

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 263

UD 030 236

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 TITLE Diversity, Equity and Community in Educational Reform.  
 PUB DATE Apr 94  
 NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).  
 PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Community Development; \*Cultural Pluralism; Curriculum Development; Economic Climate; \*Educational Change; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Equal Education; Inner City; \*Multicultural Education; Partnerships in Education; School Restructuring; Social Environment; \*Urban Schools

IDENTIFIERS Empowerment; \*Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

Educational equity demands are progressively being framed in terms of multiculturalism and diversity within the educational process. This change of focus means that strategies aiming to secure rights should make room for others that emphasize the building of relationships, mutual knowledge, and community. For schools in poor, inner-city neighborhoods, community building must reach beyond the school, to address the social and economic environment in which the school is located. The paper presents an incipient model which begins with conceptual revisioning in four areas, with a common emphasis on reciprocity, capacity finding, and capacity building (empowerment) rather than deficits (service provision). The four areas are: (1) the student and the curriculum; (2) school relationships; (3) community "partnerships"; and (4) community development. (Contains 19 references.) (Author)

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## DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND COMMUNITY IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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Running head: Diversity, Equity and Community //

Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, April 4-9, 1994, New Orleans.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND COMMUNITY IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

by

**Novella Z. Keith, Ph.D.**

**Educational equity demands are progressively being framed in terms of multiculturalism and diversity within the educational process. This change of focus means that strategies aiming to secure rights should make room for others that emphasize the building of relationships, mutual knowledge, and community. For schools in poor, inner-city neighborhoods, community building must reach beyond the school, to address the social and economic environment in which the school is located. The paper presents an incipient model which begins with conceptual revisioning in four areas, with a common emphasis on reciprocity, capacity finding, and capacity building (empowerment) rather than deficits (service provision): (1) the student and the curriculum, (2) school relationships; (3) community "partnerships; and (4) community development.**

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND COMMUNITY IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

### Prologue

The words, the phrases are all there: teamwork, collaboration, culture change; building partnerships; community involvement. And, yes, diversity: sometime after (soon after) the year 2000 (will there be an after?), we are warned, "minorities" will become majorities...at school desks, but not in front of the class; then, perhaps there will no longer be a front of the class.<sup>1</sup>

The words and phrases of school reform. They portend a vast transformation: reducing hierarchical relationships, building connections, they herald a new paradigm. Rhetoric, I almost said; but, no sooner said, the word calls for a companion-- rhetoric versus reality. And we do acknowledge now the fallacy of the dichotomy: reality is socially constructed, positionality matters, there are multiple realities jostling for dominance in the social arena. They are immense, they threaten to deafen us with their words, their metaphors; they are barely thoughts, which need nurturing to find their voice.

So instead of positing a rhetoric and a reality, I will ask about how we wish to change and what we see as the tools to forge that change. I will look at our transformative project(s) and see if shifting one's vantage point and tools might not yield new realities and new possibilities.

### Of Boundaries and Limits

Time and space impose limits, boundaries. But boundaries separate and limits... well, limit. So what will I include in this conversation? I will proceed, in an exploratory fashion, from general statements and definitions to a discussion of

educational reform in inner-cities.

I write in the first person singular because at the moment I can do no other, although I cannot unravel what is me and what is others. There are references, but they can only point to formal knowledge, which does not acknowledge the rest of the web. My starting points are the result of considerable thought, observation, and conversations--with texts as well as people. They are conclusions that now become beginnings. I will risk stating them short of the extensive background and documentation they would require. The effect, I think, is to increase the possibility of entering into an interesting conversation with those of you who agree with at least some of my beginnings. What of those of you who do not? Perhaps you could still consider my beginnings as interesting questions: what would happen if this were true, if we looked at things this way?

## BEGINNINGS

### Educational Equity

Our concepts of equity have been informed largely by the principles of distributive justice, which pertain to the fair distribution of social goods. Accordingly, education is seen as either one of the social goods to be distributed fairly among a citizenry, or as an enabling mechanism allowing this citizenry, regardless of background, equal chances in the competition for other social goods.

