

Empathy and Cultural Competence

Reflections from Teachers of Culturally Diverse Children

Michaela W. Colombo

Teachers cannot hope to begin to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their children come. To do that it is vital that teachers and teacher educators explore their own beliefs and attitudes about non-white and non-middle-class people.

—Lisa Delpit
Other People's Children



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pproximately 40 percent of children in U.S. public schools are from culturally diverse backgrounds (NCES 2003). Yet, other than in Head Start—where 52 percent of teachers come from a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds different from the mainstream—only 22 percent of preschool teachers are culturally diverse (Saluja, Early, & Clifford 2002) and the percentage of non-White K–12 teachers actually may be closer to 10 (NCES 2003).

A cultural mismatch between teachers and the children they teach can result in uncomfortable classroom experiences for some children and teachers. Unlike many children who arrive at preschool and elementary classrooms and find familiar environments and teachers who speak their same language (English), many culturally and linguistically diverse students may feel like they are moving “from one world to another” as they go from home to school (Au 1993, 9). Their teachers often differ from their families in race, culture, and language. Classroom expectations and patterns of communication may also differ from those at home.

Cultural compatibility

Teachers who share their students’ culture can minimize some of the differences between home and school. Often these teachers serve as role models, validating the identities of culturally diverse children (Saluja, Early, & Clifford 2002). Unfortunately, while the need for teachers who reflect the cultural diversity of the student population has grown, the percentage of culturally diverse teachers has declined (Saluja, Early, & Clifford 2002).

Considerable research (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba 1991; Halcón 2001; Moll 2001; Ogbu 2001) indicates, however, that teachers who do not share children’s cultures *can* provide culturally compatible instruction if they understand the children’s “cultural funds of knowledge,” which can be thought of as the different ways of knowing, communicating, and doing that exist within diverse homes (Moll 1994, 2001). Teachers who understand and appreciate culturally different strengths and funds of knowledge are more likely to provide enriching

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and responsive learning environments that celebrate and capitalize on children's cultural differences.

Still, understanding and acknowledging the validity of different cultural behaviors and beliefs can present challenges for some teachers. As students themselves, most teachers were socialized in mainstream schools for at least 12 years (Cuban 1993) and often attended teacher preparation programs grounded in the mainstream culture. In centers and schools, many teachers then find themselves working with colleagues who have similar educational and professional experiences.

Beginning the journey toward increased cultural competence (the ability to understand diverse perspectives and appropriately interact with members of other cultures in a variety of situations) requires teachers to rethink their assumptions and consider life's issues through the lenses of people who come from cultural backgrounds different from their own.

The activities most likely to increase cultural competence are those that immerse teachers in meaningful interactions with members of other cultures and promote cultural disequilibrium or a sense of being lost (Sleeter 1995). This article describes one such professional development initiative that combined course work with cultural immersion experiences designed to create this sense of disequilibrium.



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A professional development initiative to increase teacher empathy

The public schools in one suburban Massachusetts city sponsored a professional development initiative designed to educate teachers about their Latino students' unique cultural backgrounds. Latino families form the largest non-mainstream cultural and linguistic group in the school district. Twenty-seven White teachers of pre-K through third grade participated in course work, cultural immersion experiences, and interactions with culturally diverse families.

Teachers attended 12 workshops and participated in two Family Literacy Nights with Latino families and their children. The Family Literacy Nights were tailored to the needs and characteristics of several Latino cultures. Spanish is the home language for all of the families, many of whom have limited proficiency in English. Many parents work long hours for minimal wages, and most of the children participate in the school's free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch programs.

In activities that simulated the experience of being part of a cultural and linguistic minority group, teachers played games in which the rules continually changed and the language was unfamiliar. Group debriefing exercises followed. The teachers were encouraged to think about their own cultural perspectives and recognize multiple perspectives as well as cultural and linguistic differences.

At Family Literacy Nights, teachers participated in storybook reading and activities in both English and

Spanish, learned about parents' interests through ongoing conversations with them, helped children with homework, and supported parents during English



as a second language (ESL) activities. A variety of guest speakers spoke about the school's structure, expectations, and available services.

Although the target for Family Literacy Nights was children from age four to seven, to support attendance the program coordinators encouraged families to bring all their children, babies to teenagers. Grandparents and other family members were also welcome.

Challenging misconceptions

As part of a research initiative with a local university, teacher participants were interviewed during and following the professional development series. This article focuses on teachers' views with regard to four commonly held misconceptions that had been expressed by some teachers before the workshop series. We hope that their

reactions and thoughts and some of our subsequent suggestions help other teachers increase their cultural competence.

