Part II   Multicultural Education

Breakthrough COLLABORATIVE

Objective

By the end of the section, readers will be able to (RWBAT):

- Define multicultural education.
- Explain the importance of multicultural education.
- Design a classroom approach based on multicultural education principles.

The Breakthrough Challenge: You will be different from some of your students. You will be similar to others. Your challenge is to capitalize on the similarities and differences, attending to their needs with an awareness of their identity and background while striving to provide an equitable education for all students.

Breaking it Down:

Goals of Multicultural Education

A majority of the students Breakthrough serves are low-income students of color. Studies over the past decade have shown both students of color and low-income students, regardless of race, lag behind their peers:

- **By the end of fourth grade,** African American, Latina/o, and poor students of all races are two years behind other students in academic achievement.
- **By the time they reach eighth grade,** they are roughly three years behind academically.
- **By the time they reach twelfth grade,** minority students are an average of four years behind, meaning many 17 year-old African American and Latina/o students have skills in English, math, and science similar to those of 13 year-old Caucasian students.

These students are not incapable of learning; they simply do not receive the same quality of education as other students. They are not given the same encouragement to achieve, nor do they have the same access to academic support networks. This summer, you will have an opportunity change that for a small group of students. You will inspire youths to exceed all expectations, including their own, and you will play a significant role in creating an academic support network to propel these students to success.

Multicultural Education: A Definition

Multicultural education is a philosophy of education, which focuses on creating a socially just system of equitable education in the classroom, school, and community. The philosophy is based on awareness, consideration, and celebration of cultural and individual student differences, including race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic group. Although multicultural education has ramifications beyond the classroom, this discussion will focus on how teachers can employ the theory in the classroom.

A teacher skilled in implementing multicultural education demonstrates an ability to guide each student to bring experiences, knowledge, and assets to bear in the classroom in a relevant manner so as to strengthen the entire class. Not only should a teacher consider what he or she teaches, but also where, how, and to whom she or he teaches.

Only by considering all facets can teachers begin to provide a meaningful education to students.

The components of classroom-based multicultural education, described in detail later in this section, include the following:

1. Classroom Environment
2. Curriculum
3. Teaching Strategies
4. Community

At the root of the philosophy of multicultural education lies a shift away from *deficiency orientation* towards *difference orientation*. The deficiency orientation perceives student or communities outside the mainstream culture as lacking qualities necessary to succeed. This view suggests a prescriptive path to academic success exists, which deficient students cannot access. Instead, the difference orientation proposes all students are capable of success and views their characteristics as strengths. The teacher must accept responsibility for adapting the classroom to incorporate and support student differences and utilize them as assets for the whole class.

Strategies for Multicultural Education

1. Classroom Environment

- Design a Physical Environment to Reflect Diversity
- Maintain Self-Awareness
- Establish High Expectations for All
- Dispel Stereotypes & Prejudices
- Make Classroom Codes Explicit

2. Curriculum

- Present Culturally Diverse & Relevant Curriculum
- Teach Critical Thinking
- Connect with Prior Knowledge
- Incorporate Service Learning

3. Teaching Strategies

- Give Positive Reinforcement and Frequent Feedback
- Validate Communication Styles
- Diversify Opportunities for Participation
- Provide Collaborative Learning Experiences
- Utilize multiple Instructional Methods & Assessment Opportunities

4. Community

- Knowledge of Diverse Groups
- Encourage Family & Community Participation

Breakthrough COLLABORATIVE

Teachers may find the following strategies useful in creating an environment where all students are held to high expectations and supported in reaching them. They are divided into the four components of multicultural education, as listed above.

1. Classroom Environment

Goal: Create an equitable environment to support high achievement for all students.

Design a Physical Environment to Reflect Diversity

Although the physical environment is only a single aspect of the classroom, it is an important one. Students should see themselves reflected in any posters, artwork, photographs, or other materials present in the classroom. Teachers may choose to post photographs of the students and family or community members, directly reflecting their diversity. An assortment of significant historic or contemporary role models from diverse groups presents positive images of various cultures. It is important, however, to represent a given culture, gender, race, etc. without stereotyping any group.

In addition, if students in the class speak languages other than English, incorporating multilingual materials validates their language experience and exposes the rest of the class to a new cultural experience. Upon entering their classroom, students should feel a sense of ownership and see themselves represented.

Maintain Self-Awareness

A teacher must maintain a constant self-awareness of his or her own cultural identity and the effect it has on interaction style, learning style, and values. While a teacher's individuality can play a positive role in the classroom, he or she must also build the skill to set aside natural preferences in order to instruct all students in the most effective manner possible. Additionally, any cultural beliefs, including stereotypes or prejudices, a teacher may hold about the students may have a negative impact. Continuous awareness of one's own perceptions and expectations can help to eliminate any negative influence. Self-reflection and self-examination are essential when working with children to best serve each individual, especially in a diverse setting.

