Why Teach Tolerance and Appreciation of Diversity?

All children want to belong, to fit in, to be one among a community of learners. Children want to attend schools where they see themselves—in the artwork displayed on the walls, in the faces of those who teach them, in the books they read, and in the textbooks they study.

For too long, however, many teachers used curriculum materials that did not reflect the kaleidoscope of cultures in their classrooms. For too long, many children looked for, but could not find, images of their families and their cultures in the schoolwork they were assigned. For too long, many children were made to feel different and separate. And, unfortunately, all children suffered.

Helping students understand and appreciate diversity—inside and outside the classroom—is not only a worthy goal; it’s an absolute necessity. Students who identify only with the mainstream culture are denied “the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of references that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups” (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1993, p. 195).

Changing Trends

As Shelley Lapkoff and Rose Maria Li (2007) explain in an Educational Leadership article titled “Five Trends for Schools,” several demographic trends in the United States illustrate how our diversity is continuing to evolve.

Our already diverse society is growing even more diverse. In the 1970s, the majority of immigrants to the U.S. were from Europe; today, only 15 percent are from Europe.
Current immigration is primarily from Latin America and Asia. And although immigrants continue to stream into states such as California, New York, Florida, and Texas, many new immigrants are finding their homes in the suburban areas of North Carolina, Georgia, and Nevada (Lapkoff & Li, 2007).

This trend in immigration brings with it advantages and challenges. For example, new immigrants often bring new ideas, energy, and spirit. Children from immigrant families often learn English rapidly, an advantage in “an increasingly multilingual world” (Lapkoff & Li, 2007, p. 11). These same children often assimilate to their new cultures very quickly. An important challenge, however, is that new immigrants need social and educational services, including English as a second language instruction.

In addition to changes within immigration, changes on the home front also affect the need to recognize student differences in the school environment. Research shows changes in recent years in three areas that can greatly influence a child’s life. The marital status of parents, the economic status of families, and parental employment all contribute to a child’s ability to achieve in the classroom (Lapkoff & Li, 2007). Today, more young people live in single-parent households than ever before. But students are also less likely to live in poverty, being raised by parents who are more likely to hold secure employment.

**Cultural Differences in Learning**

Diversity runs deep, and in an article called “Cultures in Harmony,” authors Elise Trumbull and Carrie Rothstein-Fisch (2008) explore the different views that cultures have on learning, including “how [students] should behave; what kinds of interventions can help them meet the school’s expectations; and what roles teacher, student, and parent should play” (p. 63).

They distinguish between two cultural views of learning—an individualistic view and a collectivistic view. These views are summarized in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Collectivistic</th>
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<td>Learning is an individual matter.</td>
<td>Learning is a group process.</td>
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<td>Reflects the mainstream values of European-Americans: independence, individual responsibility, achievement, self-expression, self-esteem.</td>
<td>Reflects the values of many immigrant populations, including Hispanics, Africans, Asians, and American Indians: interdependence of family, responsibility to a group, group well-being and success, and respect of older people.</td>
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When teachers learn to tap into these two sets of cultural skills “in concert,” all students learn and grow (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008, p. 64). For example, in group writing projects and group competitions, students can work on individual skills in collaboration with other students, emphasizing both the individual and collective aspects of learning.

**It Starts with Teachers**

Teachers can lead the way in making their classrooms work for a diverse population by first examining how their own culture affects the way they view students and learning. Additionally, teachers should learn more about their students’ cultures and their families’ expectations for learning. When teachers understand the values and learning styles of a student’s community, teachers are better able to “design learning experiences that work with, not against, student cultures” (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008, p. 66).

And when curriculum reflects the faces of all our people, educators better prepare students to become productive citizens in the global society we all share.