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6. DIVERSITY CREATES DIMENSION

Recently I visited a classroom where a poster on the wall displayed an array of diverse-looking butterflies. Below were the words *diversity creates dimension in our world*. Knowing that I was about to begin writing about diversity, I sighed a big sigh of relief! Finally I knew how I would begin.

That was the easy part. The more I thought about the topic of diversity, the more diverse became my thinking. Within the topic of diversity, there are many diverse issues and where should I begin? Schools are places where diversity abounds. You see and hear diversity within and among students and their thinking, the homes and backgrounds and beliefs from which these students come, the teachers who teach these students, the teaching methods and philosophies about teaching and learning, the access to resources available to schools and classrooms, and the administrators and their expectations of their teachers and students. The list goes on. My dilemma was how to narrow down such a diverse topic.

I thought back to a grade six classroom I taught several years ago and remembered situations in which there were diverse opinions and where students would remind each other – and me – about diversity. Varying opinions about issues or ways to accomplish tasks would often result in someone piping up with “Diversity!” And yes, I had to be reminded too that my way wasn’t the only way. At times individuals saw diversity as an unwelcome challenge. *Can’t you just tell us how to do this instead of us coming up with other (diverse) possibilities? Can’t you just tell us the answer?*

Diversity was a term and a concept used every day and often led to interesting conversations. This notion of ‘living diversity’ became clearer as I contemplated what to write. I knew that diversity in our world was an important concept to learn about, but also believed that diversity in the classroom could not be separated from this – in other words, the issue was ‘*living and learning about diversity*’. Students can learn a definition of the term *diversity*, but there’s no guarantee that they will remember it, and even if they do, they may not really have developed an understanding of the concept. If we *live* diversity, we are much more likely to develop an understanding which is longer lasting because we will talk about it, explore what it means, and grapple with some pre-conceived notions we may have. As I write my thoughts about diversity, I also gain a better understanding of what I have learned about the concept of diversity in my classroom and from my students. My story tells of one way in which to explore diversity and how it creates dimension in our world (and in

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our classrooms). It is a reflection of many years of teaching, but in particular, one year with grade six students. I intend to explore the following ideas:

- There is more than learning *about* diversity; diversity is a concept to explore in the classroom while addressing the diverse needs of students.
- Diversity presents opportunity.
- In a classroom where diversity is seen as opportunity, varying perspectives become the norm.
- Individual differences provide a wealth of ideas and solutions that allow students to compare, make connections, and go beyond just seeing differences.
- Conversation is key in exploring diversity in a constructivist classroom.

The context in which this concept was explored was a project in which my grade six students explored the theme *Unity Within Diversity*. This was an interdisciplinary theme where Social Studies concepts were explored through literature circles. I wanted my students to explore diversity in a deeper way, and at the same time, respect the diverse ways in which they explored their thinking and represented their learning. What made this project unique was that teacher candidates from a nearby university made weekly visits to this classroom and participated in intergenerational literature circles. Teacher candidates explored alternate ways of teaching Social Studies and observed ways in which younger students read and thought about their reading. Since one effective way to explore diversity is through literature, the text we used, fiction, non-fiction, informational, both print and electronic, was an important aspect of our work. To summarize this project, students read historical fiction novels to begin their exploration, but this led to many conversations, inquiry research, and diverse ways of representing their understanding. The approach allowed both teacher candidates and younger students to construct their own understanding of *diversity*.

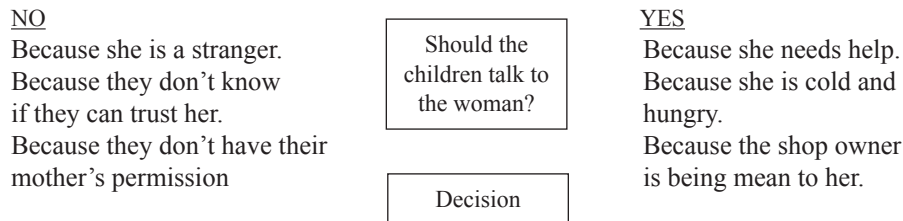
LIVING IN A DIVERSE CLASSROOM

Let me provide some background context. Exploration of diversity did not happen overnight. During the first few months of school, my students and I spent time trying to create a safe and respectful culture in the classroom. We talked about respect, rights and responsibilities in the classroom and explored the concepts of perspective and point of view. Being respectful of different perspectives was practiced and reflected upon through discussion and writing. This language was not unfamiliar and could be heard throughout the day whether looking at different ways of solving a problem in math or in a variety of social situations. Often literature became the springboard for discussions. A great book to begin the topic of diverse perspectives was Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*, which portrays perspectives of four different characters on a trip to the park. Discussions of what the worldview of each character might be followed the reading. Students could relate quite easily to how they might have a different perspective than someone else about the same situation. The discussion

became very interesting when they shared reasons for their thinking. Representation strategies such as a discussion web helped students consider diverse perspectives.

