Canadian schools and classrooms are becoming perceptively more diverse, and educators are recognizing this diversity - and its correlated educational needs - more acutely than in years past. The most discernible differences in student populations tend to be visible, such as those associated with race, ethnicity, culture, some religious affiliations, and (dis)abilities (Harvey & Houle, 2006; Ryan, 2006). However, student populations can be different or diverse in other nonvisible ways, such as class, academic abilities, and sexual orientation.
Diversity in Their Student Populations

By Patricia Briscoe & Katina Pollock

It is important for educators to both recognize and understand this diversity if they are going to provide an inclusive environment that promotes optimal learning experiences for all students. It is also crucial that student diversity is embraced and understood not just by teachers, but by school administrators. In this article, we illustrate how 59 Ontario principals understand difference and diversity within the student populations they serve. In this study, we asked principals how the changing nature of their student populations influences their work. We purposefully did not define student difference or student diversity in the interview or interview questions so that the participants’ answers would illustrate their understandings of the concepts. During interviews, some participants asked, “What do you mean by diversity?” and we accordingly instructed them to respond based on their understandings.
Difference and Diversity

Participants

We selected participants from seven school boards (four public and three Catholic) in Southern Ontario. Of the 59 principals, 46 had at least five years of experience, and 13 had fewer than five. Forty-six of the 59 participants were employed in the elementary panel, with only 13 working in secondary schools. Twenty-four of the 59 principals were male, and 35 were female. Thirty-nine principals worked in schools located in urban areas with relatively high levels of population density, and the other 20 worked in rural settings. Overall, the principals represented a range of professional contexts, levels of experience, and genders.

Table 1 - Participant Characteristics

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<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>EX*</th>
<th>LE**</th>
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<td>13</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* EX: Experience as a principal for more than 5 years.  **LE: Experience as a principal for fewer than 5 years.

Principals' Understandings of Diversity in Their Schools

The principals in this study identified four distinct ways they view difference in their student populations: (a) no differences, or homogenous; (b) nonvisible differences defined by socioeconomic status, academic differences, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation; (c) visible differences, as a result of religion, race, ethnicity, language, or culture; and (d) an all-encompassing understanding of student difference defined by both visible and nonvisible factors.

No difference. Sixteen of the rural principals perceived their school populations as homogenous, with little to no diversity or difference(s) among their students. For example, Larry stated, “I would say we are more or less homogenous.” For these rural principals, identifying “no differences” meant they did not see visible differences in their school populations (e.g. differences in culture, religion, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation). Alice stated, “Our region is a very homogenous society and diverse it is not. As far as race, religion, sexual orientation - it’s not prominent at this point in our K–6 school.” There may have been other types of differences within Alice’s student population - difference in ability levels and experiences, for example - but she did not consider these when conceptualizing student diversity in her school. As illustrated by Dennis’ comment, the degree of perceived difference(s) may have been narrow for a few of the principals, but they did have some understanding of how diversity was represented in their student populations: “We don’t have much diversity in this building; it is White, middle-class.” In this case, while Dennis reported minimal diversity within his student population, he did describe the characteristics that defined its homogeneity: White and middle-class. These rural principals associated student diversity with observable, visible differences among students, and according to their responses, they did not perceive any recognizable diversity in their schools.
Nonvisible diversity. Of the 59 participants interviewed, 19 principals who identified their student populations as visually homogenous also described other, nonvisible (or less visible) differences, including academic needs, socioeconomic status, mental health needs, and sexual orientations. Some of the participants focused on one specific nonvisible factor in their responses, while others discussed many factors in tandem. For example, Martin explained:

“...We are primarily White, Anglo-Saxon out in the hallway, but that’s only skin tone. There is much more diversity that comes with economic status, academic issues, mental health issues, and sexual orientation. Diversity today is much greater even though we have generally the same appearance of population here.”

