

## **Cultural Diversity: A Look at Diverse Students and Tolerance Issues in Schools**

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### **Introduction**

Intolerance of those who are different is an issue that we, as a society, face on a daily basis. It occurs in homes, places of business, and in schools. It is a complex problem that requires an understanding of how intolerance, as a process, works as it stems from conceptualizations and values that are ingrained at an early age. Schools play an integral role in helping to expose students to other cultures and ideas that may bring down the barriers that divide and, ultimately, begin the process of healing wounds caused by acts of intolerance. It is important to open an on-going dialogue with students about diversity issues. Administrators and teachers need to be willing to deal with the issues that living in a diverse society causes so that students can understand and appreciate their own culture in context with the one in which they currently find themselves.

Increasing tolerance for diverse populations involves developing curriculum that responds to the needs of the school community. In an ideal world, each school could develop programs and curricula that are matched to the profiles of the school, the students which attend the school, and the community in which the school is located. However, in these times of standardization and pre-set curriculums particularly in humanities subjects, there is little flexibility in which to customize curriculum. There are opportunities, outside of curriculum, in which administrators and teachers can make in-roads into bringing about positive change and build relationships among diverse student groups.

Percepts about what makes individuals different relate, in part, to the anthropological development of societies. As cultures and societies developed, new ways of thinking, beliefs, religions, values, and arts were generated and no one culture developed in exactly the same way. The implications in a pluralistic society, such as in the

United States, are challenging to all, but educators see most, if not all, of the difficulties in balancing diversity in micro-cosmism. School systems are unique in that the challenges, tribulations, and complexities of diversity are present every day and must be dealt with in order to foster a positive school climate that is accepting and inclusive of all whether students are of differing races, religions, ethnicities, home languages, sexual orientation, or socio-economic backgrounds. This is likely to be a long term process for most schools as the pollution demographics shift as suggested by Johnson and Lichter (2010), from a majority of whites to nonwhites by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (p. 151-176)

It is important for students, teachers, school administrators, and parents to be aware of the changes in the fabric of our American society and to respond in a manner that embraces and is accepting of differences. Marx (2006) suggested, "What we have in common helps us form a sense of community. If we accept diversity as part of the norm, it will enrich us, bind us together. If we don't, our diversity can divide us."(p. 43)

### **Implications for Students**

Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are as diverse as the communities in which they reside. They also are a product and reflection of the values, morals, mores, and cultures of their communities. It can be difficult to explain to students why it is important to embrace the qualities in which they have in common instead of focusing on what makes people different. This may mean that students, especially those of high school age, will find themselves in conflict with what have been traditionally accepted beliefs and practices within their communities in dealing with those who deviate from the majority population.

In a recent national school climate survey, conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (2010), 7,261 students between

the ages of 13 and 21 representing all fifty states, were asked to respond on the following factors to determine their relationship to impeding educational experiences and negative school climate: hearing biased remarks, feeling unsafe in school due to a difference in personal characteristics which included sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, missing classes or school days because of concern for personal safety, and experiencing harassment or assault in school. The percentages of student respondents who felt unsafe at school indicated that sexual orientation (61.1%), gender expression (39.9%), and religion (16.4%) were the areas where there was the most negativity and were considered to be contributive to creating a hostile school climate in which students were verbally harassed, taunted, mocked, or felt physically threatened due to a perceived difference. The authors of the study state, "this high incidence of harassment and assault is exacerbated by school staff rarely, if ever, intervening on behalf of students" (p. 3). Students who perceive that their differences are being used against them, in some way, may feel disenfranchised, isolated, and not part of the school community which could have life consequences beyond the classroom. All students need to feel included and supported by the adults that surround them, particularly in school settings. Students should also be encouraged to see the commonalities that transcend the qualities that divide.

### **Implications for Teachers and Administrators**

Creating, establishing, and getting support for development of diversity-related tolerance programs requires a commitment to change and a dedicated staff. It may be worthwhile to invest in giving appropriate staff development on tolerance building and efficacy. School staff may need to reinvest in the school community and be reenergized towards making positive changes that can bridge diverse student populations. Pushor and Ruttenberg (2005) suggest,

The implication is that the person 'engaged' is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to take their place

alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, of teaching and learning, with teachers' knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial. (p.13)

Educators should also become more aware of achievement gaps in various student ethnic groups beyond African American students. The Hispanic achievement gap continues to impact students across the country. In a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress report, the gap between non-Hispanic white students and Hispanic students has remained relatively static for the past twenty years despite efforts of state and federal legislation designed to close the gap. Allen (2011) posits that among the contributors to the continuation of the achievement gap of Hispanic students are the duration of time the student's family has been in the country, the state in which the student lives, parents' level of education, parents' tendency to hold on to their cultural beliefs about education, and socio-economic factors (p. 5-7). Students from Hispanic backgrounds account for a substantial number of high school drop-outs nationwide. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), the drop-out rate for Hispanic students is about 18%, three times the number of drop-out white students and eight percent higher than the drop-out rate among black students. The statistics are not improved if the student is native-born as the drop-out rate among those students currently stands at 10%. Students educated in large, urban high schools are more likely to drop-out of school than those educated in suburban or rural schools. The challenge to educators is to show students and their parents that there is relevance to having an education, both for economic reasons and for future generations. If Hispanic students receive early interventions and services that increase their academic abilities and social skills, they may

remain in school and, eventually, encourage their own children to pursue educational goals.

