

## **Who is in my classroom? Teachers preparing to work with culturally diverse students**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers attempt to understand the various ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds, languages, customs, values, ceremonies and symbols of the children and families in the community in which they teach. Sixty practicing teachers in the Midwestern United States were interviewed to examine their understanding of diversity. Teachers report numerous methods; however, they demonstrate a lack of true understanding of diversity. Teachers reported a reliance on outside sources such as guest speakers and children around the world unit but failed to utilize their colleagues, parents, and their own experiences.

### **Introduction**

Teachers all over the globe are faced with students with diverse backgrounds whether it is capabilities, culture, socio-economic status, religion among many others. Regardless of the type of diversity that teachers face, teachers need to be aware and be willing to learn about the diversity. Teachers in some parts of the world are encountering more and more students from culturally diverse backgrounds. This is particularly true in the United States. However, while the student population in the United States is rapidly becoming diverse, the teaching force remains predominately white, female, middle-class, and from a European heritage (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000; Allen & Porter, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). Numerous researchers believe that there is a connection between children's failure in school and those who teach them (e.g., Au & Blake, 2003; Benson, 2003; Ukpokodu, 2004). These research findings suggest that some teachers lack the requisite background knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively teach children from diverse backgrounds due to their limited cultural knowledge and exposure to issues of diversity.

There is evidence that in the United States, students from culturally diverse backgrounds experience less positive educational outcomes than their peers (Fryer & Levitt, 2006; Sanders, 2000). There are many home-based variables and school-based variables that affect how these students perform academically. Home-based variables such as parental involvement and socioeconomic status have proved to contribute to minority children's school achievement and engagement (e.g., Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012). School-based variables that include teacher quality and school climate also found to have strong relationships with student learning (e.g., Williams, 2011).

Teacher quality is a school-based variable often used when studying effects on academic achievement. The relation between teacher quality and student achievement can explain why minority students are not doing as well as their white peers in the United States. For example, Irvine (2003) found that pre-service teachers tend to have negative beliefs and low expectations of success for non-White students even after taking course work in multicultural education. Furthermore, McKown and Weinstein (2008) found that teachers have much lower expectations for African-American and Latino students than they do for White students with similar achievement. Becerra (2012) found that white teachers who did not understand Latino culture is a

major reason for the achievement gap. Although there are differences in the ways in which parents and teachers view education and the role of teachers, research has also indicated that some parents have lost their sense of trust in schools (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). Additionally, Sternberg, Lipka, Newman, Wildfeuer, and Grigorenko (2007) found that many teachers do not understand the importance of including socio-cultural contextual and practical knowledge as a way to enhance their students' academic achievement.

In New Zealand, Rubie-Davies (2010) argues that teachers who have high expectations tend to build positive learning communities and their attitudes toward their students are positive. Rubie-Davies (2006) also found that students made large gains in learning with teachers who had high expectations for students. On the other hand, students who are with teachers who have low expectations tend to be unmotivated to learn. Similarly, Boer, Bosker, and Werf (2010) found that there is a correlation between **teacher expectation** bias and students' long-term school performance in Holland.

The profound impact of teacher quality on student learning requires our attention more than ever as the student population has and continues to change. To better meet the needs of the diverse student population, culturally responsive teaching should be in place in all schools. Implementing a diversity curriculum however, is not without difficulty, because of the fear, uncertainty, or discomfort of many teachers. Teachers' beliefs influence and affect their teaching practices and become barriers that prevent the integration of diversity curriculum (Van Hook, 2002). Van Hook states that some teachers have difficulties discussing sensitive topics in the classroom and are not able to recognize and accept diversity. Furthermore, many teachers find it difficult to recognize that their personal perspectives consciously and unconsciously shape and shade their relationships with children and children's families. Yet, to support the development of strong self-identities and to meet children's various needs, teachers' awareness of culturally responsive teaching is essential if they are to welcome and work with all children (Gay, 2010; Hein, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

