

Diversity: Challenges for Change

Susan Gilleshammer

Abstract

This article examines how school leaders, teachers and students experience the challenges resulting from the changing demographics of student populations in our schools. Increased cultural diversity in schools results in complex issues that require a proactive approach from school leaders. By utilizing strategies found to increase feelings of school connectedness in culturally diverse students, schools can mitigate negative outcomes and create the possibility of greater academic success for these students.

For some time, there has been a call for greater attention to be paid to multicultural education, due to the changes in demographics in many schools (Cooper Shaw, 1997). School administrators, teachers and students all experience different challenges in dealing with this diversity. When educators meet these challenges openly and proactively with effective strategies, all students can experience success as they move into the future.

Three Different Perspectives: School Leaders, Teachers, and Students

School leaders, teachers, and students experience cultural diversity and demographic change in a school community in different ways. Each of these perspectives must be considered when examining the effects of increased diversity in the school setting. From its unique position in this complex system, each group has its own understanding of diversity and the challenges that diversity creates.

School leaders play a significant role in facing the challenges presented in schools that are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. School leaders must consider numerous stakeholder groups as their schools' demographics change. The school board and community exist outside the walls of a building, but still have a significant influence on school leaders and their decision making. Communities often undergo other social and economic changes that drive the demographic change in a school. A school leader must be sensitive to these changes, without sacrificing the good of the institution in order to serve these outside interests. The administrative team, the school staff, and the students are all part of the internal school context. To further complicate matters, all of these groups can be broken down into various subgroups that should be considered by school leaders when dealing with any school-related issue. These multiple contexts create a complex and multilayered environment that a school leader must navigate in order to face the challenges that changing demographics present (Gause, 2008).

School leaders can set the tone in a school for the response to changing demographics, reflecting the multiple contexts of the school environment (Evans, 2007). Some school leaders choose to consult stakeholder groups and to open lines of communication, in order to facilitate progress. Others may delegate responsibilities to the level of the classroom teacher, without clear direction for the action that should be taken. Depending on how these leaders understand the changing demographics in their school systems, school leaders themselves may actually become one of the challenges to creating a successful school experience for culturally diverse learners. If school leaders move too quickly in trying to institute change, they may lose the support of their staff or their leadership may be delegitimized by staff members. School leaders may choose to take no action, thereby legitimizing the status quo, for better or for worse. School leaders may only grudgingly recognize the issue of racism in their learning communities, for fear of tarnishing their own reputations or that of their schools (Evans, 2007). Often, acts of racism

must be blatant in nature for school leaders to be propelled into action. Unfortunately, it is the more subtle resistance to fully integrating non-dominant cultures into a building that goes unrecognized and unchecked. It is imperative that school leaders address issues of diversity directly, so that a school can adapt in a positive manner as a system to meet the needs of all students.

Teachers are directly affected by demographic change as their classrooms transform in composition and they struggle to meet the requirements of learners with unfamiliar needs (Gause, 2008). These students' needs may be academic, linguistic or social-emotional in nature, and many teaching staff feel ill equipped to offer effective support in any of these areas. Conversely, some teachers see no need to change their teaching methodology to accommodate the racial make-up of the student population, adopting a Darwinian philosophy of "survival of the fittest" in building their classroom climate. Some claim "colour-blindness" (Gause, 2008, p. 184), using denial of the impact of racial differences as an excuse not to alter the way things are done (Evans, 2007). By denying that differences exist, teachers and administrators may feel that they are being more even handed in dealing with students and with people in general. However, denying racial differences sometimes results in equal treatment that can actually be discriminatory towards a group (Knight, 2008). Equal is not always fair. Teachers must recognize that differences should be explored in order to find the best instructional practices to produce success for all students.

Many teachers feel empathy towards groups of students whom they assume are living without necessary resources. Evans (2007) identified the danger of "deficit thinking" (p. 176), whereby certain racial groups are viewed as lacking such basics as a stable family, economic security, proper housing, and access to healthy food; these areas of deficit are assumed to be causally linked to students' being at risk of academic failure. Stereotypes are reinforced when responsibility is placed on the students, their families, or their racial group for academic problems, allowing teachers merely to tolerate these pitiable, underprivileged students. This view relieves the responsibility of those working in the system to examine institutionalized racism, and to acknowledge historical and present-day conditions that have contributed to the disadvantaged situation of certain racial groups (Knight, 2008). Without a critical examination of systemic racism and the accepted stereotyping in schools, no gains can be made towards a truly inclusive school system that supports students of all racial backgrounds.

Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in relation to the dominant culture face many challenges that affect their school experience (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). These students may have difficulty engaging or connecting to school, due to language barriers. Their academic performance may be below grade level as a result of differences in prior school systems or gaps in past schooling. Behavioural problems may be an issue with these students, perhaps resulting from misunderstandings encountered in communication or from frustration while dealing with cultural differences. The cultural contrast between home and school may cause culturally diverse students distress and create barriers to their success (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Students may find that they are in the same classroom or the same school as cultural groups with whom they have a political or historical context of conflict. This type of negative, shared past between two cultures may result in an eruption of cultural wars in a school (Gause, 2008). Violence between cultural groups is an extreme example of potential conflict. More pervasive – and more common – is the quiet discrimination whereby the dominant culture students fail to recognize racial differences or passively exclude racially marginalized students.

Schools may fall into the practice of celebrating diversity as their main method of including cultures other than the dominant one. Knight (2008) referred to these types of celebratory events as "exoticizing the Other" (p. 95), whereby cultural identities are reduced to costumes, dances, and traditional foods. While these types of celebrations are socially acceptable and encouraged within school systems, they fail to address the discrepancy of power inherent in the construct of the quaint foreigners entertaining the dominant cultural group (Knight).

