Each student has a unique perspective that is different from every other student. Educators must acknowledge the common need that all students need to feel a sense of belonging, respect and acceptance. Students need to know their unique characteristics and their perspectives they bring into the classroom are valued.

Students come to school with diverse backgrounds, values, expectations, traditions, strengths and limitations. These differences often impact their overall academic achievement. Often when considering cultural diversity, many of us immediately think of race. But a person’s culture includes much more than race. The dictionary defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group... the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices” (Merriam-Webster, 2012). There are several attributes that make up a person’s culture including race, ethnicity, social aspects, and religion. Students of diverse cultural backgrounds have had different life experiences and challenges. They may bring different perspectives, understanding and characteristics into the classroom. Even though their perspectives may be different, teachers should not view them as a hindrance to learning and academic achievement.

Some cultures believe that education is a joint endeavor between the school, community, teachers, students and family whereby others may view education as the professional purview of teachers and that families should not be a part of that endeavor. Various cultural groups have different views when it comes to educational perspectives, and as educators, their perspectives will often impact academic needs of students within the classroom. One culture may support the need for having a highly-structured, teacher-dependent classroom, and another culture may see teachers as authoritative. Although these are broad generalized statements, it is important to acknowledge that parents and students from various cultural groups value distinct aspects of school, teaching and learning. Educators are challenged with creating and teaching lessons that acknowledge cultural diversity. However, before you can teach in a way that acknowledges cultural diversity, you must first
acknowledge that you may have some assumptions that will influence your expectations for student performance, the environment of your classroom, your communication with students, and the design of your instructions.

To effectively teach all children, teachers must recognize their own assumptions and beliefs about diversity. Here is an exercise that will help educators reflect on their own beliefs about diversity represented in the classroom and how he/she can approach learning so that everyone can participate in the lessons.

Educators and students as… shoes. Take every shoe in your closets at home. Select one shoe from each pair and place in a pile. Separate the shoes in the pile into two groups. What characteristics did you use to separate them? Next, separate the shoes in each of the two groups into two subgroups for a total of four piles. What characteristics did you use to separate them?

What if each shoe represented a student? Each shoe-student would have the characteristics of the shoe, complete with the material it is made of, its color, its size, its purpose, and whether it is a left or right shoe. Each shoe-student would be in a group with a label that describes the group’s purpose. None of these can be changed; they are who they are.

Look at the shoes you have on. These shoes represent the teacher. This shoe-teacher has the purpose, the looks, and the characteristics of your shoes, and none of these things can be changed. You, the shoe-teacher are who you are.

Now suppose as the shoe-teacher, you must plan a lesson for all your shoe-students. The lesson should be active and suitable for all students to participate. As the shoe-teacher, the lesson activity that you planned can be conducted and successfully participated by you. Can this lesson also be participated by your students? For example, suppose you are wearing hiking boots. The first lesson involves hiking on a rocky terrain for three miles. Which one of your students would easily be able to successfully participate in this activity? Which would be able to give it a good try? Are there any shoe-students that may require special accommodations? If so, what accommodations?

Suppose you did another lesson activity that involved jogging for three miles. Now ask yourself the same questions. Which students would be able to easily participate in activity and which students would give it a good try. For some students, perhaps jogging three miles would be easy whereas with others, three miles of jogging would be difficult. As the shoe-teachers, how would you accommodate those students that may find this task extremely easy and those that may find it extremely difficult?

As the shoe-teacher, consider your own shoes. If you assume every shoe-student learned the same way as you do, you would be ignoring the different traits, characteristics and perspectives of your shoe-students. Students differ from one another in many ways. Some individual characteristics are readily noticeable whereby others are subtler. These characteristics affect how students approach learning and therefore how you should teach. The goal of education in the United States is that all children learn, regardless of their differences.

From the above activity, you can infer that everyone in the classroom comes with unique characteristics that affect how learning is approached. Educators can teach acknowledging these unique characteristics so that each student feels respected, accepted and is motivated to learn and challenge their best. Regardless of perceived differences, Visconti (2011) writes that we must come to the realization that “I am not different from you; I am different like you.” Thinking about lessons that accommodate all learners, educators may reflect on their own beliefs about diversity represented in their classrooms and discover how he/she approaches learning so that everyone can participate in the lessons.

References:

About the Author
Dr. Eloise Marks-Stewart has worked as a school administrator, special education teacher and department leader across all grade levels. She earned her Doctor of Education Degree from Walden University in Teacher Leadership, a Master’s Degree in Education Administration and Supervision and a Bachelor’s Degree in Special Education. Eloise has presented at workshops and published articles in teacher preparation textbooks, journals, and newspapers. She is a professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University in the Humanities Department where she teaches academic writing. In 2011, she was selected as an “Outstanding Educator” by Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society in Education. In her spare time, Eloise works closely with her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. in various community service activities.