# Reflection on Diversity

 We have a tree stump at the bottom of our driveway, and a few years ago a friend suggested that he could carve the Lorax out of the stump, and the word "Unless" below it. I loved the idea but learned some Dr. Seuss books were being recalled because of racist imagery. I read several articles, all of which made sense but none of which really changed my perception, until I found an article on NPR that cited a study which revealed that just 2% of people in Dr. Seuss books were people of color, and all of those were "depicted through racist caricatures" (Jenkins and Yarmosky, 2019). Even then, part of me thought – well, that's not good but it doesn't entirely negate the book's value – but then I read further.

Those caricatures have a potent effect, even at an early age. Research shows that even at the age of 3, children begin to form racial biases, and by the age of 7, those biases become fixed. ... If kids open books and "the images they see [of themselves] are distorted, negative [or] laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which they are a part" (Jenkins and Yarmosky, 2019).

I am ashamed to say this was an "aha" moment for me (it seems painfully obvious now). My two older children grew up in Brooklyn. Their classrooms spoke to diversity in America – white children were the minority, more than half of the students were bilingual, with at least five or six different languages and countries represented in each classroom. This is consistent with the statistic that about 1 in 5 children speak a language other than English at home (Stone and Dahir, 2016). In preschool my children knew one of their friends as a boy, and when she identified as female in first grade, they didn't blink, just switched pronouns. In some ways diversity was a non-issue.

What we did not have in our Brooklyn school, though, was economic diversity. And as Stone and Dahir note, "As the lines continue to blur between what had been perceived as majority and minority populations, school counselors, as social justice advocates, should encourage students and faculty to be knowledgeable, open-minded, and respectful of all cultures and **all** aspects of diversity" (2016). There was a young girl who looked the picture of a majority: fair skin, blond hair, blue eyes, but whose income fell below the poverty line, whose parents were divorced and whose mother struggled with mental health issues. This student struggled academically and behaviorally. "Children of poverty often live in single-parent homes, and most often, the single parent is a woman" (Stone and Dahir, 2016). The school was based on a progressive model, and each unit ended in a Family Share, where parents are invited to the classroom and children present their work. As a relatively affluent community, most had jobs that were flexible enough to allow for missing an afternoon here and there. But there were a few students – the girl I mentioned among them – whose parents were never able to attend. The school didn't have a good policy in place to invite family members into the school without hurting those whose family didn't have the flexibility to attend. We did not have a school counselor, but certainly would have benefited from having a dedicated team member to implement a close examination of the nine social justice competencies, as outlined by Stone and Dahir (2016).

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As Stone and Dahir (2016) elaborate, multicultural education needs to be a holistic approach, which incorporates content integration, equity pedagogy, empowering school culture, knowledge construction, and prejudice reduction. Let's frame a few of these ideas using the example I cited above

**Content integration:** A school counselor could suggest that when the class discusses different cultures, they not forget that culture is not just about race but encompasses a plethora of factors, including socioeconomic status. While discussing heritage you can also discuss the kinds of jobs parents have: some work freelance and choose their own hours, others work on a set schedule and do not have flexibility. Some children have two moms, some children live with just their mom. Some students have breakfast at home and walk to school, some come early on the bus and have breakfast in the cafeteria.

**Knowledge construction**: In a multicultural classroom the teachers ask the question "Whose story is being told here? Whose story is *not* being told. We all have different skin colors and speak different languages, but are there any of us who are hungry? Who go home to an empty house? Is the neighborhood you live in the same as the neighborhoods around you? Do you have two moms? Just one parent?"

**Prejudice reduction:** A school counselor could suggest a name change from "family share" or "family sing" to "community share" and "community sing," modeling inclusiveness by asking the students to share with the community, not just family members.

The lessons I learned in Brooklyn serve me well in a less diverse setting like Chatham, NY. My two older children grew up surrounded by different skin colors, different languages, different names (my son saw the name "Matt" in a beginning reading book and didn't recognize it as a name – he knew Shintaro, Pema, Tomek, and Jose, but surely "Matt" was not a person's name). But now my two younger children will grow up in a largely white, English-speaking community. The problem is that we don't live in a predominantly white, English-speaking world. "Multiculturalism is an awakening of our global interdependence. Globalization is **infusing cultural differences** into our everyday existence" (Stone and Dahir, 2016). For a white, English-speaking person speaking to other white, English-speaking people, it's a complex, intricate process to "**infuse cultural differences**" without creating a "single story" as Chimamanda Adichie warns (TED, 2009).

During one site visit to an elementary school, I spent several hours in the counselor's office. Part of what I was looking for was evidence of whether *all* students could find themselves in that room. While there was nothing off-putting (no posters of smiling white children), the bookshelf did not have multicultural offerings. When I asked, the counselor shared that they hadn't received multicultural training in school, and that, given the demographic (they noted there were "a smattering" of children of color in the school) they didn't encounter issues very often. They did note that in the last few years there had been an increase in incidences of racism – mostly name calling – where they hadn't seen for many years prior.

The example I cited at the beginning of this paper is one example of examining my "cultural lens," and to be formative it needs to be an ongoing process (Stone and Dahir, 2016). I tried a few of the Implicit Bias

studies on perception.org, and the tests revealed a bias against disabled people, and a bias against politicians. I'm sure if I'd kept going, I would have uncovered more. Even before viewing my results, I could tell I had biases, because it was hard for my brain to associate Good and Disabled, or Objective and Politician. I had to think before responding when I was in those sections. Now that I am in a largely white community, but one with mixed socioeconomic levels, and "a smattering" of people of color, I need to adjust my lens to include questions like "How do I avoid bias when I have a student in my office who's been using racial slurs? How do I reach out to parents who have limited time and resources? How do I avoid bias if it seems the parent is the source of the racism?"

The example I cited in earlier also demonstrates the need for a true multicultural education. It is not enough to say that we embrace diversity, our school system needs to *be* diverse. **Multifaceted** means that we need to examine whether we are showing a picture of diversity across a full range of services and events. **Inclusionary** means we need to include everyone in the process: teachers, counselors, administrators, support staff, bus drivers, our community, parents. **Developmental** points directly to the idea in my example: it is not enough to tell people that we need to accept everyone – we need to have a curriculum that includes everyone. **Continuous**, too, is supported by my example. We can't exclude (or worse, deride) every race but white in preschool and kindergarten and beyond, and then expect a lesson in middle school to eradicate racism. And supported through the school system means that we need to examine everything about the system – are our administrators and superintendents white? White men? How many people of color do we have in our support staff? How many in our administration? Where are our students finding themselves in our schools?

**References:**

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