

Effective Diversity Practices in the Classroom – Lisa Quigley

Today's interactive classrooms are led by teachers who strive to create a classroom environment where students feel safe and comfortable with being themselves. The teachers of today not only recognize the diversity of gender, race, size, learning styles, and ability levels...they celebrate it. Today's classrooms mimic the real world and the diversity within them enhances curriculum and increases the opportunities for students to grow socially and emotionally. Teachers need to take advantage of diversity by taking time to understand the backgrounds and needs of their students, so that every student can reach their learning potential. One of the many perks of a career in teaching is that you never have the same day twice and interaction with your students and their families will always provide opportunities for you to grow both personally and professionally. Self-evaluation becomes a major part of this job if you want to be good at it. If you want to find out how to make things better in your classroom, you start by looking at what you could be doing better.

Plants need varying amounts of sunlight and water. Some plants need their blooms removed in order to bloom again, while others just sprout up on their own and they don't seem to need much attention at all. Children are like plants because they, too, have different needs in order to grow socially and academically. And, there are those children, who just seem to do everything right and don't need too much guidance from you. The first thing I do during the summer, when I get my class list, is go through each of my student's cumulative folders with a fine tooth comb. As soon as I meet them, I want to know more. I ask each parent to write a letter to me at the beginning of the year to share special family traditions and how they see their child as a learner. My students create "ME" bags and share them at the beginning of the year. Administering a learning styles inventory to find out how your students learn, can be very helpful and insightful for both you and your students.

I refer to my class as a family and constantly remind my students that we take care of and worry about each other, just like any other family would do for its members. When we pair up for activities, my higher level students know that they will be expected to help those who need help and they don't complain. I teach that life isn't always fair and that sometimes we won't all get the same treatment. For example, my students understand that Michael needs to get up out of his seat more often than normal. They realize that he may make a few strange noises that seem quite funny at first, but Michael won't be punished for it and no one will laugh at him. They know this because it's what I model: tolerance and patience. While most students seem to mesh with the majority and can adopt the behaviors we consider acceptable in the classroom, there are those who don't and will never be able to fit the mold. That mold should not be the deciding factor

of a student's success or failure. I can't change Michael's habits, so I have to work with him the way he is and try to help him gain a little more control over how he behaves so that each day he is able to find success in our classroom on his level. Another student requiring a teacher's insight is Jared. Jared's temper tantrums will only escalate if I treat him just like everyone else. I have to know what works for him and what makes him tick. I recognize he needs cool down time - not me getting in his face to prove that I'm in control. My approach makes or breaks how he handles himself. Along with Jared is his classmate Jordan, who needs a teacher's special understanding on how she comprehends. Jordan may seem like she is in another world to someone visiting our classroom, but her doodles on her page actually help her focus. I can't lose my patience because I have to redirect her 4 or 5 times in a half hour time period. She is probably more frustrated with herself than I am with her. I think she would like to have more self control, but something hasn't clicked for her, yet. It's my job to know these types of things about each of my students and to help them develop study skills and behavior choices to become more successful decision makers in the real world: not to make them fit a mold that only works for the classroom.

As teachers, we need to show students respect to gain their respect, even those worst behaved. Stay calm, set the example, and never yell - no matter how much you feel like doing it. You'll feel much worse than you did, and you'll lose the trust and respect of your students. Try to leave your personal problems at home, even though it's difficult. Remember that each child in your room could have started out their day much worse than you.

Children need boundaries; they want to know where the lines are that they aren't supposed to cross. It's okay to set an expectation and if it's not reached uphold the consequence set in place. Your students will learn that you are a fair person and that while you have whole class expectations, you will understand their differences and treat them accordingly.

Classroom diversity affects a class reward system. The kids that always behave will behave whether you have a reward system in place or not. It's the kids that struggle with behavior that you should target with your reward system. When determining your behavioral standards, consider the differentiation among your students and make it possible for the strugglers to reach your goals. Some have struggled for so long that poor choices have become a bad habit they just can't break. Some may feel isolated because they simply feel different and they don't feel they "fit in" because of experiencing divorce, wearing glasses, obesity, shyness, economic status, skin color, appearance, low grades, etc. Their behaviors may be the way they cope with their feelings. Everyone wants to feel special and teachers have a golden opportunity to give that gift to each of their students.

Compliment students often. Notice what they do well, not just what they don't do. Never make them feel they can't do something. For instance, I use sticks with names on them to randomly select students to participate to ensure that I'm not always choosing the smartest or most outgoing students to respond to questions. Be conscious of how you are listening and responding to each of your children. They will tend to mimic you. Show particular restraint in using sarcasm when responding to students. Give students "think time" to answer a question before moving on. Don't interrupt students or allow them to be interrupted by their peers. Record students' comments on thinking maps or charts to refer to during reviews of lessons and give the students' credit for their thinking. Make each student's contribution to the class equally important and find ways to let them know you value each individual in your class.

Include books, poems, plays, and video excerpts that include all races, and highlight significant events from various cultures. Use literature as a tool for students to make connections with other cultures, careers, and hobbies they are interested in. During independent work time or during brain breaks, use background music from various cultures. Allow time for students to share how they think about things based on their culture or personality and model acceptance of varying ideas. Teach ways to praise, and discourage criticism of ideas. When criticism is appropriate, don't allow it to be hurtful or of a teasing nature. Center class celebrations around varying cultures and allow students to help plan those events.

Give students many opportunities to evaluate themselves and you. Ask them what they like about lessons and the class environment you've created and what they would like to change. Share information about yourself. Be human and don't claim to be perfect. When working cooperatively, make sure you group students heterogeneously. Regroup students often to allow everyone to get to know each other. Listen carefully to group conversation to make sure it's appropriate and kind. When conversation isn't appropriate, use this cooperative learning atmosphere as a teachable moment.

Teachers should welcome the challenge of understanding how their students learn, change their lessons to best meet their students' needs, utilize the many technological resources available to us today to help us go beyond a textbook, and address the needs of visual learners, auditory learners, and kinesthetic learners. When teachers match their instructional strategies with the individual learning styles of their students, then learners will blossom academically and teachers will make a positive impact on all students. Rather than stay in our comfort zones, we should use a variety of teaching styles and methods, mixed with a whole lot of love and patience to include all students.