Understanding and Inclusion in a Culturally Diverse School Community: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: School administrators face many challenges in their dealings with contemporary communities. A number of these challenges are associated with the differences that exist between administrators and their communities. Many school administrators in the Western world are of European heritage, while members of the communities that they serve sometimes trace their heritage to other parts of the world. Consequently, administrators in these situations may find that they know too little about the groups in their school communities, despite efforts to understand. This article describes a case study that highlights the efforts of one administrator as she attempts to understand a particular group within her school.

Introduction

School relationships with communities have become more complicated over the last couple of decades. One of the reasons for this is associated with the increasing levels of diversity within school communities. Fueled, at least in part, by changing immigration patterns, some schools in the Western world now cater to upwards of sixty different language groups and cultures (Ryan, 1999; 2003). Not surprisingly, this diversity presents challenges for students, teachers and parents alike. It also challenges administrators. This is due to the fact that administrators in Western countries like Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom are required to interact with community groups and individuals who are from different heritages to them. This is a common occurrence since most administrators are of European heritage and the more diverse communities are frequently composed of non-Western groups (see for example, Merchant, 2000). In these situations, administrators find themselves knowing too little about the groups that comprise their school communities, not to mention the processes associated with diversity (Ryan, 2000; 2003). Unfortunately, the strategies that they employ to compensate for their shortcomings in knowledge are not always successful. This article describes one such case. It documents the strategies that an administrator employs to understand the circumstances surrounding a particular problem and to resolve the problem. This case was one of a number from a study of culturally diverse schools (Ryan, 2003).

Barbara’s Predicament

As an administrator of a large diverse secondary school, after just three months in the position, Barbara was challenged by a sort of problem that was new to her. Two devoutly
religious families from Asia had come to her in the hope that she would solve what they believed to be a very serious problem. Barbara was told that both families had received a number of phone calls from someone who claimed that their teenage daughters had been dating young men, skipping classes, and ‘doing this and doing that.’ Both young women had vigorously denied the allegations. Their denials turned out to be quite beside the point. The father of one of the girls told Barbara, in no uncertain terms, that he wanted not only the phone calls, but all talk of these alleged indiscretions, put to an immediate end. He emphasised that if she could not achieve this, he would take matters up with her superiors. As it turned out, this was not a simple problem. At the time, Barbara knew little of the group in question, and as she was to discover, she did not approve of the gender-related beliefs that she sensed dominated relationships within this group.

Barbara’s Strategy

What did Barbara do? In her own words, Barbara’s strategy was to, ‘fly by the seat of your pants … and get information.’ Like many other administrators in these kinds of situations, she sought to gather enough information to enable her to understand the culture of the group in question, and in doing so, the circumstances of the problem. She believed these tactics would allow her to take appropriate action.

This strategy is consistent with a particular approach to multicultural education which suggests that once people come to understand different others, they will also accept them (see for example, Gibson, 1976). Ideally, when understanding is achieved, then fair treatment will follow. For someone like Barbara who is committed to equity, antiracism and inclusion, this approach appeared to be a sensible one; however, it proved to have its shortcomings.

Barbara’s quest to understand the group and the situation began with what she described as her research. Because she had a general sense of the issue in advance, she was able to consult a number of sources and use the information as she prepared for the meeting with the two families. Barbara approached several teachers and students, and spoke with a board consultant. From the students and teachers, she learned details of the specific situation, and developed a general overview of the religious group in question. The consultant supplied her with further details about the practices of this group. On the basis of this information, Barbara was able to establish that the callers were in all probability young suitors who had been rejected by the daughters of the two families. The calls were, in her estimation, acts of retribution. These young men apparently knew ‘how to press the fathers’ buttons’, and did so with the intention of retaliating against the girls.

Barbara also learned more about the particular religious group, and this knowledge was subsequently confirmed at her meeting with the parents. While the parents were obviously concerned with the actual behaviour of their daughters, they were apparently even more concerned about the impression within their communities. If word spread about their daughters’ alleged indiscretions, these parents would have little or no chance of arranging marriages for them; a task that went to the heart of their duties as parents. In other words, the parents’ priority was to save face in their communities.

