

Building Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Gheorghita Mihaela Faitar*
D'Youville College, NY, USA

Abstract

The effort of increasing teachers' preparation and training is a daunting task of today's teachers' college institutions in the US; still it cannot be accomplished without understanding and responding to the stringent demands of working with students of various backgrounds; their various religions, races, ethnicities, sex-orientations, linguistic heritages, socioeconomic statuses. It is the environment of respect and enhanced self-awareness that may lead to a beneficial collaboration and a responsive classroom that facilitates learning and growing in any school. This paper aims to analyze ways in which pre-service teachers in today's teacher college institutions in the US are to be familiarized with ample methods of addressing students' diversity of today's world. A special emphasis is placed on preparedness for working with the culturally diverse learners based on various modes of communication. The complex world of linguistic diversity related to students' backgrounds is to be better addressed through a proper training of the teachers when faced with multiple modes of verbal and non-verbal communication channels in their classroom.

Key Words: Diversity, Channels of communication, Multicultural education

* Ph.D. D'Youville College, Education Department/Childhood Buffalo, NY, 14201, USA;
E-Mail: mfaitar@yahoo.com

Introduction

The most challenging aspect of today's classrooms is the diversity that defines it. We have almost a majority of minority students that are part of our classrooms and they can change the prospects of teaching and learning in the urban, suburban and rural schools.

One simple way of understanding the impact of students' diversity is related to students' demographic data in any classroom. As mentioned by Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (2011):

Nationally, the "average" classroom would fit the following portrait: Of its 30 students (15 girls and 15 boys), 17 are White, five are African-American, six are Latino (three Mexican-American, one Puerto Rican, one Central American, and one Cuban American), one is second-generation Asian-American, and one is American-Indian. Two of the African-American students, three Latino students, and two White students come from families who live below the poverty line, while another four White students are from upper-income homes (p.42).

In today's society all of the US teachers are facing the major challenge of high-stakes testing and accountability teaching in this diverse environment. The educators, teachers and administrators are confronted with the challenge of individual and institutional accountability process first enacted through the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, and then re-iterated in 2009 through the President Obama's administration. The degree to which all students are attaining academic achievement is assessed through 'one shoe fits all' performance standards (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010, p.208). The implementation of higher academic standards involves rigorous timelines and appropriate strategies for improving teacher's education. Efforts to increase the quality of teachers will potentially enhance the academic achievements of the very diverse student population. It is anticipated that by 2020, minority students will make up about 48 percent of the nation's school age youth (Banks & Banks, 2007, p.vi). New teachers should be able to apply the best instructional strategies in introducing learning and assessment methods for diverse learners (Faitar, 2010).

Culturally responsive factors

As teachers, it is our job to make each child feel welcomed and respected. This is the sole reason why we have to chart the pristine territories of building in the today's society a culturally responsive schooling. Diaz-Rico & Weed (2010) stated, "Culturally responsive schooling is defined as effective teaching and learning occurring while in a culturally supported, learner-centered context where each student's culture is recognized and respected during learning and social activities throughout the school day. The cultural strengths, students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement" (p.265). They also explained that there are four major components of culturally responsive schooling and they are defined as: 1) respect students' diversity, 2) work with culturally supported facilitating or limiting attitudes and abilities, 3) sustain high expectations for all students, and 4) marshal parental and community support for schooling (p.265).

Respecting student diversity may seem like an easy task; however if we have to take into consideration all of the diversity encompassing features, we may end up not knowing what we have to emphasize more in order to address it. It is the complex aspects of academic ability, multiple intelligences, learning styles, thinking styles, gender, attitudes, culture and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, home language, and developmental readiness that are to be understood and promoted for an efficient learning (Kagan, 2007). Apparently, teachers who are members of the mainstream culture recognize that they need to adapt culturally to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, just as these individuals learn to accept and adapt to the mainstream. With the goal of respecting students' diversity in mind, also comes the importance of validating students' cultural identity. Cultural identity –defined as having a positive self-concept or evaluation of oneself and one's culture – promotes self-esteem. “Students who feel proud of their success and abilities, self-knowledge, and self-expression, and who have enhanced images of self, family, and culture are better learners” (Diaz-Rico and Weed, 2010, p.280).

Sustaining high-expectations for all students relies on teachers who develop initial expectations based on students' reputation, on previous classroom performance, or on stereotypes about racial, cultural, and linguistic groups. Educators must base their expectations on their day-to-day experiences with students. The process of assessment of students' work and capabilities amounts to a continuous catering to the needs of the diverse students and the recognition of their accomplishments. By everyday's teacher-to-student interactions, teachers should set high standards of achievement for every student, and in turn, students may be able to perform at their best abilities benefiting mostly from teacher's individual support toward increased curriculum access and intervention (Diaz-Rico, and Weed, 2010, p.293).

