MRS. BOYD'S FIFTH-GRADE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM
A Study of Multicultural Teaching Strategies

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Public school students are increasingly heterogeneous in their family structure and the social, cultural, ethnic, and economic diversity they bring to the classroom. Inclusive classrooms broaden this scope to encompass behavioral, intellectual, and physical diversity. Educators who are committed to providing each student with an equal opportunity for success frequently seek and experiment with accommodation methods that use creative management, instruction, and assessment strategies to foster academic proficiency and social responsibility. This case study of one exemplary multicultural fifth-grade classroom teacher provides educators with accommodation activities that support and encourage all students without limiting or impeding their academic or social development.

Public school students are increasingly heterogeneous in their family structure and the sociocultural and economic diversity they bring to the classroom. Conversely, classroom teachers are becoming more homogeneous (Caucasian, middle-class, with limited cross-cultural experiences). Additionally, teachers and administrators are faced with an increasing demand for educational reform, inclusive classrooms, more stringent academic standards, and national standardized testing. Although this academic environment can be frustrating and challenging, with planning, nurturing, mentoring, and accommodation teachers and their students can find it fulfilling and rewarding.

In a study conducted by Miller, Leinhardt, and Zigmond (1988), it was found that accommodation techniques manifested in admin-

istrative policy decisions such as attendance flexibility, modified academic expectations, and attenuated assessment requirements provide a nurturing atmosphere and serve to motivate students but often limit or impede the level of academic engagement and therefore fail to adequately prepare youngsters to be productive members of the mainstream society. However, Geary (1988) interviewed successful students from culturally diverse and socioeconomically impoverished communities and found that they attributed their achievement not to administrative accommodations, but to self-efficacy, educational relevance, and teacher support and encouragement. This is further demonstrated through the research of notable multicultural experts such as Pang (2001) and Gay (2000) who confirm that the attitudes and behaviors of classroom teachers profoundly influence the academic success of culturally diverse students. Additionally, the research of Bennett (1995), Ladson-Billings (1994), and others indicate that classroom teachers with a multicultural purview recognize, understand, value, and incorporate the cultural diversity of their students. In so doing, they provide a nurturing classroom environment for all students, have high expectations for the academic achievement of all students, incorporate student voices by building bridges between student experiences and the curriculum, vary teaching and assessment strategies to accommodate differences in learning styles and ways of knowing, and make the curriculum relevant to students' current experiences and future expectations. Therefore, rather than concentrating on the causes and effects of academic failure among diverse student groups, this case study investigated strategies used by one multicultural fifth-grade teacher to nurture academic excellence in an inclusive classroom environment.

METHOD

CONTEXT

This study was conducted in a midwestern upper-level elementary school (Grades 4-6). The district is an inner-ring suburb of a large industrial city and draws its students from a large working-

class urban neighborhood within the city and the small affluent suburban community. Primary caregivers include parents, grandparents, extended family members, foster parents, and hired housekeepers. Family income ranges from economically disadvantaged to millionaires, with most falling in the upper-middle-income range. The educational attainment of the parents includes those who did not complete high school and those with professional degrees (physicians, attorneys, major business owners, politicians). The school district was selected because of the social, economic, educational, and ethnic diversity of its student population, the school board's continued commitment to an inclusive educational environment for all students, and the district's numerous awards for teaching excellence. There are seven lower elementary schools (Grades K-3) scattered throughout the district, all of which feed into one upper elementary school (Grades 4-6). The upper elementary site was selected because children in this age group are more susceptible to the policies and procedures of their educational environment than at any other time in their academic careers. Alexander et al. (1969) found that between fourth and seventh grades, students become more aware of the importance of peer acceptance, are the most open minded, openly challenge the wisdom of authority figures, and are in constant need of nurturing feedback. Hence, the long-term academic and social decisions of students are often solidified during these preadolescent years.