When it came time to meet the parents, Barbara felt she knew exactly what the parents were talking and thinking about. Barbara recalls her efforts to understand the situation:

I hastened to understand their perspective. And I did. I did understand that it had little to do with the girl, that it had a lot to do with her reputation. So now we know what we're talking about. And if these boys do not stop these phone calls, these girls
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could have to go back to Asia because there is a chance that the community will know.

In one sense, Barbara was able to understand enough about the religious practices to enable her to formulate a plan to placate the parents. For her, a key was in her understanding that the parents were first and foremost concerned with stifling rumours about their daughters. Because she was aware of this, Barbara concentrated on issues associated with the circulation and curtailment of information, rather than on the behaviour of the young women. At the meeting with the parents she explained what she believed were the reasons for the phone calls. She also took care to attribute impropriety to the boys and not their daughters. Barbara stated:

I did suggest . . . to the parents that their buttons were being pushed [and that] perhaps they could consider changing their phone numbers, [or] perhaps they could consider hanging up. But I let it be known that I was much more annoyed with the activities of these boys than I was with what the girls were doing.

Barbara believed that the parents left the meeting happy, apparently satisfied that she was doing all she could to assist them. The parents seemed now to understand more about the disturbing calls, and they appeared to accept that it was not necessarily indiscretions committed by their daughters that were prompting them. Most importantly, they seemed to believe that the calls did not necessarily mean that they would lose face in their communities, or that they would have to send their daughters back to Asia to ensure their marriageability.

Ethnocultural vs. Gender Equity

Barbara’s attempts at understanding and accepting other aspects of the group’s beliefs, however, were not as successful. Here she encountered conflicting equity perspectives. On one hand, Barbara, her school, and her school district, were committed to ethnocultural and gender equity. On the other hand, Barbara perceived that particular groups – like the one with which she was currently dealing – held strong patriarchal values and beliefs. To fully accommodate the wishes and beliefs of these religious groups, Barbara and her school would have to violate their commitment to gender equity, or so it appeared. Barbara herself was a strong advocate of gender equity, and while she made every effort to acknowledge and respect beliefs of all cultural groups, she readily admitted that she found these gender-related practices personally offensive. In this case, the actions of the parents, specifically those of the man who was spokesperson for the group, made her ‘sad’ and ‘enraged’. She had particular difficulty with what she perceived to be the relationships of the fathers to the mothers and daughters, and the kinds of restrictions that were placed on the women. Indeed, Barbara was upset by the way that one mother apparently deferred to the father instead of standing up for the daughter, and by the father’s lack of trust in the young woman. She freely admitted wanting, at one point, to ‘crunch this little man’. Barbara also objected to the fact that these young women were not permitted to mix freely with other students in the way that most other students were. Referring to one of the girls, she maintained that, ‘This is a 14-year-old girl. She just turned 14. She’s just a kid.’

In the end, Barbara felt that it was her responsibility to emphasise the commitment to gender equity to the parents. Barbara bluntly acknowledged that she sometimes takes a stand against particular ethnocultural values that she does not favour, however difficult taking such a stand may be:

When you're not accommodating you feel somehow you've failed, because we are a multicultural nation ... We're a mosaic and we have to accommodate as much as we
can. It really does hurt not to be able to do that. And in some cases you want to take a stand. [But] I can’t accommodate that kind of abuse of young women. It would be the same thing if I found out a young girl was to undergo circumcision . . . I couldn’t stand it. I wouldn’t give a damn about their culture or what they believe is important. There comes a point where you have to say: ‘This is wrong, you’re in Canada now.’

How, then, does Barbara reconcile her personal beliefs with the wishes of the parents in her office? To achieve her goal, Barbara took two separate approaches. First, she reiterated her philosophy about gender-related freedoms to the parents in their meeting. Second, she kept from the parents much of what she knew of their daughters’ activities at school – the two young women were apparently cavorting with young men in ways that would certainly shock their parents. Revealing their unsanctioned activities with the opposite sex, she obviously felt, would compromise her personal belief that these young women had the right to partake in certain interactions, not to mention the harsh punishment she felt would be forthcoming were their habits discovered.

