



Diversity Value Part II: Existing in a Diverse Community

Jennifer Friedman, April 2010

The harsh reality of our world is that all things that make us different, while they ideally make us special, in reality they give room for judgment and inequality. Therefore, it is not only our goal to create and exist as a diverse community but to also promote equality within our community. We acknowledge that this is an equality that most certainly does not exist in the “outside” world but we strive for it nonetheless.

We fully understand that in order to create a welcoming environment to families of diverse backgrounds that we must promote equality by counterbalancing for some of the inequalities in our world. These counterbalances do not come easily in some situations and in others they come across as trite. In fact, will it really matter if we do an event and ask each family to contribute ten dollars? Surely, most families can contribute ten dollars. But it is a slippery slope from inclusiveness to exclusivity and the path is lined with “will it really matter” scenarios.

There have been in the past, and I am certain there will be in the future situations where what we expect from parents is received as unusual, or even inappropriate. As in all of our decisions for the school community we hope that these expectations are met with trust and open dialogue so we can all further our understanding of how our actions affect those around us.

While it is not all that common for families to be affected by existing in the diverse community of La Escuelita families, it is the daily experience of your children that is most certainly affected. We think about infusing similarities and differences into pretty much all of our curriculum planning and discussions. While selecting books for a classroom unit we attempt to find books that are not only high quality native-language literature or solid translations, but also show children with disabilities, have characters with different skin colors, and open the world outside of our own community to the students.

We do not intend to cushion our students from the realities they will face in their daily lives, realities brought on by the inequalities in our world, since that would undermine the goal of creating a diverse community. For example, it would be pointless to ensure dialectal variation of the teachers in the classroom in order to expose children to the different dialects, only to then ask the teachers to neutralize their accents or all use the same word for items such as “bus” and “socks”. Similarly, it would defeat the purpose of creating a diverse community if we then only had white dolls in the classroom or only introduced curricula relating to Catholic holidays.

Within the classroom we define equality not by making all things the same, but rather by giving them more equal value. When Jack was at La Escuelita he once became engaged in an argument with another child about the afterlife. Coming from very different religious backgrounds, he and the other little girl argued when she stated that when one dies he or she comes back as something else. Jack’s response was, “That’s not right. When you’re dead you’re just dead!” In La Escuelita classrooms, this type of fascinating discussion between 3 year olds is met with teacher commentary as opposed to a request for more “appropriate” conversation or a teacher inserted opinion to choose sides. A La Escuelita teacher may summarize for the children, stating, “Isn’t that interesting. Some people believe that you just die when you die and some people believe that you come



back as something else.” By giving equal weight to each child’s perspective the teacher has not inserted her own beliefs of what is “right” or “wrong” but rather has pointed out that these differences of beliefs exist.

That is not to say the teacher will never guide students, and in particular they will guide them away from ideas that promote racism, sexism, and other inequalities. After a statement by a boy that a girl cannot play firefighter because only boys can be firefighters, for example, the teacher may ask the students to think about if this statement is true and what makes them think that. They may read books about firefighters and the teacher may point out that most of the firefighters in the book are male but that there is a woman firefighter as well in the book. And the teacher may plan the next unit on “jobs” and invite a female firefighter into the class to talk about her job.

Promoting equality within a diverse community does not mean getting the children to think they are all the same. It means allowing the children to explore their similarities and differences while challenging them to think about those aspects of themselves and each other from a perspective that is more free of judgment. And this is how they, and we, can exist within this amazing, diverse community of families and educators that is La Escuelita.