Diversity in the Family and Consumer Sciences Classroom: Teaching and Learning Strategies

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The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) classroom is a perfect place to address issues of diversity and present divergent views of individuals, families, and communities. This article presents a variety of creative teaching strategies that promote teaching for and with diversity. Allison (2003) explored diversity in the FCS classroom and identified ten implications for FCS teachers. The strategies and techniques suggested in this article will address three of the implications: learn about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the students they teach; implement sound, research-based strategies that recognize the needs, strengths, and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and culture; and incorporate culturally relevant curriculum materials and instructional aids.

A young girl, who grew up in a small Western town, lived in a family that had a staple food that the mother prepared almost every day for lunch; a peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwich. She grew up eating this sandwich, and assumed the rest of the world’s people did, too. It was not until she left home to attend college that she learned otherwise. One day, not liking the main course in the dormitory’s cafeteria, she went to the condiment bar and made herself a sandwich. The looks on the faces of her university friends told her that the rest of the world did not eat peanut butter and mayonnaise. That event changed the way she viewed her world. She could not help but wonder what other things in her life, things she assumed to be the norm, were unique to her family. What were the things that other people had in their lives that were unique to them? If peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches were an accident of birth, what other circumstances were also accidental? Religion? Gender? Race? Social customs?

In an isolated world, the young woman might have never discovered that peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches were unique. The world is no longer isolated, however, every day people interact with others from around the world through both physical and cyber travel. Thereby, daily classrooms become more diverse.

In 2005, the United States had a population of nearly 300 million citizens (U.S. Census, 2007a). Caucasians and non-Hispanic individuals accounted for 69.4% of those citizens, African Americans accounted for 12.7% and Hispanics 12.6%. Projections for the next 40 years are for the percentage of Caucasian citizens to decrease to 50% while African Americans will increase to 14.6% and Hispanics to 24.4% (U.S. Census 2007b). There will no longer be a clear ethnic majority in the United States. Cultural diversity will continue to be a reality in the lives of citizens and within the classroom atmosphere.

It is important to recognize that there are two types of culture – overt and covert. Overt culture consists of “established behavioral patterns that can be explicitly identified and studied”. Covert culture is not as easily recognized, but “regulates one's daily life unconsciously. Learning
how to talk and walk, how to move one's body and make facial expressions, and most of all, how
to think and feel, is so deeply ingrained in humans that they are rarely aware of these processes”
(Haung, 1997). Overt culture consists of food, clothing, and artifacts and is about 10% of culture.
Ninety percent of culture (covert) is comprised of the beliefs, values, and understandings that are
hidden beneath cultural norms. These characteristics are seldom recognized, communicated or
understood (Dr. Charles Payne, Assistant Provost for Diversity, Ball State University, FCS 103
class presentation, March, 2008).

Nationally, only 14% of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educators are from
minority populations (National Education Association, 2002). In a study by Rehm and Allison
(2006), Family and Consumer Sciences teachers were surveyed to determine their response to the
culturally diverse nature of their students. “The majority of teachers in this study did not indicate
that they adapted their subject matter, reading materials, or classroom” in response to the cultural
diversity of their students. Adams, Sewell, and Hall (2004) determined that FCS teachers believe
that cultural pluralism and diversity should be preserved and recognized as a positive educational
resource; it is appropriate for students to feel pride in their cultural heritage; students should
learn to respect themselves and others; and diverse cultures make positive contributions in our
society. Because of these beliefs, it is recommended that FCS teachers gain education and
training in developing and infusing teaching strategies that emphasize the needs of diverse
learners in their classes and programs. FCS teachers may also need assistance with developing
instructional practices that appeal to diverse student populations. FCS teachers who feel
uncomfortable when dealing with diverse student populations need to obtain additional
educational guidance, preparation, and sensitivity regarding multiculturalism and diversity.

Because the FCS curriculum applies to all aspects of the lives of individuals, families,
and communities, the FCS classroom is a perfect place to address issues of diversity and present
divergent views (Rehm & Allison, 2006). Some strategies are commonly called “foods, flags,
and festivals” approaches because they explore the superficial aspects of culture (Goldman Sachs
Foundation, 2009). While looking at the celebrations and traditional food dishes of other cultures
is an excellent starting point for addressing diversity in the classroom, it is only the tip of the
iceberg for classroom experiences. In contrast to the “foods, flags, and festivals” approach,
Reese (2005) identifies the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching as promoting positive
perspectives on parents and families, communication of high expectations, learning within the
context of culture, student-centered instruction, culturally-mediated instruction, reshaping the
curriculum, and using the teacher as a facilitator.

