

## *Culturally Responsive Classroom Practice*

*by Ilsa Govan*

As a teacher, I had to seek out resources for culturally responsive teaching ideas. I find it helpful to think of actions in the classroom as falling into three different categories. There are curriculum ideas that include specific lesson plans. Then there is the way these lessons are taught, or pedagogy. Finally, there is the classroom climate established by a teacher knowing herself and her students and establishing expectations based on this.

Many of the teaching ideas I tried and modified in my classroom came from brainstorming and learning from others. I tried new ideas as I came across them, never teaching in the same way from year to year. Some of my activities and methods worked right away, while most required modification to fit my teaching style and the learning style of different students. I hope you will read the following list and choose one thing that appeals to you to try out and modify for your classroom.

### *Curriculum*

#### *Cultural Watersheds*

The idea for the Cultural Watershed came from a man named Running Grass who specialized in multi-cultural environmental education in the San Francisco area. This was one of the first lessons I tried with students that deviated from the given curriculum.

I start by introducing the concept of the watershed in science class. We spend some time studying what watersheds are and how the water cycle works. This fits particularly well with the fifth grade Land and Water curriculum we were using in Seattle Public Schools.

I then make a T chart with parts of a watershed on one side and elements of culture on the other. We list the different naturally occurring watershed components such as mountains, rivers, snow, clouds, oceans, etc. Then we discuss what makes up a person's culture and list such things as music, religion, language, countries, food, etc. I am very clear that culture includes not only the values and traditions of our ancestors and families, but also our current activities. Examples from my own life include playing cards, which connects with my mid-western background, and a reverence for nature that stems from my parent's spiritual beliefs.

After brainstorming, I talk about the concept of symbolism. I explain that we will use the watershed to symbolically represent our personal culture. I show them an example where I draw two mountains that represent my mother's and father's sides of my family. Rivers run down the mountains and form the lake that is my life. Every part that I include in my picture must be connected to my culture in some way. The trees may be a symbol of my appreciation of nature, while raindrops are colored like the flags of the countries my ancestors came from.

Each child creates a rough draft of their watershed picture. Before they move on to the final, I have them explain to me what each part symbolizes and how the whole fully shows their unique culture. This is an important step in offering individual support to those who do not at first grasp the concept of symbolism. I will often ask them to choose one part of their culture and then think about how that could be a part of the watershed. The students have come up with football shaped lakes to demonstrate their love of sports and sunlight that represents their now dead family members watching them from above.

We use large poster paper to complete the final projects. I allow the students to choose from a variety of art supplies including oil pastels, tissue paper, construction paper, ribbon, and material scraps. The conversations while they are working on these are rich and I encourage them to talk and share ideas with their neighbors.

Once the final posters are done, I introduce the idea of metaphors in writing. We discuss the difference between this and similes. Having just completed symbolic posters, it is easy for them to tell the story of their culture using the watershed as a metaphor. I share a few examples of metaphors in poems, then they each write their story in poem format. These often begin with lines such as, “My mother is a mountain of strength...”.

They type up final drafts of the poems and mount them on poster paper. I have had the students share these with our class and visit other classes in groups of four to conduct presentations. We have also read them to our kindergarten and first grade buddies. I always laminate and post them in the hallway for others to appreciate.

The value of this lesson comes in sharing and learning about others and ourselves. The students also grasp such ideas as symbolism, culture, watersheds, and metaphor that can be difficult to make concrete at an elementary level.

#### *Action Research Groups*

This idea came to me from teacher Margie Butcher who was using a similar strategy in her first grade classroom. With younger students, she had parents and other volunteers facilitate each group. In the fifth grade class, I had a couple of volunteers work with groups that

needed extra help on a rotating basis. The groups met once a week at a set time, although they sometimes did extra work throughout the week.

Action research groups are also based on Paulo Friere's praxis model. We began by listing all of the things we would like to see changed in the world, and synthesized these ideas into approximately eight main categories such as "Environmental Destruction", "War", and "Homelessness". The students then thought about the area they were most concerned with and formed groups based on their chosen topic. These groups ranged in size from two to six students. I recommend larger groups breaking up so that there are no more than four students working together at any one time.

Once groups are formed, they list all of the things they know about their topic and what they would like to find out about. Then they begin their research based on what they want to find out. Some students worked independently on a couple of research questions, while others chose to research together. I guided them through the research process by instructing them in note taking strategies and ways to find the best information. We used videos, books, the internet, magazines, newspapers and interviews to gather information. In one case, several students were studying drug addiction. Through a parent's connection, I invited a US custom's agent who trained drug-sniffing dogs to give a presentation to the class about his work.

