

H-18: Diversity Article written for Leadership Magazine-Cindy Bader

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I had just come home from participating on a WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) visitation team and had a stack of Leadership reaction papers to grade before meeting with the class the next day. “Our train is exciting, well worth the price of admission, and is moving at lighting speed; either jump on board, and stay on board, or you’re going to fall off or be left in the dust,” began the first paper. While I was out on the WASC visit, I had them read and react to an article in Leadership magazine titled “Reaching Out.” Some of the students noted it was written by Bob Burton—he’d come to our school to do the Terra Linda High School’s Leadership Retreat and they were impressed, some noted it was written in 1999 and they wondered why I’d given them such an old article. Others focused on the fact that we *DO* host a lot of interesting events, and there *IS* something for everyone at our school...if *they* are willing to step up. Many of the reaction papers, however, carried a similar, disconcerting theme; it’s the job of the ASB to somehow provide activities that include, involve, celebrate, recognize, and ultimately unify the school and if the ASB does their best and people *STILL* don’t want to get involved, well then...that’s *THEIR* problem.

Still...I was impressed with many of the individual papers I was reading. One student wrote; *“The unity desired through reaching out to others is a primary goal our ASB has always striven to reach. This is my third year in ASB, and I truly believe that many of the activities we put on are geared towards recognizing different groups of people. Every event, such as the film festival, which attracts the artists, to the rallies, which include performers and athletes, takes us one step further. In creating events other than dances for those who enjoy the “popular” music, we created an outlet for students to create a place for themselves in our school. When we held the skate day, not only were the “skaters” involved, but also many other students came to watch them, which made them feel recognized and important. In doing this we unify the school by accepting all different types of people and interests. With the diverse music played on Mondays, the Friday games and the Volunteer Fair we take step after step. We continue to take these steps towards our goal, but we have a long journey before we get there. We have yet to jump forward with leaps and bounds and create an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable, involved, and happy to be at TL. This lack of unity is created by the diversity in the population at the school. We are faced with many “pop culture” teens, musical, artistic, or theatrical teens, hackey sac die hards, “punk culture” teens, skaters, “rappers”, and an interestingly diverse ethnic population. We have students who speak Russian, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, French, Greek, German, Hebrew, Armenian, Italian...you name it! The barrier that seems the hardest to break is the cultural barrier, and it is the one ASB is the most frightened to break down. Although ASB has ventured to organize multicultural week and food faires, it has ultimately created more cultural awareness for the “American” kids rather than including the cultural population in an event that they would wish to attend or be a part of.”* “Whew,” I thought, “How insightful!”

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As I moved through the papers, impressed with the insights of my students, I reflected on the previous four days I'd spent as a WASC team member. Our team's focus became an achievement gap that was not addressed by the school, and our response was borne out of a broader idea than what we had in front of us. Our team leader was eloquent when he wrote that *"there is a concept more basic than the intellectual response...it is a concept that requires "thinking from the heart" rather than thinking from the mind. It involves reflecting on our own feelings rather than trying to figure out how to improve student performance. It requires that we become more comfortable with talking openly about the differences among student subgroups rather than viewing them all through the same lens. At the same time many of us have been raised in a culture where the norm we were inculcated with was "treat everyone equally." Obviously, this norm grew in response to decades of inequality among various races and cultures. To single out a particular student group based on race or ethnicity could risk being characterized as a "racist." So we try not to separate out certain student subgroups for concern that they may be labeled, they may be offended, we may be viewed as treating students inequitable or worse, that we are "racist."*

I was inspired when I left my WASC team earlier in the day, and now I was excited by the perfect timing of this assignment with my experience at WASC, it was kismet! My class was primed. It was time for me to go to school and make a difference. I read on. *"True leadership is a skill not very well known. Many can lead a group of people they are familiar with. But the real challenges and the true tests of leadership are trying to incorporate people who may not necessarily agree with you, someone whom you are not completely comfortable around. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, 'The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.' We must challenge ourselves and those around us,"* she wrote. The more I read, the more excited I became. They were ready! We could talk about this and really get somewhere.