Change is not easy, especially when it challenges social norms and traditional viewpoints that may be engrained in local communities. Educators, at all levels of instruction, should be aware of diversity related issues and how to handle questions, comments, and actions that could be taken as inflammatory or offensive by community members from other areas. Schools tend to become microcosms of society and the issues that develop in the greater community will, eventually, filter into the daily activities in schools. This reality means that educators and administrators need to be informed and armed with knowledge that can be used to present diversity as positive and enriching to the school culture. It is a process that takes time and effort, but bridging diversity as a means to build understanding can help move students, faculty, and parents toward tolerance.

In *Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Guide for Teachers, Counselors, and Administrators*, Jim Carrier and Richard Cohen (1999) provide an array of effective and positive activities that can be used to promote acceptance of diversity. When used, they have been shown to increase student-student and teacher-student relationships that promote tolerance. The ten steps that are described in this guidebook provide a step-by-step road map for school community leaders on how to promote tolerance. Each step can be adapted to meet the specific needs of the school. These steps include: 1) Take action in a way that acknowledges the issues. 2) Unite by organizing a collation of students that represent the diversity of the diversity. 3) Show support for the victims and make them feel valued. 4) Be well informed about diversity issues in the school and the greater community. 5) Create alternative forums and outlets by creating positive activities. 6) Speak about the issues as you encounter them and use them as learning experiences. 7) Involve community leaders in the process. 8) Hold events that celebrate the community's diversity. 9) Teach tolerance to reverse bias that might be learned at home. 10) Educate yourself about diversity issues that divide

people and work to help conquer stereotypes and discrimination. While these ideas may seem to be simplistic or idealized, they are not easy to achieve. It takes diligence and hard work to break to the barriers that society generates. It is an important undertaking that requires one to have courage, knowledge, persistence, and patience in order to bring people together in a way that celebrates the wonderful tapestry that exists in schools.

Relationships with parents are an important part of building understanding and acceptance. Often these relationships are built to encourage participation in various school events such as parent-teacher nights, fundraising, and acting as chaperones. While these types of events are not unimportant, they are functions of the school. As Pushor (2011) asserted,

When we involve parents in these ways, we are asking them to serve the school's agenda, which educators have determined. There is an inherent hierarchy in this relationship. Educators have the power to decide when and how parents will play a part in their children's schooling. As the school's agenda unfolds and decisions are made, information or requests for involvement move out in one direction, from the school to parent and families. ... We begin to make real change only when we challenge myths and deficit thinking about parents and families. (p.67)

Parents, particularly of younger children, may wish to be involved in their child's educational process. For some parents, this could involve becoming an in-class parent volunteer which serves two purposes, learning about the American educational system and, for some, learning English along with their child. Teachers and administrators need to see past the traditionally accepted means of parental involvement and expand their definitions to allow parents to have a voice in the educational process. This exchange of insights and values can lead to greater appreciation of the common goals that parents and schools share for children. It can also

foster an environment of trust, respect, and communication that can build efficacy for all concerned.

**Research and Implementation Considerations**

Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull (2008) described “The Bridging Cultures Project”. This was a longitudinal study across seven elementary schools where immigrant Latino students were a majority population. The project spanned five years and consisted of workshops, meetings, observations, and interviews. The research supported a framework that combined both individualism and collectivism. They utilized these two frames, not to show differences between the individuals and cultures, but to show “variation exists within a culture, just as any one person will exhibit both individualistic and collectivistic behaviors at different times” (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 9)

According to the teachers who participated in the Bridging Cultures Project, the “group” dynamic of the classes caused learning to continue in the classroom.

Students’ from collectivistic backgrounds seem to need little or no instruction on how to form groups or function within them. Students’ very sense of “self” is constituted by their group membership, with wide-ranging implications for how they think, communicate, learn, and behave. (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 21)

In an individualistic classroom “the emphasis is on suppressing each student’s potential for distracting, disrupting, or disrespectful behaviors. Theoretically, when each student must be considered as a single unit, the classroom management should become more complex.” (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 24). In this scenario, the teacher is looking at a group of students, but only seeing an individual instead of the entire group and its collective needs.

In a collectivistic setting, the teacher is viewing the class as a group or as a “family”. “The learners are linked with each other and the teachers

as a whole. Individual students are factored into a collectivistic classroom.” (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 26). Lessons and activities are created to focus on the organization of a whole or collective group instead of separate individuals within the group.

