

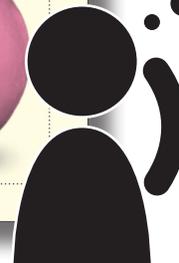
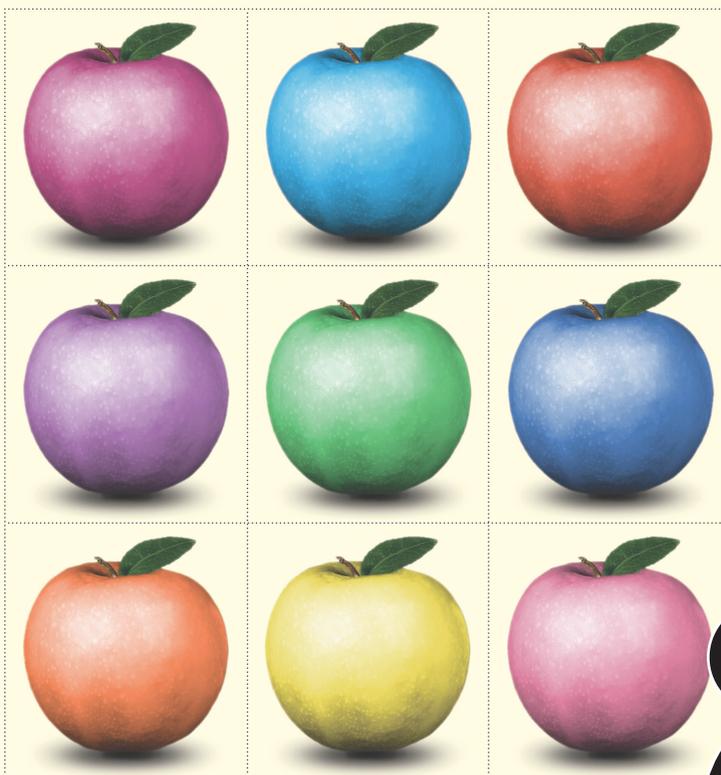
Understanding Cultural Diversity

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Kathy Paterson



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Appendix A: Understanding Cultural Diversity

Throughout my teaching career, my classrooms have included students from dozens of backgrounds and cultures. My work with teachers in training, many from an Aboriginal background, has taught me to better appreciate that students' cultural differences may be a factor in their classroom behavior. Frequently, student teachers, new teachers, or even seasoned teachers faced with a diversity of cultural backgrounds in their classes have asked for guidance in this matter. They want to be familiar with any cultural behaviors or nuances of behavior that might appear "different" from what they have come to expect in a classroom. Below I have identified some of the things that my students from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures have clarified for me. The ideas are generalizations—not all students will exhibit any particular behaviors in a given situation—so be sure to use this appendix as a guideline only. Always remember that students are unique and need to be treated as individuals first.

Eye Contact: (Asian, Aboriginal) Avoiding eye contact is polite and respectful. Although eye contact is deemed important for respectful conversation and attention in European cultures, it is rude in these cultures.

Cooperation: (Southeast Asian, Polynesian, Aboriginal) These children are taught to cooperate, to help one another, to avoid one-upmanship. Therefore they are not "competitive" and can feel threatened by competitive activities.

Tardiness: (Aboriginal) Time has an entirely different meaning to First Nations children; habitual tardiness should be examined through their eyes and a mutual understanding reached.

Risk Taking (learning through mistakes): (Japanese) Teachers typically encourage risk taking, but in some cultures, notably Japanese, correctness is valued more. In Japan, as well as some other Asian countries, students are taught not to guess or take risks. What may appear as refusal to cooperate, may be unwillingness to make a mistake.

"Show-off" Activities, such as Show and Tell (or being first in line ...): (Aboriginal, certain religious groups such as Mennonite and Hutterite) Any behavior that attracts attention to self is discouraged, so teachers must consider the cultural implications of activities that require the child to be other than modest.

