

# Teaching Children of Color

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this presentation is to discuss teaching and learning strategies that will generate encouragement and support with cultural sensitivity for diverse learners. Three Key Learning Objectives: (1) Recognize and identify the different learning styles of diverse learners, (2) Develop and support differentiation instruction to meet the needs of diverse Learners, (3) Construct and summarize effective teacher characteristics to engage diverse learners in reaching their maximum potential. This presentation will be information for early childhood educators to locate information on challenges that they can encounter and solutions to solve these challenges. The presenter will discuss how the following components are relevant for teaching children of color and how relevant these components are to building positive self-esteem in children of color. These are (1) the teacher's attitude, (2) the learning style of the students in the classroom, (3) the parent/family's role in the education of the student, (4) exploring the student's cultural background and (5) resources that are available. The components will be critical in helping each student reach their maximum potential. This paper will demonstrate how to meet the needs of the diverse learners by empowering teachers, families, and students. The information will service all educators, including novice and tenure teachers, families, and administrators. Educators can use the information as a referral guide that will demonstrate respect and appreciation for the diverse learners.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural sensitivity, Diverse learners, Multiple Intelligence Theory, "All About Me" Profile, English Language Learners (ELL)

## **Introduction**

When one thinks of children of color and what changes need to be made to assure that all students are reaching their maximum potential for learning, it is necessary to explore the following: (1) the teacher's attitude, (2) the learning styles of the students in the classroom, (3) the parent/family's role in the education of the student, (4) exploring the student's cultural background, and (5) resources that are available. It would be necessary to start with the teacher's attitude about teaching diverse children as many teachers are not giving all students the appropriate attention needed to be successful in school. Teachers can no longer be allowed to refer to students "as those students" or "the apartment children". This idea of labeling students is viewed as judgmental and disrespectful.

Delpit (2006) mentioned that students she has talked to have reported that teachers deny themselves as the source of knowledge necessary for students to learn. Delpit explains that to exhibit one's personal power as expert source is viewed as disempowering one's students. She feels there are two qualifiers necessary: (1) the teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom and (2) merely adopting direct instruction is not the answer. She feels to deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them. Also merely adopting direct instruction is not the answer. Writing for real audiences lets students know they have an important voice in their own learning processes.

Teachers must begin with self. They must be honest with themselves and analyze what they are doing, what is appropriate, and what needs to be altered. Everyone has some biases. Change will occur when one is honest about self. Once teachers have done an analysis, they can begin to ensure that they are practicing equity that encounters each student in the classroom. In every classroom, there will always be a student that may be a little difficult and teachers will find when they use positive reinforcement, and begin to allow that student to be the leader, or recognize that particular student for any positive behaviors that the student may exhibit, then the distraction will become more of an asset than a disturbance.

Teachers may want to keep a daily personal record that indicates, daily, what has been accomplished in terms of building on a student's strengths and giving the necessary compliments to build a positive self-concept. When students recognize that a teacher is interested in them reaching their optimal potential in their learning, they will become more attentive to their tasks in the classroom and will begin to do their best work because they know their teacher cares, and in return they will want to

please their teacher. Building this kind of bond between the teacher and the student is necessary so that the student can reach their maximum potential.

### **1. The teacher's attitude**

The teacher's attitude is a critical component in making change in the education process. Teachers must view themselves first and must be honest about biases that they may have regarding children, families, and race/culture. Teachers must appreciate and respect the different cultures that are in their classroom. There was a time that teachers would express a negative attitude towards students that were different or children who did not come from the same background as themselves. Teachers can no longer possess the mindset that different is bad or better. Students from another culture or background must be entitled to the same educational privileges as all others in the classroom.

There is a poem that says, "attitude is everything". It is important that teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards every student in the classroom. It is necessary that when students are different that teachers go the extra mile to extend themselves by talking to all the students and inquiring from student's information about their culture. Sometimes, just a smile and a warm greeting can make a student feel very welcomed.

Knowing each student in the classroom can be an asset to developing a positive rapport with their teacher. It can be helpful to know students' likes and dislikes so that the teacher can build concepts on things that are familiar relatable to the students. They will then begin to develop a trust and bond with the teacher when they recognize the teacher is interested in them and is demonstrating that they care about the students learning and have the students' best interest at heart.

