

Running Head: DIVERSITY IN THE INCLUSION CLASSROOM

Five Strategies to Address Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the Inclusive Classroom.

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### Abstract

Today's general education classrooms are becoming more and more diverse with both students with disabilities and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In order for teachers to effectively teach a classroom of diverse students, meeting each student's needs individually and successfully, effective research based strategies must be implemented. This article identifies five key strategies, that when implemented in the classroom and at the school level, can positively affect each student both academically and behaviorally in the inclusive diverse classroom. These key strategies are as follows: acknowledge student differences, connect with students' families, establish school-wide "cultural" collaboration, implement culturally responsive teaching, and establish mentors for students. For each of these school strategies, examples from the literature are provided that supports that the strategy is indeed effective. The strategies are followed by some advice on how the school together can best implement these key strategies.

### Five Strategies to Address Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the Inclusive Classroom.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, our school-age population is becoming increasingly diverse each year, yet the majority (90%) of our public school teachers are white non-Hispanic females. The Condition of Education 2006 reports that American schools are showing more growth and diversity. Their report found that "...42 percent of public school students were racial or ethnic minorities in 2003, markedly up from 22 percent in 1972" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p.5)

These public school teachers are expected to teach a diversified group of students including students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and students who may or may not have disabilities. In fact, according to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, it was reported that around 76.3% of students with disabilities are educated in the regular classroom for some part of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The inclusion of students with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom and the enrollment of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse has significantly increased over the past decade (Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad, 2003; Cartledge, Gardner III, & Ford, 2009).

Teachers who teach in inclusive and diverse classrooms must implement several key strategies in order to ensure that each student in that particular classroom truly feels like he/she belongs. This article identifies five key strategies, that when implemented, positively affect students with disabilities as well as students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Together school administrators, school guidance counselors, general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals must work to ensure the successful implementation of these key strategies.

**School Strategy # 1: Acknowledge there is a difference: We're not all the same**

In order to truly be an effective teacher, the teacher must acknowledge that each child in his/her classroom is different and unique. Just like every person has a fingerprint that is only identifiable with that particular person, each child has a different personality, feelings/behaviors, learning style, and characteristics that are distinctive for that specific child. The classroom teacher must meet each child at their point of need, which will in fact be a different “point of need” for every child. The teacher must be willing and able to adapt to the child and give that child what he/she needs. Some professionals may call this way of thinking “unfair”, but in all reality, the very definition of fairness is every person gets what he or she needs, not necessarily the same thing or the same amount. Educators must not confuse the concept of fairness with equality. A young child may tell you that fair means everyone should get the same thing; however an educator should know that fairness is when a child gets what he/she needs. There is a fundamental difference between a need and a want, school personnel must understand that the concept of fairness and equality are not synonymous (Lavoie, 1989). Equality means everyone gets the same and is treated as equal (Merriam-Webster dictionary, 2008). An example between the difference of fairness and equality is this: If a child needs to wear glasses in the classroom in order to see the notes on the board, fairness would be to ensure the child is able to wear his/her glasses; equality would mean that every child in the classroom was given glasses.

In order for a teacher to successfully distinguish the child's definition of fairness and the teacher's definition of fairness, the teacher must create and foster a nurturing and opening classroom environment for his/her students. The teacher must be responsible for developing a classroom that fosters the understanding and respect for individual differences and discusses what fairness means as a class openly with the students. A teacher might use the following

example to explain fairness: “it would be unfair to keep glasses from those who need them and equally unfair to make everyone wear glasses; it is my job, as a teacher to make sure everyone gets the help they need and that help will be different for each student” (Welch, 2000, p.38).

Research has shown that “...cultural differences have implications for human behavior” (Ogbu, 1982) and therefore these cultural differences between students do in fact take on a role in the classroom. Educators must acknowledge cultural differences in their classrooms or otherwise, the classroom becomes a place of isolation for the students’ communities and home life (Spindler, 1974). As diversity increases within our nation’s schools, it is imperative that teachers become more knowledgeable about the assumptions, characteristics, and norms of a range of cultures, while also understanding that within each culture and even family unit, there is individuality. In order to effectively educate a child from a diverse background, the teacher must understand the culture of that particular student, but also know the child’s individual attributes that may or may not align with the child’s culture. This challenge becomes two-fold when a child from a diverse background has a disability, which is a reality that all general educators will likely face and must effectively handle. Teachers can search the internet to obtain information about different cultures and disabilities; however, when looking up information, one wants to stick to websites that end with .org or .gov, since they are more credible sources than .com sites. Educators can even go to the bookstore or local library to find out about a particular student’s culture or disability. Without having a fundamental understanding of a child’s cultural and ethnic background and/or disability, the educator cannot effectively teach that student to his/her fullest potential. Every educator’s goal for their students should be for each child in their class to surpass greatness!