This article will present a variety of creative teaching strategies and techniques that
promote teaching for and with diversity and encourage an exploration of the covert side of
diversity. The strategies were developed by Family and Consumer Sciences secondary teachers,
enrolled in a masters-level diversity course at Utah State University. The teachers reported the
success of the strategies in their own classrooms. They did not, however, test the level of success
in their students. Allison (2003) explored diversity in the FCS classroom and identified ten
implications for FCS teachers. The strategies and techniques suggested in this article will address
three of those implications:
1. Learn about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the students they teach.
2. Implement sound, research-based strategies that recognize the needs, strengths, and
   experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
3. Incorporate culturally relevant curriculum materials and instructional aides.
Learn about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the students they teach

Due to the nature of the subject matter and focus on the perennial problems of family life (Brown & Paolucci, 1979) and the personal interactions within the laboratory setting, FCS teachers have the opportunity to learn more about their students than other teachers. Woolfolk-Hoy (2007) suggests that, to be effective, teachers must first know their students, then respect them, and finally teach them. Classroom activities that allow the teachers to learn more about the students promote this idea. The following teaching strategy is designed to help the teacher gain knowledge about the students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Family Fun Field Day</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>Multiculturalism, Diversity, Family Relationships, Family Customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials Needed</td>
<td>Students’ families who participate will be asked to bring the needed materials or contact the teacher with a list of items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>Students will play games from a variety of cultures. Students will reflect on the games, focusing on the similarities, differences, and the purposes of games in a culture. Please see the following website: Multicultural, Cross-cultural * Intercultural Games &amp; Activities <a href="http://wilderdom.com/games/MulticulturalExperientialActivities.html">http://wilderdom.com/games/MulticulturalExperientialActivities.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>1. Invite members of the students’ families to school to share games from their culture.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Encourage students to help explain the origins of each game and how it is played.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Following the activity, ask the students to reflect on their experience either in writing or in a class discussion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>Families could be asked to share toys, costumes, oral history, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion Questions</td>
<td>1. Why do people play games?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. In what way are the games from different cultures similar? In what way are they different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How is the culture reflected in the game?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. What games do you play that represent your culture?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variations
Families could be asked to share toys, costumes, oral history, etc.


Implement sound, research-based strategies that recognize the needs, strengths, and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and cultures

Implementing appropriate teaching/learning strategies can support the need for teachers to know and respect the individual differences among students (Woolfolk-Hoy, 2007). In order to plan lessons that support and use the differences among students, teachers may need to explore cultural learning styles and supportive strategies. It is also important to provide students with opportunities to learn and be assessed in a variety of ways in order to acknowledge and show respect for different learning preferences. The following strategy provides experiences that reflect this research approach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>If the Shoe Fits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>Multiculturalism, Diversity, Community-building, Knowledge of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials Needed</td>
<td>A display of a variety of shoes. The variety stimulates discussion. However, a single shoe will work as a discussion-starter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Objective**  
The student will explore diverse cultural perspectives as they relate to clothing, child-care, home, and employment.

**Activity**  
1. The teacher will place a display of shoes in a prominent place at the front of the classroom.
2. The teacher will begin with a simple question: “What do you think of when you see a shoe?” (color, style, materials, appearance, care, origin). Shoes may send messages, list the students’ responses and briefly discuss them.

**Variations**  
The strategy is called “Re-experiencing the Ordinary” and can be done with a wide variety of objects such as toys or food items.

