


2015

# Cultural and Functional Diversity in the Elementary Classroom: Strategies for Teachers

Rama Cousik  
cousikr@ipfw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opus.ipfw.edu/profstudies\\_facpubs](http://opus.ipfw.edu/profstudies_facpubs)

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Opus Citation

Rama Cousik (2015). Cultural and Functional Diversity in the Elementary Classroom: Strategies for Teachers. *Journal of Multicultural Education*.9 (2), 54-67. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.  
[http://opus.ipfw.edu/profstudies\\_facpubs/72](http://opus.ipfw.edu/profstudies_facpubs/72)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Professional Studies at Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. It has been accepted for inclusion in Professional Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. For more information, please contact [admin@lib.ipfw.edu](mailto:admin@lib.ipfw.edu).

# Cultural and functional diversity in the elementary classroom: strategies for teachers

Rama Cousik

*Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne,  
Indiana, USA*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to discuss current issues and provide suggestions for solutions. Today's classrooms across schools in the USA are increasingly diverse. This diversity encompasses students from a myriad of cultural and linguistic and backgrounds' academic performance levels. Teacher training programs and schools are making efforts to enhance teacher knowledge in regards to this cultural and functional diversity. Problems continue to exist because it is challenging to clearly perceive the connections between the two and identify cultural basis for school performance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This article provides suggestions for teachers to enhance their own understanding of how cultural and ethnic diversity affects student performance and improve classroom practice in inclusive settings.

**Findings** – The author argues there is a need for a systemic effort that encourages an ongoing debate over cultural and functional diversity, improves teacher knowledge in the area of best practices in teaching children from diverse cultural and functional backgrounds and fosters collaboration among schools and families.

**Originality/value** – This article is an original look at teacher training for cultural and functional classroom diversity in the USA.

**Keywords** Diversity, Disabilities, Functional, Children, Parents, Cultural, Linguistic, Elementary

**Paper type** Viewpoint

A classroom that has children from diverse backgrounds and functional levels, abilities and interests holds much promise – ample opportunities for teachers and students to learn unique perspectives from one another, develop empathy and promote cross cultural understanding. When children are intentionally exposed to peers from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, they are less likely to make biased judgments (Jackson *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, contact with peers with disabilities can promote acceptance and arouse positive emotions such as empathy, warmth and compassion in young children (Cameron and Rutland, 2006; Cameron *et al.*, 2011).

Diversity can positively affect academic learning, enhance problem-solving skills and foster healthy group behaviors in children (Terenzini *et al.*, 2001). Disability is a part of classroom diversity but is often ignored, first because most standard curricula are designed with the average learner in mind, thereby making them inaccessible to learners



with disabilities, and, second, most text books are designed on Eurocentric norms. Thus, children from diverse, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, some of who may have cognitive disabilities are twice at risk for school failure (Artiles *et al.*, 2010; Harry and Klingler, 2007; Salend, 2010). One of the challenges that teachers face with children whose primary language is not English is in making the distinction between a language barrier and a learning disability that is not due to constraints of language. Several factors determine the teacher's ability to make this distinction:

- teacher's level of cultural awareness and competency;
- familiarity with family practices;
- awareness of inherent biases and a willingness to question; and
- reflect upon and change attitudes toward diversity.

Consequently, when teachers evaluate their students' academic and behavioral skills, they will be able to examine cultural, familial and ecological factors that lie outside the assessment measures that are currently predominantly Eurocentric. Thus, teachers will be able to design instructional strategies for children with disabilities that are strongly grounded in the context of their culture.

Because the constructions of ability and disability have a strong cultural and social basis, teachers must begin constantly work on and hone their cultural competencies before they reframe their curriculum and instruction. This article provides a framework for action for teachers to increase their understanding of cultural basis for school performance. The framework ultimately leads to improved understanding about the connections between culture and disability. This framework draws from a model proposed by Weinstein *et al.* (2004) and has four components, with each building on the other:

- (1) *Step 1:* Teachers *examine their prior knowledge* and attitudes toward diversity.
- (2) *Step 2:* Teachers endeavor to *increase their knowledge* by getting to know their students and their families.
- (2) *Step 3:* Teachers draw from their increased knowledge and *model* acceptance to create a healthy social environment in their classrooms.
- (2) *Step 4:* Teachers revisit their curriculum and instructional practice to provide positive *academic* learning experiences for all children.

