

Guide to Teaching Multicultural Students

Original Article and More Resources from the
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Workforce Diversity
Network



TIPS, EXPERT ADVICE, AND RESOURCES FOR BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE CLASSROOM

Long hailed as a melting pot of cultures, America is home to millions of immigrants – whether their ancestors sailed across on the Mayflower or they moved to the country last week. Research by the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#) found that one-third of U.S. students are considered racial or ethnic minorities, a number that is set to increase to more than half by 2050. In this changing educational landscape, teachers are challenged with creating inclusive classrooms where students of all backgrounds feel represented and welcomed. The following guide explores how teachers can build inclusive multicultural learning environments.

Quiz for Teachers: How Well Do You Know Your Students?

For teachers with a classroom full of students of different backgrounds, the responsibility to connect with them goes beyond simply knowing where they're from, or what their favorite subjects are. These teachers must strive to understand their students in a more holistic way, incorporating their cultural traditions into lessons and activities, so students feel understood, comfortable, and focused on learning. The [following quiz](#) helps teachers see how well they know their students and their cultural backgrounds.

Finding a Place for Culture in the Classroom What is Culture?

SOURCE:

Community for Accredited Online Schools is a comprehensive accreditation resource that provides prospective students and families with the tools needed to make well-informed decisions about their education.

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Culture is a broad term, and one that is not easily summed up. In her book *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension on the Language Classroom*, author Louise Damen defined culture as the “learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day-to-day living patterns [that] pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind’s primary adaptive mechanism.” Individuals from varied nationalities, ethnicities, and races all bring cultural traditions to their interactions, and it’s up to teachers to recognize, celebrate and share these different perspectives. The following graphic displays some of the many ways that culture affects learning, both inside and outside the classroom:

What is Multicultural Education?

Multicultural education is not a task to be done or even an end goal to be accomplished. Instead, it is an approach to education that aims to include all students, promote learning of other cultures, and teach healthy social skills in a multicultural setting. “It is the present and future of education,” according to Shilpa Bhouraskar, who runs a business offering online courses to students worldwide. “Multicultural classrooms are a melting pot of learning,” she says. “Rather than a passive, one-way flow of learning from teacher to student, there is a brainstorming of ideas, stories, and experiences that enrich the educational experience in ways that are impossible in monocultural classes.”

Classroom Resources for Multicultural Education

Using different activities and games in multicultural classrooms is an excellent way to foster inclusivity and encourage students to share their heritage. It’s also a [beneficial way](#) for teachers to involve students in different styles of study to immerse them in their

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learning. Sharing about oneself within the confines of an activity is often much easier than being asked open-ended questions and put “on the spot.” These activities can then provide a safe space for dialogue and serve as an entryway into more in-depth interactions. The following section outlines some examples of activities and games appropriate for different age groups.

Classroom Activities

Support and Resources for Teachers

Educating the future generation is a challenging job on its own, but for educators committed to [culturally responsive teaching](#), the task can feel overwhelming at times. Fortunately, they don’t have to go it alone —there are numerous resources both within schools and online. Some of the top places that teachers can turn to for support include:

Elementary School	Secondary School		
Digital Holiday Field Trip <i>Grades 1-5</i> Take a virtual field trip to different students' places of origin, on days when their country or culture is celebrating a holiday unique to them.	Immigration Stories <i>Middle or high school</i> Use Ellis Island's interactive online tour to learn about different cultures that immigrated to America. Expand the activity by allowing students to share their unique families' immigration stories.	School Counselors	School counselors typically work one-on-one with students and gain a fuller understanding of a child's background and home life. They can help teachers understand challenges that your students are facing outside of the classroom that can be affecting their learning.
Games Around the World <i>Grades 1-5</i> Use the start of each lesson to learn about playground games from different cultures.	Ethnicity Exercise <i>Middle or high school</i> Students discuss their ethnic backgrounds and share three unique things about their culture (food, holidays, celebrations, etc.).	Principals	Principals can be the driving force to help teachers enact change, engage parents, and set up meetings or events to encourage inclusive behaviors. They can be key leaders to implement multicultural learning strategies school-wide.
The Name Game <i>Grades 3-5</i> Students tell stories about what their names mean in their cultures and how they were chosen.	Writing Poetry <i>High school</i> Students write poems that describe their identity, and then peer review in small groups.	The National Association for Multicultural Education	This professional association provides resources and hosts an annual conference for teachers striving for social justice and equity in their classrooms.
Share a Meal <i>Grades 3-5</i> Students (and their parents, if possible) bring in a dish their culture is known for and share it with their classmates.	'Who Said It?' Quiz <i>High school</i> Teams compete to see who can identify the most quotes from historical leaders of inclusion movements (Gandhi, Martin Luther King, etc.).	Center for Multilingual Multicultural Research	Operating at the University of Southern California, this group conducts research about best practices in multicultural teaching and shares its findings regularly.
		Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence	CREDE offers research, curriculum development tips, videos, and resources for teachers of diverse classrooms.
		Institute on Race and Poverty	An excellent resource for teachers who have students struggling against poverty.

