Culturally Responsive Classrooms

FROM Instructor Teacher

By Jennifer L. W. Fink

Six strategies to make your classroom more inclusive and culturally responsive.

Grades
PreK–K, 1–2, 3–5, 6–8

Daniel could hardly speak English, much less read it, when he started second grade at Greenman Elementary School in Aurora, Illinois.

A recent immigrant from Mexico, Daniel had learned English gradually, but by fourth grade, he still struggled with reading comprehension and was a less-than-enthusiastic reader. Then his class read *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*, a biography of the civil rights activist. "Daniel became so engaged in reading! He wanted to investigate everything about the civil rights movement," says Brenda Mendoza, a fourth-grade bilingual teacher at Greenman. The formerly reluctant reader began checking out books on the civil rights movement, then extending beyond to books about Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War. His reading and writing skills blossomed, and by year's end, Daniel and nearly a dozen of his classmates were so proficient in English that they officially exited the school's bilingual program.

"We saw so much success in the growth of the students in reading and writing," Mendoza says. "Why? Because we were connecting with their culture."

As a teacher, you already know that students learn best when they can connect what they're learning with something they already know or have experienced. That's how we humans build meaning and understanding. And that, essentially, is what culturally responsive teaching is about.

"So often people think cultural competence is what we do for kids of color. But everybody's brain is looking for cultural references, things that are meaningful and relevant to them," says Yvette Jackson, chief executive officer of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education and co-author of *Aim High, Achieve More: How to Transform Urban Schools Through Fearless Leadership*.

Are you meeting the needs of all your students? Midyear is a great time to evaluate your practice and make some tweaks. Here are some questions to guide your reflection—and action steps you can take to help you create a vibrant and culturally responsive environment.

Question to Ask: How well do you know your students?

"A big part of culturally responsive teaching is understanding that the ways in which our kids operate at home are the ways they're going to operate in school," says Lauryn Mascareñaz, a teaching and learning specialist with Teaching Tolerance and a former elementary school teacher. "You have to understand their neighborhood, their heritage, their language. You can't just be in the classroom bubble."

Action Step: Create cultural frames of reference. Have students cut out the center of an 8.5-by-11-inch piece of paper to make a frame. (To make it interesting and to share the strategy, ask a few colleagues to participate.) Instruct each individual to fill in the frame with pictures and words that represent things (or people) that have had a major influence on them, as well as things they're passionate about. Their creations quite literally represent students' cultural frames of reference.

Share and discuss. Point out similarities: Common interests and experiences can spark empathy and understanding!

Question to Ask: Does your classroom reflect your student body?

Look around the room. What is hanging on the walls? What books are stocked in your classroom library? Does your classroom environment acknowledge, recognize, and celebrate your students? If your nod to diversity is posters celebrating the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, you'll want to dig a little deeper.

Action Step: Redo your décor. Take pictures of your students and hang them around the room. That simple step is "one of the easiest things you can do to make your classroom culturally responsive," Mascareñaz says, because "kids feel like they're owners of the classroom." Another approach: Hang flags representing your students' countries of origin. Or, have students create flags that represent their cultures and families.

Question to Ask: Do you invite and involve families?

Building relationships with families is extremely important, and challenging, particularly if language barriers hinder communication. But it is essential to reach out to students' families, again and again, if necessary, because understanding a child's family is key to understanding the child.

Action Step: Push past limitations and assumptions. Greenspan Elementary has a fair number of refugee students from the Middle East but few staff members who speak Middle Eastern languages. So staff members build relationships with community leaders, including an organization called World Relief, which provides translators. "They have been able to be a bridge for us to some of our refugee families," Mendoza says.

Some parents may need encouragement to become involved. "I've had [them] tell me, 'In Mexico, we respect the teacher and we normally don't take part in partnering up with the teacher and the education system,'" Mendoza says. If you'd like parents to be more involved, thank them for their interest and support so far, and talk about concrete ways they can help.

It's also important to acknowledge and examine any unaddressed biases. When a fellow educator told Mascareñaz that "Latino students don't succeed because their parents don't care about education," Mascareñaz pushed back. "His parents may care greatly but may not have the resources or time available that some stay-at-home white mothers have. That doesn't mean they care less about education; it just means they're coming from a different perspective."

Question to Ask: Do you help students develop a positive racial and cultural identity?

"There's evidence that when children have a strong, positive racial identity, they're more

academically and socially successful," says Ali Michael, director of K–12 Consulting and Professional Development at the Center for the Study of Race & Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness, Inquiry and Education.* Many teachers feel uncomfortable explicitly addressing race, though, and avoid discussing race in favor of a "color-blind" approach.

Action Step: Connect kids to their heritage. Having a sense of connection to the past, rather than a feeling of isolation in history, is essential for all children, particularly children from cultural backgrounds that have traditionally been ignored or glossed over in the classroom. Teachers "have to go above and beyond" what's included in the textbooks, says Baruti K. Kafele, a former elementary school teacher, principal, and author of *The Teacher 50: Critical Questions for Inspiring Classroom Excellence.* Learn as much as you can about the cultural, scientific, literary, and historical contributions of individuals from your students' cultures, and include that information in your instruction.

Question to Ask: Do you create space for sometimes difficult conversations about current events and culture?

Issues that affect students, their families, and their neighborhoods don't disappear when kids cross the classroom threshold. While it can seem intimidating to discuss potentially polarizing current events, ignoring topics that are on your students' minds is a mistake. Even very young students are aware of issues affecting their communities, and they may need help making sense of the disparate bits of information and emotion they absorb on a daily basis.

Action Step: Give students a voice. "Kids are overhearing the news and their parents. They're talking to each other and hearing other kids talking—but nobody's talking directly to them," says Andrea Martens, a K–5 ESL teacher at H. M. Pearson Elementary School in Catlett, Virginia. "I give them the space where they can talk to me. We all sit down, and I say, 'What questions do you have? What are you worried about?' and I listen."

That's a great approach, says Michael. "If you feel some of your students' opinions are really going to hurt other students, ask them to write [their thoughts] down, and then have private conversations with them."

Question to Ask: Do you embrace students' native languages?

All students need to learn standard American English to be successful in school. But because language is so intimately tied to culture, excluding a child's native language can be damaging, educationally and emotionally.

"We call a person's native language their 'mother tongue,' and that's because your language connects you to your family, your ancestry, your grandparents, neighborhood, and community," Michael says. That fact holds true for regional dialects as well.

Action Step: Allow students opportunities to learn and express themselves in their language. "My team teacher and I have started having our students' vocabulary words translated into Samoan," says Shannon Mullinax Thomas, a fourth-grade teacher at Wonder Park Elementary in Anchorage, Alaska. "Our largest population of ELL students is Samoan, so we have a word wall with a picture illustrating the meaning, with the word in both English and Samoan."

The ability to communicate in more than one language—whether it's Russian, Chinese, Spanish, or a regional dialect—is invaluable. So don't ever embarrass students for speaking their native language, Jackson says. Instead, convey that "language is about communication, and also about how people see you."

Label the language you use together "academic English," and stress that it's one you'll help them learn. But at the same time, recognize the value of their mother tongue, and give them opportunities to use both in the classroom. For fun, try occasionally allowing responses in students' mother tongues, but be clear about which language you expect and when.

Photo: Courtesy of Brenda Mendoza

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