Research Link / Managing Culturally Diverse Classrooms

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Cultural diversity in U.S. public schools is growing. The U.S. Department of Education (2003a) found that 38.8 percent of public school students were minorities in 2000, up from 29.6 percent in 1986. In addition, the number of students who spoke a language other than English at home rose from 6.3 million in 1979 to 13.7 million in 1999 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003b).

These demographic trends present new challenges for schools. Eighty percent of the teachers surveyed by Futrell, Gomez, and Bedden (2003) felt unprepared to teach a diverse student population. What guidance can research offer educators to help them manage culturally diverse classrooms? A number of recent reports shed light on both the complexity of the challenges and some promising approaches.

Peña (1997) gathered information through interviews with high-achieving and low-achieving Mexican American middle school students. He found that the high-achieving students in the study worked hard to gain school membership by downplaying their cultural identity. In contrast, the underachievers worked hard to keep their cultural identity and to strengthen their relationships with their home community; in school, they tended to misbehave and were not concerned about making good grades.

Peña concluded that promoting specific cultural traditions in school may not equally benefit all members of an ethnic group. High-achieving students generally viewed their cultural traditions as impediments to school achievement. Underachievers valued their cultural identity more, but this attitude often resulted in resistance to learning and conflict with teachers. Thus, although schools should strive to implement culturally relevant policies and procedures, raising the achievement of culturally diverse students may require a more sophisticated, reflective approach. Peña advised that

Understanding how to promote self-concept, acceptance, and belonging in school and in the external community seems important for improving students' academic achievement. This suggests that researchers and practitioners become more compassionate and knowledgeable of the relationship between formal and informal cultures, and the implications of this relationship for helping youths feel better about themselves, achievement, and their place in school.
The results of a 2002 study by Sheets confirmed the complexity of the relationship between classroom management and cultural differences. Sheets discovered that many Latino students perceived that teachers’ actions escalated disciplinary problems and believed that administrators used unfair and discriminatory disciplinary practices. As a result, these students often felt alienated. Rather than conform to expected behaviors, they often chose to satisfy their internal values by challenging teachers verbally. To control these exchanges, teachers focused on surface displays of misbehavior and often imposed inconsistent consequences for infractions. Sheets also found that positive feelings toward a teacher did not necessarily transfer to regular attendance or high academic achievement.

Lane-Garon (2001) suggested that teachers could improve their ability to deal with a diverse student population through training in interpersonal communication and problem solving. She found that many teachers lacked these skills and thus reacted to a student's rule infractions without understanding that the student may not yet be capable of following the rule.

Schwartz (2001) recommended that schools create a hospitable environment for students by developing culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate rules. Before disciplining a student, educators should demonstrate respect for the student's concerns by considering the reasons for the perceived misbehavior. Consequences for misbehavior should fit both the infraction and the student's self-esteem and academic and personal development needs. Schwartz also suggested that schools should keep parents apprised of their children's behavior, both good and bad, so that schools and parents can work together.

Romo (1998) noted that educating Latina girls presents special challenges for schools because parental attitudes, school policies, and the media often reinforce stereotypes of Latinas as submissive underachievers. Teachers can connect with Latina students by providing ample time for them to answer questions, creating a sense of community and participation in the classroom, and listening carefully and respectfully to students' questions and comments. Romo suggested that these classroom strategies be combined with counseling, parent involvement, and staff training to help teachers serve diverse students more effectively.

Jacobs and Reyhner (2002) found that American Indian and Alaskan Native families often resisted pressure from schools to assimilate their children into the school culture. Their parents' resistance often fostered students' ambivalent attitudes toward schooling or even antischool, oppositional identities. These researchers found that schools must change to welcome these students' cultures. They suggested that teachers reach Native American students through a constructivist and experiential approach that centers on the community and environment, thereby giving students opportunities to take an active role in their education.

The researchers all seem to agree that in today's diverse classrooms, teachers and administrators must take time to understand the differences among cultures, listen to students to gain an understanding of some of the root causes of perceived misbehavior, and ensure fairness and dignity among all students.

References