Teachers will need to make sure that all student jobs such as line leader, passing papers, taking attendance and taking the lunch count to the office are rotated so each student will receive an opportunity to participate. Paying daily compliments to students can be rewarding to building a positive self-concept. Of course, the compliments must be sincere. All efforts that teachers make to develop a foundation for equity in the classroom must be viewed as genuine feelings. Students will know if the teacher does not mean what they are doing or saying and the results will not be positive from the students perspective. Of course, when the teacher develops and builds the equity in the classroom that environment will be a valuable benefit for all involved. It will also be the model of what is appropriate for the students.

Learning about the many cultural differences and similarities can be a learning experience for the teacher and students. When the teacher demonstrates that a student is important and their culture is important too, it really gives the student that feeling of belonging and wanting to meet the learning objectives that the teacher has established.

Every student is unique. In a single family with children being from the same biological parents, every child in that family is different, so we know there are many differences in a classroom.

### **2. Learning Style of the Students**

The beginning of recognizing the learning style of the students could be from the home questionnaire or survey. Some teachers will send home a questionnaire or survey that asks questions about the student. If students are older, the teacher can let the student complete this survey in class. Keeping in mind that the parents are the first teacher of the child and their perspective regarding who their child is can be very beneficial for the teacher in getting familiar with the child.

When children are old enough to describe themselves and who they are can be important as well. As we discuss who the child is, the parent or primary caregiver's perspective and the child's perspective would both help the teacher in developing an academic plan that would benefit the child.

As the teacher reviews the "All About Me" profiles for each child from the parents/caregiver and from the child's perspective, the teacher can begin to integrate the different likes of the child into the curriculum that will be taught. Children will gravitate towards familiar concepts and feel more like they are a part of the curriculum. In other words, although the curriculum is already developed, the implementation can be personalized to meet the needs of the children in the classroom.

An example of this kind of implementation can be the picture books you can order with the child's name in the story with the child becoming the main character of the book. Sometimes, if the child has a dog its name and or other things in their environment which personalizes the story can be considered. Another example would be if the teacher knows a child has an aquarium then its individual items can be implemented into what must be taught.

The "All About Me" profile will enable the teacher to use it as a referral guide throughout the school year. It will be instrumental for the teacher to use it for grouping the students, developing skills that the student may not have developed, and for other activities that the teacher will be able to encourage. The teacher can build on the students' strengths but also display weaknesses that may no longer be a weakness but could be developed into a strength. Instead of the classroom being highly competitive and pushing the quiet or shy student to the side, the classroom has now incorporated all the students, all the skills, all the strengths and all the weaknesses into a supportive mechanism that produces positive outcomes and as a result, all the students feel empowered and intelligent. Students will show differing skillsets, but they will be able to observe and appreciate that though all the students are different, they have strengths in different domains.

Teachers know that every child is different. As teachers approach all the differences within our classroom, what is being taught should reflect how the students learn. Once again, it is important to be intentional about how and what is being taught. Since learners can be a visual or/auditory learner.

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences can be extremely instrumental in teaching diverse students. The premise of the theory builds on students' strengths. The theory categorizes students into different kinds of learners according to the kind of intelligence that best describes the student. When teachers intentionally implement the Multiple Intelligence Theory into the curriculum it will be rewarding for each student. Students will be learning concepts by using their learning style. This theory is demonstrating the uniqueness of each child in the classroom. Also, it reminds students that everyone is different and learning concepts can vary with each student. Indirectly, the theory is reflecting on how important students are and that although each student is different, they are not only important but critical to learning the lessons that are being taught. This way of teaching is individualized but collective. The idea is showing students that they are important, that their learning styles have been identified, and that they will learn the concepts that are being taught.

This attitude of teaching sets such a positive premise for all who are involved. It is showing students that they are going to reach their maximum potential and that the curriculum is about how they learn and retain concepts. What a different way of helping all our students benefit from what is being taught.

The implementation of the Multiple Intelligence Theory has leveled the playing field and it will eliminate the inequities that exist in education. The system is not using the self-fulfilling prophecy that dictates that skin color or who the child is or where he or she lives will dictate the grade level or whether the child is going to do well. Although, we do not verbalize these kinds of feelings to our students, they will easily feel that they are different, inferior, and inadequate when they are treated differently than the other students. How defeated a child must feel, if they are not being treated fairly or equally to other students in the classroom. In retrospect, if a student goes into a classroom and knows that the help, the supports, the kindness, the caring environment, and attitude of the teacher is in their favor, they cannot help but do well.

