

Reflecting Our Multicultural Classroom

The multicultural classroom is where rural, urban, and suburban settings, high poverty and high wealth, and public and private schools all reflect the diversity of our society. This very diversity, when presented in a positive way from the community, the families, the administrators and the classroom facilitators can serve to prepare students for successful relationships with all those they meet throughout their lives. The multicultural dimension of contemporary society provides a rich backdrop in which to learn and grow and thrive. When presented as an asset in a positive manner, it can only serve to make us all become better people.

The best way to respect and learn from the rich diversity of our day is to insure that there is quality education for everyone. Lions Quest programs are designed to create a learning environment based on the needs of all students in an environment in which no one is an outsider because everyone is needed, valued, and important. Lions Quest programs support, encourage, and celebrate diversity. The programs guide students to learn the social, emotional, and thinking skills they will need in a safe and supportive environment.

Ways to Enhance and Respect the Multicultural Representation in the Classroom

The facilitator as the message

In the Lions Quest programs, diversity is viewed as an asset. The facilitator's attitude is one of the biggest factors in determining whether students succeed academically and socially. It is important to acknowledge that people are different from one another while making it clear that someone who is different is not inferior. Then the facilitator must take the time to discover the skills and talents students have to offer and the experiences they can share. Finally it is helpful to create a plan for building upon the knowledge and skills and talents the students bring.

Students are always looking to the facilitator in the classroom as the role model for all interactions. Students are looking to see if the facilitator is mirroring in some way the experiences that they have had through their own familial and cultural experiences. The more the facilitator weaves genuine stories and examples that reflect the world of the student, the more the student sees the facilitator as a viable and credible source and role model.

Listening, reading, asking the community for resources, immersing oneself in the culture of the students, and visiting the homes of the students can help facilitators acquire many resources, knowledge, and experiences to bring back to the classroom. Asking students to share examples and validating them through equitable responses will also create an atmosphere of valuing different experiences and points of view.

First, a look inside

Every classroom has cultural diversity. Whether it is socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, religious, or many other cultural groups, all classrooms have diversity. Facilitators must first do their own work and understand what information, misinformation, or lack of information they have about the cultures represented in their classroom. Facilitators are encouraged to look at their own culture first and define what they feel and think about other culture.

Ways the Lions Quest Programs Enhance and Encourage the Multicultural Classroom

Climate of respect

In Unit 1, students work together to establish shared classroom agreements, which are norms for treating one another with respect. This contributes to the creation of a safe and non-threatening environment for all students. The Shared Agreements are referred to throughout the Lions Quest programs and are part of the foundation for respecting all people in the classroom community.

Opportunities for all learning styles

The Lions Quest programs provide a variety of opportunities to learn in ways that are best for each learner. Students experience many different kinds of learning—active and reflective, concrete and abstract. The lessons utilize both auditory and visual cues for learning and allow for students to demonstrate their understanding of the skills and concepts verbally, in writing, through role plays and skits, and many other ways.

Cooperative interaction

Students create a sense of classroom community. Students participate in a variety of groups and work on projects together, each having the opportunity to participate in several group roles. They learn from each other and work together by listening, resolving conflicts, sharing, and giving compliments.

Family and community involvement

Families and other community members are invited to serve directly in a variety of ways with students in the classroom, at home through Family Connection take-home worksheets, as helpers on service-learning projects, on the School Climate Committee, and/or the Implementation Team. In this way, representatives of the cultures in the community have a voice in how the program can reflect the values of the community. Members of these committees reflect the diversity of the school community, which maximizes the potential for learning across cultures, allows for immediate feedback and understanding of cultural differences, and opens the way for creating appropriate, meaningful, and significant activities and action plans for their own community.

It is normal and likely that all humans have some biases about different groups based on their own experiences. Facilitators can take an honest look at their fears and discomforts and create a plan to work through those fears. Taking culture-specific or general multicultural classes can help. Immersing in the culture they do not understand or working with someone from that culture can help them better understand and clarify any misinformation they may have. It is guaranteed that if there is any level of prejudice that someone is trying to cover up, the student will pick up on it very quickly, perhaps not overtly or consciously but they will feel it. Facilitators who are consciously aware and continue working on their fears and biases can serve as role models to students as they navigate and work through them.

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Creating a resource list

When it comes to learning about the diversity of your community, facilitators can ask for help from available resources. The students themselves, their family members, school staff, community leaders, local agencies, colleges and universities, and state and national organizations may serve as valuable resources that are willing to offer help.

Believe in the students

Facilitators are encouraged to become advocates for their students and to show by their actions that they believe in their students' abilities and will do all they can to help them succeed. Also, facilitators can communicate this message to their students' families. When facilitators believe their students are capable of learning and performing, students receive a powerful message of hope and assurance. The families see that the facilitator cares and they build trust and mutual respect.

