

Celebrating Diversity to Support, Student Success

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This article is taken from the presentation that Harriett D. Romo, Ph.D., gave at the National Rural Education Association convention in Albuquerque in October 2001. The theme for the convention, which SEDL cosponsored, was "Rural Education: Celebrating Diversity."

I began my career as a teacher in inner-city Los Angeles, in a community that was described recently in the L.A. Times as one of the poorest areas of the city. I first taught predominantly African-American students and then later, because I spoke Spanish, immigrants from Cuba and Mexico who arrived speaking no English. I also worked with the National Origin Desegregation Center for Language Minority Students (a Lau Center—named after the Lau v. Nichols Supreme Court Case) helping school districts provide successful programs for children who did not understand or speak English.

These work experiences impressed upon me the importance of affirming diversity. The work at the Lau Center took me to schools in isolated rural areas, in border cities, and urban centers. I learned that the reasons for students' school failures and for their successes are complex. As those of you working in public education know, there is no single magical solution, no one teaching strategy, no one program that will make all students succeed. There are, however, a variety of programs that meet important needs, that define success differently, that affirm diversity, that work well for Mexican-origin students — and for students of other backgrounds (Delpit 1995; Romo 1999; Sleeter 1996). Here I offer suggestions to make the celebration of diversity a way of affirming differences and securing student success.

Differences in Cultural Values Influence School Success

Cultural groups define success quite differently from one another and quite differently from the definition of success used in U.S. schools. Understanding various perspectives is important because cultural differences can influence how teachers view the behaviors of students in classrooms, how children interact with teachers and other adults in the schools, and how parents perceive that school staff are treating their children. I will elaborate on each of these issues by providing examples from different cultures.

Susan Philips (1983), in her book *The Invisible Culture: Communication in Classroom and Community on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation* demonstrated clearly that the successful behaviors expected of children by respected elders in the American Indian community differed significantly from the behaviors expected of children by their classroom teachers. She observed four classrooms, following students during their school activities, and then informally interviewed teachers about what she had observed. She spent time in the community, too, participating in activities and events, visiting with people in their homes, and traveling around the reservation with residents.

She concluded that many of the problems of Indian children noted by their teachers resulted from incompatibilities between Indian and Anglo systems for the regulation of turns at talk. In the Indian system of talk, the individual had maximum control over his or her own turn at talk and minimum control over the turns of others. Individuals decided when they wished to talk and did not have to be called upon to be given a turn. Address by a speaker was often general, rather than focused on a particular individual. If an individual did not pay attention in an Indian event, it did not deter the speaker from continuing to talk. Also, in Indian interaction, an immediate response to a speaker was not always necessary. An individual might ponder what a speaker had said, then respond to an earlier point after much time had passed. Individual speakers controlled the end of their turns and were not interrupted by others. In the community, young people were expected to listen carefully to their elders.

In the Anglo-system classroom, children were expected to respond immediately when called upon by the teacher. The teachers were not accustomed to allowing longer pauses between speakers' turns at talk. The teachers often allowed too little time for a response before calling on another student or asking another question. The possibility that a child might respond to questions somewhat later in the discussion was not likely to occur to the teacher. Such a response would not, in most cases, even be recognized then by the teacher as a meaningful response.

In the Indian community, the children were socialized to be cooperative and to care for siblings. They did not learn to compete for adult attention. The children were taught that it was improper to draw attention to themselves as individuals, to display knowledge, or to appear to know more than others. Talking out of turn was also considered improper behavior. Indian children would not interrupt one another or compete for attention in a group.

In the classroom, when the teachers tried to organize small-group activities, the Indian children did not participate. When the children were called upon one after another to talk, they often did not respond at all. Children who did not participate in classroom discussions were perceived as not paying attention, lacking motivation, or as less intelligent than the students who met the teachers' expectations of behaviors. Cultural differences affected the teachers' attitudes toward the Indian children and their assessments of the children's capabilities.

In my work with Mexican immigrant children, I have also noted cultural differences that affect teachers' attitudes toward children and perceptions of the children's language and literacy skills. In recent work with a community-based Head Start Program, we videotaped parent-child interactions in the homes and then videotaped the same children in their Head Start classrooms (de la Piedra and Romo in press). We found that many homes of recent immigrant, below-poverty-level children were rich in language, literacy socialization, and developmental activities. However, much as in the Philips study, the types of interactions observed in the homes were not necessarily similar to those expected in the classrooms. For example, a common assumption in the research literature regarding language and literacy socialization is that socialization transpires from adult (usually the mother but also the teacher) to child. However, in the immigrant home we found siblings played a primary role in socialization, in vocabulary building, in teaching toddlers preliteracy skills, and in language development.

In the home, adults and siblings modeled behaviors in physical ways. For example, older sisters held a two-year-old's hand and moved it back and forth to color objects in a coloring book. They provided few verbal instructions. The mother patted a doll and then patted the two-year-old to show her how to care for a baby. Again, there were few verbal instructions. An older sister moved a toy back and forth as the toddler looked on, and then called for the toddler to try the action but gave no verbal instructions. In the home, most learning took place in small-group, social situations. Examples of these observed social situations included three older children knelt along a sofa coloring, the mother used an older child's school notebooks to share pictures with the younger child, and siblings elaborated the mother's comments. The children and their mother read English-language captions from Spanish-language television programs, laughing and helping one another with the words.

