CROSS AND MULTICULTURAL

UNDERSTANDING

PBI

INFLUENCE ON CONTEXT :

THE EDUCATION CONTEXT

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THE EDUCATION CONTEXT

CULTURALLY DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

An ancient Chinese proverb tells us that "by nature all men are alike, but by education widely different." This difference is mainly due to the influence of culture on the world's educational systems. In earlier chapters, we emphasized that cultures impress upon each generation their worldviews, values, and perceptual filters. Yet, as writer Paul Goodman observed, "There is only one curriculum, no matter what the method of education: what is basic and universal in human experience and practice, the under-lying structure of culture." What is taught in a culture, therefore, is crucial to the maintenance and perpetuation of that culture and usually is a major responsibility of the formal educational systems within a culture. Cultures with formal educational systems tend to teach many of the same things: literacy, mathematics, science, history, religion, and so forth. Yet, significant differences may be found in both what and how cultures teach.

The teaching of history is common in all cultures, but each culture emphasizes its own past. This natural tendency to emphasize one's past is succinctly expressed by the scholar and diplomat Abba Eban, who noted, "A nation writes its history in the image of its ideal." In the United States, that ideal involves events such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, the settling of the American West, the Industrial Revolution, and the many victories achieved on the battlefield. In Mexico, however, the focus might be on the cultural heritage of the pre-

Columbian Indians and the Mexican Revolution. The teaching of language is also common in all cultures, but, as with history, cultures first teach their own language. When schoolchildren are taught a culture's history and language, their society is passing on its culture and reinforcing its beliefs and values—as well as its prejudices.

Every culture, whether consciously or unconsciously, tends to glorify its historical, scientific, economic, and artistic accomplishments, frequently minimizing the achievements of other cultures. In this way, schools in all cultures impart ethnocentrism. For instance, the next time you look at a world map, notice that the United States is probably located in the center—unless, of course, you are looking at a map designed by an African, Chinese, or Russian cartographer. Many students in the United States, if asked to identify the great books of the world, would produce a list of texts authored mainly by dead, Western, white, male authors. This subtle ethnocentrism, which reinforces a culture's values, beliefs, and prejudices, is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Studying only the Koran in Pakistani schools, or only the Torah in Israeli classrooms, while disregarding other religious texts, is also a quiet form of ethnocentrism. Since what is taught in educational systems varies between cultures, you should not be surprised to find there are also differences in how students and teachers participate in the learning process. Being familiar with what a culture teaches can give you insight into that culture. Knowing how teaching occurs within a culture is just as important, because it (1) provides knowledge about the nature of the culture, (2) helps you understand interpersonal relationships among students

and between students and teachers, and (3) illustrates the importance a culture places on education.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

The cultural and linguistic diversity of the nation's student body has increased to the point where immigrants and students from a wide range of cultures and co-cultures make up some 45 percent of the public school enrollment, and more than one in five is a Latino student.Over half of the children now born in the United States are nonwhite. Census data from 2009 indicated that 21 percent of the children from 5–17 years old did not speak English in their home and 5 percent had difficulty with English. From these statistics you can see that education in America has become a multicultural activity involving various ethnicities, worldviews, and life and learning styles. In order to provide adequate educational opportunities for this culturally diverse student population, the educational establishment must accommodate to this multicultural population.

Change is difficult; sometimes welcomed, but frequently not. But, as Segal indicates, "even in today's society, some classrooms seem to be focusing on the differences and difficulties involved in multicultural education rather than embracing these differences as enriching, desirable, inevitable, natural, and positive forces." Change, however, compels re-examination— looking at something as if for the first time. These refreshed perceptions, as Lu suggests, can prompt recognition of new opportunities. Alternatively, these reflections may give rise to feelings of apprehension about the future. Neither fitful nor intermittent, these feelings are continuous and encompass

societies, institutions, and the people who compose them. These are, however, the images that spark reform.

Although much of the material found here will be primarily of use to future teachers, we believe that many of you will profit from this knowledge regardless of your future employment. In the business world, for instance, you might become a corporate trainer working with culturally diverse clients. If, on the other hand, you become a health care professional, you might find yourself "teaching" culturally diverse clients about appropriate prenatal care. In each instance you can profit from knowledge about cultural diversity in education.

In the United States, multicultural education is perceived as teaching and learning based upon democratic values and beliefs that affirm cultural pluralism in an interdependent society.

