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Fostering Cultural Competence Through School-Based Routines

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Abstract

Many teachers working in urban schools are faced with a classroom of students from a variety of diverse backgrounds. In spite of undergraduate course work and other experiences, many new and veteran teachers have difficulty with understanding the significance of culture on educational outcomes. The challenge for teachers and administrators is to understand how cultural competence can become a part of the school culture as well as teacher practice. In this article, the authors will describe a school-based support system that can be used to develop, implement, and maintain efforts to help foster personal and cultural competence. This system is based on nine specific activities intended to be incorporated into school-based routines. The activities include: (a) take an introspective look at your own culture along with your feelings toward culturally diverse students, (b) classroom meetings, (c) arrange classroom discussions that highlight cultural diversity, (d) engage in one-on-one conversations with students from diverse backgrounds, (e) use multicultural literature for personal and professional development, (f) using multicultural literature in the classroom, (g) find and use strategies that have been proven to work with minority students, (h) seek the guidance of a mentor, and (i) establish sound parent relationships.

Fostering Cultural Competence through School-Based Routines

Over the last four decades, the student population attending our nation's schools, particularly in urban areas, has changed dramatically, becoming more ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse (Shakespeare, Beardsley, & Newton, 2003). This increase in diverse student populations has brought about a number of challenges for a largely Caucasian and female teacher workforce (Garmon, 2004). Questions about the mismatch between the cultural backgrounds of our nation's teaching force and the students they serve have prompted many to ponder the existence of a "cultural clash" (Necochea, 1997; Casteel, 1998; Cartledge, Kea, & Ida, 2000). Wide-spread concern regarding the achievement gaps between Caucasian and minority groups (e.g., Latino and African Americans) is reflected in federal legislation (i.e., No Child Left Behind) and in the actions of teachers and administrators in schools (Walker-Dalhouse, 2005; Alder, 2002; Brown, 2002). In short, "dealing with diversity," is a critical issue for teachers, administrators, and families affecting all students.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is often cited as a means to alleviating the achievement gap and promoting the success of all students, including those from diverse backgrounds who also have disabilities (Friend, & Pope, 2005; Chamberlain, 2005; Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2001). The purpose of multicultural education is twofold: (a) to prepare all students for the responsibility of citizenship, (b) to do so by valuing and considering the cultural background of all students in the learning process, and (c) reform schools to ensure all students, regardless of background (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) will experience educational

success (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, Schofield, & Stephan, 2001; Banks, 2001). The mere mention of multicultural education often times spawns many more questions than answers and highlights more problems than solutions. A difficult but necessary question for many educators is, “How are we reshaping our curriculum, changing relationships, and adjusting our instructional strategies based on the unique cultures our students share with us?” (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004, p. 215). Although multicultural education has been a topic of discussion in preservice teacher education programs as well as the subject of countless teacher inservice training sessions, there is still considerable misunderstanding of the meaning and purpose of the concept (Gallavan, 1998). It is not only necessary for teachers to know the meaning and purpose of multicultural education, but to actually use the strategies associated with it.

Banks and colleagues (2001) developed 12 essential principles of multicultural education to: (a) increase student achievement, (b) improve intergroup relations, and (c) help schools successfully meet the challenges of-and benefit from-the diversity that characterizes the United States and its schools. Each principle highlights a critical area for consideration when administrators and teachers take up the challenge of attempting to integrate multicultural education in the curriculum, instruction, and routines of the school.

Efforts to make multicultural education a part of teacher practice is evident in a number of different ways: (a) preservice teacher education programs (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004), (b) graduate course work in universities (Gallavan, 1998), (c) high school courses highlighting different cultural groups (Henze, 1999), and (d) considering common school practices from a cultural perspective (e.g., referral to special education) (Chamberlain, 2005). In spite of these efforts, many teachers still do not consistently and effectively utilize strategies