Marshaling family and community support for schooling implies support and encouragement for families and educators to work together in educating students (Diaz-Rico& Weed, 2010, p.295). Family members by working with their child both at home and at school may help to establish a genuine respect for their children's strengths and cultural backgrounds. The collaborative involvement in school actions includes family, communities at large who will work to efficiently set goals, to allocate resources and also to help with the realization of such goals. The parental involvement is highly influenced by cultural beliefs. In cultures in which the teachers are perceived as high-status, parents may be reluctant in addressing educational matters at school. For example, Asian-American parents, in spite of their high expectations for their children academic success, may consider important not being involved in the classroom since this is only the school's responsibility (Fuller & Olson, 1998). Other factors that may make family involvement difficult are school procedures for scheduling important events such as, family-teacher conferences and notification to parents that student's siblings are not welcome during these conferences. The parents' willingness to come to school is dependent on their perceived notions regarding benefits and values attributed to schooling and also to their personal attitudes and experiences.

Of an essential quality to the process of schooling is the effort of working with culturally supported facilitating or limiting students' attitudes and abilities. Knowing that 70 percent of the world's population lives in a collectivist culture (i.e. Native

Americans, Native Hawaiians, Latin Americans, African Americans, Asians, and Arab groups) it is of a quintessential importance for teachers to emphasize collaboration and interdependence rather than competition and aggression (Tileston and Darling, 2008). In the process of developing cooperative skills that lead to communication and teamwork, some features are to be recognized and applied in a classroom: a) positive interdependence relying on members of a group depend on one another, and no one is exploited or left out; b) face-to-face interaction implies students work in proximity to one another; c) individual accountability in which each group member bears full responsibility for the work performed by the group; d) social skills training related to the teacher who explains and models the kind of communication and cooperation that is desired; d) group processing, where the teacher makes time for reflection on how the group is working together and helps the group set goals for improvement (Kluge, 1999).

As part of the creation of a lucrative learning environment it is deemed appropriate to analyze and understand the important role of the social function of any language in any classroom. The usage of language for conveying specific messages encoded in any human culture also depicts more basic needs of an individual, such as satisfying material needs, control the behavior of others, express one's personality, get along with others, find out about the world, create an imaginative world, or communicate basic information. The linguistic approach to understanding and validating one's identity is of an undeniable value. "The fulfillment of these social functions are nonetheless of a great variety if applied to the cultures of the world; for example, when accidentally bumping someone, Americans, Japanese, Koreans, Europeans and Filipinos would say "excuse me" or "pardon me", whereas Chinese would give an only apologetic look" (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2010, p.284).

Most importantly, both verbal and nonverbal means are used to convey a language function. Still, today's teachers are more inclined to accept and validate the verbal means of expression and less likely to give credit to the "silent language", or the non-verbal modes of communication (Birdwhistell, 1974). Knowing that 65 percent of the social meaning of a typical two-person exchange is portrayed by the nonverbal cues, we as teachers aim for building of an awareness and receptivity of these means of communication present in any culture.

Theoretical background for training pre-service teachers

The present study focuses on understanding the importance of the social sciences, especially of the multicultural education curricular training for teachers' preparation toward building bridges of cooperation much needed in the classroom. In the social sciences realm dealing with various aspects of diversity, the verbal and non-verbal modes of communication are allocated important segments of training as part of the multicultural and diversity courses required for all of the pre-service teachers. Many of the aspects of communication are synthesized, analyzed and applied in the lesson plan presented by the future teachers as part of the requirements for the courses. For the pre-service teachers it becomes vastly important to be familiarized with ways of addressing spoken and non-spoken communication channels issues, especially when faced with the challenges of cultural beliefs and communication styles of various

