

As our nation's schools strive to provide quality education for students most at risk for failure, the notion of diversity continues to lead the discussion. Revisiting our understandings about diversity as a response to creating equitable learning opportunities to foster achievement for all students has become increasingly urgent given that, while the student demographics have shifted, the achievement gap remains stagnant. We can no longer neglect or miseducate such a significant segment of our population; all our citizens benefit when we improve the education of at-risk students. If schools are to meet these challenges successfully, principals will be expected to be more critically informed about diversity.

The Changing

Revisiting our understandings about diversity will reveal that it no longer refers to race alone and that it is a value-added resource to classrooms.

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According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, many states are experiencing significant growth in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups. For example, 24 states saw an increase of at least 100 percent in their English-learner student population, while other states have experienced a change upwards of 350 percent. This diversification of the student population, however, has not been matched by an increase in student achievement. On

the contrary, schools across the nation are experiencing an ever-increasing achievement gap between white students and students from diverse backgrounds. Providing effective educational programs to all students is especially significant now as schools continue to experience high student drop-out rates, sanctions for low-performing students, and high teacher attrition in schools where quality teachers are needed most—working with poor and culturally diverse students.

Evolution of Diversity

There has been a variety of understandings about diversity and how to respond to it in schools, most notable are the following three distinct approaches. The first approach occurred after the civil rights movement and ensuing legislation of the 1960s and continued through the 1980s. The assumption among educators was that diverse students performed poorly in school because they “inherited” a number of deficits: poverty, inability to speak

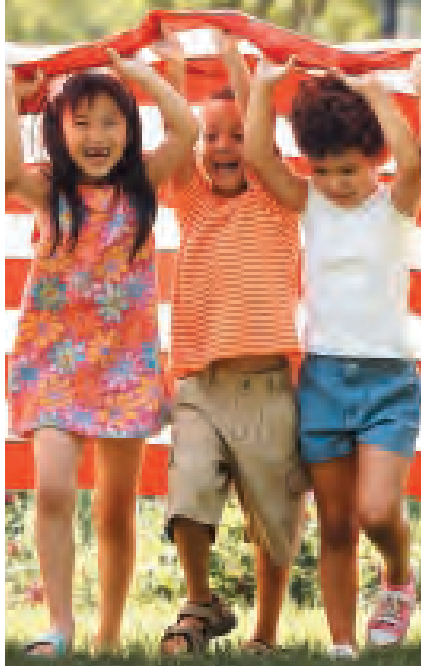
Face of Diversity



English, low self-esteem, and other forms of “cultural deprivation.” The approaches used by educators, therefore, assumed that the schools should make up for such deficits and provide more opportunities for students to improve their self-esteem and/or overcome the language barrier through bilingual education programs. Multicultural education had its origins during this time. While intended to address issues of inequalities, many schools implemented it in a nonthreatening and narrow manner. For example, multicultural curriculum often was limited to the celebration of various ethnic heroes. Additionally, while school principals supported multicultural education, it was the responsibility of the teacher to infuse it into the curriculum.

A second approach to addressing diversity in schools began in the late 1980s and 1990s. It addressed the cultural proficiencies and/or culturally relevant pedagogies necessary to work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds. This approach to diversity shifted the focus away from students’ perceived deficits toward teachers’ knowledge and skills in working with CLD students. Many researchers—including Gloria Ladson Billings in *Crossing Over to Canaan*, Christine Sleeter in “Preparing Teachers for Culturally Diverse Schools: Research and the Overwhelming Presence of Whiteness,” Lisa Delpit in *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, and Geneva Gay in *Culturally Responsive Teaching*—show that when a teacher understands a student’s background, culture, and language and uses these characteristics as strengths to build upon, the student is validated and more likely to succeed. Further, teachers who understand their students’ cultures and backgrounds are better able to design instruction that best meets their needs.

A robust, research-based model of culturally relevant pedagogy is housed at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) at the University of California, Berkeley. The CREDE model comprises five standards of effective pedagogy:



- Teachers and students produce together—Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students.
- Develop language and literacy across the curriculum—Apply literacy strategies and develop academic language competence in all subject areas.
- Make lessons meaningful—Connect curriculum to experience and skills of students’ home and community.
- Teach complex thinking—Challenge students with cognitive complexity.
- Teach through conversation—Engage students through dialogue, especially instructional conversation.

The third approach of the past 10 years reflects a response to diversity that builds on the previous two periods but is more centered on students’ civil rights. There has been a shift from blaming the victims (CLD students) for their perceived shortcomings and instead addressing inadequacies inside the school, such as deficient resources, poor teacher quality, and institutionalized discrimination, that contribute to the achievement gap.

