

From the Superintendent's Desk
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A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about the third success skill (i.e., **integrity**) Thomas Herr talks about in his book The Formative Five: Fostering Grit, Empathy, and Other Success Skills Every Student Needs. In this article, I will talk about the fourth success skill: **embracing diversity**.

In a nutshell, **embracing diversity** is about understanding that we should recognize and appreciate the differences among us. By doing so, it enables us to come together in a caring, respectful, and productive way. Easier said than done, right? **Embracing diversity** is not easy for some to do; and, in some cases, it isn't going to happen. It is not easy for some to be enthusiastic about accepting the legitimacy of this skill because it too often causes discomfort and sometimes opposition. And, diversity is not universally embraced. We may appreciate many people; but, we tend to embrace only those closest to us.

Over the course of many years, we have made progress in judging others by the *content of their character* rather than by *skin color, how much money they make, what political affiliation they have, etc.* **Embracing** is the key term here. It is more than just tolerating and accepting others—because of their color, race, creed, religion, sexual orientation, intelligence level, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation; it's truly valuing, appreciating, and holding others close who are different than we are.

Recognizing and being alert to differences among people is an important survival skill. We should not hold onto suspicions or hold negative stereotypes about people because they don't look or act like us. Judging others is a barrier to understanding and collaboration.

Despite our progress, it seems as though **racism** is more evident in our country today than in the recent past. According to CNN and the Kaiser Family Foundation poll in 2015, "almost two-thirds of the public (64%) say racial tensions have increased in our country over the past decade." Federal reports show that "1 in 4 students is victimized in racial or ethnic incidents in the course of a typical school year" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). And, the victims aren't all students of color. "Nearly 70% of girls say they have been sexually harassed, 75% of gay students report hearing anti-gay slurs at schools, and more than one-third of gay students say they have been physically harassed." Sadly, teaching children to embrace diversity will be an uphill struggle.

However, our world is becoming more diverse day by day. Those who succeed in life will be those who appreciate and embrace the differences among us. This creates the base needed for understanding and building trust. Here are a couple of statistics for you. By 2025, no ethnic or racial group will be the majority of the population. By 2050, the largest racial group in the country will be Asian. With each passing year, working with others who are different from us will be the norm. We will be collaborating more and more with others who live in foreign countries/other continents who represent different races, ethnicities, and cultures. Barbara Thomson, author of Words Can Hurt You (1993) said, "If we fail

to appreciate the diversities among us, we will fail as a nation to use all our human resources and that failure makes us less than our best as individuals and as a country at a time in history when we need ‘all hands on deck’ to deal with the challenges ahead.” She said that 24 year ago. It sure applies today!

Stereotyping people is dangerous. Researchers found that individuals’ performance on tests suffered when they were reminded that according to their stereotype, they were not expected to perform well on tests (e.g., students of color who were asked to identify their race underperformed on standardized intelligence tests, and women underperformed on mathematics tests when reminded that men typically score higher on such tests). These results speak to the power of stereotypes and self-expectations. In school (and in life), student’s perceptions of the ways that others see them become a reality for them which, in turn, influences how they are seen by others. And, the cycle continues. Our **history** and **individual experiences** also affect how we see things just as do our **roles in a community or in an organization**.

Embracing diversity calls for us to play an active role in supporting the safety and dignity of others and to ensure they are respected. We need to teach our children to do the same. When we witness someone being disrespected by others, we have an obligation to speak out.

Embracing diversity is a success skill that can be taught. The first step is “appreciating ourselves.” This happens when we reflect inwardly. To better understand ourselves, we need to examine our identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion,...) and find out what, if any, **biases** and **perspectives** that we and our family holds. The second step has to do with “recognizing others’ diversities.” In other words, what do we have in common with someone who is not like us (e.g., their culture, background, history,...)? Instead of focusing on the differences, this helps us to begin appreciating and understanding others better. The third step is “appreciating others.” To do this, it takes time and empathy. When we set aside our contexts and biases, we need to seek to understand how these people are appreciated by others. Making it more than something we read and talk about in schools, we need to bring reality to life in school. This is the best way to help children understand and appreciate the differences among us. Think of a box of Crayola Crayons. They are all crayons, yet each one is a unique color that adds so much to the landscape of the pages they color. Not one crayon is any more or less important than the next—they all are important! The fourth and fifth steps have to do with “planning and implementing.” Embracing diversity requires us to thoughtfully and with intent interact with others—in the classroom, school-wide, and in the community. It means getting out of our comfort zones and offering respect and appreciation for diversities that may be opposite of our own beliefs. To get students learning and practicing embracing diversity, the formal part of instruction needs to be a planned part of lessons, classroom activities, and school activities. The informal part consists of the routines, practices, policies, and the cultures that guide our behavior. It is what we do. Everything we say and do reinforces our formal efforts to support and develop empathy, self-control, integrity, and grit.

A few strategies educators can use in their classrooms for helping children develop the skill of embracing diversity are:

- Ensuring that the people and characters discussed in class represent a wide spectrum of demographic variables.
- Asking students to identify **stereotypes** in movies/books. Do the stereotypes allow us to predict how characters will behave? Have these stereotypes changed over time? How might others stereotype us?
- Asking students to bring a newspaper/magazine to class that they feel shows an example of **discrimination**. The goal is to help students step out of their experiences and understand the thinking of others. Listening to one another's views and explanations should be emphasized.
- Focusing on embracing diversity can be seen as another way to end **bullying**.

Next time, I will write about the fifth (and last) success skill Herr talks about in his book: **grit**.