Another story that engaged students in exploring diverse perspectives was *Lady in the Box* by Ann McGovern. In this picture book, two young children see a homeless woman living in a cardboard box in front of a deli very near to their apartment. They are bothered by this and want to talk to her, but know that their mother has told them not to talk to strangers. My students were given a question *Should the children talk to the woman?* and discussed the pros and cons of this issue before presenting their decisions to the rest of the class.

A Discussion Web for *The Lady in the Box*:



Conversation is key to understanding. However, students need time to practice the skills of having a discussion, but also need the time and opportunity to reflect on the discussion and think about how they enable or discourage a safe environment in which diverse perspectives are respected. We role-played and talked about aspects of discussion such as how to include everyone in a discussion or how to respond to someone who doesn't think like you do. The content of the discussions gave students the opportunity to practice these skills by clarifying, adjusting, and justifying their opinions, and hearing other perspectives. Previous research I had done with grade five students had convinced me that discussion helps students construct understanding and make meaning, and they themselves were aware of this. Those grade five students had reflected in this way, commenting:

It's really good 'cause then you hear what other people have to say and you get something better than if you were just to think of it on your own.

You give reasons for what you think.

You see other perspectives. (Epp, 1999)

LEARNING ABOUT DIVERSITY

A few months into the year, we began the intergenerational literature circles with the teacher candidates and the theme *Unity Within Diversity*. I wanted to get away from the all too common emphasis on 'food and festivals' and 'Culture Fest' celebration when studying different cultures. Of course there would be discussion of similarities

and differences, but the emphasis was more on what we do with differences. “Otherwise students will not become “border crossers” who cannot bridge the differences to embrace the humanness of all people” (Johnson, et al., 2005, p. 167). The essential questions that guided our thinking were:

- What is diversity?
- In what ways does learning about the past help us understand why people have different points of view?
- In what ways does interaction between groups of people affect each group?
- Can these interactions lead to change?
- What are people’s rights and responsibilities in a diverse world?

The novels which were chosen to explore the theme covered a variety of topics – slavery, the Holocaust, British children coming to Canada as home children and war guest children, Mennonites living in Russia during the Revolution, and native issues, contemporary and historical. Although the topics covered were very diverse, that was also the connecting factor – they all dealt with diversity and how people handled it. The social studies methods course professor involved in the project and myself chose the following titles:

First Nations/Metis:

Across the Steel River by Ted Stenhouse

Morning Girl by Michael Dorris

The Holocaust:

Behind the Bedroom Wall by Laura Williams

Daniel’s Story by Carol Matas

Slavery:

The Captive by Joyce Hansen

Underground to Canada by Barbara Smucker

British Children Coming to Canada:

Home Child by Barbara Haworth-Attard

The Lights Go On Again by Kit Pearson

Mennonites Living in Russia:

Days of Terror by Barbara Smucker

The grade six students and teacher candidates chose a topic that they were especially interested in, were given a novel that corresponded to this topic and met as groups to discuss the books on a weekly basis for about six weeks. Throughout this time, grade six students also became involved in an inquiry research project which grew out of their novel and discussions. Guidelines were given and at the end each group represented their learning in oral, written and visual formats.

Although participants may have read the same thing, they had different connections, questions, and opinions. These diverse connections and questions

depended on their background knowledge and experiences and this is where very interesting conversations happened. Students gave reasons for their ideas and learned how to respect others' ideas. They also listened to new perspectives and at times, adjusted their own thinking. The diverse thinking was viewed as positive. It made discussions more engaging and interesting, and provided support as students tried to make sense of what they were learning. The grade six students reflected and commented:

If other people are stating their opinions, then you'll get some sort of a different understanding about the book too and they'll take a different meaning from the book too.

Not everyone has to agree. Everyone has their own opinion. It makes it funner because you hear everyone's opinion and you want to keep on reading and you get more excited every chapter – you want to keep going.

