

Diversity Action Plan:
Building a Night of Multicultural Fun
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Part 1: Current Understanding Of Diversity

Diversity in education is a multifaceted, complex, and ever-changing spectrum of *differences* among a student population and its staff. These differences can range from cultural and religious to an aspect as simple as how a family celebrates birthdays. I believe that it is the responsibility of teachers and administrators to truly know their communities, families, and students, foster discussions and activities that address diversity, and aid in mutual understanding between teachers and students on different ends of the spectrum.

As a product of a very small, conservative Nebraska town, of a small predominately white school, and a private college, I did not, unfortunately, experience a great deal of cultural, religious, or ethnic diversity in my youth. However, I lived in a predominately Dominican neighborhood of New York City and was able to utilize some of my Spanish speaking skills there, simply with vendors and neighbors in my area and with a few of the men who worked with me in a restaurant. Then, with a move to San Diego, I was fortunate enough to encounter some Mexican American culture. However, my experiences with cultural diversity there were few and far between as well because I lived in a predominately white neighborhood and worked in a theatre with a middle to upper class patronage. Though my experiences with cultural/racial/and ethnic diversity are few, I have experienced many other types of diversity in my lifetime. As a child and teenager, my classmates, friends, and acquaintances were on a broad socio-economic spectrum, many of them living in poverty. Just the shift from a small town farming community and school to a more urban city for college allowed me to become familiar with many differences between urban and rural lifestyles, and that understanding was stretched in NYC and San Diego as well. In college, as a theatre major, I had the opportunity to get to know many people of differing gender identities and sexual orientation, many of whom became close friends.

It is evident that the largest gap in my diversity is in my lack of experience with many people of differing cultural/ethnic/racial backgrounds and religions. I am not familiar with many of the customs and traditions of other cultures or religions, but I am absolutely open to learning more. From my experiences with my students, I am aware of my own "baggage" in regards to socio-economic differences. I am conscious of my tendency to get defensive of a student and the way he or she is living, and therefore judge the parent or family. I must "unpack" that baggage in order to avoid doing a disservice to my students.

Since my first year teaching, I have come to understand that while students may come to school and appear the same, there are countless factors in their lives that may affect their learning and social behavior. I have since been more aware of my privilege and the advantages with which I grew up, and I continue to work to be sensitive to those students and teachers who come from dissimilar backgrounds.

This class has expanded my understanding of diversity in so many ways. The Diversity Wheel alone is a reminder that diversity is not only about culture and ethnicity, but encompasses so many other ways in which people are unique. Simply considering the diversity of the speakers and the experiences they shared with us, I have deepened my awareness of the obstacles that others face in order to be successful in education.

Part 2: Current School Setting

My current school setting includes diversity in many ways. Our demographics reveal that in the 2013-2014 school year, only 3 African American students and 4 Hispanic students attended PHS. The cultural/racial diversity among the staff is even less, with every one of the teachers in the district identifying as white. In 2013-2014, only 24.18% of the school's 182 students received free and reduced meals pricing, and we have a mobility rate of only 8.24%.

Some of the parents and members of the school community come from the town of Palmyra, some from the town of Bennet, a few from the city of Lincoln, and yet others from surrounding rural farms and homes. Many of the staff members do not live in the community but commute from Lincoln. In fact, of the approximately 20 teachers and 3 administrators in the building (including shared and part-time staff), over half of them live in Lincoln. Only the Principal and one other teacher live in Palmyra, and the rest reside rurally or in surrounding small towns. The most diversity with regards to the Diversity Wheel is reflected in the geographical and socio-economic segments. While I am not aware of the exact numbers, we do have a population of SPED students; however, we do not test for gifted students as we do not provide those services. There is no splitting of classes based on ability, so there are a variety of learners mixed together in all of the classes, from exceptional learners to low performing and struggling students. Over the five years I have been teaching at PHS, I have become acquainted with a handful of GLBT students, but I have never had an ELL student and once again, we do not provide those services. Noticeably, the ELL population is the only one not depicted at all, however there are other populations that consist of only a few students.

Because of these narrow populations, our school staff does not often address diversity as an issue in our school. However, our administration does communicate often with the parents and members of the community. Our principal and secretary in particular, because he lives in town and interacts with some parents and community members socially and she works part time at the community grocery store, know a great deal about the family dynamics in many of our students homes. If I have a concern about a student that may relate to their home situation, I can often consult one or the other with questions. The disadvantage, however, to receiving that information through an outside source is that it often comes with judgment. Not living in the

community acts as a disadvantage to my familiarization with the families of my students. The only time I come in contact with them is at school activities or parent-teacher conferences, and often the parents of my at-risk students do not attend those events. I would like to have an opportunity to get to know those families in order to better understand my students.

