



Dale B. Linton



Celebrating the World in Your

Classroom

The typical classroom in many parts of the world looks physically similar to classrooms of decades past. Yes, there is more modern technology, but the desks and tables are often organized as they always have been. Even the school calendar looks similar to ones in the past, many of which were based on the cycle of sowing and harvesting crops.

Something else in today's classroom also looks very similar to schools in the past: the teacher. Today's classroom teacher in the U.S. looks very much like teachers of the 1950s and 1960s: primarily Caucasian, female, and middle class.¹

What is markedly different from the past, and will continue to change in the foreseeable future, is that the racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics of classrooms nationwide will continue to look different from the majority of those who make up the teaching profession.² Whenever multiple cultures come together, difficulties can arise—and many teachers may not recognize that there are cultural disconnects between them and their culturally diverse students.³

In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer stated, "We teach who we are."⁴ Imbedded within Palmer's statement is an understanding that every teacher acts in a manner that reveals what I call his or her "inner teacher"—based on a vast array of

guiding personal and professional beliefs, acquired knowledge, personal epiphanies, and practical experiences, which are nested within a specific cultural frame of reference. It is within this cultural frame of reference that sometimes (often without the teacher's awareness), a cultural disconnect arises between him or her and culturally diverse students. I didn't fully understand this until I began teaching within an international school structure, and also began collaborating with a multinational group of teachers focused on teaching children of 30 nationalities. Over time, both my cultural frame of reference

and my “inner teacher” changed. This teaching experience altered who I was and how I taught students who were culturally different from me.

Fortunately, my circumstances allowed me the opportunity to learn how to see life from diverse perspectives. Some researchers criticize teacher-preparation programs for failing to adequately train novice teachers to “meet the challenges of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.”⁵ Furthermore, many practicing teachers don’t fare much better, as they typically have had limited experience “traveling or working with intercultural groups of people,” which could assist them in bridging classroom cultural divides.⁶ For more than 20 years, educational experts have been warning that American teachers are not “prepared to work in multicultural settings.”⁷

For some, the concept of bridging a cultural divide may be exciting. For others, it may be overwhelming or even threatening. The apostle John, writing in Revelation 7:9, describes a heavenly celebration that includes a group of people too large to be numbered, comprising every cultural group imaginable. For Christian teachers, a diverse student body offers an opportunity to celebrate a bit of heaven now in our own classrooms.

Where to Begin? It Starts With You!

The apostle Paul provides insight into how he maximized his efforts to interact and communicate with people whose backgrounds were different from his. In 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul wrote: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”⁸ Paul was keenly aware becoming “all things to all people” meant that he had to be willing to listen to those to whom he wanted to speak. In essence, Paul knew that his message needed to be contextualized, or referenced, within the culture and worldview of the people he wanted to reach. Evangelists and missionaries have long used contextualization as the primary starting place when attempting to reach out and explain bib-

lical truths to people of other cultures.⁹

Today’s teachers would be wise to adopt a similar contextualization approach, even if currently teaching in classrooms that are monocultural. To accomplish this, they must first become aware of the cultures present in their classroom while recognizing that their own cultural beliefs may hinder them from being fully successful in instructing culturally diverse groups.¹⁰ According to Spradlin and Parsons, “To be effective in multicultural classrooms, teachers must be committed to becoming more aware of who they are as a people and what they believe, including being willing to identify and question their cultural assumptions.”¹¹ It is critical then to understand that, perhaps unintentionally, a teacher’s own cultural upbringing and operational understandings may have prejudiced his or her thinking and thus negated efforts to effectively engage with students who are culturally different from the teacher. Duane Elmer points out that an individual typically communicates from his or her own “frame of reference.”¹² Despite this limitation, he suggests that several principles can be applied to encourage positive interaction with other cultures:

Recognize that “cultural heritage” plays a foundational role in how interactions with and responses to others take place. According to Elmer, “everything we say and do” is a reflection of our cultural heritage.¹³ This becomes problematic when we fail to realize how much we impose our cultural values and understandings on the way others think or do things. This quickly leads to the slippery slope of judging others. It is human nature to believe that one’s own way of doing things is “better than other approaches.” However, there are many different ways to get something done; some are more efficient than others, but each way tends to achieve the desired outcome.

Acknowledge the Role of Culture

The first step, then, in celebrating the variety of cultures in the classroom is for teachers to become aware that their cultural upbringing has shaped who they are and how they act. Similarly, the cultural upbringing of their students has also shaped who they are and how they act. As teachers find ways to bridge cultural divides in their classrooms, they begin to recognize that perhaps a portion of the contributing factors of any such divide may lie within their own cultural understandings and preferred operational norms.

