PACE

COMMENTARY

Reflecting on Contemporary Trends of Diversity in Education

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> "If two people are alike, one of them is unnecessary." — A handmade sign I saw in a classroom

I used to startle whenever I noticed the lag between what the field knows to be the right practices in education, and what—ten or twelve years later, with great fanfare—the various books and policies advocate. Now I've become used to it. For various identifiable reasons—both good and bad—official rules and recommendations in education tend to follow what researchers and practitioners have known for several years. An exception to this, however, is the recently released Studying Diversity in Teacher Education (An American Educational Research Association handbook edited by Arnetha Ball and Cynthia Tyson that, in the interest of full disclosure, contains a chapter I wrote). The volume strikes me as an important collection of cutting-edge perspectives on diversity and recommendations for how teacher educators and researchers can productively capitalize on differences among students, teachers, and families. Looking at the book got me reflecting on the modern era of diversity in education.

Simply put, 'difference' is the idea that not everything—or everyone—is the same. The central question related to diversity in education is this: How do we treat difference?

Lament and try to eradicate differences among teachers and students seems to have been the melting pot solution in early U.S. history—and, of course, the reference measure was the white, male, middle-class Anglo. Though there are still some who advocate this approach, fortunately it is considered anachronistic by most. In the 1980s we made what were considered big strides by recommending tolerance. Though that now seems rather primitive and even quaintly offensive, the notion that we should 'tolerate' the differences among us was then progressive and controversial. Next, in the 1990s we moved to acceptance: an improvement but unfortunately a rather passive concept recommending that we learn to accept what we might not understand. Forward movement, yes—but still not there. And then we moved to celebration: a well-meaning attempt to acknowledge and honor some of the non-dominant people, cultures, and practices that had for too long been neglected or disparaged. This was admirable but patronizing: we flattened multiculturalism into food days, flag walls, and token nods to alternative heroes.

Diversity was coming alive, but seemed to be in its infancy in U.S. education. We were paying attention but in our classrooms, schools, and teacher education programs we were clumsily sprinkling in multiculturalism like croutons on a green leaf salad: the croutons of diversity added to the overall taste but didn't much alter the composition of the meal. Day-long diversity workshops, single chapters or sidebars in books, and an additional teacher education course were insufficient reforms.

Over the last decade, however, there's been impressive movement to authentically embed diversity into all the parts of teaching, teacher education, and learning. We finally began weaving diversity throughout the whole of education. Rather than flavoring an already-made salad with croutons, we've begun actively melting the chocolate into the rich mole sauce of education. This is a new cooking metaphor: the chocolate fundamentally changes the sauce at the same time the sauce transforms the chocolate. Both together become something new in which one part can no longer be separated from the others. This is where diversity is headed now. And, though the journey is not complete, I applaud its direction.

We understand that the WHAT of people is mostly the same: Bill Clinton likes to say that, genetically speaking, all humans are 99.9% alike. Yet, we're accepting that WHO each of us is unique: we are different people with different experiences and views due to our different social positionings, practices, cultural affiliations, and ways the world has treated us. Honoring, examining, and making productive use of the many dimensions of difference have become a primary project of schooling in California and elsewhere.

Teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and other educators across California are making great strides in highlighting and operationalizing the positive differences among us. Curricular attempts to foreground 'funds of knowledge;' improved academic pathways, school-community partnerships, and multiple literacies; identity frameworks in teacher preparation; nuanced attention to sensitivity, heterodoxy, and intersectionality in teaching and learning... these are admirable reforms. Though value conflicts rage on in our debates about academic standards, English-only policies, and the legitimacy of creationism as science, many educators and policy representatives have embraced the educative value of difference and cultural pluralism.

This is not to advocate for some kind of ethical relativism. All views and practices in life are not morally equal. Teachers should not accept every opinion or practice their students put forward. There are better and worse, admirable and deplorable, ways to live a life, and many ideas and social practices can be rightly condemned in a modern democracy such as ours. Nor is this to relax or 'soften' the academic expectations we hold for our students: there is an awful lot of scholarly content and academic skills children must learn in school. But I am pleased to see sophisticated notions of diversity being awarded a central role in how we prepare teachers, educate children, and improve schools.

You might want to check out the book. Let's hope its perspectives and recommendations are taken up sooner rather than later.

Studying Diversity in Teacher Education (2011) *A. Ball and Tyson, C. (Eds.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield*

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