#### Theoretical Framework

Culturally responsive teaching means meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally responsive practices are grounded in the beliefs that teachers must have a thorough knowledge of the heritage, language, and culture indigenous to their particular location. This knowledge is crucial for the development of culturally-healthy students and communities and is considered essential for identifying appropriate qualities and practices associated with culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Jackson (1994) believes that most teachers already employ some if not all teaching methods that are developmentally appropriate but they may not recognize as ones they can use to enhance multicultural learning. She puts forward the case that teachers need ways to recognize and capitalize on students' differing strengths. She outlines seven strategies that support a culturally responsive pedagogy:

#### Strategy 1: Building Trust

Teachers must work to build and keep trust with their students. Trusting relationships allow teachers to challenge students to higher cognitive levels and help students to take risks that they otherwise would not take (Jackson, 1994). Trust between teacher and student is crucial as it enhances students' learning experiences. Elements of a trusting relationship begin by knowing

student's names and pronouncing them correctly, working with students to explore their family's heritage, and sharing learned information with others (Jackson, 1994). Listening is the key to building trust with students (Brown & Skinner, 2007). Listening helps the teacher understand what the student has said and adds value to the beginning of the relationship. Getting to know students and their families' cultures and traditions is extremely valuable when building trust with students.

#### Strategy 2: Becoming Culturally Literate

There are no dumb students. Most students work hard. However, the gap in certain cultural knowledge is extreme and that can make a difference in students' achievement at school. Knowledge of a game, a popular movie or a TV show may seem trivial, but they are symptoms of a much larger challenge: the inability to gather the tokens of a privileged culture in larger American life. Understanding that students of diverse backgrounds have had to become bicultural or bidialectical in order to fit into most schools, teachers should strive to learn about their student's language, values, social customs, and learning styles (Jackson, 1994).

Webster, Wiles, Civil, and Clark (2005) discuss the notion of using the third space to teach students from other cultures. Third space is defined as in-betweenness; in-between the Western traditional models of knowledge and instruction and the ways of knowing, learning, and being of indigenous cultures (Webster & Lipka, 2004; Webster et al, 2005). Using a culturally based curriculum that connects academic content knowledge with indigenous cultural knowledge is the first step in creating the third space. However, just using a culturally responsive curriculum is not enough; the teacher and students must also co-construct cultural norms for their classroom that are representative of all students. These new cultural norms require every member of the class to become bicultural or bidialectical in order to be successful.

#### Strategy 3: Building a Repertoire of Instructional Strategies

Generally speaking, students of main stream culture in the Western countries tend to strive for independence, competition, ability to sit for long periods of time, processing style that is linear and logical, understanding abstract ideas and concepts without the use of concrete representations, and following verbal directions (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Shade, 1982). However, culturally diverse students are often more field dependent (Ramirez & Caseaneda, 1974), physically active, and value a family or group identity over independence (Hillard, 1989). In today's diverse classrooms, reaching all students requires teachers to have a full repertoire of instructional strategies. Teachers need to have a repertoire broad enough to meet students' individual needs. Varying instructional strategies is especially significant when working with young children as it is one of the developmentally appropriate tactics.

#### Strategy 4: Using Effective Questioning Techniques

The way teachers question their students can influence students' motivation and ability to learn. When teachers ask students predominately recall and factual questions, teachers limit access to knowledge and content (Good & Brophy, 2007). Teachers often place blame on students' lack of ability, motivation, or appropriate family support (Osborne, 1996). High achieving students, on the other hand, receive more questions, and are asked questions that require critical thinking; thus, increasing their access to knowledge.

Teachers must understand that higher level thinking questions are critical for the development of analytic and evaluative skills of all students. They need to communicate to students that their

analysis, synthesis, and evaluative efforts are valued. They also need to allow students to see themselves as producers of knowledge instead of consumers of knowledge (Jackson, 1994).

#### Strategy 5: Providing Effective Feedback

Teachers' feedback is essential to student success and it varies by gender and race (Good & Brophy, 2007). Students of color and girls receive feedback based on their personality, neatness of work, and physical appearance, while white-males' feedback focuses on academic achievement and effort. Jackson (1994) states that all students should receive feedback that highlights a positive aspect of their work, is specific to the academic objective, and instructs students how to correct errors to improve the quality of their work. Teachers implementing culturally responsive strategies will take the time to analyze the quality of the feedback they give to students and be cognizant of the student's culture when providing that feedback.

