Cultural Insensitivity in the Classroom: Should It Be a Concern?

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Abstract
The imbalance between student-teacher cultural demographics creates conditions that are not conducive to developing and maintaining a culturally sensitive school environment or implementing culturally relevant instruction. The teachers’ lack of knowledge about culturally-based factors that impact student learning, the differential power and status between teacher and student, and policies/practices requiring American cultural values as prerequisites to school success are proposed components of a culturally insensitivity environment. Examples of negative outcomes stemming from cultural insensitivity’s are enumerated. Suggestions for offsetting cultural insensitivity in the schools are offered.

Introduction
In our society, schools are the institutions with the rare privilege of being charged with the responsibility to transmit desired values, beliefs, language, knowledge and skills. The rare privilege schools enjoy does not come without consequences, however. Schools are challenged by demographic shifts (Hodgkinson, 2001) and are targets of political rhetoric and economic instability. And, while schools must respond to each of these factors, shifts in student demographics are the singular factor that most profoundly impacts staffing patterns, budgeting, transportation, curriculum offerings, instructional strategies, type of instructional materials used, student academic achievement patterns, disciplinary management policies, counseling programs, student assessment, and staff development.

Student Demographics & Characteristics
It is believed that the greatest impact made by student demographic changes is on classroom teachers, mainly due to students’ values, beliefs, and attitudes, which are divergent from those expected by mainstream America. These cultural differences between teachers and students create concerns among teachers because they cannot rely on standard curriculum and instructional strategies to achieve acceptable academic goals. Adding to teachers’ dilemmas is the increasing number of ethnic, linguistic, and economically diverse students. In many of the nation’s largest schools, ethnic minority student enrollments easily exceed 75% (Dalton, Sable, & Hoffman, 2006). And, in several states, ethnic minority students now make up the majority of the student population. For example, Planty and colleagues (2008) report that in 2007 African American and Hispanic students alone accounted for over 50% of student enrollments in four states—California (64.6%), Mississippi (53.3%), New Mexico (64.5%), and Texas (62.2%). An additional seven states reported African American and Hispanic student enrollments between 45% and 49% during the same time period: Arizona (48.4%), Florida (47.9%), Georgia (49.3%), Louisiana (47.5%), Maryland (48.5%), Nevada (49.1%), and South Carolina (45.1%).

Furthermore, a substantial numbers of these students come from families with incomes below poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) statistics indicate that poverty continues to be most pervasive among African Americans and Hispanics: roughly 20%-33.3% of African Americans

In sum, school student enrollments are a mix of racial, cultural, ethnic, language, economic backgrounds and come from diverse family types with varying customs, traditions, religious and cultural histories; they reside in a spectrum of geographic settings (Children’s Defense Fund, 1991; Hill, Carjuzaa, Aramburo, & Baca, 1993). Moreover, because culturally diverse students bring to school values, behaviors, and attitudes that educators view as mismatches with schools’ goals, these attributes are deemed to have negative implications for students’ capacity to learn essential academic and social skills (Ogbu, 1992). Among the values that differ between culturally diverse groups and mainstream practices and beliefs are the following:

- **Interaction with young children.** Early childhood educators may face initial or ongoing resistance in attempts to encourage adults to play (or interact) with their children more frequently because in some cultural groups, adults view playing with children as too much adult attention that “spoils” them.

- **Discipline.** Cultures have different approaches to child socialization, including parental use of physical coercion. Some cultures believe that children’s misbehavior needs to be corrected (through physical punishment, if necessary) so they can learn self-discipline. In addition, many cultures have strict rules as to who in the family is the disciplinarian (e.g., in most patriarchal families, the father is the disciplinarian). However, in extended families (where grandparents live in the same home), the grand-parents may have more authority over disciplining of children than do the child’s parents. This is due to the respect and status afforded the grand-parents.

- **Expectations for teaching and schools.** Most immigrant families come from countries where teachers are more authoritarian than they are in the United States, and learning is not viewed as a participatory process. This perception may be of particular importance to American educators because of the school’s numerous legal processes requiring parent participation (e.g., admission, review, and dismissal in special education, parental permission for student participation in school activities, school programs, or assessment). In many cases culturally diverse parents may appear confused when asked by teachers and other school officials to participate in deciding “what is best for their child.” This confusion is aroused because these families hold educators in high regard and typically defer to school authority all matters of educating children. Therefore, they are ill at ease with pedagogy that encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning or with approaches that insist on parental participation. Thus, when culturally diverse parents show reluctance in becoming actively involved in their children’s schooling, it is because they view such involvement as an improper challenge to teacher and school authority.

