



## *Classroom Tips for Non-Sexist, Non-Racist Teaching*

The following suggestions are adapted from Myra and David Sadker's best selling introductory textbook, *Teachers, Schools and Society* (©McGraw Hill, 2005), now in its seventh edition.

### **Classroom Organization**

**Segregation** Avoid segregated seating patterns or activities. Sometimes teachers segregate: "Let's have a spelling bee—boys against the girls!" Other times students segregate themselves. Gender, race or ethnic groups that are isolated alter the dynamics of the classroom and create barriers to effective communication among students, as well as obstacles to equitable teaching. If necessary, you will need to move students around to create a more integrated class. Knowledgeable teachers know there are times when children need to be in same language, gender or similar clusters. If there are only two or three students of a certain group in a class, separately they can actually increase the sense of isolation. Diversity and good judgment are both important as teachers group and organize students.

**Mobility** Students sitting in the front row and middle seats receive the majority of the teacher's attention. This is because the closer you get to students, the more likely you are to call on them. If you move around the room you will get different students involved. By the way, students are mobile too. You may want to change their seats on a regular basis to more equally disperse classroom participation.

**Cooperative Education** Collaboration, rather than individual competition, is a social norm for many groups including African Americans, Native Americans, and females. When cooperation is less valued, research suggests that inequities emerge, especially when students choose their own partnerships. For instance, in cooperative learning groups, girls tend to assist both other girls and boys, while boys are more likely to help only other boys. Boys get help from everyone in the group, but girls must make do with less support. In addition, some students (usually boys) may dominate the group, while others (usually girls) are quiet. It is a good idea to monitor your groups, in order to intervene and stop these inequitable patterns.

**Displays** Check your bulletin boards, your displays, your textbooks. Are women and other underrepresented groups evident? Should you find resources to supplement materials and create a more equitable classroom climate? Do you remember the phrase, "If the walls could speak"? Well, in a sense they do. What messages are the classroom walls and curriculum sending to your students?

## Cultural Cues

***Eye Contact*** Teachers sometimes assume that children's non-verbal messages are identical to their own. But, many factors can change the meaning of "eye" messages. A teacher's respectfully stated request to "Look at me when I am talking to you," anticipates a student will feel comfortable with the request. In fact, many Asian-American, Pacific Islander or Native American children, lower their eyes as a sign of respect. For other children, lowered eyes is a sign of submission or shame, rather than respect. Consider the background of your students. Even silent eyes speak many languages.

***Touching and Personal Space*** Our personal cultural history contributes to how "touchy" we are and how we reach out and touch others. Many Southeast Asians feel it is spiritually improper to be touched on the head. A similar touch, on an African-American child's head, may be perceived as demeaning, rather than kind. Getting close or even "right up in someone's face" can be threatening, or caring. Some teachers, worried that any touch may be misconstrued as sexual harassment, avoid touching students at all. Yet, we know that touch which supports learning can be a powerful and positive force.

Teachers need to be conscious and culturally sensitive when being near or touching students. Let students know you will respect their non-verbal comfort zones. In fact, many teachers "read the need" of a child, observing students' use of touch and space.

***Teacher-Family Relationships*** Students, depending upon their heritage, view teachers with varied degrees of attachment. Hispanics may include the teacher as an extension of family, with high expectations for contact and closeness. Asian Americans may seem more formal, or even distant, evidencing respect for adults and the teacher's role. Parents from certain cultural groups may see the teacher's job as independent of parental influence, so conferences or phone calls may appear unwanted or awkward. Wealthy parents may relate to teachers as subordinates, part of a hardworking staff that serves their child's interests. The teacher's goal is to expand relationship skills and relate effectively with diverse student families and cultures.

## Interaction Strategies

***Calling on and Questioning Students*** Do not rely on the "quickest hand in the West," which is usually attached to a male. Relying on the first hand raised will skew the pattern of classroom participation. Be aware that some students will feel intimidated anytime they are called upon. Whether it is a lack of English language skill, a personal power strategy to shun the teacher's control or even a sign of respect, some students work to escape teacher contact. Asking a teacher for help can suggest a lack of understanding, and may well be avoided by Asian-American and Native American children.

Develop other strategies for student participation besides hand raising—for example, writing each student's name on a card and using the cards to select students. Or, set an

expectation for full participation then call on students who don't raise their hands. Instead of a few students "carrying" the class, all students will be pulled into the learning process.

***Wait Time 1*** Wait time can be a big help in promoting equitable participation. Giving yourself 3 to 5 seconds before you call on a student allows more time to deliberately and thoughtfully choose which student to call on. The extra wait time also allows you more time to develop an answer. Research indicates that many females, students of color and limited English speakers particularly benefit from this strategy.

***Wait Time 2*** Give yourself more wait time *after* a student speaks, as well. Research shows that boys get more precise feedback than girls do. Waiting will give you the opportunity to think about the strengths and weaknesses of a student's answer, to be more specific in your reaction, and to provide all students with more specific feedback as well.

***And by the way.*** . . . these tips are not meant to be secret. Explain why you are working to include all students in class discussions. Students need to learn how important it is for them to effectively participate in school and beyond. With knowledge and practice, teachers and their students can expand multicultural understanding!

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