#### Strategy 6: Analyzing Instructional Materials

Many educators teach about different cultures through celebrations, entertainment, and artifacts of the culture such as food and clothing across the globe. However this is often considered as the tourist approach. Although the tourist approach is fun for students, it does not provide them with the opportunity to deal with real-life daily problems and experiences (Derman-Sparks, 1989; 1993; Jones and Derman-Sparks, 1992). Derman-Sparks (1989) further stresses that tourist multicultural curriculum does not foster students' understanding and empathy for our common humanity.

In contrast, a fully developed and integrated culturally responsive curriculum may use similar activities, yet it seeks to avoid the dangers of a tourist approach. Banks (1997) asserts that teachers need to implement cultural criteria for evaluating classroom materials, instructional practices, and activities. The cultural criteria may include: assessing that cultural and ethnic materials and activities accurately portray the values or feelings of the group; ensuring that stories and books, especially fictional books, include ethnic and cultural characters that are considered strong, moral, good, and wise; eliminating any ethnic and cultural materials that communicate racist concepts, phrases, or words; and using only factual information that is historically correct (Jackson, 1994; Lake & Lin, 2004; Riehl, 1993).

#### Strategy 7: Establishing Positive Home-School Relations

Trust between parent and teacher is a critical component of students' learning experiences. It has been shown that home and school collaboration is a primary contributor in improving trust in schools (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). Establishing positive relationships with families is especially important for culturally diverse and marginalized students who are disproportionately identified as having behavior problems. Inviting families to school, meeting with families outside of school, providing flexible meeting times and schedules, and asking families to contribute their cultural knowledge to enhance the classroom are a few instructional strategies teachers can employ.

Parents of language minority groups may have different attitudes toward schooling (Daniel-White, 2002; Sy, 2006). However, when these parents are actively involved in their children's schooling, they are able to help them to achieve higher levels of academic motivation and performance (St. Clair & Jackson, 2006). When parents are actively involved in and understand school activities, they are better able to help and support their child's learning activities regardless of their ethnic backgrounds.

Peralta-Nash (2003) believes that home visits are one of the necessary components of a cross-cultural learning experience that helps teachers to better understand their students and their

families. Additionally, Lin and Bates (2010) found that home visits positively impact teacher's attitudes towards students of diverse backgrounds. Teachers are more compassionate, empathetic, and accommodating after home visits. Lin and Bates further express the need for preservice and inservice teachers to be trained on how to conduct home visits. Positive home-school relations are fostered through home visits, phone calls, and communication books and emails as teachers learn to understand the importance of helping students feel accepted by their home and school culture.

This study uses the seven instructional strategies provided by Jackson in 1994 as its framework in understanding how teachers attempt to understand the diversity of their students, their families, and communities. "The strategies offer a basis for taking a proactive stance toward the problem of miss educating or under educating whole generations of students from culturally varied backgrounds" (Jackson, p. 303). Although the issues that classroom teachers face are more complex than ever, the strategies for solving these issues remain the same. Teachers need to know who their students are and what their needs are in order to provide the learning environment and curriculum that is culturally responsive and appropriate.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers attempt to understand the various ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds, languages, customs, values, ceremonies and symbols of the children and families in the community in which they teach. The main research question of this study was: what efforts are teachers making to understand the diversity of the children and their families that exists in their classroom?

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

Convenient sampling was used to recruit participants of an ongoing study. Sixty teachers of school aged children participated in this study; all participants taught primary grades (K to 3). All participants resided in the same rural Midwestern community in the United States. The demographics of the community itself are approximately 77% white, 10% black/African American, 7% Asian and 6% Hispanic/Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The majority of the teacher participants were female, except for one male. Teacher participants' years of teaching ranged from five to 25 and only one teacher was Black. Approximately 85% of the teachers taught in public schools and 15% in private schools.