Mrs. Boyd, an African American fifth-grade classroom teacher, has more than 25 years of experience in upper elementary classroom instruction and curriculum development. She believes that the school and her classroom should be perceived by students and parents as part of their community and the environment should depict the cultures of the students (both traditional and nontraditional). Most students and parents treat Mrs. Boyd as a member of their extended family. She is often invited to community functions and family gatherings, called on for advice, and asked by parents to initiate parent/student discussions. Mrs. Boyd, in turn, affectionately refers to her students as "my babies" and "my children," and supports, encourages, and admonishes them both in the capacity of teacher and extended family member. However, she never uses

these terms to address the students directly. She was selected as the focus of this study because colleagues, parents, administrators, and former students identified her as an outstanding classroom educator, an exceptional cooperating teacher, and a compassionate teacher mentor.

During the observation period, there were 24 students (13 boys and 11 girls) whose ethnic diversity consisted of Black ($n = 13$), White ($n = 9$), Asian ($n = 1$), and biracial ($n = 1$) children. Students' economic diversity included 5 eligible for free or reduced lunch, 16 middle-class, and 3 upper income. Their academic and social skills ranged from high achievers to those with physical, mental, and behavioral disabilities. There were seven exceptional students requiring individualized education programs in the class: an academically gifted student lacking the social skills required to function in a fifth-grade environment, one student (born drug-addicted) diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) with outbursts, one student diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) who suffered from an anxiety disorder, two students identified with physical impairments (one unable to write legibly and the other lethargic and often absent), and two students with learning disabilities.

Additionally, there was no teaching aid or collaborator support for this inclusive classroom environment. Mrs. Boyd teaches the core curriculum independently, incorporates language arts into all subject areas, and utilizes a cooperative seating arrangement for all lessons.

PROCEDURE

Miles and Huberman (1994) and portions of the Spradley model (1979) were used to design this ethnographic study that investigated the practices of one fifth-grade teacher who had been recognized by her colleagues and the district administration as an exemplary multicultural classroom educator. A preliminary literature review was conducted to identify effective classroom practices as defined by multicultural experts such as Banks (1993), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Gay (2000). Subsequently five main themes (classroom management, instruction, assessment, student/teacher

interaction, and parent/teacher communication) and several subtopics were developed, reviewed, and revised.

During the initial data collection phase, I visited the school building and the subject's classroom on four occasions, twice staying the entire day. The purpose of these observation visits were fivefold: (a) to reexamine the viability of the initial themes and questions; (b) to provide insight into the informal school community and the social interaction between students and teachers, teachers and staff, and students and students; (c) to allow the students to become accustomed to my presence in the classroom; (d) to become familiar with the names and personalities of the students; and (e) to choose the most advantageous and least obtrusive place to observe both Mrs. Boyd and her students. During these informal observations, I found differences between morning and afternoon teacher instruction and classroom management strategies and between student behavior and engagement levels. Differences were also observed between beginning-of-the-week and end-of-the-week student behavior and engagement. Hence, the design of the formal classroom observations was revised to include Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and both morning and afternoon observations. Additionally, a set of questions was developed based on these initial observations. A recursive process was subsequently used throughout the investigation.

The classroom was observed on six occasions (three morning and three afternoon sessions) and in student/teacher interactions before and after school. The investigator entered the classroom 5 to 10 minutes prior to the beginning of a lesson and remained 5 to 10 minutes after the lesson's conclusion. This schedule allowed the investigator to observe the strategies used in the lesson induction and closure, the transition to the next subject, and overall classroom management. Each observation lasted approximately 70 minutes.

Informal interviews were conducted immediately after the observation or during the teacher's next planning period. The initial questions were theme-specific (based on preobservations and literature review and addressed why certain strategies were used, the effectiveness of the strategies, and possible alternatives. In preparation for each subsequent visit, the field notes were reviewed (obser-

vations, teacher reflections, and my perceptions), the literature was revisited, and the questions were reviewed and revised to secure more in-depth information.