After gathering information, the groups brainstormed possible actions to take. They selected one or two actions and tried them out. These included anything from adopting an orca, to planting a tree, to giving a presentation to the class and inviting parents. Following their action, they reflected on the effectiveness of it. From there they decided if they wanted to

continue working on that particular issue, trying other actions, or begin the process again with a new topic.

Action Research Groups allowed students to investigate something they cared about, learn valuable research skills, and see small ways they could change the world. The students always looked forward to their Action Research time. I have since used this approach while facilitating study groups on racism at one school. The staff broke up into small groups based on techniques we wanted to investigate and try in our classrooms. At the end of the year, we shared the results with the rest of the staff. This was some of the best time I've spent on professional development activities.

#### *Mathematical Analysis of Biases*

I was inspired to try this in my classroom after reading a couple of good articles in *Rethinking Schools* magazine. I also used their feature on "10 Quick Ways to Identify Racism and Sexism" in children's books for teaching qualitative analysis skills.

We began this lesson by brainstorming different types of bias such as racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. I put the students into mixed skill groups and had them select one type of bias they wanted to look for. I guided them in generating a research question such as "Do newspapers feature more men than women on the front page?" Their questions had to be objective, something they could answer simply by counting and recording data. Each group developed a plan that would allow them to complete their research within a week. They also created a recording sheet for their data.

I provided newspapers and gave them time every day at the start of math class to work on this project. At the end of the week, they totaled their results. These were then presented on a poster that included a pie chart with percents, the raw data, and a written conclusion based on their results. We shared these with the rest of the class and posted them in the hallway for others to view and discuss as well.

This lesson presented an engaging way to learn how to track data, report results, and draw conclusions. The students enjoyed researching a topic of their interest and advocating against injustices they found. Many of them chose to write letters to the newspaper as a follow-up to their study.

### *Teaching Methods*

#### *Planning for Multiple Intelligences*

Nearly every teacher is introduced to the idea of Multiple Intelligences in her college courses. However, I found that knowing they existed and actually utilizing lessons that tapped into different intelligences were two different things. Unless I was intentional about it, most of my lessons were aimed at auditory learners.

To rectify this was simple. I did all of my specific lesson planning a week in advance. After mapping out our week, I would go back through it with a list of the Multiple Intelligences, checking to see if all were included at some point. I would make sure we were doing physical activities, watching short films, utilizing music, and going outside at least once a week. I also made sure my homework exercises offered a variety of ways for students to demonstrate their

learning. For example they might have the choice between drawing a comic, writing a page, recording an interview, or creating a short play.

This simple check made my classroom a more inclusive environment and made teaching more interesting and fun.

### *Teaching from Student Interests*

As I mentioned when talking about specific lesson plans, I frequently give students control over what they're learning. If we are trying to teach students to be critical thinkers, it is important to show respect for the decisions they make by allowing them to make decisions that actually influence the content of their learning. This also easily engages students in their learning, as they get to choose. It is important to balance student choices with presenting information.

For example, at the beginning of the year, I would ask students what they most wanted to change in the world. In addition to using these topics for our Action Research Groups, I also used them to guide history lessons. If students said they were concerned about child labor, we would examine the history of child labor in the United States as well as nation-wide. This would then be related to current practices as well as the differences and similarities between the chores they do at home today and child labor in the past. I also called their parents in to help me brainstorm ideas for the units. This helped me to network and find community resources, as well as hear parental perspectives on potentially divisive topics.

I provided students with specific instruction and resources in the area of their interest. Rather than simply asking what they were interested in, I posed the question, "What do you

most want to change?” This meant our instruction would have a focus on justice, rather than simply exploring a topic like mammals.

Students will also benefit from an introduction to a topic and then choices within that. If they had no familiarity with the possibility of biases in the media, there is no way they would express this as a topic of interest. Instead, I suggested that there could be biases, let them list all the biases they knew of, then let them discover for themselves whether or not these biases existed.

Guided choice making is an intentional part of my short and long term classroom planning. It is one other way that I show my students I genuinely care about them and recognize their genius.

### *Classroom Interviews*

This idea came from the book *Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning* by Paula Rogovin. She invited parents and community members into classes to be interviewed by students about topics they were studying in school.

In my class, I would send a notice out with my weekly classroom newsletter letting parents know the topics we were studying and asking if they knew of anyone who had experience in these areas. We interviewed an anthropologist who nearly drown in the Amazon River during a unit on survival, a woman who had recently immigrated to the United States while exploring immigration throughout history, and a woman who worked as a doula when we were studying pregnancy and reproductive systems.