In a pluralistic democracy such as the United States, multicultural education holds that the primary goal of public education is to foster the intellectual, social, and personal development of all students to their highest potential. In contemporary U.S. society, however, these goals present challenges that have resulted in tension and disagreement among persons of good will. Tosolt indicates that a "fundamental belief of multicultural education is that schooling in the United States is founded on European American cultural characteristics and that students who do not share these cultural characteristics have difficulties navigating that system." Glasgow, McNary, and Hicks add, "Teachers must not only acknowledge the more obvious diversity issues such as color and physical disability, but also be aware of the cultural diversity of students and families."

In this section we will explore how U.S. schools are responding to the challenge of cultural diversity. First, we examine the challenges of multicultural education, and second, we look at diversity in cultural learning preferences.

CHALLENGES OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

The need for effective multicultural education is an issue that must be faced by the educational establishment. Regardless of a student's native culture or co-cultural membership, the goal of multicultural education must be to prepare students to become functioning, productive members of society. The wide array of immigrant students' home and school experiences pose a major challenge for teachers in the American educational system. The character of this challenge is illustrated by Gollnick and Chinn, who state:

Educators today are faced with an overwhelming challenge to prepare students from diverse cultural backgrounds to live in a rapidly changing society and a world in which some groups have greater societal benefits than others because of race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, religion, ability, or age. Schools of the future will become increasingly culturally diverse.

It is not only ethnic and racial diversity that is challenging schools. During the past 35 years, new waves of immigrants have come from parts of the world unfamiliar to many Americans. With them have come their religions, which seem even stranger to Americans than these new people.

In addition, "differences in majority and minority cultures play themselves out in visible ways in classrooms across the country" thus

increasing the challenge. Also, the process by which teachers can build cultural bridges between students' diverse home experiences and their educational experiences is complicated by the differences in the demographic profiles of both the K–12 teaching profession and student populations.To meet this challenge educational systems will have to constantly adapt to the ever-changing cultural dynamics found in U.S. classrooms.

The spirit of multiculturalism demands that educators face these problems head-on and recognize and affirm everyone's commonality. Thus, a multicultural student body is important to the experiences of members of both the dominant culture and of co-cultures. Such an approach to education requires an educational strategy in which students' cultural backgrounds are used to develop effective classroom instruction and school environments. It supports and extends the concepts of culture, diversity, equality, social justice, and democracy in the formal school setting.

In the next section we will turn our attention to the connection between culture and learning so that you can both understand that relationship and use that knowledge to help you better construct effective messages for the multicultural classroom context.

CULTURE AND LEARNING

Aristotle once wrote, "To learn is a natural pleasure, not confined to philosophers, but common to all men." While learning itself may be instinctive in humankind, people differ in how they learn. Each person has his or her own preferred ways of gathering and processing information.

Barmeyer calls these personal cognitive choices, which are acquired in the course of a long socialization process, learning preferences. Each culture has likewise adopted approaches to learning that best fit its collective needs. Hofstede describes this process as one in which "our cognitive development is determined by the demands of the environment in which we grew up: a person will be good at doing things that are important to him or her and that she or he has occasion to do often. Cognitive abilities are rooted in the patterns of a society." The strength of the link between culture and learning is emphasized by Nieto when she says "learning is influenced by the particular individual personalities of students and the values of the cultures in which they have been raised."

While there are a variety of culturally influenced learning preferences, "there is no agreement on the number or range of learning styles that actually exist." It is important to note that no learning approach is "better" or "worse" than another. In fact, diverse learning preferences may serve as an advantage to education. As Gay points out, learning preferences should be looked upon as tools to improve the educational achievement of diverse students by creating more cultural congruity in the teaching/learning process. Additionally, research indicates that "when students are permitted to learn difficult academic information or skills through their identified learning style preferences, they tend to achieve statistically higher test and aptitude scores than when instruction is dissonant with their preferences."

Students entering the multicultural classroom come from diverse backgrounds and bring with them different ideas about education. This gives rise to two topics relevant to multicultural education: (1) cultural ways of

knowing and (2) cultural learning preferences. Both of these issues affect how students learn and participate in the educational process.

Cultural Ways of Knowing

Ways of knowing refers to the mental processes people employ to think about and become aware of their universe. Although the field of philosophy includes epistemology, the systematic study of thought, we have chosen a different approach to this topic. We will introduce you to the thinking processes of two traditional cultures to demonstrate how diverse the acts of seeking and acquiring knowledge can be.

