

Cross-Cultural Community Building

Strategies for Improving Interactions in Diverse Educational Settings

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Introduction

Culturally diverse educational settings can be challenging to navigate as participants in these settings risk misinterpreting others from different cultures (Emmerich, Rock, & Trapani, 2006). Educators and students can easily misunderstand cross-cultural interactions (Bryan & Atwater, 2002) due to previous dispositions, complex and nuanced habits of mind, and interactional practices (Sockett, 2009).

Such interactions are critical to collaborations between school community members (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Claxton, Costa, & Kallick, 2016). However, educators can practice multicultural education principles within a structure of critical reflection (Charteris & Smith, 2017; Sleeter, 2001) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010) to decrease and mitigate misunderstandings.

Multicultural education principles, like professional dispositions, are applicable in all school settings (Edwards, 2011). Multicultural education principles are the intentional integration of inclusion and inquiry principles with teaching and learning practices to achieve a transformation of self, students, school culture, and society

(Banks, 1993; Whitaker, 2014). Teachers and teacher educators manifest multicultural education within their professional dispositions by teaching with an understanding of culture and its relationship to learning (Hanson, 2011; Harris-Russell, McDonald, Jones, & Weaver, 2016; Hill-Jackson, Sewell, & Waters, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers and teacher educators learn about their students' cultures and beliefs while explicitly, and often unconsciously, displaying and sharing their own cultures and beliefs.

During relational transactions, where educators and students share culturally related actions and beliefs, an assumption of risk occurs, and participants can feel vulnerable (Kramer, 2018). The everyday interactions between school community members may garner reactionary misfires—misjudgment, misinterpretation, and misapplication of social and instructional strategies—even while wholeheartedly intending to empower learners.

Practitioners who are dedicated to the enhancement of school community relationships do all they can to implement a variety of approaches to mitigate the risk of misinterpreting dispositions. They build rapport, leverage resources, and track themselves as they employ efforts that create repeated successes (Samaras et al., 2007). While these actions are committed during the process of building communities of diverse learners, the accountability of all members of an educational community is not always clear.

Educational leaders build relationships with educational communities to foster productive learning environments (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). Teachers and teacher educators are also educational leaders (Bond, 2011) who act as role models for students (Ganchorre & Tomanek, 2012). All members in a school community exemplify particular nuanced habits of mind and collaboration practices—dispositions as determined by their varied participation in cultural communities—when interacting with each other (Talbert-Johnson, 2006).

In order to foster positive interactions in multicultural contexts, community members must learn to acknowledge the underlying perceptions and interpretations that inform member dispositions; they must understand the power of culture. Culture involves social practices and habits of mind that offer entrance into and maintenance of relationships within communities of practice (Geertz, 1994; Rogoff, 2003).

Culture can be subtle and intricate practices that are unspoken or hidden. Members of communities can easily teach culture via overt gestures and identifiable strategies. Individuals may be denied admission into or ostracization from groups based on the ability to accurately display and mimic certain cultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Teaching and becoming a teacher is no different from entering into other professional communities; teaching requires practices and habits of mind—professional teacher dispositions—necessary

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for successful admission into teaching culture (Wake & Bunn, 2016).

Professional teacher dispositions impact the entire school community. Positive professional dispositions of teaching include taking responsibility, practicing empathy (Warren, 2018), respecting others (Phelps, 2006), promoting the common good before self-interests (Johnson & Reiman, 2007), cultivating relationships (Turner & Morelli, 2017), and being caring and flexible (Heckendorn, 2006). Risk taking (Balls, Eury, & King, 2016; Johnson & Reiman, 2007; Phelps, 2006) and persisting (Claxton et al., 2016) are additional skills that bolster opportunity for positive interactions in multicultural settings. While these are examples of positive teacher dispositions, such dispositions often need clarification and implementation strategies for positive results.