associated with multicultural education (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Robinson, Wolfe, Hunt, & Hoerr, 2002). Although a number of questions have been posed, one of the most basic questions associated with this lack of change in teacher practice is, how do teachers and administrators develop and maintain culturally responsive practices under the “umbrella” of multicultural education? The key to the development of such practices begins with an understanding and embrace of cultural competence ultimately impacting teacher practices.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is the ability to successfully teach students from cultures other than your own. It entails mastering complex awareness and sensitivities, various bodies of knowledge, and a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching (Diller & Moule, 2005, p. 5). Teachers play an important role in determining students’ academic success or failure (Jacobson, 2000). It is essential that teachers have the ability and willingness to develop cultural competence for the benefit of their students. This notion must be framed in the larger context of change efforts in schools. When educators are asked about the prospect of making changes to their professional practices that may be beneficial to their students; many will answer in the affirmative. But, there is often a discrepancy between what teachers *report* and what they actually *do* in classrooms on a daily basis. Though teachers can acknowledge the importance of diversity, competency in the classroom is often determined by teachers’ ability to apply their own cultural knowledge in ways that enable students to learn (Sheets & Fong, 2003). This implies that many teachers may not be influenced by efforts undertaken by a school or a district, but rather rely on their own personal experiences and understanding about culture. While it is not justified to completely discount the validity of personal experience and the ability for many teachers to “turn their experiences” into successful pedagogical methodology, it is unrealistic to

believe that personal experience can serve as the primary mode of preparation for teachers who work in urban schools. More must be done to ensure that all teachers have the appropriate preparation and support system in place to work with all students, including those with disabilities. The challenge for teachers and administrators is to understand how cultural competence can become a part of the school culture as well as teacher practice.

Teachers and administrators must be able to adequately define, understand, and implement a system that promotes cultural competence and further assists teachers to make cultural competence an integral part of their classroom routines. Garmon (2004) suggests six critical factors that appear to play a critical role in the development of cultural competence: (a) openness to diversity, (b) self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, (c) commitment to social justice, (d) intercultural experiences, (e) support group experiences, and (f) educational experiences. A combination of educational experience, formal instruction, and personal reflection all combine to foster cultural competence. The issue for many teachers and administrators is how to go about creating a mechanism “good enough” to ensure that teachers have a healthy balance of experience, self-reflection, and formal instruction to cultivate cultural competence. This task can be daunting and raise questions like, “How can we become sensitive to not only other cultures but also the amazing and complicated web of interactions and relationships between people in a diverse community?” (Puidokas, 2000, p. 300). It is a fact that teachers will have diverse educational experiences and world views. Solely depending on preservice training, personal experience, and self-motivated teachers to walk through the doors of the nations’ urban schools is not a reliable manner in which to ensure that current and future teachers will develop cultural competence. Instead, administrators and teachers must find ways to embed the process of

developing cultural competence into already existing school routines (Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Perez-Selles, 2000).

Insert Table 1 about here

Developing Cultural Competence through School Routines

Many teachers enter the workforce with inadequate preparation to implement culturally responsive pedagogy based on a sound foundation of cultural competence. This lack of preparation has resulted in a reliance on less effective methodology that may consist of minimal, fragmented content, such as discussing holidays, reading a limited amount of multicultural literature, or having international food fairs (White-Clark, 2005). The development of cultural competence that later translates into actual teacher practices cannot be limited to preservice course work, inservice training sessions, or community-based experiences. In addition, there must be a concerted effort by both teachers and administrators to bring multicultural concerns and issues to the “front and center.” (Nieto, 2000, p. 81). The prospects of teachers developing cultural competence as a result of chance or a limited number of university courses or experiences that may or may not take place, make it vital for educators to take the responsibility to develop, implement, and maintain activities that are embedded in the existing routines of the school.

In a 1997 interview, James M. Patton described teachers as “cultural agents,” and their responsibility to students in this role,

“Teachers need to understand that they are cultural agents; they bring their own culture to the classroom and it influences how they perceive their students and how students perceive them. They also need to be aware that their students are cultural agents. Unfortunately, many teachers may either deny the role culture plays in their classrooms or they are unaware of its importance. Lack of cultural awareness is problematic when teachers and students have different cultural backgrounds. When lack of understanding

and lack of respect exists, conflicts emerge” (Brownell and Walter-Thomas, 1997, p. 119).

