

**Managing diversity:
Strategies for effective
education in a diverse
classroom**

PAPERS ON TEACHER TRAINING AND MULTICULTURAL/INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

This series of documents has the objective of making known significant experiences about teacher training for education in multicultural contexts. It has been produced by the IBE's Project Basic Education for Participation and Democracy: Key Issues in Human Resources Development (Teachers and Multicultural/ Intercultural Education), financed by the Government of Italy.

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**Managing diversity: Strategies for effective education
in a diverse classroom**

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KEYWORDS: teacher training — diversity — students' attitudes — teachers' attitudes — perceptions — values — curricular restructuring — safe learning environment — classroom dynamics.

SYNTHESIS: As we become increasingly sensitive to the diverse populations within our society, one of the most important challenges facing educators today is how to foster mutual respect and understanding in the classroom.

1. BACKGROUND

As an increasing number of issues of diversity arise, whether they be related to culture, gender and ethnicity, there is a growing concern among educators about how to deal with these issues in the classroom so that all students in this diverse student body feel included, rather than marginalized, because of their differences or “otherness”. Creating a safe and comfortable learning environment means that all students feel they have a place and a voice in the classroom, and that they can express themselves without fear, thus realising that their experiences are valid and that their contributions are valuable.

The primary challenge confronting both the student and the teacher is ethnocentrism. One of the main goals of education is to learn about others and learn *from* other. However, as Raúl Gagliardi and Paula Bernadini Mosconi point out in their article, ‘Teacher training for multicultural education in favour of democracy and sustainable development: the territorial approach’:

One of the main problems for mutual understanding and tolerance is ethnocentrism. People who think that the only ‘normal way of thinking’ is their ‘own culture’s way of thinking’ are unable to accept other cultures.

Ironically, ethnocentrism remains a problem even in light of the growing emphasis on multiculturalism. Worse yet, the problem has moved beyond resistance to other cultural values, and now includes resistance to racial, ethnic, sexual and religious differences. This resistance has devastating effects on classroom dynamics.

All of us, of course, expect and hope that our classrooms are safe spaces for students to speak. The expectation is that if we as teachers and role models treat each of our students with equal respect, our students will treat each other in kind. Unfortunately, this is not the case. We live in a world where difference is feared, ridiculed and disparaged, to the extent where violence is sometimes inflicted upon ‘the other’.

The question is, what can educators do to overcome students silencing each other in the classroom? What measures can we take to effectively manage issues of hostility and violence in order to foster an atmosphere of open-mindedness and acceptance? How can we encourage

understanding and respect not only within the walls of our classrooms but also between all members of the community beyond the institutional walls?

As teachers, our challenge is twofold. We must ensure our students feel safe; and at a deeper level, to raise student and teacher awareness of the aforementioned. In order to address these complex challenges, we must devise strategies to engage in an ongoing dialogue where we can explore our prejudices and attempt to move beyond them.

2. BARRIERS TO DIVERSITY

Although the main factors contributing to a sense of 'other' are related to ethnicity, culture, race or religion, a sense of difference may also stem from such variables as gender, appearance, or socio-economic class (see Table 1). All of these may create common situations that arise in a diverse classroom.

Let us begin by identifying some common situations that arise. The following examples are drawn from actual occurrences at the public school and university levels:

- a teacher is unaware of how cultural differences regarding education influence students' participation;
- a teacher allows certain students to dominate class discussions, thus silencing the other students;
- a student makes a sexist remark which alienates other students;
- a student wears a T-shirt which bears a homophobic remark or diagram;
- a teacher or student only addresses students of a particular sex (whether male or female);
- a student denounces or ridicules the gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity or religion of a particular student.

As we can see from the aforementioned examples, both educators and students are guilty of these negative behaviours. Teachers have a responsibility — whether they themselves engage in these behaviours, or whether they let them go unchecked — the results are equally damaging. These situations do more than create pockets of tension; they often set a tone in the classroom where

students will become disengaged from the learning process. Let us now look more closely at two of these examples, and discuss strategies to effectively manage them should they occur.

The first one, “a teacher is unaware of how cultural differences regarding education influence students’ participation” which concerns culture and learning, and specifically, that has to do with cultural interpretations of what constitutes class participation. Here in the United States, students are accustomed to being vocal in class. In a multi-cultural or diverse classroom, of course, there are students from countries where the student is discouraged from active participation. In fact, their role as student is to passively receive the instructor’s knowledge, (which is being poured into them). A teacher with no awareness of cultural difference, or knowledge of how culture affects learning might perceive this student as being passive and disinterested.

A strategy in this situation would involve an active role on the part of the teacher. Educators must be keen observers of student behaviour and interaction. Look for signs of student discomfort. In a situation described above, discretely ask questions to discover the cause of the student’s reticence or silence. By asking questions, you not only come closer to finding reasons behind a student’s behaviour, but you also show the student that you are concerned and interested in him or her. Thus so you establish a rapport, and at the same time create an opportunity for confidence building. This also opens a dialogue between the teacher and student. Together they can search for other ways to get the student more involved in class activities and discussions. This situation also signals the need to raise awareness of the role of culture in education.

The second example, wherein a teacher allows certain students to dominate class discussions, thus silencing the other students, ‘in this case relates to alienation as a result of gender discrimination, and occurred in a graduate seminar class consisting of 12 males and 3 females. In it, the women had to struggle to get their comments heard in the class, yet the male professor never curbed the dominant male speakers. Although at the graduate level here in the United States, the most enlightened professors strive for the role of facilitator, and thus must observe closely the student’ interactions with one another and watch out for those who are silent, it is unfortunately not always the case.

