
THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY & CULTURAL AWARENESS IN THE CLASSROOM

Cultural diversity in the classroom is on the rise. In 2014, U.S. public schools hit a minority majority milestone with Latino, African-American, and Asian students having surpassed the number of white students. In 2044, the U.S. Census predicts that over half of the nation's population will be people of color, so this trend will likely continue.

In our increasingly diverse and multicultural society, it's more important than ever for teachers to incorporate culturally responsive instruction in the classroom -- whether teaching elementary school, middle school or high school students. And the increase of diversity doesn't only relate to race and ethnicity; it can include students of different religion, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and language background.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS AND WORKPLACES?

Fostering inclusion and awareness around multicultural education and taking a culturally responsive approach to teaching benefits all students. Not only does creating greater multicultural awareness and inclusion help students with different backgrounds and needs succeed, but it encourages acceptance and helps prepare students to thrive in an exponentially diverse world.

Diversity in and out of the classroom will continue to grow, so it's essential we prepare students to adapt to an evolving world and embrace those different from themselves. Learn more how the programs at the Drexel School of Education are helping to prepare more culturally-responsive educators today.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM?

There are several ways teachers and administrators, such as principals and coaches, can ensure that both the classroom environment and curriculum are responsive to the increasing cultural diversity of our society. These strategies will encourage all students' cultural awareness, enhancing each student's sense of identity, and foster inclusion in the classroom community.

1. Get to Know Your Students

Ensuring that cultural awareness is promoted in the classroom starts with the teacher understanding each individual student. Take the time to learn about each student's cultural background, hobbies, learning styles, and what makes them unique. Demonstrating a genuine interest in learning about each student and their culture will help establish trust and allow you to form a bond with them so they feel valued. If students feel appreciated by and comfortable with the teacher, there's a better chance they'll feel comfortable talking with and respect their peers in the class – and communication is the core to a culturally aware and inclusive classroom.

2. Maintain Consistent Communication

Aside from getting to know your students, teachers should also continue to maintain ongoing communication throughout the semester or school year. Scheduling 1-on-1 meetings with students to “check in” every so often will allow you to consistently improve how accessible the classroom is to everyone. Students can talk about whether they felt included in the classroom culture. This can help identify issues or ways to improve the overall experience. It's also an opportunity to discuss their progress in the class and offer guidance on how they can improve, based on their individual needs as a student.



3. Acknowledge and Respect Every Student

It's also important for students to celebrate and respect their own diverse backgrounds, as well as each other's. When appropriate, teachers should encourage students to research and learn about their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This allows them to better understand their own culture as well as the differences and nuances with their peers. As a bonus, this can be a great ice breaker assignment, allowing students to give presentations about their family traditions and culture to help expose the class to concepts outside of their own familiar comfort zone. Acknowledging these differences and creating a safe space for discussion helps promote understanding in the classroom and beyond. Also, as you encourage students to learn about their diverse backgrounds, remember to take the time to highlight what's offensive and the distinction between cultural celebration and appropriation. Learning how to talk about other cultures in a respectful, mature way is essential for success in life outside the classroom.

4. Practice Cultural Sensitivity

While it's important to keep an open dialogue amongst students, it's equally as important to make sure you're being sensitive to everyone's culture, beliefs, and language concerns. Take the time to understand each student's cultural nuances – from learning styles to the language they use – and use these insights to design your lesson plans. For example, provide English language learners with appropriate and relevant resources that help them improve their English comprehension skills. Rather than teach with a traditional lecture style, create learning experiences that are more interactive and require collaboration. These considerations will help ensure that every student feels included, is given the space to learn in their own way and is given a chance to succeed.



5. Incorporate Diversity in the Lesson Plan

The classroom environment is important for fostering cultural awareness, but you also should ensure diversity is represented in your actual lesson plan. For example, broaden history lessons so that they encompass the world beyond United States history and culture. Or, use references and analogies to other cultures in your lessons and assignments to help students with diverse backgrounds personally connect. Another great strategy is bringing in diverse speakers to add varying points of view and real-life context to different subjects. There are several ways you can ingrain cultural awareness and diversity into your lesson plan, and it will vary depending on the cultures represented in your classroom and the course you're teaching. Regardless of the subject, always try to present and connect lessons to real-world issues. It's easier to promote cultural awareness within your lessons when there's a real example for students to relate to.

6. Give Students Freedom and Flexibility

Teachers often feel like they need to take on a strict, authoritative approach when it comes to managing their classroom. The most valuable lessons are often learned through a student's own experiences, so giving them some freedom in the course encourages more connection to the curriculum. Allow students to read and present their own materials that relate to the fundamental lesson so they can approach the topic from their own perspective. As a teacher, you can act as a facilitator and encourage conversation and healthy debate between diverse opinions. Group assignments are also a great way to expose students to diverse perspectives, allowing them to work together to explore and solve a problem. This will also help prepare them for a diverse workforce where they'll have to partner with a range of people to accomplish their professional goals.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TEACH CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM?

It is important to remind ourselves why diversity and cultural awareness is so crucial in the classroom and the benefits it can have on students now and in the long-term. Teaching diversity exposes students to various

cultural and social groups, preparing students to become better citizens in their communities. These culturally responsive teaching strategies will help you to promote diversity in the classroom.

With these culturally responsive teaching strategies in mind, it's important to remind ourselves why diversity and cultural awareness is so crucial in the classroom and the benefits it can have on students now and in the long-term.

Students Become More Empathetic

Promoting awareness and creating a personal connection with diverse cultures in the classroom can prevent students from developing prejudices later in life. It allows them to empathize with people different from themselves since they're more aware of the experiences someone of a different race or cultural group may face.

Students Gain a Better Understanding of Lessons and People

When working and learning with people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures present in the classroom, students gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. It also teaches students how to use their own strengths and points of view to contribute in a diverse working environment.

Students Become More Open-Minded

Naturally, by exposing students to a diverse range of opinions, thoughts, and cultural backgrounds, you're encouraging them to be more open-minded later in life. This will make them open to new ideas and be able to attain a greater comprehension on a topic by taking in different points of view.

Students Feel More Confident and Safe

Students who learn about different cultures during their education feel more comfortable and safe with these differences later in life. This allows them to interact in a wider range of social groups and feel more confident in themselves as well as in their interactions with others.

Students Are Better Prepared for a Diverse Workplace

With the rise of globalization, it's more important to be able to work with people from different cultures and social groups. If students are exposed to diversity and learn cultural awareness in the classroom, it sets them up to flourish in the workforce.