It has been over fifty years, beginning with *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954 that mandated that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. Since then, some progress has been made in improving racial disparities, but it has been slow, uneven, and incomplete (Center for Education Policy Analysis). Thus, the time for educational changes has become apparent. Beginning with the "new attitude" that would be a criterion for all teachers. The attitude of the teachers must be taught, and training must occur for this positive change to occur.

The Multiple Intelligence Theory can be implemented. We can let the students know the curriculum revolves around them learning concepts and that the curriculum will be building on their strengths. Critically, however, the teacher must demonstrate that he/she cares. The appreciation, respect, and caring environment will filter down to every child in the classroom.

Roberts and Inman (2009) suggest facilitating lifelong learning with children as they move up the academic success ladder requires three keys which are: (1) support the child with rigorous classes or assignments (2) help a child find interest in and outside of school, and then encourage those interests (exposure to a topic can result in, a passion to learn about the topic), and (3) help others realize that academic success must be defined by more than just good grades. Talk to children, parents, colleagues, and decision-makers to advocate for continuous progress and excellence at various levels. The result is hard work and persistence.

### **3. Parent/Family Roles**

Ryan and Cooper (2010) give five-steps to making the parents of children the teacher's allies. The teacher must ensure that these steps should be accomplished at the beginning of the school year, The teacher must (1) prepare a short statement introduction which is to be carried home and must be returned with the parent's signature, (2) send home disciplinary and homework policies that are to be signed and returned, (3) on the first day, get the parents or guardians home, work, and cell telephone numbers, (4) call all parents at the beginning of the year, especially if a student is falling behind or there is a behavior problem and (5) if any problem persist, insist on a parent visit.

Always stress "we" with parents that means you will be working together on behalf of the child. It would be great if every student could have a parent/family representative when special events happen in the classroom such as grandparent day, father's breakfast, or Mother's Day luncheon. This is a good time to call on volunteers or community helpers when a teacher knows that some students will not have anyone to accompany them with one of these specific activities. It makes students happier and they feel a part when they have someone who is there for them.

Teachers should be mindful that parents are the students first teacher and the teacher should want parents to be inclusive in the classroom activities. The teacher, child and family/parents working together on behalf of the child will encourage and support the learning of the student. As the teacher moves forward with developing skills for the child, it will be a smooth academic transition when a bond has been created and all are school partners. Douglas (2017) discusses how one educator created a welcoming family space at her program and changed the morning drop-off protocols to allow parents to come into the building and have an opportunity to speak with teachers.

Teachers should make sure that the classroom is a place that parents feel welcomed and if there is a language barrier then the school can arrange to have an interpreter. All parents cannot make it to meetings because of work or additional children at home, however a volunteer sheet can carry home that is inclusive of tasks that do not always require a parent school attendance but something which can be accomplished from their home. Some examples of activities such as making decorations, making booklets or making costumes for a program. When teachers can accommodate parents and include them in the classroom activities, the teacher has created a trust and has shown respect for the parent/family. In addition, it is always an educational experience to show parents that as teachers learning about their culture is something that they can share with the class. This is another method of building a bond and building the self-concept with the student.

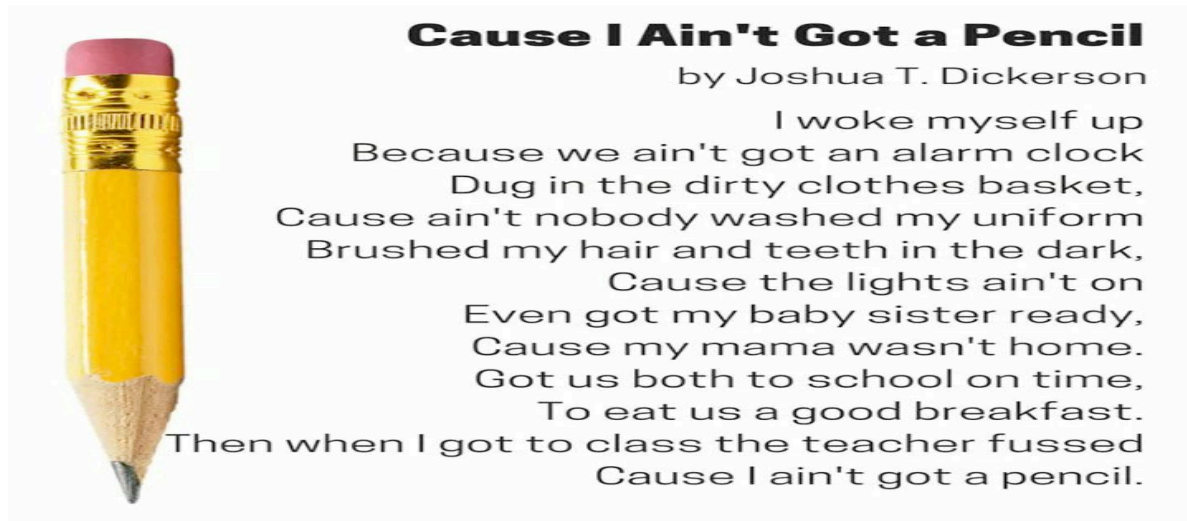
### **4. Student's Cultural Background**

