Respect in the Classroom

Reflections of a Mexican-American Educator

To be effective, teachers must treat the culture, heritage, and language of all their students con respeto.

Eva Midobuche

To understand diversity and multicultural education, we must begin by respecting our students and their backgrounds. What makes me arrive at this conclusion? I am a career educator whose heritage is culturally and linguistically different from mainstream U.S. culture. My experiences in classrooms at all levels force me to view multicultural education and issues of diversity with great sadness. Although my story is one of educational success, my school life was painful to the point that the scars have yet to completely heal. Why did my experiences differ so radically from those of other children? In our “land of equal opportunity,” they shouldn’t have. What was lacking in these experiences was respect.

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Remembering
Growing up in the Southwest was itself not remarkable. However, growing up Mexican American made life a bit complicated. For example, I remember asking my mother—in Spanish, of course—what the sign “No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed” meant at the country store near my hometown. Its meaning was inexplicable to a young child. Yet the sign was allowed to exist, beckoning our minds to it.

This blatant form of racism was there only if I looked for it. Too many times, however, racism found me instead.

During my early education, my Mexican-American culture was never described in books or illustrated on bulletin boards. Even the lunchroom was an uncomfortable place. I used to lie about what I had eaten for breakfast. I always said eggs, bacon, toast, milk, and orange juice, although I had really eaten something totally different but just as nutritious. Some of us Mexican-American students hid our lunches so that the other students would not make fun of us. What I wouldn’t give today for a lunch of tortillas made by my mother’s loving hands.

I don’t think that my experiences as a culturally and linguistically diverse student were different from those of my Hispanic classmates. For instance, I remember when a rare snowfall excited a classroom full of elementary students. Our teacher became angry and called one of my friends to the front of the class. She commanded us to look at my friend’s red canvas tennis shoes, which were wet from walking to school in the snow. The teacher made some terrible remarks about the kind of mother who would send her child to school in the snow with tennis shoes. Still standing in front of the class, my friend started to cry. Feeling her embarrassment and pain, I also began crying. The teacher told my friend to go home and change shoes. Through her tears, my friend said that she could not because those were her only shoes. The total disregard for a child’s—and a family’s—self-esteem (Benavides, 1992) now seems unforgivable. Didn’t the teacher feel what my friend and the rest of the class were feeling? How could she not be aware?

I was told by adults and family around me that school taught us what we needed to know in life. As I sit and remember another teacher, I wonder what need she was addressing when she brought her granddaughter to our class one day. She asked her granddaughter, who was two grades behind our class and came from an English-speaking family of educators, to read from our textbook. The teacher’s comment to her predominantly Mexican-American students who were struggling to learn English was, “See how much smarter she is than you. She can read at your grade level.”
I was often punished for speaking Spanish. I remember writing 25 lines of "I will not speak Spanish in school" for every word I spoke in my native tongue. I find it ironic that we now praise Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George Bush (Fineman, 1998) for their efforts in speaking Spanish to promote their politics with Hispanics. I was spanked for speaking the language they are now attempting to learn.

This lack of respect was rampant when I was in elementary school. It became so bad that I had nightmares, stomach cramps, and difficulty sleeping. My mother met with my teacher to explain what was happening. (My real problem was my fear of the teacher and of what she was doing to all of us.) Because my mother spoke no English, she had to find an interpreter. She explained to the teacher that I was having sleeping problems because I was not comfortable in school.

After my mother left, the teacher called me to the front of the classroom. She asked the class to point to me and call me "baby." She told the students that I was not mature enough to be in her class, that I was afraid of her, and that I was such a baby that my mother had to speak to her. I never again said anything to my mother. I even pretended to sleep through the night. I actually thanked God in my prayers when I got the chicken pox that year. Why not? It kept me out of school for two weeks. To this day, when I smell the perfume this teacher wore, my stomach gets butterflies.

