Diversity in the Classroom

An Honor’s Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Annie Schrader

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Dixie Denton

Ball State University
Muncie Indiana

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Abstract

Diversity in the classroom is extremely important. Having diverse groups of students in classes, diverse materials, and diverse teaching methods included in the classroom provide many benefits to students. I decided to implement some of these things in my classroom this semester. I discuss the benefits that diversity in the classroom has on students as well as some of the things I implemented and the effects I saw.

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Process Analysis Statement

The process of creating this thesis was one that was extremely meaningful for me as a future educator. I was excited to learn about diversity in the classroom and to try some things with my students to increase diversity in my classroom. The process of this project was divided into several different parts. The first was doing research about diversity in the classroom. The second was implementing diverse materials and teaching strategies in the classroom. The third was observing and analyzing the reactions of the students to these materials and strategies. When I was done doing these things, I then sat down to write my thesis and put all of that information together in one place. That is the overall timeline for my thesis. The process took the entire semester to complete.

After I had decided my topic for my thesis, the first step in completing it was to learn what research says about diversity in the classroom. I went to online databases and google scholar and found some studies that were relevant to my project about diversity in the classroom. I read through the studies to look for some of the benefits of including diversity in the classroom. There were six studies or journal articles that I used to learn about diversity in the classroom. I noted benefits to having diversity included in the classroom so that I would be able to observe if my students experienced these benefits. Before I did anything, I wanted to know what other people had said about diversity in the classroom.

I then had to decide how I was going to implement diversity in the classroom so that my students could reap the benefits. I had to figure out the feasibility of some of the things I wanted to do. I was originally going to do a survey to gauge how my students
felt they saw themselves in my classroom. After getting to my class of first graders and gauging their ability levels, I realized that the validity of my survey would not be strong. My students would have a hard time comprehending the questions and answering them in an appropriate way because of their age. The fact that it was only a group of 23 students, the majority of whom were the same race, also did not bode well for the validity of my survey, so I decided to drop it after discussing this with my advisor. I also had to figure out what my cooperating teacher was willing to let me try in her classroom. I did not want to try anything that she did not approve of. In the end, after giving it quite a bit of thought, I decided to add diverse books, diverse videos and photos, diverse learning strategies, diverse names in the lessons, and I decided to speak Spanish to my students when I could. Those were the feasible ways that I decided that I could add diversity into my classroom.

After I decided how I was going to include diversity in the classroom, I had to plan the implementation. I had to create lessons that used multiple diverse instructional strategies and diverse characters and names. I had to figure out what books I was going to use for my read-alouds, how I was going to acquire the books, and the questions I wanted to ask. I had to find diverse videos and photos online that matched what we were learning. All of this took time. I had to find friends or colleagues who had the books, I had to spend time on YouTube looking for videos, I had to write lesson plans and make sure that my instructional strategies were varied across the semester. There was a lot to think about as I prepared.

The next step was to implement the materials that I had prepared. I taught the lessons that I had created that included diverse materials and instructional strategies. I
read the books, showed the videos, and implemented all of the materials and strategies. I did this over the course of the semester and with a variety of subjects. I would teach the lessons that included diversity, exposing my students to the diverse materials or the diverse instructional strategies that I had prepared. While I was implementing all of the diverse materials and instructional strategies, I also had to gauge student reactions to the lessons being taught. I had to see how they responded to the questions, and observe how they were working and what they were saying. I wanted to know how they were benefiting from all of the things I was implementing, so I gauged their reactions and responses to see what I could discover. I wanted to know if I could see the benefits that I had read about in my students.

The last step of the process that I needed to do for this project was the actual writing of my thesis. I had to put together all of the information I had acquired throughout the semester about diversity in the classroom and the effect it has on students. I had to combine the research that I had done beforehand, how I implemented diversity in my classroom, and my observations of the student reactions into one coherent body of work. I had to figure out how to put all of this together in a paper in a way that flowed and made sense. I started with an outline and separated the paper into parts to make the writing more organized. I then found quotes from the studies that I read. I wrote my thesis part by part in this way. That is how the writing process went for me throughout the time I was writing this thesis. The paper was very broken down and written in chunks. That made things easier for me to process as I wrote and for me to make the writing more organized.
Thesis

As a future educator, catering to a diverse group of students is extremely important to me. It is important that students see themselves reflected in the classroom and feel welcome. Students benefit from having a diverse class and from having diverse materials being included in the classroom. One of the benefits that students gain when diversity is included in the classroom is that they feel welcome in the classroom and see themselves reflected in the class itself and the materials. Another benefit is that they become more accepting of their peers in the classroom and of differences in people. Students also benefit from experiencing different learning strategies and styles, which increases their academic levels. These are some of the benefits that students experience when they have a diverse classroom and diverse materials and instructional strategies are included in instruction.