Many challenges emerge with changing demographics and cultural shifts in a school's population. School leaders face the responsibility of charting a new direction for their schools, while balancing the expectations of their school communities, their staff, and their students. Teachers are confronted with classrooms more diverse than ever before; the old way of doing things will not suffice. Culturally diverse students battle stereotyping, language barriers, and discrimination in their quest to succeed in a school system that is foreign to them. These three perspectives reveal the complex issues created by increased cultural diversity in schools.

Possibilities for Success

Culturally diverse students can benefit in many ways from an increased connection to school. A greater sense of school belonging has been attributed to improved academic motivation and performance, and to reduced misbehaviour, drop-out rates, delinquency, and substance use (Brown & Evans, 2002). Students can become more engaged in their school experience through instructional practices that connect their identity to the material being studied (Faircloth, 2009). Positive relationships with teachers and other caring adults bolster a sense of belonging in students, resulting in higher academic achievement (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). Students' involvement in extra-curricular activities also enhances their feelings of school connection (Brown & Evans, 2002). Increasing culturally diverse students' connection to the school context offers hope for greater success with this student population.

The search for identity can be a powerful process for teachers to draw upon in their campaign to make course content relevant to adolescent students (Faircloth, 2009). When students are directed to draw upon their own experiences, family history, and cultural background to make sense of their learning, they are empowered to build meaningful connections to the subject matter. These connections, in turn, support students' sense of belonging in the classroom and in the school. Students in Faircloth's study reported that they felt a stronger relationship to their teacher and to their classmates after participating in the identity development exercises. There is compelling evidence that identity exploration, linked to classroom subjects, can increase school connectedness.

Another significant factor contributing to school connectedness is the influence of positive relationships with teachers and other caring adults in the school community (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). Successful students in Percy Calaff's (2008) study were able to identify at least one adult in the school context who had encouraged them and helped them to feel a sense of belonging. Percy Calaff was careful to point out, however, that "authentic caring" (p. 105) was valued by the students and seen as positively affecting motivation and learning; those teachers deemed lacking in sincerity were either endured or outright rejected. Those teachers who are naturally endowed with the ability to form genuine, positive relationships with students must themselves be nurtured so that they can continue to grow and to influence young people (Stewart, 2009). According to Brown and Evans (2002), "One theme in any successful outreach or involvement effort is the quality and sensitivity of staff" (p. 55), emphasizing the importance of having caring individuals involved in projects that target diverse student populations. Students' engagement in learning and sense of belonging can be improved by the encouraging influence of understanding adults, but support for these adults must not be overlooked.

Participation in extra-curricular activities can create a stronger school connection for many students (Brown & Evans, 2002). As hours spent involved in extra-curricular activities increase, there tends to be a corresponding increase in academic effort and achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Taking this evidence into account, there is a strong argument for creating greater access to extra-curricular activities for all students. Greater accessibility may mean providing transportation, changing the time that activities take place, or providing more user-friendly information. The most important strategy to increase at-risk student involvement in extra-curricular programming is to involve those at-risk students and their families in the discussion, so that their concerns are addressed (Brown & Evans, 2002). Strategies that give culturally

diverse students greater access to extra-curricular activities would certainly be worth the investment, especially when higher academic engagement can be a result.

Culturally diverse students can gain a sense of school connectedness from curriculum-based tasks that include identity exploration, from positive relationships with adults in the school, and from extra-curricular activities. Each factor has a significant effect on school connectedness, and therefore on academic motivation and achievement. One wonders what the impact might be if all three factors were employed in concert.

Conclusion

Cultural diversity in our schools creates challenges on various levels, but with these challenges come significant opportunities for positive change. There are strategies and approaches that have made a difference and contributed to success for many schools facing diversity challenges. It is imperative that school leaders and teachers examine the challenges of diversity honestly and openly, so that true progress can be made for all students.

References

- Brown, R., & Evans, W. P. (2002). Extra-curricular activity and ethnicity: Creating greater school connection among ethnically diverse student populations. *Urban Education* 37(1), 41-58.
- Cooper Shaw, C. (1997). Critical issue: Educating teachers for diversity. *North Central Regional Educational Laboratory*. Retrieved July, 21, 2009, from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/presrvce/pe300.htm>
- Evans, A. (2007). School leaders and their sensemaking about race and demographic change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 159-188.
- Faircloth, B. S. (2009). Making the most of adolescence: Harnessing the search for identity to understand classroom belonging. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(3), 321-348.
- Faircloth, B. S., & Hamm, J. V. (2005). Sense of belonging among high school students representing 4 ethnic groups. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(4), 293-309.
- Gause, C. P. (2008). Old school meets new school: Unsettling times at Freedom Junior-Senior High. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 11(1), 33-43.
- Kaylor, M., & Flores, M. M. (2007). Increasing academic motivation in culturally and linguistically diverse students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 19(1), 66-89.
- Knight, M. (2008). "Our school is like the United Nations": An examination of how discourses of diversity in schooling naturalizes whiteness and white privilege. In D. Gerin-Lajoie (Ed.), *Educators' discourses on student diversity in Canada* (pp. 81-108). Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Percy Calaff, K. (2008). Supportive schooling: Practices that support culturally and linguistically diverse students' preparation for college. *National Association of School Principals Bulletin*, 92(2), 95-110.
- Stewart, J. (2009). It may not be as complicated as you think: Supporting children affected by war. *Manitoba Journal of Counselling*, 35(3), 28-32.