When students have bonded with their teacher, the learning environment becomes an ideal situation for both teacher and student. It is important that daily that teachers speak to each child every single morning. When teachers arrive to school, it should be about having a great day for everyone in the classroom. The teacher should want to know if a child had a difficult evening. This gives the teacher an indicator of how the child is feeling and if any activities should be altered or if any additional discussions are needed within the day.

Some examples of additional discussions could be if a child lost a pet, a snow or storm event during the evening, if a student or family member had to go to the hospital emergency, and if a child's parent returned home from the military or a travel trip for their job. In addition, in the evening a student may not have eaten dinner or possibly no breakfast in the morning, or gunshots in their neighborhood,

as a result of any episodes of this nature, a student will know that once they arrive to school that their classroom will be welcoming, positive and full of fun and rewarding learning activities could be extremely instrumental for the student. The student should know that they will be happy, safe and smart in their classroom and this knowledge will have a positive impact on the growth and development of the student.

The teacher should greet the child in the morning, ask how they are feeling and, in the evening, so each child can share their reflection of the day. There is a poem that reminds teachers that they do not know what their students have encountered before they get to school. This poem is by professional author and poet Joshua Dickerson. It is called “Ain’t Got a Pencil.”



When the child is leaving in the afternoon, the teacher should always tell each child to have a good evening and give them a reminder of doing any homework assignment. It is also a good idea to end the day with a positive quote or have a moment at the end of the day to have “afternoon reflections.” At this time, students can share how their day went—what they enjoyed and what they would like to see enhanced. The teacher can also give the students oral compliments of encouragement, accomplishments, or improvements that they made during the day. Closing the day with these positive affirmations may help a child’s evening at home be inspirational and gives the child positive feedback to share with their parents/families. During the day, any disappointment or challenges that occurred the group can collectively come up with a solution to the issue. This kind of closure to the day is like sharing in the morning. This whole afternoon reflection will give students time to help each other resolve issues and to demonstrate the importance of reflection daily. Students will learn that reflection is a way to solve situations and to prepare one’s self to endure the next challenge.

Lessons that are taught from this activity demonstrates to students that their peers are also a support group. Each day the teacher reviews the likes and dislikes of the day. In addition, the students resolve or manage any dislikes that they have experienced within the day. The students will look forward to the next day. This activity can be written sometimes too. The activity can be the culminating learning experience for each day. The activity can be oral, written or pictorial drawings.

The teacher may want to have each student have a reflection journal that can be used for this activity. This would allow the student’s experiences to be captured and at the end of the schoolyear, the student has a journal that will exhibit the student’s experiences and accomplishments throughout the schoolyear. Also, it should always be shared so the students know they have their peer support. Although, we have not mentioned the student’s culture, as the teacher gets to know his or her student, the culturally aspects will be a natural phenomenon.

## 5. Resources Available

Irvine (2003) discussed a center Emory University called the Center for Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools (CULTURES) which in 1994 assisted approximately 120 practicing elementary and middle school teachers to work effectively with culturally diverse students to enhance the quality teaching and learning in their urban schools. The purpose of CULTURES was to respond to the demographic challenges associated with the increasingly culturally diverse public-school systems in the Atlanta metropolitan area. This program provided a supportive, nonevaluative, nonthreatening environment in which teachers learned to transform their classrooms and schools into learning communities for students of color who previously only experienced school failure.

In addition, Irvine (2002) offers a proposal for change to create and sustain effective urban, culturally diverse classrooms and schools. The change would be based on reconceptualizing roles for teachers in six ways as follows: Culturally responsive pedagogists, systemic reformers, members of caring communities, reflective practitioners and researchers, pedagogical-content specialists, and antiracist educators. Irvine offers a description of each of these roles.

