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Fisch, Carrie, and Elise Trumbull. (2008). *Managing Diverse Classrooms: How to Build on Students' Cultural Strengths.* Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (176 pages)

This book is about the different ways that cultures operate and how to serve students from different backgrounds in the classroom. Relationships are the most important part of a teacher’s job, and teachers must understand the cultural differences of their students in order to have the best possible relationships. This book is full of practical ideas on exactly what teachers can do to ensure that they are being culturally sensitive and bringing out the best in students. It takes a conversational tone, like a master teacher sharing secrets with a new teacher. The main idea is really that in order to make good decisions about classroom organization and management, teachers need to understand the role of culture in human development and schooling. Specifically, this book defines the differences between collectivist and individualist cultures and how they affect development.

Classroom management is one of the big topics covered in this book. Because organization and management ultimately depend on the values of a setting, Fisch and Trumbull explain the Bridging Cultures Project. The Bridging Cultures project was an action research project that included seven elementary teachers that represented grade levels from kindergarten to fifth. Each of their classrooms had a large population of Latino immigrant students. It was a long term endeavor that began with 3 professional development projects over a 4 month period. It continued with whole-group meetings, class observations, and interviews over a period of 5 years. Overall, the purpose of the study was to foster culturally responsive teaching and culturally responsive teaching for Latino immigrants and their families. The project used a cultural framework to see if the teachers’ understanding of their students’ culture would positively impact their teaching. The findings of this project are included throughout the book, but as pertains to classroom management, the researchers defined the differences between two broad cultural systems: individualism and collectivism. Individualism is the system that the United States operates under. It is characterized by an emphasis and independence, a call for self-reliance, and celebrates individual achievement. Collectivism is the cultural system that Mexico and much of the world operate under. It is characterized by interdependence, encouraging cooperation, emphasizing the family unit, modesty and respect for all. The basic distinction between these two ways of thinking is the amount of emphasis placed on individual versus group well-being. Knowing the difference is important because culture shapes the way people act and think. The goals for education from a collectivist standpoint is much different that from the individualist view. However, it is important to keep in mind that culture is always changing. Also, individuals can vary in a culture. Not all Americans, or Kenyans, or Germans are the same. Fisch and Trumbull caution readers not to overgeneralize on the way cultures are viewed because there are many other social contexts that cause cultural differences. The Bridging Cultures Project is a study done to help teachers understand classroom management from a cultural framework. It has its limitations but is a good place for frustrated teachers to start.

Another big topic in this book is “the culture of the group”. The phrase the culture of the group refers to the collectivist mindset. Children from this cultural framework are raised to base their sense of self on their role in a group. For these kids, modeling the classroom after a family is a great way to handle classroom management. A teacher who calls out individuals, even for positive reasons, can cause discomfort. Teachers need to work with the way students are raised, not against it. Understanding collectivism can be done by realizing that all work members for the benefit of the group. Interdependence is key with these students. One of their biggest strengths is that they are eager to help each other. For example, they will volunteer to help another student with their classroom job even if it means they will not have time to complete their own job. Supporting their classmate is more important than their own to-do list. This is not to say that individuals have no value. In collectivism, the individual is still important but is just not the focus. An excellent way to balance collectivism and individualism is to have students work in groups. Teachers in the study found that allowing their children to work in groups made them more likely to take risks. This is because they had a lot of support from each other. They had more confidence and willingness to take risks together. Working with their cultural tendency to support each other by allowing students to work in groups has been known to have huge success.