See [Table I](#) for steps in the framework and a summary of activities for each step. The strategies and activities are supported by empirical evidence where available.

### **Examine prior knowledge and attitudes**

This section will examine how teachers can reflect on their prior knowledge about the intersections among culture, disability and school performance. Such a reflection is likely to promote a deeper understanding of teacher attitude toward their students from diverse backgrounds.

Children who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds demonstrate varying levels of language proficiency (Ogbu, 2002), and personality traits, habits, dress code, food and socialization patterns often vary between children of the dominant culture and those belonging to other cultures. Thus, differences in language

	Strategy	Activity	Research evidence
Step 1	Examine prior knowledge and attitudes	Self-evaluative questionnaires Role-play, drama, poems, songs and drawings Reflective journals, personal narratives and stories	Cousik (2011), Weinstein <i>et al.</i> (2004), Cochran-Smith (2000), McAllister and Irvine (2002), Milner and Tenore (2010), Kyles and Olafson, 2008
Step 2	Increase knowledge	Talk to students about their culture Visit communities and participate in community activities Meet families through community leaders Collaborate with school counselor, social worker, ESL teacher, college students studying diversity to facilitate connection with parents Read publications in the media Visit local libraries for information from authentic sources Read works from authors of different cultures Ask students to share something from their culture during “show and tell”	Cousik (2011); Cartledge and Lo (2006), Eberly <i>et al.</i> (2007), Harry (1992), Hogg (2011), Jordan (1997), Gay (2010), Moll <i>et al.</i> (1992)
Step 3	Model acceptance	Greet children alternatively in different languages Have students who are shy to journal their responses Role play social skills such as turn-taking during conversations	Allport (1954), Bandura (1977), Cartledge and Kourea (2008)
Step 4	Create positive academic learning environment	Prompt discussion about other countries during circle time Point to similarities in musical notes in different cultures Use examples from other cultures in story problems in math and when talking about scientific discoveries Assign students to cooperative learning groups of mixed cultural backgrounds. Ask children to find answers to given questions about dress code in schools, how children address parents and how temperature is measured in a different country Stock bookshelves with pictures and books about and authored by diverse authors. Encourage children to scan pictures and illustrations, ask questions Use dolls for role-play and as props during reading	Cochran-Smith (1995), Gay (2010), Johnson <i>et al.</i> (1998), Johnson and Johnson (1999), MacNaughton (2001), Ogbu (1992), Roger and Johnson (1988), Slavin and Oickle (1981)

**Table I.**  
Becoming culturally competent: a framework for teachers

---

competency, academic performance and cultural backgrounds place certain children at a disadvantage (Killen *et al.*, 2013; MacNaughton and Hughes, 2006; Waasdorp *et al.*, 2012). That is why it is very essential that teachers make earnest attempts to know their students, know their families and the communities in which they live.

First, educators must explore their previous knowledge about cultural diversity so that they become aware of biases that may be affecting their behaviors and attitudes toward children from other cultures. This will bring about awareness about cultural factors that surround the concept of disability. According to Milner and Tenore (2010, p. 595), one of the principles of culturally responsive classroom management is “Understanding the self in relation to others”. Teachers must critically compare their own life experiences to that of their students and examine commonalities and differences in upbringing, family values and practices, schooling and social expectations (Milner and Tenore, 2010; p. 595; Weinstein *et al.*, 2004). Some questions teachers can ask themselves toward gaining this understanding are:

- Q1. Who are my parents?
- Q2. What type of neighborhood did I grow up in?
- Q3. What types of values and social expectations did I inherit from my parents?
- Q4. What type of role models did I have as I was growing up?
- Q5. What did my parents think about human diversity?

Finally, teachers should reflect on how these factors contribute to who they are at present and how it affects their instructional practice.

Several researchers have demonstrated the ways in which pre-service teachers engage in this self-evaluative process, namely, through: role-play, dramatization, creation of poetry and art to reflect on the factors that affect attitudes toward diversity such as color-blindedness, denial, silence and resistance. For example, Gay and Kirkland, 2003, p. 185). report that their “Students have dramatized, through role-playing and simulation, different ethnic perspectives on multicultural education issues, and then critiqued the adequacy of others’ performances”. Other researchers discuss the benefits of teachers writing reflective and autobiographical journals about their life experiences with diversity (Kyles and Olafson, 2008; McAllister and Irvine, 2002). Cochran-Smith (2000) describes how teachers create personal narratives and stories about assumptions about diversity. The author of this paper (2011) created a figure to illustrate the stark contrast in status between the typical public school teacher and students who were marginalized due to socio-economic reasons (Appendix). Teachers can then expand such reflective activities to examine their attitudes toward children who they consider at risk for disabilities and ponder upon cultural constructions of disability.

