

Designing the Tapestry of Multicultural Education: Learning to Weave Together

BY JULIE C. PERRON

People often ask me, "How do you teach students with so many different languages and cultures in your classroom?" My steadfast reply is always the same, "Because I allow them to teach me." Yet letting go of my traditional role in the classroom has not been an easy task. I have realized, however, that unless the voices of our students are heard and their value systems incorporated into our entire school communities, we will not successfully educate our many cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD) students. Efforts to educate our CLD populations must be combined with the strengths of every member of the school community. We must unravel our present weave of departmentalized thinking to provide a rich educational experience for all students. Multicultural education cannot truly succeed unless the structure itself unravels, freeing the potential for a new a more glorious rich tapestry to emerge.

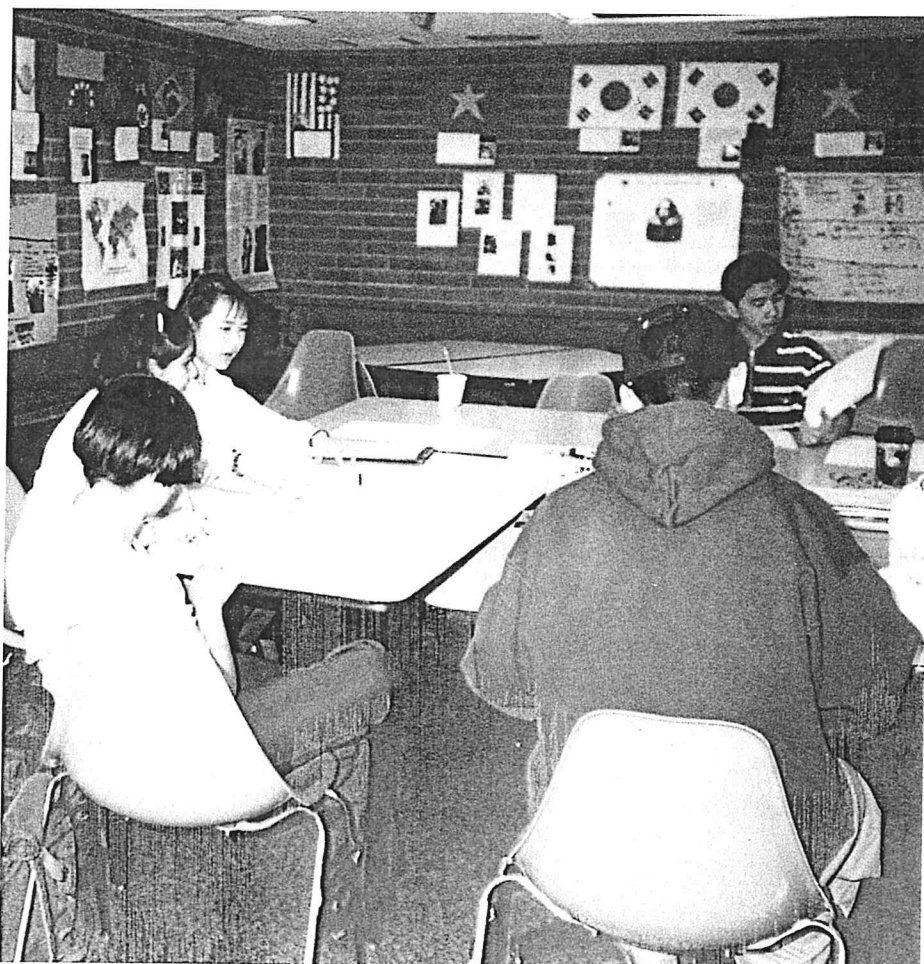
ASKING TOO MUCH?

If you ask students of cultural and linguistic diversity what they want out of their education they may eagerly respond, "to learn English." Other students may reply "to graduate." A few may answer "to make friends." What I ask of them is "Why can't you have it all?" Sadly, the students are shocked by my challenge to their educational expectations. They have complacently accepted their educational fate as one of learning English with a side dish of academics, and if lucky, a friend or two.

