



## Role of teachers in a multicultural classroom: A sensitive approach towards diversity

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### Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the responsibility of the teacher towards the holistic development of his students. In a country like India, teachers are instrumental in developing an integrated nation irrespective of diversity. Classrooms are the places where students gain knowledge and information which generates an eager curiosity to explore the world they live in. A teacher is accountable for leveraging and maximizing teaching methodology in shaping and structuring the student's mindset in a manner that will enable him to establish an identity fearlessly in an ever shrinking world. An effective teacher shoulders the arduous responsibility of interacting with a large number of students as a single unit. He has to fully comprehend that he is dealing with students from dissimilar backgrounds, each with their unique tradition of culture, upbringing, religion, attire and language. Keeping in mind the old adage, "The teacher is no longer a sage on the stage, but a guide by the side", it is crucial to impart quality education that is free of prejudice.

This paper focuses on challenges faced by teachers in the present scenario where ethics should be of paramount importance in nurturing intellectually healthy adults. Teaching outside the confines of caste, creed and religion ensures that students imbibe strong principles which instil in them a lifelong desire towards strengthening the fabric of society that is true to their authentic self. It is our endeavour to explore various strategies in implementing techniques wherein the teachers are a medium who create a neutral environment for the students thereby attaining the desired outcome.

**Keywords:** development, mindset, identity, responsibility, challenges, ethics

### Introduction

Student-teacher bonding is the most sacred and trusted attachment a child develops outside his home. Unquestionably, teacher's place is no less than the parents in a child's life. Teachers are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that inculcates in the students an acceptance of all diverse elements. The environment thus produced is such that the students do not feel threatened by discriminatory thoughts, words or deeds. When a student enters the institution, he is emotionally fragile, vulnerable and desperately anxious to be on an equal footing with his peers. Each one of them has a unique identity built upon the foundation of their cultural background.

Only a sensitive teacher will be able to create a conducive atmosphere where the students can share their exclusive experiences about their ethnic diversity through debates, seminars, conferences and presentations. In this context, the vision of the poet, Rabindra Nath Tagore from *The Gitanjali* appears pertinent:

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments

By narrow domestic walls

Where words come out from the depth of truth".

India is acclaimed for its rich cultural and biological diversity. Our country is a melting pot of languages, castes, creeds, religions, traditions, cultures and attires. When we make our classrooms anti-bias, we help children be proud of their heritage, willing to accept human differences. Undoubtedly, the crucial responsibility of the teacher in the classroom is

bringing down barriers which obstruct free flow of independent thought. A teacher understands that children carry classroom experiences into their adult world and inputs provided in their childhood shapes their personality. When a student perceives that the teacher addresses everyone on equal terms, it instils in them fairness towards all. This is outside of book learning.

Exposing a student to diversity in an empathetic way at a tender age is actually a difficult task for the teachers and should be handled skilfully and tactfully. The origin of diversity arises from a person's name itself and here lies the vital role of teachers in binding these heterogeneous groups into one unit. Ignoring diversity cannot be the preferred solution, rather unravelling the intricacies that go into the making of different cultures can be the inspiration for integrated classrooms.

The teacher is instrumental to a large extent in holding the community together. As students develop an understanding that the core human values of every ethnicity is fundamentally similar, they appreciate the microcosm of the world that is represented in their classrooms. Group discussions are an ideal platform to simulate thinking. When each student is encouraged to share his views, barriers to communication are erased and a healthy exchange of ideas can take place.

Every single child in this enormously diverse and ever-evolving system has the inherent power to provide an invaluable resource for others. Critical thinking is encouraged in classrooms with dissimilar culture which helps them to

better understand the others culture and uniqueness of the element.

A sensitive teacher assists children with recognizing differences, as well as similarities, among their peer group. Allowing children to explore varying cultures creates opportunities for them to see that even when people have different customs and traditions, they often share some common traits too.

Teamwork, Inter-dependency, and decision making are critical in the contemporary scenario. Efforts should be made to assist all students in developing and maintaining social skills. Students learn to accept differences and similarities among people and they grow with one another to create a better world for everyone. They regard others viewpoints and individuality with heightened maturity. The multicultural classroom guides students to have an equal vision towards marginal sections of society in order to develop teamwork and social skills. Their self-esteem is boosted as they are appreciated and accepted for their individuality and perspectives. They feel a sense of self-worth of their traditions and customs rather than alienation. When teaching is sensitively handled during the early impressionable years, it will undoubtedly inspire cultural sensitivity among pupils.