Take Time to Celebrate Your Students’ Uniqueness

The second step in celebrating the world in the classroom is somewhat of a reciprocal exchange, which takes place as the teacher becomes more aware of his or her students individually and learns to celebrate their uniqueness. According to Elmer, taking time to learn about the cultural heritage of others, including “their perspective(s) and intentions,” provides a better understanding of them. This in turn allows teachers to “withhold judgment” and opens the door to continued dialogue, which can build understanding and acceptance.¹⁴

Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, and Terrell tell a story about a person who viewed icebergs through a special type of glasses that allowed him to see the entire structure of each iceberg above and below the water line. An examination of multiple icebergs revealed that each was unique; no two were the same. Using this illustration, the researchers concluded that as teachers become better adept at employing the skills of cultural proficiency, they will learn more about their students, viewing each student from a special set of lenses that helps them recognize and appreciate him or her as a unique individual.¹⁵ This supports Wardle and Cruz-Janzen’s belief that “teachers must be prepared to work in affirming ways with all students”¹⁶ and Brown et al., who state

that “good teaching implies solid learning by all students, and such learning does not happen when the heritages, experiences, interests, and needs of the individual student are not taken into account.”¹⁷

Step Out and Try Something New

The third step in celebrating the world in the classroom involves trying something new and incorporating different practices and understandings. Below are some practical and effective ways to embrace students and their culturally different backgrounds.

What’s in a Name?

Everything! One of the most important things every child possesses is his or her name. It is a person’s primary identifying marker. Many traditional Anglo names can be traced back to historical roots and meanings; but in my experience, people with such names don’t generally attach too much context or value to them. On the other hand, for many students from other cultures, their name carries with it significant meaning. It may denote a long lineage of family identity and provide insight into the cultural beliefs of their heritage. It may geographically represent the area where their family originated. In some cultures, children are not named until they are several years old. The name they are given may denote something special that others observed about them. It is vitally important for teachers to learn each student’s name, pronounce it properly, and validate students by helping all of them pronounce one another’s names correctly.¹⁸

It takes practice to listen intently and replicate small inflections or to learn how to manipulate your tongue when pronouncing a name that uses an alveolar trill or rolling “r” (Miriam or Ricardo). In some languages, clicks, gutturals, and explosive sounds such as “t” and “s” are present in names. While getting the pronunciation right is not an easy

process and may require a lot of practice to replicate different sounds correctly, it is worth the effort. As one teacher wrote, “I want my students to know that I respect them for the whole person they are, including their beautiful names that are sometimes difficult to pronounce.”¹⁹

Readjusting Your Eyesight to See What “Others” See

Perhaps you have stepped into another teacher’s classroom, looked around, and noticed that something looked out of place, or appeared to be missing. Maybe you did a double-take because you would never arrange or decorate your classroom in this way. If you have ever done any of those things, then you were interpreting what you saw through your own beliefs and preferences. It is fine for each teacher to arrange and decorate his or her room differently because the decor of a classroom should reflect the “inner teacher,” and no two “inner teachers” are exactly the same.

Using this same philosophy, teachers of students from other cultures can critically examine their classroom through the eyes of their students. For example, consider what the students see when they enter your classroom.²⁰ Do they see anything that speaks to their cultural heritage? Do the pictures or images posted in the classroom vary in their geographic representation or cultural, ethnic, gender, and/or racial depictions?

Think about the English-language learners in your classroom. Do they see any words on the walls written in their primary language? Is information presented visually in a manner that is authentic and non-linguistic?²¹ Craig Roland suggests that using pictures to represent various aspects of a given culture are a powerful means of reflecting the diversity present in classrooms. In his classrooms, he incorporates numerous images and based on his experiences, has created a list of culturally referenced Websites teachers may use.²²

Seek First to Understand, and Then Begin Teaching!