**Showing Respect**

The teachers who were caring and respectful and who had a positive impact on my life recognized and valued my culture and language. They taught me the skills (including English) to survive and to become a productive citizen. I remember my high school biology teacher, who always encouraged all of us. He repeatedly met with my parents, and though non-Hispanic, spoke in Spanish to answer their questions about whether to send me away to a four-year university. The respect that this man demonstrated through his use of my native language and his understanding of how difficult this decision was for Mexican parents was, in one word, inspiring.

Here was a human being who, although his culture was different from ours, well understood my parents and me. This teacher went out of his way to understand. The truly beautiful part of his understanding was that it didn't make us feel indebted to him. Somewhere he had learned that showing respect was part of being a good teacher. He even kept tabs on me as I progressed through undergraduate school, always counseling and inspiring me. This type of teacher, however, was rare in my experiences.

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**The State of Multiculturalism Today**

The teaching profession was changed since my time as a student. Multicultural education is part of state certification requirements and teaching programs. We know so much more about how children learn, feel, and behave—especially linguistically and culturally diverse children. Yet, we seem to have to push the profession very hard to put that knowledge to work.

As Nieto (1996, p. 354), points out, "When diversity is respected, it is used as the basis for much of the education offered."

I am appalled when I hear a university student who is preparing to become an English as a Second Language teacher adamantly state in social studies methods course that she will never teach about the historical contributions made by Mexicans, although the majority of her students will be of Mexican descent. She will, however, teach about the contributions made by Egyptians. I am disheartened when I hear a student who will be teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students say, "I'm nauseated by the amount of Spanish I hear."

These prospective teachers have made public their true feelings. I sometimes feel that they are proud of these negative attitudes. They wear them as an emblem of their imagined superiority. These students can be challenged to think, read, discuss, and reflect. In the end, however, they often demonstrate a callous disregard for minority and majority students alike.

Colleges of education, as well as public schools, can nurture diversity by ensuring that they prepare their students and teachers in a multicultural environment. Universities must guarantee that their courses in multicultural education are rigorous and that they ask students with negative attitudes to consider additional preparation or an alternative to the teaching profession. School administrators must take a strong position in requiring that their teachers not only be knowledgeable about issues of diversity, but also actually incorporate these concepts into their teaching. How else will minority and majority children see their own self-worth and the relatedness of their lives?

The skills and concepts of multicultural education are needed by all teachers—not only those teaching in schools with a large minority population. Bilingual and English as a Second Language teachers should not be the only ones to shoulder the responsi-
bility for creating an accepting society. The demographics of our national school enrollment reveal that almost every classroom will at some time have students from linguistically or culturally diverse backgrounds. Therefore, the knowledge and the skills for teaching in a diverse setting become essential.

Respect for All

Teachers who respect and appreciate the different cultures in the classroom accept, validate, and acknowledge the experiences, language, and traditions of linguistically or culturally diverse students. These students develop not only a sense of belonging but also a realistic and positive self-concept. They can then learn—and enjoy the experience.

Why should a teacher of culturally mainstream students incorporate multicultural concepts into the classroom? In the real world, all students will encounter people from diverse backgrounds. Learning about diversity helps students learn more about themselves as they examine the similarities and differences in other cultures and points of view. In turn, this exposure adds to the breadth of knowledge that a good teacher attempts to create. It also allows students to understand why people are different but still able to live in harmony.

In a word, multicultural education teaches respect. Respect leads to understanding. In turn, understanding leads to caring about our community and ourselves. Respecting children for who and what they are—especially the worth of their language and culture—will go far in helping children and their families develop the skills necessary to succeed.

Respecting the diversity of the classroom as it mirrors U.S. society shows us that multicultural education is necessary to our continuance. Perhaps no other country in the world contains so much ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Increasingly, teachers will be required to show that they understand, accept, and respect this diversity. When a teacher commits to respect and does so with a complete passion for his or her students, only one result is possible: learning for all children.

I sometimes wonder how my life might be difficult if my teachers had respected me as a child. Possibly the distance between home and school would have been truly bridged con respeto, as pointed out by Valdés (1996). Perhaps my teachers might have understood me better and demonstrated genuine concern for my learning—making my pleas to God unnecessary.

 References


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