- **Expectations for females and their education.** In the U.S. both females and males are included in the schooling process. In cultures that follow patriarchal beliefs, this approach is seen as a threat to male members of the household. It can be expected that the more staunchly the patriarchal family style is embraced, the more staunch the belief about the division of labor and the education expectations for male and female members of the family. Classroom teachers should be sensitive to these attitudes among some culturally differ-
ent families, especially those who have emigrated from other countries. But, it is recommended that the schools’ goal of providing equal education opportunities for both gender groups not be altered.

• Perceptions about native language. The desire to learn English is such a powerful incentive for immigrant families that in some cases families and students are willing to “sacrifice” their native language in an effort to acquire English skills as quickly as possible. The fervent desire to learn English may lead immigrant families to discourage children who have not yet reached verbal fluency from using their native language. When this happens, these affected children may not achieve proficiency in either language (Filmore, 1991). Teachers who advocate assimilation strategies and English-only instruction should be particularly cognizant about research that demonstrate young linguistically different children who are proficient in their native language are, ultimately, more academically successful than young children who are not proficient in either their native language or in English.

**Teachers’ Characteristics**

The cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity of the student population is in stark contrast to the teaching force, which remains white, middle-class, and female, (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1989). Between 87% and 89% of teachers are White (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999), many are reared in rural and suburban areas (Zimpher, 1989), and the preponderance of them are monolingual English speaking. And, according to Bollin and Finkel (1995), most teachers have little or no cross-cultural knowledge and experiences to aid them in understanding the implications of cultural, language, and/or economic diversity on students’ learning processes.

Barry and Lechner (1995), Law and Lane (1987), Seidl and Friend (2002), Smith, Moallem, and Sherrill (1997), and Valli (1995) add that teachers’ limited cross-cultural knowledge, limited cross-cultural experiences, and monolingual skills blinds them to understanding how factors in the larger social context are linked to ethnic minority students’ opportunity to succeed academically. Wellman (1977) has proposed that teachers’ uncritical ways of thinking about racial, ethnic, language, or economic inequities allow them to accept certain culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs to justify the social and economic advantages White people enjoy. As a consequence, teachers believe that their particular personal experiences from their middle class, suburban childhoods can be directly transferred to teaching and managing culturally diverse children unlike themselves (Gomez, 1993; King, 1991). Due to classroom teachers’ disconnect with culturally diverse students, Larke (1990) and Cockrell et al. (1999) consider teachers incompetent in understanding issues related to cultural, racial, and ethnic differences. Furthermore, Cockrell et al. believe teachers do not possess the skills necessary to adapt to the cultural diversity they encounter in their teaching, nor do they possess the cultural beliefs to be sensitive to cultural differences.

**Teacher-Student cultural differences**

Unquestionably, today’s classrooms teachers face complex challenges due to student demographic changes. However, educators at all levels, but particularly classroom teachers, should be aware that it is in the classroom setting—the epicenter where most academic learning occurs—where teachers’ and students’ cultural and language differences are exaggerated (Richardson, 1996). There are two obvious reasons why these differences are exaggerated: First, differences are outcomes of each group’s cultural background; second, differences are related to teacher-student status and roles.
Cultural background.

Psychologists and sociologists have established that people acquire values, attitudes, and beliefs through socialization experiences in a cultural milieu (Shiraev & Levy, 2001). Thus, socialization experiences which are nurtured from birth by a cultural group shape an individual’s pattern of believing, thinking, speaking, behaving, and feeling (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009, p. 13), and how they interact with others inside and outside their cultural group. Continuous interactions among cultural group members help define and refine an individual’s cultural attributes, help define an individual’s concept of self (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008), and mold their cultural identity (Phinney, 1989). These cumulative cultural experiences and cultural attributes serve as cultural lenses in perceiving and evaluating stimuli (Matsumoto, 2000).