**School Strategy #2: Connect with students' families**

Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between families and school involvement: the more involved the families are with the school, the higher their children academically succeed. Family involvement is also a strong indicator of post school success (Becher, 1986; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burrow, 1995; Rasmussen, 1998), however most of the parental involvement literature relies on the deficit model; either parents participate in school-sanctioned ways or their children's education growth may suffer (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). In order for teachers and schools to connect with students' families, they must not function based upon their own "European American" culture because this in turns allows for students of different ethnic backgrounds to be viewed as the "subordinate culture" of the school (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004).

Family involvement must be viewed from an ecological perspective, taking in all aspects of a family's relationship to the school environment: roles, relationships, activities, and beliefs (Barton & Drake, 2003). Many families from diverse backgrounds are not taught the school cultural of communication and collaboration and therefore these families feel unsure of how to actively participate in their children's education at the school site. According to Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha, 2001, before family involvement can be deemed effective, schools must first address and meet the "...social, economic, and physical needs of their students' families" (p.26). This requires schools to be aware of community programs and businesses that can assist the school in meeting each family's needs. Once these basic needs are met, only then can true and successful family involvement take place.

Educators must think in color and outside the "norm" box when it comes to family involvement. Teachers must know the language spoken at home and ensure that all

communication is translated into the families “home” language. Also, schools must make an effort to seek out parents by traditional means of communication (flyers, announcements on the school’s marquee, etc.) and by nontraditional means of communication (radio, television, flyers at community churches, or local food stops, etc.). Educators must also be willing to connect with families outside of the typical school day; this may mean making home visits for families who have difficulty with transportation or child-care issues, talking to parents over the phone during unconventional hours to accommodate the parents’ work schedule, and possibly setting up parent-teacher conferences at a community-based site (Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Another component to establishing meaningful family involvement at school is “establishing a parent liaison to help develop and maintain regular home-school communication” (Cartledge, Gardner III, & Ford, 2009, p.154). For example: Ask a group of parents at your school who share similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the different groups of students at the school to help foster positive communication between all parents and faculty at the school site. The parent liaisons can greatly increase and improve parent/family and community involvement at your school site when supported by the school itself. When given the opportunity, parent liaisons can help train parents and provide information in order to encourage communication with parents/families and the community.

Educators should always begin parent communication by using positive statements about the child and should use community based liaisons to help foster and maintain positive family involvement whenever possible. Schools should establish parent education classes for parents to obtain more knowledge and skills about specific topics relating to their own needs (information about specific disabilities, availability of government funding opportunities, prenatal care

information, free or reduced after-care opportunities, training on how to effectively tutor your child in reading or math, etc.). Moreover, teachers should only send home homework assignments that reinforce a skill that a particular student has previously mastered. Doing so will lessen the chance of parents becoming frustrated trying to teach their child something that is new and that may not be well understood by the parent.

The following is an example of how my school was able to involve more parents during “Open House Night”: At the school I previously worked in, the special educators had experienced poor parent turn-out during open house night for the last several years. Last year we all decided it was vital for the parents of students with disabilities, to meet their student’s teachers and establish a meaningful connection with the teachers. Since our school has a large free and reduced lunch and minority population, we sent home flyers, in various languages, advertising a spaghetti dinner with desert during open house night and to “bring the entire family!” Each teacher signed up to bring something for the dinner and we even extended the hours for open house night from 5:30pm to 9:00pm. That year’s open house was a huge success. Parent turnout more than tripled and the teachers were able to meet the *whole* family of their students; which in turn better helped teachers understand each family’s need and priorities more effectively.

### **School Strategy #3: Establish school-wide “cultural” collaboration**

Mia Hamm, US Gold Medal Olympian, said “I am a member of a team, and I rely on the team, I defer to it and sacrifice for it, because the team, not the individual, is the ultimate champion.” Effective and meaningful collaboration is the glue that binds a successful inclusion program together. When a school site includes each person employed by the school, they together embody the school, yet each individual person is a separate but necessary part of the

school's body. As each person does his/her own part, it helps the school grow and become an effective place for all students to learn to their highest potential. A non-functioning person in the group can adversely affect the school's culture of collaboration. Teachers must be able to effectively communicate their needs and be willing to use a team problem solving approach to establish solutions to their unmet needs. "The purpose of collaborating is to achieve results that participants would be unable to accomplish working alone" (Garmston, 2007). Rainforth, York, and Macdonald (1992) defined collaborative teamwork as work accomplished equally and willingly by a group of people in a spirit of shared reward. Creating effective collaboration among all staff members at a school can be challenging; however Fullen (1991) found that the level and degree of successful educational change is a direct result of the extent to which teachers interact with one another. In order to be able to effectively communicate with each member on the collaborative team, the team must first learn and practice the following communication skills described by Salend (2005):