This article highlights six strategies school community members can use to foster positive cross-cultural interactions while exhibiting and modeling professional teacher dispositions. These strategies come from the literature and real case scenarios experienced by a teacher educator trained in multicultural education and science curriculum and instruction. Understanding how to implement these strategies can help transform what some may call “risky encounters” into learning experiences for participants.

Strategy 1: Practice Humility and Tact

Practicing humility and tact can deescalate a student’s tone and posture to foster the opportunity for learning and sharing of personal experiences, whereas being disrespectful or inserting personal feelings can exacerbate a student’s frustration and anger. When teachers show humility, they exert self-control, demonstrate open-mindedness, and act without bravado or arrogance.

Applying humility means a teacher puts the student first (Jensen, Whiting, & Chapman, 2016). Phrases such as “What answers do we need?” “How can we help each other?” “We can we figure this out together,” and “I wonder how we can solve this” demonstrate a teacher’s desire to work with the student to help solve the challenge while simultaneously

including the student within the work of critical inquiry.

Tact requires an ability to consider another’s perspective before speaking to avoid hurt feelings or misinterpretation of actions. The ability to adopt multiple perspectives activates empathy (Risinger, 2016; Schussler, Stooksberry, & Bercau, 2010). Without empathy, a teacher may elicit a student’s defensive response or an excuse-laden monologue followed by anger, hurt feelings, or resentment by both parties. Teachers who tactfully offer help to students cultivate their openness, humility, and empathy, and build a positive interaction and relationship instead of a negative one.

In education, approaching all interactions with a mild demeanor is an important skill. A teacher’s polite, respectful tone during an interaction works to moderate the negative influence of the teacher’s and the student’s underlying emotions or past, unrelated experiences (see Evertson & Emmer, 2017, for further reading on interactions arising from past experiences). Acting with humility and using tact deescalate negative interactions.

Strategy 2: Active Listening

Active listening enables a teacher to think about what the student is trying to communicate (Robinson & Clardy, 2011). Listening to hear—thinking about what the speaker is saying—differs from listening to respond, or thinking about what the listener will say when the other person stops speaking. The listener who is distracted by constructing a response may only hear a small portion of commentary and miss, or worse, misinterpret, the speaker’s message.

A person who listens to hear attends to every word of the speaker (McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2008). The active listener does not allow his or her thoughts to wander or plan a rebuttal while the other person is talking. Active listening requires full attention and repeating what the speaker is saying (Jalongo, 1995), thereby signaling the listener’s full consideration of the speaker’s message.

A teacher’s active listening signals comprehension and validates the voice of the speaker. Teachers and teacher

educators who actively listen to all members of the school community simultaneously practice and model inclusivity (McNaughton et al., 2008). Starting phrases such as “I heard you say . . .” or “So, I am hearing . . .” followed by the speaker’s comments signifies active listening. The listener may continue the conversation with a clarifying question to learn more about the speaker’s intent.

Strategy 3: Question to Learn

Questioning to learn enables an educator to seek understanding about the learner and his or her perceptions. Questions are like bridges to a student’s interpretation of ideas or actions. When teachers ask clarifying questions, and students provide answers, clues about intentions, expectations, and perceptions arise.

In cross-cultural conversations, the opportunity for misunderstanding intent, tone, or actual statements naturally occurs. Being evaluative or acting before asking clarifying questions can result in escalating interactions. Before making any judgments about the speaker’s comments or choices, ask a question to learn his or her perspective.

Teachers and teacher educators can gather needed information with a few questions. Sample questions include “What is unclear?” “Which part in the lesson/activity is confusing?” or, alternatively, “What questions do you have?” These questions are short and open-ended, and they invite background information. A student’s replies to these questions may reveal various types of disconnects or gaps in understanding. Additionally, a student’s disclosures create the opportunity for teachers to adjust their feedback, comments, and actions.

Strategy 4: Preface Advice to Decrease Emotional Fallout

Teachers and teacher educators can preface comments with questions or statements to moderate emotions and highlight opportunities for learning. This practice reveals a teacher’s intent and conveys consideration of the student’s emotions (Robinson & Clardy, 2011). Prefacing advice or instructions

increases the chances of student receptiveness. Hastily doling out advice or instructions, without an admission of intent, could increase student misunderstanding or adverse reactions.

