

Promoting Cultural Awareness in the Classroom

By Heather Howiszak

I recently participated in a project in which I designed several multicultural lesson plans about Indian language, culture and customs. As I was writing these lessons, I also was assisting a fourth-grade teacher who had a student from India in her classroom. I was able to make connections between my lessons and my classroom. The experience also made me appreciate, first hand, how important it is to expose children to different ways of life.

In my fourth grade classroom, I conducted a lesson on India. I had the students read some information and find similarities between our American culture and India's culture. One example of a similarity is the use of animals for entertainment or on holidays. During the lesson, we learned that camel racing is popular in India. The students drew parallels to our culture by discussing dog-races, sled-dog races, Groundhog Day, Thanksgiving, and Easter. All of the students were very interested in finding connections between the two cultures, especially the student from India. They enjoyed seeing how people who live so far away can still share common interests.

As I continued my lesson on India, I was able to see how important it is for students of diverse backgrounds to share their differences. The Indian boy was extremely excited to share all his extra knowledge about India. When we discussed the Taj Mahal, he told how he had been there many times and he explained the monument's importance. The other students were very interested in this additional information and asked more questions to gain further understanding. The students were excited to learn from a peer. I went from being their teacher to becoming a student of the new knowledge presented. It was a learning experience for everyone.

While involved on this project, I discovered how much I have to learn about the world around me and how important it is to show an appreciation for diversity. At the beginning, I knew very little about India and had to do a lot of research. Seeing how excited and engaged my Indian student was helped me appreciate the value of presenting world cultures to children in the classroom.

Children need to learn that the way they live is not any better or any worse than how others live. We must expose them to new ideas, people, and cultures. Cultural differences within a classroom also need be discussed. My fourth grade students have become more accepting of their fellow student because he is able to express who he is and how he is different yet similar to them.

Working on the lesson plans and supporting a fourth grade classroom helped me understand how ignorant many people are about others. We all need to work on embracing differences ourselves before we can help the children in our life

become accepting of all people. As Mahatma Gandhi once said: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

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