Managing Classroom Culture: Classroom Demographic Shift Affects Teacher Preparedness

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The teacher population at Oakhurst Hill Elementary School in Middletown, Indiana, has noticed a shift in its student demographic. This unexpected diversification has affected the classroom culture, leaving educators feeling that their level of preparedness is not meeting the needs of this newer student community. Interviews with parents and teachers suggest the need for connecting families and the school. A plan of action was put into place through preservice teachers' service-learning research project that included programming to meet the needs of students while simultaneously involving families more in additional aspects of their student's education.

Many teachers' "tried and true" methodologies for classroom management and promoting student success were no longer effective. Themes of societal differences, such as poverty amongst students and weak familial involvement, undoubtedly impacted their classroom, but a disconnect was formed between their knowledge of how to teach and what their students were demanding. Organizing an event—a Cultural Fair—that included a student's entire family and brought the school community together, as well as placing parents and students in company with each other, had the potential to encourage relationships amongst families that could ultimately spark greater parental participation in school events. Oakhurst Hill's faculty felt that parent involvement was lacking and that by parents' playing a greater role in the community and one of its schools, their cooperation could have a positive effect on their child's education and motivation.

Many activities were available for families during the Cultural Fair, all emphasizing diversity, family, or culture.

The event that I led was designed to help students see the similarities between themselves and their classmates, regardless of their backgrounds. Students were given art supplies and were encouraged to draw a picture of their family. Some students participated happily, while others preferred drawing something different. While there is nothing wrong with their choice, it became clear that the diversity activity was better in theory than it was in execution. Additionally, parental interaction was more limited than anticipated, as families kept to themselves. With more direction and programming, I believe parents would gain a greater understanding of the multiculturalism in their community (for more information, see J. K. Abdul-Adil and A. D. Farmer, Jr.'s 2006 article, "Inner-City African American Parental Involvement in Elementary Schools: Getting Beyond Urban Legends of Apathy). Hopefully, a broader perception of the varied, yet equally valuable, cultures in their area would lead to a desire to become more active participants and advocates for their child's education.

Parents are becoming more interested in the interviews that are being conducted to receive their feedback, which we consider when planning appropriate programming for the school community. Even seemingly smaller developments in parents' attitudes toward the problems facing Oakhurst Hill could be solved through increased communication and partnership amongst faculty and families. Issues outside the realm of a teacher's control, including socioeconomic status, language barriers, religion, etc., inevitably impact his or her ability to teach, and is a matter that still must be addressed. Collaboration among parents, students, and school faculty can facilitate a more supportive school environment to build a cornerstone for dynamic familial involvement. Teachers, with implementation of programming and parents' improved outlook on their child's performance and behavior in school, may be able to reclaim their sense of readiness for teaching in a way that best benefits their student population.

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