Informal Classroom Environment: (European, Asian, Muslim) Canadian teachers are taught to be relatively informal in the classroom, whereas in some cultures school is much more formal. Students from these backgrounds often view our schools as chaotic and loud. They may interpret informality as permission to misbehave.

Responding to Questions/Taking Part in Discussions: (Aboriginal) In Aboriginal cultures, one does not offer advice unless explicitly asked for it. Consequently, these students may be reluctant to answer out in class unless a question is specifically directed to them. As a rule, silence is comfortable for them; this may be seen as insubordination if teachers are unaware of the cultural background for the behavior.

Possession of “Goods”: (Hutterite, other religious groups, Aboriginal, to a certain extent) In some cultures or colonies goods are owned collectively; personal ownership and pride are discouraged. This may have an effect on certain in-class practices where, for instance, children are asked to bring items from home.

Time Needed to Respond: (Aboriginal) Patience is valued by this culture. Teachers may feel discouraged with the time that students (and parents) take to respond to questions or information. European cultures appear to “move too quickly” as far as Aboriginal children are concerned. Rather than being lazy, students may just be behaving in the slow, deliberate manner of their culture.

Social Distance: (Asian, certain religious sects, Muslim) In some cultures, children are taught to keep a social distance between students and teachers. These students are, therefore, uncomfortable with “grand discussions” or informal activities. They may view the more casual relationships between students and teachers, especially in the higher grades, as an invitation to misbehave.

Differing Parental Expectations: (Asian) In some cultures parents equate learning and knowledge with memorization of facts; lots of homework is expected and parents are upset if it is not forthcoming.

Differences in Child-Rearing Practices: (Aboriginal, Muslim) In some cultures, child rearing may be considered permissive by European standards. Teachers may mistakenly feel parents “do not care” or “are not interested” when the child does something inappropriate; instead, the parent(s) may be choosing to allow the child a measure of independence. It is also important to note that relatives in Aboriginal families often function exactly as parents. In other homes, there may be obvious differences in expectations for boys and girls. Teachers must be aware of where parents stand on this issue, especially if a brother and sister are in the same class.

Expression of Emotions: (Asian, Aboriginal, some religious groups) Although expression of emotion is generally encouraged in European culture, many cultures do the opposite. Students from these cultures may seem aloof or reserved, when, in fact, they are following their cultural heritage. It may make the student extremely uncomfortable if the teacher unwittingly insists on an expression of emotion.

Appendix B: When Alternative Activities Are Required

It is important to know if there are students in your class who, for religious reasons, are not allowed to take part in traditional activities such as making Christmas or Halloween crafts or even doing writing tasks based on these days. These students will require alternative authentic activities planned in advance.

Although there may be many diverse beliefs that affect students' participation, I offer a few that seem to crop up the most frequently in our schools.

Groups that cannot participate in traditional activities pertaining to special days such as Halloween and Christmas, or any activities outside the boundaries of their religion, include the following:

- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Evangelical Christians (Halloween)
- Hindu
- Buddhist (no focus on material things; hence, no "gift exchange")
- Sikh

Below is a list of alternatives to traditional holiday-related activities to ensure that some students are not simply doing "busy work" or, worse still, "sitting alone in the library":

- drawing, illustrating symbols of their religions, or symbols or items important to their specific cultures (rather than, for instance, doing Christmas projects)
- preparing presentations about ethnic or cultural celebrations (rather than reading holiday-related materials)
- researching ethnic or culture related topics
- being "big-buddy helpers" in other classes if the home class is involved in some holiday-related activity
- creating posters celebrating ethnic or cultural backgrounds while the rest of the class is creating holiday-related posters, cards, or decorations

Note: It is a good idea to invite all parents to your class early in the term for an informal evening forum to discuss ethnic, cultural, and religious ideas, concerns, and limitations, and brainstorm together for alternative activities in which they would like to see their children involved. In this way you will have an accurate account of "who can do what." This, coupled with a parent take-home questionnaire, will take the guesswork out of your plans and prevent any unnecessary headaches that can crop up simply because you "didn't know."