Misconception 1—Everyone is the same (children are children, families are families)

Ignoring cultural differences can perpetuate a deficit model that seeks to "fix" culturally diverse children, making them more like their mainstream peers rather than celebrating their unique cultural backgrounds.

Prior to the professional development series, a kindergarten teacher declared of her diverse classroom, "Children are children." Yet, by not acknowledging differences, this teacher may have denied the children's cultural strengths. Children from other cultures often have patterns of communication, interaction, and participation that may be different from those valued within mainstream schools. If the teacher doesn't see the richness in children's communication and interaction, she may inadvertently project her mainstream cultural values for understanding, speaking, and interacting with children. Ignoring children's cultural differences and strengths can perpetuate a deficit model that seeks to "fix" culturally diverse children, making them more like their mainstream peers rather than celebrating their unique cultural backgrounds.

Following the professional development workshops, a second-grade teacher expressed a viewpoint that was echoed by other participants: "We think everyone is like us until we spend some time with them and realize their strengths and struggles." Some teachers wanted to learn more about Latino culture. One teacher said, "As mothers, we cross all bounds of cultural diversity because we all want what's best for our children, yet our Latino parents bring rich cultural differences. I'd like to know more about their language and cultures."

Seeing the children and their families communicate with each other in their home language was an important learning experience for several of the teachers. The young Spanish-speaking children were learning English, and yet the teachers witnessed a rich expressiveness as the children and their families communicated in their home language. A kindergarten teacher noted, "Listening to the children interact with each other and their families has changed the

way I see them. Yes, they speak English, but when they speak Spanish, they speak in beautiful, rich sentences.”

By immersing teachers in language they didn’t understand, the experience created a strong sense of empathy among teachers for both parents and children. One teacher, glimpsing the difficulties of learning another language, said, “I was trying to explain the ESL lesson [to a parent] and realized that no matter how much I dug into my bag of tricks, she did not understand me. It gave me an appreciation for the patience, determination, and frustration parents must feel every day, having to work, shop, or go anyplace knowing that they might not get what they want because they’re not understood.”

Misconception 2—Culturally diverse parents should know and conform to the expectations of mainstream schools

Prior to the professional development initiative, a group of teachers had discussed ways to increase the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse families. An elementary grade teacher who was present stated, “I know we’re all different, but we’re in the United States. Our students and families live here. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Several other teachers nodded in agreement.

Delpit (1995) would argue that doing “what the Romans do” means first knowing what it is that the Romans do. Most culturally and linguistically diverse families have had experiences that differ from those reflected in the expectations of mainstream schools. Even when parents do understand school expectations such as storybook reading and reinforcing classroom learning with their children, they may not have the necessary resources in terms of language and time to meet these expectations. Some linguistically diverse parents have completed high levels of education in their country of origin but have difficulty communicating in English; others have had limited formal schooling but have had a rich array of life experiences. Many work very long hours to provide their children with necessities.

Following the professional development sessions, one teacher spoke of the need for better communication so the families can understand teacher and school expectations. She explained, “We were surprised to learn that for some parents there is a huge separation between school and home. Some parents believe the teacher is responsible for the child’s learning and have no idea of the role we expect them to play in reinforc-

Developing Cultural Competence: Suggestions for Teachers

Illustrating the Complexity of Learning a Second Language

- Take a cultural/linguistic immersion trip by dining at authentic ethnic restaurants where English is not spoken and you’re not sure of the cultural norms. Remember, any sense of discomfort is temporary; you can return to your English-speaking environment. Although visiting a place where another language is spoken is by no means the equivalent of living in a culture in which one does not know the mainstream language, it can provide some initial insight into such a predicament.
- Value the burgeoning bilingualism of your second-language learners. Choose good multilingual children’s books (both fiction and nonfiction) for your classroom. Encourage parents to communicate with and read to their children in their first language as well as English.
- Imagine completing an educational degree in another language. Consider the linguistic sophistication it would require.
- Explore research on second-language acquisition (such as Baker 2001). The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA—www.ncela/gwu.edu) provides information and resources in English and Spanish for teachers, families, and community members; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL—www.tesol.org) provides lists of resources for teachers; and the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE—www.nabe.org) features research articles and many references.

ing reading and classroom learning at home. Once you meet with parents and explain your expectations, they do try to help their children at home.” Other teachers mentioned the importance of discussing school routines and services with parents. Said one, “I can’t imagine being in another country where I wasn’t sure of the rules and expectations.”

Several teachers marveled at the complexity of language learning. As one explained, “I really have learned that I need to take extra time to make sure that English language learners know exactly what to do, because their parents may want to help but do not have the necessary English vocabulary to read with their children and support classroom instruction.

