Diversity in the Student Population versus Diversity in the Faculty Population
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Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
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Abstract
Fairfax County Public Schools have some of the most diverse and multicultural schools in the nation. This research focuses on the relationship between the diversity in the student population versus the diversity in the faculty population. The study was based on a survey of a representative subset of students who submitted responses to a questionnaire. The impact a diverse faculty body has on student learning and achievement was studied by means of this questionnaire. The study includes an exploration of how some minority students adapt to their school environment due to the fact that their school has minority representation in the faculty body.

Background
I am a minority teacher who is part of a highly diverse science department at Falls Church High School, Virginia. The school is very close to Washington D.C., the nation’s capital. The resident population in the area has become increasingly diverse in the last 10 years (Frey, 2001). As a result, the student population in the school has become very diverse which provides a great environment for young adults learning to survive in the outside world, the world awaiting them when they graduate from High School.

As a result of completing this study, I now have some data that supports the notion that a multicultural body of students needs a multicultural body of educators. My own perception of myself as a minority is a very crucial backdrop to this study that I undertook. My interest in this topic of reflective research was sparked soon after one of my myths regarding this issue was dispelled. An explanation of this so-called myth is well warranted. It all started at the time I attended the Fairfax County job fair hoping to be recruited as a chemistry teacher. Even with two graduate degrees in chemistry and awards from a graduate teaching experience, I felt disadvantaged being a minority candidate. Little did I know that this was one vantage point; by no means a disadvantage, it was a plus to my resume. I was a welcome candidate, almost a commodity. My myth about feeling like a minority was quickly replaced by the joy of acceptance by the interviewing principal who herself was a minority educator.

A National Governors Association Center for Policy Research has described recruiting minority teachers as a national challenge (Alston, 1988). My

1 “Minority Faculty: Commitment, Culture, Choice”, Journal of the Association for Communication Administration (JACA) (September 1994) (3): 152-156.
experience is a testimony to the fact that a sound education alone does not guarantee great self-awareness and an unbiased perception of one’s limits in overcoming racial and cultural barriers. A component promoting self-awareness and an unbiased perception has to be interwoven in the educational environment that prepares all students to face a diverse workforce and its demands (Mingle, 1987). Obviously there is a need for role models among teachers that all students can relate to, a requirement only a diverse faculty can provide (Stewart, Meier, La Follette, & England, 1989). The ultimate, most altruistic goal would be to foster an environment that has nobody feeling like a minority.

Methodology and Findings

Using figures supplied by the Guidance Department, Falls Church High School, I developed a portrait of the diversity in the Faculty and the Students at Falls Church High School related well though not proportionately (Fig. 1). The science department was a major contributor to the faculty diversity with three African American female teachers, two Southeast Asian teachers (both teachers are multilingual), one African American male teacher, two of Central Asian decent and three Anglo-American teachers.

A questionnaire was devised to survey the students (Appendix A). Students from all grade levels, different science classes, foreign language, AP science and special education classes were surveyed to ensure a fair representation of the student population at Falls Church High school. The results of the survey were processed using Microsoft Excel and the data is plotted as horizontal bar graphs. (See Figures 2-10 in Appendix B).
To summarize, seventy-five percent of the students surveyed believed that Falls Church High School has a diverse faculty. An endeavor to hire educators from varying ethnic backgrounds was well undertaken and accomplished by the administrators headed by Dr. Blake, the Principal of Falls Church High School. The survey verified that this diversity was visible to the students.

Forty percent of the students felt that they were minorities. Forty-six percent of the students surveyed did not mind the cultural differences they had to face in the class of a teacher who belongs to an ethnic minority. Forty-four percent of the students surveyed actually enjoyed being in the class of a culturally different teacher. Only twenty-seven percent of the students surveyed felt less comfortable in a less diverse environment. Eighty-one percent of the students felt comfortable in a diverse classroom represented by both diversity in the faculty and student body.

Sixty-six percent of the students felt positively impacted by the diverse faculty and said that they all had some teacher to look up to. The impact on learning was positive where in that eighty-six percent of the students felt that the cultural differences of the faculty were not an impediment to their learning. Fifty-eight percent of the students felt that the school should try to hire more teachers from different ethnic backgrounds. Sixty-three percent of the students surveyed felt a sense of belonging in associating with a role model they could relate to.

Conclusion and Implications

While the faculty was considerably less diverse than the student body, students appeared to believe that the faculty was more diverse than the numbers might indicate. I wondered if the additional cultural activities available to students helped reinforce their impressions of diversity.