In the classroom, teachers used numerous verbalized instructions and directives but engaged in little physical modeling. In the classrooms we observed, individual children picked up books and "read" them independently or a teacher shared a book with one child. There were few shared, group-learning activities. When we observed the child we had videotaped at home in her classroom, she often stood watching and seldom participated in classroom activities. At her birthday party, she stood in front of the cake looking at the candles. The center director kept telling her in English, "Blow out the candles." Finally the little girl began to cry. A male student pushed her aside and blew out the candles.

After analyzing the home and classroom videos, we concluded that incompatibilities between the classroom and home teaching created a disadvantage for this child in the classroom. In the home, older children modeled appropriate behaviors and provided a supportive learning environment. For example, book reading took place as a social activity, with older children or an adult helping the toddler participate. In contrast, in the classroom she was expected to take the initiative for learning, to complete activities by herself, and to learn from verbal instructions.

In the home, the child appeared to be bright, motivated, and a quick learner. In the classroom, she appeared to lack motivation and did not participate in activities. Without an understanding of cultural differences, lack of participation might have been interpreted negatively by the teacher. The teacher's lack of understanding of these cultural differences caused the child to miss important learning opportunities.

Another incident observed in our work with Head Start illustrates how cultural differences may lead to parent-teacher misunderstandings. In an Early Head Start program serving infants and toddlers in a rural area of Texas with many Mexican immigrant families, a Mexican mother voiced concern about the treatment of the children by the teachers in the child-care center. I observed the classrooms and found the teachers to be warm and loving. Teachers followed all compliance standards of Head Start and seemed to be providing the highest quality of care. After exploring the mother's concerns in several home visits and interviews, I discovered that the mother came from a rural area of Mexico and believed in many traditional folkways. The mother explained the concept of *susto* (fright) or *mal ojo* (evil eye), a belief that if strangers startle an infant, the infant will fall ill. If adults do not kiss or touch the infant immediately, the infant may become seriously ill and possibly die. This mother had not seen the staff in the Early Head Start child-care center following any of these patterns of behavior and she was seriously concerned about the well-being of her child in their care. None of the staff, the majority of whom were U.S.-born Mexican Americans, had heard of this folkway. The



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teachers' lack of understanding of the mother's cultural beliefs thus led the mother to believe that teachers were not providing appropriate care for her child. If many parents held similar beliefs and the misunderstandings were not resolved, the program would have a difficult time recruiting participants.

The examples above demonstrate cultural misunderstandings that result in lost educational opportunities. Valdés (1996, 190) noted that Mexican-origin children start school full of positive expectations. As they experience the harsh realities of cultural differences, their excitement becomes resentment and they sit sullen and silent among their more successful peers. Valdés found that teachers are unprepared to teach students who do not speak English or who come from cultural backgrounds the teachers know little about. Despite the fact that Mexican-origin families love and care for their children and are intensely concerned about their futures, teachers often believe the parents are failing their children. The Mexican parents in the Valdés study did not respond to school communications, help their children with schoolwork, or volunteer at the schools. The families had different views about childrearing and parents' responsibilities in the schools. Valdés argues strongly that when schools and teachers attempt to change parents without an understanding and an appreciation and respect for the internal dynamics of their families and the legitimacy of their values and beliefs, those intervention efforts may have negative effects on the families.



Celebrating Diversity Recognizes Different Expectations

A celebration of diversity recognizes different behavioral expectations, different ways of defining success, different patterns of socialization, and different ways that parents are involved in the education of their children (Stanton-Salazar 2001, Valdés 1996). A celebration of diversity means that teachers will accept different types of behavior in a classroom and will not make assumptions about students' abilities without thoroughly knowing each student's cultural background and experiences. It also means teachers will get to know their students' home and community cultures and appreciate diverse ways of teaching and learning that might be found in their students' cultures.



Teachers should also learn about different patterns of socialization and appreciate the different ways parents support their children's school success. For example, many parents of Mexican origin children work several jobs to make ends meet and do not have time to attend school meetings or volunteer in traditional ways. Some parents are illiterate in both English and their home language and cannot read to their children or help them with homework. Others speak only their home language and are reluctant to come to the schools because they have had few experiences with formal education in the United States. Rather than assume that these parents are not interested in the education of their children — which is certainly not true, since most families look to education as a way of improving the lives of their children — a celebration of diversity would look for the positive, but perhaps nontraditional, ways these families support the education of their children.

What does this mean for teachers, administrators, and students? There are a number of actions that each group can take to assure that a celebration of diversity has an impact on the school success of students. The following ideas are drawn from the work of scholars who celebrate diversity (Delpit 1995; Giroux 1992; Guthrie 2000; Nieto 2000; Sleeter 1996; Tatum 1997).

