

*family*

A D V O C A C Y

PO Box 502  
Epping NSW 1710

305/16-18 Cambridge St  
Epping NSW 2121

Phone: (02) 9869 0866  
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722

Record

322

File Number

10289

Author: O'Brien, John Forest, Marsha Strully, Jeff Pearpoint, Jack

Title: Thinking about diversity

Original source: TASH Newsletter Volume 19 Issue 2

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/02/93

Publisher Info: TASH

### Abstract

This article publicises the first "Diversity Gathering '93", a way of gathering people with experiences and different perspectives, who have a common interest in building inclusive communities which value diversity. It describes why the gathering was thought of and how the planning has progressed. The expectation of participants at the gathering is that they take responsibility for participation and sharing their stories and ideas. **Keywords: Community Development**

# **THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY**

By John O'Brien, Marsha Forest, Jeff Strully and Jack Pierpoint

As the growing number of children, parents and teachers who work to create inclusive schools inspire us with their achievements, our awareness grows of the connections between inclusion for students with disabilities and other efforts to build and strengthen community. As we meet native people, Hispanic people, and African American people who are reclaiming and renewing their traditions and asserting their sense of justice, we sense that their commitments are importantly linked to ours. As we meet people who are mutually rebuilding their lives out of the challenges of illiteracy, gang membership, life on the street, and imprisonment, we feel the relevance of their struggles to ours. As we meet people who are working to deepen the collective understanding of what education for full citizenship must mean in these conflict ridden, turbulently changing times, we perceive the relevance of their learning for our work. And we have discovered that our sense of common commitment, common struggle, and common learning is reciprocated: many of the people we meet feel the importance and excitement of creating opportunities for full participation for people with disabilities.

It's time to gather these threads of connection in order to explore the ways in which they interweave. It is time to find ways to gather people with distinct experiences and different perspectives, who have a common interest in the work of creating educational communities which celebrate and integrate diversity.

We believe that, like any meaningful education, such gatherings must be founded on common, personal experience. We cannot just read one another's papers or audit each other's speeches: to build a context for understanding we must find ways to share our stories, our sustenance, our music, dreams and dances, our uncertainties and disagreements. To explore the strengths and challenges of diversity and belonging, we must learn to create diverse gatherings focused on shared learning. We think that such gatherings may reveal that, across real and important ethnic, economic, and experiential differences and despite genuine conflicts, we are at work on a common tapestry.

We plan to explore the possibilities of such gatherings by convening one in Oak Brook (near O'Hare airport) in August 1993. The preliminary design for supporting the gathering includes these elements:

- **Invitations to a core group**, across international boundaries, who represent diverse experiences and different perspectives on a shared commitment to building communities that value diversity. The core group includes many people who have not met one another, but everyone has a personal relationship with at least one other core group member.

- **Person-to-person and public invitations** to a wider group in order to further extend and diversify the gathering.
- **The clear expectation that all members of the gathering will work together** to create a temporary community within which people can discover and explore the lessons in one another's varied experiences. The core group is not attending in order to instruct or therapise or entertain the other participants - the core group is attending to create a diverse, committed nucleus for the gathering. The wider group is not attending to be trained or treated or entertained - the wider group is attending to create a gathering that will allow everyone to belong and all to share their distinctive gifts.
- **The clear expectation that the gathering is based on personal participation and shared activities** rather than on consuming a program. Members of the gathering will share their own stories of hope, frustration, anger, grief and learning. Members of the gathering will have opportunities to exchange ideas and to eat, sing and dance together. Every member of the gathering shares responsibility for discovering and creating positive accommodations to individual differences so that all experience a sense of welcome. Every member of the gathering is responsible for defining and enlisting others in positive action within and after the gathering.
- **A team of facilitators** whose role is to organise the gathering and assist the participants of the gathering to remember the expectation that defined the gathering and to create and innovate ways to learn from one another.
- **A comfortable meeting place and sufficient time** (five days) for people to meet and learn from one another.