However, as teachers working with students, the key is parent involvement. The parents being a part of the education of their child is critical for achieving the optimal academic performance of the child. Sometimes, parents may not be able to participate but trying to have a representative for each child in the classroom would be the optimal goal.

It is important to inform parents how necessary their involvement is to the growth and development of their child. If by chance, there are some students who do not have a family representative, the teacher should have volunteers who can participate in the classroom for field trips, tutoring, and other kind of activities/projects. Many parents work so it is important that some activities can occur during the evening. Some ideas can be a special activity for Dads, a project-base activity for parents, and of course field trips and what about grandparent day.

Espinosa (2010) gives four positives characteristics for ELL families and children's parent involvement programs: (1) employed practices that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for the families, (2) provide comprehension services (ex. focus on the whole child), (3) promote high levels of reciprocal communication (parents are partners, not just recipients of school information) (Epstein 2001), and (4) mobile parents to advocate for the educational needs of their children. Although, Espinosa has provided this information for ELL families and children, it would be beneficial to all families of children of color.

The parent involvement is the best resource. It is making the child's education an extension of the child's family life. Remembering that the parent is the first teacher of the child. At the beginning of the schoolyear, having parents complete a parent participation form can be helpful in knowing how parents can connect with their child's education. The participation form should have everything from possible things parents can make at home for the classroom, to field trips, and to assisting in the classroom. Of course, parents can share their jobs or careers.

As teachers connect with parents, the parents may have family members or friends who can offer an educational opportunity to the students. Teachers should welcome these friends into the classroom to share their expertise.

The community that the school may be in could have some academic interests such as food store, bank or library. The teacher should inquire to the various places of businesses to see how they can become part of activities in the classroom. Students learning real life experiences within the school community can be valuable life lessons. The bank experience could be the beginning of how to save money whereas the grocery store can teach students about all the different kinds of nutritional foods and the importance of nutrition in their growth and development. The appropriate materials for activities and projects are necessary. Sometimes, businesses many discard things that can be useful in the classroom. Also, there are organizations that may have free materials for educators. These would be important for teachers to inquire about so that the classroom would have the needed materials to implement and complete activities/projects.

Lastly, technology is essential. Technology has so many virtual activities that can be an excellent resource for students and educators. What students can't experience in real time; technology will allow for virtual trips. Making sure there is adequate updated computers for the children in the classroom and for older students assuring that every child has a computer or iPad at home is important.

Knowing that our diverse students are the future, teachers should support equity across the board and ensure that all students will meet their maximum potential in the classroom. Although teachers may not be familiar with all the different cultures within their classroom, they can always ask parents for help in providing a multicultural experience for students in the classroom.

## Discussion

Duncan and Murnane (2014) explain that the longstanding strengths lie in values and commitments. Americans at least rhetorically, believe the value of equality of opportunity and a commitment to education as the primary social institution for achieving high-quality education for low-income children. While there are sharp disagreements on the best way to improve education for children from low-income homes, most Americans accept that doing so is an important societal objective.

However, Payne (2006) feels that race is a highly salient topic for young people interested in education. White students may wonder whether they can teach children of color; students of color may feel a tension between teaching and group loyalty. When they go into schools, they feel race is salient but rarely talked about in any public way. For more experienced nonwhite teachers, know perfectly well that much of what they see around them cannot be explained without reference to race. Although, one of the privileges of being white in this country is that it largely insulates one from critical discussion. What it tells us is that if we can learn to question our presumptions, we all have a chance to make a difference.

## Conclusion

Teachers, parents and students working in partnerships is a critical aspect of teaching children of color. Teachers must analyze their own biases and build a classroom that appreciates and respects diversity.

Recognizing that the parent is the first teacher of the child, teachers should involve the parents in encouraging and supporting the learning of the child. An additional educational opportunity is learning about families' culture and sharing these cultures in the classroom. There should always be a welcoming environment so parents will feel inclusive.

Incorporating and appreciating the child's culture is important in developing the self-concept. Knowing that each child is unique, it is necessary to develop activities that integrate different learning styles. Teachers know that every child is different. As teachers approach all the differences within our classroom, what is being taught should reflect how the students learn. Once the teachers build trust with their students, the learning environment becomes an ideal situation for teacher and student.

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