This approach requires that school principals be prepared to lead by embracing equity and social justice. This level of preparation requires a strong understanding of cultural proficiency and the need to reflect upon one’s biases and understandings of effective strategies for working with diverse student populations. It also requires principals to effectively facilitate discussions because

these conversations often move to issues of entitlement, bias, prejudice, and race.

Putting race on the table is not an easy issue, especially when the National Center for Education Statistics reported that a majority of the teachers (82 percent) in 2006-2007 come from the majority group. Often these teachers have limited experience working with CLD students. The first step is to participate in collegial discussions that authentically address the issues. The goal must be to identify successful structures and strategies that are inclusive of all stakeholders and empower each one to take the next step in responding to diversity as a resource that will enrich schools.

Working With Today’s Students

Now, more than ever, the ways in which school principals manage and respond to issues of diversity are essential to promote the systemic change needed to best meet the needs of our changing student population. In leading a discussion in a school, for example, a principal might ask his or her staff: What does diversity mean?

It is likely that a first anticipated response is that “Diversity is good” and should be embraced and nurtured. But not all of us have a common definition for this term. Some may first think about diversity in terms of the color of one’s skin or one’s language, background, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or race. And of course all of these criteria fit into the spectrum of diversity and how it appears in our students and in our teaching force; but what is the decisive focus of diversity? For us, it is the continuum of experience that a child brings into a school as a learner who needs to be nurtured and supported. Moreover, when there is a clash between a child’s home and school experiences, diversity is often identified as something to be obliterated or ignored, placing the responsibility of the achievement gap once again on the backs of diverse students. Past experience has shown this to impact not only a child’s opportunity

for academic success, sense of belonging, and positive self-esteem, but it can also quickly turn off a child's motivation to learn.

How can we respond to the differences of experiences that our children bring to school without one group feeling like the outlier and the other the norm? Knowing and connecting with students who enter our schools is essential. For example, it is important to go beyond the language proficiency that identifies a student as an English-language learner or an English-only student or another subgroup label that we already know. Somehow we need to make connections with our CLD students through diverse and perhaps alternative methods. A writing club could be led by individuals from the community to encourage students to write about their realities without threat of exposure or ridicule. Some other ideas might be to have specific after-school clubs, such as a chess, kite flyer, or cooking club, where students can share their talents and experiences.

In addition, teachers need to provide instruction to all students on the many groups of people who live on this earth with us. We need to respect and tap the resources at our gates: our parents and community members who come from many different places and speak many different languages. Consider a homework assignment that requires a child to ask his or her parents, relatives, and familiar neighbors about their place of birth and the languages they speak or their work histories. Teachers can follow up by inviting those diverse individuals to come to the school and share their experiences and histories, thus making a home-school connection. The ways we prepare students to enter into global relationships and reciprocally based collaborations are by giving them firsthand experience with working with someone who is different from them.

Leading Change


Previously, diversity was identified through visible labels like the color of a person's skin or his or her language.

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Now, diversity is viewed through the multiplicity of the individual. His skin color can be brown but he is a fluent English speaker or she may have blue eyes and her primary language is Cantonese. Interracial marriages are much more common and children share cultural and ethnic pride across races. The societal realities that confront families cannot be ignored. Not all of our students have two parents of the opposite sex in the home who are both employed, enjoy two weeks of vacation, are homeowners, and have cars to take children to the store or to the movies. Nor might they have a home full of books, pens, dictionaries, encyclopedias, computers, cell phones, or functioning bathrooms. Rather, some of our students survive with minimal supervision and resources each day, often with only the television to keep them company. This is the diversity of experience that our students bring with them into our schools. As principals, we must be mindful that no one in school is making false assumptions about a student based on his or her own experiences and biases.

There needs to be a way for a significant adult to develop a relationship that is built on trust and shared interests. We must explicitly teach our students how to navigate a system that is not always equitable. It is our role as principals to be advocates for our students.

Our schools are predicted to become increasingly more diverse. Add to this circumstance that leadership studies indicate that principals are key to leading change and improvement reforms. They can play a key role to ensure that diversity is handled in a culturally

responsive and student-centered manner with equity and social justice at the center. The principal, as the instructional leader, must demonstrate how diversity is a value-added resource that will enhance the learning environment for students, teachers, and the community in a positive and enriching manner. As the late Harvard University professor Ron Edmonds said in a 1978 speech: “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.” 

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WEB RESOURCES

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) is focused on improving the education of students whose ability to reach their potential is challenged by language or cultural barriers, race, geographic location, or poverty.
<http://crede.berkeley.edu>

Teaching for Change is a nonprofit organization promoting social and economic justice by offering multicultural resources, including books, videos, and posters.
www.teachingforchange.org