The reality of urban schools is that it is difficult to give priority to all change efforts and initiatives that seem to be warranted. Thus, it is necessary to make any support teachers may need an integral part of the “current school operations.” Teachers need access to training, experiences, and feedback about their quest to develop cultural competence from peers, administrations and families involved with the schools. This has the potential to create a completely different dynamic than the current model of teacher training with substantial reliance on preservice programs and district sponsored inservice training sessions. In this article, the authors will describe a school-based support system that can be used to develop, implement, and maintain efforts to help foster personal and cultural competence. This system is based on nine specific activities intended to be incorporated into school-based routines. The activities include: (a) take an introspective look at your own culture along with your feelings toward culturally diverse students, (b) classroom meetings, (c) arrange classroom discussions that highlight cultural diversity, (d) engage in one-on-one conversations with students from diverse backgrounds, (e) use multicultural literature for personal and professional development, (f) using multicultural literature in the classroom, (g) find and use strategies that have been proven to work with minority students, (h) seek the guidance of a mentor, and (i) establish sound parent relationships. Each step will be described in detail below.

Taking an introspective look at culture. According to Pang (2001), teachers, who look introspectively, think seriously, critically, and honestly about their own views of cultural diversity and culturally diverse students (as cited in Ford & Trotman, 2001). During this time of self-reflection, teachers analyze their own feelings toward those who are culturally different, determine how it relates to the dominant culture, and think about what frame of reference

influences these feelings. Two critical tasks exemplary teachers can undertake to develop cultural competence are (a) learn about each student, taking a personal interest in establishing a positive relationship and (b) consistently questioning one's self in order to clarify several salient issues (i.e., examining one's own biases, assumptions, and values)(Howard, 2003; Pang, 1994; Howard, 1993). Introspection is a private activity that must be conducted on terms that each teacher finds personally comfortable. It is also possible to openly discuss some of the thoughts one may have after taking the time to "draw conclusions," about current knowledge, required knowledge, and future directions regarding culture. Thus, it is possible for teachers to conduct forums in which they, along with their students, openly talk about culture and its implications.

Minor and Sandler (2000), relate a story about Jenny, a fictitious Caucasian teacher on the road to developing cultural awareness, who realized, during her introspective moments, that she was perceiving others through her own cultural biases. Jenny interpreted the behavior of those around her using a narrow "cultural filter," that was informed by her own experiences and notions. It was difficult for her to "see past," this strict interpretation of behavior. Like Jenny, as teachers come to realize their biases, assumptions, and stereotypes, they begin to recognize how these assumptions influence their teaching and relationships with minority groups.

Self-analysis can be difficult and cause a great deal of discomfort. When teachers make an attempt to reflect on their own experiences and try to determine how these experiences may have played a part in shaping their professional practices, it can be helpful to use a guide. By using a guide, teachers can consider information from a broader view and be prompted to consider issues that may have been left uncovered without the assistance of an outside source. Bromley (1998), created a self-assessment tool that teachers can use to examine their assumptions and biases. A portion of the questions included in the assessment are:

- What are my perceptions of students from different racial or ethnic groups?
- What are the sources of these perceptions (e.g., friends, relative, television, movies)?

After careful introspection, teachers must then try to find commonalities to connect the dominant with the minority culture(s) in their classrooms in order to build a global community (Corbin & Ledford, 2002).

In schools, teachers can engage in introspection as part of the planning or preparation period on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Teachers can examine the reliability of the self-assessment tool by comparing results on a regular basis. The results can be used for further self-reflection or shared with a mentor (described below) or even during classroom meetings (described below).

Classroom meetings. Classroom meetings are formal gatherings, when teachers designate time to interact with students and discuss issues pertaining to a host of “classroom issues.” These issues may include, but are not limited to, (a) a new student entering the class, (b) a conflict among two or more peers, and (c) an upcoming social event. The meetings are intended to allow the classroom teacher and the students to understand the issue and agree upon a manner in which to “deal with the issue” (Edwards, & Mullis, 2003; Frey, & Hallie, 2001). Classroom meetings can be scheduled on a regular basis or as-needed. The delicate nature of classroom meetings must also be mentioned here. Conducting discussions about student to student conflict and/or teacher to student conflict can be intimidating for any teacher in any classroom situation. Teachers must be prepared for discussions “going the wrong way,” and have a distinct plan for dealing with such issues. This fact does not diminish the usefulness of classroom meetings, but

rather highlights a cautionary note for teachers to understand the delicate nature of dealing with classroom interactions.