#### *Procedures*

As part of a larger study, which examined parents' and teachers' beliefs about home/school collaboration, an open-ended interview was used. Open-ended questions were used in this study to facilitate a participants' comfort and to develop an authentic understanding of the participants' experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002; Silverman, 2001). This study employed semi-structured interviews to get comparable data and encourage the participants to discourse. The interview protocol was developed by the researchers, seeking to understand how parents in the United States are involved in their children's schooling and what teachers do to understand and involve and understand the students and their families that make up their classroom. This paper focuses on one important question from that interview: How do you go about understanding the various ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds, languages, customs, values, ceremonies, and symbols of the children and families in the community in which you teach?

#### *Data Analysis*



The teachers' response to the questions was coded and specific codes emerged from the analysis. The process of analysis began with open coding of the participant surveys. Grounded Theory methodology defines open coding as the process of developing categories of concepts and themes emerging from data. Data exploration is done without prior assumptions as to what might be discovered and with relationships among the data yet to be determined. According to Bryman and Burgess (1994) "categories are rarely known in advance of data exploration, and the relationships between categories must always be discovered during data analysis" (p. 168).

Coding was conducted by the two researchers. The analysis of the data resulted in five main categories: classroom activities, personal experiences, personal efforts, community events and school/district efforts.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In examining the data and the five categories produced, it is clear that all teachers in our study make some attempt to address the diversity of the students in their classroom. However, in each of the categories, it was clear to see different levels of depth in addressing diversity. The two categories that produced the most responses were classroom activities and personal efforts.

#### **Classroom Activities**

Examples of classroom activities include children around the world units, having group discussions, and having students present on their own cultural backgrounds. The two most frequent responses were integrating different cultures into the curriculum and inviting guest speakers to class. However, less than 25% of the teachers mentioned either of these categories. This teacher includes both in her response:

"As a teacher, I feel it is important to incorporate characteristics of several cultures throughout the classroom activities. I also make sure to include books that discuss various cultures' languages, customs, values, ceremonies, and so on. I also encourage guest speakers to come into the classroom to discuss some of the cultures we discuss throughout the course of the year"

This teacher does not provide many specifics but it is clear she makes an effort to incorporate different cultures into her class. It is not clear if those different cultures are actually represented by students in her class or who the guest speakers actually are. Other teachers mentioned that they brought in guest speakers, many of whom were parents of students in their classroom. For example, one teacher stated, "Parents come into the classroom and talk about their different holidays and traditions." From the previous quote and this similar remark, "all ethnic holidays are discussed. In our library/computer time, the children investigate & do reports on various winter holidays." It appears that many teachers believe learning about ethnic holidays or food provides students enough awareness about different cultures, possibly ignoring other important aspects of those cultures. We believe that these types of responses reflect only a surface level understanding of diversity and in some sense, a superficial understanding of cultures.

As will be mentioned below, many teachers used surveys to learn about their students' culture; however the following teacher uses an interview format but assigns it to her students.

"at the beginning of the year I have the students interview a family member about their background and culture and that usually tells me a lot. It goes into traditions,

where their family came from originally, who makes up their family, who they live with and interesting things about their family.”

Only seven of the teachers in the study asked students to make presentations about their cultures and only a few of those teachers mentioned including group discussion regarding the content of those presentations. Some of the teachers offered just general classroom applications stating, “I do try to incorporate a diverse curriculum so the students can be aware of the differences in the world,” and “I include units devoted to different countries and cultures.” These teachers did not provide many details as to what is included in the presentations and how it directly related to their students and the teacher’s own understanding of her students. Other evidence that teachers may only superficially discuss the cultures is that many of the teachers stated that they put posters up and or decorate the classroom to represent other cultures. But again, no clear discussion of how it was used in the big picture or to make connections to the students in that particular classroom. Decorating the classroom to represent other cultures might be a good start but a deep discussion of what those items are and why they represent the culture should also be included.