Immediately after the final classroom observation and interview, the field notes were reviewed for clarity and a set of exit questions were developed to assist in deciphering inconclusive data. One week after the last observation, a taped interview was conducted using the exit questions as discussion topics. The tapes were transcribed and compared with the original field notes. Approximately one month after the taped interview, I facilitated a focus group session that included the observed teacher and two other fifth-grade teachers in the same building. Prior to the scheduled focus group meeting, I developed several questions to initiate the discussion and focus on the five themes. Field notes and tapes of the focus group session were analyzed and compared to previous notes and tapes. This iterative process was used throughout the investigation.

RESULTS

Data from observations, informal and formal interviews, and the focus group have been integrated into three principal sections: classroom management (environment, discipline), instructional strategies (questioning, critical thinking, subject matter relevance, language congruence, lesson closure), and teacher/student/parent interaction (teacher/student, parent/teacher).

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Physical environment. Multicultural education experts such as Banks (1993) and Bennett (1995) espouse that providing a classroom climate that is comfortable, equitable, compatible, and conducive to the learning process for each student is the responsibility of every teacher. Glasser (1986) postulates that without such an environment, students will fail to perceive the value of school and consequently will glean little from the time spent there.

The physical environment of this classroom is warm, colorful, and inviting. Examples of student assignments and projects are

interspersed throughout the room. The balance of the walls and boards are covered with other pictures, books, and art depicting current topics. Most of the reference materials and resources, placed along the window ledges, are integrated (ethnicity, race, gender, class, and culture) both in text and picture.

The desks and chairs, arranged in clusters of four, are older wooden regulation units in good condition. There are cut tennis balls under each chair leg to allow the students to scoot their chairs away from the desks quietly and move about the classroom freely. Each cluster group is integrated by gender, culture, and ability; each group member is responsible for the academic and social achievements of the entire group. These clusters are rearranged every 2 weeks to allow students to work with other classmates and develop additional group skills. Mrs. Boyd explains this arrangement as follows:

> The tennis balls serve a twofold purpose: My students are less likely to be self-conscious about leaving their seats to access materials, and the movement is less distracting to the rest of the class . . . Students with limited ability freely ask their cluster members for assistance without sacrificing their dignity, the smarter ones learn patience and compassion, and they all learn cooperation and mutual respect.

The teacher prefers to sit at a low half-round table next to her desk toward to rear of the class. Here she can interact with several students at a time while observing and/or instructing the entire class in an unobtrusive manner, "I think kids are more comfortable . . . when both of us are seated at the same level of eye contact."

Classroom discipline. Effective classroom teachers influence all of their students' behaviors by helping them move toward self-control. Teachers can help students become good decision makers and productive citizens who interact cooperatively with others by assisting them in assuming responsibility for their actions, developing dignity and respect for themselves and others, and by valuing their appropriate behavior (Fuller, 1996). Instead of using proximity of control to manage disruptive behavior, Mrs. Boyd quietly

says the child's name and "stop." When she notices a distracted student she quietly says, "Put that away, now." When the student with ADD is not paying attention she asks, "Are you focused?" When one student was asked to wait his turn, he clicked his teeth. Mrs. Boyd immediately called him back and quietly admonished him without raising her voice. She extends to her children the opportunity to self-regulate their academic and social behavior. Negative behavior is never reinforced because during the first 2 weeks of school the students have been disciplined not to laugh or acknowledge such behavior. Mrs. Boyd gives encouragement and reinforces positive behavior with phrases such as "You almost have it," "You're doing a great job," and "This material is technical and difficult but you're doing a good job and you'll get the answer."

The students know and respect the rule that no other student is allowed to answer a question that has been assigned to someone, and therefore do not raise their hands, snicker, or attempt to blurt out the answer. However, on several occasions I heard students mumble in disappointment, "Oh, that's his question." The teacher indicated, "Allowing only one student to answer a question gives ownership of that question to the student and this forces those who would not otherwise participate, in the learning process, to take responsibility for their own education."