An important thing to note is that as important as including diverse materials and having a diverse classroom are, it is also important that teachers take the time to teach in diverse ways. Students need to have “emotionally supportive and instructionally effective interactions between teachers and children that are consistently associated with better cognitive and social outcomes for children” (Reid, & Kagan, 2015, p. 9). The students will not reap the benefits of having diverse materials and a diverse class if teachers are not catering to their students’ needs. Teachers need to be using a variety of instructional strategies and teaching styles so that each student can learn in ways that are effective for them. All students learn in a variety of ways, no matter how diverse a classroom is in other ways. There is a diverse range of ways that students can learn and it is important that teachers recognize and cater to that. “...Although diversity is
linked with student development in theory, educators must create certain conditions to maximize the potential for learning...In other words, placing students of diverse backgrounds in a classroom is a necessary but insufficient condition for learning” (Hurtado, 2001, p.4). There needs to be a combination of diverse people, materials, and teacher effort to incorporate diverse teaching methods in order for students to benefit from diversity being included in the classroom.

When students have a diverse classroom that includes diverse materials as well as having a teacher who uses a variety of instructional strategies, they feel more welcome in the classroom and they see themselves reflected in the class as well. It is important that the “diversity that is part of American society needs to be reflected in the student body, faculty and staff, [and] approaches to teaching...” (Hurtado, 2001, p.3). When students feel welcome in the classroom, they are going to be more willing to do work. They are going to want to come to school and learn. This helps them improve academically. When students see themselves reflected in the classroom, it helps them to know what they are capable up. They are going to work to achieve when they see characters who look like them or pictures of people who look like them. Anything positive that the students see in the classroom that they can relate to is going to make them feel included and make them more likely to put in the effort necessary to achieve success.

Another benefit that students receive when diversity is a part of the classroom is that they become more accepting of their peers in the classroom and of differences in people in general. They gain empathy. The think about the feelings of others. According to a study about inclusive classrooms: “Social acceptance of children with diverse
abilities is enhanced by the frequent small-group work nature of their instruction in inclusive classrooms. Children get to see beyond the disability when working in small groups, and begin to realise that they have much in common with children with disabilities” (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2011, p. 11-12). When students learn about differences in the classroom because they have a diverse class or diverse materials are included, they are able to learn more about the people who are different. Students become “more comfortable talking about diversity and being around people who [are] different than they [are]” (Booker, Merriweather, & Campbell-Whatley, 2016, p. 6). They are able to learn about the ways in which they are similar and focus on those. They accept the differences in their peers and others.

Students also experience a variety of learning strategies and styles which helps them academically when their classroom is diverse and their teacher is responsive to their needs. Students learn in a variety of ways and at different times. It is important that they are learning in “an environment which considers a variety of learning strategies and levels” (Bartz, & Bartz, 2018, p. 3). When teachers use different styles they are able to learn in a way that is most effective to them. Having a teacher use a variety of methods helps all of the students in the classroom. Not only are students learning themselves, but they are able to experience how other students learn best. They are getting exposed to diverse learning styles, as well as being taught in a way that is most beneficial to them. Teachers use “classroom management skills, teaching strategies, instructional methods, and planning, processes...[to] augment, facilitate, and/or guide students in the various domains of human development” (López, 2007, p. 30). All of this
helps students academically. Learning in a way that works for them, helps students to retain the information and perform more successfully in school.

After having learned about diversity in my education classes, and doing some research of my own, I decided I wanted to implement some diverse materials in my classroom. I knew I was not going to be able to control how diverse the classroom I went into was, but I knew that I could add some diverse materials as I was teaching. I wanted to see for myself the impact that some of these things could have in the classroom. I was hoping that I could give my students some of the benefits that I had read including diverse materials could bring. I also wanted to teach using a variety of instructional strategies so that all of my students would be receiving the information in a way that was effective for them.

One reason that it was important to me to do this project this semester was the fact that I was in a diverse classroom. In my class of 23, there were 22 English language learners and 6 students receiving special education services. The school I was in also had many students who have low socioeconomic status. Because the group of students I had was so diverse, it was important to me to figure out how I could best serve them. I wanted them to feel welcome in my classroom and to implement the diversity they already had as a part of the classroom so that they would be able to reap the benefits of having a learning community like theirs.

As a part of this project, during my teaching this semester I added diversity into my classroom in various ways. This diversity was especially apparent during my unit plan when I was the person doing the majority of the teaching. I used books representing different groups of people and videos that included a diverse cast of
people where I could. I also added in diverse names to the word problems that we practiced every day in math and the stories we wrote in writing. In addition to these things, I would occasionally speak to my Spanish speakers in Spanish when there was the opportunity for it.

