

March 30, 2018

Are We Hosting Diversity, or Embracing It?

I started working in the field of education (K-12 system) in the early 70's, just about the time that the mainstreaming movement was at its height in response to Public Law 94-142, with its demand for the "least restrictive alternative environment." (If you are too young to recognize those references, you can check 'em out on your own time! GRIN)

One of the most important tenets of mainstreaming was that kids with disabilities needed to interact with kids who did NOT have disabilities. They needed to see how nondisabled children acted, responded, and functioned so that they would not be limited to seeing only what might be atypical responses from other children with disabilities. And, yes – in those days we referred to those nondisabled kids as "normal models." Kids with disabilities should be with nondisabled kids as much as possible, whenever possible. There was also some talk about the fact that being mixed in with kids with disabilities in schools, classes, recess, and so on, would introduce disability to nondisabled kids in a healthy way. When they grew up and came in contact with people with disabilities, it would not be so unusual and, hopefully, not uncomfortable. There is no doubt, though, that the focus of mainstreaming was on what was best for children with disabilities, not their nondisabled peers. That was a by-product.

Fast forward to the 90's (by which time I had been working in higher education for more than a decade), to a time when concerns about diversity on campus were first arising. My recollection is that the impetus behind the diversity initiative was that it would be good for all students on campus to interact with people whose life experiences were different than their own. College was (is) a time when students are removed from their safe/known environment. It may be the best (and sometimes the only!) time to expand their horizons and let them know that there is more to life than they have seen ("There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"). As I look at it now, it seems to me that the focus on diversity on campus was an attempt to do something positive for the masses, not for the diverse populations brought to the setting. (A reversal of the idea of mainstreaming?)

I was never big on the idea of seeing disability as a focus for diversity efforts on campus. It always seemed to me that identifying "people with disabilities" as a **group** to be acknowledged and welcomed was both misleading and, potentially, limiting. I always thought it would be more effective to remind folks, at every opportunity, that people with disabilities were more LIKE people without disabilities than they were different. The presence of disability is not limited by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or age.

[As to people with disabilities being an identifiable and distinct group, the only time in my history in the disability community that I think I saw that kind of group cohesiveness was during the push for the passage of the ADA in the late 80's. When the legislation was at a crucial stage in its path through the legislative process, a call went out (from

the Epilepsy Foundation) for political action from the disability community. They asked everyone to search through their junk drawers and find old keys that were no longer identifiable. We were to take those keys and send them to our representatives in Congress with a simple message – “the key to equal opportunity for people with disabilities lies in the passage of the ADA.” If I remember correctly, the estimates were that somewhere in the neighborhood of 88,000 keys were received in Washington during a two-week time span. The ADA was passed with more votes in Congress than any other bill in the second half of the 20th century. Of course, as soon as the ADA was passed, each group went back to pushing its own, parochial interests (from ADAPT’s push for accessible architecture and transportation, to the NFB’s push for braille and alternate media, to the NAD’s push for CART and team interpreting, and so on). We were only a GROUP when we had a common goal.]

In thinking about this flip-flop in focus/intentions of diversity efforts, I was reminded of an incident from many years ago.

I remember when my daughter, Cottie, was in 3rd grade, her class was receiving a weekly publication (along the lines of the “Weekly Readers” we had when I was in school). It was an eight page magazine-like format that was intended to broaden the kids’ horizons with stories about children in other parts of the country and around the world, just like them. I was absolutely appalled when I looked at the copy she brought home one day that had a story that was titled something like, “When Sunny Smiles.” It was a story about a little girl named Sunny, who had Down’s Syndrome, and who was included in a third grade classroom somewhere. Sunny had such a nice smile that just looking at her brightened up the room for everyone else. The children were so nice to Sunny. They knew she didn’t understand much about the work they were doing, but that didn’t stop them from being nice to her. In fact, they had taken it on themselves to help guide her along. I think the sentence that had me seeing red and foaming at the mouth was something along the lines of, “When Sunny chews on her pencil, her friend Alice takes it from her gently and says, ‘Remember, Sunny? Pencils are not for chewing. They are for writing. Let me show you how you should use a pencil.’”

I was LIVID. Not only was this news magazine (seen by how many thousands of kids nationwide?) celebrating the fact that the other children in the class were being patronizing to their poor, little friend (UGH!), but here sat my daughter, in her wheelchair, with limited speech – and smarter than most of the kids in her class. If you were a 3rd grader reading that article, would you pick up on the nice way the kids in the story interacted with that handicapped child, or would you recognize that the girl sitting next to you was very different and should be treated differently. (Actually, NO ONE should be treated that way!). It struck me then that thinking about mainstreaming as a way of teaching nondisabled kids about disability might be seen as insulting to the kids with disabilities. They were not put there to serve as anyone else’s social action project!

I read an interesting piece this week (www.tinyurl.com/hostingdiversity). It was called “*Hosting Diversity or Embracing It?*” (I co-opted the title for this essay). The author isn’t too impressed with most of the diversity efforts she sees on campuses. They put

people from different backgrounds in the same location, but they don't seem to do much about bringing them together. This is the part that jumped out at me:

...Too often engagement with these students goes no further than what is cynically called, "Fun, food and fashion," as though an international week when students from abroad are meant to participate in a fashion show wearing "traditional" dress from their home country and prepare "traditional" foods for American students to sample is the same as broadening cultural perspective. During the rest of the academic year international students on many campuses tend to be invisible to their American peers...

I think I was particularly struck by that description because it mirrors some of the frustration I hear from folks in our field about some of the activities suggested for "Disability Awareness Week" on campus. Of course, when you talk about disability, the situation is complicated by the fact that some of the disabled students CLEARLY stick out, but (on most campuses) the majority of students with disabilities have nonvisible disabilities – and many of them *don't want* to be identified as disabled.

I suppose we are back to my theme from the Stephen Hawking piece about "damned if you do, and damned if you don't." Do we proudly acknowledge our disability identity, or do we make it an issue that is of lesser importance in the make-up of who we are and how we choose to be seen? (I remember once having a fascinating conversation with a DSS colleague who was paraplegic as to whether he considered himself a disabled American, or an American with a disability.)

I know what my vote would be. I am less inclined to see benefit in pointing out our differences ("celebrating diversity"). I remember a comic strip I saw once that showed three young women talking. There was in a woman in wheelchair and one of the others said, "We've been talking about it and trying to figure it out. We aren't sure whether the correct term is 'handicapped' or 'disabled.' What should we call you?"

"Shirley." (mic drop!!!)

Have a nice weekend!
Janie

When we are talking about diversity, it's not a box to check. It is a reality that should be deeply felt and held and valued by all of us.
Ava DuVernay

Diversity is the art of thinking independently together.
Malcolm Forbes

If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.
John F. Kennedy