During one observation, I noticed a cluster-group member, one with a physical disability, sharing his book with a peer who brought neither book nor homework to the lesson. The teacher explained,

> All of my babies are responsible for making a contribution to the group's learning process, and the group is responsible for him. He doesn't write well, in fact, he still scribbles but he loves to read. See, he answered four questions as he read.

I replied, "But I also observed you reprimanding a student in another group who attempted to whisper an answer to a member who seemed to be struggling, why?" Her response was,

> Black and White kids must recognize that Black babies are smart, too. They have the ability to answer on their own, therefore I refuse

to allow the children to think for each other. If one truly needs assistance, they can request it. Struggle is good for kids, you see that she got the answer on her own.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

When creating lesson plans and implementing instructional techniques, teachers must consider the unique individual and cultural characteristics that their students bring to the classroom (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Students who are not motivated to learn often become disengaged and consequently labeled as *learning disabled* or *behavioral handicapped* making classroom management more difficult and stressful for the educator (Banks, 1993).

Questioning. Mrs. Boyd continuously walks around the room before posing a question on the lesson. Once the question is asked, hands shoot into the air. She then stops near the student she wants to respond and pauses for several seconds before calling on that student. There is a definite pattern to the length of the pauses. When a child with a learning disability is to be called on, the pause is longer and the question is repeated several times giving prompts along the way prior to calling the student's name.

If the response is incomplete or incorrect, the student is referred back to the readings (notes, texts, other resources) and instructed to search for the correct or complete answer while the class moves on. The teacher returns to the student after the next question is answered. If the answer is still unsatisfactory, the student is instructed to continue his or her research and is called on after each succeeding question until he or she has an acceptable answer. I questioned the plausibility of making the student continue to seek the answer to a question while the rest of the class moves on, but Mrs. Boyd replied,

I'm not as concerned about testing as I am about my slow and lazy babies taking an active part in the learning process. If they don't learn anything else during the lesson, they will know one thing well and will contribute to their group.

These strategies were flexible enough to accommodate the different learning styles and academic abilities, motivate high and low achievers, and invoke the different levels of critical thinking.

Stimulating critical thinking. Encouraging critical inquiry and analytical thinking reduces the probability of accepting misinformation and cultural misconceptions while expanding the students' ability for intellectual reflection (Bennett, 1995). Mrs. Boyd encourages her students to question the text, their peers, and her interpretation of material. When a student was asked the source of his answer, his response was, "I read it in the book." Mrs. Boyd replied, "Do you believe everything you read in that book? You have to support information from other sources. Now, how else do you know the Vikings were the first to reach the New World?"

I queried that this would make the students prone to question and challenge the authority of all adults. The teacher replied,

> Positive challenge can be accomplished without relinquishing classroom control or soliciting disrespect. Healthy debate teaches children that just because information is in a book or someone says it, doesn't make it true. They should always look to other sources to substantiate the information. This attitude helps children learn the importance of research, to think and question, and to make decisions based on corroborated information.

Culturally relevant. Classroom materials often are in direct conflict (by omission, distortion, and relevance) with the student's home chronicles and community significance (Fuller, 1996). The literature postulates that this conflict is detrimental to students' academic and social development and the teacher's ability to manage the classroom.

Mrs. Boyd uses a technique she coined as *Black moments in time* to incorporate other cultures into her lessons. This was modeled during a discussion of explorers: The teacher indicated that there were also Black explorers and asked if the students could tell her about them. Several students were able to name various Black explorers, where they originated, and what they were noted for. She

then asked how these children knew about Black explorers. Some students, both White and Black, had learned from their parents, whereas others remembered from previous lessons and subsequent research assignments. Research assignments are given to extend the critical thinking process. I noticed that for small research projects the gifted student was often pared with another student to help in the development of his or her social skills and to enhance the lesson for both. Mrs. Boyd indicated that

> Many textbooks don't include minorities, so it's my responsibility to teach my kids that other races and cultures besides Anglo-Saxons contributed to the discovery and development of this country. I supplement every text to build Black self-esteem, to provide both Black and White children with credible information about the contributions of others, and to foster mutual respect and awareness among my students.