Kyles and Olafson (2008) rightly point out that these efforts at self-reflection, although laudable, cannot be one-time occurrences, rather they must pervade into teachers’ lives when they are full-time teachers, and a high level of cultural consciousness needs ongoing and repetitive engagement in such reflective thinking. Milner and Tenore (2010) studied culturally responsive practices of two urban teachers and explain how these teachers used a questionnaire to examine their own biases and assumptions.

### Increase knowledge

After teachers develop a keen sense of awareness about their attitudes toward diversity, they may endeavor further to increase their knowledge. In this section, three distinct ways to increase teachers' knowledge will be discussed:

- (1) broadening teachers' perceptions and interpersonal relationships;
- (2) family involvement; and
- (3) engagement in community activities.

#### *Teacher perceptions and interpersonal relationships*

Exploration of previous knowledge about diversity then leads to the beginning of understanding among members of the classroom. Teachers can initiate that understanding during early elementary school years by getting to know more about their students from diverse cultures and encouraging students to know their peers well. A deeper understanding is likely fostered when teachers and children recognize that each human being is unique and has special qualities that define him or her, and make him or her different from the rest. They may also collectively learn that these differences must be openly acknowledged and respected. In particular, teachers must clearly understand the cultural basis for certain behaviors before making disciplinary referrals.

den Brok and Levy (2005) examined literature for studies that looked at teacher – student perceptions and interpersonal relationships and found a strong correlation between the students' race, gender and ethnicity and teacher treatment. For example, children from Latino cultures are brought up to unquestioningly obey figures of authority as a sign of respect (Rivera and Rogers-Adkinson, 1997). In many Asian cultures, students avoid direct eye contact with teachers. In other words, "[...] Teachers and students do not ascribe the same meanings and intentions to student behavior [...]" (Milner and Tenore, 2010, p. 563). If a teacher is unaware of these underlying cultural factors, he/she may presume that the students are disinterested or defiant. Thus, each culture has its own unique norms regarding expected behaviors within hierarchical relationships, particularly in the presence of figures of authority and so it is very important that teachers avoid making globalized assumptions about their students from different cultures. When teachers make efforts to understand if and/or how culture affects classroom performance and behavior, their assessment of student performance is likely to be fair and accurate.

#### *Family involvement*

With an increased level of self-awareness and by examining how culture affects interpersonal relationships with students, teachers can work on improving their understanding of families. Talking to families and expressing a desire to learn about their cultures allows teachers to form a wholistic view of their students' school performance (Garcia and Ortiz, 2006). This knowledge enables culturally responsive teaching practice. Eberly *et al.* (2007, p. 10). state that "[...] culturally responsive teaching includes reaching out to parents to learn from them". Traditionally, communication between parents and teachers has taken the form of weekly and monthly reports, Individualized Education Plan meetings and case conferences, phone calls to report misbehaviors or informal letters. Parent – teacher meetings have predominantly been conducted in schools, and because school spaces are owned by school employees, parents are placed at a disadvantage. There are a few other factors

---

that determine the extent of parent – teacher connection: some families may hesitate to speak to teachers or may not speak English, others may have time and transportation constraints and few others may be constrained by differences in expectations from the school and differences in the understanding about what constitutes parent involvement (Ryan *et al.*, 2010; Zarate, 2007). It would be helpful in such instances if teachers could visit the community in which the families reside, to get a first-hand perspective about the culture of the community (Cousik, 2011).