Families are a significant teacher resource because they set the foundation for social and cognitive development. Because of this, it’s really important for families and teachers to be partners. One of the greatest obstacles for these relationships is that people tend to think that different approaches to development are automatically wrong. Teachers have to be careful not to blame parents for behavior that they perceive as inappropriate because that will exclude parents from the problem to solution process. Contacting parents as a last resort is not the best way for a teacher to operate. Parents can do a lot to prevent future stress in the classroom if they hear of problems their child is causing early on. Again, the goal of a collectivist society is to produce moral children who maintain strong bonds to and respect for their family. It should not be necessary for students to forego family values on order to successfully participate in the classroom. Informal interactions, even simply talking about current events or the weather, is a great way for teachers to form bonds with parents. There are several ways for teacher to easily create wonderful relationships with parents. Calling parents on the phone to celebrate student successes is a simple way to promote positive interaction, but of course this is impossible if the parents don’t speak English and the teacher doesn’t speak their language. It is best to use the language of greatest common proficiency. An open house is another good idea. Obviously, parent-teacher conferences are also a good option. Home visits can be a good option but it is important to be sensitive about what level of contact the parents want. Homework can also bring parents into being included in their children’s schoolwork. Parents of immigrants benefit from learning about the way education works in the United States. Teaching people from a collectivist way of thinking about individualism and what that looks like in American schools can help them and their children succeed. This can be done with conferences, workshops, conversations, but the important thing is to allow parents to share their culture and also learn about the different culture. Many conflicts can be avoided of both parties understand the mindset of the other.

Helping and sharing are some key words in this book. They are the two prominent ways in which members of a group contribute. These two things can actually cause problems if the values of teachers and students do not line up. For example, a teacher could misconstrue a student who shares a book to be a cheater. From the students’ view, they were just assisting a classmate. Roles in the classroom can be a sensitive issue. It depends on the students but generally they do not want a single person to be a leader. Pairs on a rotating schedule can work well, or even asking for volunteers each week. It’s important to know your students to decide what they need. The important point though is that they are eager to help. They want to work together and will often sacrifice their own agenda for others. Some teachers use class buddies, which are similar to learning partners. They can be classmates or older students paired with younger ones. There are several advantages to mixing classes to pair up older and younger kids. First, older students are more interested in the material when the purpose is to help someone else. A second reason is that both parties benefit from the extra reading time. Buddy reading also frees up time for the teacher to help other students who need special attention. Helping is something that benefits all members of the classroom. Sharing is something that often has a lot of rules around it, especially where personal items are concerned. A different approach is to have the view that in the classroom, everything belongs to everyone. This can eliminate many problems with students fighting over materials.

This book is helpful for teachers because it gives real-world insights into understanding students. It shows the importance of knowing the cultural basis for student behaviors. Not only this, but this book gives many ideas for teachers to apply the knowledge given by the authors and the Bridging Cultures study. Specifically, this information will be useful for me as I continue my education. There is a large Latino population here in Colorado and the school I will be student teaching at has a Latino majority. The information included in this book will be invaluable as I attempt to form relationships and teach my students. It is so important that these researchers are taking stereotypes that can sometimes be negative, and putting them in a positive light. They have made it so the generalizations about culture are a way to better understand other cultures rather than to invalidate them.

I also appreciate this book because classroom management and cultural differences are both issues that I think should be heavily addressed in education. These are the big issues for me, because they are the areas with the most potential misunderstanding. If a teacher does not understand the way their students think and act, there will be problems. Classroom management and culture are tightly connected and this book helped me see the reasons why: they are both the basis of relationships.

One weakness of this book is that it only explained Latino culture in detail. From the cover and synopsis on the back, I was under the impression that it would be discussing culture in general. It does mention other countries in a list of cultures that live under collectivism, but otherwise there are no details about any cultures besides Latino. However, the purpose if this book is to talk about the study which was done primarily with Hispanic students. It would be interesting to see if the same study would have different results with students from a non-Hispanic collectivist culture, such as Kenya.

Overall, I see this book as a valuable resource. It is important for people to understand the differences of a collectivist and individualist cultural mindset. Understanding will make it possible for more acceptance to happen. Having factual evidence that shows effective strategies to make the classroom a safe place, and a place where better learning can occur, is invaluable to teachers.