Although today many cultures rely on science and scientific methods to gain new knowledge, indigenous cultures frequently depend on traditional knowledge, which is gained through direct experience. Knowledge from experience accumulates over time "as a result of new experiences that modify or add to the storehouse of wisdom." Traditional knowledge is, according to Chisenga, characterized as being based on experience, tested over centuries of use, adapted to local culture and environments, dynamic, and subject to change.

Many traditional native Hawaiians believe that thinking comes from the intestines, the "gut" that links the heart and the mind. In Hawaiian culture, feelings and emotions are inseparable from knowing, wisdom, and intelligence. In addition, according to Spring, for the Hawaiian, learning must include an aesthetic or practical dimension. Knowledge must link the spirit and the physical self and help foster interpersonal relationships. This Hawaiian view is distinctly different from the Western rational view in which

the cognitive domain of intellectual activity comes from the head/brain and is separate from the affective domain of emotion.

Holistic ways of knowing are a characteristic of the Kwara'ae people of the Solomon Islands. In their system, there is no detachment of the knower from the known. Knowledge is gained through sensory experiences, which are characterized as five kinds of "seeing": (1) physical seeing with the eyes; (2) seeing with the mind, which consists of insight or foresight; (3) seeing the unseen or spirits; (4) seeing beyond temporal boundaries, such as seeing something that indicates a future event; and (5) seeing through a medium or traditional healer to reveal the nature of an illness or the outcome of an event seen in a dream.

Our purpose has not been to provide you with an exhaustive examination of how people come to know, but to give you a brief glimpse of the diverse processes employed in some cultures to gain knowledge. We will now turn our attention to the influence of culture on cognitive styles.

Cultural Learning Preferences

A learning preference may be considered as the manner in which individuals prefer to receive and process information. It is an internal manner of processing information that envelops an individual's cultural elements. Cognitive styles reflect a learner's preferred sensing modalities (auditory, visual, and kinesthetic), their preference for cooperative versus competitive approaches to learning, and their perceived value of education and schooling. There are significant differences among learners within ethnic groups, and these differences are not due just to culture but to social class,

the language spoken at home, the number of years or generations in the United States, and simple individual differences.

Education researchers have investigated cognitive styles and teaching methods to determine how children from diverse backgrounds best learn. Below we will examine an approach to cognitive styles that uses four bipolar scales to identify continua that reflect four diverse cognitive styles.

Field Independence versus Field Dependence. Field independent learners perceive objects as separate and individualized, that is, separate from the field. Field dependent learners tend to perceive information through a global perspective taking in the totality rather than individual aspects. Field independent students prefer to work independently, are generally task oriented, and prefer to receive rewards that are based on individual competition. Field dependent students prefer to work with others, seek guidance from their teachers, and favor rewards based on group outcomes.

Low-context, highly industrialized, individualistic societies such as the United States are predominantly field independent. High-context, traditional, collectivistic societies like Mexico and Japan tend toward field sensitivity. According to Leung, African American, Asian American, Latino, American Indian, and Hmong students generally prefer a field-sensitive, holistic learning style. Kush indicates, however, that while children raised in traditional Mexican settings are inclined to develop a field dependent learning style, children raised in Mexican-American families that have assimilated some aspects of the Anglo culture tend to embrace a more field independent style.

Cooperation versus Competition. This cognitive style describes students who prefer to work together in a cooperative environment or to work independently in competition with one another. Students from collective cultures expect and accept group work; in fact, they often work harder in a group than they do individually. Students in individualistic cultures usually expect to be graded on individual work. Cultures do, however, differ in the degree to which they stress cooperation or competition. Latino cultures, says Grossman, teach their children to cooperate and work collectively in groups. U.S. Americans, on the other hand, teach their young to work individually and to compete with one another. In addition to Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Rim Americans, Filipino Americans, and Hawaiians tend to raise their children cooperatively. Among Hawaiian families, for example, multiple caretakers, particularly older siblings, bring up children. According to Hollins, King, and Haymen, this behavior extends into the classroom and is evidenced by "high rates of peer interaction, frequently offering help to peers or requesting assistance from them." In another example, Cleary and Peacock indicate that Native Americans usually do better in cooperative rather than competitive learning environments.

Trial and Error versus "Watch, Then Do." Some students with a fondness for risk-taking enjoy engaging themselves in a task, and learning to do it through trial and error. Others seek to minimize risk, preferring demonstrations and observing before attempting a task. Many mainstream American students prefer to solve problems and reach conclusions through trial and error. This approach, however, is not common in all cultures. As

Grossman notes, in many cultures, "individuals are expected to continue to watch how something is done as many times and for as long as necessary until they feel they can do it." Many American Indian students, say Cleary and Peacock, prefer to watch others until they feel competent to engage in an educational activity.

