

Diversity in the Classroom

Rebecca McDermott, George Jenkins High School

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free . . .": so says Lady Liberty at Ellis Island. America has been called a "melting pot," a place where people of all backgrounds can live a life of freedom. Although our country's population is indeed diverse, the "melting pot" analogy is a flawed one, for it implies that all the diverse cultures should somehow blend together into one. I prefer to think of America as a salad bowl -- a place where diversity and individuality don't disappear when we mix ingredients together, but rather a place where lettuce, tomato, cucumber, and onion come together to make the best tasting salad, but still retain their own identities. I like the taste of each vegetable on its own, but prefer a forkful with several different ingredients.

America's schools are no different. As an educator, I have taught students of many different backgrounds and cultures. Throughout my eleven-year teaching career, my class rosters have often read like the attendance record at the United Nations. I have taught a Somalian princess, Palestinian refugees, and children from Australia, Vietnam, El Salvador, Mexico, Korea, Israel, Albania, Jamaica, Laos, India, Iran, Yugoslavia, and many other nations. And, of course, I have taught American-born children of every race and faith.

How then, does a teacher create a classroom environment that not only enriches each child and encourages unity, but also celebrates those differences in culture that make each child unique? I do not have a definitive answer. Like all humans, I am still a "work in progress" and I learn a little bit more each day. I can, however, share a few guidelines that have helped me in the classroom.

Educate yourself. A teacher who assumes that all of his/her students will recognize cultural, literary or historical references familiar to her is doing a huge disservice to her students. Become more informed about the history and culture of groups other than your own. I wish that I had taken the time to research the culture of my students before my first day in the classroom. I started my teaching career at age 22 at a Tampa middle school which had a student population whose socio-economic background was generally quite different from my own. My students lived in tenement-style housing surrounded with a culture of drugs and gangs. I was fortunate enough to have led a relatively privileged life -- I grew up in an upper middle class neighborhood, my parents always encouraged education, and they met all of my basic needs (and most of my wants). To say that I experienced a culture shock is putting it mildly. In To Kill a Mockingbird, Atticus Finch tells his young daughter Scout that "you never really understand a man until you've walked around in his shoes." I suggest getting into your car and driving around the neighborhoods that funnel students into your school.

Such an excursion could have prevented some of the problems I had during my first year of teaching. For example, I couldn't understand why students were not doing their homework. When a child is worried about whether or not his basic needs will be met (i.e. will there be food on the table for dinner?), homework is understandably not a priority. Some of these children were very skeptical of me. I didn't understand the

problems they faced daily. But more than that, I did not at first *try* to understand. Once I tried walking in their shoes, my attitude changed. As a result, I earned the respect of my students.

On another occasion, I had carefully planned a culminating activity for a unit on Romeo and Juliet by turning my classroom into the Capulet house for the party where Romeo and Juliet met. The students created masks in the Elizabethan style and brought foods that might have been served in Shakespeare's times. Unfortunately, it did not occur to me to account for the calendar. Had I educated myself on my students' cultures, I would have realized that I planned an activity with food during Ramadan, a time when my Muslim students had to fast from sun-up until sun-down. I had the best of intentions with this activity, but I had several students who were unable to participate. I have repeated this activity with my classes many times since, but now I always check the calendar and schedule it accordingly.

Allow time for the students to learn about each other and gain an appreciation for the diversity they bring to the classroom. Of course, in this time of standardized tests and rigorous curriculum standards, some teachers feel overwhelmed. Not only must we prepare our students for standardized tests, but it is also our responsibility to ensure mastery of and adherence to the standards of our discipline's curriculum. We must not forget that celebrating diversity should be a part of the mix. As part of the middle school English curriculum, for example, I needed to do a unit on research skills. Students were supposed to do extensive research in the media center and report their findings in an essay. I worked with the geography teacher on my team to create a wonderful inter-disciplinary project. We asked each student to choose a country. Students researched their chosen country: its people, customs, holidays, religious views, standard of living, educational standards, and eating habits. Each student prepared a paper (complete with proper research citation) and presented his project in class. This unit both met my curriculum standards and taught the students a valuable lesson about diversity.

Bring different people into the classroom as resources that students might be able to connect with. As part of the eighth grade curriculum, I taught a unit on The Diary of Anne Frank. Because I was teaching at a school with a predominately Christian student population, I contacted the local Jewish community center and was able to arrange a Holocaust survivor as a guest speaker. The day before the speaker arrived, I gave every student with brown eyes a star to wear for the class period, and I denied privileges to the star-wearers that I gave to the students without the stars. As a result my few Jewish students felt included, and my Christian students learned something about prejudice. When the guest speaker was talking, all of my students (especially those who had worn stars the previous day), regardless of religion, felt a kinship with her.

If you teach a subject in which you are able to do so, include a wide variety of authors or other distinguished people from various backgrounds. As an English teacher, I try to incorporate more writers than just, as one of my college professors joked, "dead white guys." My students during my first two years of teaching really related to the works of Maya Angelou. I was able to meet my curriculum goals of teaching the elements of non-fiction through the works of someone with whom these

students could empathize. Students who normally were not “readers” not only read, but read enthusiastically.

Give exams that recognize students' diverse backgrounds and special interests.

We all have students we remember long after they leave our classrooms. When I worked in very cosmopolitan Fairfax County, Virginia, I taught one such child, a Palestinian refugee who was such a behavior problem that a few teachers refused to have him in their classrooms. Taking the time to talk with him after class, I learned that his childhood in a refugee camp had been traumatic and that he was clearly bored in class because he was extremely gifted. Accordingly, I pushed for him to be tested for the school's gifted program. After he took the test I was disappointed and shocked to learn that he did not have the IQ required for acceptance into the program. After some further investigation with the guidance counselor, I learned that, although this child had been in America for only two years and English was not his native language, he had managed to come within a few points of being accepted into the gifted program! I pushed a bit more and convinced the administration to have him retested in his native language. Of course, he passed with flying colors. I do not know what happened to this child when he moved on to high school, but I do know that after he was moved to the appropriate level classes in middle school, he spent much less time in the assistant principal's office. Sometimes, just the few extra minutes it takes to ensure that each student is given a fair chance to succeed can make a critical difference.

Finally, and most important, never tolerate bullying, teasing, and other put-down behavior at any time in the classroom. Implement a "zero tolerance" for anything that is disrespectful, hurtful, or intolerant of diversity. Of course, this guideline is not merely inspirational - it is a cardinal rule. I try to create an environment in which each student is not only encouraged, but expected, to share his thoughts and ideas. I have been rewarded by learning more about other religions, other countries, and other cultures from my students than I could ever learn from textbooks. Asking questions of them and giving them the chance to educate me and their fellow students makes them so much more willing to do what is required of them in the classroom. Slurs, bullying, and disrespect are absolutely forbidden in my classroom. Teachers must provide students with an environment that is conducive to learning. If a student feels uncomfortable, unsafe, or not respected, then his chance of success in that class dramatically decreases.

In summary, I believe that every classroom teacher can and should appreciate and celebrate the differences among students' backgrounds rather than pretend these wonderful differences do not exist. The recipe is simple. First, take the time to educate yourself about different cultures. Next, through creative assignments, effective guest speakers, and carefully chosen material, expose your students to people who are different from them. Add fair assessment tools and be a model of respect for everyone. The result is an environment in which teachers teach and students learn.