Creating the Culturally Diverse Classroom

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I'll never forget the day that Leonardo, a high school student, asked the school photographer to "*paint him white*" when taking a picture of him with his friends during spirit week. I asked Leo, "why did you ask the photographer to edit your picture and make you appear white?" He responded quickly "so I can be like everyone else". I was shocked, and immediately felt sad—not just for Leo, but for us as a society. It was at that moment that I began a journey to understand how it must feel to be different than the dominant group of people—and more importantly—how could I help our diverse students feel as though they belong without giving up the essence of who they are culturally.

Now, more than ever, schools are filled with students coming from diverse backgrounds. We are approaching a time when minority subgroups collectively will be more than 50% of the population in the USA. Times are changing—and we must change with them. Schools should be a safe haven for our kids, therefore it is the perfect place to practice cultural responsiveness and sensitivity training. The foundation of acceptance will serve to promote a healthy social and emotional wellbeing for all of our students– and in turn, they can focus on academic rigor and experience success in school.

Every classroom should be culturally responsive to the needs of our diverse students. While there are many specific strategies and resources that are targeted to increasing language acquisition and encourage academic success in specific subject areas, it is incumbent upon every educator to employ a general approach that can help the student to feel a strong sense of belonging and investment in their school. Check out some ideas for being culturally responsive:

- Develop personal relationships with students and their families
- Have a buddy system to ease the transition period for students
- Intentional grouping of student to include diversity
- Offer additional support classes and/or tutoring
- Celebrations/holidays should include all cultures

- Provide representation/image of cultural diversity

- Select resources that offer diverse characterization/subjects

- Student character training with emphasis on diversity

- Professional Development for staff on ways to be culturally responsive

- Educate staff of the backgrounds of students and explore their culture

- Be introspective of personal bias, work toward eradicating stereotypes

- Offer additional assistance and resources in home language

- Collaborate with diverse professionals to include alternate view points

- Build a strong sense of community for all, recognizing the contributions of diverse members

- Signage should represent all types of cultures

There is not a *one size fits all* approach to creating the perfect culturally diverse classroom or school, but I am confident that students buy into the teacher before they buy into the curriculum. Leonardo went on to become a graphic design artist and resides in Mexico. He photographs people living everyday life, celebrating his heritage. Leo discovered that the color of his skin was just perfect and he could become all that he dreamt of without giving up the essence of who he was.

Developing a positive relationship with students, while including diversity, is sure to set a strong foundation for success—in and out of the classroom! Heritage is important because it helps to shape who we become. Embrace it and celebrate it, it's what make us unique!

Michele Hill is a passionate educator in her 24th year of teaching–students first, curriculum second. Michele teaches Spanish as well as a special program working with At-Risk students that she affectionately refers to as At-Promise students. Throughout her career as an educator, Michele has been an advocate for struggling and impoverished students. She works diligently to create an environment where all students can succeed.