Welcoming All Students To Room 202

Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Donna Y. Ford

One Wednesday, a colleague was anxious about a dinner that evening to which he had invited all of his students. He'd made the invitation early in the semester, but now, he was frantically thinking of ways to make the evening a success for his students—now his guests. He called my mother several times for advice about the menu—enough times for her to volunteer to meet him at the grocery store and to cook the meal! My colleague, you see, was no longer the professor; he was the host. His students were no longer his students; they were his guests. They were no longer at the university; they were at *his* home. And he put a lot of time, thought, and effort into making his guests—all of them—feel welcome.

The next night, my mother began making last minute changes in preparation for my aunt's third visit in 3 months. We had only recently moved to Tennessee, 2 hours from our relatives. My mother had already purchased my aunt's favorite foods, including candies. She cleaned the house from top to bottom. Thursday night, she decided to rearrange my aunt's bedroom. I walked in on my mother—65 years old, 4'10", arthritis in her hands, and one reconstructed knee—attempting with all her might to move a chest of drawers from one side of the room to the other. "Why?" I demanded in shock and anger. "I want everything to be right for my sister! She can see the TV better over here. I think she'd prefer it here. That's why!" she responded with zest. The rest of the story is too heated to share; suffice it to say that the chest is on the other side of the room where Mom had requested it!

I share these two events because they remind me of the lengths people go through when guests are coming to their home. Even if we don't feel like entertaining our guests, most of us will still go out of our way to make them feel welcome. If we are tired, we still attempt to muster up enough energy to appear pleasant, thoughtful, and prepared.

I'd like to draw an analogy at this point—in many ways, our classrooms are like our homes. How much time, energy, and thought do we—educators—devote to making the classroom (or school) environment welcoming for our students—our guests? In Table 1, I expand upon this analogy. In our homes and schools, we should think about the safety and comfort of our guests. We want to project the image that both settings are clean, and that we are prepared, organized, and pleased to have company.

I equate preparing the meal at our home with preparing the lesson plans, the curriculum (the "what") at our school. When thinking about the meal, we are likely to consider the favorite dishes of our guests, as well as foods to avoid for religious, health, or other reasons. When preparing the lesson plan, we are likely to consider students' interests, as well as subjects and topics that turn students off from learning. In preparing the meal, we are likely to think about the seasonings, especially the amount and types of spice to add, and whether guests like their meat (if they are not vegetarian) rare, medium, or well-done. When instructing students, we are likely to think about their learning styles. Who is an auditory, visual, and/or spatial learner? Who likes working independently or with others? Who prefers and/or needs concrete examples and who gets annoyed by them? Who needs reinforcements? In both settings, we are likely to think about seating arrangements to maximize comfort and productive conversations. Whom should we seat

together? Whom should we seat apart?

Lastly, when guests have left our home or classroom, we take time to reflect, especially if we care about our image as hosts. Was the dinner or lesson a success? Did my guests have a good time? Did I have enough food? Did I have enough curricular materials? What would I do differently next time? Did my guests feel welcome and appreciated? Did one guest feel more welcome than another guest? Will my guests want to come back to my home or classroom?

Look Who's Coming to Dinner

Regardless of who the guests are in our classrooms, we must always seek to create learning environments that are safe, welcoming, and responsive to their needs. As our schools and communities become increasingly diverse, the need to create welcoming learning environments is even more critical. In some respects, these culturally diverse students may be like unexpected or even unwelcome guests—they are guests for whom we are not prepared. When someone comes to our house without warning or without invitation, it can be irritating. But, because they are our *guests*, we still attempt to make them feel welcome and try to meet their needs. And so it is with diverse students who come to our classrooms; although we may not be prepared for them, we must seek to make them feel welcome and a part of the learning community.

Some teachers may feel that they are not prepared for these students and, for the differences that come with cultural diversity. This lack of preparation is likely because too few colleges and universities offer substantive training on how to work effectively with culturally diverse students and families, those who are limited English proficient, or students who live in poverty. But, teachers must also be mindful that our nation and classrooms have always been diverse, and this diversity is increasing at a high rate. So, teachers, regardless of the current demographics of their district, must *expect* the student population to increase in diversity. Because classrooms today will not look like classrooms next year, teachers must be proactive at *preparing* for these new and different guests.