The books, in my opinion, were the easiest way to incorporate diversity into the classroom. There are plenty available on myriad topics if you are willing to look for them. Seeking out diverse books is not hard, but requires most teachers to look beyond their classroom library to find materials. I borrowed many books from other teachers that covered topics that I wanted to discuss. The books usually touch on diverse topics in a developmentally appropriate way, and the students find them entertaining as well. They fit easily into the busy schedule of the school day. In my class, we hold a read-aloud every morning so these books were able to be used during this time. The students were very engaged in the books.

Not only were the books the easiest to incorporate into the day, but they also seemed to be the most effective in helping my students to see themselves in the classroom. My students seemed more animated and engaged when they turned to talk to each other in response to questions about the books that I read. I heard them tell stories about how they related to the books as they talked to each other. They also seemed more willing to volunteer answers when asked about the books that were read. Some students who usually did not volunteer answers answered the questions that were asked about these books. This showed me that including diverse literature is extremely important.
The first book I used was *Say Hello!* By Rachel Isadora. This book focuses on language and racial diversity. It is about a Latina girl who goes on a walk and says hello to various neighbors in their respective languages. I had students who either spoke the languages she was saying hello in, or they at least knew the word for hello in that language. They were excited when I came to a language they knew. They were excited to share their knowledge, and some whose languages were not included in the book wanted to share how they say hello. Their excitement showed that they were excited to be represented in the classroom.

The next book I used was *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña. This book focuses on low socioeconomic status and while it does not discuss race, it has racially diverse characters. It is about a little boy and his grandmother who have to take the bus to a soup kitchen after leaving their church. It shows how the boy struggles with the fact that other people have some things that he does not. His grandma helps him to see the things that he has. My students told less personal stories that connected to this story, but they were still engaged. They did a good job of putting themselves in the shoes of another during our discussions. I also know there are students in my class who live in poverty who hopefully connected to the story even if they did not verbally state that connection. I think topics that are more sensitive or perceived as more embarrassing such as homelessness or low socioeconomic status may make students more reluctant to share, especially at first.

*The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin* by Julia Finley Mosca was the next book that I used. This book showcased a scientist with autism. It told the story of Dr. Temple Grandin and her struggle with school and thinking
differently and her success as a scientist. Again, my students were engaged in this story. They asked questions about how she thought and why. They talked about times where they had felt different like Temple did. There were students who talked about how they think differently and shared what makes them unique. I was glad they were able to connect to the book in this way.

Another book I used was *Mixed: A Colorful Story* by Arree Chung. This book focuses on race, particularly mixed races, as well as just generally being accepting of differences. The story does this all without mentioning people at all. It talks about how three colors started fighting and turned against each other. It shows how eventually, the colors decide they do not want to fight anymore and they mix to create new colors. The students were engaged when we talked about how it feels to be fighting with someone and what it feels like when you forgive and when you create something new. The students again were full of personal stories of times where they were fighting with someone and then reconciled. Some even had stories of new things that had come from this argument. All of these discussions worked to foster empathy among the students in my class.

*We Came to America* by Faith Ringgold was another of the books that I used this semester. This focused on immigrants and other people who came to the United States. It talked about the reasons why they came to our country and showcased the diverse group of people who live here. Many of the families of my students have recently come to the United States, and while they did not share personal stories about how they came to America, I hope that they saw some of themselves in the book. They were asked questions about how it would feel to leave the place you come from and were able to
take the perspective of someone who moved from their home, even if they had never
done so. Even if they cannot directly connect with the experiences in the story, they
were able to put themselves in the place of someone who has had these experiences
which is an important thing.

One of the other books that I used was *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson.
This book addressed low socioeconomic status and the effects of bullying. The story
discusses a girl who comes to a new school and is left out even though she tries to
make friends. She is portrayed as having less money than the other children in the
school. Eventually, the girl moves away and one of the other girls feels bad that she
treated her so poorly. The students were able to relate well to the feeling of being left
out. They all had experiences to share. As I mentioned, low socioeconomic status can
be a more difficult topic for students to share personal experiences about so no one
shared experiences about that during discussions, but I hope that my students were
able to see themselves in the book.

Another book I used in my classroom this semester was Jabari Jumps by Gaia
Cornwall. This book deals with race by including racially diverse characters, It is a story
about a boy who goes to the pool with his dad. He wants to jump off the diving board
but becomes scared. The story focuses on how he builds up the courage to finally jump
off the board. The students were able to connect to the feeling of being scared. They
shared experiences about times that they were scared and what they did to overcome it.
Even though the story did not directly discuss a diverse topic, it has diverse characters.
I hope that this makes my students feel more welcome and represented in the
classroom because they are seeing characters that look like them. The students
seemed extremely engaged in the stories when they included a diverse range of characters.

