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Culturally relevant approaches to classroom management

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Summary

Students from various cultural backgrounds may experience cultural dissonance when teachers and educational administrators from the mainstream culture misconstrue, misinterpret or simply disregard their cultural patterns of learning, behaviour and communication. Due to changing demographics worldwide, cultural diversity is the norm for many schools today. It is therefore imperative that teachers and educational administrators become aware of the variances and unique qualities and characteristics of the groups, cultures and languages represented in their schools. This article specifically highlights important sociocultural issues in classroom management and presents effective strategies for managing multicultural classes. Implications for Christian teachers are addressed.

Changing world demographics

It is evident that we are living in an ethnically and culturally diverse world. Pluralistic countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, South Africa, France, Australia, Holland and New Zealand are continuing to experience an influx of immigrants. These countries are therefore faced with the challenges of providing opportunities for these groups to be meaningfully included in the sociopolitical, cultural and educational systems and structures, while at the same time, creating avenues for maintaining the uniqueness of each group's cultural patterns. Diversity also demands further restructuring and modification of educational systems and processes, and further revision of educational policies and philosophies to reflect multicultural parameters and contexts.

One of the most challenging issues in multicultural education concerns classroom management. Techniques and approaches to classroom management, which in the past have reflected the values, norms and beliefs of dominant cultures must be modified to meet the academic, sociocultural, developmental, moral and ethical needs of ever-increasingly ethnically diverse school populations.

Sociocultural issues in classroom management

In order to avoid problems of culturally irrelevant classroom management techniques, teachers must be culturally sensitive and culturally literate. Cultural literacy may be achieved through a thorough knowledge of the history, social patterns, customs, mores, family characteristics, values and educational challenges of ethnic and racial groups. Cultural illiteracy may pose serious threats to the health and well-being of students. Teachers may be attempting to solve problems which do not exist, or may fail to notice problems which do exist, or may use culturally ineffective strategies to deal with problems which may arise.¹ Such teacher attitudes may be attributed to ethnocentrism, cultural tunnel vision, racism, prejudice or ignorance. These attitudes may trigger feelings of alienation, anger, helplessness, normlessness and distrust among affected students. These feelings may ultimately lead to externalising behaviours (i.e., overt aggression, destruction of school property, violence towards others, defiance) or internalising behaviours (i.e., depression, anxiety, withdrawing from school and classroom activities, extreme fears).

Cultural sensitivity is achievable through an empathic grasp of how each group feels, thinks,

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acts and reacts. Teachers may accomplish this task by developing an awareness of their cultural assumptions, values, prejudices and biases, and in so doing, seek to eradicate stereotypical behaviours, attitudes and responses. In this connection, it is especially important that teachers remain open to learn as much as possible from their interactions with students. Teachers are the foundational building blocks in the construction of a strong classroom and / or school community, where respect and tolerance for cultural and ethnic differences are demonstrated and valued.

Prerequisite skills for managing multicultural classrooms

Addressing the management of diversity in the classroom starts with the training and education of the teachers. Teacher education programs need to place a greater emphasis on embedding multicultural applications and implications in professional and practical courses and activities. This will increase knowledge and understanding of how culture strongly influences children's and teachers' behaviours, attitudes and thought processes. In turn, this may ultimately motivate them to construct and implement culturally relevant instructional and management strategies.

An essential component of the training and education of teachers is an exploration of their own cultural and ethnic background. A cultural self-assessment, such as the one listed below, is strongly recommended. Such an exercise gives teachers an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate their prejudices and their scope of knowledge concerning culture and diversity.

Cultural assessment questionnaire

- What is my definition of diversity?
- What is my ethnic background?
- What is my cultural background?
- Do the children in my classroom and school come from diverse cultural backgrounds?
- What are my perceptions of students from different racial and ethnic groups, with language or dialects different from mine, or with special needs?
- What are the sources of these perceptions (e.g. friends, relatives, television, movies)?
- How do I respond to my students, based on these perceptions?
- Have I experienced others making assumptions about me based on my membership in a specific group? How did I feel?
- What steps do I need to take to learn about the students from diverse backgrounds in my

school and classroom?