Mrs. Boyd helps her students to link their primary culture with that of the mainstream by teaching them to value what they already know and how to use this knowledge as a tool for further learning. In science, I observed her using a transfer technique that equated making a sandwich with the development and structure of paragraph writing. When asked about this strategy she replied,

> Some of these babies don't have the vocabulary or the experiences to compete. So, I use things I know they can relate to, like the sandwich. The kids know how to make a sandwich. They realize that they need a top and bottom piece of bread, the meat in between, and the stuff that makes it good like the salad dressing, lettuce, and tomato. By transferring this concept to that of writing a paragraph, you can see the light bulbs go on.

Language congruence. Because language is central to the cognitive, social, and cultural development of the individual and is important to one's cultural interaction within the broader sociocultural context, the success or failure of many linguistic minority students hinges on their opportunities for classroom verbalization (Adger, 1993; Hakuta, 1986; Hale-Benson, 1986). When the teacher demonstrates an acceptance of the student's dialect rather than encouraging eradication, Williams (1991) indicates that

student self-confidence and motivation to learn improve. I observed the teacher code-switching between standard and nonstandard English when conversing with the students and questioned the acceptability of nonstandard English. Mrs. Boyd replied,

> You can't just disregard a youngster's home dialect and vocabulary. If I ignore their home vocabulary, they can't learn what I'm trying to teach them in school. I teach them when and where their dialect and vocabulary are appropriate (at home, with their friends, and in some instances, with me). It all depends on the context of the conversation. Remember everyone uses different dialects depending on who they're talking to. I do insist they use the terminology in the text, rephrase concepts in their own words using the new terminology, and write in standard English.

Lesson closure. During the closure process, Hunter (1991) indicates that teachers should provide students with the opportunity and forum to demonstrate their achievements through discussion and presentation while the teacher continues to monitor for comprehension and the need to revise the following lesson.

Mrs. Boyd reinforces her lessons on three levels during the last 15 minutes of each class. First, each question is restated using the name of the student to which it was assigned. This helps with recall and focus for the auditory learner. Second, another student is asked to read the concept aloud from the text and redefine the concept in his or her own words. This exercise provides the students with an opportunity to talk about what they have learned, draws attention to the completion of the lesson, and summarizes the material covered. The lesson culminates with the children using their notes, books, and other resource materials to write a full page, in their own words, describing everything they know about the lesson, while the teacher surveys the room for those who are not on task. The writing assignment, an effective assessment tool, is designed to tell the teacher what the children have learned in their own words. This strategy focuses students on demonstrating their competency and provides them with lesson reinforcement. They are allowed to use tools, including their text and their cluster partners. Mrs. Boyd indicates that she offers assistance and encourages the students to use the new terminology,

Are you okay . . . ? Do you need help? I need at least one page from each of you . . . I know you know everything about the weather. Don't forget to use those seven new words we learned when you write.

This exercise teaches them to analyze and evaluate their resources and to develop their critical thinking and expository writing skills. Plus, I'm tired by the end of the lesson and it's their turn to work.

However, she keeps reviewing the students' progress and sends them back to rewrite or add more information. I asked her why she did not just grade the work they first turn in. "Wouldn't that be a better indication of what they have learned?" Mrs. Boyd's response was:

Some kids will only write a few sentences or copy from the book while others will miss the point of the lesson altogether. The purpose of the writing exercise is to get them to see that they can write and think. If they rewrite and check with me then they will really understand the material. Logic and critical thinking is what our babies need. This is the crucial age for them to learn these skills.