It is important for teachers of culturally diverse students to recognize that the typical operational norms and expectations of their classroom may not be the cultural norms practiced by their students. I have become convinced in almost 40 years as an educator that students really do want to do the right thing, and they want to please their teacher. Sometimes, they just need to be guided in how to do that. Teaching students the classroom operational norms and expectations takes patience and guidance. It is a repetitive process, not a “one and done” type of activity. However, teachers need to be aware that sometimes their cultural norms and expectations can conflict with the cultural upbringing of some students. When such encounters occur, it provides an opportunity to inform, demonstrate, and practice desired behaviors.²³

The teachers of the international schools with whom I work are typically from Western cultures. Likewise, the schools where they teach are organized around educational principles and curriculum associated with Western culture. However, a number of the students come from other cultures—and the same can be said of students in many American classrooms today. Teachers need to be mindful that while Western culture encourages traits like individualism, competition, and setting oneself apart, other cultures value the opposite: collaboration, community, and uniformity. Western culture values eye-to-eye contact when people are communicating. But this is not so in other parts of the world. For someone in the position of authority (the teacher) to demand eye-to-eye contact with students who are culturally different from him or her may cause cultural confusion because the students have been taught to demonstrate respect to those in authority by casting their eyes downward. Likewise, male teachers need to practice great sensi-

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tivity in how they make eye contact with females, both students and adults, from other cultures.²⁴

In fact, some of the most common Western classroom practices such as using proximity, touching, or using certain gestures can be offensive or construed as inappropriate within some cultures.²⁵ Even certain instructional practices may create culturally embarrassing situations. Requiring students to participate by answering a question or speaking up in a class discussion seems harmless enough—that is, until you call on a student from a different cultural heritage who does not reply, not because of disrespect, but out of deference to you as his or her teacher. In many cultures, students listen; they aren't expected to respond.

Likewise, requiring students to “problem solve” independently when they have not acquired the innovative thinking and advanced processing skills for this task leads only to discouragement and sets up barriers to their learning. For these, and many other good reasons, a number of educational experts²⁶ promote the use of small groups and collaboration or cooperative learning so that students can work and learn together. In most cases, students are able to successfully attain the desired learning they would have achieved through the use of

independent-learning activities. In addition, cooperative learning helps students practice a variety of cross-cultural skills such as listening, hearing others' perspectives, and achieving consensus in a respectful manner. These are also important 21st-century employment skills that will be required of our students.²⁷

Teachers of Asian students will benefit from acquainting themselves with the cultural differences between Eastern-based and Western-based cultures. Chang, Mak, Wu, Chen, and Lu²⁸ provide an intriguing discourse regarding the evolution of Eastern cultural beliefs and practices and the differences that exist within learning and teaching styles. Jonathan Borden's 2008 book *Confucius Meets Piaget* offers useful insights about the cultural and educational differences between the West and East, primarily within the Korean culture.

Make Cultural Adjustments to the Curriculum

Imagine my surprise when I walked into a primary-grade classroom thousands of miles from the United States to find the students busy counting money using plastic American coins and filling out a corresponding U.S.-

based worksheet. What was wrong with this picture? To begin with, there were only a couple of American students in the class, and they were so young that I wasn't sure they had ever lived in the U.S.A. or recognized the numerical value of the coins they were using. Furthermore, the rest of the class was made up of nationalities from different parts of the world. When I asked the teacher, an American, why she was using this method to teach the concept of money and counting instead of using the local currency, she shrugged her shoulders and replied, “It's in the curriculum.”

Actually, it wasn't in the official curriculum. It was, however, in the American textbook being used. The curriculum stated that students should practice counting by ones, fives, tens, and hundreds using money (coins). This incident served as a great illustration that many times, teachers become enamored with “following the textbook/curriculum” without considering whether it makes sense or leads to meaningful learning for all the students. That particular classroom enrolled eight to ten different nationalities. Imagine the potential global learning opportunities that classroom could have provided if the students had been encouraged to bring in coins from their home country, and along with coins used in the local economy, and then conversed with their fellow students while teaching one another to count and make change. Similar adjustments can be made in classrooms around the world if teachers view their curriculum as something to be modified to enhance and personalize meaning for students from other cultures—indeed, for every student—in their classrooms. Matthew Lynch stated that the “culturally responsive curriculum helps students from a minority ethnic/racial background develop a sense of identity as individuals, as well as proudly identify with their particular culture group.”²⁹

For years, I have advocated for teachers to modify their curricula—

and it isn't that hard to do.³⁰ For instance, within a science lesson on mammals, the teacher can allow students to gather information about different types of creatures indigenous to their countries of cultural heritage. Language-arts classes can incorporate poetry and writings representing the cultural heritage of the students in the classroom. Sloan suggests that math problems can be developed to "represent diverse names and situations" and that highlighting scientists and scientific discoveries from different countries demonstrate the value of the cultural heritages of the students in the classroom.³¹ Authors Tiedt and Tiedt provide numerous ideas for teaching core curriculum areas from a multicultural approach in their book *Multicultural Teaching: A Handbook of Activities, Information, and Resources*.³²