It's okay for people to have different opinions because it might help somebody more' cause they see other people's opinions and you can choose what you think is right and take a little from this person and a little from that person.

The novels proved to be the starting point. Often the discussions began with a big question someone had. For example, in a discussion around *Days of Terror*, one grade six student asked, "What would you do if someone was going to hurt your family? Would you fight back even if that was against your religion?" Other times, both teacher candidates and grade six students needed to increase their background knowledge regarding an historical event or other details and would either use the Internet or print materials to fill in missing gaps or try to understand the characters they were reading about. Another important activity for all group members was to examine the background contexts of the novel (social, economic, historical, geographical) so that they could see the story in context. Johnson et al. (2005) says that students may think the novels they read are not 'real'. Using the resource-based approach helped students to connect the 'story' to real-life events.

Students in the classroom were diverse. Not all were at the same 'reading level' or had the same interests. They were, however, all capable of thinking and exploring their own passions. Each made his/her own contributions to the classroom community. One student, who was a struggling reader and writer, needed much support, but in the end, participated with his small group in representing his learnings with a mobile. His peers recognized and respected the diversity of their group and helped each other choose representations that suited them.

The literature circles provided a context in which to give students opportunity to practice the skills and strategies that would make them independent readers. I modeled how I would try to make sense of what I was reading (not what to think, but *how* to think) and how this helped me understand what I was reading. In their literature circle discussions, students (university and grade sixes) were thinking aloud, and *struggling* to make sense of it. I do not use the word *struggling* in a

negative sense. Ellin Keene (2008), in *To Understand* says, “We struggle for insight; we savor and learn from the struggle itself; we venture into new learning territory and fight the debilitating influence of judgment” (p. 102). The book discussions would last about forty-five minutes, and often they would lament the fact that they hadn’t had enough time to discuss.

Throughout the discussions about books, students have the opportunity to learn about issues such as racism, prejudice and social justice and how people throughout history have dealt with differences (Lobron & Selman, 2007). This was the case with my students and the teacher candidates who covered a variety of ‘heavy’ topics in their discussions. Lobron and Selman (2007) describe social awareness as “the knowledge children have that allows them to understand and relate successfully to other people, both people like themselves and those who are from different backgrounds. Some of the key skills involved in the social awareness domain are negotiating with others, resolving conflicts, expressing one’s point of view, and listening to the perspectives of others” (p. 528). The literature circle participants were certainly doing this and it wasn’t always a smooth and easy

The role of conversation was pivotal in exploring the concept of diversity. By providing opportunities to discuss issues presented in these books, students developed the ability to talk about those issues. Talking about them developed their understanding about them. Johnson et al. (2005) says that readers bring individual values, attitudes and histories to their readings and must be aware of how these may influence the transactions they have with a text. By articulating their thoughts, students began to develop the vocabulary necessary to discuss issues such as racism, etcetera, and to question themselves and each other about their assumption that one’s perceptions of the world is the norm. Although students read different novels which focused on different events and issues in history, they were given the opportunity to talk and make connections between them. In a constructivist classroom, when children are exposed to different ways of thinking or different ways of doing things and these ideas are welcomed, diverse ideas become the norm. These diverse perspectives may cause dissonance, but also cause others to question their own ideas and assumptions. This holds true for students, but also for teachers.

Dressel (2003) points out the importance of writing from another’s point of view as key to understanding another perspective. Character interviews were one writing activity that allowed students to do this. Students took on the role of a character from their novels and were interviewed by someone else. In turn, each student got to interview a character from another book. This forced them to think about the character in that context and what she/he would have said or done in response to these questions. Not only did this require them to think about their own character, but it also introduced them to others’ perspectives. At another time, students worked in pairs to write a “Poems for Two Voices”, patterned after poems from *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman (1988). Students who read *Morning Girl* (Dorris, 1992) thought about the main character, a Taino girl who encounters white explorers for the first time. One student wrote from the girl’s perspective,

and one student wrote from the explorer's perspective. They co-wrote one poem to present these voices and discovered that the perspectives were different sometimes, and at times, quite similar. The poem was then read with both voices being heard simultaneously.

The question remains, *Did students deepen their understanding of the concept of diversity?* I believe they did. Our first attempts at defining diversity resulted in one-word responses such as 'differences'. Students brainstormed ideas of where we see diversity. That was the first essential question. When the other questions were first posted, students looked at them with some confusion. At the end of our explorations, responses were much more elaborate and showed deeper understanding as shown by the students' responses below:



What is diversity?