Unequivocally, each individual is ethnocentric and believes that his or her pattern of believing, thinking, speaking, and behaving and other cultural attributes are superior to those of individuals from other cultural groups. As long as individuals remain in their cultural groups, their cultural attributes are not questioned. But, living in isolation from other cultural groups is a Utopian dream because in reality, there is constant interaction between individuals from varied cultural, religious, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and economic backgrounds. And, it is this interaction (e.g., in the classroom setting) that provide opportunities for cultural differences to emerge.

When students and teachers interact at school, their perceptions, ways of doing things, language skills, beliefs, and motivations reflect their accumulated socialization experiences gained from their respective cultural group. Each has applied their cultural attributes repeatedly to the point that they use them automatically and without forethought. However, when compared to students, teachers possess a different perspective about education than do ELED students. The teachers’ different perspectives are the result of age, a range of social experiences, and extended education. However, from past research (e.g., Barry & Lechner, 1995; Law & Lane, 1987), these experiences only serve to exacerbate the teachers’ ethnocentric perspective.

Student-Teacher Status and Role Differences.

The second reason for the exaggerated differences between teachers and ELED students is related to differences in teacher-student status and roles (Raven & Rubin, 1968). Classroom teachers understand that they, not students, represent the school system and have been given the “power” to manage the classroom environment according to established guidelines. However, for teachers who have limited cross-cultural knowledge or experiences, this inherent “power to manage” is accentuated by teachers’ perception that they possess superior cultural values, beliefs, and abilities to those possessed by ELED students. This perception of superiority creates “inflated” power and status for classroom teachers (Plata, 2008).

Based on their limited knowledge and experiences with cultural phenomenon, their lack or understanding of the true learning potential of ELED students, and their “inflated power and status”, teachers can easily distort, discount, disparage, and/or devalue ELED students’ language, cultural values, beliefs, motivation, aspirations, expectations, and intellectual abilities. Teachers have been known to rely on stereotype beliefs and biased attitudes about culturally diverse students in their work (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000) and to have low expectations for these students, which has the propensity to impede students’ intellectual, social, and emotional development (Bamburg, 1994). In all likelihood, the teachers’ level of regard for ELED students has an impact on how and what they teach (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992) and the extent to which they (1) discount the negative effects of past and present discrimination on students and their families (Bollin & Finkel, 1995;
Finney & Orr, 1995), (2) perceive cultural and language differences as deficits (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995), (3) believe that culturally different students become “good students” only if they learn the superior mainstream values (Meador, 2005), (4) are willing to understand cultural diversity (Sleeter, 2001), (5) rely on stereotype misconceptions in their teaching (Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003), (6) respond to students’ requests (Plata & Robertson, 1988), (7) adapt the curriculum to meet student needs (Ortiz, 2002), and (8) allow their expectations of these student to be controlled by students’ first name (Anderson-Clark, Green, & Henley, 2008).

White-Clark (2005) believes that teachers’ misconceptions and beliefs about cultural diversity lead to misunderstanding, miseducation, and possibly the mistreatment of ELED students. Most discouraging, however, is that teachers do not perceive themselves as part of the problems experienced by students of color. In fact, Su (1996, 1997) found that preservice teachers regarded programs to remedy racial bias as discriminatory against Whites.

**The effect of assimilation on ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse students**

Classroom teachers are part of an educational system that has as one of its goals to teach ALL students (including ELED students) mainstream values so they can become “good students” (Meador, 2005). In their attempt to assimilate ELED students into mainstream education, teachers use students’ cultural attributes as tools to disable them, that is, they require them to reject their language and cultural heritage and replace them with American cultural attributes. The success enjoyed by schools is considered a Pyrrhic victory (Fordham, 1988), that is, ELED students who assimilate/acculturate and succeed in school do so at a devastating personal cost—they lose their native language and a sense of who they are. The imposed transformation process has also resulted in acculturative stress with corollary ramifications outlined by Berry (1998, p. 121): “(1) if a person regularly receives the message that one’s culture, language, and identity are unacceptable, the impact on one’s sense of security and self-esteem will clearly be negative, (2) if one is told that the price of admission to full participation in the larger society is to no longer be what one has grown up to be, the psychological conflict is surely heightened, and (3) if, collectively, one’s group is offered admission only on terms specified by the dominant society, then the potential for social conflict is also increased. Thus, assimilation policies and actions on the part of the larger society can be plausibly linked to greater acculturative stress.”

