

Adapting Earthquake Education to Meet the Needs of Our Culturally Diverse Population

by Jacobyn L. Dudley

Instructor, UCLA Extension, School Earthquake Preparedness Program

If students are going to be prepared for a disaster of any kind, particularly an earthquake, we must acknowledge the relevance of cultural diversity and the influence which students' pre-existing, culturally-based attitudes and belief systems have on their ability to grasp earthquake education concepts.

The purpose of earthquake education is two-fold: to provide an exciting and often timely introduction to earth sciences curricula and to train children in effective earthquake preparedness and response actions.

It is axiomatic that successful teaching must begin at the point of the student's current level of understanding. When teaching earthquake science and safety, it is important to recognize the need to pre-test not only to assess the student's factual base, but also to understand his cultural perspective and personal experiences. A recently immigrated child who has been subjected to natural and/or man-made disasters will almost certainly understand the importance of preparedness far better than a child who has grown up in the relative safety of the United States; conversely, that child's painful memories may be a barrier to effective learning.

Educators who teach earthquake safety and survival to children from diverse cultural backgrounds are encouraged to consider the following points:

1. Lessons must be age- and culture-appropriate. Many children have an existing base of myths, experiences, and religious interpretations of earthquakes. The successful teacher needs to be sensitive to these belief systems when introducing basic scientific concepts.
2. Information must be simple and clearly explained, with lots of pictures to help those who may not have a good grasp of the language. For example, the command to "duck and cover" may confuse a child whose primary association for the word "duck" is a fluffy yellow bird.
3. Practice is an integral part of preparedness. The more familiar children are with exit routes and other emergency procedures, the less likely they will be to panic during the confusion.
4. Materials designed to reinforce preparedness in the home must not only be available in the family language, they must be written and delivered in a manner which reflects and honors culturally diverse attitudes. Families from a culture which considers their children a crucial link to the new country will enthusiastically participate in a "home hazard hunt." A child from a different background who brings the same assignment home may be punished for his impertinence.
5. Since parents' post-quake responses will partially determine the success or failure of the school's disaster plan, it is essential that they are incorporated into the planning process. To encourage this interaction, the school should provide interpreters at planning meetings and arrange free child care so that more parents can attend.

In a large proportion of urban and suburban schools, the "minority" student population is actually a majority. If educators intend to give students a basic understanding of geological concepts and a greater chance of surviving a damaging quake, they must use every means at their disposal to insure that each child - and his family - is fully included in our science and safety program.
