

Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners

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Introduction

One visible trend in America's public schools today is the increasing diversity in the student population. More than one-third of the students in the nation's schools come from ethnically, socially, economically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds.¹ In the decade to come, it will be virtually impossible for a professional educator to serve in a public school setting, and probably in a private school, in which there are no students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.² Unfortunately, many categories of "minority student" perform less well on measures of academic achievement when compared with white middle-class students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) continues to report that many students from diverse backgrounds lag behind in many areas, including the social studies (U.S. history, geography, and civics).³

Many students from diverse backgrounds have been erroneously diagnosed and labeled as "learning disabled" (LD) and disproportionately tracked into special education classes, which further reduces their chances for academic success. Some social commentators (in our century, as well as in the previous two hundred years) have blamed the poor academic performance of students who are cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic minorities on some hypothesized "genetically determined intellectual inferiority."⁴ What a convenient answer that is! It absolves teachers (and society in general) from responsibility, since it implies no need to enact any serious response to the problem, or look for other possible causes, or to ask any tough questions.

Ineffective Instructional Practices

Why might students of various categories of "minority" have difficulty in succeeding academically when compared with the majority? Ineffective instructional strategies utilized in the classrooms may be an important part of the problem.⁵ Many educators have the expectation that all students should adapt to the instructional strategies, and not that the teacher could adapt to the students' learning styles.

Educator and author Howard Gardner points out that we can shortchange many students when we teach to a handful of students while failing to recognize the multiple ways in which diverse learners learn.⁶ For example, in most classrooms, the two dominant modes in teaching are (a) the presentation/lecture with audio and visual materials, and (b) direct verbal instruction. Auditory learners (who learn best by listening and discussion) and visual learners (who learn best by viewing images) benefit from these modes, but what about the other students? Many teachers do not recognize that some students are primarily tactual, spatial, or kinesthetic, in their abilities.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Despite the pervasive scholarship on learning styles and the role of culture and contexts, many classroom teachers still believe that, when it comes to the question of how to teach a lesson, "one size fits all." Such teachers continue to plan and implement curricular and instructional activities that meet the needs of "the average" learner, while assuming that those who do not learn and achieve have no one to blame but themselves. Students from diverse backgrounds enter a classroom culture that reflects the norms, values, and ideas of a middle-class, Western European society.⁷ As a result, they often experience disconnection from the learning experience. Today's teachers need to recognize that in any given classroom there is an array of learners who think, process information, and perform in different ways.⁸

Defining Diverse Learners

Who are diverse learners? What are their learning characteristics? While the concept of diversity is broad and denotes differences of all sorts, in this article the focus will be on ethnic, cultural, and/or linguistic differences (for example, students of color, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans). Research suggests that students from diverse backgrounds often come from cultures that are communal, group-oriented, and with high physicality. Such students require teaching strategies that are action-oriented, collaborative, and cooperative.⁹ It is not surprising that these learners will not be successful in classrooms that are individualistic, competitive, quiet, passive, or culturally monotonous. They might learn more effectively when culturally relevant materials, examples, illustrations, language, and content are integrated into the curriculum, and when their prior experiences are used as a "scaffold" for new learning.¹⁰

Pausing for Translation

Linguistically diverse learners (often referred to as ESL, English as a Second Language, students) are those who come from home environments and communities where English or Standard English is not the primary means of communication. Most ESL students can excel if their teachers use appropriate strategies and construct a scaffold of affirmation (of students' home culture, language, and experiences) gradually over time.

A key to helping ESL students is being aware of conceptual tempo, which is the rate at which students process and respond to questions and tasks. Because linguistically diverse students are functioning in two languages, they tend to take longer to process information. They may often be translating questions or tasks given in English into their native language, then processing the tasks, and then translating their response back into English. Teachers need to understand this process and to exhibit patience when conversing with ESL students.

A disproportionately high number of students from diverse backgrounds are placed in special education classes.¹¹ An effective strategy for these students, in the regular classroom, is to allow them more time for task processing. They also may be global and communal learners who will benefit from cooperative or partnership learning. Such students are not “dumb,” “retarded,” or “unteachable,” they just need more culturally relevant learning opportunities. Presenting them with real-world activities and using culturally relevant materials will increase their chances of performing well. Placing them in any setting where the intellectual level of the material is substantially lowered is unfair and discouraging to the ESL student. It also short changes the rest of the students in the social studies classroom, who need to function in settings that reflect the diversity of the greater society.