Planning Ahead for Our Guests: Becoming Culturally Responsive Educators

All educators, not just teachers, but also counselors, psychologists, and administrators, must begin to prepare their schools and classrooms for the guests who are here and those who are surely coming. Several scholars have written extensively about the need to create culturally responsive classrooms (e.g., Banks & Banks, 2004; Ford & Harris, 1999; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2002; Shade et al., 1997). We all seem to agree that the first step consists of self-reflection and self-appraisal. How prepared am I to work with students who are different from me? How do I feel about working with students who may hold values and beliefs that differ from what I value and believe? How do I work with students who have different customs and traditions? How do I feel about working with students who have different learning styles and communication styles? Do I even want these students in my classroom? What fears, stereotypes, or biases do I have about people who are different from me? How will these beliefs get in the way of my teaching and working with these students?

Without an honest and thorough self-appraisal, it will be difficult for educators to seek out the resources they need to be effective with and supportive of culturally diverse students. As with the home-guest/school-guest scenario, it will be difficult to make the classroom a welcoming one if educators do not invest time and effort into examining who they are as cultural beings. The literature on teacher expectations informs this premise. Our beliefs, attitudes, and values influence our expectations of, and interactions with, students. Some data indicate that teachers tend to hold lower expectations for culturally diverse students (i.e., African American, Hispanic American, and Native American) than for White students and Asian American students (Foster, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

After this self-appraisal, we must secure training to work with culturally diverse groups. In my classrooms and workshops, I remind my guests that "The less we know about each other, the more we make up." While we can never fully anticipate the needs of our students/guests, we can get training in understanding culture and how groups tend to differ culturally. For instance, cultural groups differ on such dimensions as: (a) cooperation-individualism, (b) indirect-direct communication style, (c) high context-low context communication style, (d) adult-child relationships, (e) male-female relationships, (f) internal-external locus of control, and (g) monochromic-polychromic orientation (e.g., Hall, 1981; Hoffstede & Hoffstede, 1991; Storti, 1998, 1999). What are some of the potential conflicts for students when the teacher places a high value on students work-

ing independently, but students prefer to work in groups or cooperatively? How will teachers change their questioning style and strategies with a student who has been raised to believe that teachers should not be questioned, even if the student is confused about the lesson? How will teachers who are monochromic and ever mindful of time work with students who see time as social and flexible, and time constraints as a nuisance? These differences—mismatches—can potentially hinder our efforts to teach and to create safe and responsive learning communities for *all* students.

Mi Casa Es Su Casa: Some Characteristics of a Welcoming, Culturally Responsive Classroom

Whether diversity is welcome or not, it is real and very much present in our classrooms. And students who bring their differences to our classrooms want to be respected, appreciated, affirmed, and validated. What might diverse students be looking for in their classrooms? I believe that students want a classroom where:

1. diversity is recognized and honored—a colorblind and culture-blind philosophy is avoided;
2. cultural mismatches are minimal, not only among students, but also between teachers and students;
3. teachers take the time to get to know students for the unique individuals they are—students feel physically and emotionally safe to be themselves;
4. formal and informal, standardized and nonstandardized assessments are fair and equitable;
5. materials are culturally relevant and meaningful—students' back-

grounds and experiences are central to teaching and learning;
6. lesson plans and activities are infused with multicultural content—content that is respectful; and
7. teachers display cultural sensitivity and competence.

A Final Word

Many culturally diverse students are not doing well academically in school settings. A litany of reports discusses the achievement gap and provides suggestions for how to narrow or close the gap. In reading these reports, I am baffled by the lack of

attention given to how closing the cultural gap may help close the achievement gap. I am equally troubled by the lack of attention to how changing the learning environment can help to narrow the achievement gap. In looking over the wishes just presented, one question comes to mind: How can we deny any student, any guest, these requests? ɢᴄᴛ

References

Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

Table 1
Creating Culturally Responsive Learning Environments: Some Considerations