populations of learners such as, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Arabs, African Americans, and any other ESL ('English as a second language') or ELL ('English language learners') minority. In the process of anticipating and assessing the knowledge of the future teachers in a multicultural and diverse class, the encompassing aspects of the human communication arsenal are included in some of the chapters of instruction offered by the Education course. In relation to the teaching of diversity through non-obtrusive procedures of Human Relations approach, or the Multicultural approach to education, pre-service teachers are taught that it is important to adhere to the idea that there are multiple ways of addressing diversity in a classroom (and in the society as well). The Human Relations approach is essential in providing help mainly at the affective level. Students (individuals) as part of this approach are better educated and trained to communicate with, accept, and get along with other people who are different from themselves. They are also taught to be active in the collective group aiming at reducing prejudice, eliminating stereotypes that students (individuals) might have inherited or acquired about other people. In the process of initiation into the Human Relations approach, pre-service teachers learn that it is quintessential that students in the classroom develop a positive image about any of themselves (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p.78). The Multicultural approach as emphasized by Koppelman and Goodhart (2005) is "based on a commitment to pluralism; its guiding purpose is to prepare students to be active participants in a diverse, democratic society" (p.292). The Multicultural Education seeks to reform the entire process of schooling and does not stop with the improvement of individual and collective attitudes. It is mainly catered toward addressing societal change. It seeks to also develop skills and a strong knowledge base that will support multiculturalism (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p.162). The Multicultural Education is taught based on recommended practices around defining elements such as, curriculum, instruction, home/community-school relationship assessment of learning, and other school-wide issues. Moreover, the implementation of Multicultural Education is often tied to the goals of teaching it through a thorough approach that involves people able to envision, define, and work toward a more humane and fair society. They have to be trained so that schools, community and teachers come together in a process of continuous democratization (Apple and Beane, 1995). The approach in which people 'conscientization' and empowerment are stringent teaching necessities is part of the works of many renowned scholars. The critical multiculturalism as understood by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), or the anti-oppressive education described by Kumashiro (2002), and culturally responsive teaching portrayed by Irvine (2003) are all rallying to emphasize the importance of a higher-level teaching pathway needed to be embraced by stewards of learning for building a critically thinking population. The regular citizen who envisions actions, consequences, long-term goals for himself/herself as part of a diverse and expanding contemporary society has to be trained to live and work in a culturally responsive environment.

When talking about the ability to increase awareness for the pre-service teachers, especially while reading the non-verbal clues of communication in a classroom, the potential teachers are introduced to the dimensions of the non-verbal channels. Their meaning and application as explained by Christine Bennett are further exemplified for the students (Bennett, 1999). The extensive presentation of the

defining aspects of kinetics (body language), proxemics (personal space) and heptics (frequency, location of touch) for various cultures helps to better understand differences in cultures and beliefs throughout the world. The significance of signs, symbols, clothes, and jewelries in various cultures is also presented in the diversity and multicultural courses of the teachers' college institutions. There is also information regarding aspects of non-verbal communication that have pan-cultural meaning. Research using facial expressions has shown that six emotions are recognizable in all cultures: anger, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, and disgust (Ekman, 1971, Izard, 1971 as mentioned in Brislin and Yoshida, 1994, p.278-279). The pre-service teachers become familiarized with the idea that there are general ways of displaying emotions, and also numerous challenges of transmitting their meaning in all world cultures.

After the introduction and analysis of the possibilities to teaching toward understanding and respecting diversity through non-linguistic channels and non-obtrusive perspectives (Human Relations and Multicultural Education), the students are given a questionnaire (Annex 1) to assess their own grasping of the topic. The questionnaire is part of the study presented by Richard Brislin and Tomoko Yoshida in "Improving Intercultural Interactions" (Brislin and Yoshida, 1994).

Research Methodology

The present paper aims to apply the aforementioned study on a population of pre-service teachers enrolled in the EDU 651 Multiculturalism and Diversity class offered in one of the teachers' training institutions in Upstate New York during the academic year 2009-2010. There were two sections of pre-service teachers (30 students) who answered to the survey's questions, specifically formulated for people involved in working with diverse background collaborators.

The sequences of the research imply that first, the pre-service teachers had to take a survey related to the self-assessment of their awareness for various modes of communication, followed by questions related to the importance of these modes of communication when teaching core subjects such as, language, arts, sciences, and mathematics. The pre-service teachers are informed that diverse background collaborators are exemplified by their students (and their family members) in their future classrooms. Their anonymous answers to the self-assessment surveys were associated with the 1 to 5 Likert scale. The questionnaire (Annex 1) envisions that any respondent should count the total number of points earned during the self-assessment exercise. If they were aware of the need of a high level communication (verbal and nonverbal) at their workplace, they would score between 20 and the maximum 40 points.

After the assessment exercise has been performed, in the second part of the investigation, the pre-service students were specifically asked by the instructor if they consider one communication aspect (the verbal one) much more important than the other one (non-verbal) and why.

The anonymous answers were then interpreted and analyzed. In the end, in order for the students to better comprehend their own ways of applying tolerance,

respect and appreciation toward diversity as part of the non-obtrusive procedures of human communication abilities and features in any of the daily aspects, they were invited to give their personal reflective opinion about ways they can improve.