In schools, teachers can conduct classroom meetings at almost any time during the school day, as a morning exercise where the teacher chooses one day twice a month to directly discuss methods to effectively interact with others or an emergency meeting, when an unpleasant incidence between students takes place and the event is used as a catalyst to generate a discussion that requires students to reflect on what has taken place and identify possible actions for the future to promote harmony among classmates. In the beginning, classroom meetings require a systematic approach and teachers should have a thorough knowledge of themselves and their students. In addition, before the meetings can be used on a regular basis the classroom teacher must work with students and collaboratively establish discussion ground rules to maintain order and social decorum. Specifically, teachers should adhere to the following steps:

- Ask students to move into their discussion configuration (e.g. a circle or semi-circle with the teacher in the middle).
- Call the meeting to order and identify the purpose of the meeting.
- Identify the issue of the day
- Discuss considerations for the issue (e.g. the cause of the conflict, and students involved)
- Create positive solutions.
- Identify possible barriers to solutions
- Implement the solution
- Evaluate the usefulness of the solution

Arranging classroom discussions that highlight cultural diversity. A classroom discussion is a formal approach for students to learn content associated with different cultural groups and how this content contributes to a better understanding of all members in the school community. There are several ways in which to facilitate this approach. First, teachers can invite culturally diverse civic leaders, business leaders, artists, writers, members of the police and fire department, college professors, and academically successful high school students to the classroom to talk about their heritage and their road to success (Banks, 2001). These talks can then lead to open discussion among the visitors, students, and teacher. Second, teachers can use popular literature—specifically, magazines and other periodicals, to supplement the curriculum. This type of literature not only serves to increase the knowledge base of teachers, but also serves as a resource for lesson planning. Supplementing the curriculum may also provide culturally diverse students with an opportunity to learn about high-achieving individuals who come from backgrounds similar to their own (Jairrels, Brazil, & Patton, 1999). If materials contain inaccuracies, omissions, or distortions, then teachers need to help students question the content in order to assist them in overcoming possible feelings of alienation (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Third, teachers can simply arrange specific times for informal “show and tell” classroom discussions. Here, students are encouraged to share aspects of their culture, such as rituals, dress, and food through means by which they feel comfortable (Brownell & Walter-Thomas, 1997). They can relate stories their parents have told them, experiences they have had while visiting or living in their native countries, or books they have read about aspects of their culture. Also during this time teachers can ask questions to clarify misconceptions, ask for explanations, and gain suggestions from their students. Classroom discussions require the active participation of teachers and students. Often times, teachers will ask students “share experiences,” without

contributing to the conversation. Multicultural education is built on the contributions of all teachers and students regardless of background (Cruz-Janzen, 2000).

In schools, discussion forums help all students feel self-pride and pride in their culture when they see their backgrounds valued in classroom reading and other activities (Montgomery, 2001). Teachers who discuss these issues are saying to children that culture is important and must be presented accurately. It also communicates to students that they are respected and validated, which in turn, serves as the basis for a meaningful relationship between teachers and students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Engaging in one-on-one conversations with students from diverse backgrounds. To further develop a deep understanding of diverse students, teachers can engage in private conversations with them. According to Ford and Trotman (2001), most teachers recognize that positive student-teacher relationships are the foundation for students' school success. Culturally responsive teachers make a conscious effort to connect with students on an interpersonal level.

Jenny (the fictitious teacher described in Minor & Sandler, 2000), related her experience of a one-on-one meeting with one of her students after she grossly overreacted to an incident between two African American students whom she thought were on the verge of fighting. Jenny's reaction to the "non-fight," was met with much criticism from her seventh grade class. In an effort to understand herself and why she had misunderstood the situation, she decided to ask for clarification. This was the conversation she had one afternoon after school.

"Jerome, I was wondering, is there a difference between how kids act when they're just angry and how they act when they're going to fight?" "Of course," he said, looking at me as if I was crazy. "Like what? Will you show me?" Jerome explained that he could tell if an argument would become a fight by very specific phrases and gestures people would use. He instructed me that, "Some words are just arguing words, but other words are definitely fighting words. You have to be really careful what you say." I was really impressed by how adept he was at reading signs that were a mystery to me (p. 39).