Classroom materials

Visuals, instructional materials, resources and guest speakers can all reflect a positive view of a multicultural classroom, the community, and

Some Additional Things To Know

Facilitators as viewed by other cultures

Different cultural groups view facilitators differently. In some cultures, for credibility, facilitator must be seen as an equal or peer, while in other cultures they are held in higher esteem and require deference. One can often tell how they are viewed by listening to how they are addressed, by first name or as Mr. or Mrs. with either the last name or the first. In many cultures calling the facilitator simply, "Teacher," is meant to be an honorific of the highest regard. Sometimes family members are viewed as not caring or indifferent about their children, when in fact they are simply deferring to the facilitator, since they see the facilitator as knowing what is best for their child. It is important to observe and ask questions and use the stance that is most comfortable to the family members so that the information about their child is heard, understood, and received.

Cultural identity

It is important to remember that not all who look like they may come from a specific culture are from that culture. Students may have ethnic names and not be from the country one thinks. They may look like they are from one cultural group but they do not identify with that group because they were adopted or do not speak the language or live far from their extended families. Perhaps they choose not to identify with that culture or group. Facilitators do not assume that someone is from one social class or that someone has a particular disability. Certain religious beliefs are not always visible and may surface and catch one by surprise. It is best not to assume but to inquire. Students should be allowed to self identify as much as possible. Facilitators are encouraged to become comfortable with the fact that the information or visual and auditory clues may or may not be correct. Facilitators can model respecting and honoring cultural diversity by learning to apologize for mispronouncing a name or inaccurately guessing at a cultural identity. The worst is to ignore differences or to minimize them by saying they are not important. Cultural identities are important to some people and groups more than others and at different times they are more important than other times. They can be rewarding and valuable and the facilitator must welcome the differences, be willing to make mistakes, and give support and model respect for those difference.

contemporary society. All materials and resources: human, visual, and auditory must reflect ethnicity, gender, people with disabilities, and class in a non-stereotypical manner. Facilitators can look for books and other materials that include a multicultural focus. Grading and tests must also reflect an understanding of different learning styles and cultural diversity.

Languages spoken

Facilitators acknowledge the advantages of knowing more than one language. If students speak more than one language, facilitators can point out on a map where these languages are spoken. They can encourage students to teach each other words from their languages. The facilitator can model learning as a student and practice and use the new words throughout the day. Facilitators can discuss the value of being able to communicate with people from a variety of backgrounds. They can stress the advantages of being bilingual or multicultural in the workplace. There are many current books or stories that highlight young people who speak more than one language.

Planning in advance to have an interpreter for open houses and meetings with family members is helpful and does not catch anyone by surprise. When using an interpreter, the facilitator should remember to look at the person speaking and not the interpreter, making sure the speaker feels like they are having the conversation and not the interpreter.

Facilitators send all communication home in a language the family understands. If this is not possible, an interpreter can call and give them the information they need. They also send home reminders or special instructions about homework in the home language. Even if these communications are difficult or challenging, uneven in quality, or inconsistent, families will be impressed that the school is making the effort. They live in a world where they are challenged to navigate through a language they don't understand. Someone reaching out in their language to talk about their children will help families and community members feel valued and supported.

Classroom language

Be aware of the use of non-sexist or otherwise biased language used in the classroom. Facilitators need to be sure that language is even, appropriate, and non-judgmental and that the language used is open and affirming. Stories that students share that may not be readily understood and the facilitator avoids identifying with are given equal interest and affirmation.

Use of names

In the Lions Quest programs, names were picked that might be universally recognized but not culturally specific. Facilitators are encouraged to use names more common to the region that allow for authenticity of the story being told or the illustration being used. Caution should be used, however, to keep away from names that could identify a specific student in the school community, especially when referring to a character who is illustrating a negative behavior.

Facilitators learn the correct spelling and pronunciation of each student's name to show that their identity is respected and valued. Helping them learn the facilitator's name as well as the other students in the class is equally as important. Facilitators avoid imposing nicknames or shortening a student's name unless the student has requested to do so.

Some Additional Things To Know

Dealing with cultural conflict in the classroom

Many of the skills in the Lions Quest programs are useful for dealing with conflict in general and apply to intercultural conflict as well. The important thing is not to ignore or pretend intercultural conflicts didn't happen or show fear or disdain for the process. The facilitator models learning about people in the classroom and what makes them unique and yet a member of their cultural family. Being comfortable not knowing all the answers, being willing to ask questions, and working the skills taught in the Lions Quest programs can help facilitators contribute to the safe, supportive, and caring environment that furthers the skills for thriving in a multicultural world.