Barbara was also engaged in what she referred to as ‘a conspiracy’ with the two girls in question, albeit after the fact. In the course of a conversation with one of the multicultural assessment officers in the school district, the woman offered to consult with the young women. Desperately wanting someone with whom to talk about their situations, both girls jumped at the chance. Barbara was well aware that their parents would not approve, but felt it was the least she could do to assist these young women with the injustices she believed were being perpetrated against them.

The Limits of Understanding
Although Barbara’s understanding of the importance of marriage-related behaviour appeared to coincide with that of the parents’, her view on the nature and place of gender relationships within this culture did not. In fact, her view of these practices was a narrow one. For instance, she failed to comprehend the complexity of these gender practices within the context of Islamic families and communities. Like many other Western people, Barbara adopted a view that pathologises the Asian family (Brah & Minhas, 1985). She believed the cause of the problem that she had encountered lay with the family. Her superficial understanding of these family relationships led her to see the family, and in particular its gender relationships, as dysfunctional. Her lens does not do justice to the complexity of the gender (and ‘race’ and class) relationships operating not only within the family, but also outside it; in the school and in the world in which these young women interact.

Barbara’s view is simplistic on two counts (Haw, 1998). The first concerns her understanding of what the central problem is for these young women. Like other educators in her situation, Barbara believes that it revolves around the warring generations in the young women’s families. She is under the impression that the primary cause of the young women’s anxiety is the differences that they have with their parents, and the actions she takes are designed to relieve this anxiety. Unfortunately, these understandings and actions do not account for, or address the underlying social problems of poverty, inequality, male honour and power relationships which maintain female oppression. They also do not account for, or address the racism and sexism they experience in school and outside of school (Brah & Minhas, 1985). While there is little doubt that the intergenerational conflict may be stressful for these young women, they also have to deal with Western sexism and racism on a daily basis. Focusing on intergenerational conflict merely deflects attention away from these more global issues.
The other limitation of these views is that they present a narrow view of Islamic families. The two generations are depicted as warring against each other. The father is frequently seen as authoritarian, uncompromising, and oppressive. Contrary to these stereotypes, Brah and Minhas (1985) maintain that the majority of Asian girls have strong, positive, and mutually supportive relationships with their parents. Furthermore, the intergenerational conflict among Asian families is not any higher than among ‘White families’. Because Barbara understood little about the private sphere of Asian family life and its dynamic and vibrant female cultures, she jumped to conclusions about what she perceived to be injustices, and acted accordingly. Beyond that, her actions ran the risk of alienating these young women from their families and the communities upon which they depend for support.

Inclusion and Understanding

Providing inclusive education requires that members of diverse school communities make attempts to understand one another; however, inclusive processes, particularly when they involve issues of understanding, can be complex. They do not always involve simply recognising or understanding different values and practices, and unproblematically including or accommodating them. There are at least four obstacles that get in the way of this sort of straightforward scenario. The first is the difficulty in understanding different perspectives. As the above case illustrated, understanding different others is not always easy or possible. Despite valiant efforts, educators may never totally comprehend perspectives that differ radically from their own.

The second problem with the recognition/inclusion scenario is that understanding will not always lead people to embrace what they have understood. In fact, quite the opposite may occur, as we saw in Barbara's case. Her (superficial) understanding of the group's beliefs only reinforced her own different beliefs, prompting her to reject the community perspective, and to engage in covert activity.

The third complexity revolves around conflicting inclusive priorities. In Barbara’s case, accommodating ethnocultural values required that certain gender-related rights be ignored. The inclusion of one meant the exclusion of the other. While in this case, Barbara managed to appease the parents, she had to make a choice between the two conflicting priorities.

Finally, administrators may be so preoccupied with appeasing the parties in conflict situations that promoting inclusion may take a back seat to this appeasement. Getting through the day may take priority over promoting inclusion. While Barbara did hold inclusionary principles, she nevertheless gave priority to satisfying the complaining parents. What administrators need to take from all of this is the idea that the sooner they acknowledge the limitations of understanding others and the complexities of inclusion, the sooner they will be able to get on with the work of providing inclusive education for their students.

References