Tolerance versus Intolerance for Ambiguity. This dimension reflects how well people contend with ambiguity in learning situations. Students from some cultures are open-minded about contradictions, differences, and uncertainty. Students from other cultures prefer a structured, predictable environment with little change. Although U.S. culture generally shows a high tolerance for ambiguity, the classroom tends to be an exception. The U.S. school day is frequently quite structured, with students moving from subject to subject, and often from room to room, based on the clock. Tolerance or intolerance for ambiguity also affects what is taught in the classroom. For example, U.S. culture emphasizes right/wrong, correct/incorrect, and yes/no answers, and values logic, rationalism, and cause-and-effect relationships. In contrast, many non-Western cultures are less tied to logic and rationalism. American Indian cultures, for instance, give little regard to seeking truth in absolute terms.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

One important conclusion should have emerged by now: "Communication in the learning environment is influenced by cultural, psychological, and contextual factors and it involves the application of

interpersonal and intrapersonal values." Every classroom is a cultural community that is a product of the subject material, textbook authors, students, and the teachers. Successful educational outcomes depend upon teaching that is responsive to cultural diversity and require an approach where both teachers and students are responsible for understanding the perspectives of others and for understanding their own perspectives and how they acquired them. In addition to cultural knowledge, culturally responsive teachers must possess communicator qualities that aid in their presentation of the curriculum. Three such qualities, which we will discuss below, are self-efficacy, immediacy, and empathy.

COMMUNICATOR CHARACTERISTICS

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in her or his ability to organize and execute the courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context. It is a person's belief that he or she can influence how well students learn and correlates positively with student outcomes. Teachers who have a high sense of efficacy are more satisfied with teaching, experience less stress, and exhibit greater enthusiasm for teaching.Self-efficacy stems from lifelong experiences resulting in beliefs and perceptions affecting how people see themselves individually and collectively.

Immediacy

Teachers may use immediacy, which incorporates approach and avoidance behaviors to optimize their teacher–student communication and enhance their credibility. Immediate teachers are viewed as approachable, friendly, open, responsive to student needs, as well as perceived as warm and relaxed. Non-immediate teachers are frequently perceived as cold, distant, and unfriendly.

Immediacy involves the presentation of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that enhance physical and psychological closeness. Immediacy displays include such behaviors as praising, using humor, addressing others by name, making use of personal examples, using the words our and we, smiling, maintaining eye contact, and displaying changes in vocal and facial expression.

Research has revealed a positive relationship between immediacy and cognitive learning, as well as between immediacy and credibility, across numerous cultures. Even in high-power distance cultures such as Kenya, say Johnson and Miller, students seem to benefit from seeing their teachers as approachable. Additionally, Jazayeri reports that immediacy has been related to students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness in Mexico, Norway, China, Japan, and Australia, as well as in the United States.

Empathy

The practice of empathy by both teachers and students is an indispensable quality found in the multicultural classroom environment. Empathy is the ability of one to assume the role of another and, by imagining

the world as the other sees it, predict accurately the motives, attitudes, feelings, and needs of the other. Empathy in a classroom involves two steps. First, empathic teachers are able to imagine how it must be for immigrant students to adapt to a classroom where surroundings, language, and behavior are often unfamiliar. Second, empathy involves communicating in ways that are rewarding to the student who is the object of empathic prediction.

Accurate prediction requires accepting people for who they are and thus understanding what can realistically be expected of them. Because you accept other people for who they are does not mean that you must agree with what they say or do. Although you may accept students' feelings, ideas, and behavior as legitimate, that does not mean you necessarily have to agree with them. Students do, however, react positively to empathic understanding—to the realization that they are not being evaluated or judged, and they are understood from their own point of view rather than from someone else's.The empathic teacher, therefore, will let students use their own cultural resources and voices to develop new skills and to critically explore subject matter.

The ability to communicate empathically requires learning specific behaviors and practices; it does not happen automatically. Cooper and Simonds offer four guidelines that you should follow in order to become an empathic communicator:

• Communicate a supportive climate. Community classrooms are supposed to create a supportive climate. To nourish this climate, you must create

messages that indicate you understand your students' feelings and needs, rather than expressing judgments of student behavior.