TEACHER/STUDENT/PARENT INTERACTION

Teachers can no longer wait for parents to initiate parent/teacher interaction, but must reach out to parents and form collaborative partnerships (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). Additionally, classroom teachers who actively seek and respond to the concerns of parents find it beneficial to the academic and social development of their students (Manning & Baruth, 2000). Mrs. Boyd often facilitates parent discussion and interaction on current issues that effect her students. Several parents, distressed with the growing influence of television on their children, approached her with their concerns. Together, they initiated the *fireside chat*, which was held on a Friday evening at the local nature center. This informal family gathering was attended by the students, their parents, and the teacher.

The fireside chat opened with a discussion led by the children. As they sat in a circle on the floor, they talked with their peers about the amount of television they watched, the programs they viewed, which programs were objectionable or appropriate, why they liked

certain programs, what their parents thought, and who should regulate the amount and types of programs they watched.

During the parent discussion, families found that they had similar views on what, when, and how much television their youngsters should be exposed to. Most were astonished to find that their children were quite aware of the effects of television, knew which programs were appropriate, and basically agreed with their parents' philosophy on television viewing. They examined the various methods they were currently using to regulate television viewing and then mapped out a strategy to assist them in supervising future family television programming. The teacher was also instrumental in assisting the parents in selecting alternative individual and group activities to compensate for the loss of television viewing time.

DISCUSSION

To effectively foster the academic and social engagement of *all* students, a classroom teacher must: (a) possess effective classroom management skills; (b) maximize the inclusion of diverse cultures in the classroom environment, text books, instruction, and community resource; (c) be flexible yet consistent in discipline practices to assist students in assuming responsibility for their actions; (d) affirm the student's language code while assisting each in learning to articulate in standard English; (e) develop and utilize assessment tools to focus on student weaknesses and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction; and (f) actively encourage parent/teacher partnership. An example of these qualities was demonstrated by an exemplary multicultural fifth-grade teacher in her culturally diverse inclusive classroom environment.

This case study provides a glimpse into the inclusive teaching strategies of this experienced multicultural teacher who actively motivates and nurtures all of her students. The data collected during the study permits a detailed look into Mrs. Boyd's teaching philosophy and attitude toward her students, her instructional and management practices, and the role of parents in the educational process. Data from classroom observations; formal and informal interviews with the teacher, students, and parents; and the focus

group activity with three fifth-grade teachers provide compelling evidence of Mrs. Boyd's continued commitment to multicultural education. She possesses the sensitivity, competence, and willingness to create a classroom environment that is conducive to the needs of all of her students.

In Mrs. Boyd's class:

1. All students can visualize themselves in the classroom displays, in lessons, and during discussion;
2. Students are encouraged to support and cooperate with each other, to assume responsibility for their actions both individually and collectively, and to be compassionate toward one another;
3. The home culture, dialect, and language are affirmed and celebrated;
4. Cross-cultural interactions and friendships are cultivated and nurtured;
5. Instructional delivery techniques are varied, utilizing all sensory channels, to motivate and fit the needs of all students;
6. Questions are rephrased and cues are provided when necessary to encourage both cooperative and independent engagement by all students;
7. Alternative assessment tools are sometimes used, but competency requirements are never abated;
8. Academic excellence is expected of everyone, and critical thinking and inquiry are nurtured in all;
9. Teacher/student interpersonal relationships encouraged and nurtured;
10. Parent/teacher communication and partnering are initiated and encouraged.

At the end of the day, there are always students asking to stay after school to interact with Mrs. Boyd. Even when she says no and instructs them to go straight home, several will beg to stay, promise to be quiet, and even intentionally miss their bus. What is so exciting about staying after school with Mrs. Boyd? Just homework, extra help, board games, a hug, and conversation with their favorite teacher, "We love Mz. Boyd."

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