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# Middle School Journal

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## Effective Teaching Strategies for Middle School Learners in Multicultural, Multilingual Classrooms

### \* *This We Believe* Characteristics

- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity

\*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

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Middle school teachers, like all educators around the nation, are encountering classrooms comprised of an unprecedented number of students from various cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Due to the influx of immigrants entering the U.S. educational system, the number of students who speak a native language other than English has grown dramatically and will account for about 40% of the school-age population by 2040 (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). If current trends continue, almost half of our nation's school population will consist of members from non-Caucasian cultural groups by the year 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). The reality of a multicultural, multilingual student population dictates that educators, 87% of whom are Caucasian, must be prepared to interact and work with students who do not share the same language, culture, or national origin (Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001; National Education Association, 2002).

The increased diversity in the nation's classrooms has prompted much attention to the challenges associated with educating a multicultural, multilingual student population (Darling, 2005; Hodges, 2001). Some researchers believe that meeting the needs of diverse students is, and will be, even more challenging for middle school teachers than other teachers, because they must also help students deal with the unique developmental changes that occur during this time (Johnson, 2005; McLeod, 1996). As young adolescents confront a host of transitions associated with the emergence of puberty, including dramatic physical, social-emotional, and cognitive changes, they

also undergo transformations in relationships with parents, encounter more emotionally intense interactions with peers, and struggle with personal identity issues (Steinberg, 1981).

In addition, young students from varying cultural and racial backgrounds may simultaneously experience cultural conflict in the home and pressure from racially and culturally different peers at a particularly salient stage in cultural identity development (Banks, 2001; Garcia Coll, et al., 1996; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Middle school teachers, therefore, must become educated about and skilled in using pedagogy that is sensitive and responsive to the developmental and educational needs of young adolescents from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Clauss, 2006; Darling, 2005; Davis & Thompson, 2004; Hefflin, 2002; Johnson, 2005; National Middle School Association, 2003). This article explores instructional strategies employed by teachers in middle school classrooms in Florida, a state in which 50% of the students in public schools are members of ethnic minority groups (Florida Department of Education, 2004).



### **The participating teachers**

Family and consumer sciences (FCS) middle school teachers were targeted for this study, because FCS courses are required in all middle schools in the state of Florida and attract a wide range of students in any given class. Further, FCS teachers typically cover an array of topics from nutrition to self-esteem and employ a variety of instructional approaches in their classes, including didactic, experiential, and laboratory forms of instruction. Finally, there was a mechanism available to access FCS middle school teachers across the entire state (i.e., FCS district supervisors who agreed to assist the authors and distribute survey questionnaires to teachers).

A total of 16 middle school teachers from seven different districts across the state of Florida completed and returned the survey instrument. While it cannot be assured that these 16 teachers represented all middle school teachers in Florida, they represented districts with culturally diverse populations, including small rural and larger urban communities in Central Florida, South Florida, and the Gulf Coast regions. In addition, the participating teachers were experienced educators with an average of 15 years in the classroom and, thus, based their answers on what strategies worked for them in the daily life of teaching.

### **Diversity within Florida middle schools**

In the classes taught by these 16 middle school teachers, the non-white minority representation of students averaged 48%, a number that closely matched the state average (50%). In their "most diverse class," teachers identified Latino (40%) and African American (29%) students as

the largest groups represented, while 15% of the students were white. The Latino group, itself, was quite diversified, with students of Puerto Rican (17%); Mexican (13%); Cuban (6%); and South American (4%) ancestry, primarily Colombian and Brazilian. Although the two primary languages spoken by students in these diverse classes were English and Spanish, languages included Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Haitian and Haitian Creole, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Albanian, Lithuanian, Mandarin, Romanian, and French.

The extent of diversity in these Florida classes is astounding. Because of the mixture of languages, cultures, and national backgrounds, middle school teachers confront numerous and varying pedagogical challenges on a daily basis. This portrait of diversity and the challenges confronting these teachers will inevitably extend to other middle school teachers throughout the nation, given the rapidly growing diversity of student populations (Lessow-Hurley, 2003; U.S. Bureau of Census, 2004).

