioning from their primary language to their second language if they are provided with easy access to and frequent exchanges with native speaker of English.

Grouping desks rather than arranging them in rows helps teacher manage classrooms more effectively.

Teachers of democratic classrooms do not have to solve all the problems; they just need to be willing and able to facilitate the problem solving process.

“Yes, but it wouldn’t work with my students”

Some teachers say that their students have to receive stickers or other rewards for what is achieved during an activity. Those who say their students would not act responsibly if there were no token rewards for good behaviors have never genuinely instituted democratic management practices. Other educators justify their use of extrinsic rewards by saying that in life people work for money to buy material goods. Given that social reality, they feel the token distributed in their classrooms help to prepare students for their adult lives.

Relationships are sustained and enriched through a personal sense of social responsibility and empathy. These qualities cannot be reinforced through the use of stickers or candy. They are, though, the qualities an individual must learn and must nurture to lead a fully engaged existence.

Classroom chatter and the learning process

It is impossible to imagine that every student in a classroom can achieve subject matter competency as a result of the direct instruction given by any one person. Learning styles, special needs, primary languages, and cultural perceptions all come into play in the acquisition of information, and no single teacher can address every aspect of students’ diverse learning needs.

Some students process the excitement they feel when they hear new ideas by sharing their thoughts with others. New ideas trigger the need to share a thought with another participant. Teachers whisper, write a quick note to a friend, or engage in a quick side conversation. This behavior is more characteristic of how some individuals process new information than of a malicious intent to disrupt a learning environment.

One strategy for quieting side conversations is to ask all students how everyone is doing. The teacher can then wait to hear students’ thoughts and ideas.

Whatever the reason, side conversations should be seen as indicators that something is breaking down in the learning process – and it may well be tied to issues of gender, culture, language, or ability – rather than a deliberate attempts to disrupt.

Summary

Educators learn firsthand the one great reality about effective democratic classrooms management; when power is shared, there is no management by quick fixes. Equitable, democratic management is a process rather than a series of tricks. It consists of good communication, patience, trust, being willing to try another idea when the last one did not work, keeping calm in the face of anger and patience. Positive relationship and positive interactions with students requires a genuine commitment of time to establish trust and to effectively address each student’s needs.