Educational equity has its historical roots in attempts by subordinate groups to gain access to institutions monopolized by members of dominant groups. Most contemporary gains for educational equity, defined as equal access and sought through programs such as desegregation, affirmative action, equal school funding, and compensatory education, have been made by invoking the concept of rights and demanding that government (through legislation, the courts, and regulatory and budgetary means) protect and enforce equal rights. Once sufficient numbers had gained entry, as a consequence, for instance, of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the focus of critique and equity pursuits was broadened to include the educational process itself and its epistemological foundations. Of course, this accords with the post-modern plurality of knowledge claims (Lyotard, 1984): for the post-modern, the world consists of "meaning-generating agencies" which are "self-sustained and autonomous" and "armed with their own facilities of truth-validation" (Bauman, 1992:35).

Equity in the educational process requires more (or something other) than striving for a universally defined "quality" for all. Diversity posits, for instance, that there is no universally valid "quality" curriculum. Thus the right of the Other to

partake in existing, dominating realities--formalized as Knowledge, as institutions--cannot be the final aim. Rather, it may be the first step in a process that changes those dominating realities, in ways that accommodate and make room for marginalized "voices" and worlds. The focus of equity, therefore, shifts to both the substance and the process of education, calling for a new definition of what constitutes meaningful knowledge and appropriate relationships between learners and teachers. We need to seek equity, therefore, through the validation of Otherness and through the creation of organizations that resemble more community than bureaucracy.

Progressively, then, educational equity demands have been framed in terms of multiculturalism and diversity within the educational process. Although state intervention had enjoyed a measure of success in securing access, the new focus requires different strategies. Experience shows that government and bureaucratic mandates do little to change what happens inside institutions. As Goodlad and Keating (1990: 17) observe,

Laws against discriminatory arrangements in schools are not likely to put an end to them; too many subtle ways to subvert such laws are available. And laws are unlikely to increase understanding of human learning and sound educational concepts, change attitudes and values, and develop moral sensitivities pertaining to human rights.

Learning involves relationships. For instance, research suggests that non-mainstream/minority students learn best when they like their teachers and sense a caring attitude from them (Vasquez, 1988). But relationships, trust, mentoring, the opening or closing of learning opportunities cannot be legislated. Although their

cumulative effects are public, these actions reside more in the private sphere.

Government must continue to intervene in cases of gross breaches in the provision of justice, services, and opportunities for discriminated groups and individuals. But we cannot count on it with regard to those everyday events and relationships that are within the purview of community. This creates added difficulties in the inner city, since relationships among students, parents, and teachers are marred by class and race biases that often solidify deficit views of students and their neighbors.

### School Reform for Inner-City Schools

For students in inner cities, however, educational equity involves more than education itself. The economic and social story of cities is by now fairly well known. Loss of the industrial base has created a dual labor market in which, more and more, the only "opportunities" the formal economy offers residents of the inner city are in menial and meaningless service jobs, guaranteeing only poverty and insecurity in perpetuity. Not only have cities declined drastically as sites of manufacturing, but the range of the new specializations includes "services" as waste disposal sites (Molotch and Logan, 1985). No wonder that "ecological racism" has made its appearance in the lexicon. To aggravate conditions, American cities have gradually lost federal support, particularly over the past decade or so: federal aid to cities declined from \$47.2 billion in 1980 to \$21.7 billion in 1992 (USA Today, May 5, 1992).

These are only some of the myriad details of the story. Its major point is that concerns for educational equity that focus only on the school are missing the important connection between education and its environment. This has been the focus of some compensatory programs such as free school lunches and Head Start. But such

programs, though certainly effective in their way, continue to be steeped in deficit models.

How should the environment of the inner city be perceived? I chose to list some factors over the list of usual woes-- teenage births, drugs, violence, drop-outs, and so on--for two reasons. The first is to counter prevailing tendencies among most mainstream professionals to think of the inner city as disorganized, "war-zone" neighborhoods and deficient homes. I will make an argument later for looking at this environment in terms of its capacities and not merely its needs and deficits. The second is to emphasize that the environment of which schools are a part is really larger, since the school's neighboring areas are affected significantly by trends whose origins span the gamut from local to global. Rona Wilenski and D.M. Kline (1988: 4) note one such effect, in discussing the economic functions of schools:

the economy as it now exists is incapable of motivating all students toward academic success. These students, especially minority youth in urban areas, know what many adults refuse to acknowledge: that rewards worth trying for do not exist for everyone and they are least likely for a young minority men or women.

Educational equity, then, calls for measures to address the issues raised by "the environment." But what is the role of schools in this project?