What sets Falls Church apart is the various “specialty” clubs sponsored by minority teachers. These clubs organize cultural and social events that relate to the students within that culture – these students feel that they have a voice. The clubs create awareness among other students about that culture, food and attire. This is a process that increases tolerance and awareness of other cultures other than ones own; a mechanism so desperately needed in the present political turbulence and ethnic violence that so many countries are facing. Following is a list of some of the organizations at Falls Church High School, who sponsors them and the make-up of the members.

a) “Hermanitas” is a club for Hispanic girls sponsored by a Hispanic teacher who together do community service and help promote a positive self-image for young Hispanic girls.

b) Legacy is a club for African-American students sponsored by African-American teachers who together celebrate African heritage and cultural activities.

b) MESA is a club for Middle-Eastern and South Asian students sponsored by South Asian Teachers. This organization helps students take pride in their culture and serves as a support group.
d) Japan Club is a club made up mostly of Asian students sponsored by a Japanese teacher and focuses on Asian culture.

e) Heritage club is a school-wide organization for all students, sponsored by several teachers who once a year celebrate diversity with a week of activities culminating in a food court and talent show.

There is nothing as beautiful as working in a school that celebrates the diversity of its students and teachers. Some students and teachers speak as many as four languages and have traveled all over the world. Some of the positive impacts of a diverse faculty are as follows:

a) Performance in academics usually improves when students have role models from their own culture.

b) Diversity provides opportunities for students from all ethnic backgrounds to contribute to the community.

c) Promotes a sense of belonging to students enrolled and a future of acceptance for younger brothers and sisters.

d) Provides an avenue for identity with one’s own culture in the school.

e) Provides opportunities to participate in school wide activities, i.e., homecomings, fairs, and clubs.

f) Create awareness among students to not perceive themselves as minorities.

This study helped me focus on many of the cultural aspects of the students and the faculty and the impact that their cultural diversity has on learning. I learned that it is not enough to view teaching as a job but rather as a commitment to students. One of the things that impressed me most about Falls Church is its teachers’ commitment to students which is reflected to the extra-curricular activities sponsored by the faculty.
References


Appendix A

DIVERSITY SURVEY
Please take a few minutes to answer these questions. Please circle a number from 1-5 for your choice.

1. Do you think that there is enough diversity in the FACULTY at Falls Church High School?

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<tbody>
<tr>
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2. Do you feel like a minority?

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<tr>
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3. Do you feel that the diversity in the Falls Church faculty makes students more comfortable in their classes?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not comfortable</td>
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<td>Very comfortable</td>
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4. When you see teachers of your same ethnic background in the school, do you feel a special sense of belonging?

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<td>Not much</td>
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<td>Very much</td>
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5. Are the cultural diversities of the faculty (i.e., accent, body language, personal appearance) impediments to your learning?

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<tr>
<td>Yes they are</td>
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<td>No not at all</td>
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6. Do you feel that the school should recruit faculty members from different ethnic backgrounds?

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<td>Not necessary</td>
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<td>Yes! Diverse teachers</td>
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7. Do you feel that having teachers from different cultures has positively impacted your tolerance and acceptance of different cultures?

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<tr>
<td>No positive impact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lot of positive impact</td>
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8. Does it take you longer to get comfortable in the class of a teacher who comes from a culture different from your own?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It takes me a long time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I welcome the change</td>
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9. If you've ever been to a school (including middle school) that does not have the ethnic diversity that FCHS has, were you more comfortable there?

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<tr>
<td>Not comfortable</td>
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<td>Very comfortable</td>
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Appendix B

75% of the students surveyed believe that Falls Church High School has a diverse Faculty.

Figure 2
Student Perception of Diverse Faculty

Only 40% of the students at FCHS perceived themselves as minorities.

Figure 3
Student perception of themselves
46% of the students did not mind the cultural differences. 44% of the students actually enjoyed being in the class of a culturally different teacher.

Figure 4
Impact of Differences

Only 27% of the students surveyed felt comfortable in a less diverse environment.

Figure 5
Conditions in a less diverse environment
66% of the students surveyed felt positively impacted by the diverse faculty.

Figure 6
Acceptance of different cultures

![Bar chart showing the acceptance of different cultures among students.](chart1)

86% of the students felt that the cultural differences were not an impediment to their learning.

Figure 7
Impact on Learning

![Bar chart showing the impact of cultural diversity on learning among students.](chart2)
58% of the students surveyed felt the school needed to hire teachers from different ethnic backgrounds.

Figure 8
Changes to the Faculty Body

![Bar graph showing responses to the question: Do you feel that the school should recruit faculty from different ethnic backgrounds?]

63% of the students surveyed felt a sense of belonging when they see a teacher of similar ethnic background.

Figure 9
Sense of belonging

![Bar graph showing responses to the question: When you see teacher of your same ethnic background in the school do you feel a special sense of belonging?]

81% felt comfortable in a diverse classroom represented by diversity in both the faculty and student body.

Figure 10
Classroom Climate

Do you feel that the diversity in the Falls Church Faculty make students more comfortable in their classes?

1 = Not comfortable 5 = Very Comfortable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
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