Establish High Expectations for All

Students achieve more when their teachers hold consistently high expectations for all students, demonstrating a belief that each child can rise to meet the classroom standards. No one benefits from a teacher who makes excuses for why a student did not adequately fulfill an assignment. Neither does a student benefit from the "dumbing down," or simplification of the curriculum. Mitigating circumstances are not excuses, only obstacles to overcome. Teachers show high expectations when they construct challenging curriculum, ask challenging questions, and consistently support students by giving them the tools to increase the quality of their work and meet standards, despite any barriers to success.

Dispel Stereotypes & Prejudices

To foster learning, the classroom must be safe for all students. Safety can be achieved, in part, by dispelling existing stereotypes and prejudices, as well as preventing new negative concepts from forming through both curriculum and classroom management. Incorporating examples in the curriculum to break down stereotypes broadens students' worldviews and builds understanding of the diversity of an individual's capabilities. Identifying stereotypes in literature and other classroom materials helps students become critical participants in their education.

A low-stress environment where students feel comfortable and supported enables them to learn more and retain a greater amount. A stressful environment detracts from the learning process by diverting attention from academics to social-emotional well-being. Students will bring their own stereotypes and prejudices into the classroom, but the tone must be set by the teacher the first day: no discriminatory or prejudicial language or comments will be tolerated. Once the tone is set, racist, sexist, anti-religious, and homophobic comments, among others, must be addressed immediately, either publicly or privately. Not only should it be clear that the language is unacceptable, but teachers must also work proactively with the class or individual students to understand the root of these perceptions.

Make Classroom Codes Explicit

Most schools and classrooms have a set of codes, usually unspoken, which define acceptable and unacceptable behavior, communication, and academic achievement that

may at times contradict students' home cultures. Lisa Delpit describes these codes as "codes of power." She states students must be taught the codes of power in order to fully participate in "the mainstream of American life." Students' personal power and sense of "expertness" must also be supported and developed. Clearly explaining expectations and actions defined as acceptable or successful provides students with previously inaccessible cultural knowledge. While explicit codes of power should in no way exclude or take the place of the community- or home-based knowledge, elucidating the cultural guidelines increases available opportunities and potential for success in the mainstream culture.

2. Curriculum

Goal: Create a culturally relevant curriculum inclusive of all to support students in critical evaluation of and participation in society.

Present Culturally Diverse & Relevant Curriculum

Students must learn about topics with cultural relevance, or personal meaning and import. Whether the topic is math, science, English, history, Spanish, or art, teachers can present lessons addressing a diversity of perspectives and referencing a plethora of cultural groups. Literature must represent a variety of author perspectives whether inside or outside of the "canon." Math problems should include examples to break down stereotypes rather than promote them. History must represent the perspective not only of the "winner", but of the oppressed as well. In every subject, students should be able to see themselves and their communities in the curriculum, not only to learn more about their own cultural history, but also to feel valued as individuals.

Teach Critical Thinking

An essential aspect of multicultural education is the act of teaching students how to think for themselves. This tool will provide them a method with which to negotiate society, including biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. Critical thinking involves analyzing perspectives in the materials to which they are exposed. In order to effectively evaluate, students must be taught to ask questions, hypothesize, debate, and make connections. These are all difficult skills to teach even for the most experienced teacher, but proactively developing a space for student voices in the classroom will serve to foster

these skills. Encouraging students to ask questions and asking difficult questions of them will also support critical thinking. Not all questions have a single answer and students should be encouraged to develop their own answers.

Connect with Prior Knowledge

Students come to the classroom with years of experience. Teachers can capitalize on this knowledge. Introducing lessons with an activity or a question to activate students' personal understanding provides them with an access point. Increased motivation also results from personally connecting with the material presented. Valuing student knowledge and experience in the classroom creates a sense of self-worth among students and invests them in the material.

Incorporate Service Learning

Service learning combines standard curriculum and service to others. This method of learning is especially powerful because students do not have to wait to see the impact of or justification for their learning; an immediate application exists for their knowledge. For instance, learning about a disease becomes much more relevant when the goal is to write a pamphlet for the community on prevention of the disease. Exposure to diverse groups or connection with students' communities outside of school is natural with this method of instruction. Thus, the relevance of their education becomes connected to their home life. Motivation often increases once students see the potential impact of what they learn in school and its significance in relation to their own communities and their future.

3. Teaching Strategies[1]

Goal: Implement a curriculum in an accessible way to reach all students.