First, each of us can acknowledge the complexity of diversity and be willing to become engaged in dialogue regarding diversity. We can help students and adults in our schools and communities to understand the meaning of stereotypes (Guthrie 2000). We can explore the ways in which our social heritage involves deeply embedded cultural stereotypes that are too frequently accepted unquestioningly. We can analyze the effects that stereotypes can have on our thinking processes. To do that, we must urge students and adults to actively question the adequacy of stereotypes as a basis for an evaluation, a decision, or an action. We must encourage individuals who are meeting someone different from themselves or learning about an unfamiliar place to suspend judgment while getting to know the individual or place. We can assist students in understanding the role of evidence in the formation and justification of a viewpoint and help them weigh and evaluate evidence. We can encourage them to take stands on controversial issues based on evidence instead of commonly held stereotypes.

We can help students appreciate the richness of multiple interpretations. Many students — even at the college level — want the "expert" to tell them the right answer. They do not realize that many interpretations contribute to a fuller understanding of the subject at hand.

We can incorporate an affirmation of diversity throughout our curriculum and our school activities (Nieto 2000), and not just for such special occasions as Black History Month or Mexican Independence Day. This means, for example, that math problems might have examples of calculating the distance in kilometers as well as miles, that word problems might involve cooking, auto repair, or Navajo rug weaving. Writing assignments can reflect a diversity of topics, and library books should be available in English and in other languages that are represented in local communities. Music classes might include salsa, gospel singing, and folksongs as well as classical music.



To truly celebrate diversity we must take positive steps to diversify our faculty and administration, and our community and school organizations. Learning and working alongside others of different racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds significantly enhances our own educational experiences. Often, we live in communities, work with, and socialize only with people of our same ethnic or socioeconomic group (Tatum 1997). Research has shown that all of us are enriched through interactions with other racial and ethnic groups. Building communities within and across diverse racial and ethnic groups results in our building a knowledge base and enhanced skills that allow us to engage in actions that are proactive or preventive in nature, rather than being responsive or reactive to negative incidents as they occur.

We can all seek new experiences that will expose us to diverse people, ideas, and ways of doing things. The tragic events of September 11 made us aware of how little we know about the Islamic religion or the Muslim community in the United States. We can read about other groups and read what they write. Fiction and poetry, as well as nonfiction can help us understand different cultural perspectives.

We can visit religious institutions, museums, schools, and community-based organizations in racial or ethnic neighborhoods that are different from our own. We can go with a friend to an ethnic event — a religious service or ceremony, a special celebration, a musical or art event, or just a tour of the neighborhood — that is different from our own.

Above all, we must make certain that our school is a setting that values diversity and promotes community among all persons. In addition to teaching about the value of diversity in our classrooms, we must also address incidents of intolerance whenever we see them. To fail to do so is to be seen as concurring with them.

We can encourage diversity courses or in-service sessions for our staff members. Research has shown that persons who participate in effectively structured diversity courses show changes in attitudes and knowledge as a result of their participation (Humphreys 2000). Sometimes we do not even realize we hold certain biases or stereotypes about a group or groups until we are allowed to examine issues of power and oppression, attitudes toward particular cultures or languages, and our own levels of tolerance. Well-developed and well-taught diversity courses can affect our perspectives and behaviors in the school context, on our skills in working with the public, and in our attitudes and behaviors outside the school context.

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Responsibility for Celebrating Diversity Is Everyone's

Celebrating diversity is everyone's responsibility. Schools have a culture of their own. A school that celebrates diversity sponsors extracurricular activities that reflect diversity and assures that all students can participate. This means considering cost, transportation, scheduling, and parental values about participation in the activities. Schools can also be organized to avoid academic tracking that is identifiable by racial or ethnic group. It takes the effort of all school staff to establish an environment for safe discussion of diversity issues.

Teachers are key agents in assuring the academic success of all students. Celebrating diversity means that teachers must have high academic expectations of all students. Teachers must be able to form caring and mentoring relationships and provide positive role models across many different cultural and language groups. Research has shown that teachers do make a difference (Romo and Falbo 1996; Valenzuela 1999). Teachers who take the time to get to know their students as individuals and to learn about their students' experiences and cultures can mean the difference for some youths between staying in or leaving school.

Administrators must provide leadership that affirms diversity. That means taking opportunities to speak out for diversity and supporting teachers who celebrate diversity.

Communities can provide resources, extracurricular activities promoting diversity, and an environment that celebrates diversity. Parents may not become engaged in the school in traditional ways (Lareau 1989; Valdés 1996), but they can still celebrate diversity. All parents can see that their culture is accurately represented and can share experiences that help students better understand and develop pride in their own ethnic background and culture.

Parents can also assure that their children respect the cultures and experiences of others.



Research has shown that students are capable of crossing cultural boundaries. Those who develop the skills to do so are more successful in school and in their communities than those who do not develop such skills. Children from all groups come to our schools eager to learn. Children and parents from all groups look to education as a way to have a better life. Teachers, administrators, and families can make a difference. We can help students cross cultural boundaries if we are willing to cross them ourselves. If we truly celebrate diversity, we will look beyond festivals, foods, fashions, and folkways for ways to structure our classrooms, our schools, our communities and our programs in ways that affirm diversity and promote success for all.

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