### **Personal Efforts**

The second most common category is that of personal efforts, where teachers perform personal actions to learn more about their students and/or different cultures. For instance, a few teachers mentioned they send a questionnaire home to parents in order to learn about their students’ backgrounds. One teacher stated, “At the start of each new school year I have all my parents fill out a questionnaire to let me know about their child, their family, their traditions, cultures, etc.” This teacher was more specific as to what was included in the survey than some others, such as, “At the beginning of the year I send out a questionnaire that is completely optional and voluntary but it asks questions about that area and subject matter.” This teacher also states that the survey is completely optional so she may not be receiving information on all of her students therefore missing out on some valuable information. An explanation to parents of why this information is important to the teacher and how it will be used may encourage more parents to respond to the questionnaire. The following teacher seems to have a good grasp of what she wants to learn from her students’ parents. Her reply seems to imply that she understands that diversity goes beyond ethnicity.

“at the beginning of the year I ask parents to fill out an interview. It consists of questions about their child’s interests, etc., but it also asks them what celebrations they have throughout the year, what celebrations/holidays do they observe or not observe, what languages are spoken other than English, what is their family compositions, religious background, community/school environment, etc. This serves as a way for me to learn more about each child and where they come from. I also ask them if there is anything they would be willing to share with the class, such as how they celebrate a holiday/customs/food, etc. This also helps me know what backgrounds I will have to research more about so that I have a basic understanding of that family’s culture.”

The above teacher also indicates that she makes an effort to learn more about the family’s culture and backgrounds by doing necessary research. Unfortunately, this was only one teacher out of our sixty participants. Other teachers also indicated the importance of learning about their students’ families but did so with other methods. For example, one teacher stated, “I have found it best to just ask the parent in the first meeting about

themselves and their culture, they are usually more than willing to share.” This may be a good idea to do in person, however, the first meeting often times takes place later in the school year in which case the teacher may have lost out on many important teaching and learning opportunities. Another teacher stated she learned about her students, “with home visits, it is easy to get a taste of students’ culture.” This teacher clearly sees the importance of getting to know the parents and the environment in which her students live. Home visits are a great way to learn about many aspects of children, but only one teacher even mentioned this possibility.

Besides asking about students’ backgrounds, a few teachers focused on action such as one teacher who stated the importance of, “Modeling respect and appreciation for diversity.” It was unclear how she showed her appreciation for diversity. And another teacher who took it upon herself to learn more through reading about different cultures, “I am an avid reader so I gain a general knowledge of ethnic groups, customs, ceremonies, etc. of different ethnic backgrounds through my readings.” Reading can be valuable but teachers must remember that their students are still individuals and may or may not have similarities with what they read in a book.

### **Personal Experiences**

The three additional categories, personal experiences, school efforts, and community events, occurred less often than classroom activities and personal efforts. In regards to personal experiences, some teachers felt that their previous coursework would help them understand their students, “I have taken many multicultural classes in order to become familiar with the various ethnic groups that are represented in my classroom every year.” It is commendable that this teacher has taken many classes but what is important is how she applies those classes in her practice, which she does not effectively address in her response. Other teachers focused on their many years of teaching experience, “Since I have been teaching at-risk for 27 years I feel that I work well with and understand many of the various ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds, languages, customs and ceremonies.” In fact, she may know a lot about different cultures but she does not seem to indicate how she addresses that her students are individuals and are diverse in many ways besides ethnicity and culture. Another teacher pointed out that there is very little ethnic diversity at her school, but since she is a member of that community, she is very familiar with many of her students’ families and extended families:

“there is very little ethnic diversity in the school community. Fortunately, I have been a resident of this town. This allows me to be an active citizen and become familiar with many of the school families. I know many of the families and even their extended families before those students come to my classroom. This has allowed me great opportunities for insight into the backgrounds and customs of each child.”

Although she indicates that there is little ethnic diversity in her community, she still demonstrates that she believes getting to know students and their families’ background is important regardless of ethnicity.