Top 10 Books for Multicultural Learning

Reading aloud is an important teaching tool no matter the classroom, and books featuring children from different cultures can play a vital role in bringing all students together. Teachers can set the stage by reading aloud during class, or by having students take turns. For independent reading, students can be encouraged to choose books that allow them to step outside their culture. Below are some good examples of books that explore themes across varied cultures.

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Children's Books	Young Adult Books
<p>Esperanza Rising A young girl from Mexico flees to California during the Depression and rises above difficult circumstances.</p>	<p>Tea with Milk May leads a completely different life in America than she did in Japan. When her family moves back to Japan, she struggles to feel at home.</p>
<p>Under the Sunday Tree A collection of 20 poems about Bahamian life for grades 3-6.</p>	<p>They Had a Dream The Civil Rights Struggle – Provides biographies on four influential leaders of the civil rights movement.</p>
<p>Where the Flame Trees Bloom Author Alma Flor Ada shares 11 true stories of her childhood in Cuba, told from the eyes of a child.</p>	<p>Windows Into My World Collection of more than 50 short stories from Latino youth on growing up in America.</p>
<p>The Magic Paintbrush A fantastical tale of a magic paintbrush that carries Steve from his life in San Francisco's Chinatown to a lively world filled with adventure.</p>	<p>The Color Purple This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel tells the struggles of African-American women in rural Georgia in the 1930s.</p>
<p>The Mockingbird's Manual Learning of her ability to speak to birds, a Navajo girl explores ways of communicating and learning, and shares them with her people.</p>	<p>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian Motivated by his goal to become a cartoonist, Junior leaves the Indian Reservation to attend an all-white high school in a nearby farming town.</p>
<p>The Name Jar When Unhei moves to America from Korea, she's convinced she'll need a new name her classmates can pronounce, but her new friends have other ideas.</p>	<p>Best Ramadan Ever Almira learns how to deal with temptation during the Holy Month while also trying to fit in to America.</p>
<p>The Sandwich Swap Best friends Salma and Lily eat sandwiches at school every day, but Salma eats hummus and Lily eats peanut butter. Together, they work to overcome their differences.</p>	<p>Keeping Corner Leela looks to Gandhi for hope for social and political change in 1940s India.</p>
<p>Last Stop on Market Street As CJ and his grandmother ride the bus, he starts wondering about the differences between his life and those of his classmates.</p>	<p>Under the Moonlit Sky Esha travels to India and learns about being a Sikh after her father passes away.</p>
<p>Brown Girl Dreaming A collection of poems that share a glimpse into the life of an African-American girl growing up in New Orleans and New York in the 1960s and 70s.</p>	<p>Muslims Around the World Today Traces the diversity of Muslims worldwide and introduces students to their beliefs and practices.</p>
<p>Grandfather's Journey A Japanese man immigrates to America and then moves back to Japan, guided by his love for both countries.</p>	<p>Children of War Voices of Iraqi Refugees – Includes 20 stories from children growing up during the Iraq War.</p>

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Teacher Resources for ESL Students & Families

ESL, an acronym for English as a Second Language, is a study program for students who are nonnative English speakers. Ideally, ESL teachers can use their students' cultural traditions and customs to help them learn about one another and find topics of conversation in English, although it will take creativity and forethought to effectively incorporate the experiences of students from many different cultural backgrounds. Some of the best resources for multicultural integration and ESL learning are given below.

For Parents & Guardians: Strengthening Multicultural Education

Parents, guardians and other family members are a crucial component in educating the future generation. They serve as role models, advocates for their children, and links between their children and society as a whole. As active participants in their children's learning, they can help ease the tension, confusion, or frustration that may arise when children are trying to navigate cultural and language differences. The following section highlights some of the ways parents, guardians and other family members can help their children receive the best education possible.



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- ❖ **Attend multicultural sessions at school**
Many schools offer sessions at the beginning of the school year to provide parents and guardians with tools for incorporating multiculturalism into home life. Take advantage of these sessions and meet other students' families.
- ❖ **Take advantage of resources**
Whether it's the library at your child's school or your city's public library, countless resources – offered as books, videos, audio recordings, or lectures – are available to help learn about common topics in multicultural learning.
- ❖ **Sign up for “anti-bias alerts”**
Popular culture has an enormous effect on children, but it isn't always constructive. Numerous watchdog agencies exist to help parents be aware of television, film, or music content that is biased against cultures, so they may protect their children from it.
- ❖ **Spend time with the parents of your child's classmates**
One of the best ways to learn about other cultures is to spend time with the parents of your child's classmates. Take turns preparing traditional dinners from your cultures or schedule a playdate.
- ❖ **Attend multicultural events**
No matter the size of your city, chances are there are events celebrating other cultures. Check the calendar and find a family-friendly outing to learn about another culture or celebrate your own.
- ❖ **Learn more about your own heritage**
America is commonly referred to as a melting pot because of the many citizens who trace their heritage to other countries. Take the time to learn more about your own roots and culture and share this with your children.