### *Engagement in community activities*

Visiting the communities creates an awareness about indigenous knowledge and strengths that families possess – their world views, their philosophy of education, their definitions of ability and disability and their social norms (Moll *et al.*, 1992). According to Hogg (2011, p. 673), the concept of funds of knowledge “[...] challenges teachers to direct their gaze at students’ lives, looking beyond assessment data to identify prior knowledge”. See a seminal article by Moll *et al.* (1992) which describes how a collaborative effort by educators, anthropologists and school teachers demonstrates how to utilize strengths in the communities to inform class room practice. Harry’s (1992) work with Puerto Rican families demonstrated how parents and professionals could work together to understand the differences between the definition of disability by the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA, 2001) and that of the families and enhance cross-cultural communication. It is not possible to know the families merely by making home visits. These visits need to be intentionally planned, with a clear agenda about the purpose of the visits and goals to be accomplished. Thus, visiting communities enables teachers to understand their students’ backgrounds, families’ construction of ability and disability, strengths in students that may not manifest in the school setting and strategies that parents have found effective to help their children learn life skills, social skills and academic skills.

This extensive knowledge enables teachers to use “culturally and linguistically sensitive tools” to measure cognitive and linguistic capabilities. Cultural and linguistically sensitive tools are those that enable measurement of student’s abilities across settings, in the student’s native language. Consequently, the questions deployed during the evaluation maybe altered keeping in mind the student’s background and/or life experiences. For example, in some cultures, children are groomed not to question or contradict figures of authority and even to avoid eye-to-eye contact. In such cases, children can have the option of writing their responses or a family member can be present during the evaluation to facilitate responses from the child. In the classroom, if a question tests the ability to express ideas and thoughts verbally, teachers could check whether the student is able to express in alternative ways – through writing, drawing, pictures or symbols.

All families may not be willing to have teachers visit their homes. In that case, teachers could participate in some activities that the community may be engaging in. For example, the author of this paper regularly worked in a community garden with families who attended a local school. This helped the author and the families to become more familiar with one another, helped build trust and thus enabled sharing (2011, 2014). Another option is to find out if there is an organization that represents these cultures in their community and talk to leaders who run the organization. The leaders may facilitate opening of communication channels between teachers and families from other ethnic

---

groups. This strategy may be of particular relevance among communities whose values include demonstrating deference to people in power – elders in the family, elders in the community, community leaders and community professionals. A final strategy would be to involve students from local colleges who are pursuing degrees in special education, counseling education or cultural studies. University students get a chance to utilize knowledge gained through course work about working with families from other cultures and they can collaborate with teachers to facilitate connections between school and the community – thus function as cultural liaisons.

Regular and frequent meetings with families in informal contexts such as the community can bring in an awareness in teachers about their students' family values and practices which may be inherently different from those of the teacher. For instance, in some cultures, an individual's success and failure are a collective responsibility of his/her community and not of the individual's alone. Socialization and social skills may be differently practiced. Teachers can assess some of these differences by asking parents focused questions, such as "What manners are important to you in your children?" "How would you like your child to interact with friends and teachers?" and "What personal qualities would you like your child to have in order to enhance his learning?" If the parents do not speak English, a translator must be engaged to interpret these questions for parents. The general education teacher and an English as a Second Language teacher at the school to communicate these questions to parents. The interpreter should preferably have a fair amount of knowledge about the community, be sensitive to and aware of families' values and worldviews and use a language that is free of jargon (Harry, 1992).

Families have a varying need and sensitivity for preserving a bicultural identity. Some parents might feel that to ease the child's adjustment in school, use of English at home is important and that preserving the primary culture is not as essential. Other parents might view protecting cultural identity as a priority for their family and make strong community connections that coach their children deeply into their culture. In this case, teachers need to understand what family goals are fostered within the family. Some immigrant parents might be very shy to assert their preferences about identity and so if the classroom teacher expresses a genuine interest in parents' goals, this will validate children's sense of self and position parents as experts in their children's lives.

Other ways of gaining knowledge about other cultures are by reading newspapers and magazines, through films and social media. Often, the knowledge gained through these media maybe problematic because they may perpetuate existing stereotypes or have a tendency to sensationalize information. Teachers must endeavor to authenticate the knowledge and adapt this to the level of understanding of young children. One way of authenticating knowledge is to read articles printed in the country of origin (Jordan, 1997). Teachers can also explore the Web or contact the public library for authentic resources. Gay (2010) effectively used textual analysis to increase awareness and knowledge about other cultures in pre-service teachers. Similarly, teachers can expand their repertoire of reading to include literature authored by African, African American, Hispanic and Asian writers. Reading authentic work facilitates reflection of their own biases and pre-conceived notions about other cultures (Gay, 2010).