Jenny realized that she was so busy teaching her students that she had not thought about what she might learn from them (Minor and Sandler, 2000). Not only will one-on-one conversations serve to edify the teacher, they will also communicate to the student that their ideas and opinions are valued, and important enough to receive the teacher's undivided attention. Private conversations will also help students to feel more comfortable expressing themselves openly to teachers, which will lead to improved classroom performance.

In schools, teachers can find several opportunities through out the day to engage in one-on-one interactions with students. They can arrange to talk with them before classes begin, eat lunch with them, meet with them for brief conversations during times of independent student practice activities, and talk with them as they wait for transportation home.

Using multicultural literature for personal and professional development. Using multicultural literature calls for the teacher to “engage with text on a personal and professional level.” Reading and seeking to understand the profiles, experiences, and commentaries on different cultural groups introduces teachers to material that can help present similarities and differences. As teachers interact with multicultural literature on a personal and professional level, not only will their knowledge of cultural diversity increase, their students will also come to gain a greater understanding of individuals different from themselves. On a personal level, teachers can purchase or borrow books that are written by people of color, including history, literature, and education (Minor and Sandler, 2000). Some of these books include: *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton, and *Women of Silk* by Gail Tsukinama. On a professional level, teachers can ensure that books received during training sessions are not only read, but applied in classroom settings.

Using multicultural literature in the classroom. Using multicultural literature in the classroom has become a focus in recent years as classrooms have become more diverse. Multicultural literature helps children identify with their own culture, exposes them to other cultures, and opens the dialogue on issues regarding diversity (Colby & Lyon, 2004). Some of these materials can be in the form of children's books, international literature, and resources found via the internet. All materials require critical examination to ensure all groups are portrayed in an accurate manner. The use of children's books in the classroom provides opportunities to examine multiple perspectives. Students can compare and contrast the five versions of *The Three Little Pigs*. Teachers can guide students through a conversation about cultural differences, multiple perspectives, and how the needs of culturally different families affect the teacher/learner relationship (Corbin & Ledford, 2002).

Teachers who use multicultural literature in the classroom can create a connection between themselves and students in a quest to become culturally competent and gain insight into students' cultural backgrounds. Both teacher and students will "grow" as experiences from literature are shared and related to the realities of the classroom, homes, and the community. These efforts may ultimately help teachers cultivate personal cultural competence. It is necessary for teachers to collect materials that can serve as a "bank," to be used throughout the school year to avoid the "add-on" nature of some multicultural efforts.

In schools, the use of multicultural literature can occur on several occasions throughout the day. Teachers can use these materials during read aloud activities, alternate their use with the traditional basal text, encourage students to read them independently during silent reading periods while they also engage in independent reading, and assign homework from these materials.

Finding and using strategies that have been proven to work with minority students.

Lispson and Wixson (1997) stated that “perhaps no single factor influences the instructional setting more than a teacher’s knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning” (p. 128). Teachers need to *know* and *implement* effective instructional strategies for the benefit of their students, supported with empirical evidence with replicated results. Cultural background can have a significant influence on the way in which students receive, respond, and produce information. It is important that students also support the strategies teachers choose and perceive these strategies as valid. It is difficult to utilize instructional methods that students do not view as appropriate, fair, and beneficial (Alder, 2002).

Several instructional strategies have been identified as having application for all students, regardless of cultural background or presence of disability. Students can benefit from, (a) cooperative learning strategies and the use of community resources when designing curriculum (Maczynski, Rogus, Lasley, & Joseph, 2000), (b) recognition of learning style (Young, Wright, Laster, 2005), and (c) recognition and documentation of students’ background knowledge as a starting point for academic study (Lasley & Maczynski, 1997). Recognition of the learner is one of the most significant ideas underlying any instructional strategy a teacher may consider for use. McMinn (2001) discussed different methods students use to process and apply the information they receive. Many students adopt a particular method of learning and rely on this method to complete their academic tasks (students may adopt this method regardless of its proven effectiveness). If teachers are unaware of the method which students use to process information, students may either reject a useful method or fail to identify a possibly effective one that does facilitate learning. In a classroom with students from various cultural backgrounds, it is essential that teachers help students understand themselves and their notions regarding effective

methods used to learn and retain material. Several questions can be posed to help clarify a students' learning profile:

- Do they prefer to participate in group discussions or are they more inclined to speak to the teacher privately?
- Are they comfortable working in collaborative groups or do they work better alone?
- Do they have a competitive nature, or do they enjoy cooperative groups?

