

The Two Sides of Diversity - Schools as a Means for Integration

Tom Fadrhonic and Lena Lauridsen

The majority of positions claim that diversity is a good thing. For the economy and business. It is said to be a good thing for innovation, creativity, for progress.

But a massive study, based on detailed interviews of nearly 30,000 people across America, has concluded just the opposite. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam has found that the greater the diversity in a community, the fewer people vote and the less they volunteer, the less they give to charity and work on community projects. In the most diverse communities, neighbours trust one another about half as much as they do in the most homogenous settings. The study, the largest ever on civic engagement in America, found that virtually all measures of civic health are lower in more diverse settings. "People living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker down' -- that is, to pull in like a turtle," Putnam writes.

So how to explain the great melting-pot cities that drive the world's creative and financial economies? The image of civic lassitude dragging down more diverse communities is at odds with the vigour often associated with urban centers, where ethnic diversity is greatest.

It turns out there is a flip side to the discomfort diversity can cause. Every western country faced with immigration challenges knows ethnic diversity, at least in the short run, is a liability for social connectedness. Long term however, research suggests it can be a big asset when it comes to driving productivity and innovation. The creative tensions unleashed by those differences in the workplace may vault those same places to the cutting edge of the economy and of creative culture.

In addition, studies from the Montreal-based Institute for Research on Public Policy shows that most second-generation immigrants are more educated and earn more than children of Canadian born parents. Similar studies in the US and Australia confirm the findings. Long term, in those countries, children of immigrant parents are better educated, and earn and contribute more.

Immigration and diversity have long term benefits. And short term hurdles.

The implication for those in politics is that they articulate the vision of our common long term benefit. And that vision must include a strategy to get from A to B quicker, i.e. get through the friction phase faster.

Schools play a key role. The story of Ali.

Ali and his family have been living in the Netherlands for 5 years. Now Ali's parents have been called in to a meeting with his teacher. He is not doing his homework and is quite noisy during classes. But his teacher and parents do not agree on the problem. His teacher expects him to take responsibility for his learning, to co-operate and show respect towards other students as well as teachers. Ali's Iranian parents expect a school environment with strict discipline; teacher controlled learning situations and respect enforced by the teachers and school management.

For both Ali's parents and his teacher it is difficult to understand and accept the reality of the other. The principles of independence and joined responsibility strongly rooted in the culture of the teacher are difficult to relate to for people like Ali's parents who



come from a culture with other values. A culture where teachers always have all the answers and where students are not supposed to initiate communication nor give suggestions. Therefore, Ali's parents might easily assume that their son is attending a school with a poor education level and without discipline.

However, the meeting can also be an interesting discussion between people close to Ali. And the teacher needs to be the initiator to understand and communicate that different cultures have different views on learning styles, expectations and norms.

Today, interacting with people from a different cultural background than our own is a part of every day life. We do business with companies around the globe, we work together, and we go to the same shops and schools. People move around –voluntary or not – and become citizens in a country and culture which is not their own. Students in school today, regardless of their level of education, will have an international job. Whether they end up working around the world or around the corner. Because their future bosses, consumers, employees etc. will have multiple nationalities. For the benefit of Ali and his friends, regardless of their background, schools need to help them develop an awareness of, and an interest in the different cultural value systems. Cultural diversity is a given. It is here to stay and grow. Knowing that diversity is a long term asset to our companies, our economy and the future opportunities of Ali and his classmates, we have to prepare for it. Starting with our teachers.

We have to take culture seriously. And culture is not the same as symbols and language and traditions and customs. It seems to be an international belief that the quicker we manage to get foreigners to speak the local language and know our traditions and customs,

the easier it is to integrate them in society and for the system to embrace them. However, we lose the respect of immigrants and induce resistance, radicalism and conflicts. We compound the short term challenges of integration, rather than reduce them. Returning to Ali and his parents: When we insist that he and his parents understand our language and traditions, and don't give them the tools to understand and adapt to the cultural values of their new country, we provoke a setback. We try to integrate Ali's parents without realizing that they cannot identify themselves with our national values because they don't understand them. We cannot just explain them how things work in their new country and then assume everything is fine. We need to be sure that they recognize why our way conflicts with their values. If parents do not function well in a society how can they teach their children how to live there?

If we want to take integration and its challenges serious we need to teach our teachers how to perform in a diverse classroom. Returning to Ali's teacher he needs to be a qualified cultural communicator who can both mediate and most importantly motivate students and parents of a foreign origin. He also needs to be aware of his own cultural background to the extent that he can explain why his values conflict with theirs – and vice versa. When we get to that point we not only help Ali and his native and multinational classmates, but also their parents.

In 2009 itim has teamed up with Webster University in the Netherlands to develop a 36 hour program to teach intercultural skills to teachers. Maybe it is ironic that an American University is addressing the structural challenges in the Dutch education system. But it is a start.



Tom Fadrhonc and Lena Lauridsen are intercultural management consultants at itim international. After many years abroad both are currently living in their home country, the Netherlands and Denmark respectively, where they frequently lecture on cross-cultural issues.

References

Diversity: An Added Value - Government policy to promote participation of all in Québec's development
Direction des affaires publiques et des communications, ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles, 2008

Michael Jonas *The downside of diversity*, Boston
Globe
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/08/05/the_downside_of_diversity/
2007

Robert D. Putnam *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century* Scandinavian Political Studies, Vol. 30 – No. 2, 2007