Give Positive Reinforcement & Frequent Feedback

Students thrive on positive reinforcement; the more often they hear positive comments about their work and abilities, the more motivated they will be. It is important to acknowledge and validate student efforts before providing them with other options. Again, validating their personal viewpoints or techniques allows them to maintain

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[1] *Note:* Some items in this section will be fully described in the *Educational Theory* and *Delivery* sections, but are mentioned here with specific reference to Multicultural Education.

connection with their cultural values and modes of interaction, while exposing them to mainstream or alternate modes. Especially when giving corrective feedback to an English Language Learner (ELL), teachers must be wary of frequently criticizing. One method to balance affirmation and correction is to affirm the comment, then repeat the student comment with the alternate structure, simultaneously supporting and teaching the student.

Validate Communication Styles

A broad array of communication styles is represented in diverse classrooms. While students must learn to communicate in academic English and develop their academic voice, teachers must also validate individual communication styles. Remember that vernacular English is not "bad English," but a valuable mode of communication. Teachers can address the subject by introducing the idea that certain environments require certain communication styles. Students can practice translating ideas or statements for different situations. For example, a student telling a friend about a book he or she read would present information differently than when describing the same book for an oral report or writing a written book report. Teachers must expand linguistic flexibility, rather than suppress a communication style.

Diversify Opportunities for Participation

A student-centered environment allows students to test their ideas and learn from their classmates. Teachers must set the expectation that everyone will participate in the classroom to prevent dominant voices from taking over. This issue is especially prevalent in regard to gender. Research has shown boys tend to receive more attention in the classroom, positive or negative, than girls. Often girls experience a self-esteem drop in early adolescence, which results in less participation in whole-class environments. This research, however, has relevance beyond gender. In any classroom, not all students will be comfortable participating in the same way. If the teacher does not intercede by encouraging participation from students who are less likely to join of their own volition, then patterns will form that will be difficult to break in the future.

One method to ensure students understand the expectation that everyone will participate is to create a deck of index cards or popsicle sticks including each student's name. The teacher can use the deck to select students to ensure representation of every

student voice. Another strategy is to allow for "wait time"—waiting several seconds after asking a question before calling on a student for an answer. This allows more students time to develop their answers, whereas calling on someone immediately will discourage those students who need time to develop their answers.

Levels of comfort vary when speaking out in class; teachers must create diverse opportunities for participation. Different configurations including pairs, triads, small groups, single-gender groups, and teacher-student interactions provide varied opportunities for students with different needs to voice their thoughts.

Provide Collaborative Learning Experiences

Collaborative learning involves students in small groups working together to achieve given objectives (further described in *Delivery*). The value of collaborative learning for multicultural education is that students learn from each other and are exposed to people from different cultural groups. They can also bring their own interactional styles and strengths to bear on classroom projects.   By providing every student a role, every student feels valued and has the opportunity to demonstrate mastery in a specified area while contributing to a larger project.

Utilize Multiple Instructional Methods & Assessment Opportunities

There is no single best way to present a concept in the classroom. Students benefit from multiple presentation methods based on their own cultural norms. When a lesson is organized around student strengths, the content will be easier to manage and more meaningful to the student. In addition, the way in which teachers measure student progress should also represent student strengths. Some students may be most comfortable demonstrating mastery orally, while others are more confident on paper. Assessment must be ongoing and frequent in order to provide multiple opportunities for students to exhibit progress. And although students should, of course, be pushed to expand their repertoire, they must also be provided with opportunities to excel. Varying instructional methods including visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and interpersonal approaches will be further described in *Educational Theory.*

4. Community

Goal: Incorporate students' communities in the classroom.

Knowledge of Diverse Groups

Not only must a teacher have command of the curriculum, but also of his or her students' cultures, histories, and backgrounds. An awareness of the histories and contemporary issues facing diverse groups strengthens a teacher's ability to incorporate relevant curriculum. An understanding of the local community and their triumphs, as well as any issues they face, can also foster a valuable understanding of individual students and the classroom dynamic. Teachers will be better positioned to support student academic achievement armed with this knowledge.

Encourage Family & Community Participation

Families can have a powerful effect on their child's education whether they participate in classroom activities or support the student at home. Teachers must remember the family is an important stakeholder in their child's education. To smooth the transition between school and home cultures, teachers should invite parents and guardians to visit the classroom, participate in classroom activities, or witness demonstrations of student learning. Discussing effective methods of home support for a child's education can also empower families to become agents in their child's learning process.

In order to incorporate families, teachers must maintain open lines of communication with them. In a diverse language setting, this can be difficult, but help from bilingual individuals to translate both written and oral communications is often available. Frequent opportunities to update families on their child's progress help them to feel involved and informed. Most importantly, teachers must learn to listen to the family and elicit relevant information from them regarding the student. The family can be a teacher's most significant ally in building an effective individualized education; for the most part they have known the child much longer and in many more contexts.