Current restructuring efforts have revived the idea of the community school. For instance, there is a renewed emphasis on parental involvement and the building of partnerships with businesses, service agencies, and other organizations. These are joined to efforts to transform the school into a community center providing educational,

cultural, and other services, as well as simply a meeting place. "Older" models such as Comer schools and High School Academies have been joined by a myriad of others.

And yet I will maintain that however well meaning and potentially useful these efforts are, most are conceptualized and put into practice in ways that diminish their potential usefulness. Two major problems can be identified: first, these links continue to be based on a perception of local area inhabitants as the recipients of services, rather than as agents or subjects (at least potentially); second, and relatedly, the types of linkages are not such as to foster a revisioning of local people as true partners in efforts that require them to contribute through their experiences and knowledge, as well as supports them where they need support.<sup>2</sup>

An alternative approach to linking with the community comes from the work of John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) and is based on the practices and experiences of many organizations in Chicago and elsewhere. It centers on the local neighborhood and in so doing builds community "from the inside out." This approach starts out by asking what are the assets to which the neighborhood has access and which it can control; the answer is that the people are the major assets. The model presumes and looks for those assets and, in looking, it does find them. No matter how blighted and devastated an area may appear, there are always alternative community "maps" that are based on capacities rather than deficits. Again, I must emphasize that one should not minimize the needs of local people; rather, we must shift our perspective so that their capacities become visible.

I propose that such a revisioning of the local neighborhood is needed as a foundation from which to create school-community linkages. It is not that partnerships

with businesses and other formal organizations such as service and health agencies, and so on, are not important; but the fact of the matter is that the present model, of community school linked to services, essentially leaves neighborhood people out, puts them in the place where they have always been seen (and thus, to an extent, they see themselves), as helpless and in need of services... as opposed to finding strengths and giving voice and institutional supports for the building of those capacities and strengths.

I propose, therefore, that equity, as applied to school reform in the inner city, must involve three practices: work inside the school; work in the neighborhood; and links to other resources capable of supporting the rebuilding of the community. In so doing, we may foster the social networks and relationships capable of supporting community not in a spatial sense but in a relational sense. These practices require conceptual redefinitions in four areas. First, the curriculum must acknowledge the Other. Second, to succeed in motivating students, the curriculum must be accompanied by changes in relationships within these schools and between school and community. We know the importance of teachers' expectations for success and these are not likely to change fundamentally until schools become places that support relationships and activities that value and validate the knowledge, strengths, resilience of the students and local residents. The third area is moving beyond the school, to reconnect with these residents on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity. And the fourth one involves a focus not only on needs, but, more importantly on local empowerment for the social and economic development of the neighborhood.

What do these tasks require? We need to return to the concept of community.

### Community and Diversity

Although the concept of community is enjoying a renewal, this reflects less a clear sense of its meaning than a recognition of the bankruptcy of present modes of association. In this climate of change, there are strong tendencies to resolve uncertainties by invoking traditional definitions of community, based on homogeneity, custom, and accepted authority structures. In education, this conceptualization of community is reflected in calls for "cultural literacy" (Hirsch's, for instance) and a national curriculum, and in the manipulation of "culture," and "collaboration" in schools (Anderson, 1991; Anderson & Blase, 1993).

We cannot "go home" to this type of community, but there is a danger in the nostalgia it evokes. Agnes Heller (1990) warns us that in trying to revive community, we might also revive patriarchy and its tyranny. We may also perpetuate separation, prejudice, and racism. These attempts at moving backwards might also obscure the possibilities for advancing a more appropriate but more difficult notion of community, which includes diversity. The question, then, is how to create community in diversity.

## APPLYING THE CONCEPTS

### Community

Community has received considerable attention of late. Rather than focusing on an analysis of the details of concepts (a common approach), I will focus on a number of specific questions: how can diverse people work together, and in working together learn to respect one another, to rely on one another, and so forge bonds of community? I

have opted to draw on one theorist, Bill Jordan, whose writings in The Common Good: Citizenship, Morality, and Self-Interest (1989) come closest to my views and provide some encouraging ways to approach the question at hand.

Jordan pursues the possibility of interdependence and mutuality by asking when individual interests might coincide with the interests of others. It is precisely this coincidence of interests, he posits, and not the sacrifice of one's interests for the common good, that forms the foundation of a good community. A society or community, then, must be consciously organized so as to enable its members to have such common interests.