Prefacing comments should be short and typically in the form of a request or statement. Sample questions include “Would you like a helpful tip?” “May I provide some coaching?” and “May I give a consideration?” Similarly, example statements are “I wonder what would happen if you _____” and “I really like how you _____; try _____ for better results.”

Prefacing evaluative questions models how to begin a difficult conversation and allows the recipient to choose to receive pending comments. When educators make such offers, most students will listen—they are more likely to hear consideration rather than judgment.

Teachers and teacher educators moderate more than student understanding of academic concepts; they also referee student exhibitions of social intelligence. Teacher educators track and monitor preservice teacher dispositions (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2016; Helm, 2006; Johnston, Almerico, Henriott, & Shapiro, 2011; Wadlington & Wadlington, 2011) and observe and evaluate deviations from professionally acceptable temperaments (CAEP, 2016; Weiss & Weiss, 2001).

Likewise, K–12 teachers notice and grade student conduct in the learning community. Modeling by teachers and teacher educators of how to diffuse potentially counterproductive conversations by carefully prefacing comments can encourage rapport and dual belonging within and outside of the learning community. Students, like educators, rarely subscribe to one culture. When educators model and support confidence in belonging to multiple cultures, they instill acceptance and cultivate community.

Strategy 5: Offer Opportunity, Not Judgment

Dual belonging or duality refers to membership in two or more cultural groups (John, 2002; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008). An example of duality might involve being Hispanic, female, and a first-generation college graduate.

The student’s perspective about and participation in educational settings is uniquely different because of influences from several cultural affiliations—feminism, Hispanic cultural constructs, and a college-going culture.

Culture refers to norms, practices, and dispositions for belonging to a group (Geertz, 1994). Each separate group has practices, attitudes, and behaviors that must be learned and exhibited for acceptance. As cultural groups intersect, a person displays the requisite knowledge and skills to belong within all of these groups (Claxton et al., 2016; Gay, 2010; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Geertz, 1994). Students, whether adult or adolescent, have the most internal conflict when belonging to multiple groups with conflicting social practices.

Educators and students rarely drop all of their cultural characteristics when in various settings. Cultural connections define and join individuals to their dispositions (Jensen et al., 2016; Sockett, 2009). Individuals face a multitude of choices when operating in settings that have personally countercultural requirements. For them, acculturation means choosing new cultural constructs and dispositions that may be counter to their own or rejecting new cultures and their necessary dispositions.

For example, a Hispanic female may not have familial support while attending college because her culture values female positions in the home. She may realize that going to and completing college provides access to careers, but the act is antithetical to her home culture. She may also struggle with support and feel isolated because her family does not encourage or understand the social expectations and dispositions required for college success. To feel connected and gain more insight into college-going social norms and behaviors, she may seek out similar successful individuals for help. Teachers might also view her struggles and point her toward programs that specialize in helping first-generation college students.

Teachers and teacher educators assist students in their social choices when offering advice and resources (Stooksberry, Schussler, & Bercaw, 2009). They can encourage and uplift the student’s culture, while simultaneously showing the student how to be successful in a

different or new culture. Implementing a caring tone with a few choice phrases that acknowledge duality can help the student recognize how the student can keep his or her current culture and adopt needed practices for acceptance into the desired group. Failure to have concern can, unintentionally, diminish one or more of the student’s cultural groups and encourage disengagement from a personal culture or a sought-after profession (e.g., K–12 classroom teaching, education research, or a STEM career).

During coaching conversations, stating such phrases as “It is not good, it is not bad; it is just different” helps students accept competing cultural constructs. Other phrases include “You do not have to bring your job home with you” and “You can leave your work-self at work.” These phrases prompt survival within and compartmentalization of work and home cultures. Individuals may adopt these phrases, which hold inherent expectations of certain practices; or they may recognize value and adopt the phrases for use with their future students. The phrases discourage judgment of other cultures and acknowledge code-switching—a fact for many people of color (Baum & Swick, 2008). Implementation of the expressions requires a teacher or teacher educator to realize and appreciate the student’s duality.

