

PEI Home and School Federation
AGM, April 15, 2023
Round Table Summary: Diversity

Where Are We Now?

The Roundtable Discussions identified Island classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse: they are multicultural, contain many EAL students, discuss Indigenous culture and Reconciliation more openly; families have different compositions, students identify in different ways, there is increasing gender fluidity, and more and more students are identified as neurodiverse, having learning disabilities, or other disabilities. There is hope that younger students, being increasingly exposed to more diverse classrooms at a younger age, will have diversity and acceptance more normalized. That said, students, staff and families in Island schools experience racist, homophobia, anti-trans, and other types of exclusion. There are inconsistencies in how minorities are treated across schools; and inconsistencies in the case-by-case consequences and disciplinary measures across schools: behavior that might warrant a student suspension at one school faces minor or no consequences at another school. Participants asked about the flags, artwork, portraits, and words that are seen when one enters a school: are students seeing themselves represented? Whose faces do we see? Are people from different backgrounds, languages and abilities represented?

What Are the Challenges?

- Inconsistencies in consequences for racist, homophobia, anti-trans (etc) behaviors across schools are problematic
- Different schools have different needs: the conversations you have depend on who your population is. If you have transgendered students, or students with trans parents/siblings, those conversations need to happen. But, not all issues are relevant at every school
 - New communication needs can arise quickly/unexpectedly (e.g. a new student arrives; a current student transitions)
- The Department of Education and Lifelong Learning (DELL) is responsible for guidelines and policies; the Public Schools Branch (PSB) is responsible for day-to-day operations, including discipline. There is public confusion between what is a DELL issue and what is a PSB issue, and the processes by which these work together to promote diversity and inclusion
- Teachers want to know how to incorporate diversity and culture throughout the curriculum, for example in math - it's an exact science, how do we reflect diversity?
- Teachers are responsible for regular academics, as well as issues of diversity/acceptance/bullying
- There are few cultural/diversity/inclusion resources available in French for French immersion teachers and students
- How are we defining Diversity? The discussions reflected the need to include culture/race, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), and ability/disability (inclusive of physical and cognitive disabilities and neurodiversity)

- What students are learning at school is not always mirrored in what they learn at home: how can we reconcile what is learned at home, with the messages we teach at school?
 - One participant gave an example of a student who wanted to choose a rainbow lanyard as a prize at school, but decided to choose something else because the lanyard couldn't go home - home values didn't align with the message of Pride and the rainbow symbol would have been rejected
- How do we reconcile our own differences?
 - One participant: why is anyone against inclusion?
 - One participant: parents need better communication - Gender Diversity Guidelines were shared 4 days before the deadline to submit comments. Not everyone's voices were heard because there wasn't enough time or opportunity
 - One participant - parents need clarity on diversity and inclusion services at school, and clear understanding of requirements for parental consent and the age of consent to participate (12+)?
 - One participant: accept everyone as they are
 - One participant: many operate on faith-based values, everyone should have a right to their opinion

What Do We Need?

- Students need to see themselves represented: do we visually represent other cultures and abilities in our school buildings and materials?
- Discussions about diversity and inclusion need to start early
- We need to introduce how to teach about diversity without highlighting/stigmatizing differences
- We need to invest in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): how do we as educators and adults have difficult, but meaningful and important conversations?
- Can teachers' professional development include visits to Lennox Island? Learn from elders and communities about intergenerational trauma, reconciliation, etc.

What Strategies and Suggestions Have Been Presented?

- Diversity and Inclusion discussions, planning, etc. is included at the DELL (Debbie Langston) and the PSB (Evelyn Bradley)
 - The DELL's focus is to build childrens' capacity to discuss differences and diversity
 - Debbie Langston (DELL Diversity and Inclusion Consultant) is setting up public engagement sessions with community organizations, to engage communities that have previously been marginalized to develop resources. These consultations must reflect the authentic experiences of those affected
 - We need better communication about where and when these sessions are being held, parents can't go looking for information, some don't use social media
 - Families need consistent, direct and accessible communication from school about these opportunities

What Are the Action Items Identified for PEIHSF?

- PEIHSF has connected DELL Diversity and Inclusion Consultant Debbie Langston with Nick Diamond, Acting Executive Director of the Autism Society of Prince Edward Island, to discuss collaboration for a public consultation session on disability/neurodiversity; AS PEI has a broad reach Island-wide with families of school-aged, neurodiverse children. Ms. Langston's previous outreach to ResourceAbilities did not result in wider public consultation as hoped.
- With respect to incorporating diversity into the curriculum, Nova Scotia has mobilized resources and experience with the goal of populating the curriculum with local content - can PEIHSF investigate how this is being done?
- Can PEIHSF support organizing, communicating about Public Consultations?
- Next year's AGM should include longer discussions about Diversity and Inclusion, with a focus on bigger topics (eg. 1 session on Diversity, 1 session on Bias)