Promoting Inclusion: Solutions to Common Challenges

A classroom attuned to the individual histories and backgrounds of its students is best positioned to be an inviting and stimulating space for all students. Unfortunately, there are still many that fail to embrace and educate students on the beauty of difference. Some of the most common problems of non-inclusive classroom environments along with their solutions are listed below.

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Problem	Solution
Bullying presents an increased risk in classrooms where students aren't properly educated about different cultures.	Help students understand that classmates from other places aren't weird or bad, only different, to help remove motivations that lead to bullying.
Cliques often exclude students from other cultures, as students don't have the tools to interact with children who aren't like them.	Ensure classroom activities are inclusive and designed to engage students with each other, to build friendship and familiarity.
Refraining from talking about culture means students remain ignorant of how their classmates learn and interact with the world.	Make sure lesson plans focus on the cultures and histories of all students in the classroom, not only those from majority groups.
Teachers who don't take time to get to know their students' backgrounds often set a negative precedent for student engagement.	Commit to speaking to all students on a regular basis, to send the message that interacting and learning about one another is important.
When teachers fail to discourage behavior that stems from stereotypes or misconceptions, it can foster bias against students of certain cultural backgrounds.	Teachers should be aware of preconceived ideas about the students in the classroom to guard against biased talk on the part of other students.

Spotlight: Advice for Teaching English Abroad

According to a recent [report](#) on international education, the number of international schools has risen by 153 percent in the last 12 years, with more than 529,000 qualified teachers expected to be employed overseas by 2022. Teachers who want to be truly immersed in multicultural classrooms are drawn to these positions, which often pay similar salaries as positions in America. Some of the top tips for succeeding in an international school system include:

Do's	Don'ts
<p>DO dress appropriately Appropriate attire varies dramatically across cultures, and dressing too informally could be a sign of disrespect or show a lack of awareness about how teachers should present themselves.</p>	<p>DON'T single a student out Whether for praise or discipline, this is a decidedly American teaching habit and should be avoided in most international classrooms. Instead, encourage inclusive behaviors.</p>
<p>DO learn how to manage your classroom early on Different cultures manage classroom behavior in different ways, so observe native teachers and learn about their practices of discipline.</p>	<p>DON'T neglect to monitor student progress New teachers may feel like they are struggling, so it's important to track how your students are doing to help remind you that they—and you—are making progress.</p>
<p>DO understand the country's learning style School children in America are taught to be engaged, energetic students, but other cultures train students to be quiet listeners. Just because all students aren't raising their hands doesn't mean they aren't learning.</p>	<p>DON'T forget to make inclusive learning fun While it's important to make sure students feel represented and known, it's also important to make sure there are fun activities that help students naturally engage with each other without feeling like it's an assignment.</p>

Q&A: Advice from a Multiculturalism Expert

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How does creating an inclusive classroom lead to better learning for all students?

Every topic discussed gets a unique flavor from the experiences of every student who contributes, based on their individual culture and background. Recently, in one of our classes we were discussing how to write a friendly, open email. It was fascinating to see how students from across the world tweaked the message differently based on cultural aspects of what friendly, open communication means to them. This type of discussion and input would have been impossible in a monocultural class.

What are some teacher behaviors that could encourage (and discourage) multiculturalism?

The first step for any teacher is being aware at all times that they are addressing a classroom spanning languages and culture. Everything they say, the examples they give, the issues they address, the opinions they express, and the stories they share should keep a higher perspective to avoid issues of prejudice in religion, culture and social structure. Self-awareness is a huge factor, as is being able to create a space where students feel their opinions are valid and accepted, and that there is no right or wrong answer. Experiencing the freedom to say things without fear, ridicule or judgment encourages the most interactive and enriching learning experiences for everyone.

What are the factors to consider when trying to create an inclusive classroom?

The main factor is creating an environment where open, honest conversation is possible. I also strongly believe in giving my students the freedom and control, rather than me controlling and monitoring what they should and should not say or do. If we trust and let students be within a multicultural room, they eventually tap into their humane side and find ways to understand each other. They still have their differences, but there is a growing sense of acceptance. Cultural barriers cease to exist and people can look beyond to focus on a common goal of learning.