Most of the principals who identified nonvisible diversity in their responses worked in schools where differences in the student population were not based on culture, ethnicity, race, language, and/or religion, but rather based on other, less observable criteria. For example, Eileen, who was a special education teacher before becoming a principal, explained her understanding of difference(s) in ability: “I see diversity in special education; the trademark of our school is that students are fully immersed with special education; [students] are integrated into their classroom and the school routine.”

Some participants, like Scott, suggested that difference within student populations can be associated with learning needs: “We are not diverse culturally. Everyone pretty much looks the same, but we have a lot of diversity in terms of learning and this is where differentiated learning comes in.” Others focused on differences based on socioeconomic status. Bill explained: “Diversity in my school is related to socioeconomic status. We are working at giving equal access to learning to kids who are coming from lower economic homes.” Lastly, Tony highlighted differences in student populations based on sexual orientation: “We’re predominantly White, middle-class, but a big change has been the [recognition of] gay and lesbian orientations.” The principals in this group largely serve visually homogeneous student populations, and defined difference and diversity in their schools based on nonvisible, or less visible, criteria.

Visible diversity. Fourteen principals described their student populations as diverse based on visible factors such as culture, ethnicity, race, language, and/or religion. For example, Linda stated, “We have a higher number of Spanish speaking folks than before and a relatively large Islamic population - so, it is relatively diverse.” Collectively, these principals’ comments on diversity articulate an understanding of difference based on what they can see within the student population. The degree of difference can vary as well: Linda described her school population as having both Spanish and Islamic students, potentially implying that these groups are different from a dominant student population. Dan, however, described his student population as:

“[Having] almost everything. We have Spanish, East Asian, Vietnamese [students]. We have students from Africa, and I don’t know the exact countries. We have students from the Caribbean and a lot from Sudan, Nairobi, Ghana. Twenty-seven countries represented in this school.”

While Linda described one group of students being different from a majority student population in her school, Dan reported a range of visible differences within his entire student population. It is possible these two school sites also have students with differences based on academic ability, class, and sexual orientation, but these factors were not a part of how these principals understood difference and diversity in their schools. This group of principals associated student diversity with visible factors and some participants expressed that their student populations embody many of these differences.

All-inclusive diversity. A comparatively small group of principals articulated an all-inclusive understanding of difference and diversity, defined by both visible and nonvisible factors. They did not indicate, however, that they experienced these differences within their current school site. Ten principals described different combinations of diverse student populations using both visible and nonvisible descriptors. For example, Paula stated,

“As for cultural-level diversity, we are very White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community. We don’t have a lot of diversity in terms of culture. Our kids are White here. In other areas, you see cultural diversity, the beautiful rainbow of colours. So, we don’t have that. We have other [kinds of] diversity in our community. We have rural kids and urban kids in our community. Some of our rural kids live in very low-income housing. There are also some very wealthy people. We have a lot of health issues; there are a lot of mental health issues. So, student needs are really diverse in the school. It is not really a homogenous school.”

Paula demonstrated that she conceptualizes diversity in an inclusive manner and has a

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- **Stress Lessons®** For Grades 4-6, 7-9 and 9-12 These programs provide educators, parents and counselors with practical, developmentally appropriate, engaging activities for grade 4-6, 7-9 and 9-12 classrooms.

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broad understanding of difference, even though many of these differences do not appear to exist in her local school population. This smaller group of principals described student difference and diversity as including visible, less visible, and/or nonvisible factors.

Why are principals’ understandings of student difference and/or student diversity important? Principals have considerable influence on student success in schools, second only to teachers (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2008; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). How principals understand diversity will influence how they respond to the different needs of the various groups of students in their schools, and influence subsequently impact the extent to which they are able to meet these needs. If principals do not recognize certain differences, it is possible that some students’ educational needs will go unmet. How principals understand difference and diversity can either help them lead school transformation in a way that ensures all students achieve academic excellence, or put their school populations in positions where some student needs are - sometimes unconsciously - ignored.

**References**