 • Attend to a student's nonverbal behavior as well as his or her verbal communication. Effective interpretation of messages requires that you respond to the cognitive content of the message as well as to the meta-communication expressed nonverbally. For instance, many Puerto Ricans use a nonverbal wrinkling of the nose to signify "what?" In one classroom, when the teacher asked if they had understood the lesson, some students would invariably wrinkle their noses. Not understanding this gesture, the teacher simply went on with the lesson, assuming that the nose wrinkling had no meaning.

 • Accurately reflect and clarify feelings. There is a tendency to respond more to the content of what others say—the ideas, thoughts, opinions, and attitudes expressed— than to the feelings that they are expressing. Feelings are more difficult to respond to because in the mainstream U.S. culture most people have less experience responding to feelings than to ideas.

 • Be genuine and congruent. You are not likely to foster a good relationship with students if you communicate in false or misleading ways. A truly constructive relationship is one in which the participants respond to each other in an honest and genuine fashion. Your communication is congruent when the things that you do and say accurately reflect your real thoughts and feelings. An important factor in classroom empathic behavior is demonstrating that teachers care about their students. Student perceptions of teacher behaviors perceived as caring include:

• Listening to my side of the story

• Encouraging me to keep trying

• Writing helpful comments on my papers

• Intervening when other kids are picking on me

• Making sure I understand directions

•Insisting that I do my very best work most of the time

• Smiling at me

• Seeking my opinion

In addition to the communication characteristics we have just discussed, effective multicultural classroom communication requires the employment of appropriate communication strategies.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Communicating effectively in a culturally diverse educational setting is not easy. Effective communication depends, in part, on the use of appropriate communication strategies. A first consideration in developing effective strategies is to consider the culture for which messages are being constructed. For example, in a traditional U.S. classroom situation, if a teacher has a disciplinary problem with a student, he or she might warn the student that further inappropriate behavior will result in a trip to the vice principal's office. In a remote Alaskan village, however, the teacher might use a very different message, such as "I'll be steaming with your mother tonight." In this cultural situation homes in the village have no running water and bathing takes place in communal gender-specific steam rooms as a group activity. For the student, this message could translate as "I'll be seeing your mother tonight, so shape up or I'll talk to her about your behavior." In a

more general sense, effective communication strategies should be based upon a number of relevant factors and assumptions. We will list a few of the most important assumptions below.

• Provide ample opportunities to discuss global topics of interest and relevance with students. Always encourage perspective taking during such conversations.

• Avoid conversations that perpetuate "us" and "them" discussions. Foster a collective sense of being in the classroom.

 • Allow discussion about unique cultural beliefs and practices and how they differ from those who misuse them to sustain terrorist activity.

• Be sensitive to cultural customs that might differ from the mainstream, particularly in regard to dress and personal rituals (such as daily prayer and fasting for Ramadan). Actively seek information about these unique customs, and promote accurate understanding with all students in your class.

• Remind students that school is a safe place of learning for students of all cultural backgrounds. If they do not feel safe, it is your obligation as an educator to directly address their feelings of insecurity and/or discomfort.

• Use culturally relevant proverbs as a teaching tool. Select similar proverbs from the diverse cultures in the classroom community to make a lesson point as well as to reveal the similarities among cultures.

Another strategy is to create a harmonious communicative process by establishing the rules of discourse or communication. The social interaction styles of some urban ethnic groups or cultures can be misidentified as disrespectful. For example, some Asian cultures use ritualized laughter to

maintain harmony and avoid conflicts with authority. Certain African-American groups use a social interaction style referred to as "call response." Here, students may frequently speak while the teacher is speaking as a response to their feelings about a teacher's comments. This is not rude behavior but is a cultural strategy to enter into the conversation through personal assertiveness rather than waiting for an "authority" to give permission.

Self-questioning is another appropriate strategy. Teachers should ask themselves questions such as will this example or assignment make a student feel uncomfortable with regard to his or her race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or cultural background. What about the student who doesn't celebrate Christian or Jewish holidays? Rather than asking students to write a story about their favorite Christmas memory, a teacher could ask students to write about a favorite family tradition.

A final suggested strategy focuses on teachers making good connections with their students both personally and intellectually. To this end, you might ask students to share information about their interests, their learning styles, and how you can successfully interact with them. Since so many students are computer literate, questions such as "Can anyone give an example of something they saw on Facebook or YouTube that is relevant to this topic?" are another way to honor their knowledge and make connections.

We hope that at this point you understand and appreciate the impact cultural diversity has on the U.S. classroom. And we hope you will acknowledge that an education system that fails to understand cultural

diversity will lose the richness of values, worldviews, lifestyles, and perspectives of the diverse U.S. co-cultures.

REFERENCES

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