The professor either consciously or unconsciously failed the female students by not carefully facilitating the proceedings. At best, he failed to provide equity in the class, and at worst,

was highly insensitive to the female members of his seminar. The three women left the course feeling alienated and frustrated, and were not motivated to learn nor to read critically. As a result, by being silenced, they felt they were not a part of the class, and literally had no voice. These were all graduate women students -- imagine how this type of marginalization would affect younger students, perhaps unsure of their worth and identity.

Now that we have looked at two examples of frequent sources of conflict and tensions which stem from difference, and have discussed the damaging effects this can have on the recipients of this negative behaviour and on the class dynamics in general, we can offer some suggestions to facilitate awareness, openness and understanding.

3. STRATEGIES TO MANAGE DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

FIRST STEP: TEACHER TO TEACHER

We must engage in a process that simultaneously involves an internal and external approach. This means starting from within with a self-reflective journey that explores and defines our own biases. One way to do this would be through working groups or experiential workshops. With a clear and positive sense of one's own identity, one can appreciate both the similarities and differences between oneself and others, making, one hopes, the differences less threatening, this awareness then will enhance the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom, and will foster a more positive environment and provide a richer learning experience.

The following suggestions are by no means comprehensive, however they offer a point of departure for more dialogue and more ideas.

- Develop an awareness of your own biases and how these affect your classroom and your relationship with your students;
- Initiate and attend regular discussion groups for educators, students and staff, that target philosophical issues regarding diversity, such as how our perceptions, values and beliefs influence and create a frame in our classroom. Hence the need for a keen awareness of our own biases and how these can impact our classroom environment (Pinderhughes, 1989, xi);

- Monitor conflicts that arise in the classroom — pay attention to what led each particular incident and how it was dealt with, what the outcome was, and how it affected the students and the subsequent learning environment over the long-term;
- Create a ‘place’ for ongoing discussions that students, educators and can go to when issues arise that appear harmful and unmanageable;
- Train educators and staff using videotaped vignettes of situations that occur, followed by brainstorming sessions to arrive at positive solutions to these problems;
- Initiate experiential workshops and exercises stressing the need for solutions that will lead to growth and understanding, rather than silence and alienation.

SECOND STEP: TEACHER TO STUDENTS

- Select readings and materials, and design a curriculum which reflect a multitude of backgrounds so that it better meets the needs of a diverse student body;
- Observe issues of power in the class — who is speaking and who is silent. Be an active facilitator to ensure that all your students have a voice in their class;
- Reach out to the silent students — speak to them outside of class to discover the reasons behind their silence, and together, devise strategies to get the student more involved;
- Make an issue of conflict a ‘teachable moment’¹;
- Above all, treat each student as an individual deserving of respect, not as a representative of a group.

4. BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

While our immediate goal must be to initiate an immediate, fundamental change in our classrooms today, we must also look ahead to the future, and look beyond our own classrooms. We must look

¹ I first learned of the ‘teachable moment’ during a teacher training workshop for teaching assistants at Syracuse University. The idea is to turn a negative occurrence in the classroom into an opportunity for learning by talking through the conflict, rather than ignoring it in order to ‘avoid’ further discomfort.

for ways to make this change sustainable. For a change of this dimension to occur, we must establish links with other educational institutions. Diversity goes beyond institutional and geographical boundaries. Thus, in addition to our work “at home” it is necessary to see what’s going on elsewhere. What are other universities and schools doing to grapple with the challenges we face in today’s classroom? One way to open a dialogue with other educational institutions would be to create and attend conferences at different institutions, and to visit other schools and engaging in informal discussions with other educators and students.

These discussions can revolve around the sharing of experiences, restructuring the curriculum so that it reflects our diverse society, and encourage new ideas on how to incorporate and address these issues in an interdisciplinary manner. By continuing our dialogue on a larger scale and sharing our experiences, we can learn from one another, and devise and implement strategies for our classrooms which reflect our world today.

5. CONCLUSION

As educators, we have a responsibility to our students. For change to occur, our awareness must be raised at all levels. Effective learning cannot take in a classroom where tensions first, arise and second, are then overlooked in silence. We must become role models by embracing difference and creating an atmosphere of mutual respect. By taking a proactive approach to diversity we can communicate our commitment to supporting all members of our classroom and move away from the ethnocentric attitudes which have dominated our educational institutions.

We must make it our mission to penetrate areas of resistance and silence, raise awareness about different identifies and communities, and encourage mutual understanding and respect. As educators, we can help each other and our students to overcome ethnocentrism by developing an appreciation for and an understanding of the larger contextual issues of gender, race, culture and ethnicity. By recognising that life circumstances are vastly different in their scope of meaning and context, we can begin to draw on the diversity of our student body. In this way, we can enrich and enhance the learning experience not only for our students, but also for ourselves.

ADDENDUM

As a response to issues of diversity, the Teaching Assistant Training Program at Syracuse University has created a university-wide Diversity Taskforce. The taskforce is comprised of a member of the Graduate School Teaching Assistant Training Program, volunteer teaching fellows and graduate students. The primary goal of the taskforce is to create and implement practical strategies to prepare teaching assistants to teach in a diverse classroom. The wider scope of the taskforce is to begin an ongoing dialogue throughout the campus, with a focus on our individual perceptions, attitudes and beliefs in the attempt to raise awareness at all levels.

My warmest thanks to Stacey Lane Tice, the TA Program staff At Syracuse University, and to those on the Diversity Taskforce.

Table 1. Sources of difference:

race	behavioural style
religion	sex (gender, sexual identity)
ideology	age
nationality	size
ethnicity	family constellation
appearance	occupation
body structure	socio-economic class

(Source: Pinderhuges, 1989)

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