**Discussion questions**  
1. What might a shoe represent to a middle school student? (prestige, belonging, embarrassment). Having the “right” kind of shoes gives a sense of belonging. Shoes are also a way of expressing individuality.
2. What might the shoes represent to someone from another country (customs, rituals, practices)? In some cultures people remove their shoes when they enter a home. Some might believe that it is healthier for a child not to wear shoes. Others may come from a place where children pick up parasites if they go barefooted.
3. What might the shoe represent to someone on public assistance? (discrimination, inferiority, need). A mother on welfare might buy formal shoes and insist that her child wears them all the time so people do not think she cannot afford to take care of the child. Shoes are often seen as a status symbol.
4. How might this discussion apply in your classroom? Everyone makes choices based upon particular backgrounds. Is there something about a class member that you don’t understand? Discussing these issues will help you see the logic of others, and will help them see how you make decisions as well.

Adapted from Thompson, N. (2007). FCSE 6240, Diversity in Education. Unpublished document, Utah State University, Logan: UT.

**Incorporate culturally relevant curriculum materials and instructional aides**

Like the peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwich example, people grow up with materials that are specific to their cultures. It is important to incorporate culturally relevant materials for two reasons: to allow unfamiliar, various materials to become familiar to the students; and to help students recognize that their personal way of doing things may seem unusual or awkward to someone from a different culture. All materials used in the classroom should be reviewed for cultural bias. The materials are part of the “hidden curriculum” and convey a message about diversity without the teacher doing so in an intentional manner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>What Are We Selling?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>Consumer economics, Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials Needed</td>
<td>A variety of food products that exhibit advertising that may be interpreted as discriminating or racially stereotyping. Examples may include Aunt Jemima Pancake Mixes or Syrup, Mama Maria Tortillas, Uncle Ben’s Rice, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Objectives**
The students will become aware of products that promote stereotyping in their labels or advertising. The students will reflect on the stereotypes that are a part of their personal view of the world.

**Activity**
1. Referring to the display or products, ask the students for feedback about their opinions concerning the appropriateness of these food labels.
2. End the discussion with a journal entry or reflection paper on the stereotypes that are a part of their personal view of the world.

**Variations**
If food items are not available, prepare a collage of food advertisements that could be considered to promote stereotyping.

**Discussion questions**
1. How do these items promote stereotyping?
2. What are the problems that occur with stereotyping?
3. Why do you think food manufacturers and advertising companies use stereotyping to promote their products?
4. What are the stereotypes that are prevalent in your school? When asked about “(use the names of typical groups within your school such as ‘cheerleaders, jocks, geeks, Goths, etc.’)” what do you think?
5. Are there members of those groups in this classroom? After getting to know each other, are your stereotypes an accurate description of these persons? In what ways are these individuals unique rather than exactly like the stereotype we have?
6. How do others stereotype you? How does that make you feel?


Some teaching strategies are effective in addressing all three implications discussed in this article. The following strategy assists the teacher in learning about the cultural backgrounds of the students; recognizes the needs, strengths, and experiences of the students; and incorporates culturally relevant curriculum materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Strategy</strong></th>
<th><strong>Music to Make Us Think</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topics</strong></td>
<td>Multiculturalism, Interpersonal Relationships, Communication, Management, Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materials Needed</strong></td>
<td>CD player or computer A copy of Kermit the Frog’s “It Isn’t Easy Being Green” (<em>Muppet Hits</em> album)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
<td>The students will share ideas, reflect, and develop an appreciation for the perspective of others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Activity** | 1. Play the selected song. It may be helpful to display the lyrics of the song so that students can read them as well as hear them.
2. Lead a class discussion focusing of the meaning of the song to each student.
3. Have students complete a journal entry or reflection paper on their personal reaction to the song and the class discussion. |
| **Variations** | Other effective songs include “Walk a Mile in My Shoes” performed by Elvis Presley and “Colors of the Wind” performed by Vanessa Williams. |
### Discussion questions

1. What is the song saying to you?
2. How would you view the world if you were a frog?
3. Who are the “frogs” in your school? How do you think his/her views of the school differ from your view? If you cannot answer this question, maybe it is time that you sat down with a “frog” and talked to them about their experiences and perceptions!


As the faces of America and the FCS classroom change, FCS teachers need creative teaching strategies that celebrate diversity. These strategies should help teachers learn about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the students they teach; implement sound, research-based strategies that recognize the needs, strengths, and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and cultures; and incorporate culturally relevant curriculum materials and instructional resources. Many people wear cultural blinders due to ignorance of the diversity that surrounds them. It is the duty of educators, to first remove cultural blinders, then help students see the light and power of appreciating the diverse world.

### References


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