Diversity is altogether everyone's differences. It is the things that are different even in the smallest ways. Diversity is everywhere. Everywhere you look there is diversity whether it's right before your eyes or somewhere you can see clearly. Everything is diverse.

In what ways does learning about the past help us understand why people have different points of view?

You discuss why people's points of view are what they are.

Perspective means you can be close together but see different things. Like a two-coloured ball: one side is black and one side is white. You're standing close but you see different things.

We talked about how interesting it was that there are so many books about a Jewish child's experience and not from Nazi children.

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In what ways does interaction between groups of people affect each group? Can these interactions lead to change?

Interactions lead to change by people changing their points of view. When a person sees something from another person's angle, their opinion may change.

Interactions can lead to major change like friendship between races that could never be friends without interaction.

What are people's rights and responsibilities in a diverse world?

People's rights are to be free, be safe, have food and water, to voice our opinions and beliefs if we chose to, to make mistakes, to be listened to, and to be different! People's responsibilities are to not hurt people or their feelings, to not discriminate people because of how they look or think, and ...let people be different!

Teacher candidates also reflected on their learnings and realizations about the diversity of students in the classroom and diversity as opportunity. They commented, for example:

I feel that I have learned a lot as a teacher over the past few weeks. I have seen what a great range of learning abilities, styles, and interests can exist within one small group of children, let alone an entire classroom. It has made me realize that I will have to be very vigilant in attending to the great and varied needs of my students when I have my own classroom. I have also seen, however, how students of varying interests, learning styles and abilities can help one another to build background knowledge, create learning connections, and think critically about material they are studying.

I have been helped to see the importance of both teaching about diversity, and teaching with awareness of diversity that exists among students I am working with.

I enjoy how the different perspectives of adults and young learners can come together, broadening the knowledge of both groups.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These are my reflections about one experience in exploring the concept of diversity. What have I learned? For one thing, as one teacher candidate put it: *I see the importance of bringing resources that present a variety of perspectives.*

Johnson et al. (2005) suggest "authors, their texts and readers all are situated within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts" (p. 42). These contexts influence authors' beliefs and what is written as well as how it is written. Readers'

responses are also culturally situated and readers' contexts influence how they perceive texts. Through conversation and teaching and learning the language of multiple perspectives, readers become more aware of their own beliefs and question these. If students are given the opportunity to wonder about diversity and ask, "Why?", they may be able to connect and engage with literature and people from other cultural locations because they realize that reality is not limited to what they know. Students need the opportunity to wonder.

Teachers must examine their own beliefs and assumptions. They must become, as Miller (2003) describes, 'co-learners and advocates for diversity'. We have more and more culturally diverse classrooms, and we need to look at this as a strength. Incorporating a student's native language and culture into the classroom, talking about the advantages of knowing more than one language, or looking at the historic roots of each language are only some ways of acknowledging and valuing diversity in the classroom.

We can ignore or obliterate language diversity in the classroom, or we can encourage in our teachers and students a mental set for diversity. Choosing the latter helps to develop linguistic diversity. Learning to talk in more than one way enables us to view students as resources who can help us learn what it feels like to move between cultures and language varieties and perhaps better learn how to and become citizens of a global community. (Delpit, 2006, p. 69)

Students' abilities and interests are diverse. Using constructivist teaching methods and finding out what students already know about a topic enables learning to proceed from where the child is at. Scripted lessons that are the same for every student in every school standardize learning. Even if policies try to mandate that students are seen through the same lens, we must see them as individuals. Not all students will learn the same things from each lesson or activity they participate in. They will construct their own knowledge and understanding at their level. Diversity adds layers to our classroom, to our own lives, and to the world. We cannot teach about diversity if we do not recognize the diversity in our classrooms.

We are all creative, but by the time we are three or four years old, someone has knocked the creativity out of us. Some people shut up the kids who start to tell stories. Kids dance in their cribs, but someone will insist they sit still. By the time the creative people are ten or twelve, they want to be like everyone else (Angelou, 2008). We must think of their differences as their strengths.

My understanding of diversity evolves continually. Addressing diverse needs in a classroom can a real challenge, but I am inspired by my grade six student who reminds us that our rights and responsibilities are to voice our opinions and beliefs if we chose to, to make mistakes, to be listened to, and to be different ... *to not hurt people or their feelings, to not discriminate people because of how they look or think, and ...let people be different!* Let diversity create dimension in our classrooms!

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