But what are these interests? For Jordan--and here is the link between interests and community--our interests and those of others are not separate or separable and we cannot know them except through interaction with others. Market relations remove us from the consequences our choices have for others, and thus behaving as independent, self-interested individuals does not impugn our rationality. However, this is not possible when we act as members of groups or communities:

Because my actions do affect others, and theirs me, I must engage in a public dialogue about our lives together to discover what is possible, what is desirable and what the likely consequences of my actions are... there is no way of knowing my own interests before I have this dialogue, because any choices I make in ignorance of their projects and purposes may have all sorts of unintended consequences. Until I debate and negotiate with others, and coordinate my choices with theirs, I will not be able to follow my interests or act rationally." (Jordan, 1989: 162-63)

What this passage suggests is that our self-interests are intimately bound with those of others. In all except (perhaps) market relations, the individual is a fiction: we exist in relationship with those who share our social environment. A good society involves dialogue and "cooperation between people whose quality of life depends on one another's actions" (Jordan, 1989: 159).

This definition of interests, then, has the potential for people to develop common aims in the process of working together. Identifying one's interests becomes a joint, exploratory task. But the key is in allowing silenced voices to emerge, and in understanding that the first utterances of the dominated are only the beginning of the voyage. As Anne Phillips notes in Democracy and Difference (1993), especially when it comes to silenced voices, we are not quite sure of what are interests are, we discover ourselves as we speak.

So, this presents the possibility that people who might start out having very dissimilar and conflicted interests may, in the course of a "conversation," of participation in a joint activity, come to at least partial, mutual understanding. Even if they do not, the conversation in which they have engaged helps them learn about themselves and about the other, and learn about difference. And, after all, community does not have to exist on total agreement; it can, indeed it does exist with conflict and disagreement.

What may bring the diverse inhabitants of inner cities to a mutual conversation? I believe that a common interest in children can be a motive for taking the first steps. Conversation with Judy Goode on her research, for instance, suggests that children very often can bring a community together. Children can be seen, in a sense, as "community

property," they are seen as "innocent," and perhaps as worthy of being "saved." And so perhaps this process of community building is easier or even should start, in some ways, around elementary schools.

How might we go about school reform in the inner-city, then? I will offer some programmatic suggestions, organized in terms of the four tasks of conceptual redefinition identified earlier (see p. 5). These provide the rudiments of an incipient model.

### 1. Revisioning the Student and the Curriculum

Although still influential, traditional views of the underclass and minorities stressing cultural deficits and compensatory education are beginning to give way to models that focus on cultural difference, culturally relevant education, and resilience or strengths (Phelan & Davidson, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1992; Linqunti, 1992). For instance, Lisa Delpit reports on the way a Native Alaskan teacher of Athabaskan Indians introduces her students to standard English:

We listen to the way people talk, not to judge them, but to tell what part of the river they come from. These other people are not like that. They think everybody needs to talk like them. Unlike us, they have a hard time hearing what people say if they don't talk exactly like them. Their way of talking and writing is called "Formal English." ...We're going to learn two ways to say things. Isn't that better? One way will be our Heritage way. The other will be Formal English. (Delpit, 1988:293)

Along with others who share similar approaches, this teacher communicates a strong understanding and appreciation on one's own culture and knowledge, thus providing a context for understanding the "Other" and stripping the usually dominant cultural expression of its definitional power. At the same time, the approach does not fall into the trap of promoting cultural exclusivity, such as may foster ethnocentrism or, worse, xenophobia.

Of course, Athabaskan villagers benefit from relative isolation from the dominant culture--an advantage that minorities in urban environments lack. Especially vital for these settings is a focus on changing not only the discourse of minorities but also engaging in a similar effort to change elite discourse (Van Dijk, 1993).

### 2 and 3. Revisioning Relationships and Partnerships

We need to start by seeing the school, local people, and organizations internal to the community as members of a partnership. The partnership should also be able to call on outside resources from surrounding, non-community organizations. A good partnership is based on some kind of equality of power and resources--each brings to the table something the other needs and wants, and the combination can have synergistic effects. School professionals should not bear the major responsibility for the partnership, not only because inner-city schools are already overburdened, but also because this would not foster equality.

I think I have sufficiently made the point that education for development requires new links to be built between schools and communities. Such involvement needs to be informed by an understanding of broad socio-economic trends, as well as the culture, history, and social dynamics of a particular community. The "Comer model" of

community schools for poor urban areas (Comer, 1980; Payne, 1991) begins to address some of my concerns. Briefly, the model is based on interventions in the area of human relationships both in the school and the community. These are designed to restore adults' lost power to influence children (a loss that, with Comer, we may consider crucial) and the sense of connectedness, nurturing, and participation that are part of an organic community.