---

### Model acceptance

Teachers must not only be aware of how cultural factors affect student performance, they must also model acceptance of diversity and student variance. Children observe, learn from and emulate adult behavior and modeling serves as a guide (Bandura, 1977). When teachers model a keen interest in learning more about other cultures, it can go a long way in fostering acceptance in children. *Furthermore, in a diverse classroom*, rather than presume that attitudes can be changed just by increasing students' proximity to peers from other cultures, teachers must demonstrate and teach the skills required to ensure children initiate and strengthen contacts with their peers (Allport, 1954). A language that is positive and empathetic is essential to initiate contact. When teachers demonstrate and teach children how to use this tool to initiate contact, children can then explore opportunities to make friends with their peers from other cultures.

For example, if there is a student who speaks Spanish in the class, the teacher could greet all students with "Good morning" or "Hello" in Spanish instead of using the English words. Most Asian students are taught to bow to their teachers in greeting. Teachers could find out other ways of greeting and use them alternatively in class to greet their students. Children are conditioned to be loyal to the values of their families, and when teachers recognize and speak positively about these values, it gives children a sense of belongingness and security (Allport, 1954). Thus, by speaking positively about various aspects of other cultures such as language and socialization patterns, teachers demonstrate respect for that need for belongingness and display exemplary models of behavior for their students to emulate.

In some cultures, children are taught to listen to the teacher without asking questions. In other cultures, children learn that "overlapping speech" (several people in a group speaking at the same time) is acceptable. A teacher who is unaware of these factors may mistakenly presume these as "behavior problems" that need intervention (Cartledge and Kourea, 2008, p. 353). Instead of giving negative consequences to students who engage in these behaviors, in the first case, the teacher could have the student journal his/her response and submit it to the teacher. In the second case, teachers could explicitly model turn-taking in conversations and provide students several opportunities during the school day to practice the skill. In their research on culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students Cartledge and Kourea (2008, p. 365) state that:

The psychological impact of the extensive punitive practices on students is powerful and potentially destructive. Educators need to pay more attention to the strengths of CLD students to help them become more productive and socially appropriate in their behavior.

Teachers could create scripts and/or short stories that portray strengths in other cultures. During reading and language arts periods, they can guide students to enact the stories. Thus, journaling their responses allows quiet students opportunities to demonstrate their learning and role-play and practice increase students' awareness about differing cultural expectations in the classroom and enhances his/her cultural competency.

### Create positive academic environment

The final step in the framework is using the knowledge gained about other cultures to enrich the curriculum and modify classroom instruction. Teachers can foster a healthy

---

and empathetic classroom climate by strategically including instructional activities that encourage discussion about diversity and disability.

One way of doing this by deliberately including talk about diversity in the curriculum (Cochran-Smith, 1995). For example, during the first school period, teachers usually assemble children in a circle and discuss the day's expectations, the current weather and share important announcements. At such times, teachers could ask children "It is cloudy today in this part of the USA. I wonder how the weather is in our neighboring countries!" Or during music period, when children are learning about musical notes, teachers could point out "Did you know that we have 7 notes in our music and Indian music has the same notes? We call them Do, Re, Me, etc. I wonder what they call them!" Another way to include diversity in the curriculum is to use illustrations and examples from other cultures when teaching core subjects. For example, story problems in math could be situated in cross-cultural contexts. When talking about scientists and scientific discoveries, the teacher could provide extra information about the cultures and countries to which the scientists belong.

Stories are an effective media to initiate conversations about disability. Teachers can equip the classroom library with picture books and children's storybooks that feature children with disabilities from various cultural backgrounds. Teachers can read the books to students during circle time, use the readings when teaching language arts, vocabulary and social skills. Teachers could also invite community members or families to share stories and/or folklore that portray children with disabilities. The Council for Exceptional Children has instituted the "Dolly Gray Award for Children's Literature" and books submitted for the award portray children with disabilities in a positive and friendly manner. The stories are written from various perspectives, including the child with a disability and can be a helpful addition to classroom bookshelves.

Another strategy is to form cooperative learning groups. Assigning children to formal and informal cooperative learning groups has been effectively used to facilitate peer-to-peer learning. Children in lower elementary grades may benefit from informal cooperative learning groups where they work on common goals briefly or during the entire class period (Johnson *et al.*, 1998). Cooperative learning groups are not just ones where children work together in small groups on individual goals, rather:

In a cooperative learning situation, interaction is characterized by positive goal interdependence with individual accountability. Positive goal interdependence requires acceptance by a group that they "sink or swim together" (Roger and Johnson, 1988, p. 2).