Figure 1 below lists the most significant contrasts between individualistic classrooms and collectivist classrooms as referenced by Rothstein and Trumbull (2008) that should be taken into consideration when considering the implementation of instruction and management to diverse classrooms.

Individualism	Collectivism
<i>Representative of mainstream United States, Western Europe, Australia, and Canada</i>	<i>Representative of 70% of world cultures (Triandis, 1989), including those of many U.S. immigrants</i>
Well-being of individual; responsibility for self	Well-being of group; responsibility for group
Independence/self-reliance	Interdependence/cooperation
Individual achievement	Family/group success
Self-expression	Respect
Self-esteem	Modesty
Task orientation	Social orientation
Cognitive intelligence	Social intelligence

(p. 9)

In reviewing how teachers view classrooms as related to instruction and to management, it is also important to keep in mind the administrator’s leadership tasks that guide the response to diversity in schools. Riehl (2008) identified three tasks that face educational administrators. The first task is fostering new meanings about diversity. The second task is to promote inclusive practices within schools. The final task is to build connections between schools and communities.

In the first task of fostering new meanings about diversity, the principal is in the key position to frame these new meanings.

Fostering new understandings and beliefs about diversity and inclusive practice involves more than simply communicating particular understanding so that they become diffused through an educational context; it also means supporting the generation of new meanings within that context. Groups and individuals are thus not simply the recipients of new meanings, but their co-creators. A key strategy available to school principals for accomplishing this is the promotion of democratic discourse processes in schools can engender educational practices that serve the needs of diverse students. (Riehl, 2008, p.186).

The author states that this idea of democratic discourse will “promote trust within the community, increasing the capacity for larger problems to be addressed, so that “over time, a detailed scrutiny of existing organizational practices becomes possible.” (Riehl, 2008, p. 186)

The second task that faces principals with diverse populations is to create a specific condition and practice that will focus on the needs of that population or populations. The author presents this idea as two-fold: the first idea is that the principal acts as a supporter or facilitator promoting the teaching and learning styles that will help the diverse learner to proceed. In this role, the principal is affecting the outcome indirectly through the teachers of these students. The principal’s primary role is to “establish the goals, obtain the resources, stimulate the understandings, change the structures, and promote the practices that improve learning experiences and outcomes for students” (Riehl, 2008, p. 187). The second idea is that the principal molds the school cultures that embrace and support diversity. Advocacy and critique are mentioned as the key strategies that will go the farthest toward promoting a “learning for all” environment. However, it is also the easiest to be derailed.

Principals who make a concerted effort to create mixed classrooms that do not allow “tracking” can often be dismantled by teachers, parents and others who pull from “political strategies and institutional dynamics to subvert or dismantle detracking.” (Riehl, 2008, p. 189)

The final task recommendation by Riehl (2008) is to build connections between the schools and their communities. This not only includes the neighborhoods that the school serves, but also the organizations and the institutions that revolve around the students and their families within the community. “This task, then, has two prongs: mobilizing schools within process of community development and working with other organizations to deliver coordinated services to children” (Riehl, 2008, pp.189). Ultimately, by utilizing the community services available to the children and by creating the connections between the school and the community, the additional supports will be provided and will assist in bridging the diversity of the students within the schools.

### **Conclusions**

The need for bridging the diverse cultures in schools is difficult, but necessary. It is necessary to involve the students, teachers, community and administrators to be successful. In the current time period, the “look” of the diverse student is not as we have always seen it. It may be race that creates a diverse school. It may be working with impoverished and homeless children. It may be the disabled children that are being identified at a rapidly growing rate. A “diverse culture” in itself is already becoming a more diverse culture; therefore it is harder and harder to define. However, the way we go about working with these children, regardless of what makes them different or unique, is what is the most important. Their growth and success is what will help improve their lives and build cross-cultural understanding.

Schools are uniquely situated to become an integral part of the process of education individuals to accept differences. The reality is that over the course of 100 years of American history and anthropologically-based justifications for why

individuals are not alike, it will take time to heal the divisions and barricades to equality that were established in the past. Nevertheless, it is important for teachers and administrators to embrace their roles in the process as Baptiste, Boyer, Herrera, Murry (1999) expressed in *Educators Healing Racism*, that

Healing will only begin when people of different races meet as social equals, with all that implies, to begin a dialogue. Broadening of understanding of each other is vital. Since schools assume responsibility as the guardians of knowledge, then we suggest that they become leaders of this healing attempt (p. 47).

As mentioned earlier, change is not easy. Social and traditional views can promote or disable the potential growth of children from diverse cultures. Educators and community members are integral to promoting acceptance and creating the blending and support to allow for growth and understanding to occur in our schools and our communities and to, ultimately, bridge the existing gap.

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