At the personal level, (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1998, p. 127), list three major dangers in forcing culturally diverse students to assimilate: First is the possibility of being rejected by members of the majority culture; second is the likelihood of being rejected by members of the culture of origin; and the third is the likelihood of experiencing excessive stress during attempts to learn new behaviors associated with the assimilative culture and to shed the inoperable behaviors associated with the culture of origin. In addition to the negative outcomes resulting from assimilation policies already mentioned, there are other negative outcomes stemming from cultural insensitivity. Examples follow.

**Negative Outcomes Stemming from Cultural Insensitivity**

The following list of negative outcomes stemming from cultural insensitivity is not exhaustive; but it is hoped that it serves to highlight the importance of culture, language, and socioeconomic conditions on ELED students’ learning processes. By presenting examples of negative consequences of monistic teaching approaches, classroom teachers will become motivated to learn appropriate skills and attitudes to reverse unacceptable achievement outcomes of ethnic, linguistic, and economic diverse students.
Cultural insensitivity has the potential to—

1. Create a superiority-inferiority continuum for categorizing individuals.
2. Contribute to ELED students’ self degradation, low self-esteem, and high anxiety by convincing them that their cultural heritage and cultural attributes are stigmatic and should be eliminated. The failure to assimilate causes confusion and brings about poor academic performance and atypical social behavior.
3. Create feelings of alienation, which are easily converted into anger and expressed as retaliatory activities.
4. Create doubt and mistrust in ELED students and their parents about teacher’s and other school personnel sincerity in providing appropriate education for ALL students.
5. Perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy that ELED students do not have the capacity to learn as do mainstream students, which—
   a. Sets in motion the mechanism for failure that contributes to “self-helplessness,” “hopelessness,” high drop-out rates, low aspirations, low expectations, etc.,
   b. Leads to inappropriate instruction that contributes to ELED students’ failure, which, in turn, contributes to acculturative stress, atypical behavior, disinterest in school, which leads to truancy, and eventually to the disengagement from all school activities, and
   c. Is a root factor for aggressive, destructive, and unacceptable behaviors (e.g., bullying, teacher assaults, school break-ins, defacing or destroying school property, destroying community property, breaking societal rules and laws, and creating antiestablishment dress codes, customs, and speech).
6. Lead to student-teacher power struggles and the teachers’ and school’s use of power to control ELED students, including sanctions, threats, scolding, coercion, suspensions, expulsions.
7. Increase division, conflict and mistrust between teachers and students, school and students, and school and home—resulting in increased numbers of ill-prepared and under-educated ELED students, which is a factor in perpetuating their low socioeconomic status.
8. Teach ELED students to become passive resistant adults who defy mainstream authority, disprove of school’s academic standards and societal guidelines in general, and shirk societal/civic requirements and responsibilities.
9. “Force” students to learn to survive through illegitimate means, such as cheating, coercion, deceit, deception, dishonesty, fabrication, forgery, fraud, power, pretext, threat, etc., which are applied in adult life.

Offsetting Cultural Insensitivity in the Schools

The imbalance between student-teacher cultural demographics creates conditions that are not conducive to developing and maintaining a culturally sensitive school environment (Smith-Davis, 1995) or implementing culturally relevant instruction (Curtis, 1998). If teachers are to be successful in providing a quality education to ELED students, Plata (2008, p. 189) notes they must affirm three beliefs: “First, children who are limited-English speakers, who are from culturally diverse backgrounds, and who are from economically depressed families are worthy of an education equal in quality to that provided to children from the mainstream group and from economically advantaged circumstances. Second, racial, ethnic, and linguistically different children have the
capability to achieve equal to that of children from the mainstream group. Third, they are obligated to seek out and use culturally relevant teaching strategies and instructional material to bring these beliefs to fruition.”

To accomplish these three affirmation points, teachers need to engage in a vigorous, ongoing, systemic process of professional development (Howard, 2007). Moreover, these engagements are particularly true for teachers who are known to possess limited knowledge about or experiences with cultural diversity (Smith, Moallem, & Sherrill, 1997).