Cooperative learning groups have been used to teach academic skills (Johnson and Johnson, 1999, p. 69), but they can be used to teach social skills and enhance cultural awareness as well. For example, teachers can pose questions such as:

- Q1. "We measure temperature in Fahrenheit scale. How do they measure the temperature in China?"
- Q2. "Some of us address our parents 'Mom' and 'Dad', Mommy and Daddy, Mother and Father or Mama and Papa. How do children address their parents in Saudi Arabia?"
- Q3. "In this country, most children come to school dressed in casual, everyday clothes. Is there a difference in what children wear to school in Mexico?"

---

Children could talk to students from other cultures in their groups to find answers and also search the Web for answers.

When teachers assign students to cooperative learning groups consisting of students from different races, this has a positive effect on both inter-personal relationships and academic achievement (Slavin and Oickle, 1981). Slavin and Oickle studied 230 students of which 33.9 per cent were Black and found academic performance on standardized tests for all students in the cooperative learning group improved. More recently, Durlak *et al.* (2011, p. 406) conducted an extensive literature review of school programs that practiced “universal and emotional social learning programs (SEL)” including cooperative learning and found that they showed “[...] significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school”. They also enhanced students’ behavioral adjustment in the form of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems, improved achievement on standardized test scores (p. 417).

Similarly, it is essential to implement cooperative groups with children that come from cultural groups that encourage individual achievement as well. Choi *et al.* (2011, p. 991) studied cooperative learning experiences in elementary school children and concluded that:

[...] the more cooperative experiences children have, the more likely it is that they will engage in prosocial behavior while interacting with their peers, and thereby gain the advantages of positive relationships with peers and prosocial behavior.

Teachers can structure activities that result in success only when each member of the group applies his/her unique skill. For example, a group project may require visual and auditory representation of ideas. A student who is good at drawing can work on the visuals and one who is a good speaker is chosen to make a presentation of the project. A student who uses an augmentative communication device can point to pictures to illustrate the topic being discussed. A student with autism who may have great rote memory skills can recall math facts to solve given problems. Thus, teachers can promote “positive interdependence” that determines the success of the project or goal (Choi *et al.*, 2011, p. 977).

Gay (2010) used visual analysis to increase self-awareness about other cultures among pre-service teachers. Similarly, pictures can be powerful in initiating conversation and dialogue about culture in the elementary classroom. Teachers could provide magazine and newspaper pictures about news from other countries and encourage children to talk about what they see. Children from diverse cultural backgrounds bring in their own assumptions and impressions about the world to school (Ogbu, 1992, MacNaughton and Hughes, 2001) and this may greatly impact their behavior with peers. In one study, MacNaughton and Hughes (2001) used dolls that represented white male and female and aboriginal people with a large group of young children to understand how children construct their views about the “others”. Through use of doll play and stories and by encouraging children to comment, question and express their views, the researcher helped dispel myths and stereotypes about aboriginal people. Similarly, teachers could use dolls or puppets as props when reading stories from other cultures to the class. Teachers and students can work together to create stick figures and paper or sock puppets that represent children with varying abilities and disabilities and engage in discussion. Teachers must be ready to answer questions that children may raise, but it is important to initially pay close attention to

what they spontaneously say about the pictures and dolls. These spontaneous thoughts can then become topics for dispelling myths and stereotypes, for providing factual information about disabilities and for beginning acceptance.

Thus, after having examined their own attitudes and biases through textual, visual and object analysis, teachers are likely to be more equipped to understand the basis for children's assumptions and guide them to develop healthy peer relationships.