Misconception 3—Families who don’t participate in school activities don’t value education

One impetus for the professional development workshop series was teachers’ perceived lack of understanding as to how transportation, work schedules, and locations affect parents’ ability to attend school meetings. The comment of one teacher illustrates this misconception: “You can tell the parents who care,” she

said. “When I have a parent meeting, none of my parents come. It is so hard to work with children without parental support.”

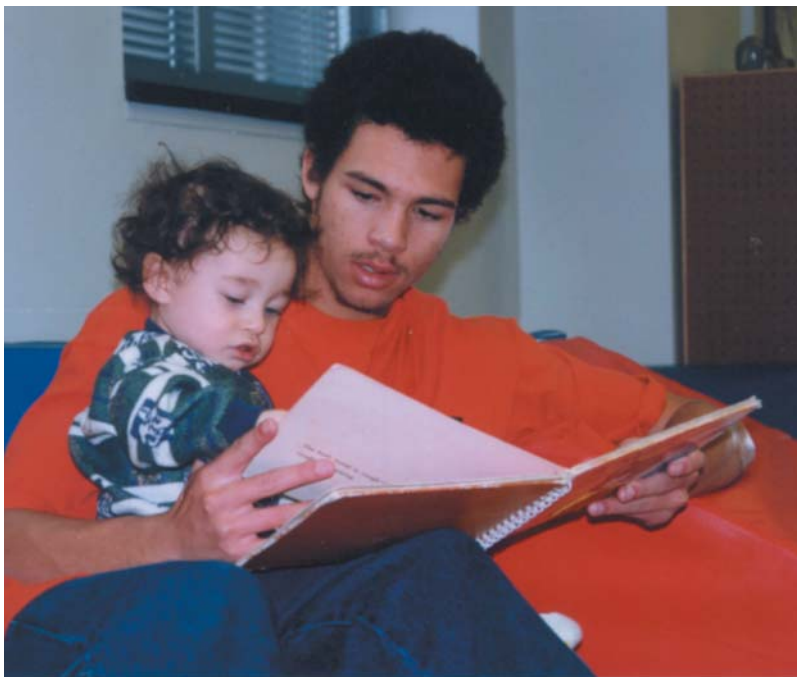
When parents don’t regularly attend school functions, some teachers assume this reflects a lack of concern. Yet, as most teachers who participated in the Family Literacy Nights realized, there is no lack of concern on the part of families. Many teachers indicated their surprise at the number of parents and children who attended the family literacy events twice weekly both in the evenings and also in morning sessions, which were added at the request of parents. Holding Family Literacy Nights in a central location, within walking distance for most families, and scheduling evening and morning meetings made the events accessible to parents who work different shifts and/or don’t own cars or have access to public transportation. “We need to make schools more accessible and welcoming. Then parents will come,”

remarked a third-grade teacher. Research

supports her conclusion; teachers who believe in their efficacy to involve families achieve high parental involvement regardless of parents’ background or socioeconomic status (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Bridesie 1987).

A first grade teacher echoed most teachers’ reactions to parental participation and their new awareness of the extra effort required for parents to participate in the Family Literacy Nights: “It was wonderful to see mothers with their children, knowing that it wasn’t easy to get there, they don’t have the transportation, and they’re going to get home a little bit later that night. They put everything aside [to attend].”

The teachers viewed the video *My Brown Eyes* (Koh 1994), which shows a day in the life of a young Korean immigrant child and his parents, who work long hours to provide for him. Afterward, the teachers acknowledged the



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Developing Cultural Competence: Suggestions for Teachers Fostering Empathy

- Get to know families in their homes, neighborhoods, or places of worship. Talk with parents and discover the diverse strengths within families. Explore family customs and history and make these an integral part of your curriculum.
- Be aware of your own feelings and reactions when visiting culturally different communities. By placing yourself in situations that cause a sense of cultural disequilibrium, you can better understand how the children and their families feel when they come to school.
- Read adult literature about other cultures written by authors from those cultures. For example, for Latino cultures, consider the writings of Julia Alvarez, Esmeralda Santiago, Sandra Cisneros, or Gary Soto. Authentic multicultural literature is available at many public libraries, large book stores, and online retailers.
- View *My Brown Eyes* (Koh 1994) with a colleague. Keep notes of your reactions and share your ideas with each other.
- Read educational books that recognize and celebrate differences in young children, such as *Other People's Children* (Delpit 1995), *White Teacher* (Paley 2005), *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* (Paley 1997), *Kwanzaa and Me* (Paley 1995), and *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (Nieto 1999).

Young children are able to learn more than one language well, and children who fully develop two languages enjoy cognitive advantages, especially in the areas of divergent thinking and linguistic competence.

practical challenges that many families confront each day. As one teacher said, “If parents have to work 12- or 15-hour days to support their children, they may not be able to attend school functions or provide homework support, no matter how important they feel education is.”