Strategy 6: Conduct Dispositional Self-Checks

Dispositional self-checks are voluntary conversations about adherence to and performance of unspoken practices, norms, and skills within a professional group (Dweck, 2014; Jensen et al., 2016; Kennedy & Goodwin, 2016). These conversations typically occur with a trusted individual who is a senior or expert member of the sought-after group (Hill-Jackson & Williams, 2013). They can occur between peers, fellow teachers, and teacher educators.

When such conversations occur, they can begin with the following questions: “What would you do?” “How would you handle this situation?” “Was this a challenge for you?” “How did you go about solving it?” and “What can I do differently or better?” These questions are designed to receive insight and advice.

The self-checks, in general, also answer such internal questions as “How am I guiding my students?” “Am I giving good advice?” “Does my advice align with that of other successful colleagues?” and “Do my actions align with them?”

Teachers and teacher educators who conduct dispositional self-checks do so to learn how their successful colleagues exemplify care, compassion, and high expectations (Heckendorn, 2006). While dispositional self-checks act as aids to decrease risk in future conversations, they may also occur to gain insights about school members.

When school participants share their perceptions, they may feel vulnerable. Shared ideas may be personal and reveal information that is counter to perceived community norms. Therefore all school members should prepare to act with care when listening during dispositional self-checks. These conversations are evidence of self-reflection—the pre-work for exchanges that influence school climate and implementation of multicultural education practices across the curriculum and school community.

Conclusion

Implementing the described strategies can encourage affirming interactions between members of multicultural school settings by increasing instances of positive communication across the school. The described approaches facilitate such exchanges, as they allow for appreciation of cultural differences.

Without the discussed strategies, especially in diverse settings, teachers and teacher educators may find themselves in precarious positions (Banks et al., 2005). Students and other school community members may perceive faculty as unprepared, tactless, and unprofessional, thereby inducing adverse outcomes.

For example, students may feel marginalized and make unflattering comments about a teacher or the school; teachers may feel unappreciated and dissuade others from joining the school community; parents may feel unheard and withdraw their child. A teacher has a responsibility to take a leadership role in the classroom to disrupt such results, as these negative interactions have long-term implications for learners and parents.

For students and parents, unwarranted labels and interactions may also emerge. Learners may develop negative perceptions of themselves, schooling, academic content, and certain professions. Students may get angry and act out in classes. Overtly aggressive behaviors, such as ignoring teacher requests or shouting in classes, may also occur.

Participants may disengage from the school community following negative interactions with its community members. Implementation of the above strategies will seek to decrease these occurrences and assist with modeling communication across differences (DiAngelo, 2011; Parkhurst, 2008) and multicultural education principles across the curriculum (Harris-Russell et al., 2016; Hill-Jackson et al., 2007; LaDuke, 2009).

These strategies allow educators to model multicultural education principles with culturally relevant pedagogy during all facets of educational activity and teacher training. With these practices, teachers promote cross-cultural conversations for inclusiveness by seeking opportunities for understanding self and learners through questioning techniques and consideration of culture and personal biases as well as by uncovering personal bias.

Moreover, the use of these practices requires school community members to confront themselves and others. These actions for positive relationships are necessary for the sake of students' well-being and academic achievement in growing multicultural school communities.

Members of increasingly diverse school settings also have increased chances of engaging in cross-cultural dialogues. Encouraging school community members to model and implement the strategies herein inserts multicultural education tenets and culturally relevant pedagogy that foster a welcoming cross-cultural school climate.

These strategies also promote openness and a willingness to be student centered, allowing for greater understanding of school member perspectives. Educators who implement these approaches increase feelings of inclusivity between school community members as multicultural tenets permeate school conversations and the curriculum.

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