*Please describe what a learning community that celebrates diversity looks like. What are some strategies that a teacher can implement to create an educational environment in which all kinds of students can feel comfortable? Please write a response of at least 300 words.*

 As schools grow increasingly diverse, it is important for schools to learn how to celebrate the differences within their student bodies. Especially in a political climate that has caused many minority groups to feel vulnerable and scared, learning communities must send a message to all students that their diversity is not only respected, but also valued and even celebrated (Powell, 2016). A learning community that values diversity is one that engages in culturally-responsive learning while ensuring that all students feel varied and appreciated not despite, but because of, their differences. Geneva Gay (2013) defines culturally responsive learning as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.” (p. 49-50). In other words, culturally responsive learning is all about making learning relevant for students of various cultures and heritages. Importantly, the goal of culturally responsive learning is to promote the positive aspects of each culture and to bring out the potential learning possibilities of minority students rather than focusing on the weaknesses or tragic circumstances associated with those groups (Gay, 2013). In an America that is comprised of much more than a single set of beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives, it is inconceivable that only a single kind of education should be promoted in schools. Culturally responsive learning is the answer to teaching a diverse classroom; by promoting multiple perspectives, teachers who utilize culturally responsive learning demonstrate their celebration of diversity.

At the same time, a learning community that celebrates diversity does more than just connect learning to the cultural values of diverse students. Rather, the learning community also explicitly values and respects each culture and tradition that is present within the classroom. All too often, teachers and administrators tend to adopt a “colorblind” approach, in which they try to relate to each child equally while ignoring their differences (Powell, 2016). This often is the case when teachers are less diverse than their students (as they tend to be), and feel uncomfortable addressing issues related to race and culture (Howard, 2007). This attitude, however, sends the message that diverse cultures and heritages are not inherently valuable, and that people can be separated from their culture and related to outside of its context. Unfortunately, the colorblind approach is not only impractical – culture completely defines a person, including his or her thoughts, speech, and actions – it also sends the message that culture is not valuable in it of itself (Powell, 2016). Learning communities that celebrate diversity do not ignore cultural differences; rather, they actively embrace them. Therefore, an integral aspect of a learning community that celebrates diversity is to be open and explicit about cultural differences, and about how each culture and tradition is valued and respected.

 Apart from building a learning community that celebrates diversity, individual teachers must also work to ensure that their classrooms are environments that make all students feel comfortable and supported, regardless of their ethnicity. One strategy to support a culturally-responsive learning environment is to actively address diversity. The majority of teachers in the United States are white (Howard, 2007), and this can make some teachers forget to address diversity openly. Teachers should not only tie culture and diversity to the learning (Gay, 2013), they should also create events that support diversity. For instance, Walt Disney Elementary in Indiana holds Culture Night for their student body, which includes 23 different languages (Roach, 2015). Related to actively acknowledging and addressing diversity is another key strategy: remaining authentic and open to all conversations. Research shows that minority students value teachers who show true caring and honest acceptance (Howard, 2007). Overall, teachers who demonstrate true caring and openly celebrate diversity related to diversity are most likely to establish a classroom environment that supports students of all cultures and backgrounds.

References

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