Before our guests entered the classroom, each student wrote three questions and prepared their notebook, clipboard, and pencil for note taking. They served as journalists. Rather than lecture as experts, the people being interviewed would answer the students' questions and share their personal experiences. I helped the students learn to take notes by telling them what I was writing during the interview. I would also record important new vocabulary terms on the board. After the interview, I gave them 10 minutes of free time to talk personally with the presenter or just visit with each other. This also gave me a chance to take a picture of the interviewee.

Each student then wrote one paragraph and created an illustration about the thing that stood out to them the most during the interview. I organized these by topic, had them laminated, and compiled them into a book. The cover of the book featured the picture I had taken. We gave the color copy of the book to the interviewee and kept the black and white copy for ourselves.

This is a great way to involve parents and community members in the classroom. It helped to bring our topics of study to life. In addition, it was a great way to feature "experts" from diverse backgrounds.

### *Classroom Expectations*

#### *Behavior Management*

One of the most difficult skills I had to learn as a teacher was how to manage a group of students. Asserting authority without acting in an oppressive way was and is a balancing act that I'm not sure I will ever master. I had to get over the idea that I was not "being mean" to my

fourth and fifth grade students by insisting that they follow my directions; that it is actually a disservice to not insist that they learn. I was raised to question authority and the answer “because I said so” was mocked in my family. However, I have found some very effective ways for working with children in a classroom where their voices are encouraged while I maintain authority and thereby earn their respect.

The first premise of my interactions with children is to treat them with respect as thinking human beings. I try not to talk down to students, but rather to explain complex vocabulary and concepts in ways they can understand. I assume they have much to teach me and give them opportunities to share this knowledge. We joke with each other and I find out about their lives outside of class.

Before teaching a lesson I connect it to the students’ lives so they can see the importance of learning it. When a student asks me why they have to do something, I genuinely listen to them and do not consider it an affront to my lesson planning. However, this also means recognizing when they are really in need of an explanation and those times when it is okay to simply say, “Because I think it’s important.”

I’ve worked to balance my teaching style with the students’ learning styles. I come from a family where we interrupt each other in conversation to add a joke, build on what the other person is saying, or finish each other’s sentences. Some of my students are very comfortable with this means of discourse, while others find it confusing or rude. Being cognizant of this, I create opportunities for a variety of types of conversations and encourage self-awareness. I know that I can tolerate a certain level of noise in the classroom and sometimes I need total

silence. So I think it is only fair to the students to tell them what this noise level is. At the same time, I am flexible with what they need and attempt to recognize when someone is getting louder than I would because they are excited and engaged in the lesson. This balancing act involves knowing my students and myself well enough to make concessions to involve them without compromising the comfort I need.

Students are far more cooperative and engaged in any lesson when they have some choice over what they are studying. As I mentioned earlier, this can be in the form of researching projects of their choice, giving them control of the overall curricular themes, or letting them complete projects in different ways. Sometimes giving choice means letting them choose which three of the five math problems they want to complete. I set the initial parameters for their choices and have veto power.

One example of this was the way I had students sit on the first day of school. I had decided in my second year of teaching fifth grade to let the children choose their own seats. Predictably, they picked seats by their friends, which was fine until they started excluding others. One poor girl ended up crying in the hallway during the first ten minutes of the first day of school because no one wanted to sit with her. I felt awful. To avoid this the next year, I gave each group of four desks a color. Then I put colored dots on blank nametags that I handed out to students as they entered the room. They had to sit at the table that matched their color, but could choose which specific seat they wanted. After sitting, they were instructed to decorate their nametags. This gave shyer students something to do that was simple and unthreatening.

In addition to explaining why we are doing a given lesson, I make a point to clearly explain my expectations before we begin. For example, to fit the different learning modalities of my students, sometimes I let them call out answers to questions individually, sometimes I have them talk with each other, and sometimes I tell them to raise their hands. This means I have to consciously think about what kinds of responses will best engage my students. When I first began teaching, students had to guess at how I wanted them to behave and were then punished if they could not accurately read my mind. Of course the ones who suffer the most from this are those most culturally distant from me.

I've also found that students are always more interested in an assignment when I am genuinely passionate about what I am presenting. I will tell students, "This is so cool! You are really going to enjoy this. You'll get to go home tonight and say, 'Guess what I learned today,' and shock all your friends and family!" My enthusiasm is evident not only in what I say, but in my tone of voice and body language. If I'm not having fun teaching, there is no reason my students should be having fun learning. And if learning isn't fun, then why do it?