

Learning Within the Context of Culture

3. Learning Within the Context of Culture

"The increasing diversity in our schools, the ongoing demographic changes across the nation and the movement towards globalization dictate that we develop a more in-depth understanding of culture if we want to bring about true understanding among diverse populations."

-- Maria Wilson-Portuondo (*)

WHAT

Children from homes in which the language and culture do not closely correspond to that of the school may be at a disadvantage in the learning process. These children often become alienated and feel disengaged from learning. People from different cultures learn in different ways. Their expectations for learning may be different. For example, students from some cultural groups prefer to learn in cooperation with others, while the learning style of others is to work independently. To maximize learning opportunities, teachers should gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms and adapt lessons so that they reflect ways of communicating and learning that are familiar to the students.

WHY

Children learn about themselves and the world around them within the context of culture (Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, 2002). Students from minority cultures may feel pressured to disavow themselves of their cultural beliefs and norms in order to assimilate into the majority culture. This, however, can interfere with their emotional and cognitive development and result in school failure (Sheets, 1999).

HOW

1. Vary teaching strategies
 - Use cooperative learning especially for material new to the students
 - Assign independent work after students are familiar with concept
 - Use role-playing strategies
 - Assign students research projects that focus on issues or concepts that apply to their own community or cultural group
 - Provide various options for completing an assignment
2. Bridge cultural differences through effective communication
 - Teach and talk to students about differences between individuals
 - Show how differences among the students make for better learning
 - Attend community events of the students and discuss the events with the students

References

Sheets, R. (1999). Relating competence in an urban classroom to ethnic identity development. In R. Sheets (Ed.), *Racial and ethnic identity in school practices: Aspects of human development*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB). (2002). *The diversity kit: An introductory resource for social change in education*. Providence, RI: Brown University. Available: <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/diversitykit.shtml>

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