- How often do social relationships develop among students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds in my classroom and in the school? What is the nature of these relationships?
- In what ways do I make my instructional program responsive to the needs of the diverse groups in my classroom?
- What kinds of information, skills and resources do I need to acquire to effectively teach from a multicultural perspective?
- In what ways do I collaborate with other educators, family members, and community groups to address the needs of all my students?²

Armed with the increased sensitivity this self-knowledge brings, teachers can then move forward to the next step of getting to know the cultures of the students in their classroom. The kinds of cultural context knowledge that are essential for teachers to learn include the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students, which can serve to promote the "multilingualism and multiculturalism of all the students and the teacher".³

Knowledge and awareness of the social, cultural and religious practices of the countries from which their students have emigrated can aid teachers in understanding how these practices have influenced students' behaviours, attitudes, lifestyles and thought processes. Teachers should take the opportunity to know each country's geographical location and have some knowledge of the languages spoken⁴ since country of origin and language are so important to children's sense of identity.

Teachers and administrators can even go the extra step and learn to greet children in their native language. This type of cultural context knowledge may be used by teachers as a way of demonstrating an openness and willingness to learn about aspects of culture that are important to students and their families.⁵ Additionally, cultural context knowledge should also be considered essential in the development of curricular innovations and applications that are culturally inclusive.

Useful strategies for managing multicultural classes

The special feature in managing a multicultural class "is the heterogeneity or multiplicity of students' cultural background".⁶ This is evident in schools in Australia and New Zealand where many students from varied ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds attend. Such diversity of students' backgrounds demand that teachers become enlightened about how

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cultural teaching and learning influences the manner in which children respond to classroom expectations. A child's meaningful participation in the activities of his / her classroom is highly dependent on how he / she perceives his / her roles and functions within that learning environment. Four important elements that need to be woven into the framework of classroom management approaches are as follows: (1) a supportive, nurturing classroom environment; (2) the physical design of the classroom; (3) instructional relevance; and (4) collaboration among school and community personnel.

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A supportive, nurturing classroom environment enhances relationships among teachers and students, and is a strong antidote to indiscipline, intolerance, indifference, prejudice and bigotry. This type of environment can be created from the first day of school by teachers "greeting students at the door with a smile and a warm, welcoming comment and communicating with second language learners with a phrase from their native language".⁷ Teachers can also instil in students' minds that they all can succeed. Such expectations, with encouragement, will help students feel that they are being supported in their efforts.⁸

When students know that you care for them and that you are looking out for them, it makes all the difference in the world. Students then feel valued regardless of their characteristics and are more likely to participate actively in the classroom.⁹

Respect and tolerance for culturally diverse groups may be enhanced by **the physical design of the classroom**. Classroom displays could include a map of the world that identifies the countries from which the students or their parents emigrated, and signs and banners welcoming students in their language. Arranging desks or tables in clusters creates opportunities for students to work together in small groups on class assignments and activities.¹⁰ This type of interaction creates an atmosphere in which interpersonal relationships are conceived and nurtured. Bulletin boards can highlight the social, technological, political, scientific and educational contributions of culturally and ethnically diverse individuals or groups. The media corner should contain books, magazines, DVDs, CDs and videos that highlight multicultural issues, experiences and traditions.¹¹

Instructional relevance enhances the classroom management functions of teachers. This is achievable when teachers become culturally responsive in their classroom interaction and instruction strategies. Children who do not belong to mainstream middle-class culture are at risk of educational failure if their teachers do not have the

cultural sensitivity, knowledge, skills and attitudes to facilitate their learning.¹²

The process of infusion, which integrates content and process, involves using ethnic and cultural materials to develop mastery of general academic and subject matter skills. For example, teaching reading skills such as comprehension, vocabulary and inferring meaning may be achieved through ethnic novels, poetry, stories and folklore; patterns of ethnic migration and settlement might be used in teaching geographic directions, and locations; and mathematical skills such as ratio, percentages, proportions and probabilities may be derived from looking at ethnic and gender employment trends.¹³

In addition to instructional approaches, teachers must also learn about the brilliance the students bring with them 'in their blood'.