Classroom teachers need to understand the ramifications in affirming the belief that culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students deserve quality education similar to their mainstream peers. That is, they must understand that a quality education will not only ensure immediate and future success for these students but also that their families, community, state and nation will reap benefits. To provide an education different in quality to that provided mainstream pupils would relegate ELED students to a life of despair—“one that is fraught with anxiety, maladaptive behaviors, problems in self-discipline, and feelings of diminished self-worth,” (Plata & Robertson, 1998. p. 115-116). Affirmation of this belief may be strengthened through observation of the economic status of the communities in which these students reside, by visiting cultural events conducted by the various culturally different groups, by studying state and national achievement and economic data for culturally and economically different groups, and/or by reviewing research studies reported on educational outcomes of these students (e.g., National Center of Educational Statistics, 2005—or other years desired).

Affirming the second point that ELED students have the capability to achieve equal to that of their mainstream peers is based on the classroom teachers understanding of these students’ achievement levels. However, because there is evidence that the use of standardized tests to measure school success is one of the most insidious and deleterious factors to successful teaching (King, Houston, & Middleton, 2001), culturally diverse students’ academic achievement results obtained from curriculum-based test instruments must also be reviewed. The literature is replete with results of the misuse of standardized tests with culturally diverse students, especially in the overrepresentation of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and low economic students in special education programs (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Cummins, 1986; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Patton, 1998). In addition, achievement results gained via culturally responsive teaching must be studied. To assist in this understanding, teachers can delve into research literature that reports these students’ educational outcomes based on the use of specific teaching strategies and/or instructional materials. For example, the use of dual language in academics (Thomas & Collier, 2003); teaching ELL students in their native language (Padilla, Lindholm, Chen, Duran, Hakuta, Lambert, & Tucker, 1991); using socio-cultural approaches in math with African American and Hispanic students (Escalante & Dirmann, 1990; Frankenstein, 1990; Tate, 1995); using students’ native language to promote school achievement and ethnic identity (McCarty, Lynch, Wallace, & Benally, 1991); and, predicting children’s English-reading performance by using reading proficiency in their native language (Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000). In addition, teachers may attend conferences where data-driven educational outcomes of culturally diverse students are presented.

The third belief challenges teachers to become producers, not just consumers of knowledge. It asks teachers to affirm that they are obligated to seek out and use culturally relevant teaching strategies and instructional material to bring these beliefs to fruition. For some this reality will provoke anxiety, especially if they are novice teachers and/or have little or not experience in
teaching ELED students. A goal for these teachers is to dismantle encapsulated stereotype beliefs (Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003) about these students’ motivation, aspirations, expectations, and intellectual capabilities (Howard, 2001). Other teachers will be anxious due to the time constraints to create and/or acquire the necessary materials in order to be a successful teacher with these students. Regardless of their experience level, however, all teachers need to increase their awareness of ELED students’ culture and language attributes as powerful forces in their lives. It is believed that when teachers learn about ways in which culture shapes thought and behavior, they are able to integrate students’ cultural knowledge and prior experiences into academic content and classroom practices (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), thus, generating culturally responsive/culturally sensitive instruction (Lonner & Malpass, 1993).

Haberman (1995, 2008) and Chamberlain (1995) advocate that teachers must be prepared to interact with students from all walks of life, who are from varying economic circumstances, and who bring to the classroom various degrees of anxiety, frustration, and skill levels. To offset these deleterious circumstances, Haberman suggests that successful teachers of culturally diverse students possess skills to create school experiences in which students succeed and learn to relate to one another in ways not determined by threat of force and coercion. And, because they understand the socio-cultural circumstance and violent environments in which many ELED students live, culturally sensitive teachers willingly “give up” the use of power as a tool to “control” students, including sanctions, threats, scolding, coercion, suspension, and expulsions, which, when used only add to students’ personal dilemmas and increases their mistrust in adults.

Whether or not teachers root out culturally insensitivity from their personal and teaching arsenals depends on their openness to cultural diversity and a commitment to social justice (Garmon, 2004). However, nothing will determine their success more than their willingness to (a) understand the interrelatedness of cultural, linguistic, social, and economic factors, and how these variables effect learning and (b) their willingness to acknowledge their “inherent power to control,” and (c) to hold in abeyance their ethnocentric values, beliefs, and attitudes in their teaching role. Otherwise, teachers will continue to use students’ attributes of race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status as explanations for their underachievement and atypical behavior.
References