Misconception 4—If you want children to learn English, just speak English

Prior to the workshop series, several Latino parents had expressed concern because their children’s teachers had advised them to speak and read in English and to avoid speaking Spanish at home because it confuses their children. “I can’t speak English,” one parent said through an interpreter. “What can I do?”

Young children are able to learn more than one language well, and children who fully develop two languages enjoy cognitive advantages, especially in the areas of divergent thinking and linguistic competence (Baker 2001). Children who become balanced bilinguals (develop equal competence in both

languages) can differentiate between languages and accurately switch languages when appropriate. In a study of Puerto Rican children in the United States, the children developed complex linguistic abilities at a young age, accurately switching between English and Spanish depending upon their perceptions of their audience (Zentella 1997).

To illustrate the absurdity of requiring non-English speaking parents to use only English with their children, one workshop presenter displayed a drawing of a smiling dog wearing dentures and asked the teachers to work in small groups to develop rich descriptions of the illustration. Participants read their sentences aloud, displaying their native English linguistic abilities. Next the presenter asked teachers to again generate descriptive sentences, but this time in a second language. None of the teacher participants was able to do so. “And if you were able to,” the presenter asked, “would your writing have the same quality and richness as it did when you wrote in English?” Throughout the room, teachers shook their heads.

The point was made. The teachers saw the importance of encouraging parents to use their most proficient and richest language when speaking with their children. “Now I really understand [the damage] we do when we ask parents to only speak English—now I know,” said one teacher. Encouraging parents to read to their children in their richest language builds English language reading because abilities developed in the first language transfer to English. Reading in the first language also keeps parents with limited English proficiency involved in their children’s literacy development. Children also

Most teachers gained a greater understanding of the complexity of language and second language literacy.

benefit from reading to their parents in English. Parents who attended Family Literacy Nights often borrowed both tape recorders and English books on tape so they could read with their children.

Most teachers gained a greater understanding of the complexity of language and second language literacy. As one kindergarten teacher summarized, “Being immersed in Spanish reading was good for me. This role playing was so important. We were reading a Big Book [in Spanish], and I was trying to figure out from the pictures what was going on. It was difficult for me even though the readers were very expressive and asked many questions. I could imagine a child in my classroom when I’m reading a Big Book. As a teacher I often think, ‘The book has pictures; it’s expressive and repetitive.’ I ask questions to build comprehension so the child should understand. Yet these same strategies didn’t work for me. How would these alone work for a child who is learning the language?”

Lessons from the professional development initiative

The majority of teachers who participated in the professional development series indicated that the workshop content, combined with the invaluable interaction with families, promoted greater understanding and empathy. As one teacher said, “When you work one-on-one with anyone, it breaks down some of the misconceptions.”

Some teachers who expressed the greatest changes in their perceptions and perspectives indicated that they would benefit from ongoing workshops and regularly scheduled interactive activities with families outside the school setting. Of the 27 participants, there were two teachers who reported that they had experienced little change in their understanding of cultural diversity and multiple perspectives.

Implications for culturally diverse students

Further study is needed to understand how these teachers’ increased empathy and competence shapes their classroom practice, relationships with families, and ultimately the success of their students. But the initial results of the effectiveness of the Family Literacy Nights on student achievement are promising. The school district used the Survey of Out-of-School Youth Outcomes (SAYO) (Miller & Surr 2002) to measure behavioral changes in children in grades K–3. (The SAYO is not normed for pre-K.) According to those results, children who participated in the Family Literacy Night program demonstrated statistically significant progress ($p < .05$) in the areas of reading, verbal communication, and overall behavior during the school year.

Although this professional development model focused on Latino cultures and mainstream teachers, such learning experiences can be adapted for use in schools with other cultural and ethnic populations. Everyone benefits when we get to know the children in our classrooms.



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Developing Cultural Competence: Suggestions for Teachers Becoming an Advocate

- Explore Whiteness and its privilege in such books as *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* (Howard 1999), and *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Tatum 2003). Read *What If All the Kids Are White? Anti-bias/Multicultural Education with White Children* (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006). Also see Derman-Sparks and Ramsey's *Young Children* article (based on their book) "What If All the Children in My Class Are White? Anti-bias/Multicultural Education with White Children" (November 2005, pp. 20–27) and their article "What If All the Children in My Class Are White? Historical and Research Background" in this edition of *Beyond the Journal*.
- View *Blue Eyed* (Verhaag 1995) and reflect upon White teachers' responsibility for empathy, honesty, and advocacy.
- Ask parents about their work schedules and any transportation problems and arrange meetings accordingly.
- Speak up for culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families—and about their needs—at meetings within the school and the greater community.

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