The next day in class I presented excerpts from various papers and then proceeded to have my Leadership students participate in a brainstorming activity. Each group was to make two columns on their piece of binder paper. One column was a brainstorm of every kind of group, clique, culture...we have on campus, the other side was the list of activities ASB provides specifically FOR that group. Once the instructions were given, there was an almost palpable silence in the room. My students didn't seem to know how to proceed. They started a sort of whisper but it was uncomfortable, strained, something I needed to address. I asked if they needed clarification. They did not. One student raised his hand and proclaimed the activity "racist." Others said it was the opposite of what we, in ASB, were trying to accomplish. They said that singling students out based on their culture was going backwards. They all agreed and it was almost a mutinous moment. I have been an activities director for 18 years and had never had a class react to any activity I'd ever tried with such resentment. I was amazed at what had just happened. Many of the students were capable of pointing out, on paper, in private, with me as the only audience, what they recognized as our approach to providing activities to the various cultures on campus, we obviously knew what we wanted to do as far as our goal of

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unifying the school, yet it wasn't okay to talk about it if we were going to single out any one group. I couldn't believe it was happening. I had just spent three long, sleepless nights with my WASC team discussing this same issue. As I'd read the papers, I'd been proud that we were confronting the issues, that we could talk about a difficult, almost taboo subject.

But when the discussion began, I found out I was wrong. Political correctness was carrying the day. And while being PC has become a part of California culture, in Marin, it has been elevated to a religion, and my students were worshipping at the Alter.

They looked to me to stop this uncomfortable activity, they looked to me for an answer, though they didn't exactly say those things...I needed to read between the lines—I wasn't actually being attacked, the whole paradox was coming into play here—we were not allowed to have the very conversation we needed to have in order to make things more equal, because the conversation was politically incorrect—and the very nature of it smacked of inequality. It seemed to me we needed the consent to talk. Permission to talk openly about the cultures, the differences, the wants and needs, the likes and dislikes... And maybe we didn't just need the acquiescence, maybe we needed to appreciate that it was our responsibility even our obligation to have this conversation. I stopped them. I told them I understood. I read a few more excerpts from their papers. I read, *"I also know another group of friends who think that TL is full of crap, and who don't believe that this school is worth anything. Maybe it's because they never get a chance to participate. Maybe it's because this school has not done enough to factor into their needs, what they want."* I also read, *"Every category we put our students into singles them out. This can be a great thing, when the groups have positive labels, but we are bound to leave out those on the outside, who we never think of."* Or are afraid to mention... And then I brought in the big guns—I read the WASC thoughts (printed above) and we discussed how in our effort to be color blind, we were making things less equitable for everyone. And then we talked. We talked about how important it is for us to identify the cultures on our campus. We discussed that the only way to make needed changes was to understand the challenges. We asked ourselves the hard question: Was it worth it to us? Were we up to the task? Did we want a unified school, or did we just want to say we did and go on having fun with our regular activities? The answers were always, "yes." We gave ourselves permission to identify different groups and to work toward understanding the needs of these different groups. We even *discovered* that it was our job to do so. And then *we* enthusiastically embraced the activity as a means to an end and we got some very important information and closure from the experience. We completed the activity with a fresh view of where we were and where we were headed. It was a good place to start.

I was equal to the task of leading the class through this activity because of my WASC experience. I was up to the task because my students' beautiful papers expressed so much truth. But maybe the biggest reason I could tackle the daunting task were the words from the first paper I read: "I used to think that ASB was a train. Our events were exciting, well worth the price. Many students would come to our events and they would enjoy them. On the other hand, there were those who did not want to join, and they were left

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‘in the dust.’ As my first year in ASB progressed, I soon realized my job was to find a place for the ones who were dusty.”