

Student Diversity in Classrooms

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Abstract

In a classroom, we come across diversity in various forms. They can be broadly classified into four categories: racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds; different learning styles; different levels of motivation and different opinions about the world around them. This growing diversity is the cause of discrimination, leading to growing intolerance amongst the youth.

To lessen the gap, diversity has to be redefined to help remove intolerance. Students need to take pride in their individuality so there can be a change in their perceptions, leading to a better tomorrow.

This responsibility can be relegated to teachers as they are the nation builders and are considered the torchbearers and will remain so, come what may.

Keywords: *Diversity, schooling, language, inclusion*

Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization.

Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

There has been growing intolerance amongst the youth all around the globe, the reasons are discrimination based on race, religion, gender, community. Our diverse views have created differences and the problems that could have been solved mutually are blown out of proportion, rifts created, enemies born, where no one is ready to compromise, let alone find solutions. In Australia, racial discrimination emerged as a big issue, in the US and UK, immigration became a political issue, while in India, there are divisions across gender, caste and religion. Even among the more educated youth, intolerance towards these sensitive issues exists. Where are we heading? Are we becoming so ruthless and mercenary that we can only think in these terms, think about the differences and find reasons to subjugate one another?

Diversity- Categories

The diversity can be broadly categorised into:

- Racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds
- Different learning styles
- Different levels of motivation and
- Different opinions about the world around them

We live in a world of diversity. Every individual is different. Diversity can be seen in abundance, whether it be religion, caste, class or languages. With a change in distance, we find a change in dialect, cuisine and mind-sets. This diversity is extended to schools of today, where students from different backgrounds meet and study under the same roof. In certain instances, diversity can hinder the growth of the students because of their varied circumstances and perspectives, but the overall positive outcomes outweigh any negatives. Cesar Chavez rightly

says, *'We need to help students and parents cherish and preserve the ethnic and cultural diversity that nourishes and strengthens this community - and this nation.'*

Who can handle this responsibility?

The question arises, who can enlighten these innocent minds towards this diversity? The mantle falls on the teachers, because since time immemorial, they have been entrusted with this responsibility. They have been the torchbearers and will remain so. Now another question arises. With so many rights taken away from them, the teachers do not have the power to enforce these values. For instilling values, they might be taken to court, if the parent feels he/she is wrong and that their child is right. Then who can teach this life skill? Again, my answer would be the teachers, as they are the beacons of light in this dark world, who swallow the bitter pill to teach the minds under their care. In diversity there is beauty, a beauty that encompasses everyone in the vicinity, a beauty of thought a beauty of creativity and above all the beauty of strength leading to *'Unity in Diversity'*.

In every classroom, we find diversity, but instead of catering to it, we stuff them with the same syllabi, not realising its futility. We forget that we are catering to individuals and not dealing with assembly-line products. Instead of diversity, we force students to become similar and a part of the rat race. Instead of nurturing their individuality, helping them to explore their interests and passions, they are forced to conform to pre-conceived expectations. Sadly, we judge a fish's ability by its ability to climb or fly, and not by its ability to swim. We should remember the lesson given by *Aamir Khan* in *'Three Idiots'* to follow the dreams which we are passionate about.

In this 21st century, we, as custodians of the country's future and spirit have to instill the values of brotherhood and harmony, and to think above religion, caste, gender and category. Today, when we are facing differences, where

the majority is on the threshold of frustration and extinction, we need to teach the millennials to remove this diversity for the betterment of the society. We need to encourage diversity of thought, so that they can come up with *out of the box* solutions, to cater to the growing challenges and solutions to the problems that can destroy the sanctity of family, society and the nation.

How to deal with Diversity?

Redefine diversity: First and foremost, we need to redefine diversity. The diversity of thoughts, creativity, culture, languages, innovations and inventions that do not divide instead unite needs to be encouraged, so we truly become a nation with its tagline *'Unity in diversity'*. This diversity should be like the stars that brighten the galaxy and bring in serenity and tranquility to the universe. As Shashi Tharoor said, *"A nation may endure differences of caste, creed, colour, conviction, consonant, culture, cuisine, costume, custom and still rally around a consensus."*

Appreciate and value diversity: Teachers need to teach students to *appreciate and value diversity* (1). How boring would it be if we all looked alike, did similar things and behaved in a similar fashion. Nature, with its various landforms, variety of species and vibrant colours, looks beautiful, as it is full of diversity. Similarly, all of us, with our diversity, make the world beautiful. Instead of widening the gap by picking on their differences, we should lessen the gap by teaching them the power of appreciating diversity. This will help them in going beyond boundaries to understand one another and to value the differences.

Encourage Collaborative Learning: Teachers need to *encourage collaborative learning* (1) to help in generating tolerance. If they imbibe this quality, their time and creativity can be harnessed productively. Accepting differences goes a long way in cultivating lifelong bonds. When a team of students, with different skills and abilities, is made to work together, it can help them in learning from one another, but also

in understanding and accepting different opinions and ideas.

More than one answer: They also need to be taught, *there is not always just one right answer* (1). Thus, they can overview the situation from different perspectives, think instead of just getting answers. Every answer is correct if you have a valid reason. Teach them to think, explore and reason why. If they can, they will be able to face the challenges that they face in their path. Thus, it will not only encourage students to explore for answers, but it will also lead to fostering independent thinking. Moreover, when this happens, it will improve their communication skills, making them confident.

Passion for learning: Teachers can also generate, in students, the *passion for learning and enjoying their individuality*. Exploring this diversity will help create many new professions, and instead of the world becoming competitive, everyone would be striving towards perfection. Imagine a world similar to the one *Ayn Rand* had created through John Galt, in *Atlas Shrugged*, where there was novelty and innovation. *Ayn Rand* said, “*Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark in the hopeless swamps of the not-quite, the not-yet, and the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish in lonely frustration for the life you deserved and have never been able to reach. The world you desire can be won. It exists...it is real.....it is possible.....it's yours.*” (2)

Conclusion

Diverse are opinions, diverse are ways,

Diverse are thoughts, diverse are minds.

Can diversity adversely affect and be a cause of differences?

Can diversity create invisible walls and be a cause of conflicts?

Diversity is beauty in nature of hills and cascading waterfalls,

Diversity is beauty in differences of culture,

Diversity is beauty in thoughts and uniqueness,

Diversity is beauty in creation and strength.

Can this beauty be cultivated and strengthened?

Can this beauty be innovatively used?

Can this beauty help in Unity in diversity?

Teachers are beacons, the role models,

They are the hope, they are the source,

They are the ones who can enlighten the students,

That diversity is strength not weakness,

They can make them diverse yet similar;

Instead of machines, individuals who can think and realise.

They are the ones who can find solutions and bring in serenity,

They are the ones who are behind this beauty,

They are the creators of beautiful minds,

They bring out the individuality and blend it into creativity,

Bringing in life and vitality.

Thus, the need of the hour is to teach the wards under our care about diversity and how it can lead to a future filled with hope. Instead of creating a bleak future for themselves and the coming generations, create and recreate a world where there is no scope for hopelessness and frustration. Instead, it is all about living life to the fullest. As it is aptly said, “*Live and act within the limit of your knowledge and keep expanding it to the limit of your life.*” When they are able to inculcate this life skill, the day is

not far when they would be brimming with the acceptance of diversity. They will appreciate what Jacqueline Woodson said, 'Diversity is

about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together.'

References:

<http://www.nde-ed.org/TeachingResources/ClassroomTips/Diversity.htm>

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