

Confronting the Challenge of Diversity in Education

How we respond to the increase in diversity in America
will be a challenge for many schools and communities,
but it need not be a problem

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More often than not, the increase in racial and cultural diversity that is occurring in schools across the United States is thought of as a problem, or even a threat.

I was reminded of this a few weeks ago when I received a call from a journalist who asked me to comment on some of the problems being experienced by a school district in a suburban area of northern California. She informed me that this had been a fairly homogenous, middle class bedroom community, that had very recently seen an increase in diversity among students. She said that with this increase there had been a rise in the kinds of problems typically associated with urban schools.

When I asked her to be more specific, she said “You know, gangs, fighting and some complaints from minority parents about school curriculum.” Apparently, some minority parents were protesting the district’s use of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 8th grade English classes. “School officials are at a total loss” she continued. “They have no idea of how they should be responding to these issues.”

A Common Refrain

This journalist’s description of the community’s troubles in responding to an increase in student diversity is quite common. I hear similar stories, typically phrased as complaints, when I visit public schools throughout California. Diversity is no longer an urban issue.

As the home to more new immigrants than any other state in the nation, communities across California are convulsing from the demographic and political changes that accompany the change in population. And perhaps more than any other social institution, public schools are at the epicenter of this change, and educators are on the frontline in figuring out how to respond.

But, why is the rise in diversity seen as a problem? This is an important question, for I believe that in framing the growth in racial and cultural diversity as a problem, educators, policy makers and journalists, have set the stage for how communities will react to this change.

This is not to say that a change in the racial and ethnic composition of a school or community does not pose new challenges or require a change in approaches on the part of educators. New immigrants often speak languages other than English, and in many California school districts for example, it is not uncommon for 30, 40 and even 50 foreign languages to be present among the student population.

The arrival of new groups, especially racial minorities, often leads to racial conflict and the venting of various kinds of prejudice and intolerance. Too often, those receiving the new arrivals feel threatened and insecure and react with hostility and resentment.

Finally, and most importantly, diversity tends to be perceived as problematic because American schools have historically seen cultural assimilation of immigrants and non-whites as central to their mission. During the nineteenth century, one of the major concerns of educators and politicians was how new immigrants would be absorbed into the American population. For many, public schools were the most logical place at which the task of converting foreigners into Americans could be carried out.

But Americanization was not limited to foreigners. In the southwest it was common for Native American children to be taken from their families and sent to boarding schools so that they could be saved by Christianity. For African American and many Mexican American children, segregated schooling spared them from being subjected to forced acculturation. However, de-segregation has changed that also, and with it, the spoken language of children - whether it be Spanish or Ebonics - has often been subject to eradication. Furthermore, far too often, the cultural differences of these children are equated with cultural inferiority, and not surprisingly, children from these groups are more likely to do poorly in school, get into trouble, or drop out.

Return to Yesteryear

Given our history, and given the real challenges that accompany an increase in diversity, it is not surprising that many educators and communities would treat the issue as a problem. However, like it or not, even in small towns and isolated rural areas, diversity is our future, and all projections point to continued growth in diversity in the years ahead.

Conservative activists in California have responded to this trend with futile efforts aimed at preserving the status quo. The approval of ballot measures such as 187 - which denies undocumented aliens access to public services such as education, 209 - which eliminates affirmative action, and 227 - which prohibits bilingual education in public schools, is likely to make life more difficult for immigrants and many people of color, but unlikely to stem the tide of diversity.

Evidence that wedge issue politics has the effect of adding to racial tensions and conflict between groups, a prospect which the LA uprising of 1991 clearly showed could have disastrous consequences if left unchecked.

Pluralistic Advantages

However, there is another alternative. Instead of responding to rising diversity with fear and insecurity, we can treat our diversity as an asset and devise ways of responding to it which enable our society to reap benefits from our pluralism.

For this to happen there must be a significant shift in the perspective taken on the growth in diversity, and educators must play leading roles in bringing this shift about. Schools will undoubtedly continue to serve as the initial meeting place for different cultures, and it will be very important that educators find ways to make those encounters positive experiences for children, parents and teachers.

Shifting the perspective involves getting the public to understand the benefits our society derives from a growth in diversity. For example, there is substantial evidence that rather than draining economic resources, new immigrants often help to revive local economies. It is ironic that in some of the communities where opposition to immigration has been greatest, that there is a complete dependence on immigrant labor in most service jobs (e.g. nannies, gardeners, waiters, etc.).

Furthermore, with larger numbers of people expected to live longer lives, retirees have a vested interest in seeing that our diverse student population is well educated so that they can be gainfully employed and make steady contributions to social security funds.

The Need for a Willingness to Adapt

Finally, schools can move away from their preoccupation with assimilating those who are culturally different and promoting a version of American history that has rendered many groups - racial minorities, women, workers, etc. - largely invisible. In its place we can teach students to respect differences and develop curricula aimed at helping them to understand more about themselves and others.

We can also teach our students to think critically about America's past and help them to recognize that they can play a role in creating a fairer and more equitable society in the future.

How we respond to the increase in diversity in America will be a challenge for many schools and communities, but it need not be a problem. Once we recognize that like changes that are brought

about as a result of innovations in technology, diversity is our future, and not a passing fad, then we can begin to make the adjustments that will make change possible.

As educators we will be on the frontline of this change, and we have a responsibility to show that change can happen without acrimony and resentment, if there is an openness to adapt and to continue to learn.

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