Until they appreciate the wonders of the cultures represented before them—and they cannot do that without extensive study, most appropriately begun in college courses—they cannot appreciate the potential of those who sit before them, nor can they begin to link their students' histories and worlds to the subject matter they present in the classroom.¹⁴

Teachers cannot successfully implement culturally responsive classroom management techniques without effective support systems. **Collaboration among school and community personnel** is vital. Teachers can assist each other by establishing instructional and classroom management guidelines that are culturally and ethnically relevant. They can also enlist the support of professionals, such as school psychologists, counsellors, social workers and behavioural intervention specialists who clearly understand the contexts and dynamics of multicultural education and diversity.

School administrators can also be involved by working with teachers to create a school environment that emphasises respect and tolerance for cultural differences.

Administrators are the primary role model for the teachers and the students; having them participate in what the students are working on validates the importance of the work that the students are doing.¹⁵

Communicating with parents is essential to the success of any classroom management system. Teachers can send "newsletters to all families providing an overview of culturally-responsive curriculum goals, classroom activities and selected student-written stories and poems".¹⁶ Through parent-teacher conferences, teachers can gain additional insights from parents on how students' families influence and / or shape their behaviours

and attitudes. Parents can learn from teachers how their children are adjusting to the demands of school.

Implications for Christian teachers

Christian teachers who operate in culturally diverse school environments must be ever conscious of the opportunities and challenges presented as they seek to integrate their faith with learning and instruction. This goes beyond adopting teaching techniques that are facilitative of learning outcomes that predispose students to respect and embrace diversity as a God-intended reality. It requires that teachers be intentional and explicit about identifying particular Bible-based principles that guide their management techniques and strategies.

Specifically, because Christian schools are worldview driven, with specific philosophical and theological claims undergirding such a worldview, Christian teachers will do well to justify their pedagogic and management styles against such claims. Not only will this approach facilitate faith / subject integration, it will also aid in helping students make the connection between their learning, behaviours, attitudes, and their faith.

Cultural diversity presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Christian teachers. The challenge arises from the fact that attitudes and behaviours are culturally driven, and can trigger differences, which may lead to conflict and misunderstanding in learning environments. With this challenge comes the opportunity for teachers to aid students in the cultivation of Christian virtues, which will be evident in behaviours and attitudes that reflect tolerance, acceptance and respect for those who are culturally and ethnically different.

For example, two constructs / concepts that may be associated with the Christian worldview are *Oneness*, which emerges from our human differences, and *Interdependence*, a requirement for *Oneness*. Teachers can point students to the biblical concept of *Oneness* which is derived from differences, as exemplified by the triune God (three separate, different individuals) constituting a single reality (unity, wholeness). The construct / concept of *Interdependence* as a requirement for *Oneness* can be linked to the biblical example of the Apostle Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12:14–15 and 25–26 in which he makes a strong case for interdependence.

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?... That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. (KJV)

From the aforementioned examples, teachers can use group projects and cooperative learning techniques which foster interdependence—the pooling of diverse individual strengths to achieve a common goal. These management approaches enhance meaningful relationships among students and teachers, and engender mutual trust and open communication.

Christian teachers must continue to create and sustain learning environments in which all students meaningfully participate in setting and reinforcing standards and guidelines for learning and behaviour. They have a sacred obligation to demonstrate to other teaching professionals, how to visualise students as unique individuals, created by God, who have an “object to achieve, a standard to attain that includes everything good, and pure, and noble”.¹⁷

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Endnotes

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