(McMinn, 2001)

Montgomery (2001) highlighted two effective culturally sensitive instructional strategies, (a) think-aloud and (b) reciprocal questioning. The think-aloud method takes advantage of the benefits of modeling. In think-aloud, the teacher reads a passage and talks through the thought processes for students. This shows students how to generate questions as they read, leading to a greater comprehension of the text. The reciprocal questioning method requires that teachers and students engage in shared reading, discussion and questioning. The goal is to help students learn to self-question and gain an understanding of the meaning they are constructing as they read.

When culturally diverse students' perceptions about teaching methods are taken into account, teachers are better able to provide them with the necessary support. A study conducted by Diamantes in 2002, examined the impact of obtaining information about student perception of the learning environment in order to assist science teachers in multicultural classes. Using the My Class Inventory (MCI), discrepancies were found between students' perceptions of the actual and preferred classroom environment. These results were then used to guide improvements in classroom environment. In a related study conducted by Thompson in 2000, researchers identified instructional strategies that either helped or deterred students from learning. These

tenth-grade culturally diverse students perceived literature-based activities, oral practice, individual help, peer interaction, games, and use of real objects as being most helpful to them in the classroom (as cited in Curtin, 2005). The connection between teacher and student goes beyond the social relationship, but is better understood as a comprehensive relationship involving social and academic interactions that are built on the foundation of understanding how each views the purpose of school, and the most effective and efficient manner in which one can accomplish these goals. Teachers and students must have an open line of communication in order to appreciate and benefit from the relationship previously described.

In schools, strategy selection is an on-going process that teachers undertake on a number of occasions. Some teachers consider new strategies at the beginning of an academic unit, while others make weekly decisions about new and possibly more effective instructional strategies. The key for any teacher is her relationship with students. The teacher needs to know about student progress and why or why not students are making progress. This insight will enable teachers to continuously make the “right decision,” regarding the selection and implementation of instructional strategies.

Seeking the guidance of a mentor. Many teachers coming into the classroom are unprepared for the students sitting before them. During preservice training many teachers were only exposed to a limited number of experiences directly intended to prepare them to teach and relate to students from diverse backgrounds. How are teachers supposed to make up for this short fall, while meeting all the other challenges of teaching? Teachers, especially those new to the profession, can benefit from the expertise of those who truly understand the steps necessary to achieve success. When teachers seek the guidance of mentors, they ask for peers, as well as,

administrative assistance to help support them in the development of cultural competence as well effective instructional methodology.

Teachers can find mentors in several ways:

1. Ask or wait for their administrators to pair them with teachers who truly understand the culture of the school and students.
2. Seek the assistance of teachers whom they have observed as being successful in relating to students from diverse cultures.
3. Use staff development settings, specifically geared towards multicultural and related issues, to voice their needs, questions, or concerns and learn from teachers in this forum; following up with teachers who show an interest in helping them or demonstrate expertise in these workshop discussions.
4. Use small group or one-on-one collaborative settings to gain the support of other teachers versed in this area.

How does seeking the guidance of a mentor help teachers build cultural competence? A support system increases teachers' effectiveness and encourages them to initiate and implement effective strategies. A support system can alleviate the feeling of "going it alone." Teachers with this kind of help will be more receptive to new ideas and instructional approaches to meet the needs of their culturally diverse students (White-Clark, 2005). Mentors can identify issues of inequalities associated with teaching racially and linguistically diverse students, and help novices to rethink their practices (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004). Teachers who have the assistance of mentors face instructional and cultural diversity challenges with experienced educators who are there to help maintain a support system designed to help them be successful.