Welcome to My Home! Atmosphere/Ambience	Welcome to My Class/School Learning Environment
Image • Clean • Safe • Organized • Prepared	**Image** • Clean • Safe (physically and emotionally) • Organized • Prepared
Meal • What do you like to eat/drink? • What are you allergic to? • What do you dislike? • What can't you eat?	**Curriculum** • What do you like to read? • What are your favorite subjects? • What subjects do you dislike? • What topics/subjects are you leery of?
Preparation • How do you like your food prepared (e.g., seasonings, spiciness, well-done, etc.)? • Do you like appetizers? • Are you a dessert eater? What desserts do you like? • Do I have all the ingredients for the meal? • Seating arrangements	**Instruction** • How do you learn best (visual, auditory, spatial)? • Grouping (Do you like working alone or with others?) • Do you prefer/need examples? (Concrete to abstract? Inductive to deductive?) • Do you need reinforcements? In what form? • Do I have the materials that I need? • Seating arrangements
Reflection—Was the evening/dinner a success? • Did my guests enjoy the meal? • Did my guests have a good time? • Did I have enough food and drinks? • Did my guests feel welcome? • What will I do differently next time? • Did one guest feel more welcome than another guest? • What will they tell others about the dinner—the meal, my home, my hospitality? • Would my guests want to come back again?	**Assessment—Was the lesson a success?** • Did my students learn what was taught? • Did they enjoy the lesson and materials? • Did I have enough materials? • Did my students feel welcome and appreciated? • What will I do differently next time? • Did some students feel more welcome than other students? • What will my students tell other students and their families about me, the lesson, and the class? Would my students want to come back—if they had a choice?

Nerds and Geeks

handicap? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 11*, 41–56.

Cross, T. L., Coleman, L. J., & Terhaar-Yonkers, M. (1991) The social cognition of gifted students in schools: Managing the stigma of giftedness, *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 15,* 44–55.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Howley, C., Howley, A., & Pendarvis, E. (1995). *Out of our minds: Anti-intellectualism and talent development in American schooling*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Welcoming All Students to Room 202

Ford, D. Y., & Harris, J. J., III. (1999). *Multicultural gifted education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Foster, M. (1994). Effective Black teachers: A literature review. In E. R. Hollins, J. E. King, & W. C. Hayman (Eds.), *Teaching diverse populations: Formulating a knowledge base* (pp. 225–241). New York: State University of New York Press.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hall, E. T. (1981). *Beyond culture* (2nd ed.). Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hofstede, G., & Hofsted, G. J. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.

Irvine, J. J. (2002). *In search of wholeness: African American teachers and their culturally specific classroom practices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Storti, C. (1998). *The art of crossing cultures* (2nd ed.). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Storti, C. (1999). *Figuring foreigners out: A practical guide*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Shade, B. J., Kelly, C., & Oberg, M. (1997). *Creating culturally responsive classrooms*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Meeting the Educational Needs of Young Gifted Readers in the Regular Classroom

gramming. In N. Colangelo, & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (2nd ed., pp. 75–88). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Rogers, K. (1998). Using current research to make "good" decisions about grouping. *NASSP Bulletin, 82*, 38–46.

Rohrkemper, M., & Como, L. (1988). Success and failure on classroom tasks: Adaptive learning and classroom teaching. *The Elementary School Journal, 88*, 297–326.

Schnur, J. O., & Lowrey, M. A. (1986). Some characteristics of young gifted readers. *Early Child Development & Care, 26*, 191–198.

Starko, A. J., & Schack, G. D. (1989). Perceived need, teacher efficacy, and teaching strategies for the gifted and talented. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 33*, 118–122.

Swanson, D. (1997). *Welcome to the world of owls*. New York: Walrus Books.

Tolan, S. S. (1985, November/December). Stuck in another dimension: The exceptionally gifted child in school. *G/C/T 41*(4), 22–26.

Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C., Kaplan, S., Renzulli, J., Purcell, J., Leppien, J., & Burns, D. (2002). *The parallel curriculum: A design to develop high potential and challenge high-ability learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Van Tassel-Baska, J., & Brown, E. F. (2001). An analysis of gifted education curriculum models. In F. A. Karnes, & S. M. Bean (Eds.), *Methods and materials for teaching the gifted*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Vosslamber, A. (2002). Gifted readers: Who are they and how can they be served in the classroom? *Gifted Child Today, 25*(2), 14–21.

Wang, M. C., & Palincsar, A. S. (1989) Teaching students to assume an active role in their learning. In M. C. Reynolds (Ed.), *Knowledge base for the beginning teacher*, (pp. 71–84). Oxford: Pergamon.

Westberg Peters, L. (2003). *Earthshake: Poems from the ground up*. New York: Greenwillow.

Wildsmith, B. (2000). *The owl and the woodpecker*. England: Oxford University Press.

Winebrenner, S., & Devlin, B. (2001). *Cluster grouping of gifted students: How to provide fulltime services on a part-time budget: Update 2001*. Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED451663)

Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl moon*. New York: Philomel Books.