

Making diversity real in teaching

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Black Environment Network works with black, white and other minorities in the UK to enable them to benefit from and make their contribution to the environment. We use the word 'black' symbolically, recognising that the black communities are the most visible of all ethnic minorities. Making sense of the current panicked thrust of addressing diversity and normalising it in the wake of all its negative associations with terror and threat is the crux of the matter. Young children absorb all that is around them easily and comfortably when those in charge of shaping the feel and context of their learning environment are confident and enthused about the subject of learning.

There is a wealth of material that inspires a natural entry into diversity issues in the environmental sector. Here I would like to give examples of how to directly engage pupils in order to awaken and instil the basic elements that make up the absorption of diversity as part of normal life:

- Opening up the recognition of the presence of difference in continuity among those who are not different in

an obvious way to those that we recognise as different straight away, usually through very superficial characteristics

- Nurturing the enjoyment of difference
- Experiencing that although there are differences, there are usually more things about people that are the same rather than different
- Connecting in a real and meaningful way with others that are different but the same
- Sharing and valuing difference.

One very powerful way of doing this is simply to ask pupils to go home and ask their parents or grandparents for a short story that they know about a single theme – for example a traditional story about trees, but from any part of the world, whether it is their origin or not. Lordwood Girls' Secondary School in Birmingham did this many years ago and stories from all over the world came tumbling out of the diverse community. They used it to teach English writing, but with younger pupils an oral approach could be taken. The simple telling of the story and noticing and enjoying common or different elements

will be fun, illuminating and revealing. To enhance this type of activity:

- Bring in photos or drawings of the natural or urban environments in which the stories are set
- Talk about how people are the same basically although they live in very different environments
- Talk about how although environments or other aspects such as what people grow for food or what clothes they wear taste or look so different, basically we all get hungry and have to eat; we all eat about the same amounts and we grow because we eat; we all get tired when we work or play; we all start the day by waking and we all go to bed; we all want to be warm whether we grow up in a hot or cold climate.

Colin Bridge's article, pages 35-38 gives further ideas about how to approach looking at similarities and differences.

Especially important are the core issues of life. Stories are, in the main, about how to be good, how to take care of ourselves and others and the protection of the natural environment. Again, no matter how different trees look, they are

recognisable as trees¹. Just as no matter what our skin colour or hair texture is like, it is all skin or hair. Show the most beautiful images of different peoples that you can find.

If it is possible, pupils can also bring in things that express their ancestral origins and global connections. If they do not have these, they can bring in objects that are obviously made in another country, whether they are cultural objects or everyday things such as an apple from New Zealand.

The point of the example above is that the stories and objects come from real people who are part of the local community. They are things that are there everyday for the pupils. They are all around them, and making them visible simply reveals in a natural way the diversity of the contemporary world. You do not need to have many pupils from diverse ethnic backgrounds to make this work. An important part of the discovery is that, due to Britain's global history, every family has bits and pieces and stories from everywhere. Various pupils may find that their grandparents were born in India, for example, or that a relative worked in another country and knows a story from there. Everyday items of food from a supermarket can also form the basis of connecting pupils and sharing – how they prepare tomatoes to eat, no matter where they come from, for example; the methods of preparation and the final dishes may be different, but they all eat tomatoes as part of their everyday lives.

Intercultural exchange and the enthused response to physical or cultural elements from other countries can transform entire nations. Can you think of



Italy without tomatoes (from the New World) or spaghetti/pasta (noodles from China brought back by Marco Polo)? Do we not all think of Holland as the land of tulips (a flower originating from Turkey and Persia (now Iraq and Iran) – you may notice many species of bulbs in plant catalogues called *Tulipa Persica*)? And can you imagine New Year without fireworks (from China)?

I hope that this article opens up possibilities for you. Stories about the environment is a wonderful, non-contentious area in which to explore and enjoy diversity. May I tempt you further with the fact that the English Cottage Garden is, according to my dear English horticulturalist friend, 'Nothing but a glorified collection of foreign weeds!'. The story of plant hunters and the way our

gardens celebrate the plants of the world is another very big story in our own backyard.

May I wish you all lots of fun in creatively inspiring the understanding and enjoyment of how we are all different but the same, living on our one shared earth!

Note

- 1 A technique from Earth Education and Forest Schools that has proved very successful is 'Get to know a tree'. This needs access to a copse or small wood (or perhaps a local orchard). Pupils choose a tree, name it, look at it carefully (a mirror can help look up into the branches), feel it, take rubbings and create a pen portrait of their tree, describing its character. The location can be revisited on a number of occasions during the year in order for the pupils to notice how their tree grows and changes with the seasons.

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