Suspicion of power holders abounds in inner-city neighborhoods. The Comer model aims to improve these relationships and lessen suspicion by erasing the power differential between parents and professional educators. This is achieved through three organizational structures: a governance team of all adult stakeholders in the school; a parents' program; and a mental health team which "encourages both teachers and parents 'to think developmentally, to think relationships" (Payne, 1991:13). These groups operate according to a set of important guidelines: discussions focus on problems, not blame; the parties agree not to paralyze the principal's authority; and decisions are reached through consensus.

For me, a crucial aspect of the Comer model is its role in revitalizing community social networks. These richer social relations can then provide the framework for increasing and sustaining the kinds and levels of community exchange that can contribute to community development. A recent addition to this model, implemented through the Urban Schools Service Corps (USSC), calls for establishing greater linkages to the community, broadly aimed at community development. Corps Members (usually community members or college students) facilitate access of community members to various resources by bringing them into the school, which becomes a community center.

Activities may include literacy programs, after school programs for children and others, health services, training programs, and so on. My visits to some USSC sites reveal promising high levels of community involvement and the blurring of school-community boundaries.

#### 4. Revisioning Community Building

Once some community linkages have been created, the first task is to "map" community capacities. In a community school this task should be made easier by the fact that parents, students, and other community members can engage in it.

We are beginning to understand that the relationship between education, poverty, development is changing. There are obvious fallacies, for instance, in development models assuming unending resources and perennial growth, and their epistemological and cultural underpinnings. Structural changes in the economy (national and global) suggest that the underclass is a permanent social feature. The information/service economy is leading to a greater rather than lesser gulf between social classes. Those at the bottom can look forward to minimum wage jobs with little security--if they can get them. And the competition and educational requirements for jobs are increasing. Building partnerships with parents and the community depends on the partners finding ways to work together toward common goals.

As amply demonstrated by the growth of the informal economy, of micro-entrepreneurial activities in our cities, market relations are finding their limits. In these emergent social conditions, school reform and community building activities which assume the ongoing expansion of the "modern" economy and the continuity of cultural hegemony (the "cultural literacy" thesis) come increasingly into conflict with the reality

of co-existence of divergent forms existing at the margins of "formal" institutional arrangements. Efforts that assume the continuity of existing "modern" economic, social, and cultural forms need to be rethought. It is not that they should be entirely forsaken, but that they should look at present problems from a perspective better informed about possible futures. Fostering development in poor communities requires attention to alternatives, such as mutual exchange, cooperatives, and other "informal" social and economic activities.

### CONCLUSION

This model is designed to empower students, teachers, and community members to develop local solutions to meet school and community needs, as well as to foster a sense of community and reciprocal assistance among the school, local residents, and community organizations. The potential benefits of the model go beyond the expansion of educational and economic opportunities for the urban poor. By increasing social interaction between the school, the local community, and organizations in the surrounding area, it enhances mutual trust and cooperation and opens up new avenues for internally driven development.

By helping disadvantaged participants identify their capacities, and the skills and services they might offer in mutual exchange (as well as new ventures such as micro-businesses), the model fosters their self-confidence and bargaining power and thus helps them move toward self-reliance. Further, by providing opportunities for mutually beneficial exchange among community members and representatives of the public and private sectors, it contributes to the strengthening of social networks and the development of community leadership for self-reliant development.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. See Watkins (1989:A41) for a discussion of the need for American teachers to become "bicultural, bilingual, and bicognitive" in anticipation of the entry of large numbers of immigrants' children into the school system: by the beginning of the next century, some 40 percent of students are expected to be "minorities." The magnitude of the problem, however, is indicated by the additional expectation that 95 percent of teachers will be white.
2. This is the theme of an ongoing scholarly project. A volume is in process of being co-edited by Novella Keith, Nelson Keith, and Douglas McConatha. It focuses on "indigenoussness," which is treated as a cluster of forces redefining certain traditional forms of domination. Our focus is on problematizing processes leading to the reemergence into "history" of dominated societies and groups within societies and their reintegration into international and social relations on a more equal basis. One important facet of this process is the rediscovery and validation of indigenous knowledge, partly but not exclusively through integration into formal institutions that deal with knowledge, e.g. educational institutions. We are currently seeking additional contributions. Contact Novella Keith for more information.