

How to Improve Teacher Behavior in Multiethnic Classrooms

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Specific negative practices are countered here with positive behaviors that will give practical help to teachers of multicultural groups of children or young people.

Misinformation and stereotypes about ethnic minorities cause prejudices. These, in turn, lead to the development of negative attitudes that produce negative behaviors. When expressed by teachers, these negative behaviors—sometimes direct and conscious, sometimes subtle and unconscious—usually lead to offensiveness and torment for minority students and to oppressive classroom atmospheres that have debilitating effects on the educational process.

Behaviors Derived from Negative Attitudes

Requisite to eliminating these kinds of teacher behaviors and creating classroom climates more conducive to student education and growth is a conscious awareness of these behaviors in their operational form. Following is a list of *operational* teacher behaviors that are distasteful and inappropriate when exhibited in the presence of and in interaction with black and other minority students:

- Labeling or referring to students as "disadvantaged," "culturally deprived," "slow learners," or "underachievers"
- Nonverbal expressions of disgust (for example, shrugging shoulders, throwing up the hands, rolling of the eyes, staring continuously)
- Verbal expressions of disgust with racial overtones (for example, "you people get on my nerves," "you people are dumb")



Photo: Staff



"Understanding factors that influence negative teacher attitudes is a necessary first step in improving teachers' interaction with minority students." Photo: Staff

- Overly restrictive sanctions (for example, whipping excessively, expelling students from the room, having minority students perform meaningless menial tasks)

- Controlling time—allowing only a few seconds within which to respond to a question, not varying time for individual differences

- Restricting interaction—causing and/or allowing ethnic groups to congregate in one corner or on one side of the classroom

- Contesting of wills—shouting matches

- Omission—relegating students to a state of invisibility by ignoring them, not seeing them in a literal and symbolic sense

- Using knowledge, power, status to intimidate ethnic minorities (for example, uttering in disgust statements such as "I got mine . . ."; flaunting economic and social status or well-being; deliberately using words, phrases, and asking technical questions you know students cannot answer)

- Making subtle innuendoes about personal matters such as ma-

terial possessions, clothing, personal hygiene, and physical appearance

- Being paternalistic or maternalistic—acting in a fatherly or motherly manner as if ethnic minority children don't have fathers and mothers

- Patronizing students—being nice or benevolent to students while exhibiting an air of superiority and/or condescension

- Constantly insisting on absolute quietness on the one hand or being too permissive in order to be liked on the other hand

- Establishing and adhering to an etiquette of race relations in the classroom whereby the minority student is low person on the totem pole (for example, expecting to speak last, expecting to be answered last, to sit behind whites, to always take a follower role)

- Using racial slurs such as nigger, darkies, coons, spic, greaser, dago, or chink

- Repressive control of minority students' efforts to participate in class (for example, refusing to recognize students who raise their hands to speak, or to call on them)

- Discriminating between students in terms of kinds of opportunities available to them for classroom interactions (for example, more sustained qualitative academic contact with white students, more managerial and procedural contact with minority students)

- Avoiding physical contact with minority students (for example, rapid retraction of hand when touched by minorities, afraid to touch minority students, always walking to the side of the room away from minorities)

- Patting minority children on their heads in a demeaning, condescending way

- Referring to minority students as "boy," "you all," "your people," "your kind"

- Reacting to students on the basis of stereotypes (for example, blacks are lazy, nasty, shiftless, irresponsible, unskilled, lack appreciation for middle class standards of living; Japanese are brilliant in science courses; Mexican Americans are lazy and lack initiative)

- Constantly criticizing the language usage of minority students

- Criticizing and devaluing behavior, the culture basis of which the teacher does not understand

- Selecting ethnically irrelevant content for study

- Selecting means of presentation of instructional materials not appropriate to minority students' learning styles

- Recommending that students be expelled for minor infractions of school rules (for example, chewing gum or not bringing books, paper, and pencils to class).

Improving Classroom Behaviors

Understanding factors that influence negative teacher attitudes, the

behaviors emanating from those attitudes, and their effects on student self-concepts, behaviors, and academic achievement is a necessary first step in improving teachers' interaction with minority students. Such understanding can be facilitated by sensitizing teachers to their own classroom behaviors and helping them develop skills to systematically record, analyze, and interpret these behaviors.