When teaching students from other cultures, educators need to be considerate in how they present accounts of historical import. For example, the social studies curriculum offers multiple opportunities to explore and modify topics in culturally responsive ways. Historical events can be examined from both American and non-American viewpoints. However, when doing this, one must also examine the disturbing parallels between the past and present, and recognize that there may be students whose lives are still being affected by these events. For instance, when teaching about wars, revolution, civil unrest, and injustice, culturally responsive teachers are mindful that there may be students in their classrooms whose ancestors perished as a result of such events, were enslaved, forced to flee their homes, and perhaps made great sacrifices to come to America, or relocate to new homelands. Some students may even have family members who are presently living with fear and vulnerability due to current political unrest in various countries. Teachers of refugee students thus need to acquire knowledge about the backgrounds and sensitivities of their students, as some may have arrived with

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the horrors of war and injustice freshly imprinted on their minds. Sadly, these students may have family members still living in these same horrific situations they fled. It is imperative that before they begin teaching certain subjects, teachers carefully review the curriculum to be taught and express sensitivity regarding who their students are, their countries of origin, and the events that may have brought them to their classroom.

Celebrate Your Students' Cultural Heritage

Schools and classrooms reap tremendous benefits when they create a day to celebrate the cultural heritage of a specific group or multiple cultural groups. Dressing up in national dress, singing songs, and reading poetry or other works from their culture provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate pride in their heritage and stimulates curiosity and learning opportunities for others. Best of all, involving parents in the celebration creates a positive connection between the school and home. According to Matthew Meuleners: "When you celebrate the many differences in those around you, you will be able to utilize, nurture, and empower others to achieve

more than ever before."³³ And it goes without saying that a celebration that includes food from the various cultural heritages in your classroom is a must. As a wise mentor once told me, "Food is culture!"

Respect, Relationships, Caring, and High Expectations = Success

Certain universal values speak volumes about the teacher's character and help to bridge cultural divides. Exhibiting respect toward others, taking time to build meaningful relationships, and demonstrating genuine care are hallmarks of culturally responsive teachers.³⁴ According to Irvine and Armento, culturally responsive teachers understand that teaching is a "social interaction that involves the development and maintenance of relationships as well as more widely accepted activities such as planning, delivery, and evaluation of instruction."³⁵ The culturally relevant teacher is adept at finding ways to learn about his or her students' lives and then creating connections to the curriculum from these relationships.³⁶

Numerous studies indicate that students highly desire a teacher who is

respectful, caring, and takes time to build meaningful relationships.³⁷ In some of the cited studies, the student voices provide a multinational perspective (American, Australian, Canadian, and British) and represent culturally diverse groups including African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Australian Aboriginals. The takeaway from this is that across nationalities, separate countries, and cultural heritages, a respectful, caring teacher who builds meaningful relationships with students is valued and appreciated by her or his students. This supports the belief that students gain many benefits from studying with a genuinely caring teacher who possesses strong cultural competency skills. Parents, administrators, communities, and even students desire to have teachers who know how to teach the content material well, hold high learning expectations, demonstrate flexibility, and practice good classroom management. Together, these practices provide a safe and structured learning environment that is appreciated by students from multiple cultural backgrounds.³⁸

The challenges presented by a rapidly changing student population require today's teachers to take stock of their abilities to reduce cultural barriers in their classroom. They can start by examining their own cultural heritage, reading more about the topic and completing self-inventories, participating in professional development training, and recognizing any limitations they may have in understanding students who are culturally different from them. Next, by putting on a new set of "cultural glasses," teachers can train their eyes to view each student as unique. Coupling these two things with a curiosity to investigate and learn more about their students, teachers can position themselves to move forward in engaging in a variety of culturally responsive practices.

Wading into another person's culture can be a bit scary and complex. It may even challenge a few things you believe about your own cultural heritage. But for today's teacher, it is a ne-

cessity to face the challenges and reach each student, regardless of cultural backgrounds, in order to maximize individual learning experiences. ✍

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Dale B. Linton, PhD, is Professor of Education at Spring Arbor University in Spring Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A. He has taught in American public schools and international Christian schools in Ethiopia and Kenya. Dr. Linton earned his doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. He provides professional development to Christian teachers around the world, and his research on the desired teacher preferences among third-culture kids has been published and presented in a number of settings.

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