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**What Every Teacher  
Should Know About**  
Diverse Learners



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# 1

## Influences

*A teacher affects eternity. . . . She never knows where her influence stops*

—Anonymous

**T**here is an old story about the new teacher who is so excited about the first day of school. As she gets her room ready for the first day, she envisions a classroom of students eager to learn. Then, when the day finally arrives, she complains that someone sent her the wrong kids, because the students she was sent are not all eager to learn, not all ready to learn, and not all prepared to learn.

As a former administrator of mine used to say, “Parents are sending us the best they have.” We do not have much control over the environment from which our students come, nor do we have much control over some of the adversity they must overcome to be successful. What we do have control over is seven to eight hours of their lives five days a week. During that time, we can give them the hope, the dreams, and the tools to make their lives meaningful. We really do affect eternity!

Diversity refers to differences. Today’s learners are different in many ways, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic

status, gender, learning modalities, cognitive development, social development, and the rate in which they take in information and retrieve it.

Each student in the classroom is unique in some way. A successful teacher recognizes that diversity may affect learning, and thus works toward a classroom in which diversity is celebrated and revered. In such a classroom, there is a conscious effort to help students recognize and respect differences; there is a sense of community. In this book, we will look at how we acquired these students and what we, as teachers, can do to make sure that there is an equal opportunity for success in the classroom.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

To understand students today, it is important to look at the recent past and some of the major influences in the world that have affected schools. This exercise will provide insight into why some of the things we try today do not work and why we cannot teach multimedia kids with the same techniques that we have used with homogeneous classrooms.

### The 1950s

If you had been a teacher in the 1950s, most of your students would have come from families with traditional values. “Mothers stayed home and managed the home and children. Values of the home were reinforced through the church, school, and organizations” (Stratton, 1995). Your school building would probably look something like the factories of that time, and the factory model would certainly influence the way schools were run. Jensen (1998) says that the notion was “that we could bring everyone together in a single place and offer a standardized, ‘conveyor belt’ curriculum.” That works if students are all alike, learn alike, and have no special needs.

Have you ever seen the old *I Love Lucy* episode in which Lucy and Ethel take jobs in a candy factory? That scenario is a

pretty good analogy to the factory model of learning and why it just does not work. Just as Lucy and Ethel could not keep up with the pace as the conveyer belt changed speeds, so many students who have different needs and time restraints on learning cannot keep up either. The overall drop-out rate in the 1950s was around 30%. The labor market gladly took the drop-outs, because at that time the number of jobs for unskilled labor was about 30%.

The 1950s was also a time of major curriculum reform influenced by major events. Some of those events shook up the thinking and changed education forever. Stratton (1995) listed the major effects of the past on students today. Using their list, let's look at some of the influences from the 1950s.

*Television.* Television came into the homes of Americans in the 1950s, and with it came an introduction into a world much larger than the local neighborhood that had controlled their thinking. Students' idols went from the more traditional to the new-era idols of Rock-and-Roll. Until the events of September 11, 2001, in which airplanes were flown into New York's Twin Towers and the Pentagon, our heroes tended to be media idols. The events of that September morning and the subsequent fallout have led to the more traditional, pre-1950s heroes, such as firefighters, police officers, and superheroes.

*Brown v. Board of Education.* The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case changed the precedent of the courts and changed the way we view separate versus equal. Up until this landmark case that went to the Supreme Court, courts had viewed separate facilities for education, public toilets, water fountains—the general way of life—as equal, so long as they were provided to both races. The Supreme Court, however, ruled that separate is *not* equal and ended segregation as a law. I said “as a law,” because after all these years we are seeing a recurrence of segregation today based on poverty in our cities.

It is interesting to note that, while we have moved a long way from the days of separate is equal, we have come full

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## How Are We Diverse?

**D**iversity is differences. There are many differences among students within one classroom, much more within a school. In this global society, it is not unusual to find a school in which there are as many as 30 different languages spoken and in which there is a vast difference among students in terms of socioeconomic standing. In Chapter 1, I listed an important difference among our students in terms of the ability to obtain the goods and services (resources) necessary for success. For the purposes of this chapter, we will look at the following differences:

- Differences in learning styles or modalities
- Differences among socioeconomic groups in regard to how they view the resources that affect schools
- Differences in race/ethnicity

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO EXAMINE DIFFERENCES?

The single most important influence on the climate in the classroom is the teacher. The teacher can create a classroom

where there is chaos and a general disrespect for others or a classroom where there is a sense of community and an appreciation for the gifts that everyone brings to the educational process. The responsibility is not all the teacher's, but a large part of what happens begins with the beliefs and commitment that the teacher brings to the classroom.

As we select materials for our classrooms, we must take into account the differences that usually appear in our schools. What is the racial makeup of the class? Our materials and books should reflect that makeup by using pictures, illustrations, and quotations that bridge the races. Materials and other resources should appeal to both genders and, as teachers, we should be sure that students are called on equally. I was once observing in a middle school science classroom in which the teacher only called on the male students to answer questions. The underlying message was that science was for boys. I also visited a classroom where the minority students' desks were in the hallway. The attitude was blatantly biased.

The most important step in working with a diverse classroom is for the teacher to first examine his or her own attitudes about differences. McCune, Stephens, and Lowe (1999) recommend that teachers make a "concerted effort to avoid stereotypical expectations":

To meet this challenge, teachers can begin by developing good teacher-student relationships. Teachers need to develop an awareness of practices common in various cultures, so that when children behave in a manner consistent with their culture, the behavior will not be misinterpreted. Nevertheless, teachers should discuss with students that some behaviors are acceptable at home but not at school.

Certainly, history has taught us that if we are to narrow the achievement gap in urban schools, we must have teachers who "have a clear sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities and who communicate high expectations to all



students, along with the belief that all students can succeed” (Zeichner, 1996).

## DIVERSITY OF MODALITIES

Sousa (1995) defines modalities as three types of learning styles. While students can learn in any of the three styles, most have a learning preference or style that comes easier for them. This is especially important when working with students who are experiencing difficulty learning. If we teach and re-teach using the same learning style that is not compatible with a student’s mode of learning, the chances are that we will not reach that student.

Different learning styles and modality preferences tend to run in various ethnic and cultural groups. For example, students from the inner city tend to be more hands-on, kinesthetic learners. This reflects the culture from which they come, which relies on learning by doing. In contrast, there are cultures (particularly some Eastern cultures) in which students learn by listening. A teacher who will be successful with students in urban schools where there is a mixture of cultures will use various tactics for teaching that include a variety of resources. Such a teacher does not rely on only one modality or tactic for teaching, but provides information in a variety of contexts. As Zeichner (1996) says, successful teachers “focus instruction, guiding students to create meaning about content in an interactive, collaborative learning environment” and “provide a scaffolding that links the academically challenging and inclusive curriculum to cultural resources that students bring to school.”

Society tends to identify intelligence by looking only at those who can take in information quickly, process it efficiently, and retrieve it from long-term memory when needed. Sprenger (2002) notes that students who take in information slowly but retrieve it quickly are usually labeled as overachievers. Students who take in information quickly but retrieve it slowly are often labeled as underachievers.