Listening carefully to others as they express their ideas, perspectives, concerns, and solutions; being tolerant of different viewpoints; using I statements when presenting your position, feelings, and perspectives; understanding culturally based differences in verbal and nonverbal communication; respecting confidentially; disagreeing respectfully; and being willing to compromise. (p.167)

Collaboration involves all persons who are involved at the school site. During collaborative planning, the team must always focus their efforts around the student and their family. Along with implementing effective collaboration techniques, schools must also ensure their school staff is "culturally proficient." According to Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell (1999, p.3), cultural proficiency is defined as "the policies and practices of an organization or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable the agency or person to interact effectively in culturally diverse environment." Many schools have the tools to make their staff "culturally proficient" at

their fingertips, but fail to use those resources. For example: Social Science teachers are very knowledgeable about specific cultures that they teach and could be a great resource to use when trying obtain information about a specific culture. Additionally, educators must rely on each other's knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity when dealing with a student whose culture is unfamiliar to them. Educators should ask around to see if anyone at that school is familiar with that particular culture or is from that particular cultural background. Many staff members including janitors, culinary staff, parent liaisons, guidance counselors, paraprofessionals, and teachers have cultural connections and resources, but do not openly share the information because the school's culture does not encourage the sharing and collaboration of different cultural attributes, characteristics, and norms. Schools must set up an environment where all types of collaboration are encouraged, especially cultural collaboration. Research has shown that schools who are culturally proficient, display higher levels of student achievement and lower rates of failures and dropouts than schools who are not deemed culturally proficient (Guerra & Nelson, 2007).

I believe a great way to learn about the different cultural backgrounds that school personnel have is to establish a "multicultural lunch and cultural awareness day" at the beginning of the school year. For this day to be truly effective the school must include *all* personnel at the school site and in the community; teachers, administrators, janitors, guidance counselors, parent liaisons, school psychologist, students' families, business and community partners, etc. Then ask for each person to bring a type of food that is a staple food in their culture and then share the food with the school's staff and briefly discuss their cultural roots and heritage. The "multicultural lunch and cultural awareness day" is a wonderful way for the staff and the school's community to "culturally unite" and learn about one another; it also allows teachers to

establish connections with school personnel and other members of the community who share the same culture as some of their students. After the school's "multicultural lunch and education day", staff members will be able to use each other as a resource if they encounter an issue with a student in their own classrooms that they believe to be more of a cultural issue rather than an academic or behavioral issue. To further foster cultural collaboration, the school can set up monthly multicultural lunch days or activities.

#### **School Strategy #4: Implement Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Educators must ask themselves "what is culturally responsive teaching?" To fully answer this question, educators themselves must become culturally receptive by making connections with their students as individuals while also understanding the cultural contexts that influence their interactions. Teachers must understand that "not all children of any given age have learned the same things; they cannot all be taught in the same place, much less the same things, at the same time" (Kauffman et al., 2005, p.3). Every teacher should meet each of their students at their point of need, regardless of where that point may lay. To do this, teachers need to implement culturally responsive, standards-based instruction (CRSBI), which is a teaching style that encompasses each student's cultural background, history, and current societal interests into daily standards-based instruction. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally responsive, standards-based instruction as a way of thinking that empowers students' academically, socially, emotionally, and politically by implementing cultural and historical references to communicate knowledge, teach skills, and change attitudes. There are five components to CRSBI and all five must be present in the classroom and each component must be an equal piece and work in sync together like a well fitted puzzle to be effective. The five components are: caring, communication, curriculum, instruction, and standards-based instruction.

The caring component is just simply that, ensuring that each student genuinely knows that you, as their teacher, really care about them both academically and personally. This component is established by the teacher's own attitudes, beliefs, and performance expectations for his/her students and how these ideas are conveyed to the class effectively. The teacher must strive to obtain and maintain a trusting relationship with each one of his/her students, especially since there is so much mistrust that exists in today's society (Jones, 2007). Classroom communication is another important aspect of CRSBI; it involves effectively communicating expectations and aspirations with both families and students. To do this, the teacher needs to know the "home" language of the students' families and work with other professionals in establishing proper and meaningful communication with these families. Educators need to have a concrete understanding of their students' communication styles and home literacy practices in order to effectively build off these practices in the classroom.

