

## The Trouble with Diversity

The following is an excerpt from *The Trouble with Diversity*

Our current notion of cultural diversity - trumpeted as the repudiation of racism and biological essentialism - in fact grew out of and perpetuates the very concepts it congratulates itself on having escaped. The American love affair with race - especially when you can dress race up as culture - has continued and even intensified. Almost everything we say about culture (that the significant differences between us are cultural, that such differences should be respected, that our cultural heritages should be perpetuated, that there's a value in making sure that different cultures survive) seems to me mistaken. We must shift our focus from cultural diversity to economic equality to help alter the political terrain of contemporary American intellectual life.

In the last year, it has sometimes seemed as if this terrain might in fact be starting to change, and there has been what at least looks like the beginning of a new interest in the problem of economic inequality. Various newspapers have run series noticing the growth of inequality and the decline of class mobility; it turns out, for example, that the Gatsby-style American Dream - poor boy makes good, buys beautiful, beautiful shirts - now has a better chance of coming true in Sweden than it does in America, and as good a chance of coming true in western Europe (which is to say, not very good) as it does here. People have begun to notice also that the intensity of interest in the race of students in our universities has coincided with more or less complete indifference to their wealth. We're getting to the point where there are more black people than poor people in elite universities (even though there are still few precious black people). And Hurricane Katrina - with its televised images of the people left to fend for themselves in a drowning New Orleans - provided both a reminder that there still are poor people in America and a vision of what the consequences of that poverty can be.

At the same time, however, the understanding of these issues has proven to be more a symptom of the problem than a diagnosis. In the *Class Matters* series in *The New York Times*, for example, the differences that mattered most turned out to be the ones between the rich and the really rich and between the old rich and the new rich. Indeed, at one point, the *Times* started treating class not as an issue to be addressed in addition to race but as itself a version of race, as if the rich and poor really were different races and so as if the occasional marriage between them were a kind of interracial marriage.

But classes are not like races and cultures, and treating them as if they were - different but equal - is one of our strategies for managing inequality rather than minimizing or eliminating it. White is not better than black, but rich is definitely better than poor. Poor people are an endangered species in elite universities not because the universities put quotas on them (as they did with Jews in the old days) and not even because they can't afford to go to them (Harvard will lend you or even give you the money you need to go there) but because they can't get into them. Hence the irrelevance of most of the proposed solutions to the systematic exclusion of poor people from the elite universities, which involve ideas like increased financial aid for students who can't afford the high tuition, support systems for the few poor students who manage to end up there anyway, and, in general, an effort to increase the "cultural capital" of the poor. Today, says David Brooks, "the rich don't exploit the poor, they just out-compete them." And if out-competing people means tying their ankles together and loading them down with extra weight while hiring yourself the most expensive coaches and best practice facilities, he's right. The entire U.S. school system, from pre-K up, is structured from the very start to enable the rich to out-compete the poor, which is to say, the race is fixed. And the kinds of solutions that might actually make a difference - financing every school district equally, abolishing private schools, making high-quality child care available to every family - are treated as if they were positively un-American.

**Michaels, Walter Benn. "The Trouble with Diversity." The American Prospect Sep. 2006: 20-21.**

## Questions to consider

1. What systems are in place in your school / district to assist staff members understand the culture and prevalence of poverty amongst students attending your schools?
2. What training is provided to teaching staff members to assist them to differentiate & provide support for students who are identified and who are not identified in the low SES subgroup?
3. What specific support systems are in place to assist students compete in highly rigorous classes who are identified and who are not identified in the low SES subgroup?
4. What support do you need as a Project Director in order to facilitate conversations in your SLC schools around Equity & poverty issues?
5. Are there personnel that could be considered as “gatekeepers” or criteria for placement into classes that might prevent or hinder students in the low SES subgroup from entering highly rigorous classes? What do you see as your role in changing that system?