

Education Week's blogs

Does Diversity Enrich or Divide Us?

By Gary Marx on February 12, 2015 10:07 AM

The handwriting is on the wall. By 2043, fewer than half of all people living in the United States will be non-Hispanic white. That's been a reality for children through age 1 since 2011. This tipping point was expected to stretch through age 5 by 2014 and through age 18 by 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

There's more. In August of 2014, *Education Week* reported that "Latino, African-American, and Asian students in public K-12 classrooms were expected to surpass the number of non-Hispanic whites." Source of that information? The U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

One thing is crystal clear, the traditional majority/minority society is fast becoming a minority/minority society. No single racial or ethnic group will make up more than 50 percent of the population. Nothing new for states and equivalents such as Hawaii, the District of Columbia, California, New Mexico, and Texas as well as many cities and communities across the nation which tipped during the past several years.

How does a country get so diverse? The short answer is immigration and birth rates. In the 1920s, immigrants came to the U.S. largely from northern and southern Europe as well as from Canada and Mexico. In 2010, top immigrant-sending countries were: Mexico, China/Hong Kong/Taiwan, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, Korea, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Immigrants are often younger and more likely than the general population to be in their child-bearing years. The face of the nation continues to change. However, our motto remains the same, *E Pluribus Unum (Of the Many...One)*.

During what can easily be called another age of mass migration, people are moving in droves from one part of the world to another, generally seeking opportunity. That means receiving countries, wherever they are, face education challenges ranging from working with a diversity of languages and cultures to improving achievement for all students, whatever their backgrounds.

Social cohesion depends on maintaining an inclusive country or community. To form that glue that holds us all together, we need to start with a basic premise or belief: *If we manage our diversity well, it will enrich us. If we don't manage our diversity well, it will divide us.* Every diverse nation or community, to secure its future, simply must be flexible and inclusive enough to constantly reframe its identity in a fast-changing world. Of course, that raises a basic question: "Are we inclusive or exclusive?"

Let's remember that the whole idea of diversity is constantly being redefined. It's no longer simply black and white. In fact, the definition keeps growing and now includes: social and economic factors, race, ethnicity, national origin, color, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disabilities, political and religious affiliation, language and linguistics, physical and cognitive abilities and qualities, political beliefs, educational background, geographical location, marital status, parental status, and life

experiences. Considering learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, and emotional and behavioral concerns, we can add neurodiversity (Armstrong, Thomas, *Neurodiversity in the Classroom*, ASCD, Alexandria, VA., 2012). Feel free to expand on this list.

Implications of diversity? There are hundreds. A constant challenge is maintaining that critical balance between what divides us and what unites us. Depending on whether people feel their voices have been heard, they will very likely conclude that they are either in power or out of power. We should never stop searching for our common denominators. Of course, effective communication is bottom line, at the very heart of understanding.

Our steadfast pursuit of equal opportunity should be aimed at lifting all boats. Educators should insist on high expectations for all students across all diversities. A fast-changing, interconnected world demands an understanding of languages and cultures and a commitment to celebrating our differences.

The world is rife with conflict, often built on a firm foundation of misunderstandings. How can we build bridges and find common ground? How can we get future generations ready for life in a highly diverse world? Those are questions we need to answer, not just once but every day across all political boundaries and in every family, school, and community. Think of it this way: Our children, our need for education and learning, and our future as viable communities and as a planet are among things we all have in common.