### **Identifying effective teaching strategies**

The survey questionnaire completed by the teachers included a six-point rating scale to assess the effectiveness of a variety of teaching strategies, ranging from "0 (*have not used*)" to "5 (*very highly effective*)." The scale included a total of 10 classroom practices and instructional strategies identified and endorsed by educators in the scholarly literature as being potentially valuable and effective with diverse learners in culturally diverse classrooms (Davidman & Davidman, 1997; Manning & Baruth, 2004; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2003). The practices and strategies listed were: case studies reflecting real-life experiences of diverse students; cooperative learning; dual language printed materials; field trips; guest speakers representing the cultures of the students; inviting parents to visit and participate in classroom activities; peer tutoring; role playing or skits to solve real-life problems or see others' perspectives; using alternative assessments to evaluate students; and the use of visuals.

Four of the 10 practices and strategies were rated as being most effective in diverse classrooms by these middle school teachers (mean ratings between 4.00 & 5.00). These most effective strategies were use of visuals ( $m = 4.44$ ), peer tutoring ( $m = 4.19$ ), cooperative learning ( $m = 4.06$ ), and the use of alternate forms of assessment ( $m = 4.00$ ). Each of these strategies is discussed and suggestions for how middle school teachers can implement each in their respective classrooms are offered.

### **Strategies and teaching practices for diverse learners**

#### **Visuals**

Florida middle school teachers rated the use of visuals such as teaching aids and pictures as the most highly effective teaching strategy for multicultural and multilingual students. In the research literature, visuals have been found to be especially helpful when teaching students whose first

language is not English (Carrier, 2005; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2003). Through pictures, teachers display visual stimuli that can be universally understood by all students (Curtis & Bailey, 2001). Visuals can be used in any subject area when teaching about concepts. Furthermore, hands-on materials and visuals that students can manipulate engage a variety of senses and help to make learning more meaningful, especially for diverse students who tend to be tactile, kinesthetic learners (Bruno, 1982; Curtin, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

As classrooms become more diverse, middle school teachers will realize that visual aids are valuable and possibly necessary instructional tools because most diverse students are not auditory learners (Curtin, 2006). Pictures, cartoons, maps, graphs, charts, diagrams, videos, and other multimedia resources enhance learning because they engage different senses, accommodate visual learners, and help reinforce key ideas by presenting information in alternative formats (Carrier, 2005). For English language learners, visual teaching aids ensure that learners attach meaning and mental images to words and concepts through the use of concrete instructional materials (Curtin, 2006).

There are myriad ways that middle school teachers can incorporate visuals into lessons. Student-constructed visuals such as drawings, posters, graphic organizers, storyboards, and autophotography (an autobiography that includes both photographs and words) can increase motivation and help students, especially English language learners, express their thoughts through non-verbal means of expression (Carrier, 2005; Moran-Ender & Ender, 1995; Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001). Teachers can also develop their own visuals such as bulletin boards, graphic organizers, flash cards, games, and handouts that include pictures and symbols that correlate with specific lessons. The use of multiple and varied visual aids also can capture the interest of active middle school students who require frequent stimuli to keep them engaged in learning.

### **Peer Tutoring**

A second strategy teachers in Florida rated as highly effective with students from racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse backgrounds was peer tutoring. This strategy, which pairs two students of differing abilities and backgrounds, has been found to be extremely effective in multicultural classrooms, especially with English language learners and with Hispanic and Native American students whose cultural values emphasize cooperation and mentoring (Saravia-Shore & Garcia, 1995; Snowman & Biehler, 2003). When native English speaking students are paired with English language learners, they become teachers and resources for each other, often relating better to each other than they would to a teacher (Kline, 1995). Furthermore, peer tutoring promotes communication, motivates students, and helps learners attain higher levels of achievement while developing friendships between students from different backgrounds (Saravia-Shore & Garcia, 1995; Snowman & Biehler, 2003).