### **School Efforts**

Only a few of the teachers indicated that their schools or districts offered some opportunities to learn about different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. One teacher stated, “In order to better understand the various ethnic groups and cultures that are represented in the community, I



participated in a program called REACH that taught about ethnic and cultural differences and having respect for all people.” She was not specific as to what the program was or what exactly she learned from it and how she applied it. Another teacher remarked, “The only thing that has taken place at the school is when an African American woman was asked to come in and talk to the teachers about values, prejudice, and poverty. It was very interesting and informative. Other than that no other efforts have been made.” This seems to indicate that although her school offered one event, she did not feel she had much support from the school. This teacher made no other comments to how she could go about learning about her students’ backgrounds. It was apparent that she wanted it to come from the school or district level. It is important that the district offers support but the teachers must also make a strong individual effort.

Other teachers focused on one aspect of diversity such as ELL or bilingual population and how their schools supported those issues, stating:

“We also have wonderful ELL teachers here that are always available as resources,” and “Our school is a bilingual school. There are cultural activities that are run through the school. Everything we have in our school is translated into Spanish. The school and my class are always doing things that incorporate other cultures into our days. We say the Pledge of Allegiance as an entire school and say it in both English and Spanish every day. We have a bilingual coordinator that helps plan activities and is there if we need her for anything.”

Recognizing the language needs of students in a classroom is important however, there is many other important diversity areas that teachers should take note of. Focusing on language though it is a good start will not help teachers truly understand the background of their students and their families.

### **Community Events**

In regards to the resources in the community, it was clear that teachers did not take advantage of these resources to learn about various cultures. Only one teacher mentioned anything about community resources saying, “I attend cultural activities in my community.” She did not elaborate as to what they were or how she connected them to her classroom and students. Many communities have cultural centers or events that teachers could attend to learn more about their students and the various cultures in the community, unfortunately these resources seem to not be utilized by teachers.

In addition to the five categories identified, some teachers’ responses to the question demonstrated they had a very limited view of diversity. The only African American teacher commented she “grew up in the inner city, everyone was in the same social class so race wasn’t a big deal.” This seems to imply that she does not consider race an important issue in her teaching, perhaps she has the view that all children should be treated the same regardless of their background. She did not mention any methods she used to get to know her students. Other teachers commented, “Since we do not have any students with a big cultural difference, this year I haven’t really done anything,” and “No, not really. [Town’s name] doesn’t have a lot of ‘ethnic groups’ or ‘cultural backgrounds.’” Both of these comments reflect an inability on these teachers’ part to see that diversity goes beyond ethnic background. Regardless of ethnic background or cultural differences, their students still come from different families with different beliefs, customs, and the like.

## **Implications**

Findings from this study reveal that overall; the teachers participating in this study are not adequately prepared to work with children of diverse backgrounds. It is not surprising that many of the participants in this study did not recognize that varying abilities, learning styles, and linguistic abilities are all part of diversity. Their limited understanding of diversity sheds light on how teachers can better prepare themselves in this regard. Moreover, we gained an understanding of how little perceived support there is from administration at the school and district levels in this particular community when it comes to preparing teachers to better serve all children.

## **In Classrooms**

Knowing one's root, heritage, and tradition and how one's background influences his/her teaching is crucial. Teachers need to be aware of the beliefs that underlie their decision making (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996) because their beliefs drive classroom practices and those practices have a significant impact on their students' learning. When teachers are not aware of their roots and dispositions, they will not be able to understand their students' dispositions and behaviors. Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal (2005) believe that when teachers do not have deep understandings of their own or their students' cultural backgrounds, they tend to have difficulties building bridges between school and home. Katz (1993) argues that teachers need to develop a self-awareness of culture, bias, and discriminatory practices and to examine the effects on their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations on their children as teachers tend to treat children as they have been treated.

One of the most important skills that teachers need to develop is the ability to build on the knowledge that students bring into classrooms. The knowledge that is shaped by their family, community, and cultural histories is particularly critical. Unfortunately, neither parents nor students were utilized as resources by most participants in this study. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (1999) suggest that by collaborating, sharing resources, and generating strategies to overcome obstacles with parents, teachers can improve their practices. One strategy for utilizing parents in the classroom is to invite parents as guest speakers to share their own and their children's experiences (Lake & Lin, 2004). Parents may then provide specific strategies that teachers could then implement to address their students' cultural, ethnic, racial, and special needs. This is especially true when working with bilingual parents.