Diversifying Social Studies Instruction

As a social justice educator, the issues of equity and social justice are at the heart of my efforts. As I work with teachers, I strive to ensure that they engage in culturally responsive and responsible practice. What do I mean by this? As teachers make curricular and instructional decisions, they can consider the academic needs, cultural and family backgrounds, and learning styles of their diverse students. Here are four things that any teacher can do to become more aware of diversity issues and possibilities.

1. **BECOME COGNIZANT OF THE DIVERSITY AMONG STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM.** Know who your diverse learners are—ESL, ethnic, and those with exceptionalities.¹² What are their learning styles? Develop the habit of considering diverse learners when planning instructional activities for students. In doing this, ask yourself: Would my ESL, ethnic, and exceptional students succeed in this activity or learning experience? What might limit their chances of success in this activity? How might I construct a “scaffold” for them? How might I adapt or modify this activity for them? Adapting and/or modifying instructional activities for diverse learners may mean a simple adjustment such as granting extra time, planning for partnerships or peer learning, or using illustrations. Use a learning style inventory (LSI), whether commercially prepared or self-constructed, to help determine the learning styles of your students.¹³ Most importantly, talk with your students, get to know them as individuals, and observe how they learn.

2. **SUSPEND HABITUAL NOTIONS THAT PRESUME SAMENESS.** It is not enough to plan one activity and expect that everyone will experience success engaging in it. One size does not fit all. This understanding creates the capacity to bridge social and ethnic gaps. Being sensitive to the needs of each student will help one make adaptations and modifications. However, this does not mean that teachers should create lower expectations for diverse learners.

3. **REEXAMINE LONGSTANDING BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT DIVERSE LEARNERS.** For example, a linguistic difference such as slow speech does not indicate low intelligence. Often, linguistically diverse learners just need more processing time, visual-mediated teaching, and peer learning. Ethnically diverse learners can learn social studies concepts that are contextualized and connected to their experiences. Using familiar materials and partnership learning increases their chances of success. Students with exceptionalities, especially those who experience conceptual difficulties, are not “unteachable.” Many students of diverse backgrounds are erroneously designated LD and tracked into

special education classes that further reduce their chances for academic success. Use culturally relevant materials and actively engage these students through partnership learning.

4. **STRIVE TO CREATE CLASSROOMS WHERE EACH STUDENT CAN SUCCEED IN DIFFERENT WAYS.** Provide learning tasks that tap different dimensions of learning and a climate that fosters cooperation, flexibility, collective responsibility, and autonomy so that students take responsibility for their own and their peers’ learning. Help students connect concepts to their frames of reference. Learners are complex, multifaceted individuals who need to be treated with sensitivity and taught through a variety of teaching methods. (See the pullout “Classroom Activities for Diversity,” in this issue.)

When diverse learners are alienated from the learning situation, they may respond with poor attention, non-participation, incomplete work, and general academic failure. These reactions can be generated when an official culture and language are imposed from the top-down, ignoring the students’ themes, language, life conditions, and diverse cultures.¹⁴ Teacher, author, and social critic Paulo Freire summed up eloquently what we need to remember about working with diverse learners: that our “here” is the student’s “there.”¹⁵ In other words, the student’s intellectual moorings for understanding and communicating are secured not to America, but to another culture. Maybe the distance that too often separates these students from full participation and success can be partially overcome in the social studies classroom. The study of the whole world is, after all, our domain. ☞

Notes

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10. *Ibid.*
11. A. J. Ariles and S. C. Trent, “Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education: A Continuing Debate,” *Journal of Special Education* 27 (1994): 410-437.
12. “Dual Exceptionalities,” ERIC Digest E574 (www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed430344.html). This article is about gifted students with disabling conditions.
13. Gary Price and Rita Dunn, *Learning Style Inventory* (Lawrence, KS: Price Systems, 1975).
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15. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

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