

## Sensitivity to Classroom Diversity among Teachers of Minority Children in the United States

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### Abstract

*The landscape of classrooms in the United States is undeniably changing. Schools and teachers are seeing more diversity of learners in terms of culture, race, language, traditions, family systems, and socio-economic status and special needs children. These changes affect the conversations and human interactions teachers have to make education more meaningful and students successful. Whereas diversity is a strength and enhances the school and learning community, it can also present challenges to those who may not embrace it. According to Banks (2007), the intricacies of cultural differences could lead to potential misunderstandings and even conflict. The purpose of this article is two-fold: 1) To explore effective tools for navigating diverse classroom environments and empowering educators to be culturally responsive to the needs of the learners. 2) Expound the role of teacher sensitivity as they work and interact in highly diverse classroom environments.*

### What is Cultural Sensitivity?

Cultural sensitivity is “the ability to discriminate and experience cultural differences” (Hammer, Bennet & Wiseman, 2003). A clearer understanding of sensitivity would be that of people being aware of cultural differences and be willing to modify their behavior as an indicator of respect for people of other cultures. There is an increase in diversity in institutions of learning in the United States. This diversity is changing the texture of the nation’s classrooms and presents both challenges as well as opportunities to all stakeholders in education including administrators, educators, and learners. This change in the landscape of the classroom mandates that teachers respond effectively. Besides having the knowledge of the concepts, the theories, the principles and practices that undergird cultural sensitivity in education,, teachers need to examine and clarify their own racial and ethnic attitudes and develop the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed to work effectively using cultural sensitivity with students from diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, language and social-class backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 2007). The experience of both the authors from different corners of the world- one from Kenya and the other from India feel that cultural sensitivity transforms the environment and learning in the classroom so that all students become recipients of the knowledge, the attitudes, and skills needed to become active and responsible citizens.

### Why is cultural sensitivity in the classroom important?

As schools become more diverse so should our response and embrace of diversity. The change in the cultural environment in the classroom has mandated for equity based practices to encourage achievement of all students. For years, minority students have fared poorly in their academic achievement. Many initiatives have been started to address this gap in achievement, but the challenge remains. For instance, The No Child Left Behind law did not help to bridge the gap for this group of students. School districts today are trying their very best to bridge this gap. However systemic problems like poverty, funding, lack of technology in minority school districts have prevented them from moving ahead and preparing students to become successful future citizens. Hence, cultural sensitivity in our schools is still important in our school today.

### How might educators create a culturally sensitive classroom environment?

One way is to provide students with ample evidence that people that do not look like they are at the core people just like them. A teacher can promote this viewpoint by promoting an environment of learning from one another, rather than encouraging students to notice the differences in values and beliefs. Besides tailoring classroom activities to encouraging students to be more sensitive to other cultures, teachers need to help

students respect and appreciate their own culture and heritage. Minority students may sometimes feel the need to hide their cultural norms, behaviors, and traditions in order to fit in with the majority culture. Lynch (2012) says this behavior could interfere with the minority student's emotional growth and social development, which in turn results in poor academic performance. Being sensitive to this behavior using culturally centered instructional approaches can help facilitate pride in their community and culture. The teacher could provide opportunities for students to investigate the unique facets of their community.

As educators look at the global landscape of their classrooms, educators need to understand and be aware of what is involved by sensitivity in a multiethnic classroom. Hidalgo suggests that teachers need to look into themselves and begin understanding and accepting neighbors, and the community that is different from them. Essentially, "one begins by becoming sensitive and appreciative of individual differences, without becoming judgmental" (Diaz, 1993). Across the United States, students of various cultures and ethnicities are learning to work and live together while maintaining their own cultural heritage. This dual search often confuses students and causes anxiety as they try to find their own identity. Teachers must first begin by encouraging students by first discovering and acknowledging individual and cultural differences and then helping students focus on the common aspects of their cultures.

### **Recommendations for practice**

Educators can demonstrate cultural sensitivity when they create a respectful multicultural climate in the classroom. Morris and Mims (1999) list four ways for teachers to become sensitive to the diversity in their classrooms:

1. Surround students with a classroom that reflects the diversity of the classroom: The use of pictures, books, artifacts encourages conversation. This encourages students to dialogue and deliberate encouraging respect for different perspectives and worldviews.
2. Involve all students: Depending on the grade level various activities can be taught. However, racial and ethnic stereotypes must not be used, as there is more than one way to view and understand a particular event or tradition. The concept of dialogue and deliberation for any strategy encourages respect and acceptance another culture.
3. Make a place for the Special Needs and EL students: Being sensitive to a diverse classroom includes being sensitive to the Special needs and EL student. Find ways and strategies to include the special needs as well as the EL student in all activities of the classroom including the multicultural.
4. Create a culturally sensitive classroom library: Build a library of multiethnic authors and books that can be used in all areas of classroom instruction. Being sensitive would require books that are selected to focus not only on the cultural differences but also on the similarities.

Carol Tomlinson (2012) suggests that giving access to all students in the classroom involves "accepting human differences as not just normal, but desirable" Teachers are encouraged to craft lesson plans that encourage students how to construct the meaning of what is learning and also support making meaning in multiple ways (Gay, 2000). Dweck (2007) encourages teachers to provide all students with equal access to excellence so that all students can succeed. He encourages teachers to have a growth mindset respecting their backgrounds, race, and culture. This approach encourages students to be respectful and responsive to what each student brings to the classroom. Tomlinson (2012) encourages teachers to create a rigorous learning environment with high expectations for all students in the classroom. She encourages teachers to design lessons that are relevant to the student's life experiences and challenge students towards excellence.

Implementing culturally sensitive instruction involves using communication strategies, cooperative learning and understanding the different learning styles of multi ethnic and culturally diverse students.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural sensitivity is a process and the outcomes enriching to the learners and educators as well as to the classroom environment. Teachers in a culturally sensitive classroom need to engage in acts that demonstrate a strong belief in the learners and their potential such as in providing opportunities that some children in the classroom may never have. When a child lives in a constricted universe, ruts come to look like the horizon. Thus, teachers should support the children as they navigate their journey towards success. Teachers can bridge

the gulf between the students nowhere and somewhere, the world of their past and the world of their future because the gulf is wide- and their future is in the teacher's hands. This requires a commitment to sensitivity and persistence with sensitivity. Do teachers have that? The answer is a resounding YES. That is how teachers can change our classrooms with sensitivity and equal access for all students - one child and one classroom at a time.

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