

The Importance of Culture-Based Education

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One of the aspects in my life that has had the most significant impact on how I view educators and the school setting has been experiencing in my own skin what is like to be an English Language Learner. Every ELL has a unique experience, some more positive than others. I don't think mine was particularly negative, but it was quite challenging and sometimes a very lonely journey. First of all, not only was I learning a new language, but I was also a foreigner in this country. I didn't quite fit into the middle school where I was enrolled even though the teachers tried to make me feel included and welcomed. It was still difficult to acquire the new language, succeed academically, make friends and live a normal middle school student's life if there is such a thing. The few teachers who went the extra mile in helping me learn English and made special accommodations to help me learn academic content, really inspired me to one day pay them back by helping other students in my situation. I believe teachers should be aware of students' background culture and build upon their cultural differences to help students acquire English in a more meaningful and natural way, empower students, and prepare their students to participate in a multilingual and multicultural world.

For many minority children school and home have a significant mismatch. Students feel as if they were living in two different worlds, one in the morning and a different one in the evenings. In school it's appropriate to raise your hand before talking, throw away leftover food in the cafeteria, and sit "criss-cross apple sauce" for reading time, where at home they might get scolded for throwing food in the trash and don't know even know what apple sauce is! These are just a few simple examples of

how different life can be at these two places. It is okay to have different activities and rules for each setting; when it's not okay is when students can't relate to anything in the curriculum and therefore cannot make any connections to what they are learning.

It's important for teachers to get to know their students at a more personal level and not make any assumptions on each student's individual culture. Teachers must be aware of their students' primary languages, background culture, interests, and hobbies to construct a curriculum that is relevant to their students' lives. When students can make a connection to what they are learning at school they will be more engaged in the lesson and will have a better comprehension on the concepts being taught. Teaching and embracing the students' cultures can be embedded in the curriculum to enrich the lessons and to help students learn better. Debbie Zacarian (2013), the director for the Center for English Language Education and Advancing Student Achievement, makes a few recommendations for teachers working with English learners. She recommends that teachers help their students by connecting learning to socially relevant issues and building learning from students' personal, social, world, and cultural knowledge. She also recommends connecting students' learning to their literacy level, and explicitly telling students in terms they understand what they will be learning and what they will be doing to learn these objectives, and finally teaching students how to think to learn.

In addition to using students' culture and interest to shape the curriculum, school districts should offer more opportunities for students to have access for bilingual education. When primary home languages are respected and used in the classroom

for instruction, students have an easier time adjusting to school and have fewer barriers to access academic content. The Indian Nations At Risk Task Force found evidence that "schools that respect and support a student's language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students" (As cited in Reyhner, 1996, p. 10). As a result of, the Task Force recommended that schools should promote students' languages and cultures. It is not necessary for students to lose their primary language to learn English. In fact using the primary language for instruction in the classroom has been demonstrated in various studies that it improves student achievement. Acquiring a second language is easier when a student can use his or her development and knowledge of the primary language, "Many studies have shown that cognitive and academic development in L1 has a strong, positive effect on L2 development for academic purposes (Ovando & Combs, 2006, p. 135). Jim Cummins refers to this as the "common underlying proficiency" (As cited in Ovando & Combs, 2006, p.135). Students depend on their first language knowledge and transfer their knowledge to the second language. I firmly believe in UNESCO's findings that "It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is in his mother tongue" (1953, p. 11).

Building upon students' heritage language and culture does not only benefit students' academic success but also empowers them as individuals. A culturally responsive classroom environment allows students to feel respected and safe to learn and participate. Teachers should invest time to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust among the students. One way of creating a culturally responsive classroom

is by building upon the students' different cultures represented in the classroom. The teacher can embed the students' cultural heritage, knowledge, and practices in the curriculum instead of teaching them as isolated cultural awareness lessons. Thematic units constructed with the help of students' input is, a good way to embed their background knowledge and culture without treating culture and academic content as separate subjects. When I refer to students' cultures, I mean their individual home cultures, as in their "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Here I don't mean the typical cultural subjects such as celebrations, music, and foods. It is important to get to know the students and their particular funds of knowledge to create an efficient curriculum.

Not creating a positive environment where the non-mainstream children's culture is respected can have serious consequences. According to Navin Singh, having a mismatch between school and home can result in; teacher-student confrontation and miscommunication, hostility, alienation, poor self esteem, and school failure (2011). Students should feel that even though their cultures might not be the standard or norm, they are accepted and welcomed in the school. Students who feel alienated at school might develop a sense of cultural embarrassment and distrust with their teachers. In the words of Geneva Gay, "The validation, information, and pride that culturally appropriate pedagogy generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating" (Singh, 2011, p. 18). Students who feel their language and culture are valued not only perform better academically, in addition they grow up to be more independent and active citizens ready to participate in their communities.

Building upon the different students' background culture and knowledge to construct the classroom's curriculum helps prepare students to become respectful citizens of today's global community. Establishing a strong sense of respect towards other's heritage language and culture among the students from an early age is necessary to prepare students for today's pluralistic society in the United States and around the world. Through cooperative learning and team building activities in the classroom, students can learn about each others' different cultures and learn to

respect and value their differences. Sonia Nieto recommends treating discrimination in school by cooperative learning and the inclusion of social justice issues within the academic content instead of "one-shot" lessons delivered sporadically lessons throughout the year (as cited in Ovando & Combs, 2006, p. 210). Eliminating biases and prejudice in the classroom might not be completely possible, but we can expose students to carefully examine their feelings and watch carefully how these pre-conceived ideas can hinder our relationships inside and outside of the classroom. One of my favorite ways of building trust and sense of community in the classroom is by having special read aloud moments in the classroom, of carefully selected pieces of children's literature that promote multicultural views and languages. Exposing students to different samples of children's literature that touch on these sensitive subjects and then discussing them at an appropriate student level can bring benefits to everyone in the classroom, not only emotionally but academically as well. Teachers can be a source of information that liberates students from old pre-conceived ideas and biases that they might have been carrying from home. This can be a liberating process for the students as they learn to respect themselves and their peers for who they are as individuals.

I believe teachers have a responsibility as educators, mentors, and role models to get to know their students cultural background and use it to construct their classroom's curriculum. First of all students of non-stream cultures might be learning English as their second language and allowing them to use and pull on their knowledge from their primary language helps their learning and softens their transition. In addition to

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this, when students view their cultures and language being promoted at school they feel included in their school community empowering them and creating a sense of cultural heritage pride. As a result, they grow up to be active community members who know they have a voice and can offer an important contribution to their society. Exposing students to the different cultures represented in their classrooms allows them to view the similarities and differences they share creating a sense of tolerance. Culturally appropriate education helps students reflect on social justice topics discussed in the classroom developing critical thinkers and liberates them from ignorance and fear. Teachers need to take the time to develop and modify their academic curriculum to include their students' different cultural background to create a more positive, and productive school experience for all children. ★

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