Students of cultural and linguistic diversity often fail to recognize that they are selling themselves short. They are unaware of their rights within the school

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community and have no understanding of equity. Frequently feeling like strangers, they ask for very little from their education, believing that if only they had the English skills, everything else in their lives would fall into place. Many dream of educational experiences that parallel those of the mainstream students but settle with basic English skill development instead.



A COMMUNITY OF UNDERSTANDING

Teachers working with limited English proficient (LEP) students and multicultural populations, in both mainstream and self-contained programs, may overlook or fail to realize that diversity and multicultural education are integral parts of the students' learning. Food and festival celebrations are many times the limit to the teachers' understanding of CLD students. Furthermore, when programs for diversity training are available, they narrowly target only those staff working with ethnic groups considered minority cultures and languages.

Yet an understanding of the culture as well as the academic, cognitive and linguistic development of the student is critical for the entire staff of a school, not just for those staff involved with the students' special programs. Administrators, counselors, custodians, secretaries and all other valuable members of the staff should be included in the process of multicultural education. Each individual staff member must have the opportunity to dialogue about concerns and anxieties regarding CLD students. Assumptions about CLD students, who should be responsible for teaching them and ensuring their success, must be confronted.

Mainstream students must also have to the opportunity to discuss their concerns, fears and frustrations regarding multicultural issues. How easy it is to look to the special program staff and CLD students to "make things happen," when realistically, the mainstream student body itself has a tremendous influence in our students' lives and in our school communities. We are failing to tap a very valuable resource when the mainstream kids do have not had the chance to confront and unravel their own assumptions about diversity.

STUDENTS IN ISOLATION

Still, even when CLD students and staff begin to learn of the value of multicultural education, the success of a special program or a group of CLD students is not ensured. Many educational programs that foster the academic success of cultural and linguistic diverse students often fail

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short of achieving the high objectives of their advocates and initiators. I am frequently asked for my assessment of such programs and urged to offer recommendations. Any recommendation to a program, no matter how relevant, is absolutely ineffective if the individual students are perceived by the school community as distinct and diverse entities. Often the student government, clubs and teams are not an inviting environment for CLD students. Cafeterias become naturally separate as students eat with those who are comfortable, unthreatening and share similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds. During school assemblies, students of cultural and linguistic diversity often sit alone or try to sneak out the back of the gym.

When such conditions are present and students are seemingly self-segregating, many well-meaning advocates of diversity will target the students of cultural and linguistic diversity as those in need of education, counseling, and support.

DESIGNING A NEW TAPESTRY

Once we allow our old fabric to unravel, examining our assumptions and dialoguing our fears, we can begin to design something beautiful. Instead of the former notion of a "multicultural thread" that we attempt to weave through our school communities, we are discussing millions of separate threads that make up a tapestry of diversity. Still, these threads will not weave themselves. Through my education and experiences, I have come to real-

ize that a multicultural approach, commitment to that approach, and school experiences are the responsibility of the designers: the CLD and mainstream students and staff.

The designers never finish the design. This tapestry is never truly completed as it is continually enriched with the colors, styles, languages and individual perspectives of diversity. Instead of using the same pattern year after year, new designs are needed that emerge from the collaboration of several individuals and challenge our traditional ways of thinking.

Yet the unweaving of our current educational system seems preposterous and frightening. How can we start from scratch after we have come so far? How can we unravel what we have taken decades to weave? Perhaps a more valid question is how far have we really come if our students of cultural and linguistic diverse backgrounds are staying behind?

One recommendation is to examine the fabric with which we presently work and determine who has not been included. It is critical to involve the individuals who are not part of our present weave. We do a serious disservice to our schools when those who are most impacted by our decisions are not allowed or invited to be designers of our multicultural tapestry.

To integrate multicultural education, to create a rich and empowering tapestry, the following recommendations are offered:

- *Refuse to accept the notion of multicultural education as the responsibility, agenda and/or salvation of a particular group.* Everyone can share in the multicultural experience by bringing their own diverse backgrounds to the design. Only when individuals are recognized and respected, not in isolation, but in the spirit of community, can a true tapestry be woven.