## **In Schools/Districts**

Many of the participants in this study claimed that they tried to introduce and integrate other cultures in their curriculum. However, only a few knew how to do it. Becoming culturally literate is one of the strategies that Jackson (1994) proposes if teachers are to work with students of all backgrounds. Understanding that students of diverse backgrounds have had to become bicultural or bidialectical in order to fit into most schools, teachers should strive to learn about their student's language, values, social customs, and learning styles (Jackson). Districts and schools could support teachers by organizing study groups and workshops on various cultures that the students in those particular districts and schools are from. The schools/districts can and should invite parents besides the so called experts to share their cultures and teach teachers some important phrases/words in their languages.

It can be understood that when a teacher who has no knowledge of or experience with children and parents who are different from him/her linguistically, culturally, and racially, he/she may feel overwhelmed when dealing with them. Furthermore, not all teachers have the knowledge and training of working with all children, especially children with special needs or ELLs. Thus, it is

definitely a great investment for the schools/districts to provide professional development training on working with students with special needs and working with ELLs, as well as home-school collaboration on a regular basis. Providing professional development/training to their teachers can help teachers to feel less overwhelmed when it comes to dealing diverse student populations.

The schools/districts should also provide incentives for teachers who want to advance their degrees, attending conferences, workshops, and working with parents more closely. Home visits, for example, should be supported at the district wide level. Only two teachers out of 60 had visited their students' homes in this study. Peralta-Nash (2003) believes that home visits are one of the necessary components of a cross-cultural learning experience that helps teachers to better understand their students and their families. Additionally, Lin and Bates (2010) found that home visits positively impacted teacher's attitudes towards students of diverse backgrounds. Teachers became more compassionate, empathetic, and accommodating. Once they recognized that their perceptions had changed towards their culturally diverse students, teachers looked for ways to include the students' cultures more in the classroom, further increasing their knowledge and tolerance of different and diverse backgrounds.

Many of these ideas can be implemented easily in any classroom. However, the first thing that teachers need to know is that their students and their families come in all sizes, shapes, structure, and makeup (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010). If teachers are not able to understand their students, they will not be able to tailor instruction. In order for teachers to work effectively with all students, teachers need to know who is in their classrooms. With the support from the schools/districts, this goal can easily be achieved.

It is apparent that some of the participants of this study employed many of Jackson's (1994) culturally responsive strategies in one way or the other. However, we might argue that their good intent was not fully materialized because of their limited funds of knowledge of diversity and lack of preparation to educating all students. A large scale of study of this kind that is carried out across the United States will help us better understand whether localities play a role in teachers' readiness and preparation to teach all students.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that teachers in the Midwestern part of the United States may not be fully prepared to handle the diverse classrooms that they are currently or soon will be facing. Although the teachers in this current study do make an effort to learn something about their students, they are often at a loss as to what information they should obtain and how to use that information effectively to inform their teaching. We suspect that teachers all over the world face this challenge. Teachers themselves are not to blame, they must be provided with opportunities to learn about diversity and the integration of diversity and diversity curriculum into their classrooms, and most importantly teacher education programs must go beyond offering one diversity class and instead integrate diversity throughout all content courses as well. And of course, pre-service teachers must be taught proper ways to learn about their students, examine their own cultural backgrounds and to go beyond skin color.

All students in every classroom have something to offer; it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to determine what that may be. In order to accomplish this, teachers must get to know their students and their students' families. Family resources as well as community resources should be used to not only learn about other cultural or ethnic backgrounds but also to allow children to

see the value of resources that are available to us, whether it be our parents, the community or the classmate they sit next to. Everyone has something to offer. And the best will be to include all students and their families in the learning process.

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that there is a long way to go for many teachers to become culturally responsive. As the world has become more diverse than ever, we believe it also offers an opportunity for teachers to become innovative and collaborative. With the support from colleagues, parents, students, and administration, we are hopeful that this goal can be achieved.

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