Findings

In all of the responses to the survey there was an agreement that both verbal and non-verbal channels of communication are important in understanding diversity in any setting. From analyzing the answers, the instructor concluded that fifty percent of the students were already familiarized with the non-verbal/verbal modes of communication before taking the course in multiculturalism and diversity as envisioned by the curriculum for the teachers' training institution. The total score earned by students in the self-assessment exercise ranged between twenty-two and thirty-six. Interestingly enough, some of the students (ten percent) considered that the non-verbal channels of communication are more important in working and coping with diverse learners, especially if teaching hard-core sciences, such as mathematics and natural sciences. The verbal modes of communication were recognized as more important than the non-verbal modes for teaching language arts, and social sciences. Some of the most insightful answers (thirty percent) given by the pre-service teachers recognized the importance of the non-verbal modes of communication because "non-verbally you can understand and stimulate people's emotions, thoughts, and actions". They explained that sometimes a glance or a facial expression are strong enough to encourage and increase awareness in a child. Along the same lines, pre-service teachers aware of the difficulties of working with children with disabilities (twenty percent) admitted that "for special education, perceiving non-verbal cues is important because students are not always verbally or emotionally well understood".

The most insightful answers concluded that all of the teachers should become familiarized with both modes of communication; they nonetheless acknowledged that the non-verbal communication channels are harder to be grasped and dealt with if some of the students chose at a moment in time to not fully participate in a sequence of learning in the classroom, for cultural, emotional, linguistic, religious, or other various reasons. Therefore, the non-verbal modes are much more important to be recognized, addressed and used in a classroom for a conducive and productive continuous teaching activity. Based on the findings of the aforementioned study, it becomes important for any future teacher to be trained and up-to-date to the newest ideas and discoveries in the realm of human existence, communication, learning and education so that their students may work and live up to the requirements of the contemporary society. It might become imperative to implement in all teacher training institutions a series of comprehensive multicultural and diversity studies for all teachers, educators, administrators, in order to increase their performance in any culturally diverse classroom.

Conclusion

If we ought to become fully aware of the importance of working and living in a peaceful and equitable world, we have to acknowledge the importance of becoming more understanding, respectful and tolerant for the fellow human beings. Regardless of the cultural, social and economic background, all students in a classroom are held accountable for becoming future well-educated citizens of the world. Therefore, a paved way of bejeweled values conducive to respecting diversity, tolerance and collaboration needs to be built from childhood by the teachers of contemporary societies. They are the ones called to generate models of working and living in the midst of challenges presented by a multicultural and ever-evolving world without frontiers. They are responsible for the inculcated values and beliefs that are so very important in building new, encompassing, enlightened consciences for our children. The teachers are also responsible for understanding and applying a whole set of instructional methods that take into consideration recognized verbal and nonverbal modes of communication.

As a major consequence, efforts to build awareness, understanding and increased self-esteem that are so vastly recognized by any school system in the world should be better embraced and applied especially in training our educators, teachers, counselors and administrators. Recent initiatives like the one mentioned in the paper, in which pre-service teachers are required to take and pass courses in multiculturalism and diversity as part of their curriculum, are to be replicated and extrapolated in all major institutions that prepare teachers as future citizens of a 'kaleidoscopic' world.

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Annex 1* . Self-Assessment Exercise: Interpersonal Communication in the Workplace

Please respond to the following eight statements. You can write a short response, or you can use the 5-point (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-not sure, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree) scale that follows each statement.

1. When information is conveyed through person-to-person conversations in my organization (sometimes called “the grapevine”), I am one of the first people to learn the information.
2. When working with others in group activities, I am skillful at encouraging others in the group to make contributions.
3. When working with others in group activities, I listen carefully and respectfully when others speak.
4. When high-level executives in my organization share information with me, and when this information is not privileged and sensitive, I share it with my colleagues.
5. When I learn a skill that is important to job success in my organization, I try to pass on that skill to others.

* Improving Intercultural Interactions, 1997, p.18.

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6. When people with whom I work are from different backgrounds than myself (e.g., other ethnic groups, other countries), I try to respect differences in the way they behave.
7. Other people in my organization find me a cooperative and pleasant colleague.
8. I am good at “reading” the nonverbal signals that others send out when communicating with me.

In scoring this self- assessment, add up the number of points you gave yourself for each question. The lowest possible score is 8, and the highest possible score is 40.

About the Author

Dr. Gheorghita M. Faitar is an Assistant Professor of Education at D’Youville College in Buffalo, New York, USA. A graduate of the State University of New York at Buffalo, she teaches courses in Social Foundations of Education, Multiculturalism and Diversity, Sociolinguistics, and Philosophy of Education. Her research interests encompass science education, social issues in international and comparative education, and educational leadership and culture. Her studies were published in several American and International peer-reviewed journals and presented at various conferences and scientific meetings.

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