The last book I shared with my students was *Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal. This book deals with family, race, and being proud of where you come from. A little girl does not like her long name but as her father explains the family stories behind her name, she begins to love it more and more. My students were excited to answer questions about the things that make them who they are and tell a little bit about where they come from. They demonstrated pride in who they were through the things that they shared with one another. I was excited that this story was able to instill this pride in them.

Videos with diverse casts were another way that I tried to make my classroom more diverse. Incorporating videos was more difficult than finding books was. It was challenging to find videos that had diverse casts and related to the topics that we were learning. The number of videos that exist about certain topics can already be limited, and finding ones with diverse casts can make that challenge even harder. It is also hard to gauge their reaction to the videos because videos are usually already engaging for the students. This makes it hard to tell if videos featuring people who look like them make them more engaged than they would be if they were watching other videos. The students are also usually sharing information they gained from the video rather than their reaction to it, so it is hard to tell how they feel about the video. I hope that this helped them to see themselves in the classroom even though it was hard to tell their reaction.
Another way that I was able to incorporate diversity into the classroom was by adding diverse names into the lessons where I could. I was able to do this most easily in the writing and math lessons that I prepared. I would add names that sounded like the names of my students into the stories that we created together in writing. I used them as characters for the model stories I created. I also added them in the word problems we did in math every day. When our math lesson was a review of how to solve word problem, I added diverse names to these problems as well. Sometimes I even used the names of my students in the stories and the word problems I created. They would be extremely excited when this happened. The students who were included smiled and there would be whispers about the name being included. This helped the students to see a bit of themselves in the lessons we did and helped engage them in the lesson we we were learning, no matter the subject.

Something that I did to make my classroom more diverse that I think my students found extremely meaningful, was using Spanish with them on the few occasions that I could. They were extremely excited when this happened and many of them asked if I really spoke Spanish. I think they found it meaningful that I could communicate with them in a way that might be easier for them. Because the majority of my students were Spanish speaking, I was excited to be able to relate to them in this way. Some of my other English Language Learners who do not speak Spanish started sharing words or phrases in their native language with me as well. The excitement they showed to be sharing part of their culture with me was tangible. I think it was helpful to model language diversity to my students and I think that it helped them to feel heard and helps them feel welcome in my classroom.
I also used a variety of instructional strategies and teaching styles to cater to the diverse needs of my students. I taught lessons to the whole class as well as pulling small groups to work on specific skills with. I helped conferences with students during reading and writing to help them work on skills as well. I used a variety of visual and oral teaching methods so that students could learn in a way that worked best for them. I provided content in a variety of ways, through videos, charts, and models, so that my students were able to see the information in various ways. I scaffolded my lessons so that they were being taught one step at a time. I also differentiated my lessons to make them more accessible to students of all ability levels. All of this catered to a diverse range of ability levels and learning styles so that my students could learn in ways that were most effective for them.

After implementing diverse materials and teaching strategies in the classroom, I was able to see some of the benefits of doing this. My students did seem to react well to these things being implemented. They appeared to feel more welcome in the classroom because of it. They also seemed to be more accepting of others. They appeared to respond well to the different instructional strategies and teaching styles that were presented to them as well. Overall, it definitely seemed like my students benefited for having diversity present in the classroom. I observed many of the benefits that I had read about in my research.

I was able to see my students feel more welcome in the classroom and see themselves reflected in the things that they were learning. They became more willing to do work. I would not have to ask them as many times to do things. They seemed more engaged in the lessons and seemed to genuinely want to learn. The students were
more excited to share things about their lives with me and with their friends. This to me showed that they felt welcomed and accepted in their learning environment. Adding diverse materials and teaching styles into the classroom seemed to help them feel more a part of the classroom.

I saw my students become more accepting of others and the differences among them. They seemed to fight with each other less. They talked about what they were feeling and seemed to be able to take the perspectives of other people more easily. They seemed more willing to reach out to students who were different than them. I saw many of my students interact more with classmates who were different than them. They asked to work together and played with each other at recess. They seemed to become more accepting of each other after the diverse materials and teaching styles were included in the classroom.

I also saw my students respond well to a variety of instructional strategies and teaching styles. They seemed to retain the information they learned more effectively. The quality of their work also seemed to improve. They completed their assignments accurately the majority of the time with the assistance they needed. Without the small groups and conferences, I am not sure the students would have been as successful. The same thing could be said about the material being presented in a variety of ways. The students benefited from having diverse instructional strategies used in the classroom.

Overall, I think that this project was a success. I was able to learn how students benefited from diversity in the classroom. Not only did I see this in the research I did, but I also saw this by implementing diverse materials and teaching methods in my
classroom this semester. I was able to see how this affected my students in the classroom. I saw them demonstrate that they felt more included. I saw them become more accepting. I saw them improve academically from using a variety of instructional strategies. Adding diversity to the classroom benefited the students immensely and I will continue to add diversity into my future classrooms so that those students can reap the benefits as well.
References


