Cultures in Harmony

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*Effective teachers make sure that their strategies are in tune with students’ cultures.*

In a 2nd grade classroom, Mrs. Blaine is conducting a discussion and asking her students questions. Some of the students are whispering to one another. Mrs. Blaine stops the discussion. “I have heard people whispering, and I really don’t like it. . . Why? They need to learn by themselves, and you really aren’t helping them learn” (Isaac, 1999, p. 34).

In another classroom, Mrs. Pérez is conducting a discussion and posing questions to a small group of her 3rd grade students. She notices that one student seems to be volunteering to answer most of the questions. She stops and says to the student, “Why don’t you whisper the answer to a friend?” She later explains that this practice “lets both children feel successful and work cooperatively” (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 147).

Mrs. Blaine’s belief about how children learn reflects a mainstream approach to education in which learning is largely an individual matter. Mrs. Pérez’s belief about how children learn reflects her—and her students’—Mexican American heritage in which learning is a group process. These two different views lead one teacher to chastise students for a behavior that another teacher encourages.
U.S. classrooms are increasingly places where different cultures meet. There’s the culture of the school and the teacher, which is usually the “mainstream” culture reflecting European American values (Gay, 2006; Hollins, 1996). And then there are the cultures of the students. Cultural differences often bring with them different notions of how students learn best; how they should behave; what kinds of interventions can help them meet the school’s expectations; and what roles teacher, student, and parent should play.

In light of these differences, how can teachers make their classrooms work better for diverse groups of students? By becoming more aware not only of their students’ cultures but also of their own culture and by tapping into the strengths of each culture represented in the classroom.

Understanding Cultural Differences

In a research project called Bridging Cultures, we partnered with fellow researchers Patricia M. Greenfield and Blanca Quiroz to document how teachers can use their understanding of student cultures to make schools more harmonious (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). We worked with seven elementary teachers in culturally mixed classrooms where Latino immigrant students were in the majority, and these teachers generated countless innovations.

The individualism-collectivism framework captures perhaps the most fundamental difference between U.S. mainstream culture and the cultures of many immigrant and minority students. This framework describes idealized models of two cultural value systems that implicitly shape people’s worldviews and parents’ developmental goals for their children. These models have been called individualism and collectivism or independence and interdependence (Greenfield, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).
Individualistic families encourage independence, individual responsibility and achievement, self-expression, and self-esteem. In contrast, collectivistic families emphasize interdependence of the family, responsibility to the group, group well-being, group success, respect for elders, and personal modesty.

Of course, no culture or individual is completely individualistic or collectivistic. Each differs in the relative emphasis placed on individualistic or collectivistic values. And there is overlap in values, even between societies whose cultures are at the extremes of the individualism-collectivism continuum. Mexico and the United States are about as far apart as two societies could get, with Mexico being very collectivistic and the U.S. being very individualistic (Hofstede, 2001). But both U.S. mainstream culture and traditional Mexican culture value personal responsibility. The former emphasizes taking responsibility for oneself; the latter taking responsibility for the group.

The distinct values of the two cultures can work in concert, as with Mrs. Pérez’s whispering strategy in our opening illustration, which shows how a collectivistic behavior (sharing) can support an individualistic behavior (self-expression). Cultural strengths of collectivistic students can strengthen overall classroom harmony and productivity. Such skills as the ability to collaborate and to take responsibility for the group are skills that most teachers would, no doubt, like to see all students develop. So how can teachers capitalize on these cultural skills in the classroom?

Collaborating to Learn

At home, Latino immigrant children have likely learned that helping their parents and siblings is a priority; thus, they readily collaborate to help one another learn, without regard for individual roles or achievement and without competition (Hollins, 1996). Teachers can tap into this tendency in a variety of ways.
Group Writing

Like many California teachers, 4th grade teacher Ms. Altchech uses a process approach to writing in which students go through the steps of brainstorming, drafting pieces of writing, doing peer review, and editing, but she takes the process one step further, by having students write stories together. The resulting stories are “group” stories, and the writing process draws directly on students’ inclination to help one another. They pool their skills to produce a story that some could not produce alone, giving them a direct sense of what is possible and allowing them to see their peers model the skills that they need.