Curriculum, instruction, and standards-based instruction are all equally important components of CRSBI. When implementing CRSBI, a teacher must ensure that the curriculum being taught to the students contains culturally diverse content. Additionally, educators should have their classroom library filled with "culturally rich" books; these books should reflect the many different cultures across America and even the world. Instruction is based upon effective teaching strategies. Teachers must individualize their instruction to the students, making modifications and accommodations when needed; "educators are expected to respond to student diversity by providing differentiated instruction for students with cultural, linguistic, learning, and behavioral differences" (Welch, 2000 p.36). Differentiated instruction means using a variety of research based teaching and learning strategies to reach each learner's need (Friend & Bursuck, 2009). This is achieved by providing materials and learning tasks at mixed levels of

difficulty and with varying levels of instructional support, by the use of multiple grouping arrangements, student choice, and varied assessment strategies (Tomlinson, 2001). Culturally responsive educators build upon the prior knowledge of their students before introducing a new concept; these educators make sure they connect the concept to something that is familiar to the child. By activating prior knowledge, educators increase student engagement and skill mastery. Culturally responsive teaching takes place when educators implement appropriate evidence-based instructional approaches that have been validated with diverse populations (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

The final component of CRSBI is standards-based instruction, which takes the instruction component one step further, ensuring that each student is mastering the grade level benchmark for his/her grade. To ensure grade level benchmarks are being mastered, educators must continuously monitor their students' academic progress. To do this, educators should use curriculum based assessments (CBA); CBA is a "method of measuring the level of achievement of students in terms of what they are taught in the classroom" (Friend & Bursuck, 2009, p.128). CBA allows the teacher to ensure a match between what is being taught in the classroom and what skills are being assessed; it also helps the teacher to guide his/her instruction because CBAs are ongoing throughout the school year. There are two types of CBAs that are mainly used in the classroom: probes of basic skills and probes of content-area knowledge and learning strategies. Probes of basic skills are quick timed samples of academic tasks (basic addition skills, letter-sound recognition, words read correctly per minute, writing letters, division skills, etc) and are used to determine where each learner is at in terms of mastery and then guides the pace and course of instruction. Content-area probes assess a student's knowledge of specific subject area knowledge; for example, a teacher may have the students write the steps of the scientific method

to determine the level of background knowledge each student has on this concept before creating a lesson to teach the scientific method. For more information on CBAs explore the following websites: [www.aimsweb.com/com/measures](http://www.aimsweb.com/com/measures); <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/measures>; [www.cise.missouri.edu/links/research-cbm-links.htm](http://www.cise.missouri.edu/links/research-cbm-links.htm) (Friend & Bursuck, 2009).

### **School Strategy # 5: Ensure each student can identify a role model**

Research has proven that students of low socio-economic backgrounds, students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and students who have a learning or an emotional disability have significantly higher school drop out rates than those students who are not affected by one or more of the above factors (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Lee and Burkam's research study: "Dropping out of High School: The Role of School Organization and Structure" found that when students had at least one positive relationship with a teacher at their school, the student's drop out rate was reduced. Positive student-teacher relationships were found to be important factor in reducing student drop-out rates. Lee and Burkam looked at this relationship from a school level, while Croninger and Lee (2001) looked at this positive student-teacher relationship at an individual level and found that indeed, a positive student-teacher relationship directly affects a student's decision to complete or drop-out of school.

Mentoring is usually defined as "a one-to-one relationship between a caring adult and a student who needs support to achieve academic, career, social, or personal goals" (McPartland & Nettles, 1991, p.568). Research has also shown positive relationships between older adults mentoring at-risk youth. The Big Brothers Big Sisters organizations have had immense success in pairing up adult mentors with at-risk youth. Larkin, Sadler, & Mahler's study (2005) documented that when the mentor was able to give "steady care" to the youth and allow their

care to override their own self-absorbed behaviors, it significantly decreased undesirable behaviors and attitudes of the youth.

Effective mentors must be able to be empathetic and able to assess the needs of the child they are mentoring and implement effective solutions to meet those needs (McPartland & Nettles, 1991). Mentors need to use meaningful communication to clearly define their expectations to the child; mentors should set high expectations for the child they are mentoring and encourage the child to rise above their own hardships. Additionally, successful mentors nurture and give individual attention to the child that they are mentoring and become that child's support network (Larkin, Sadler, & Mahler, 2005). Mentors can also get involved with the child's family and help foster more effective collaboration between all members of the family and faculty at the child's school. It is critical that each student in a teacher's classroom can verbally and openly identify a positive role model to them, who inspires them to be greater. It is paramount that each child has someone telling them daily affirmations like: "Reach beyond greatness", "you can rise above this", "you are capable of doing this", "I believe and support you" and having that person being able to follow through with the appropriate support for the child.

## **Conclusion**

The literature base regarding cultural and linguistic diversity in the inclusive classroom has shown that inclusion and diversity has become an issue that is in the forefront of today's education. There has been significant growth in the last several decades in including students with disabilities into the general education classroom and in the number of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds entering the general education classroom (Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad, 2003; Cartledge, Gardner III, & Ford, 2009). It is imperative for educators to

be aware of effective and successful research based strategies to reach each and every learner in their classroom, because each learner is unique in his/her own way and it is this uniqueness that can make the classroom a potentially wonderful learning experience for both the teacher and the students.

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