---

### Conclusion

It has been established since long that children begin to make decisions about personal and group identity, ethnic identity, group behaviors, hierarchy and social expectations in a group very early in their lives (Erikson, 1968). *Invariably, this leads to formation of bias and prejudice between individuals and groups.* By demonstrating an eagerness to learn about diverse cultures and cultural interpretations of ability and disability and by talking openly and positively about other cultures – by modeling acceptance – teachers can greatly influence attitudes of children toward one another, reduce the harmful effects of prejudice and create a welcoming classroom climate. Furthermore, by learning about their students and their families, teachers enhance their cultural competency. Equipped with extensive knowledge about their students' cultures, family values and meanings ascribed by families to children's behaviors, teachers can design instructional practices that are sensitive to cultural diversity and its effect on school performance. However, support from administrators is very crucial for any initiative that aims at attitudinal changes in a school (Allport, 1954). Teachers are expected to maintain discipline and order in the school, with the ultimate aim of improving student performance, and this, in turn, can make their instructional practices rigid and regimented (Milner, 2012). This leaves little room for flexibility needed to learn about and accommodate the needs of children from diverse cultural, linguistic and academic backgrounds. There is a need for a systemic effort that encourages an ongoing debate over cultural and functional diversity, improves teacher knowledge in the area of best practices in teaching children from diverse cultural and functional backgrounds and fosters collaboration among schools and families.

### References

- Allport, G.W. (1954), *The Nature of Prejudice*, Addison-Wesley Publications, Oxford.
- Artiles, A.J., Kozleski, E.B., Trent, S.C., Osher, D. and Ortiz, A. (2010), "Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968-2008: a critique of underlying views of culture", *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 76 No. 3, pp. 279-299.
- Bandura, A. (1977), *Social Learning Theory*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Cameron, L. and Adam, R. (2006), "Extended contact through story reading in school: reducing children's prejudice toward the disabled", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 62 No. 3, pp. 469-488.
- Cameron, L., Adam, R., Rhiannon, N.T., Rosie, H.-N. and Claire, P. (2011), "Changing attitudes with a little imagination: imagined contact effects on young children's intergroup bias", *Anale de Psihologia*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 708-717.
- Cartledge, G. and Kourea, L. (2008), "Culturally responsive classrooms for culturally diverse students with and at risk for disabilities", *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 74 No. 3, pp. 351-371.
- Cartledge, G. and Lo, Y. (2006), *Teaching Urban Learners: Culturally Responsive Strategies for Developing Academic and Behavioral Competence*, Research Press, Champaign, IL.

- Choi, J., Johnson, D.W. and Johnson, R. (2011), "Relationships among cooperative learning experiences, social interdependence, children's aggression, victimization, and prosocial behaviors", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 976-1003.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1995), "Color blindness and basket making are not the answers: confronting the dilemmas of race, culture, and language diversity in teacher education", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 493-522.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2000), "Blind vision: unlearning racism in teacher education", *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 70 No. 2, pp. 157-190.
- Cousik, R. (2011), *A Case Study of Four Children with Multiple Risk Factors in a Music Class (Doctoral Dissertation)*, available at: <http://gradworks.umi.com/34/81/3481387.html>
- den Brok, P. and Levy, J. (2005), "Teacher – student relationships in multicultural spaces: reviewing the past, preparing the future", *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 72-88.
- Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D. and Schellinger, K.B. (2011), "The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions", *Child Development*, Vol. 82 No. 1, pp. 405-432.
- Eberly, J.L., Joshi, A. and Konzal, J. (2007), "Communicating with families across cultures: an investigation of teacher perceptions and practices", *School Community Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 7-26.
- Erikson, E. (1968), *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Norton, New York, NY.
- Garcia, S.B. and Ortiz, A.A. (2006), "Preventing disproportionate representation: culturally and linguistically responsive prereferral interventions", *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 64-68.
- Gay, G. (2010), "Acting on beliefs in teacher education for cultural diversity", *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 61 Nos 1/2, pp. 143-152.
- Gay, G. and Kirkland, K. (2003), "Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education", *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 181-187.
- Harry, B. (1992), "An ethnographic study of cross-cultural communication with Puerto Rican-American families in the special education system", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 471-494.
- Harry, B. and Klinger, J. (2007), "Important instruction for students with learning needs: discarding the deficit model", *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 64 No. 5.
- Hogg, L. (2011), "Funds of knowledge: an investigation of coherence within the literature", *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 666-677.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2001), available at: [www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/disability/idea.aspx](http://www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/disability/idea.aspx)
- Jackson, M.F., Barth, J.M., Powell, N. and Lochman, J.E. (2006), "Classroom contextual effects of race on children's peer nominations", *Child Development*, Vol. 77 No. 5, pp. 1325-1337.
- Johnson, D.W. and Johnson, R.T. (1999), "Making cooperative learning work", *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 67-73.
- Johnson, D.W. and Johnson, R.T. and Holubec, E.J. (1998), "Cooperation in the classroom", Interaction Book Company, Edinā MN: Interaction Book Company.
- Jordan, S. (1997), "Student responses to culturally diverse texts" in Cruz, G., Jordan, S., Melendez, J., Ostrowski, S. and Purves, A.C. (Eds), *Beyond the Culture Tours: Studies in Teaching and Learning with Culturally Diverse Texts*, Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 9-34.
- Killen, M., Mulvey, K.L. and Hitti, A. (2013), "Social exclusion in childhood: a developmental intergroup perspective", *Child Development*, Vol. 84 No. 3, pp. 772-790.