Before I started at PHS, teachers submitted reports of how they incorporated multicultural education in their curriculum. I do several activities in the classroom with literature and writing that relate to diversity, but I am not required to report those to administration. We as a staff are not held accountable for incorporating and aspect of multicultural education in the classroom. I believe one of our biggest challenges is not only understanding our own student population, but expanding their understanding of cultural diversity. Because they are not exposed to a great variety of those Diversity Wheel facets, it is our responsibility as a staff to widen their view of the world and its people.

Part 3: Furthering My Own Understanding

Learning Goals

I would like to learn more about the diversity of my students and their families with regards to other facets of the Diversity Wheel. Just because my school is not culturally/ethnically/racially diverse does not mean there are not differences among the students, their families, and their ways of life. I want to find a way to learn more about my students' family and community cultures, but also facilitate a way for the rest of the school's staff to expand their understanding as well. I would also like to examine more closely the culture of my school and analyze its attitude toward diversity and multicultural education. I hope to accomplish these things by creating a one week plan to focus on cultural diversity culminating in

a night of celebration in which parents will be invited to see the activities the students have that relate to cultural diversity.

Resources

I will need the support of my administration. The superintendent, principal, and activities director will all need to be informed and involved. However, one of the most important jobs will be to get the teachers on board. They will be planning and creating activities that bring diversity into the classroom, so it will be crucial that they are not only willing to participate but enthusiastic about learning more about their students and helping them learn about each other and the world. The school counselor, who oversees the character education program, will also be an important resource to help plan. The Teaching Tolerance will be an excellent resource for both me and the other teachers, and a copy of the 88 Ways to Appreciate Diversity Month can help produce ideas as well.

Reading

I will read a copy of Culturally Proficient Leadership by Raymond D. Terrell and I would also like to become familiar with Mindsets in the Classroom by Mary K. Ricci. The Teaching Tolerance website also has wealth of resources and information, so I would like to familiarize myself with that site as well.

Outcome

This plan will take strategic leadership to develop a vision and purpose with the other staff members and support innovation within the school community. More significantly, it will involve community and political leadership to promote multicultural awareness, gender sensitivity, socio-economic, racial, and ethnic understanding in the school and community, and

most importantly to demonstrate sensitivity, respect, and empathy for the multiple perspectives held by our students, staff, and community.

Action Steps

The first step will in fact be to take this plan to my administration and get their support to proceed. If they agree to its implementation and give me consent to move forward, I will do the following:

1. Develop a timeline and schedule a night for the end of the event. It would be ideal to accomplish this during diversity month; however, because that begins in August, that may not work (at least for this coming school year.)
2. Develop a timeline or possible periods when the activities can be completed. Depending on the nature of each activity or lesson, they can be incorporated into regular classes, accomplished over lunch (such as a lunch panel discussion or lunch partners with a list of questions), and most easily used during our character education period that week. The plan can be implemented by grade level as there are two or three teachers assigned to each grade for the character education program.
3. Plan for food for the event.
4. Contact parents and advertise the event in the communities of Bennet and Palmyra.
5. Generate a list of possible activities teachers can do with their students. The aforementioned resources can be shared with teachers, but I would prefer to have a list of ideas to make it as easy as possible on the teachers. Ideally, each activity would have an end product that could be displayed at the evening presentation. (Posters, artifacts, videos using iMovie, Power Points, etc.) The activities should be diverse in nature as well, addressing as many of the facets of the diversity wheel as possible.

6. After giving teachers a chance to plan, make a list of the activities, when they will be executed, and what the outcome will be. From this, plan the event and get any additional resources scheduled (such as the projector or sound system in the gym.) Plan for setup on the evening of the event. Plan for any need for student assistance. Students will be free to peruse the displays with their parents with the exception of displays that need operation or additional explanation.
7. When the activities have been completed, collect and display the projects and prepare for the evening. Prepare a brief statement to share with parents when the event begins to communicate the ultimate goal of mutual understanding, acceptance, and multicultural awareness.
8. Hopefully, have fun!

Possible Resistance

I may first encounter resistance from my administration. It will be crucial that I am organized, prepared, and ready to answer questions. While time will be one of my most difficult challenges, I will dedicate myself to the project to make it successful. (Remaining organized will help with this as well.) I may also experience some resistance from teachers. It will be important for me to show them I am dedicated and will be there for help if they need it. I will need to show them empathy and make it clear that I understand time constraints in the classroom. The first time we accomplish this (together) will be difficult, but it would be amazing if this could become something we do each year to make multicultural awareness a consistent part of our school community.

Risks

Along with the risk that comes with trying something new and encountering any kind of resistance, I have to be prepared for mistakes and missteps. Even if everything goes smoothly, there is the risk that not enough parents and students will attend. Hopefully, if we foster a feeling of excitement about the project with the students and give them ownership, they will be the biggest advertisers. Their learning is the ultimate outcome, and if that happens, we have succeeded.