The academic and social benefits of peer tutoring, for both the tutor and tutee, have been recognized by educational scholars who investigate culturally responsive teaching strategies

(Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001; King, 1982; Webb, 1988). For the tutor, peer tutoring enhances the development of leadership and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem. It also offers the tutor the opportunity to work one-to-one with a peer who is performing at a different level of achievement, facilitating a new appreciation and understanding of others who may be different (Webb, 1988). Peer tutoring actively engages tutees in learning as their partners model the English language, and they practice speaking in authentic, conversational situations. As they interact, converse, listen, and share ideas, there is immediate feedback, clarification, and modification. Because students with limited English speaking skills are often apprehensive and afraid to seek help from a teacher, working with a peer has many benefits for young learners (Curtin, 2006).

Peer tutoring can be implemented in any subject area and may be used to conduct experiments, revise and complete assignments, practice new skills, review for tests, solve problems, and gather information (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2003). Although most young adolescents welcome the opportunity to work with a classmate because of learning style preferences and because peer tutoring is more fun than working alone (Carbo & Kapinus, 1995), there are some potential pitfalls in pairing students. For example, students may get off-task and spend more time socializing than working, and higher-achieving students may become resentful if asked too often to help their lower-achieving peers (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2003). Attentive monitoring of activities, thoughtful decisions about pairing students, and specific guidelines and rules about working together can help to minimize these problems in middle school classrooms.

### **Cooperative learning**

A wealth of research has demonstrated that cooperative learning is an instructional approach that benefits all students, and, in particular, students from diverse backgrounds (Kline, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Slavin, 1991; Willis, 2007). Grouping students from different cultural backgrounds into heterogeneous groups and instructing them to collaborate and cooperate with each other on activities and problem-solving tasks has been found to promote inter-ethnic friendships, develop cross-cultural understandings, and build teamwork while also enhancing literacy and language acquisition among linguistically diverse students (Crandall, 1999; Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001; Saravia-Shore & Garcia, 1995; Slavin, 1990; Snowman & Biehler, 2003). Cooperative learning also assists diverse students in developing intellectual autonomy (Crandall, 1999). Furthermore, because young adolescents are extremely interested in their peers, cooperative learning provides a perfect opportunity for them to interact and collaborate with friends and other young people who are likely to become friends. The middle school teachers in Florida affirmed the benefits of cooperative learning, rating it as a "highly effective" strategy that improves academic performance and enhances communication skills in multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

There are a number of specific cooperative learning activities or methods that have been employed with success by teachers in multicultural middle school classrooms. One example is the "Think/Pair/Share" method in which students are first asked to think individually about a topic.

They are then paired up and asked to share information with each other. After the pair has discussed the topic, they are asked to share the information with the entire class or another group of students. Another example is the "Jigsaw" method, in which a unit of material is first divided into a number of different sections or components (e.g., for four sections the class is divided into four groups, and each group is assigned to learn the material in one section and to become "experts" on that specific material). Each group then teaches the content they have learned to the whole class, and the component parts are put together like a jigsaw puzzle to complete the study of the material. These methods, and other cooperative learning activities, offer unique opportunities for positive social interactions and interpersonal communication between students from different backgrounds in diverse classrooms, thereby providing the basis for real dialogue, mutual understanding, and positive learning outcomes (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994; Slavin, 1990; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

### **Alternative modes of assessment**

The use of alternative assessments within classrooms is a universally sound teaching practice that is particularly appropriate for diverse learners (Hodges, 2001). Florida middle school teachers strongly endorsed the value and need for a variety of assessment methods to effectively and accurately evaluate the progress of multicultural and multilingual students in their classrooms. They considered alternative assessments to be critical, because they enable students to demonstrate their understanding of information in multiple ways while providing them with a variety of opportunities for success.