Establishing sound parent relationships. Public schools are often a source of alienation for low income and minority parents (Calabrese, 1990). With such a sobering statement, how can teachers truly develop cultural awareness if they do not understand the profound role that families play in their students' outlook on the schooling environment? According to Cobrin and Ledford (2002), teachers must understand the needs of culturally different families and how these affect the teacher/learner relationship. Knowledge and understanding of the variety of family structures and systems increase the professional's ability to respond to the family's needs. In turn, respect for the diverse systems of family organization enhances the professional's effectiveness (Bruns & Corso, 2001). In short, teachers must strive to help parents of culturally diverse students feel that they are an essential part of the school environment by making sure that these parents feel comfortable enough to communicate with faculty and staff, and participate in classroom and other school-wide activities and events. How can this be done? Teachers can:

1. Establish regular communication through the use of home/school notebooks, planners, newsletters, or utilize the medium of telephone calls depending on the family's preference; ensuring that written material for linguistically diverse families is in the native language. If parents cannot utilize the aforementioned modes of communication, it is also helpful to use alternatives (e.g., providing information to churches for distribution or broadcasting school information on local radio). Teachers may have to "tap into" local resources to make information accessible and widely available.
2. Use respected individuals from the community and school system, such as counselors, principals, ministers, and parent liaisons, to deliver special invitations to school activities or events (Harris, 1999).

3. Ensure that an interpreter is available, for linguistically diverse families, at general school or private classroom meetings to explain and or clarify information related to their child's needs.
4. Ask parents to share pictures, family recipes, dramatic play props, family experiences, books, and other print materials, stories and other artifacts that reflect their cultures (Swick, Boutee & Van Scoy, 1995-1996).
5. Invite grandparent to serve as assistants in their grandchildren's classrooms.
6. Involve parents...in multicultural social and educational activities (Boutee & McCormick, 1992).
7. Visit community cultural events (Boutee & McCormick, 1992).
8. Suggest, or help to start parent education workshops and academic evening classes (Cobrin & Ledford, 2002).

When efforts are made to show parents that teachers want what is best for them and their children, the barriers impeding teacher/family relationships is removed and a new appreciation for diversity is established. Only when teachers truly understand and value their diverse classroom population will they be able to effectively teach, interact, and appreciate their students and communities.

Conclusion

The mismatch between culturally and linguistically diverse students and the teachers who teach them is a reality in schools today. The current demographic make-up of schools necessitates a concerted effort from educators to ensure that the respect and dignity of students, teachers, administrators, and families are taken into account when making decisions about the functioning of schools. There is still considerable misunderstanding of the meaning and purpose

multicultural education. In addition, personal teacher experiences may not amply prepare educators to understand and appropriately interact with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This lack of knowledge and or preparedness, however, does not excuse teachers from becoming culturally competent; that is, being able to successfully and appropriately teach students from backgrounds other than their own. Therefore, the initiative must be taken, both by administrators and teachers, to implement, and maintain cultural activities and strategies, such as those specified above, that are embedded in existing classroom and school routines. Teachers are empowered with practical knowledge and skills in working with diverse student populations, including cultural competent teachers can ultimately, (a) help students feeling comfortable in and positive about their learning environments, (b) feel confident in their abilities to manage the classroom environment, and (c) create classrooms where a learning community can truly be developed and flourish.

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Table 1.

Scott, a teacher attempting to be successful in an urban school.

As silence once again falls upon the classroom Scott is told by Malik, one of his fifth grade students, “that’s not how things happen around here, Mr. Anderson; we can’t act “soft” or else we won’t get any respect.” Scott had been trying to reason with two students engaged in a verbal confrontation. Sophia told Charmaine that her father was no good because he had been locked up for three years, and Charmaine responded that at least she knew where her father was. As Scott tried to neutralize the situation, all he could think about was whether or not he would make it to the end of the first trimester.

Scott Anderson, a 22-year-old male from Minnesota, is a first year teacher at Johnson Elementary School. He had been recruited directly from his university campus at a national job fair, and is now working in a large urban community. His school, whose population is 97% minority with 95% of the students on free or reduced lunch, has a Title 1 status according to

federal guidelines, and is once again, considered underachieving according to the latest results of the state-wide assessment standards.

As the school year has progressed, Scott is finding that he no longer talks in a normal tone as he is always trying to stay above the volume level of his very “boisterous” class. He does not understand why his students are so easily offended, why they must always act tough, why their jokes always seem to include somebody’s parent, and why they think it amusing when he tells them to just walk away from confrontation. Now that Scott has left Minnesota far behind, how will he be able to learn all those things he did not during his undergraduate training?
