

Incorporating Diversity in the Classroom:

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With the growing cultural diversity of the world, the K-12 classroom has become a critical launching pad for understanding cultural differences. Education about cultural differences begins with the teacher. Today it is a prelude to the world of work, where many students will encounter diverse cultures. It is this exposure to cultures that can bring out a teacher's creativity in teaching a broad range of subjects. So each teacher must go on a journey to uncover how cultures influence families, government, language and where people live.

In his book, "*The World is Flat*" Dr. Thomas L. Friedman points out that the trend toward cultural diversity will not change. Some teachers are ready to make bold changes in their class format, which will allow every student to feel included in the class discussion. For others, an adjustment will be needed to re-examine teaching approaches in order to incorporate a broader view of the world. The teacher must provide experiences that are culturally specific inside and outside of the classroom. Instead of taking the traditional trips to museums, each trip becomes a cultural exploration throughout the year. The class could go to see the communities where Chinese, Russian and African immigrants live and talk with the local residents. The students are likely to find differences and similarities in their own culture. Another teacher could invite a guest speaker who helps an art class to recreate some of their culture's art.

One unique idea would be for teachers to explore their own culture and talk with the students from a personal perspective. Also, invite the students to do research on their families' culture. Invite a relative who can talk about the history of how their family arrived in this country. Explore some of the things that have changed in your family. For example some children no longer speak the language that their grand parents were taught. Some families still have property in their native countries and return to their roots for family reunions. Students may also be assigned to interview a family member about an historical event that they experienced. Families are filled with rich stories that aren't always passed down.

A teacher who is sensitive to cultural differences can bring tremendous value to the classroom. They are more likely to understand that every student does not have the same learning style. Some students are visual learners and some are tactile learners. Bringing cultural diversity into the classroom enhances the learning opportunity of the entire class. The visual learner can benefit from maps, discussions of videos and pictures. One assignment might involve students finding pictures that represent how cultures live in their native country. Housing itself can be very symbolic of a culture's history. In another class students might talk about the types of clothes that are acceptable in a country. A chemistry teacher can discuss the difference in materials and the dyes that are used and in a certain culture's clothing. For some cultures clothing is very symbolic. Students may bring in clothing and foods representing their culture.

Some teachers have joined efforts to take students to other countries. This is particularly true in classes that involve international languages. Students who are learning Spanish may visit Mexico. Before going, they spend a semester learning the values of Mexican culture. Students can benefit from learning how families have different ways of communicating. The teacher can benefit from researching how a culture can change over time. Students can also

study how the economies in other cultures operate. An economy that works in one country may not work in another country. There are cultural differences about the value of money and the importance of having material possessions. Some economies around the world are still very focused on living based on the productivity of their land. This may lead to a class discussion about who is allowed to own land in a different country. Teachers may also benefit from taking advantage of training and enrichment travel programs for educators.

Developing a balanced educational experience requires a teacher who is willing to reach out to multicultural associations that have resources and materials. Some of these associations are specifically designed to preserve the important aspects of a culture. There are many associations and community groups that sponsor events about Africa. A teacher can join or attend events that are sponsored by the African groups and other cultures. Building a relationship with a group can give the teacher access to materials and newsletters that are produced by the association. The teacher may be allowed to bring artifacts to the classroom to discuss their origin, or give a joint presentation with someone from the association.

The teacher also must realize that some students have not been exposed to people who are from different backgrounds and cultures. They may not be sure how to respond to someone who speaks differently. There may be some assumptions about the student's knowledge level because they can not speak English clearly. This offers a great teaching opportunity. It also provides material for class discussions on the dangers of stereotyping people, the role of the media as it relates to culture and understanding people on an individual basis. Teachers may initiate projects connecting students with schools in other countries.

We are living in a rapidly changing world. While a teacher is providing instruction in their classes the world is changing everyday. There are video conferences where languages are translated. There are Web sites that uncover cultures that are rapidly growing more modern. The teacher who is sensitive to these changes will produce a student who is better prepared to have a flexible world perspective. The new labor force will require students to understand cultural differences. Today workers are sometimes assigned to live and survive in other countries while working for international companies.

Teachers can intertwine courses with cultural themes throughout the school year. Just a study on the pyramids alone could yield thousands of years of history, and math and science of specific cultures. At the end of the year students could have a culminating presentation of the cultures they have studied. Also there is value in seeing how these cultures have changed to adjust to modern technology. There is a lot to learn about cultures all over the world, and it can be fun. Teachers can present rich cultural lessons by highlighting the accomplishments of other cultures and preparing students to have a better global perspective.