- *Acknowledge and accept culture on the most individual of levels for staff and students.* Invite others to share their backgrounds, no matter how mainstream they may seem. Reject any notions to assume that a particular individual is represented by a specific group. When all are welcomed members, then most will contribute willingly and enthusiastically.

- *From the most fundamental levels of school experiences, invite, encourage, and challenge representation and input*

from all members of the school community. Although a particular idea or opinion may be closed-minded or seemingly ignorant, all must learn to be sensitive. Listening to voices is more than simply hearing words.

•*Refuse to tolerate intolerance.* Silence is a strong influence on our campuses. Many times CLD students are confronted with potentially explosive situations that may be unnoticeable to others in the mainstream. In such instances, all students and staff need to be aware of issues that are sensitive. We need to take care of each other.

By attempting to explore and implement the above suggestions, we can unravel our old fabrics and make way for new, exciting designs. The new designs support a multicultural approach to the entire educational experience. Language, academic, cognitive and socio-cultural development in students of cultural and linguistic diversity has the potential to not only be balanced, but instead, elevated to a new realm of equity. This equity is ensured by the participation of all students and staff. Our national motto, "E pluribus unum," indeed comes alive when we welcome the challenge of this tapestry.

WEAVING WITH STUDENTS AND STAFF

Our students are the most valuable resource of the future. Although I have learned much through research, pedagogical theory is futile unless "learner" is a term that defines the experience of learning rather than one variable of the educa-

tion equation. The students, or traditional learners, have influenced my growth as an educator immensely. While my students have discovered cultural connections within themselves and with others, I have also found a connection to them and their life stories. As we learn together, so do we weave together.

One way that we have threaded the needle and begun to design our tapestry in our classroom is through multicultural literature that speaks to the students' life experiences. Whether they read a short story composed by a teenage immigrant or a poem by an inner city youth, students connect with literacy in a way that makes meaning for them.

Integrating multicultural literature inspires students to dialogue about issues and to write their own life stories. Peer-editing and cooperative learning allow for students to connect not only to literature but also to each other. Diversity is seen less as an obstacle or an isolating element and rather as a miracle and a meaningful tenet in their own lives.

In addition to literature, students are encouraged to bring their frustrations about their school and life experiences to the table. This is indeed no easy task and requires some painful unraveling of assumptions and stereotypes. However, such frustration when voiced, gives rise to more trust and understanding among peers. The students become their own advocates. They begin to empower themselves. Those students who are not yet comfortable in open discussion are encouraged to listen and respond in their interactive journals. These journals are private space that the students may discuss issues with me in a forum of trust. Several of them share journals with each other also.

Literacy becomes an avenue for trust-building, connection, meaning-making experiences and multicultural education. At the same time that students are reading, writing and communicating and fulfilling some of the essential learnings, they are weaving their own tapestry, creating their own design.

At the staff level, we invite classified and certificated staff to support sessions that provide a forum for discussion about

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CLD students and offer strategies for student success. We are also reaching out to mainstream students in an effort to bridge the socio-cultural gap that can be so vast between students in the CLD program and mainstream students. We welcome both staff and students to visit our classrooms as guests. Recently a mainstream student remarked, "Ms. Perron, I'm not sure how to talk to your students." I assured him that he had taken the first step by simply confronting his uncertainty.

SO THREAD THE NEEDLE

We cannot deny that we all have a sense of centeredness and connection in our lives. Our individual cultures highly impact our decisions, values, behavior and attitudes. How can we use our own rich backgrounds to weave side by side with our students? How can we foster a spirit of collaboration? Designing a new tapestry seems at times an insurmountable task. However, real change is never transitionally smooth. Initial steps in designing this rich tapestry are baby steps. Merely inviting and encouraging individuals to participate can be difficult. It can be painful to unravel our traditional assumptions about cultural and linguistic diversity. Yet participation and commitment of our entire school communities are imperative for an authentic, dynamic tapestry. A tapestry will not weave itself and multicultural approaches and integration in educational organizations will only reach the highest levels of success when everyone is invited to thread the needle.

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