- Kyles, C.R. and Olafson, L. (2008), "Uncovering preservice teachers' beliefs about diversity through reflective writing", *Urban Education*, Vol. 43 No. 5, pp. 500-518.
- McAllister, G. and Irvine, J.J. (2002), "The role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students: a qualitative study of teachers' beliefs", *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 53 No. 5, pp. 433-443.
- MacNaughton, G. (2001), "Dolls for equity: foregrounding children's voices in learning respect and unlearning unfairness", *New Zealand Council for Educational Research Early Childhood Folio*, Vol. 5, pp. 27-30.
- MacNaughton, G. and Hughes, P. (2007), "Teaching respect for cultural diversity in Australian early childhood programs a challenge for professional learning", *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 189-204.
- Milner, H.R. (2012), "Losing the color-blind mind in the urban classroom", *Urban Education*, Vol. 47 No. 5, pp. 868-875.
- Milner, H.R. and Tenore, F.B. (2010), "Classroom management in diverse classrooms", *Urban Education*, Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 560-603.
- Moll, L.C., Amanti, C., Neff, D. and Gonzalez, N. (1992), "Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms", *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 132-141.
- Ogbu, J.U. (1992), "Understanding cultural diversity and learning", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 21 No. 8, pp. 5-14.
- Ogbu, J.U. (2002), "Black-American students and the academic achievement gap: what else you need to know", *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 9-33.
- Rivera, B.D. and Rogers-Adkinson, D. (1997), "Culturally sensitive interventions: social skills training with children and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds", *Intervention in School and Clinic*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 75-80.
- Roger, T. and Johnson, D.W. (1988), "Cooperative learning: Two heads *learn* better than one", *Transforming Education*, Vol. 18 No. 2.
- Ryan, C.S., Casas, J.F., Kelly-Vance, L., Ryalls, B.O. and Nero, C. (2010), "Parent involvement and views of school success: the role of parents' Latino and White American cultural orientations", *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 391-405.
- Salend (2010), *Creating Inclusive Classrooms: Effective and Reflective Practices*, Pearson, New York, NY.
- Slavin, R.E. and Oickle, E. (1981), "Effects of cooperative learning teams on student achievement and race relations: treatment by race interactions", *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 54 No. 3, pp. 174-180.
- Terenzini, P.T., Cabrera, A.F., Colbeck, C.L., Bjorklund, S.A. and Parente, J.M. (2001), "Racial and ethnic diversity in the classroom: does it promote student learning?", *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 72 No. 5, pp. 509-531.
- Waasdorp, T.E., Bradshaw, C.P. and Leaf, P.J. (2012), "The impact of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports on bullying and peer rejection: a randomized controlled effectiveness trial", *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 166 No. 2, pp. 149-156.
- Weinstein, C.S., Tomlinson-Clarke, S. and Curran, M. (2004), "Toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management", *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 25-38.
- Zarate, M.E. (2007), "Understanding Latino parental involvement in education", *Perceptions, Expectations, and Recommendations*, Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, Los Angeles, California.

**Further reading**

Building the legacy: IDEA (2004), available at: <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/home>

Gay, G. (2002), "Preparing for culturally responsive teaching", *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 53 No. 2, pp. 106-116.

Irvine, J.J. (2012), "Complex relationships between multicultural education and special education an African American perspective", *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 63 No. 4, pp. 268-274.

Wolf, E. (1996), *Peasants*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs. NJ.

**Appendix**



**Figure A1.**  
Cultural chords' dischords

**About the author**

Rama Cousik, PhD, is an Assistant Professor, Special Education, at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW). Rama Cousik can be contacted at: [cousikr@ipfw.edu](mailto:cousikr@ipfw.edu)

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)