Another outcome of multicultural education is that it encourages cooperative learning and social skills. In this learning arrangement, small groups of students discuss topics and learn to take charge of their own learning. Team spirit, rather than individual competition, is stressed as students work together. Positive interdependence is the goal of cooperative learning. The success of the group depends on each member attaining both the group learning goal and his or her individual learning goal (Putnam, 1993).

The famous book of William Hart 's *Never Fade Away* deals with the multicultural student's issues and problems with great clarity. A teacher's greatest strength lies in his/her ability to bring the students together as a cohesive whole. *Never Fade Away* is a book that portrays this knack in an explicit way. In this he depicts how the unbending rules of bureaucracy can stand in the way of a child's development.

### **Some strategies which a teacher can adopt while interacting with students to achieve harmony in the classroom**

1. A regulatory body comprising of teachers should be formed which sets in place basic codes of conduct to ensure smooth functioning during an academic session. There should be a periodic appraisal of the same.
2. A teacher should possess the foresight to deal with sensitive issues in order to attain the desired structure of the classroom.
3. Controversial queries and remarks must be attended to promptly as any delay in addressing such matters may put the teacher at the risk of being misunderstood.
4. A teacher should step out of the confines of a rigid framework to integrate the classroom through an informal dialogue. This will provide a common platform to students for free exchange of ideas, an opportunity for them to listen actively and respect others' perspectives.
5. The non-judgemental attitude of the teacher will go a long way in restoring equilibrium in the multicultural milieu.

### **Barriers to multicultural education**

Multicultural education is more than cultural awareness. It is an initiative to empower all heterogeneous groups and to ensure curriculum and content. Inapplicability of customs and traditions from place to place is a huge hindrance to establishing multiculturalism. Teachers hesitate to come out from their comfort zone and the rigid and vast syllabus with time constraints creates pressure on the faculty. In addition to this personal prejudice on the teacher's part as a result of her own cultural influences creates an unhealthy environment where multiculturalism cannot flourish or prosper. Tendency to favour the majority in the class results in not being able to relate to the underprivileged which in turn acts as a road block to free flow of ideas. Authors of history text books may present facts in a distorted manner which generates wrong notions about one's heritage and culture.

The multicultural classroom becomes ideal when the teacher encourages student to enhance his personality by offering him a platform which generates an equal educational opportunity that creates an atmosphere where intellectual and emotional aspects are given equal consideration. When the facilitator develops an environment where intellectual superiority is not evaluated on the basis of culture, upbringing, religion, attire or language and highlights the positive aspects of all cultures it will result in an anti-bias classroom. If the archaic and pre-conceived notions do not cloud the innocent mindset of student, It will prepare a fertile ground for nurturing students of tomorrow with a global vision.

The mentor ideally should lead the way by practicing in such a way that a student imbibes by observation. Therefore, a teacher must learn to accept and get along with students from myriad cultures, races and religions in order to produce productive world-class citizens.

The attitude of the teacher towards the students has far reaching effects. A sympathetic approach ensures that the student imbibes the qualities of tolerance and acceptance and takes it forward in his own life. If his personality is scarred by a teacher who conveys contempt with regard to diversity in culture, then the student is sure to be very similar in his adult life. The teacher cannot be too careful in handling a student be it with regards to classroom activities or any issues outside the school. It is impossible that a teacher would have a sound knowledge of all the cultural backgrounds of every child. He / she could make the students more comfortable by encouraging each of them to talk about their particular customs and rituals so that it could be a learning experience for the teacher and the student alike.

Undoubtedly, racial-discrimination and racial shortcomings in education have no place in multiculturalism. When students are taught about different cultures and the importance of each of them in the formation of the society and the world, it creates new perspectives for them and they understand the importance of their lives in forming a better world for the upcoming generation. The core understanding of diverse cultures depends entirely on the facet of its introduction to the students. However, the diverse culture is also responsible for the cultural differences which leads to prejudice and discrimination in the society. So this aspect should be treated and handled with extra care and tenderness, otherwise it can lead to destruction of the system as well. Therefore, it should

be presented and introduced in such a way to the students where they can find different ethnicity, nationalities, languages as a means of bonding. They should appreciate diversity with all its advantages and allow themselves to experience different ways of life and be a part of each other's traditions and behaviours & life style.

Without teacher's intervention and inclination maintaining equilibrium in the classroom cannot be implemented. A student enters the portals of education hoping to become a well-integrated human being with the capacity of finding his rightful place in the world arena. Fulfilling these expectations to the best of his ability is what the teacher needs to create a win-win situation in a classroom consisting of a multicultural background. We as teachers have an obligation towards society in cultivate young minds to becoming rational individuals having the aptitude to judge right from wrong. Thus, *multiculturalism* helps teachers combat stereotypes and prejudicial behaviour in the interest of social justice.

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