Classroom interaction observation techniques or schedules similar to those developed by Flanders, and Brophy and Good are very feasible for this purpose. Teachers, with the aid and assistance of their supervisors, principals, and other instructional leaders, can develop modified versions

"In addition to self-awareness and understanding of their own attitudes and values, teachers need also to understand the students they teach." Photo: Staff



of Flanders' or Brophy and Good's instruments for recording their classroom behaviors. Unquestionably, self-awareness of one's own classroom negative attitudes and behaviors toward minority students is a necessary precondition to changing those attitudes and behaviors.

"Equipped with a knowledge of self and a body of information on minority cultures, needs, problems, and behavior problems, teachers will be better able to analyze, synthesize, and integrate the positive elements of both bodies of knowledge into their teaching for the enhancement of themselves and their students."

Once teachers have become aware of their negative attitudes toward minority students and have begun to analyze these attitudes, they can heighten their self-introspective processes by analyzing the possible premises, attitudes, and assumptions underlying the negative behaviors identified. Some variation of James Banks' model of value inquiry can be useful for this purpose. Using this model, they can ask questions about themselves and their behaviors toward minority students such as:

- What values are symbolically represented by my behaviors?
- Which of these values are at conflict with each other and why?
- Where did I acquire these conflicting values?
- Which would be better and more positive values to cultivate about minority groups to replace the negative ones I now have and display in my classroom behaviors?
- If I continue to hold to these negative values identified, what harm can they do (or have done) to my students, as well as myself?
- Which of these values do I actually prefer?

In addition to self-awareness and understanding of their own attitudes and values, teachers need also to understand the students they teach. Requisite to a positive, productive, and effective change in attitudes and behaviors toward teaching minority students is knowledge and understanding of the existence of different cultural traditions, perceptions, and behavioral patterns among black, hispanic, Asian, and other minority groups, that affect these ethnic students' classroom attitudes and behaviors. To achieve insights into minority students' cultures, teachers should:

1. Make more meaningful visits to students' homes; get to know their parents and their life conditions.
2. Visit and get to know the communities in which students live. Participate in community service programs where and when possible on a voluntary basis.
3. Visit community play areas. Get to know students' recreation and community leaders and talk with them. Why not even participate as leaders for student groups on playgrounds, as scout leaders, or as big brothers to some needy minority children?
4. Be daring. Volunteer to serve as an assistant for a day to some needy minority parents.
5. Become acquainted with and try to participate in specially designed courses, programs, and institutes for teachers of nonwhite students, as a means of continuous professional growth and development.
6. Become more critical about what you read, hear, and see regarding blacks and other ethnic minorities.
7. Be creative. Initiate yourself, and/or participate in interracial rap sessions initiated by others. Be an active participant in multiethnic teacher-exchange programs and mul-

tiethnic encounter sessions whenever the opportunity presents itself.

8. Conduct a case study a month on a minority student.

9. Sit in on the classes of other teachers (whatever the ethnic origin) who seem to know, respect, and get respect in return from all of their ethnic students. Share with your colleagues your successes in teaching and interacting with ethnic students.

10. Consult your library, professional journals, and material consultants in your school, and reputable company representatives for advice on "good" multiethnic films, film clips, and total media packages on diverse ethnic groups. Study these well for their accuracy, authenticity, and usefulness in understanding cultural groups.

11. Make critical and formal analyses of historical, sociological, anthropological, and educational research findings that have resulted from the study of black and other minority lifestyles as viable, distinct cultures.

The information obtained from these sources and references will be helpful in conceptualizing and understanding some of the problems and issues faced by minority students in their continuing struggle to identify who they are, where they want to go in life, and the seemingly insurmountable difficulties they face with teachers in classrooms while trying to reach these goals through education.

Equipped with a knowledge of self and a body of information on minority cultures, needs, problems, and behavior patterns, teachers will be able better to analyze, synthesize, and integrate the positive elements of both bodies of knowledge into their teaching for the betterment of themselves and their students. Teachers will also be better equipped to create a more conducive classroom

environment for learning in which they *do not* (a) view minority students as dumb, trouble-making radicals who are threats to their comfort and security; and (b) use the classrooms as prisons, indoctrinating cells, or filters through which to process minority students, to make them come out after twelve years of schooling as ignorant, conformist, politicized, passive citizens who cannot and dare not think for themselves.

The suggestions offered here are by no means panaceas for resolving the problems of educating ethnic minority students in multiethnic classrooms taught by teachers with negative attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and different ethnic origins than those of their students. However, if approached seriously and conscientiously by dedicated teachers, working together and with trained consultants who have similar problems and concerns, these suggestions can form the basis of coherent professional development experiences that will result in markedly improved student-teacher interactions and qualitative education in multiethnic and multiracial classrooms. [E]

References

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