Competing or Collaborating?

We now revisit the classrooms of Mrs. Blaine, a non–Bridging Cultures teacher and Mrs. Pérez, a Bridging Cultures teacher. Isaac (1999) videotaped many hours of instruction in Mrs. Blaine’s classroom, and viewing these tapes points up the competitive nature of her teaching practices.

In one mathematics activity, Mrs. Blaine divided the class into two groups, and a representative from each group came up to the board to work the same addition problem. As each student representative approached the board, the students shouted, “Ooooh,” indicating the pressure this activity evoked. Some even positioned themselves as if praying. The two students at the board competed with each other without any help or support from their teammates. Isaac’s notes mention “signs of great stress” among the students. This seemingly collaborative activity in which students were grouped as teams was actually highly individualized and competitive.

Mrs. Pérez, in contrast, used ideas from her students to develop a truly collaborative strategy that motivated her 3rd graders to master the multiplication tables. Students paired off as “math buddies” who studied together in preparation for an individual test. When each student felt ready for the oral timed test, he or she would sign up for testing.
During testing, each student came forward, bringing his or her buddy for moral support. While the buddy watched silently, the student was tested orally, and most succeeded. Successful students would ring a bell and receive applause from the entire class (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003).

**Defining Cheating**

In classrooms where students are encouraged to help one another learn, one may wonder what differentiates helping from cheating. Students from nonmainstream cultures often have different definitions of cheating than their teachers do—a situation that can lead to painful misunderstandings (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). So teachers need to make it clear what cheating is. In many Bridging Cultures classrooms, students know that helping is always appropriate except during tests.

**Students Managing Their Own Learning**

During our observations in Bridging Cultures classrooms, we saw many instances in which students took responsibility when the teacher had to attend to an emergency or unexpected event.

**A Hallway Conference**

Ms. Saitzyk and another 1st grade teacher needed to talk about how to handle recess on a rainy day. As Ms. Saitzyk conferred with her colleague in the hallway, she heard her Spanish-English bilingual students continuing the lesson she had begun. They didn’t miss a beat, and no one was interrupting the lesson. At the same time, the monolingual English students of the other 1st grade teacher erupted into noisy commotion. Ms. Saitzyk wondered whether the difference was related to the expectations of cooperation and group responsibility her students encountered at home (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 108).
Student Storytellers

Students with a collectivist mind-set are often willing to guide their classmates in learning. When Ms. Daley prepared to read *La calle es libre* (The Street Is Free) to her 2nd grade students, some of the students informed her that they already knew the book. “Could you tell the story?” Ms. Daley asked. While Ms. Daley used this opportunity to fill out some forms for the office, six children—self-selected—lined up in front of the class. Each child told part of the story. One girl walked around and showed the pictures in the book to the rest of the class. Other children in the group in front of the class corrected the story as needed. The seated children in the audience seemed genuinely content to be observer-learners rather than leader-participants (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008).

A Cultural Starting Point

If we wish to establish in our classrooms “an inclusive, supportive, and caring environment” (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006, p. 267) that facilitates students’ learning, then we must attend to culture. The examples we use here are from classrooms of mostly Latino students—those whose families came from Mexico or Central America. But students with African, Asian, and American Indian roots often have much in common with these Latino students: Their cultures are in general far more collectivistic than the mainstream U.S. culture (Greenfield, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The individualistic-collectivist framework can be a starting point for teachers’ observations and is just one example of a cultural difference that can influence teaching and learning. Teachers can learn more about their students’ cultures by asking family members about their goals and expectations for their children, visiting students’ neighborhoods, participating in community events, and working closely with parent volunteers. Such experiences can help teachers learn what
values and learning styles are embraced in their students’ communities, which can help them design learning experiences that work with, not against, student cultures.

References


Authors’ note: The seven elementary teachers in our Bridging Cultures Project are Marie Altchech, Catherine Daley, Kathryn Eyler, Elvia Hernandez, Giancarlo Mercado, Amada Pérez, and Pearl Saitzyk. Mrs. Blaine is a pseudonym.

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