Researchers have strongly asserted that assessment techniques must be compatible with and relevant to the cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and life experiences of all students. Traditional assessments such as paper and pencil tests discriminate against students of diverse backgrounds because they fail to recognize their heritage, languages, and experiences (Banks & Banks, 1999; Pai & Adler, 2001; Saravia-Shore & Garcia, 1995; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Therefore, alternative assessment methods have been widely accepted, because they provide a means for English language learners to demonstrate cognitive understanding without heavily relying on language.

Just as multiple modes of input are essential when presenting information to diverse learners, multiple and alternative modes of assessment are important when evaluating students because they do not require a high level of language proficiency (Carrier, 2005). Diverse learners tend to have a hands-on preference for learning; therefore, assessments that are performance based are helpful and congruent with their tactile/kinesthetic mode of learning (Carrier, 2005; Curtin, 2006). Because early adolescence is a time when self-concept and self-esteem are unstable, helping all young learners demonstrate their abilities and strengths in successful ways is important (Robertson & Valentine, 2000; Steinberg, 1981).

Researchers have identified a number of alternatives to traditional forms of assessment such as

the use of projects, exhibitions, journals, demonstrations, observations, graphic organizers, videos, and multimedia formats (Carrier, 2005; Kline, 1995). The portfolio has been found to be especially effective for young adolescents in middle school classrooms (Robertson & Valentine, 2000), particularly classrooms with multicultural, multilingual students (Kline, 1995). The portfolio, which is a collection of samples that represent a student's work, provides a means of self-expression, holds the student accountable as a learner for thoughtful decision making, and helps the student gain self-understanding—all of which contribute to the development of young adolescents (Robertson & Valentine, 2000). For diverse students, the portfolio allows students to showcase their work and share their cultural heritage while nurturing a sense of accomplishment. Portfolios, which can be implemented in most classes and for projects that integrate two or more subject areas, provide documentation of the capabilities, skills, and experiences of students. Given their flexibility, portfolios will be an important assessment tool for middle school teachers in their diverse classrooms (Kline, 1995).

## Conclusion

Today's classrooms are comprised of more ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse students than ever before. The increasingly multicultural, multilingual student population presents significant challenges to the nation's teachers, requiring them to adapt to their new "clientele" by becoming knowledgeable about the cultural backgrounds of their students and recognizing the abilities and skills of students who speak a language other than English (Carbo, 1995). Teachers must be prepared to implement instructional practices that accommodate the learning styles of their diverse students while effectively meeting educational objectives and standards (Banks, 1997; Banks & Banks, 1999; Gay, 2000; Heflin, 2002; Hodges, 2001; Saravia-Shore & Garcia, 1995). For middle school teachers, the challenges are even more imposing, as they must also be responsive to the changing developmental needs and characteristics of students who are transitioning from childhood to early adolescence (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; National Middle School Association, 2003).

The specific instructional strategies identified as "highly effective" by a group of 16 middle school teachers in Florida, teachers with extensive experience in teaching multicultural and multilingual students, included the use of visuals, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and alternative forms of assessment. These instructional practices have been supported in the scholarly literature on culturally responsive teaching. While there is a growing body of research-based information on strategies for diverse learners, these teachers appear to be meeting an urgent need for promising practices to be employed in classrooms with multicultural and multilingual students (Carrier, 2005; Curtin, 2006; Gersten, 1996). The information provided here is pertinent for middle school teachers who will be increasingly accountable to accommodate the needs of many different kinds of learners. To make informed pedagogical decisions about classroom practices, middle school teachers must be educated about and prepared for the challenges and rewards inherent in the reality of a multicultural, multilingual student population.

### Editor's Note

<sup>1</sup> See Willis (2007) and Moore (2007) in the March issue of *Middle School Journal* and Delaney & Shafer (2007) in the September issue for more ideas on the power of appealing to multiple senses to improve learning.

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